



**Short Stories
about "Across
A Crowded
Room" type
romances**

When You Just Know!

Book One

P L JONES



When you just know

(It does not always take an age to realise that you have fallen in love)

A collection of short romance stories

by P. L. Jones

Book One

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*These stories are about romance, and several include some brief content that may be seen as **Adult Reading Material**. It may to some people be mildly erotic, but it is not pornography and does not include any violent, un-natural or forbidden acts or indeed any actions that do not figure in most, if not all, romantic encounters.*

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Introduction

We are all well acquainted with such contradictory arguments as, *marry in haste and repent at leisure*, and the oft-quoted, *I just felt a spark and immediately knew*, or, as the words that were immortalised in the song, *Some Enchanted evening*, go to some lengths to explain, *I saw her across a crowded room and somehow, I knew*.

And on the other hand, I'm sure that we all know of instances where a couple have courted for years, marry and find themselves separated and in the divorce courts within months, all because they actually knew very little about each other even though they had been 'together' for a long time. Equally we all know of people who have met, fallen in love and married within months or even weeks, and go on to have long, happy marriages.

After all, it is a matter of history, supported by her own personal diaries, that Queen Victoria proposed to Albert just four days after first meeting him, and that they had a very happy, and fruitful, marriage that lasted some forty years until his death.

While, perhaps, less common these days, arranged marriages do still take place, as do marriages that might not come under that essentially cultural umbrella but have a very similar effect, 'expected marriages'. The former may be arranged at the time of the birth of the children, and they may not meet until days, or even hours before the ceremony. The latter may sometimes be for dynastical reasons, although not by any means always. There are many other reasons, including the unplanned pregnancy!

In all cases, modern statistics indicate that the percentages that fail, muddle through, or succeed brilliantly are much the same.

Why is this? Many learned people have tried to rationalise the facts and if you were to ask one hundred such persons, I would suggest that you would probably get at least one hundred different answers. Yes, there may be some common threads in their answers, but there would be no one defining answer. Less scientific research also has theories. For example, a marriage celebrant I know says that they can tell, just from their interaction with a couple prior to and during the wedding ceremony, whether or not the marriage will last beyond a year. How? By the couple's interaction with each other and knowledge of each other. Maybe. It's just another example of the general underlying theme that runs through the experts' answers. Personally, I believe that it is much more complex than one simple answer. I also think that it is each individual's ability to adapt, discuss, accept differences, support and yet allow freedoms, respect, openly encourage and ALL those good things, that will be the deciding factors, and that they will be different for different people with differing personalities.

Maybe the celebrant is right, you can tell a lot about people be just watching and listening.

Or maybe further lines from *Some Enchanted Evening* are a warning to not question the whys and wherefores:

*Who can explain it, who can tell you why?
Fools give you reasons, wise men never try.*

But, when one looks closely at the examples in this book, there appears to be a reasonably consistent theme – message if you like. Is this right, is this wrong? Am I dreaming? What if? Uncertainty. In some cases

almost to the extent that people talk themselves into and almost out of making what appears to be an obvious decision. And, that same song provides what may well be the answer in the final verse – in particular, the final lines:

*Some enchanted evening, when you find your true love,
When you hear her call you across a crowded room,
Then fly to her side and make her your own,
Or all through your life you may dream all alone.
Once you have found her, never let her go,
*Once you have found her, never let her go.**

In other words, don't over-analyse – if it feels right then go for it!

Each one of these stories is a work of fiction but, somewhere in each there is an important factual element, because each has been based upon a real marriage. Names, dates, places have been changed and there is a partially fictional background story written around those facts. There is not one common theme to those facts. It is not the circumstances of the meeting, the place, the persons jobs or titles, because in some stories these have been combined to create the narrative. Therefore, if there is any resemblance between the narratives in any of these stories and some person's real life, it is totally coincidental.

But, for those readers that need to be reassured, both in the real-life situations from which odd facts have been extracted, and the actual stories related herein, all the marriages survived for the long haul, and there was a genuine happy ever after.

And, if you find these stories of interest, a second edition of similar short stories is in the planning and writing stage.

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

She stood out from the crowd that spilled up from the sandy beach and over the paved area in front of the shops that pandered to the wants and needs of the sun and surf-loving set frequenting the popular seaside location. The bikini and speedo-clad late teens; the untidily fashionable casual gear of the trendy twenties' groups; the more sedate swimming costumes of the slightly older set and the, by comparison, very conservative attire of the more "elderly" who strolled along among the myriad of people out and about on that perfect summer's day. All these others became lost in the background, like one of those scenes in a movie where everything turns to black and white except one extraordinary, colourful object.

Everyone looked. Some just a brief glance at the 'different' person they only half saw. Some openly stared as if they had never seen anything like her before – and they very likely hadn't. A few looked appreciatively, almost as though they were reliving a time from somewhere in their past that, deep down, they still longed for.

Andrew, however, was very much from the present and yet his gaze had an intensity that made him look as if he had finally discovered something for which he had long been searching but never before found. Something that he may not have been able to describe but he immediately recognised when he saw it.

He stepped back a little into a shadow – partly to be less obvious and partly to shield his face from the glare of the sun, that he might see her more distinctly.

Probably only a little over 5 feet tall, she was wearing a sprigged-muslin top over a full skirt of a pretty boarder print held out in a wide circle by many stiff petticoats and all accentuated at her narrow waist by a wide, elastic, clasp belt. Cuban heel shoes, a daintily trimmed straw hat and dark glasses set off the classic 1950s ensemble.

His face glowed with pleasure, and he knew at once that he had to meet this vision, if for no other reason than to compliment her on her appearance. More importantly, Andrew wanted to know just how real the vision was. Was she perhaps just coming from or going to a special photoshoot, or even a movie set for a film based in the 1950s'? Or did she prefer to dress like that.? He had to know and, regardless of why she was attired like that, something deeper and far less superficial drove him to find out more about her.

Stepping into the moving crowd he carefully walked just a little slower than was necessary, so that by the time he caught up she had left the very busy area directly by the beach and there were fewer people around, making approaching her easier.

"Excuse me," he walked alongside her and spoke, "I don't want to delay you, but I felt compelled to compliment you on your stunning outfit."

She stopped and looked closely at him. He did not appear to be making fun of her – in fact he seemed to be extremely serious. Generally, any compliments she did get were from older gentlemen (and, occasionally, ladies), but he looked as if he would be a similar age to her. His own clothes were also more conservative than those common with his age group. “Thank you. I take it you like this style of dress?” It was clearly a question that was inviting further comment.

Relaxing, realising that she was not going to slap his face or call for help, he responded with, “Indeed, I think it is far more attractive than most of the outfits of today. If you will pardon my saying so, you have captured the style extremely well and it looks absolutely delightful and so right on you.” He paused, amazed at his having been able to talk so easily to her, but blushing a little from the impassioned outburst.

She looked both appreciative and very slightly amused, but friendly enough for him to gather his bravado and ask, “I know it may sound a bit forward, but would you care to have afternoon tea with me? There is a rather nice little tea rooms just along the street and I think you would feel quite at home there.”

There was an almost imperceptible pause before, with a hint of a smile, she answered. “If you are sure that it is not putting you out, I should very much like that, thank you.” It was hard to tell if the smile was just a polite, friendly reaction to the invitation, or if there was something more behind it – but Andrew was sure that he could read something more from the little that he could see of her eyes behind the absolutely correct 1950’s style sunglasses.

“My name is Andrew, Andrew Cartwright,” he explained and, without touching, indicated the way to go and they started off.

“Bryony Morgan.” Her reply was brief, but sufficient for the moment, and they walked together in thoughtful silence the short distance to the tea rooms.

As they walked Bryony noticed that Andrew took care to walk on the correct side of her – changing when they crossed the road. He appears to know his etiquette, she mused, one favourable point.

They found a quiet table and Andrew held her chair as, with a swish of the multiple parchment petticoats under the full-flared skirt, she sat, placing the small train case she carried as a handbag, onto the floor beside her feet. Andrew sat across the table and looked into Bryony’s eyes as she removed the sunglasses. They were soft blue and matched the little floral sprigs on the perfect, pale lemon, muslin blouse that she wore.

“I hope you don’t find me too forward, but I simply had to talk with you,” he faltered, not knowing how to explain why he had had to talk and how he was feeling.

“Not at all,” she smiled, and Andrew emotions went from very hot to boiling point. “In fact, I really appreciate your asking me here with you. It is very warm out and I was ready for a quiet sit down and a drink. But, might I ask, why did you suddenly – out of nowhere – just appear and ask me to join you - why me?”

How could he put it into words that did not sound crazy? “Actually, I can’t explain it logically. It was something like that concept of seeing someone across a crowded room – except this was across a crowded footpath. It was impulsive and compulsive – I just had to know you.”

“Was it the clothes?”

“Yes, the clothes certainly caught my attention, but I seemed to sense something else – something that told me there was more to the package than just the immediate visual impact. I’m trying to rationalise my reactions but at the moment I can’t. But if you were to tell me a little about yourself and we could just chat for a while it may make more sense to both of us.” He looked across at her, hopefully.

“Ah, yes, but do you think we should order first?”

“How stupid of me – yes,” and he caught the eye of a waitress who was hovering, expectantly, close-by.

They ordered afternoon tea for two and just chattered superficially about simple things, like where they were from, siblings and the weather, until their order arrived.

Automatically taking up the silver teapot, Bryony enquired how he liked his tea and poured their two cups. He passed her the sugar and they reached for little sandwiches before looking across at each other and simultaneously asking, “Who will go first?” Embarrassed laughs and Andrew said, “Okay, I will start – not that it will make much sense.”

“My mother was in her teens and early twenties during the mid-1950’s to the early 60’s and there are, probably hundreds, of photographs around of her and she is, of course, wearing the clothes of the time. I have always felt that those fashions were the best of the last 100 years and certainly the last of, what I would call, the truly feminine clothes that looked neat and smart, attracted the right sort of attention, left enough to the imagination to make men want more, perfectly wrapped the package and didn’t just lay everything out as though it was being given away...” He stopped –embarrassed again. “I hope I didn’t put that too crudely. What I mean is there was still an element of romance in clothing, and I like that.”

Bryony was having some difficulty not laughing. “I think you put that most succinctly. I’m surprised that any boy these days can still see the truth of all that. My mother describes some of the modern clothing as things that people have dragged out of the rubbish and worn. Not washed, all tattered, covering very little and she says that she sometimes has trouble determining if a person is male or female. My grandmother says it looks as if they can’t sell it, so they are giving it away – and she is talking about young ladies’ bodies!” Now it was her turn to blush. I hope I didn’t say that so loud that all the others around us could hear.”

The ice was broken, and both happily chattered away as they worked their way through the old-world, silver service, afternoon tea with the thin sandwiches and little savouries and cakes on the silver, three-tier plate stand in the traditional tea rooms, where their attire fitted in so well with the decor.

“How did you find this place?” Bryony asked. “I must have walked along this street hundreds of times and never realised that it was here.”

“Quite by accident; I was on my own one weekday afternoon and needed somewhere to have a drink. I saw the shop and just came in, not expecting it to be anything special. Having found out what it was like I now make a point of coming here rather than the more modern coffee shops nearer to the beach. Do you like it?”

“I didn’t think this kind of establishment still existed. My mother and Grandmother would love this. I will defiantly be bringing them here.”

“So, tell me about your reasons for wearing those superb clothes.”

“It’s quite a long and convoluted story that starts back when I first became interested in dolls. I of course had my own dolls, but my mother had a collection that had been built up over many years – starting with her grandmother – and they were all dressed in the clothing of the different periods. They fascinated me and over the years I decided that I wanted to study the history of fashion. I looked around for what, if any, jobs that might require people with that sort of knowledge. The film and stage industries of course need such people, but there did not appear to be enough work on a regular basis to keep too many employed. So, I studied the history of fashion but also trained to be a fashion designer. Perhaps that sounds a bit too pretentious, she laughed, “More like a plain dress designer or clothes designer and not so much fashion.”

“I take it you like to dress in the clothes of different periods then.”

“Yes, but the ones that I prefer are from the 50’s and 60’s – this era (she indicated her clothes) and I like going out and enjoying myself, trying to feel like I live during those years.”

“But where do you find the outfits and all the accessories to match?”

“That is not as hard as one might think. I learned to sew and make my own clothes. The internet has been a great help as I can find all the materials and most of the accessories from on-line suppliers or, frequently, from e-bay and such sites. The costs are very reasonable in most cases, and if I can’t buy a pattern, I can always cut my own. I make clothes of any period for other people and drama clubs and this, along with what work I get in advising on fashions and in doing contract designs for clothing companies, provide a nice income and enables me to be a little eccentric, if you like, and dress how I prefer. It has turned out very well for me.”

Andrew was, to say the least, impressed, by all this. A young, modern, entrepreneurial, multi-talented girl who had created a career for herself from the things she loved and had also managed to retain her individuality. He found himself becoming VERY interested in this young lady who was, in his eyes, also attractive - very attractive. However, before he could get her to open up more about herself, she asked him, “What do you do that enables you to also ignore the current fashion trends and let you be comfortable in what you like?”

“I guess you could say that I also design things. I am a registered architect; I have my own business specialising in designing and decorating office and shop interiors. As a side-line I work with a couple of friends and we do house staging for several realtors and, in my spare time, I like to pretend that I am an artist.”

“With all that I’m surprised that you get any spare time.”

“I might say the same about you, but we both obviously have time to promenade along the beach front and adjourn to tea shops now and again.”

Bryony laughed, a soft, bubbly laugh that had Andrew feeling all funny inside. “I have often wondered about staging houses but when I have looked at some of the ones that have been done up for sale, I feel that I could not possibly have lived in them. I know that all the realtors say everything must be minimalist to give an illusion of space to allow people to imagine where they would put their own things, but I love to have ‘stuff’ around to make a house feel ‘lived in’ – a ‘home’. That probably sounds terrible to someone in your profession, but I think that where you live needs to feel like a home, not just a show-piece house.”

“Exactly,” exclaimed Andrew, “Some of the places we have done feel cold and uninviting – but the agents seem to like that, so we please them and try and close our eyes. If I were selling my house, I should like to think that whoever purchased it would keep it feeling homely and therefore would try and leave it as I had it – comfortable to me. I have artwork on every spare area of wall; models of buildings and rooms all over the place and lots of comfortable furniture that one can sink in to and relax. None of that stark, angular furniture, that seems to be a la mode at the moment.”

They had eaten all the food and had several cups of tea during this lengthy exchange of likes and dislikes and neither had realised the time passing.

“I guess I should be getting on”, Bryony sighed, “I have thoroughly enjoyed talking with you and thank you for the afternoon tea.”

Andrew did not want this to end, “Where do you have to get to?”

“I catch a bus just back along the road.”

“Would you allow me to take you home? I have my car parked in the next street back from the beach.” He held his breath as she paused for a moment before answering.

“I would not like to take you out of your way.” She sort-of hoped that he might insist.

He took a chance, “If it was as far as the next town, I would not consider it out of my way. I am in no hurry to get anywhere, and it would be my pleasure to drive you.”

“Well – if you are sure, that would be very nice.” *Very nice – **very nice**? What am I saying? I would be overjoyed! How often have I had an offer like that? What must he be thinking of me? Actually, I suspect I know what he is thinking, and I hope I’m correct!*

“Come on then, let’s go,” he took her hand (to both her surprise and delight) and they set off at an easy walking pace to the place his car was parked, where he held the door as he handed her in.

Now Andrew had worked hard (as had been intimated) and he was not one to spend a lot of money on himself, but in the matter of cars he was rather a fan of luxury. Consequently, when Bryony saw his almost new, large, comfortable, hybrid, Lexus SUV, she was impressed. However, she was too well brought up to immediately comment and waited until they had driven a short distance before saying, “This is a very comfortable car and so much nicer than riding in the bus.”

Andrew glanced across and smiled at her. "I spend a lot of time in my car – it's almost a second office - and I appreciate the comfort and quiet. I get to think a lot while I am driving between jobs."

On arriving at the address Bryony had given him he found that she lived in a rather smart apartment block in a good suburb and was then, pleasantly, surprised when she invited him in.

"Are you sure," he queried, "You don't have to hurry to get ready to go out on a date or anything. I wouldn't like to hold you up."

She blushed slightly, "I don't have a boyfriend – if that's what you are asking – and yes, I am sure that I would like it, if you have time to come in."

Andrew leapt out of the car and was around opening her door before she had a chance to identify the door handle and helped her out onto the pavement.

Bryony mentally clocked up another point in his favour – he certainly knew how to be a gentleman!

Inside, the apartment was very much as he had imagined from her description. Lived in, full (but not looking as if it was just full of junk) and homely. Comfortable!

"This is really nice". His voice a sincere ring to it and Bryony smiled. "I especially like the furniture. Much of mine is old – not actually genuine antiques, more like restored, old solid wood framed. I have a couple of wing-backed chairs very similar to those two." He indicated two comfortable looking and obviously used (because they did not have 'stuff' stacked on them) chairs.

"Two dollars each – plus delivery – from a nearby second-hand dealer. I stripped them down, fumigated, re-stuffed and re-covered them myself." She replied, clearly very pleased with her efforts.

"I have a few pieces in storage awaiting such treatment. I picked them up in out-of-town village 'junk shops' and could not resist taking them home. One day I will try and find time to restore them, but, in the meantime, they await my actually making that time to start working on them. Like my house, they are part of a 'work-in-progress', except I do not seem to be making much progress. I spend too much time working on other people's projects and not enough on mine. I know I should make time, but I keep thinking I'll start next week and, of course, I don't." He gave a nervous laugh. "I need a reason to make the effort and, well, there has never been one compelling enough to get me started."

Bryony smiled inwardly, wondering if that was some sort of a line. Something like I don't have a girlfriend and if I had a serious relationship, it might encourage me to get on with putting my own house in order, so to speak. Her suspicions were somewhat confirmed with Andrew's next comment.

"Look, it is getting on and, well, I would like to continue this discussion so, if you are not doing anything this evening, could I entice you to have dinner with me – my treat – your choice of where?"

Bryony's face did not give anything away, but Andrew noticed that she could not keep her eyes from lighting up. "Are you inviting me on a date? She asked with a hint of a laugh in her voice.

"Would you like it be a date?"

She paused and considered before answering. "I think I would. It's been quite a while since I actually went on a date, and I rather like the idea of a quiet dinner where we could chat some more."

Andrew resisted going further into the reasons why she had not been dating because the look on her face seemed to suggest that now was not the time to enquire. Instead, he asked if she had a suitable, quiet place in mind.

"What is your favourite food, perhaps we can find something based around that?"

"I just like food. I'm not choosy – to me the atmosphere is just as important as the style of menu. Sorry, I'm not being very helpful am I – put it down to lack of practice."

I like this lady more and more, Andrew was thinking to himself as he struggled to quickly come up with a suitable suggestion – also being, as she had put it, out of practice.

Finally, he came up with a place that he remembered as being pleasant and with enough space between tables to enable talking without the whole room knowing what you were saying. Bryony knew of the place but had never been there and Andrew phoned and secured a booking.

"Should I change?" Her question caught him unawares.

"Ah, you would probably know a lot more about what to wear than me. You look terrific to me as you are, but as to whether it is suitable for dinner out..." He stopped – blushing.

"What will you be wearing?" she responded.

"I hadn't thought about that either." He admitted. "I too am rather out of practice." he added lamely. Then, on a complete whim, "Without going overboard – not ball gown and tuxedo – why don't we do this in style! You get ready while I go and put on a suit and tie, and I'll meet you back here in about an hour. Would that work okay for you?"

"Yes, I'd like that." She smiled broadly, "I'll see you again in about an hour." And leaning in slightly so that she was able to give him a light kiss on one cheek, she walked with him to the door.

In a little less than an hour he was back, showered, shaved and in his best suit. A little surprised, but very impressed, that Bryony was ready to go, dressed in a plain black dress with a fitted bodice and a full skirt that fell in soft pleats from the (very attractive) waist to just below the knees, all topped off with a white, fluffy, bolero jacket. Tonight, she did not wear a hat and her hair was done in a French roll with a silver filigree clip in the fold. Andrew's eye involuntarily almost popped out of his head, and she knew that he approved of her choice before he managed to bring himself to speak. "You look absolutely stunning." Was all he could think of saying as he stood looking admiringly at her.

"And you don't look too bad yourself." Was her, cheekily smiling, retort.

They walked to his car (where he again carefully handed her in), and drove to the restaurant, chatting easily as they went. Parking, he assisted her from the car, stood back a little as she checked her reflection in the window, and offered his arm as she strolled into the reception area.

Seated at a very pleasantly located table they ordered pre-dinner drinks while they considered the menu, comparing likes and dislikes. Having ordered their first courses and wine, they sat and

chatted about everything and nothing while they waited for the meals to arrive. There was no first date awkwardness – strangely, both were completely at ease.

After having their entrees and main courses, they danced for a while before ordering deserts and later coffee and liqueurs. It was a perfect date that could easily have been just one of many delightful evenings out rather than their first and only after a few hours of first meeting.

Leaning back as they were finishing the last of their drinks, Andrew smiled across the table at Bryony and commented, “Thanks to you, this has to be the best Saturday I can remember having.” She smiled as he immediately continued, “If you don’t already have something else organised, would you like to come with me on an outing somewhere tomorrow?”

Grinning, she replied in a voice that he was already beginning to realise was indicative of her mischievous side coming to the fore, “If you can promise it will be more entertaining than housework, I would be delighted. I’m sure the cleaning and dusting will still be there on Monday.”

“So, what sort of things do you enjoy doing? Picnics, fun fairs, mall crawling, country pubs, drives in the country, horse trekking, lazing in the sun, movies?”

Bryony thought for a moment, and she looked, questioningly at Andrew, “Listening to you rattling off all those enticing sounding possibilities, there is something that I have never done but have sometimes day-dreamed about. It may not be possible, but you may know of somewhere.” She looked almost embarrassed about continuing. “I imagine a grassy bank beside fresh water – a stream or a lake – a quiet, secluded spot; a picnic, sunbathing and talking or reading; possibly a swim then a drive home through the countryside in the evening, stopping for dinner in a rustic country pub on the way. There is probably nowhere around here where that could happen.”

Andrew thought for a moment and smiled. “As romantic a fancy as that might sound, I believe I can make most of that happen. It would mean an early start but there is beautiful weather forecast again tomorrow. Are you okay travelling by car for a long distance?”

“I don’t suffer from motion sickness and in your car I’m sure that any distance would be a pleasure. Where did you have in mind?”

“That will be a surprise. I’ll pack up a picnic hamper and organise a suitable blanket to sit on. You just bring what you need, and I believe that we can make a reasonable job of bringing your dream to life,”

“Can I assist with the hamper?”

“I was just going to pop into the 24-hour supermarket on my way home and get things from there.”

“Can I come and help?”

“If you like, it is on the way to your apartment.”

Walking around the supermarket they might have been mistaken for a young, married couple as they picked out favourite cheeses, pate, fruit, French loaves and other 'picnic treats' they both fancied. Some cool drinks, a nice wine and they were done.

They drove to Bryony's apartment in companionable silence – both reflecting on the relatively few hours that they had spent together and the immediate friendship that had developed between them.

He walked her to the door, saying that he would call for her at 7 am in the morning if that was not too early. She leaned towards him, "Thank you for a wonderful afternoon and evening."

"It has been a pleasure." He briefly kissed her gently on the lips and she eagerly responded.

That night Bryony drifted off to sleep reliving that kiss and dreamed of sunny afternoons by a lake.

In the light of the new day, she had started to think about the previous day's events and had to admit to herself that it had been unusual in so many ways. A chance meeting: afternoon tea and a dinner date all with a person who she had never seen before and, although they had shared more personal details than was normal in such a short time, they were, really, still complete strangers. Now they were about to head out for a whole day together, to an undisclosed destination, probably miles out of town. Why was she not a little worried? Her normal caution would have had the red flags frantically waving all over the place long before now and yet she was not in the least concerned. Perhaps she should let someone know that she was going out and with whom – but, apart from her parents, there was no one that she felt comfortable about talking about this, and she did not feel inclined to cause them concern when all her instincts were, strangely, telling her that everything was okay.

Andrew had sat for a time reflecting on exactly what had happened in that very unusual afternoon and went to sleep thinking about tomorrow and hoping that it was to be the first of many more tomorrows. Come morning he was still more than a little amazed that he had had the courage to speak to her in the first place and even more surprised when she had agreed to go out with him for the day. He certainly did not get the impression that she was an 'easy pick up' but there had been no real signs of hesitation when he had suggested the afternoon tea, dinner, or the outing today. Could it possibly have been one of those cases that one hears about but never personally experiences where two people sort of 'click' at first sight? He was rather hoping so...

On Sunday morning Andrew was up bright and early, packed the hamper and a freezer bag, a large picnic blanket, a small tent, several outdoors-type cushions, and suitable extra clothing. He drove via a service station to check the car and top up petrol and arrived at Bryony's sharp at seven.

Bryony had woken up to her alarm ringing and, vaguely aware it was Sunday, wondered why she had set the alarm. Suddenly she realised, woke up in an instant, leapt from her bed and headed for the shower, where she stood luxuriating in the warm soothing water, deciding just what 1950s style clothes would be most suitable (and attractive to Andrew) for the sort of day's outing that was apparently in store.

When Andrew saw the print, square-neck sun frock, the look in his eyes and the good morning kiss was all she needed to reassure her that her choice met with his complete approval.

Andrew packed her bag into the car, ensured she was comfortable, and they set off through the suburbs and out into the countryside. He had a good selection of music available, and they chose some easy listening as background as they chatted and travelled on, in what Bryony considered to be the epitome of luxury. About two hours into the trip they pulled into a little tearoom for morning tea. Then after a further one and a half hours motoring Andrew slowed right down – carefully watching the side of the road – and then suddenly pulled off down a little track that meandered for about half a kilometre to a small, totally deserted, lake-side beach, where he parked beside a grassy knoll that faced across the lake towards mountains, blue with distance. Several large shady trees bordered the area and there was not another person in sight.

“This is heavenly.” Bryony enthused, “How did you know about this place?”

“Some years ago, I was travelling up the main road in the early evening and my old car broke down. I saw some lights flashing over this way, so I walked down to see if there was a house. There was no dwelling, but a couple of guys, who owned the property, were setting up to go fishing. They helped me out and we got talking about what a beautiful spot it was. The upshot was I came back through a few weeks later and called in to thank them for their help by bringing some fishing gear for them. They were impressed and told me that any time I wanted a quiet camping site for a few days to feel free to use this. I phoned them this morning and here we are.”

Andrew had set about putting up the compact two-person tent with the opening and an awning facing out towards the lake, which brought another cry of appreciation from Bryony. “You have thought of everything.”

He smiled and asked if she fancied a swim before they opened their picnic lunch, “That is the prime reason for the tent,” he added as he indicated for her to go inside.

She walked into the tent and gasped. Andrew had a curtain wall that slid across the width of the tent and had hooks on the centre pole for clothes and a framed mirror about 45cm square. Her comment, “Now this is five-star picnicking; I really approve, thank you.”

Andrew came out of the tent after they had both changed and found Bryony tentatively dipping her toes into the water.

“This water is very cold. I guess lake water usually is and I assume this lake is fed from those hills.”

“How warm would you like me to make it?” Andrew smiled, expecting some smart retort – which he got!

“Okay, so now you are going to tell me that you can also raise the water temperature on demand, just like magic.” Along with a raised eyebrow there was a slightly cynical tone to her voice.

“Only if I am standing in the right magical place, so, if you would care to walk this way I will demonstrate.” And, taking her hand he strolled along the beach for about fifty metres. Dramatically waving his hands in the air he told her to move into the water and move to her left for warmer and to the right for cooler, until she was satisfied with the temperature.

Looking more than a little sceptical, Bryony slowly entered the water –expecting it to still be very cold – and then yelled with glee, “This is like a hot bath!”

“If it’s too hot just move to the right a fraction, or out a little deeper, until it’s just right for you.”

He joined her in the lake as she sat down, neck deep in the tepid water and sighed with pleasure. “Hot springs as well. What a way to spend a day.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“I find it pleasant to just sit in the warm for a while and then very gradually move back to where we have the tent. You slowly become accustomed to the cooler water and when you get out the air the feels warm and you can sit on the beach and dry out in the sun in comfort. Also, by then you are out of the slightly mineral tainted water and your togs are nicely rinsed and clean.”

Later, sitting on a blanket in the partial shade of the tent fly and eating their picnic lunch, Bryony commented, “This is so beautiful and peaceful it feels like we have been transported to another world.”

“Yes, it may be a long way to come for a day’s picnic, but I think it is pleasant to get away from the rush and enjoy the seclusion with just the sounds of nature to break the silence. Maybe, sometime, you may like to spend a few days here.” It was asked more as an exploratory question, but her immediate response raised his hopes.

“I think I might like that.” Said with a shy smile...

After their lunch they dozed and chatted. Around mid-afternoon Andrew said, “We will take a slightly different route home and stop off at a rather nice little place for dinner. Between here and there are several excellent antique/second-hand shops that we could stop and browse around if you felt so inclined. Or we can stay here a little longer if you would prefer that. It’s totally up to you.”

At the mention of the antique shops Bryony’s eyes lit up. “I understand that some of those country antique shops have some wonderful things for sale at far better prices than around the city. I just never have the courage to drive to them on my own. Would it be okay if we stopped and looked at a couple?” She went to get up.

“There is no rush. If you want to sit in the sun for a while longer, or have another swim, there is time.”

“I would love to stay here until sunset, but the lure of those shops is too much to ignore. You don’t mind, do you?” she added, not wanting to sound as if she was taking advantage of his hospitality.”

“Not at all, this is your day out and I would not have mentioned them if I hadn’t thought you might be interested - and there will be other opportunities to see the sun set here.” *At least I hope so, he thought to himself.*

Again, that shy smile but excited eyes, “Yes, I would really like to watch the sun set from this spot sometime.”

They started to slowly pack up their picnic, and while Bryony changed out of her bathing costume, he stowed the blanket and hamper in the car. When she exited the tent, Bryony was most

thankful for the mirror that Andrew had hung there. "I think I look reasonably presentable again – thanks to your thoughtfulness."

Andrew stood and looked for a fraction of a second, took her into his arms, kissed her, and whispered into her ear, "You look perfect to me – but then you have all day." He held her against his still naked chest and could feel her heart beating as she whispered back

"Thank you!"

Andrew changed, packed up the rest of their gear and they set off towards the first of the antique stores, where he was enchanted with the enthusiasm that she displayed for the many objects that caught her attention. Between them they made several small purchases, and then moved on to the second shop – which Andrew thought was even better and from where he had previously purchased a number of items.

The owner recognised Andrew and asked if they were looking for anything in particular. They indicated that they were happy to browse for a while, but Andrew made sure that Bryony moved towards a counter where he knew that there was a considerable collection of old jewellery at usually very reasonable prices. When she spotted it the gasp of appreciation was immediate, and she stood transfixed, gazing into the trays of rings, pendants, broaches, and watches.

Andrew watched closely as she went through the trays that the owner had lifted out onto the countertop. She lifted each piece up, examined it closely, assessed the weight and selected a pair of sterling silver belt clasps and several rings. He noticed that there was a locket that she kept going back to and then, almost unwillingly, setting aside. He caught a glimpse of the price and realised why it was being passed over. After making her selection she moved on to look at some other areas of the shop and Andrew indicated that he would like to purchase the locket but to keep it quiet.

They finished looking, paid for their respective purchases, and moved on towards where they were to have an excellent country pub dinner during the late dusk and then the two hour drive back home. As they drove through the dark countryside and finally on to the motorway into the city Bryony's eyes kept drooping and she was clearly having difficulty keeping awake. "Why don't you just relax, get comfortable and sleep. There is no need to stay awake for my benefit, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" she seemed concerned – perhaps that he might think her rude.

"Absolutely sure – I am used to driving alone and you look worn out."

She roused as they started to drive through the well-lit suburbs but did not wake up until they came to a stop outside her apartment, where she immediately started to apologise.

"Hush – you obviously needed that sleep. Let me help you in with your stuff."

"Please stay for a coffee. You probably need something to get you home without dropping off."

"I'd like that, thank you."

They sat over their coffee and biscuits and Bryony was again profuse in her thanks for the beautiful day out. The picnic spot; the hot water swim; the luxury of having the tent available to change

in; the wonderful antique shops with such great prices; the special atmosphere of the place where they had that excellent meal; the drive in such a divine car – what a memorable day it had been!

“In truth, it’s been an unusual and wonderful day for me as well.” Andrew confided, “I have never been there with anyone before – always alone. Indeed, I have never done that drive, visited those shops and eaten at that pub except on my own – and then never in one day. I have eaten at the pub on several occasions when travelling – in fact I designed the dining room for the owner after we had been talking during one visit – but I never taken anyone there. But do you realise that, even though we have had afternoon tea, two dinners, a picnic, and a long road trip together, we still don’t know very much about each other beyond names and work. Other names; birthdays; birthplace; family; all the little details never came up in discussion. I’m thinking that we need another date – very soon – to fill in some background. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“You know, I’d not even thought about that. (She blushed – not because of the truth of his comments, but because of her similar thoughts that very morning which she had pushed to the back of her mind as being irrelevant.) You are right – we don’t really know each other at all, do we?” Then, mischievously, “perhaps we are both hiding some dark secrets. Would another date be wise or would the bubble burst when we discovered the real people behind the cool facades we have put up?” She was laughing now.

“Well, I’m game if you are. Tomorrow is Monday. How is your calendar looking?”

Bryony looked at him, wide eyed. “You’re serious, aren’t you? Well, as it happens, I do have a potentially free afternoon – actually from about 11:30. There are a heap of things I could be doing – or perhaps should be doing – but I am easily tempted to do things apart from work!”

“I have nothing in the afternoon that would stop the world spinning if I did not do it. Would you like to meet for lunch and then see what the afternoon brings forth?”

“Are you always this impulsive? There was a serious note under the smile and wide eyes.

“Quite often, fortunately, but not usually in relation this sort of situation. It’s apparently my creative side of me that leads to sudden ‘bright ideas’, but generally only in respect to designs or artwork and not things pertaining to my private life. I think you must have some devilish magical powers that alter my mind in some way.”

“Yes, just like your power to make lake water warm!” There was that mischievous grin again.

“Right, where shall we meet and when, and do you have any preferences about lunch?”

“I will be working from home all morning, so I can meet you wherever you like.”

“Okay, what say I pick you up here at, say, 11:45, and we can see what the weather is like before we choose where to go?”

He stood to leave, and Bryony accompanied him to the door.

“Thank you again for a perfect day.”

He took her in his arms, "It was a real pleasure and I look forward to learning all your dark secrets!" With that his caress was tight and the kisses were real as she settled into his arms with a contented sigh.

Andrew's dreams were of a very modest 1950s style bathing suit that seemed to accentuate rather than conceal the trim, shapely, body beneath it; the shapeliness of which he had confirmed by a quick check on size tag on her bra hanging on the tent pole; the firmness of which he had proof of, having held those breasts against his chest only hours before, and by the slim but well defined legs, arms and neck that were emphasised, it seemed, by whatever she was wearing and a waist that he could easily encompass with his two, not especially large, hands. His hardness upon waking being proof positive of his desires.

Bryony simply dreamed of being held by strong, and it seemed, loving, arms in an everlasting embrace, and woke in the morning with an unaccustomed but very pleasant warmth around her core - ready to take on the world - provided that the day did not reveal any deep dark secrets in his past, and, of course, assuming that he was not turned off by her uninteresting background.

During the morning Andrew spent some time on examining and cleaning the locket purchased the previous day. He carefully removed the chain and opened the locket out almost flat. There was nothing in it, but he noted the gold rating and then gave attention to another mark that was visible and that looked familiar. Opening his computer, he searched until he was able to confirm what the mark meant.

Part-filling a small tumbler with Gin, he placed the chain and locket in and watched the years of accumulated dirt start to soften and float away. Using a small, very soft brush he gently assisted the fluid by brushing away the dirt as it loosened. Then, making a very mild mix of washing up liquid and warm water he carefully washed the whole thing – using the brush to gently move the last of the dust and what was probably talcum powder. Finally, he rinsed everything under running water before placing all the pieces on a soft cloth and gently patting dry. He then took up a magnifying glass and examined all the markings again, looked closely at the brilliant stones that surrounded the heart shaped front, checked the hinge and clasp and the fine chain.

Satisfied, he replaced the chain, carefully wrapped the whole thing in acid free tissue paper and placed it in a snap lock plastic bag. Before going to meet Bryony, he called in on an elderly jeweller friend of his and asked him to have a look at the locket.

His friend spent several minutes examining the locket. He weighed it, carefully studied it with a strong eye glass and looked up at Andrew. "I think you have found an extremely nice piece here. What can you tell me about it?"

Andrew told him how he had come to buy the locket, how he had cleaned it and what he thought he had found out about its origin.

Your friend had a good eye for this kind of object. And I'm glad to see that you headed what I have told you about cleaning this kind of thing. You are correct about the maker and that the stones are diamonds – small but of excellent quality. The fact that it is clearly handmade and not something that has been stamped out by the thousand and the way in which the diamonds have been mounted

confirms that it is genuine and not some fake. The style is right for the early to mid-1950s. The price you paid is what I would expect in a place where the person recognised value in second-hand gold but not the real value to a collector. I am assuming, given your reasons for buying it in the first place, that you are not looking to sell this. Upon Andrew confirming this, his comment was, “this must be a very special person we are talking about here.”

The jeweller then sat down and made a few calculations before coming back to the anxiously waiting Andrew. “Okay, I am going to give you three valuations. One is the value of this to a legitimate gold dealer. He quoted an amount that was only a little more than what Andrew had paid for it. The second is its value to a person who liked it as it is. It is not a currently ‘fashionable’ style, but it has a market to people who like that era and appreciate it for that reason only. He quoted a price only slightly higher. The third is to a collector who knows exactly what it is and who made it and who appreciates the mint condition. I say mint condition because it has clearly been worn on only a very few occasions – quite probable never. I would happily give an insurance certificate to back this value. Andrew gasped at the sum – more than ten times what he had paid for it.

“Do you still intend to give it away? In a specialist sale with competing bidders the price could go even higher.”

Without a further thought Andrew replied, “Yes, it deserves an owner who appreciates it for what it represents and what it is. Someone who will use it and not just collect it and let it gather dust again.”

“Okay, you will need a suitable box. I don’t have one with this maker’s name, but I do get a great number of odd generic boxes from items that people bring in to sell for the gold value. My wife thinks that it is a shame to toss them out and spends a lot of time and effort cleaning and refurbishing the better ones. I’m sure that I have one that is the right fashionable colour for that era and will be suitable to take such a piece.” He disappeared for several minutes and come back with a beautiful velvet covered box that fitted the locket perfectly.

They agreed on a very reasonable price for the appraisal, the insurance certificate and the box and Andrew went away happy that his ‘spur-of-the-moment’ decision to purchase the locket had paid off.

A few minutes before 11:45 Bryony heard Andrew’s car arrive and, ready to leave, she walked out to meet him as he approached her door.

He greeted her with a kiss and handed her into the car. Before they drove off, he enquired if she had any thoughts about where to go for lunch.

With a shy smile she responded, “Where do you think it might be safe to discuss or dark, secret pasts?”

“Hmmm, I see your point: Would you prefer takeaways on my terrace – or is that too uncomfortable too soon?” He added the last bit in case she felt awkward going to his home, although, he thought to himself, she had invited him into her apartment within hours of their first meeting.

“I should like that.”

“What is your favourite takeaway?”

Again, she blushed a little, “Actually, I like fish and chips, just opened in the paper on the table, in my fingers. I know it sounds a bit ordinary, but I enjoy that.”

“And I have the necessary vinegar, sauces, bread, butter and liquid refreshments to go with that. There is a nice shop on the way – let’s go.”

As they entered Andrew’s driveway Bryony’s immediate thought was ‘what a beautiful old house’. They crossed the wide veranda and entered through the front door into a ten-foot-wide hallway which they traversed, past a staircase and through a door into a dining area which in turn led out through eight-foot-high glazed folding doors to another covered, wide, veranda and on to an open terrace where a large, circular outdoor table was set up and shaded by an enormous sun umbrella.

All that alone took Bryony’s breath away, but when she sat down and gazed down the long back yard and saw that it was boarded with fruit trees and looked out over a reserve and a tranquil lake with ducks and swans paddling slowly around, she was speechless.

Andrew saw her stunned expression and commented, “Can I take it that you approve of the setting for an outdoors easy lunch?” He was grinning as she looked up – eyes sparkling.

“This is extraordinary! How can you bear to leave this house, even to go to work?”

He set down the condiments that he had picked up on their way through the dining room and started to open the newspaper wrapping on their lunch. “I think you need to reserve judgement until you have seen some of the rest of the house before you get too carried away. Much of it has not been restored yet. If you would like to finish organising the food, I will get some wine and other bits and pieces.”

They chatted casually, as they ate their lunch and sipped on the white wine that Andrew and produced from somewhere in the house. Bryony could not help commenting on the view and the quiet relaxed atmosphere. “It’s hard to believe that on the other side of the house there is the city and the traffic and here we are looking out over a park-like scene where the only disturbance seems to be the wildlife and I suspect a lawn mower from time to time. It seems almost impossible. I never knew that park existed and yet it’s almost like an extension to your backyard.”

“When my grandparents purchased this property, the two on either side of us and the reserve were all part of their land, and they ran a couple of cows and the odd sheep for milk and meat. Grandma used to make their own butter and they always had cream to go on scones or desert. As the city spread it became impractical to keep on farming – even on that small scale. They sold off two lots but thankfully ensured that they still retained nice wide spaces on each side of this house, which included the orchard. What is now that reserve and the lake were part of their property, but they gifted that to the City Council with an ironclad provision that it stays as a reserve, and not be sold off later for any other purpose. As it is now surrounded by housing, it is almost totally unknown to anyone who does not live in one of the properties around it. There is a narrow lane that leads into it - across the other side – but the only people that I have ever seen around there are bird watchers and the odd jogger.”

They had finished their meal and sat sipping the last of the wine when Bryony asked, “What about the house? It looks far bigger than the bit we saw as we came in. You mentioned something about it being a ‘work-in-progress’, is there a lot left to do on it?”

“Would you like the grand tour before we have coffee?”

They went back into the dining room and through to a completely modernised kitchen. Well, modernised to the extent that the layout, fittings, and fixtures were all new and very modern and it had all the latest equipment. However, the old atmosphere had been retained by keeping the very high ceilings and racks on cords that could be raised and lowered – like were to be found in old farmhouses. As well as the huge double door refrigerator there was a very large, cool, pantry, from where another door opened to a staircase leading down into a below-ground wine cellar (complete with some wine) and another room with some shiny equipment that Andrew explained used to be a dairy where the milk had been separated and they had made butter. Grandfather used to make wine from excess fruit but there is none of that around anymore.

Bryony had noticed a basket of eggs in the pantry and Andrew explained that there were still hen runs and a house in behind the orchard and he was kept well supplied with fresh eggs all the time.

Throughout the ground floor of the house Bryony noticed that the ceilings were all very high and the walls had been finished in a dado style with a picture rail at about eight feet up and the upper section finished in a different style to the lower sections and that, like he had previously mentioned, there was a considerable amount of artwork hanging on most walls.

Off the large front entrance there were three doors on each side of the hallway. Those on the left of the front door led to large bedrooms that had been refurbished and furnished with furniture and furnishings suited to the period of the house. The difference to original lay in the on-suite bathrooms and built-in wardrobes. The original rooms must have been huge because the rooms were still noticeably big and airy compared with most modern houses. The third was another bathroom.

On the right of the hall there was what had apparently been a large reception room, but which Andrew had converted into his office suite. Then there was the staircase and beyond that, alongside the dining room, and connected to it, there was a ‘withdrawing room’ of significant size, which had also been set up to serve as a TV lounge. So far everything seemed to have been completely restored and furnished, and Bryony was starting to wonder what was still to do.

The staircase had only been partly refurbished and by the time they reached the upper-level Bryony could see what his, ‘a lot left to do’, meant!

A bathroom and four more very large bedrooms (all filled with furniture awaiting restoration) were in a sorry state. Paper needed stripping, painting was required, and Andrew explained that the approved restoration plans included building on-suites in two bedrooms and converting one other to sitting-room/lounge. The last room was uncluttered but still in need of refurbishment. This, Andrew explained, is where he, anonymously, pretended to be an artist. He has set up a couple of easels and a drawing table, several shelves of paints and there were a good number of canvases leaning against the walls.

“May I have a look at some of your work?”

“Help yourself – just promise not to collapse laughing!”

She turned over a few and studied them intently. Then, turning more she exclaimed, “These are good – really good. You should certainly consider showing them somewhere.”

“No one would consider showing these and I don’t know a café that might hang a few for sale. I don’t think that there is much chance of interesting anyone in even taking them on commission.”

“What about the houses you stage? Who selects the artworks shown in them?”

“I do, but surely you’re not suggesting I have some framed and hang them in houses staged for sale.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am suggesting. They are far easier on the eye than many of the monstrosities I have seen in houses for sale – or in many galleries for that matter.”

Andrew considered this for a minute and replied, “I agree that some of the paintings displayed in staged houses are not all that pleasant to look at, but I would feel a bit cheeky putting my own up.”

“Nonsense, some of those restful landscapes would create a very pleasant atmosphere in the right houses and I am sure that many people would be asking where they could be purchased. The realtors would not be concerned – all they are interested in are sales of properties and if your paintings were in a house that sold, they would be happy to pass on who should be contacted about buying them. I reckon you should try it and see.”

With that thought in mind they went out into the front yard and looked around the limited amount of garden that Andrew had continued to maintain. Then, he opened the double garage door and showed Bryony how the garage was connected to the main house by a covered walkway onto the veranda, which did not completely encircle the house. Near the back door, through the wall where the pantry was on the inside, there was a room that was laundry with large space for coats and boots and thence to the back door.

The garage extended through to an enormous workshop with all manner of wood working equipment and above the garage/workshop there was an attic that was partially fitted out as an apartment.

The rest of the back yard consisted of the orchard, the chook run and several areas that had apparently been vegetable gardens but had been left to turn back into lawn. The whole section was huge – almost half an acre, Andrew explained, and, in Bryony’s eyes, offered so much in the way of opportunity for future development. But, of course, she refrained from saying so – at least until Andrew asked, “What do you think of it all – now that you have seen all that has NOT yet been done to the property?”

“I really don’t think you want to hear all my off the top of my head thoughts – it’s not my place to tell you what I would do if the property was mine.”

“But I would like your comments because I have always just gone ahead with what I considered at that moment seemed to fit, and another viewpoint – especially a female one – would be useful. Besides, you have some brilliant ideas about design and decorating and I need help to ensure that the

place does not just represent a hotchpotch of my brainstorm over a number of years. The whole project is starting to need some discipline and pulling together into a co-ordinated design with some discernible plan. When I plan spaces in work that I am doing I am very clear about what I am doing and what is needed. Here I have not been required to be so focused and my planning has been less organised because I have not had the need to sit down and consider the whole area. I get an idea and think, yes, that would look nice in that area. When I get the time, I do the work. Then, later, I think, okay, I think that this area would work very well as – whatever – and do that it. It is very bad practice, and I should really work out a plan for the complete house and stick to it. It is not a very good advertisement for my work in this state, is it?”

“Well, my first impression thoughts are based around my own need to consider every little available space and may seem out of place when taken in the context of all the area that you have here to play with – and of course, they will reflect a feminine point of view. My priority would be to upgrade the workshop. *At his raised eyebrows, she continued.* I thought that might surprise you! I would completely line and sound-proof it as much as possible so that it can be used commercially without complaints from neighbours. The area nearest the garage I would use to store furniture awaiting restoration and to keep timber and other supplies required for that work. In the middle area I would re-setup the machinery – probably much like it is now. I envisage it would be very much like a kitchen where one machine leads onto another in some logical order. Then I would wall off the far end, where there is still good light, and turn it into a showroom for completed items that are ready for use or sale and where they would not be getting dusty from the workshop operation. Items that were restored and which you did not wish to keep could be used for house staging or sale. Then I would finish the upper level of that building with the front – over the garage and start of the workshop - being a self-contained flat and the far end, walled off and made dust-proof to use as a finishing room for the restored furniture. Dust-free for varnishing or French polishing; good light day or night and as that is quiet work, it being up high would not create a noise problem if you wanted to work at night. In the longer term you may wish to consider building a new garage on the other side of the house and using the existing the garage area for incoming goods. Then you have a ready-made additional business where you could engage a man – or perhaps a married couple – to live in the apartment and to operate the restoration business under your direction (and, if you would like that, with your assistance).”

She paused, and Andrew was simply gazing at her open-mouthed. “You saw all that in just the short time we spent in there?”

She grinned, “Yes – but it is just an impression. I’m sure that the architect in you would soon see practical problems with what I am visualising on the run. I just looked at it as a potential multi-revenue-earning space that was currently being overlooked in favour of the house that is already very liveable but is too cluttered in the areas that still need work. This solves that problem as well, I think.”

“Dare I ask you to go on?”

“I see the upstairs of the house as needing to be looked at carefully once all the clutter is removed. My first impression was to leave your studio there and possibly leave one of the other rooms for a similar use – a domestic work room. Then, perhaps two bedrooms, with a connecting bathroom; a small lounge with maybe a curtained-off area where one could make afternoon tea or even a light supper. An area where perhaps visitors could be self-contained if they so desired or, even though it is

upstairs, a place where one could accommodate elderly parents. Possibly even the main bedrooms upstairs and visitors down. I'm not sure. I would need to see it empty to decide.

"I have thought of several options for the upstairs – much along the same lines as you are suggesting – but have not been able to decide in my own mind which would work best. I have even wondered if perhaps I might have done the downstairs a little different to make better use of all the space there, but I went ahead with my office as the top priority and things just developed from there."

"It's not too late to make some adjustments there that may help, is it?"

"No, there are several little things that I could have done different but that would not be too difficult to alter as there would be nothing structural involved."

"Oh, I know nothing about that sort of thing in buildings – only in clothes." She laughed. "Like I was saying, you will probably be able to pull my other suggestions apart on those grounds alone. I just see space, not the problems of changing it."

Both went quiet for a few moments – each thinking their own, and interestingly, rather similar, thoughts.

"How would you like to spend the rest of the afternoon and the evening?" Andrew asked. "Do you fancy a coffee and then perhaps a drive or a walk – or both?"

"I'd love a coffee and we were going to spend this time finding out all about our deep, dark secret backgrounds, so whatever the best stage-set is for that drama would be fine with me."

She sat in the kitchen while he brewed coffee and, before he took a seat by her, he went into the lounge and returned with a large photograph album, saying, "My family and my life in pictures - the complete exposé."

They sat drinking their coffee and chatting about the photos – filling in gaps in knowledge about birthdays, family, places they had lived and travelled to, all the little background details that such albums tend to remind one of, for some time until conversation began to lapse. "What do you think about an adjournment to somewhere that is not all about me? I would like to learn more about you and (he grinned) I am worried that the more you find out about me the less likely you will be to want to tell me about yourself."

"There is not much to tell really. What you already know is about all there is to my limited claims to anything exciting in life."

"Now that I simply can't believe! There has to be a story or two behind that cute little scar on your thigh; the reason why you have two ear piercings; your family; your hometown; your school days; the journey that has brought you to today, why you appear to be favouring your left leg at the moment and all then other new things that I see about you each time we meet. Come on, let's drive over to the Mall, grab a disgustingly decadent box of goodies for an afternoon tea in the park where we can sit in 1950s style under a shady tree and learn about your dark mysterious past"

And so, a little while later, sitting under a tree, on a blanket and cushions that had appeared from the back of his car, gazing out over the duck pond, and nibbling on sticky cakes, Andrew and

Bryony were discussing her past. At least Andrew was, laughingly, asking leading questions and Bryony had, because of the very relaxed atmosphere, been, almost unwittingly, telling him all sorts of things about her history. One point that had immediately attracted his attention was that the coming Saturday would be her birthday.

Filling that morsel away in a corner of his mind, Andrew kept the discussion on light general matters that – one never knows – might draw out information that would fill in gaps in his knowledge about that lady who was rapidly becoming more and more interesting to him. There seemed to be a mutual bond and understanding between them and a relaxation that he had never experienced before on such short acquaintance. He sensed also that it was probably the same for her and he was very keen to ensure that this association continued.

During a short lull in conversation Andrew leaned back on his cushion and, with a far-away look in his eyes, started to quote parts of some poetic lines. “A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou beside me underneath the bough...”

“And in answer to the question in the next line – Yes, I think it could be.”

He looked quizzically at her, “What could be?”

“Paradise! I had you well and truly figured as a romantic, and I might have expected Shakespeare or Keats, but I would never have thought of Omar Khayyam. The only thing missing is the book of verses and then this ‘Wilderness would be Paradise e’now’. Except perhaps for the singing part, and it’s not quite enough of a wilderness for me to burst into song.”

He regarded her with great amusement and obvious respect in his eyes, “Who would have thought that I might have found a fellow enthusiast of an ancient Persian poet. Most people would have no idea where that originated and may even have thought I dreamed them up myself. There is no fooling you, is there?”

They were still laughing as they packed up their improvised picnic and started back to the car.

Andrew raised the question of what they could do in the evening and Bryony’s rather sad reply was that she had better pretend that she was responsible business owner and do some work tomorrow, so needed to get an early night. But this was dramatically brightened in Andrew’s eyes when she added, “You have been wining and dining me for the last two days, would you like to come to my apartment, and I will rustle up some dinner tonight?”

After a light but very satisfying dinner they sat together on a couch with coffee, cheese and crackers, quietly chatting over nothing in particular. Andrew asked, “Would it be alright if I had a look at your workroom?”

“Of course – but why?”

“Well, as you know I design workspaces and from what I already learned from you, you have a very good eye for that sort of thing and I would be really interested to see how you have set up your own, multi-purpose, business space. I thought I was reasonably good at what I do but you have already

opened my eyes to possibilities that I had never seriously considered as an immediate, and potentially lucrative, use my garage and unused workshop building.”

“Oh no, as I said, I just see space and try and use it well, because I never have enough. Your problem with the workshop is that you have never had to really consider it. When you made time to explore the possibilities of that area, I’m sure that you would have come up with the best use of the space very easily.”

“Maybe; but you do seem to have a eye for optimisation of space which is something I know that I sometimes miss out on – probably because I have not often have to be concerned about that so much – and it is something I should be much more conscious of. I think you could help me.”

” I’m happy to help, if you think I can, but I’m no expert.”

They looked around her small, but very efficient, workroom and she pointed out why certain things had been set up as they were and what she would have preferred if she had more space available.

They finished up the evening and Andrew helped clear away the coffee cups before taking his leave. At the door they mutually and without any hesitation were in each other’s arms, sharing a good-night kiss, before reluctantly parting for the night.

That night Bryony reflected over the past two days and thinking ahead to her birthday on the upcoming Saturday, was wondering if Andrew would like to be included in her day and how she might be able to arrange that. (Without being seen to be trying to arrange it – of course.)

Not surprisingly, Andrew was thinking very similar thoughts. He would like to be part of her day. He had an extremely nice present for her. He had no idea what she may have planned – but imagined that it may involve visiting her parents who lived in a town about an hour-and-a-half’s drive away. He did not want to impose on her and, after so short an acquaintance, could not see her wanting to invite him to meet her parents – as attractive as that idea suddenly seemed to be. He’d never been in any rush to meet any girl’s parents, he realised with a start...

Tuesday at around Noon Andrew stopped resisting the temptation to ‘phone Bryony and was surprised when she picked up after just one ring, “Hello, this Bryony, how may I help you?”

“Hi, it’s just Andrew,” his rather self-deprecating reply.

She appeared to gloss over his shortness, “Hi, I’m glad you called. I have been sitting debating if it would be bad manners or too ‘pushy’ of me to ‘phone you and then wondering what I would say if you had not wanted to hear from me. But I’m burbling on. How are you today?”

That sounds promising, Andrew thought to himself, and, in a much more confident manner responded, “I didn’t want to disturb your morning so thought I should at least leave it until lunch time to ring. Me, well, after such a relaxed couple of days I have had to focus really hard on trying to do some actual work today. My mind wants to stay in free-wheel mode. I think you may have opened up a new and more interesting side to me. And you, how is your day going?” *I hope that came out sounding right...*

“Fortunately, I made an early start and have had a good clear run this morning, so I am rewarding myself with a quiet sit down over a disgustingly un-healthy, light, lunch while I try and motivate myself to have a productive afternoon. Unfortunately, while I was preparing my lunch, I noticed the packages that I purchased from those antique shops on Sunday, and I’m about to give up fighting the temptation to start cleaning that jewellery I bought.”

Ah, Andrew thought to him-self – an opening, “Would you be able to use some assistance?”

No hesitation, “Yes please, *and clearly as an afterthought*, if you are free, that is.”

“I have one little thing I must do first, but I can be there in an hour – if that is okay.”

Just under an hour later Andrew arrived with a plastic bag containing several items – including a part bottle of Gin. “What have we here?” asked Bryony, looking puzzled at the Gin.

“According to an old jeweller friend of mine, the absolute, minimal, essentials for this task. And no, the Gin is not for drinking!”

They worked at their task for some time and, when they had all the pieces cleaned and stored away in airtight bags, they sat back and smiled at each other with feelings of a job well done – together.

“Your friend’s methods are certainly easier and far more efficient than how I usually clean old jewellery. All this stuff looks so much better than I had imagined it might.”

“Do you buy a lot of that sort of thing?”

“Generally, just the odd piece, but the prices at those two shops on Sunday were so much better than anything around close by here. I would have bought more but wanted to be sure that my instincts were right, and these pieces did come up well, before spending too much money. Now that I have seen what it is like cleaned up, I will just select a few for personal use and expand my on-line business to include old jewellery. You know, stuff that suits the styles that I am designing. I know that there is a good demand out there and it is clearly another diversification that has the potential to make money without involving too much time or capital and will take up very little space.” Bryony’s enthusiasm was a joy to see, and Andrew felt confident in telling her about some thoughts that he had been mulling over since the previous day.

“Since our discussions yesterday, I have given a lot of thought to the suggestions that you made regarding my property. As well as all the old furniture I have around awaiting restoration, I have inherited along with the house a large quantity of old, recycled, cabinet-making timber. It is all filet-stacked in the dry under the veranda of the house. Now, I know a young chap who has trained as a cabinet/furniture maker and who specialises in that sort of thing. He recently got married but, to get any regular work and pay his way, he has to live in a small town, and he spends his day making kitset kitchens in a big factory. He might be interested in taking the apartment and setting up his own business in my workshop if I were to finance it on some shared equity basis. And that would also give his wife a better chance of finding work.”

“That sounds like a very kind and lovely idea.”

“I was thinking of calling him and perhaps arranging to meet him when he finishes work for the day, bringing him and his wife down to look at the set-up so they can think about it. Would you like to accompany me?”

“If you think I might be of some help, yes.”

He blushed, “Just having you with me would give me a great deal of pleasure and I would like you to be able to explain your vision of the set-up. You sold me in an instant and I think together we can paint a better picture than I could on my own. Oh, I know that sort of work is my job, it’s what I do, but I have already found that you have a gift for that type of thing too and – how can I say this – I rather like having you around.” He stopped, now uncontrollably blushing bright red.

Tingling inside at his little confession, Bryony took his hand, “In that case, how could I refuse. Yes, if you go, I will go with you, and if you don’t go, tonight, dinner is on me.”

They did call the young man. He jumped at the opportunity of coming and having a look and they did drive up to collect him and his wife. They were excited at the idea and promised to give it careful consideration. They drove them home.

All that meant that there were two journeys with just the two of them in the car – the second being well after dark. It was during this time that both felt comfortable to raise things – little things – that were in the backs of their minds.

Andrew. “I’m not saying that I can’t or don’t want to see you again this week – because I can and I do – but I would like to spend, even just a few minutes, with you on Saturday. I know it’s your birthday and you probably have all sorts of things that are planned already, but would you have a few minutes when I could call in to say Happy Birthday.”

Bryony. “Every birthday I drive an-hour-and-a-half each way to visit my parents and have lunch with them and spend some time around home. I also go at Christmas and several other times during the year, but it’s on my birthday that the routine never varies. ‘Well, here you are (28 this year) and still single and not seeing anyone. None of us are getting any younger – grandchildren – happiness – we worry about you – all alone’, ‘blah-de-blah-de-blah’, - and so it goes. You get the drift?”

Andrew. “I know exactly what you mean. I also get ‘you are financially independent – you have a nice home and a good business – you keep on talking about travel, but you never do...’ Yes, I think it must be a parent thing, but it does get a bit repetitive and depressing – especially as it is all essentially true.”

Bryony. “Weeell. I don’t want you to think I’m using you and I’m not hinting at anything else or suggesting anything more at this stage, but would you consider accompanying me on Saturday? No strings attached. I feel very happy and comfortable when I’m with you and – it may sound selfish, but I would like to share the day with you – if that is okay. I would understand if you did not feel happy with the suggestion.”

Andrew. “To be quite honest, I have been trying to think up some way of asking if I might take you, or come with you, without looking as if I am pushing in by asking if I could come with you – if you get **my** drift!”

Bryony. "In that case, I would be more than pleased if we could go together and, please forgive me for sounding like I have an ulterior motive, but because my car is rather an old 'banger', if you could take me."

"What time do you want to leave?"

They stopped for a quick meal on the way back to the city and had coffee at Bryony's apartment while she 'phoned her parents to inform them that she would be bringing a friend with her on Saturday.

After hearing one side of the conversation Andrew asked what their story would be on Saturday. "There are going to be a string of questions about when and where and how we met and why have you not mentioned me before. Your Mother already had a list of queries during that phone call; just think how many more she will be able to dream up over the next three days. We need to get our answers sorted. May I suggest another date – very soon – like tomorrow, perhaps, please?"

"Yes please, but in the meantime, I need a reassuring cuddle – it's been quite a day!"

A request to which Andrew was more than pleased oblige – and to indulge her for as long as she wanted.

Lunches and dinners on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday saw them getting minor details such as when, where, and how, they met, with only the **when** being significantly altered from the truth. On Friday the couple that they had spoken to earlier in the week confirmed that they were very interested in discussing a deal with Andrew and it was arranged that they would come and visit on Sunday.

Saturday morning, just before 8 am, Andrew arrived at Bryony's door with a neat little parcel and a nice card in which he had written a very sweet note.

"Happy Birthday," They hugged, and he handed her the parcel.

"May I open it now?"

"Of course – whatever you want."

She opened the card and read the note, blushing, and then leaned over and kissed him. "That has to be the nicest card I have ever received. Thank you. With that I don't need a present as well. You are spoiling me, and we really hardly know each other."

Upon opening the parcel, she looked up at Andrew and slowly opened the velvet covered box. Her eyes opened wide as she drew out the locket, "This is the one I was looking at last Sunday – oh, you shouldn't have – oh, it's beautiful – oh, Andrew," she threw her arms around his neck and, holding him tight, kissed him like she had never dared to kiss anyone before.

A few minutes later Andrew patted her tear-clouded eyes dry with a clean white handkerchief and smiled, "I take it that you like it then."

"It was hard to resist when I first saw it but now that it has been cleaned it's beautiful. Thank you so much. Oh, I can't believe that you did that for me." And she was crying tears of joy again.

‘I had it checked, and it is quite safe to wear. In fact, the jeweller said it is quite possible that it has never been worn. He also certified it and I have arranged a temporary insurance cover. The documents are under the lining of the box.’

She looked quizzically at him, “Surly it does not need separate insurance.”

“Let’s just say that you might feel better knowing that it is covered. Now, what do we need to put in the car? It’s time we got on the road.”

Bryony went to fix her face while Andrew put the few items that were to go, into the car. When she returned, wearing the locket and ready to leave, she appeared very subdued. “Is that certificate genuine?”

“Completely, and all the marks have been checked and verified. You had your hands on something really special when you kept returning to look at it in the antique shop. My jeweller was sure that the dealer knew only of its value as scrap gold but had missed the maker’s marks and could not see beyond the dust and grime. He believes that the Insurance value is very fair but says that in the right auction with competing buyers the sale price would probably go far higher – particularly if it could be re-united with two, possibly three, other pieces that he believes would have been produces as a set.”

“Did you pick up on that?”

“Not until I started cleaning it. I do dabble a little but have never been that lucky. I thought I recognised the marking and looked it up on the computer. The jeweller, (who I will introduce you to), thinks you have great taste and I know he will be happy to help you in your proposed new business venture.”

“Okay, all set? Then let’s go.” He held her in a tight squeeze and kissed her lightly on the lips before taking her hand and walking to the car.

They drove in silence for about 10 minutes – both absorbed with their own thoughts – until Bryony expressed what was in fact very close to what Andrew had been considering. “I thought that I had a good – practically perfect – life and that nothing could get much better. Then, less than one week ago, you chanced to speak to me – one person out of hundreds, perhaps thousands, who were in that area at that moment. In that week I have done things that I had never imagined doing; dreamed dreams I have never had before; had my eyes opened to new and exciting possibilities and I now find myself looking at my life in a completely different way. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.” She reached across and squeezed his hand.

“Given my usual reticence in communicating freely on anything that is not about business, I still can’t believe that I had no qualms about just walking up to you – apart from the fear that you would turn around and slap my face in public. I just acted on an impulse and here we are. My Mother would tell you that the reason that I am not married is that I have never taken a chance walking up to a girl – stranger or not – and striking up a conversation. Are you concerned that this is too uncomfortable or moving too quickly?”

“Strangely, when I think about it, it seems right. I feel that I should be worried – or more careful – or something – but I cannot find any reason to feel concerned because I feel totally comfortable with

everything that has happened over the past week. I almost feel that I should be worried that I am not worried - if that makes sense – but for some reason I feel as if we have known each other for ever and... Oh, I don't know, I just can't explain why, but at the moment everything in my world seems at peace and – perfect.”

“I'm glad you feel that way as well. I am acting very much out of character and, strangely, enjoying it. I would never discuss business secrets with anyone – but I have been seeking your comments because it seemed the thing to do. I took you to my secret spot and I think we had a great day. I am not relaxed around girls, but I am completely at ease with you. No one has ever seen my art, but I allowed you to view it without any second thoughts. The same applies to my house and my photograph album and, indeed, some of my deepest thoughts. I would have strongly denied any interests in philosophy, any romantic side I may have, cleaning up old jewellery and artefacts, old furniture, or draw attention to any particular likes I have in respect to clothes. But with you I feel completely comfortable about anything.”

“Do you believe in fate?”

“If you had asked me that a week ago, I would probably have said no. But now – Now I would have to confess to having an open mind.”

Music was put on, conversation was complexly re-directed and they arrived at the home of Bryony's parents and the expected 'appraisal, assessment and possible inquisition'.

The day went far easier than either of them had expected and Andrew got the impression that both parents were happy that Bryony was dating someone and, having satisfied themselves that he was not some deadbeat or had two heads, considered he would do!

As they were driving back Andrew commented, “That seemed to go okay, I thought”

“Yes, Dad very much approves of people being self-employed and doing well, (which is the main reason why I have been permitted to follow my own career path and not just work in an office), and they both, separately, took me aside and in their own way, indicated their approval of you. Do you feel like you have passed a difficult exam?”

Andrew laughed, “In a way, yes – it almost feels like I have been scrutinised, assessed and certified as suitable to be moving around free in public. I have actually never been taken home to meet any girl's parents before so I'm guessing that it is normal to feel that one has been put under a microscope.”

“Actually, you are the only boy that I have ever taken home to meet my parents, but I had a fair idea about how they would act and was quietly confident that they would approve. However, I must say that I am relieved that it all went so well. I'm not sure how I would have reacted if anything had gone wrong. I know that we are both well past the impulsive teenager stage and, in reality, what we do is arguably no business of theirs, but it's still nice to know that they don't think I'm being stupid or anything like that.”

“Maybe not teenagers, but I guess we have both been a little bit impulsive over the past week. Not that I regret it at all, and I hope that you don't either. It has seemed totally right and natural that I

would find it hard to dismiss my feelings on the grounds that they have come about as a stupid, unconsidered, impulse.” He glanced across at Bryony and saw her smiling to herself.

“I don’t think it’s silly at all. I believe it is fate and it was a natural result of two people being in the right place at the same time. I don’t want to analyse it. I’m happy to just accept that it happened and to see what develops from here.”

Andrew reached across and took her hand, “Then that is yet another thing that we agree on.”

Mid-morning Sunday Bryony drove to Andrew’s because he had asked if she would like to be around when the couple interested in setting up a business his workshop arrived to discuss it further. They were extremely excited about the opportunity but were at pains to point out that they had very little money that they could put into the project. On the other hand, they would be willing to put in as much free labour as it took to get the premises lined and finished and were happy to, as they put it, ‘camp out’ in the unfinished apartment while they did the finishing work.

As far as operating the business side of the proposal they were again limited as to the capital that they could put up but were willing to work for minimum wages to have the chance of doing that type of work and for the wife to get a job in the city.

Andrew then surprised them (and, to some extent, Bryony) by agreeing to the minimum wage suggestion, but added that as a further incentive to making a viable business out of the project, by saying that the apartment would be rent free for the first year and that he would arrange for accounts for the business to be prepared each three months and he would pay them 50% of any net profit earned. As it was to be operating on what really amounted to something like a partnership basis, there would also be no rent for the workshop or showrooms. After the first year they could all sit down and review the progress of the business and decide how to proceed from there.

The couple, Alice and John, were to put it mildly, ecstatic, and they wrote out a short form of agreement on the spot and signed off on the deal.

As they left to travel back to what was now their very temporary home way out of town, Andrew commented, “You do realise that I will be doing everything that I can to direct business to the operation, so you can look forward to being very busy almost from day one.”

There were broad smiles all round as they drove off.

“That was a very nice and generous gesture you made.” Bryony commented as they walked back into the house.

“He is an excellent tradesman and I know he is a hard worker and wasted making kitset kitchens. Also, he only gets a minimum wage now, so in that respect he is no better or worse off. They deserve a break. He should make profits quite quickly so that will add to his earnings and, if I’m not mistaken; it will work out nicely for me as well. But in fact, it was not my idea in the first place. You saw the possibilities that I had been overlooking, or ignoring, and put the whole idea in my mind. All I did was put the appropriate person in place and there it was. I just saw the space as another task to get around to one day, but you saw it as space that needed utilising now, and then visualised the end product, up and running with outlets for production and everything.”

“Now, he continued. “Come with me as have a look at what I did last night and first thing this morning.”

Inside he had opened out the original plans of the upstairs of the house and he had, on transparent paper, drawn a proposed plan of what the alterations may look like. Upstairs he had already cleared out some of the furniture awaiting restoration and stacked the items in the unused part of his garage, leaving space to move around a little better in the rooms. He explained what his thoughts were and sought her comments – especially on how she would envisage the second workroom to be set up.

“Why all the sudden interest with this part of your restoration of the house?” Bryony was intrigued with his change in attitude towards this work in just one week.

“Alice and John’s enthusiastic acceptance of the offer on the workshop and,” he paused – considering how to word his thoughts, “Other developments and ideas that came out of an interesting and action-packed week have inspired me to actually do something and stop just putting it off.”

“It would depend on what the room was going to be used for and who was going to use it. Different people would no doubt have their own ideas on what was needed.”

“Okay, without details, what would be the most important things that you think would be necessary, regardless of what use the room was being put to?”

“Light is, of course, vital for almost anything, so maintaining the good light from the windows and not blocking that off to any part of the room. On the same theme, good low-heat, even-coverage ceiling lighting would be good. Because power points tend to always be 30cm from the floor and are difficult to get at under tables, desks or other work surfaces, I would suggest plenty of points around the room paced at a height that would be a little above the height of a normal table – even some that were above the level of a stand-up work surface. Light coloured walls or wall papers and floors that are either light-stained natural wood or that have a floor covering that is light and easily cleaned – not carpet as that can be very dusty for some types of work. Heating/cooling, like heat pump perhaps. Anything else would need to be specific to whatever the room was being used for.”

“That is all easy to arrange and I like your logic. I will ensure that kind of thinking is also incorporated in the workshop finishing as well. As I said before, I am an office and workspace designer, but the woman’s touch is also important because I might get the layout as perfect as it can be, but the little things like the height of power points, is something that can so easily be overlooked, and electricians will follow their normal procedures unless something different is specified.”

“Now, it’s lunch time. Where would you like to go for lunch and are you free this afternoon?”

“To answer your several questions,” Bryony laughed, “Yes, it is defiantly lunch time – you choose where and yes, I’m free this afternoon but one day – soon – I will have to do some housework, or I won’t be able to breathe for dust.”

“I can recommend a good maid service if it gets too bad.”

Bryony raised her eyebrows at that comment. "My place is very compact, so I certainly don't need a maid trying to move all my precious plies of very necessary stuff around while trying to clean thank you. But, how do you come to know about a maid service?"

"Ah, that is a very good question! While I do dust and vacuum and occasionally polish things, there have been times when it has all become too much and I have been busy either working or creating more mess. Several times I have called in a maid service just to help me get back on top of things again. They are really good, and I have never actually caught them looking too disgusted at my mess and I have to hope they don't talk about me too disparagingly when they go away!"

They drove to a large shopping mall on the outskirts of the city where they had a light lunch and then spent several hours just mooching around the shops - both getting to learn more about each other's likes and dislikes and enjoying just spending time together. Several coffees later they headed back to Andrew's house and sat chatting, apparently inconsequentially, until he suddenly asked, "Would you be willing to come and meet my parents and have dinner with us on Wednesday evening? It's my Mother's birthday and I usually drive over to see them. I leave about mid-afternoon and would usually be back by midnight, or thereabouts."

"I can't really say no when you so willingly came with me to my parent's, but only if you are sure that I won't be butting in on a family function."

"No problems there; they already know that I have been keeping company with a young lady and my guess is that they will not only be expecting you but would be disappointed if you were not able to come."

"In that case, if you would like me to come then I would be very happy to. What sort of things does she like, so I came find something suitable for a present?"

"Actually, if it is of any help, she shares our passion for old jewellery. Do you perhaps have something that you would be willing to let go? I'm sure that I could arrange a suitable box from my friend, if you think you have something. A brooch; a ring; a bracelet or a necklace, perhaps?"

"That would be easy to arrange, if you are sure that it is sufficient and suitable."

With that detail sorted Andrew had one more suggestion to make but was waiting for an appropriate time and place to do that.

"Would you like to go back to the tea rooms where we first got to know each other? It seems like far longer than just a little over a week ago, and it is a quiet, cool place to just sit and talk."

"She took his hand, "That is a very sweet suggestion and yes, I would like that very much." Squeezing his hand, she kissed his cheek.

In the tea rooms they sat waiting for their order to arrive. Bryony was thinking back over a week where she had had her previously well-ordered routine turned very pleasantly upside-down and was secretly hoping that her rapidly growing feelings for Andrew were reciprocated.

Andrew was just hoping that his own feelings were correct, and that Bryony would take his next suggestion with the same calmness she had shown with his approach just over a week earlier. It was,

perhaps, rushing things, but he felt reasonably confident that she might – given that she seemed to feel the same about him as he did about her.

Their afternoon tea arrived, and they sat eating and chatting. In a lull in their conversation Andrew looked across at Bryony and quietly said, “The weather is forecast to be fine and warm for the next ten days, would you be interested in spending next weekend camping at that beach by the lake? I know it may appear to be rushing our relationship, (we do have a relationship, don’t we), but it is getting late in the summer and while the weather is still nice it seems to me to be an ideal time to go. I would suggest travelling down Friday afternoon and returning Sunday afternoon. Is that something you would like to do? Just say if you don’t feel comfortable with the idea – it is just a suggestion.” He stumbled to a stop – waiting for her reaction.

Bryony had been nodding to the question about having a relationship and, to his surprise and joy, her eyes were wide with glee as she answered, “Yes please, that sounds wonderful. It is such a beautiful, romantic, place and I could get to watch the sunset (*she reached across the table and took his hand*) with you. I was hoping that we could really do that one day and I can’t think of a better time than a summer evening. Thank you.”

“That’s great. I have all the necessary gear, sleeping bags; self-inflating mattresses; blankets; cooking and eating stuff and a small fridge that runs off the car; lights and so on, so all you need is whatever you want to bring. You have seen the tent so you know that there is an inside wall so you will be able to protect your privacy. I will arrange food on Friday Morning so everything will be fresh. Is there anything you particularly want?”

Internally frowning a little bit about being walled off from Andrew in the tent (and seriously wondering at herself for already feeling somehow cheated about that), she answered, “You seem to have everything that is required. I will come with you on Friday morning to help with the shopping and I insist on sharing the cost of the food. You have done so much for me over the past week, and it is only fair that I pay my way.”

The week flew by with the two meeting at least once every day. They had dinner on Wednesday with Andrew’s parents, which turned out be very relaxed and at times hilarious, with his father having a wicked sense of humour. The drive home, although late, was romantic, but not nearly as romantic as the hour spent in each other’s arms as the cuddled and kissed goodnight – well into the wee small hours of the morning – before Andrew left her place to go home. Bryony again felt the pangs of disappointment when he had to leave and wondered hopefully (and, as it happens, correctly) if Andrew was feeling the same way.

Friday morning shopping and lunching together, loading up the car with what seemed to be a lot of things for a couple of nights away, and off down the motorway – well ahead of the peak hour traffic, to their weekend getaway.

They stopped at the last town on the way and had an early dinner, arriving at the beach about an hour-and-a-half before sunset. They erected the tent and set up the light and the fridge. Andrew erected a screen that had a solar heated shower set up over it, and had organised their bedding. The landowner had already arranged for a toilet to be on the site for them.

Andrew had set up the camp stove and boiled water for hot chocolate drinks which they held while huddled under a blanket as the air chilled, watching the brilliant sunset across the lake and down behind the hills. When the last glimmer of sunlight had faded Bryony lay back on the blanket and sighed with contentment. “What a glorious sight. No buildings to spoil the view, an idyllic setting and no noise to drown out the last chorus from the birds and the occasional splash as a fish went after a drowsy insect.”

Andrew lay beside her and held her in his arms. “And, to me, made perfect by your presence,” he whispered as he kissed her, passionately.

And Bryony thought the evening could only get better in one way, as she mentally crossed her fingers.

They made a light supper and prepared to settle down for the night.

At the opening of the tent they stood, arms around each other, gazing out across the lake where only the odd light from a boat and a silver moonbeam path could be seen in the silent darkness, the slight chill of the night air surrounding them. As they moved inside, and Andrew zipped up the flap Bryony stood looking at him illuminated only by the glow of the small lamp that was attached to the centre pole. “The tent would seem much bigger without that curtain across the centre,” she observed, innocently, “Do you think it is still necessary? We would be much warmer closer together.”

His response was an enquiring look deep into her eyes and a slow and deliberate movement to slide the curtain back against the wall of the tent. “I agree – if you are certain that my snoring won’t disturb you too much.”

“Actually, I think you snoring on the other side of a curtain that would not stop any sound would be far worse than having you where I could kick you if you snored and have you close whether you snored or not.” There was that wicked twinkle in her eyes again and Andrew decided that it was time to turn the lamp down low and prepare for bed!

Andrew zipped the two sleeping bags together to form a double bag on the two self-inflating air mattresses, and, in just their underwear, they snuggled down, spooned together, and enjoyed the very intimate closeness until they finally succumbed to sleep.

Just after dawn Andrew awoke and found that he had one hand confidently against a firm, warm breast, held in place by a still sleeping Bryony. Outside the dawn chorus was in full song and he lay there thinking that life could not be more perfect.”

Bryony stirred and moved her head so that she could see him, “Good morning, isn’t it beautiful just being here with the birds singing and everything else so peaceful? You didn’t snore – did I?”

“Not that I heard.”

She had made no indication that his hand on her breast was concerning her – in fact she appeared to be holding him tighter.

She sighed, "I'm going to have to move, sorry." He quickly went to move his hand. "No, it's not that – I just need to go somewhere - very soon." Laughing she unzipped the sleeping bag a little and wriggled out, kissed him, pulled on an oversized tee shirt, and hurried out to the toilet.

When she returned and saw that Andrew was still laying there she smiled, "I'm going for a warm bath – will you join me?" and with that she started to strip off the tee shirt and her underclothes and put on a skimpy bikini. Andrew, to hide his growing manhood, quickly followed suit before it became too obvious, but she, of course, noticed. "Glad to see that you enjoy being here too," she wryly stated, "I had originally intended to skinny dip but was not sure about early fishermen in the area."

They headed out, Bryony directly through the cool morning air to the warm water and Andrew via the toilet. When he arrived at the thermal area, he saw that Bryony was standing almost neck deep, facing out into the lake and apparently washing herself. As he waded into the water, he noticed her bikini, under a rock, at a point where she would have been able to stay under the water and reach down to the bottom. Okay, he thought, there is obviously no reason why I can't follow suit, and when he came up behind her he put his arms around her, pulling her close. Feeling his nakedness, she turned to face him and hold him as they kissed. Life was good!

After standing the warm for a while – oblivious to anything but each other – they moved to recover their bathers and edged their way into cooler water before deciding that they had gone far enough and dashed back to the tent to towel themselves dry before dressing. Andrew threw on some clothes quickly and went out to brew up some hot chocolate while Bryony finished dressing. They sat holding their hot cups while breakfast cooked. It was a beautiful morning and, as the sun rose steadily higher, they felt the warmth and the calm infiltrating their bodies and minds as they sat contemplating the peace and quiet of their little oasis.

Bryony leaned against Andrew and whispered, "Thank you again for sharing this beautiful place with me."

Andrew turned and kissed her, got up to tend the cooking breakfast, returned and in front of her got down on one knee and, looking into her eyes said, "Would you consider becoming my wife so that we can enjoy this and the rest of our lives together?" and as Bryony's eyes opened wide and her face lit up he hurried on, "This may seem sudden and very quick, but we already know that we are in harmony on so many things, we have met each other's parents, we have established that we don't appear to snore and I believe that I knew that I would be doing this the moment I first saw you. We are both mature adults and I'm sure that I have the ability to keep you in the fashion that I believe you should be kept, and I think you will enjoy."

He continued to kneel, waiting her reaction and response. He could almost see her mind processing the unexpected proposal and trying to formulate a suitable answer – but the look on her face was giving him hope!

"Yes, please – or should that be yes, thank you – but yes! Sorry to keep you in suspense, but, while I have been hoping that you may ask one day, the suddenness caught me totally unaware, and I was trying to think of appropriate word to say and not JUST yes and my mind was totally blank apart from the thought that you had asked me to marry you."

They both stood and embraced until, looking over Andrew's shoulder, Bryony noticed that the breakfast was about to burn. "Quickly, sorry, breakfast, burning." And they both leapt to save their meal.

As they sat eating Andrew asked, "Do you have any special preferences in ring sets?"

"Now that is something I have thought about over the years, but I must say that I never expected to have a male ask me about ring SETS. I gather the usual question is just concerning the engagement ring. That's another thing I like about you – the willingness to think through a subject and not just latch on to one small part of it." She kissed him, again. "I have looked at many rings in jewellery shops and on the fingers of brides or just strangers walking or sitting around, and I always come back to the same thought. I would like a ring of the style that was popular in an earlier age. Not necessarily the 1950s, and probably not from the depression or war years. A well-worn set, because that would, in my mind at least, indicate that the original owner had worn it for many years and therefore it was from a deceased estate not a marriage breakup. In my mind I would see that as a long and happy marriage. Romantic, naïve perhaps, but I could cling to a thought like that and see myself experiencing the same thing. Can you see where I am heading with this?"

"I think so – a stop at one of those antique dealers on the way home?"

"Well, not necessarily tomorrow, but yes, that is the idea. Would you be terribly upset with that?"

"Not at all, and it would be more in keeping with the YOU who first attracted me. Yes, and we will do whatever it takes to find just the one that makes you see your future as being married long and happily. We can get all the settings checked and any serious wear fixed, but let's start out search on the way home. That is unless you want to watch the sun go down again tomorrow evening."

"No, we will see the sunset again tonight. Tomorrow can be the start of a new era. If I wake up in time, I would like to watch the sun rise. I know it will be almost behind me, but the view across that lake and on to the hills should be nice."

I can set the alarm on my phone if you like – perhaps we can watch it from the warm water, it might be better than the chill of the morning."

"You just want more of what you helped yourself to this morning." Big grin.

"And you would be fighting me off – just like you did this morning, I suppose?"

"Of course, we wouldn't want the water to stop bubbling, would we?"

"Okay, young lady, let's get these breakfast things cleaned up. We have a busy day of doing nothing – or very little – ahead and we had better get started before we miss the sunset. It's a very hard, full on, job being a beach bum."

The day did pass quickly, although all they did was sunbathe, swim, eat, read and talk. Talk about so many things that had become important topics with their new status as an engaged couple. Andrew had the Institute of Architects Annual ball and dinner coming up. He usually didn't look forward to attending, but this year he now did, and explained how formal it was.

“Should I dress in the latest fashion or some earlier one?” Bryony asked.

They agree that her choice of what she liked best was the only possible answer!

That led to Bryony saying that she had been thinking about trying to develop her own range of fashion styles, based on those of former eras. Not mass produced as that would take too much capital, but more just a few examples to get people interested in having things custom made for them. She had found some interest from other people and thought that if she designed some items and they were seen around, she may be able to build up an exclusive clientele without having to make the prices too high. In the future, if the concept took off, she may be able to stage a fashion show.

Andrew thought that the upcoming ball may be a great place to introduce one design and perhaps interest some other people.

Despite the leisurely pace of their day, it seemed no time before they were again in the warm water watching the last of the sun's rays as they disappeared behind the distant hills. They wrapped up warm against the chilling night air and cooked dinner before retiring.

There was no question of any false modesty as they settled down on the warmth of the sleeping bag. Andrew's hand found her breasts and he gently kneaded them, gauging the things that she appeared to like best. After a time, she turned onto her back and, kissing him, took his hand and moved it 'south' until he was gently stroking her increasingly wet centre.

Looking into his eyes she said. “My doctor put me on the pill some years ago to help regulate my periods. I must confess that I am not, technically, a virgin as that went one New Year's Eve, when I was nineteen and a group of girls and guys got more than a little 'merry' and collectively took the plunge. That experience is very memorable for just how unsatisfactory that all was. I am very sexual, but I have only flown solo since then. My little Rodger Rabbit is not quite built like you, but I think I can manage if you are careful - and want to...”

Slowly and very carefully they explored their bodies and later made long, passionate, and very satisfactory love – afterwards falling into a deep sleep in each other's arms.

It was still dark when Bryony became conscious of Andrew carefully moving out of the sleeping bag and she reached out to touch him.

“It's okay, I felt my alarm going off and I was going to have a look to see if the sun is about to rise.”

“Let's just wrap towels around ourselves and go along to the warm water to watch.”

They stood shoulder deep, her in front of him, skin pressed to skin as the golden rays come over the horizon behind them and spread across the lake and hills. Waiting until the best of the display was over, and the day was still just dawning, they left the water and went back to the tent to make love again, before starting the new day properly.

By mid-morning they had packed up their camp and loaded the car. Taking one last look around Bryony looked up at Andrew, “These have been a few wonderful days. Thank you for making everything

so special for me.” The caressed and kissed to the soft sounds of water lapping gently on to the beach and perfect stillness all around them.

When they drove back on the main road Andrew almost immediately turned down another track that led to a small cottage. Here he introduced Bryony to owner of the beach area, Max, ““Morning Max, I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Bryony.” It sounded so strange but beautiful. They thanked him for the use of the camping area and started towards home, stopping at a small town about half-an-hour along the way to have lunch.

While travelling Andrew mentioned the locket he had given to Bryony. “Remember I told you the jeweller had said that it was very likely part of a set. I’m wondering if the dealer we bought it from has the other pieces. I know it is probably a long shot, but if we were able to find them it would be nice to get them all back together. We should keep a close look-out and see if we can find other matching pieces.”

“What are they likely to be, did he give any indication?”

“Almost certainly a ring; frequently a bracelet and, on very rare occasions, a tiara.”

At the store where the locket had been purchased they did identify a ring and a bracelet that they thought were a match for the locket and purchased both, saying in answer to the shop assistant’s question (for the owner was not there) that they often purchased odd pieces for period costumes in plays and suchlike. But perhaps the best finds there was a pile of what appeared to be tatty old jewellery boxes that had been just dumped in a corner. Andrew asked what the boxes were selling for, as there were no prices on them. The shop assistant explained that there was no call for them, and they were awaiting dumping. Saying that there was sometimes a need for a box to be used on stage when, for example, a gift of jewellery was part of the play, Andrew offered to take the lot for a nominal price, explaining that the condition was not important, just the authentic look from a distance.

Of course, the sale was arranged, and they were later delighted to find that the box that had first caught Andrew’s eye, was an exact fit for the three pieces they thought went together; was correct for maker and was in reasonably good condition. Their Jeweller friend confirmed everything for them and issued a new valuation for the entire set – that would never, in their lifetimes at least, be broken up again.

There were stops at several other antique shops where, as well as ‘the perfect ring set’, they acquired several other pieces of jewellery to add to their stock for the new business venture.

Back home there was the next most important matter to deal with – contacting parents to announce their engagement! Yes, it’s true we have not known each other for very long. Yes, we are sure. No, we are not having a baby. No, we don’t believe we are rushing anything. Thanks for you good wishes. Yes, we will place a notice in the paper. We have not even discussed having a party, but we will let you know. Yes, we have picked out rings. We won’t try and describe them – we’ll see you soon and you can see them...

Epilogue:

Their engagement lasted through the short remainder of Summer, the Autumn and Winter, but in Mid-Spring they were married and spent their honeymoon doing some of the travelling that both had been talking about doing 'someday' but had never previously got around to doing.

The second workroom in Andrew's house had been finished off to Bryony's specifications and she had moved her businesses to the new location. Because getting the rest of the house finished off took a little longer, she had kept up her apartment – albeit with less and less 'stuff' in it – until after the wedding, spending her last night before the big day there. After the wedding, the apartment was put on the market and sold.

Within a year they had successfully started the several additional business ventures that they had been discussing and life was good. Some weekends were spent at their special beach, and it was there, a little girl, who was to look very much like her mother, was conceived with love.

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CONTRADICTORY COWBOY

*Cowboys ain't easy to love and they're harder to hold
They'd rather give you a song than diamonds or gold
Lonestar belt buckles and old faded Levi's and each night begins a new day
If you don't understand him and he don't die young
He'll probably just ride away*

*Mamas' don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys
Don't let 'em pick guitars or drive them old trucks
Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such
Mamas' don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys
'Cause they'll never stay home and they're always alone
Even with someone they love*

*Cowboys like smoky old pool rooms and clear mountain mornin's
Little warm puppies and children and girls of the night
Them that don't know him won't like him
And them that do sometimes won't know how to take him
He ain't wrong he's just different
But his pride won't let him do things to make you think he's right*

Popular country and western song.

Elizabeth:

It was my first day as a freshman in the law school of a leading University and I had intentionally arrived early to ensure that I could find my way around. From out of town, not knowing anyone, and feeling lost, small, insignificant and a little scared, I was sitting alone in the shade of a palm tree waiting to go in to my first lecture.

The large pick-up truck come, remarkably quietly, down the road and parked in the last remaining parking space, at the end of the row, close to me. I noticed it particularly because it looked out of place beside the small compacts and sporty cars that most students (or those who had cars) were proudly driving. A young man stepped out and he looked as proud of his 'truck' as any other student did of their smart car. It clearly was not new, but it did run very quietly and was in immaculate condition, shining in the early morning sunlight. Inside I could clearly see a guitar. Of course, I thought to myself, the truck, the guitar, and six-foot something of him in faded jeans, a big, shiny belt buckle, red check shirt a black Stetson and tooled leather boots. *One of mama's babies that had grown up to be a cowboy. But what was he doing here?*

He carefully locked the truck and was walking towards where I was sitting when a puppy, dragging its leash and pursued by a loudly barking bigger dog, came streaking down the pavement. In a single, effortless movement he snatched the puppy up into his arms, sidestepped the dog, which had leapt up after the pup, and turned to face it as it turned back on him. A harsh, "GIT DOWN", and he stood, one foot forward and glared directly into the dog's eyes. The dog was snarling, and he just stood, staring down. His eyes looked as if they were turning black and he looked fiercer than the dog.

Slowly the dog seemed to start acting as though it might back down: it looked away briefly and, when it turned back, he had not moved, his glare as steady as ever. Then the dog started to paw the ground – almost as if it was nervous. And still he did not move – his eyes fixed directly in the dog’s every time it looked back at him. Finally, as if admitting defeat, albeit unwillingly, the dog moved, circled a few times to see if he had stopped looking, and then, still glancing back, sulked away.

Only when it was out of sight did he move. Just in time to see an anxious lady and a sobbing little girl with skinned knees hurrying down the road. They stopped as the little girl pointed to the puppy.

He kneeled so that he was not much higher than her and, still holding the puppy, spoke kindly and softly, “I guess this is your puppy.”

She nodded, still tearful, but apparently not afraid of this rather large man.

“What’s his name?” Again, a soft, friendly, kind voice.

She was almost smiling now, “Whisky.”

“Now that sure is a mighty fine name for this little golden puppy. But Whisky has had a big fright and you have hurt yourself, so why don’t we all go over to my truck, and I will fix up your knees while he has a rest.” He smiled up to the lady in a way that could have charmed the grass to grow on the sidewalk, took the little girl’s hand and lead her to the back of the truck where he swung her up on the tailboard and placed Whisky beside her, giving her the leash to hold.

“Goodness me, what happened here?” he asked as he examined her knees and noticed that one hand was also bleeding a little bit.

The Mother explained that the girl had been leading Whisky when the big dog appeared and frightened him. As he took off, Mandy, the girl, had tried to run with him, tripped over and whisky had kept on running.

“Well now my pretty little Mandy, we can soon fix that.” And producing a first aid kit from the truck, he cleaned the blood off her legs and hand and placed neat little plasters over the wounds – continuously chatting to her and whisky as if they were old friends.

Lifting Mandy and whisky down, making sure that she had a tight grip on the lead, he raised his hat, shook the mother’s hand and waved them a cheery, “By now,” as they walked away.

*And cowboys like little warm puppies and children (and their mammas too, it seems) Yes, definitely a cowboy. But what **is** he doing here?*

An then he walked directly towards me, smiling broadly, and spoke.

.....

Ed.

My Great-Grandfather was the youngest son in an English titled family and, with a young wife and a comparative fortune for the times, emigrated to America where he set about accumulating property in an area that tended to look like the fertile and highly productive land where he had grown up. Over his lifetime he developed a very large holding which produced crops that rewarded him with handsome returns on ever-increasing local, national, and even world markets, and he breed and raised cattle that were to become famous.

On his death the property passed to his one surviving son, my grandfather, who expanded and further built up the huge holding. He had two sons: the eldest, my Father, inherited the property and my uncle, who had gone in the law, was left a considerable fortune of his own.

There were two children in our family: me and my twin sister Kate. The holding, which had been settled in a family trust, had continued to grow and, although there was still a small proportion devoted to cropping, the bulk of the property was now devoted to cattle. When the question of succession came up, my parents sat my sister and I down and discussed the whole matter with us. My sister had recently married a young cattle man who had purchased a small holding adjacent to ours. Our parents wanted us to share in the family property and it was, happily, agreed that the interest in the trust would be left to both of us. I wanted to be a cattleman, but I also had a hankering to study law, and I could see benefits in knowing more about business in general.

Fortunately, my parents were sympathetic to my desires and encouraged me to work with my uncle after school. Then, for a couple of years I spent Monday to Friday working in what was almost like an apprenticeship in the law office, where my uncle involved me in all his cases and discussed in detail all the different aspects of them with me. At weekends I worked on the property, and in the evenings, I completed a correspondence course in accounting and management.

Finally, I decided that my future lay primarily in law and my parents agreed that if I could get a place in a good college, they would happily go along with my idea of completing a degree and being admitted to the Bar. I sat the entry exams and was offered several places – finally accepting this prestige school.

The first day of lectures and I drove up to the campus, parked my truck, and spotted a real pretty young lady sitting under a tree. She was almost certainly going to be heading the same way as I was and it occurred to me that it might be nice to have company, if she would agree to walk with me. I mean, she was alone, looked as if she was waiting to go off to a lecture and, as I said, was *real* attractive!

I was about to walk over and introduce myself, but this little puppy came by at high speed, pursued by a mean-looking dog. I intervened, helped the pup, helped its owner, and looked around for the young lady. She was still sitting under the tree, so I walked over.

.....

“Hi, my name’s Ed. Ed Cantwell. I’m new here and just about to go to my first lecture – Commercial Law 101. Would I be right in assuming that you are here for the same reason?”

He was standing to my shadow side so that he was not shading me from the sun, and I was able to look up, what seemed to be an enormous distance from where I was sitting, into his tanned, rugged face. His smile could have melted the hardest frost as he slightly raised his hat in greeting.

“I don’t wish to intrude on your peace and quiet, but I haven’t had a chance to look around and sort of hoped you might know where we were going and be able to show me the way.”

How could I refuse? I went to stand so that I could be at a, slightly, better level when I answered, and he stepped forward and offered his hand to assist me. A big, warm, friendly, dependable-looking hand – which I took, and felt the strength of that long arm as he gently helped me to stand up. “Thank you,” I couldn’t resist smiling back. “Yes, I’m new here as well. First day. I have had a quick look around

and found the lecture room. I would be happy to show you where it is. Oh, my name is Elizabeth O'Connor."

"Elizabeth, a regal name for a pretty young lady, I'm real pleased to meet you Miss O'Connor." It may sound corny when written down, but there nothing corny about it when **he** spoke it. Warm; sincere; dependable; one couldn't help but feel as though it was all that and more. I realised that he was still holding his hand – but didn't want to drop it. I slowly let go, as did he.

"It's not far, but I guess we had better get going." I said – because I couldn't think of anything else to say!

"Yip, I need to get in early so that I can get a seat where I don't block someone's view." He grinned down at me, "One of the problems of being so tall." It could have been seen as a put-down because I am only 5 foot two, but the way he said it made it seem as if his being tall was a trial for him. One couldn't help but like the guy.

Where in that song does it say anything about being a cowboy AND a lawyer- or about them being so nice to everyone?

During the lecture I found myself constantly glancing in his direction – and noticed that a number of other girls were also doing so. (Unaccountably I found myself thinking, 'Back off, I saw him first'. Strange, especially for me.) He seemed intent on the lecture and appeared to be nodding and agreeing with points made by the lecturer. Apart from taking the odd note, it looked as though he was assessing the correctness of what the lecturer was saying rather than learning from it. Weird!

We, without saying anything about it, walked together to the other lectures during that day and throughout the ensuing week. Our conversations were about anything that happened to come up; the lecture, the professor, the weather, some news item, anything. But nothing about each other – that **never** came up and, although we seemed to somehow hit it off, there was never any suggestion of our friendship being anything more than casual and on campus.

Then, about three weeks into the semester, a day that had started off beautifully fine, suddenly turned wet. Very wet. As we were about to leave our last lecture for the day, Ed said, "I notice that you walk here every day, could I offer you a ride home?"

I didn't often see him arriving and I was not aware that he had seen me walking to and from the campus, but he obviously had noticed me somewhere. I was not one of the lucky students who could afford a car (of any vintage - I could barely afford to pay the fees and accommodation that were required over and above my small scholarship). Without a thought I replied, "Yes please, that would be very helpful, thank you very much."

He gathered me in under his arm, (against his solid body, which caused my prim and proper hormones to suddenly wake up and start to dance), and which also brought me somewhat under the shelter of his Stetson, and we walked quickly to the truck, where he helped me up into the cab. Inside was spotlessly clean and polished – even the leather seats were shining. On the ledge behind the seat was his guitar – black and inlaid with mother of pearl – and obviously lovingly cared for.

Climbing into the driver's seat he turned and passed me a clean, fluffy, folded hand towel from the ledge, "Here, this will get the worst of the rain off of you."

Is this guy for real? He's apparently a cowboy; this is a truck, but it is as neat and cleans as a new pin and, in addition to the obligatory guitar, he has a handy little first aid kit and fluffy clean towels on hand in it. He is studying law, he's polite, thoughtful, utterly gorgeous – and is it just me, but he has not made a pass - yet.

Meanwhile, Ed was also considering the situation. He did not date much. He was not against dating, but time had always been the problem in the past. That, and the shortage of eligible young ladies around the area he came from. Study, work on the property and in his uncle's office, had dominated his time. He considered himself a cowboy but one who wanted to be a lawyer – at least as his main vocation. Law school was going well so far, but he did have considerably more time on his hands. Elizabeth was cute as a button, very nice, easy to talk to – in fact he really liked her. She seemed to like him. They got along well together so far. Maybe...

"I'm just along there on the right – number forty-one, thanks. I would have been soaked if I had walked this far."

"Say, this is only a couple of blocks away from my little place, would you like me to call for you in the mornings and bring you home after lectures? We do have the same timetable and with Autumn being upon us very soon you won't want to be walking in the bad weather."

She thought quickly. *It would be nice and it's not anything more than a ride – although I probably wouldn't mind if it was – and he is a gentleman.* "That would be great. Thank you very much. I was starting to dread the onset of winter."

And so, it was settled. Just like that!

Over the next few weeks, while driving backwards and forwards to the campus, they had time for short discussions about all manner of things and found out where each had come from, what their families did, their hopes and ambitions, their living arrangements and, without either directly asking, had deduced that neither was in any way 'attached'.

Was he a 'typical' cowboy who 'just rode away – even from someone they loved? Somehow that was another thing about Ed that didn't quite fit the song. But it was early days!

Mid semester assignments were due, and Elizabeth found that she had held her own in the class, getting good grades and finishing in the top ten in all subjects. She noticed that Ed was getting perfect results, top of the class, in all the subjects. That is, until the last one, Property Law, when the professor was very scathing, running Ed down in a most disgusting way and carrying on about him not learning anything and ignoring all the good things he had been taught.

All through this tirade she was felling embarrassed for Ed – as, clearly, were most of the group. Ed, on the other hand was sitting there smiling as if nothing was wrong.

I couldn't understand it at all. Why was he not bothered or upset? Why, after doing so brilliantly in the other subjects, had he failed so miserably in this one. I had noticed him frowning and shaking his head during lectures – in contrast to his attitude in all the others, perhaps it was having difficulty with this topic.

Ed just let the old professor go on and then, when he finally ground to a halt, calmly said, "But what about Simpson v. McDonald?"

The rest of the class just looked blankly at this challenging action. A case that had not come up in the lectures and was not in the textbook – which had been written by the Professor himself.

“Ah, we have a smart Alex in our midst. Why don’t you stick to your football or whatever sports scholarship you wangled your way into this college with? You country hicks are all the same – all bush lawyers and troublemakers. For your information, decades of decisions, many at Federal level, are not upset by one insignificant case from a single small state decided by some incompetent local judge appointed by some dumb official who was probably his cousin.”

Ed continued as if he had not been interrupted, “and Smith v. Johnson, O’Brian v. Black, Williamson v. Richardson.” The Professor was trying to break into this stream, but Ed continued, “All of which are almost identical to your example and all of which went all the way through the state courts to the Federal Courts and all of which were decided in the same way as I answered you question and as a result of these cases new decrees have been issued and widely advised to the legal fraternity during the last decade. I suggest that your teaching has been incorrect and that as a result you have influenced all these students, who trust you, to answer the question as per your lectures, but incorrectly, Sir.” All spoken evenly, calmly, ‘matter-of-factly’ and in his normal voice - apart from a noticeable emphasis on the ‘Sir’. An almost military “Sir”.

The professor was apoplectic and speechless. It was probably the first time anyone – particularly a first-year student had spoken to him like that. He stormed out of the room, muttering about ungrateful young pups, and slammed the door.

Ed just shrugged his shoulders, smiled around the room, and came to stand by my side. “I’m off to have a short chat to the Dean, if he is available. I don’t expect to be too long and will take you home as usual.” He patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry, all will be fine.”

With that he quietly went out the door while the rest of the class just looked at each other in bewilderment.

Ed arrived at the Dean’s office and could hear yelling from within. He approached the Secretary, “Good Afternoon Miss, I was wondering if I might see the Dean.”

“I’m sorry,” she told him, glancing towards the door, behind which the yelling continued, “I’m afraid he’s rather busy at the moment.”

“If you mentioned that it was Edwin Cantwell waiting to see him, I reckon he would be willing to give me a moment of his time.”

She looked at him as if he were from some other planet. “And why do you think that?”

“It’s me that they and yelling about in there.”

“Oh!” and she picked up the phone, dialled the Dean, and when he picked up explained who was wishing to see him. There was a brief exchange, and she rang off, looking up at him in wonder.

“He’ll be right out!”

A moment later the Dean came out of his office, closing the door on the Professor who remained inside, still ranting. He too looked about to explode and started off with. "What on earth do you mean by starting an argument with your professor?"

"Hang on a minute Dean. All I did was ask a question and when the Professor flew off the handle, I pointed out why I had asked. I tape all my lectures and I have the whole conversation here and would be very happy to supply a copy. I'm sure when you hear what has happened you will want to fix the problem quickly and quietly. It would not do to run the risk of having this leak out to the public."

"Are you threatening me now?"

"I'm not threatening anyone. I just want this fixed so that you are not sending more students out into the world with out-of-date and wrong information. I have no desire to get the school or the University into any sort of trouble, but I am serious about having this corrected. If you will not listen then I will have to go to the Board of Trustees, and that would cause un-necessary publicity that none of us want. Just think, if your ex-students start failing State Bar Examinations, questions will be asked by the University Accreditation Authorities. Please, just listen to what I have to say."

A look of panic on the Dean's face. "Okay, but this better be good or I'll have your guts."

Ed played the recording. The Dean rushed off with Ed's final, quiet, calm comment ringing in his ears, "And I will expect a complete apology and retraction of his comments about me, in front of the whole class, and a regrading of my paper. I'm not real' happy about being defamed."

Ed was back with Elizabeth within five minutes. The rest of the class was standing, waiting expectantly, "So, have you been kicked out?"

"Nope. Things will be changed – quite quickly I'm sure. However, I reckon that we will not be having any more of today's lecture, so I'm all for going home."

As they walked out together, Elizabeth, still concerned for Ed, asked, "What happened with the Dean?"

He gave her the details of what had happened. "They will need to change the book and contact all the students that are still here to ensure that they are aware of the corrections. I think the problem may have come about because the Professor is an academic but not a member of any Bar Association and has not kept up to date with changes over the years. I think all the other lecturing staff are Bar members so if they are not up to date it's their own fault. I am aware of other out-of-date information in his book but I'm hoping that this will be found with the full review that they will now have to do. If it isn't, I will bring it to their attention in due course - but I pay a lot of money to be a student here, not to review their textbooks. Now, Miss Elizabeth O'Connor, would you care to join me for a coffee downtown in the mall? I have discovered a little place that makes what, I think, is a delicious brew. My shout."

As they sat having coffee and rather decadent pastries, Elizabeth, still confused at Ed's ability to point out mistakes in the university texts, asked, "How did you know all about those law changes? I mean, that is pretty complicated stuff, and you had all those facts that the law school appears to have been ignorant of."

Ed looked at her intently before answering, carefully choosing his words, "I am telling you this in confidence because, for a number of reasons, that I think you may appreciate, I would not like it to

become common knowledge. While everyone probably thinks I'm just, (as the good professor so crudely put it), just another hick cowboy, I do have a good deal of education behind me." He went on to explain how he has some other qualifications and had been tutored by his uncle at his law office for two solid years and some part-time periods before that. "I have had most of the things that we are now learning officially, drummed into my head for a long time and could possibly fluke my way through the Bar exams without spending three years at school. However, I want to do things properly so that I have the solid background to fall back on, if necessary, as well as the day-to-day practical experience. That's why I don't have too much trouble with the assignments."

"When I saw these obvious mistakes in that text, I figured that the book was old and, rather than reprint, they would point out the changes as we went through and provide up-to-date information as additional notes. When that didn't happen, I thought that perhaps the correct data would come out as a result of the tests – using it as an example of how further research was expected from students. However, as soon as I saw that was not going to happen, I figured that asking questions would get the answers. Wrong again! Anyway, I'm sure the Dean will sort it all out now, because it would not be in anyone's best interests to let it be known that a student raised the matter."

Forget the song, Elizabeth thought to herself. This cowboy seems to have all the good attributes and none of the less desirable ones. And he is a hunk. I might be considered a little shy, timid even, a swot, perhaps a geek, but I know that this guy is good and kind and the sort of person I want to be able to call a friend – and perhaps more. And she was thrilled when he said...

"I trust you not to tell anyone about what I said and, if you'll pardon me saying so, I really like you, so if you would like for us to study together, I would like to help you. We could discuss lectures and cases, which may be helpful to you and would also keep my mind active and perhaps stop me getting lazy. I understand that your living arrangements may make this a little difficult, but if I promise to behave myself, would you have any problems with coming to my place? I have plenty of room and privacy."

I lived in a three-bedroomed house with two other girls who were studying at different schools in the university. We had a bedroom each. Well, a bedroom, cum sitting room, cum study – our own little sort of semi-private space – and we shared the lounge, kitchen, and facilities. Okay for most of the time, but not suitable for having company around to study in peace. All I knew about Ed's accommodation was that he had, as he put it, his own little place. My prim and proper little voice inside was trying to tell me that this would be a bad idea, but my recently discovered, 'I've got a crush on a cowboy' voice, was telling me in no uncertain terms that I should take him up his offer for the obvious reason that it would be good for my grades – or at least I think it meant grades.

Ed was the kind of guy who did not rush into things without giving them careful consideration. After all, even a cowboy herding cattle had to think about where he wanted the cattle go and how he was going to convince them to get there with minimum fuss and un-necessary rushing around. It was, therefor, logical that, in order to ensure secure for himself a quiet, well-located place to live while at university, he should travel to the town at the beginning of the summer when last year's students were leaving or gone, and not wait until just before the new school year was about to begin and fight for whatever was left available.

I arrived in town and set about finding a letting agent. Happening upon a realtor who was also advertising student accommodation I met up with a very business-like lady who, I could see immediately, had me branded as a country bumpkin and an easy touch.

When I asked what she had that was cheap and suitable for a couple of guys she, all confidential like, told me about this place where three chaps had been living and made rather a mess of. The owner did not want to pay to bring it up to the standards required by the authorities so was letting out very cheap on the condition that the tenants agreed to accept it as it was and not complain and be willing sign only a one academic year lease because it was the house was also on the market with that proviso.

She took me to see the house and it was definitely in need of fixing up, but had solid bones, good location and lots of potential. I noticed on the notes she was carrying the owners asking price for a sale and decided to encourage her perception that I was rather dumb. Saying I was interested in leasing but needed to talk with my two mates, I asked her to please hold it for a couple of hours. Then I went back to her and said I was interested in taking it but wanted to negotiate on the price. She assumed I meant to rent and started to protest. When I said no, to buy, cash, and quoting a figure \$7,500 below the asking price, immediate settlement, condition as is, I could see the dollar signs in her eyes, as she nearly fell through the floor. I said I was only in town for the rest of the day and would need an answer by late afternoon so that I could instruct my lawyer. Half-an-hour later she called me with the news that I had a house.

By evening I had a relation who owned a construction company – and who owed me some favours – lined up to get plans approved for some alterations that turned three bedrooms into three bedrooms with on-suits, add a two-vehicle garage cum workshop and a roof extension that would be soundproofed (so we could have jam sessions without upsetting neighbours), and all the do-up work done to the extent that one bedroom and bathroom, the kitchen and the lounge ready for occupation by the commencement of the first semester. I would do the rest of the finishing work after I moved in. From the worst house in a good street, it would turn into the best house in the street before I finished university. I could then sell at a good profit or just keep it. Options! It sometimes pays to look dumb!

And so, when Elizabeth arrived at the house with Ed, it looked pretty decent – at least in the places that mattered – and anyone could see what it was going to look like when finished (complete with the white picket fence and neat little gardens, which one had to just imagine at present).

“How many of you are there living here?” Elizabeth was wondering how this was going to be quieter than her place and more conducive for studying.

“Just me.” Was Ed’s laconic answer - while wondering how she would take that news, given her apparent primness.

“Oh,” as she processed this information.

Apparently, her train of thought was not running along the ‘he will be the only one here and I will be alone with him,’ line, and more along the, ‘how can he afford all this space without flat mates,’ track, because she continued, “Have you managed to get a good deal because of all the work that is being done?”

Time to come clean, “In a way you could say that. I bought this house for a lot less than its true worth because students had trashed the inside and it would not have come up the authority’s standards if anyone had complained. Some good mates and I fixed it up, made a few alterations and extensions and now I am living it, finishing off the rest of it as I get time, and creating a nice little asset.”

“So, you own this house?”

“Every board and nail. Would you like to have a look around and see what I’m doing with it?”

The more Elizabeth saw the more she wished that she had something like one of these rooms. While her two housemates were nice enough, they were drama students, and they were noisy and seemed to have time and money to party. She needed to study to keep up her grades, and the shared costs of the house were turning out to be more than her available funds. She would soon be looking for a job – probably waitressing, or worse – and fighting for the bathroom and the shared kitchen and ...

It could never happen, of course, but purely out of interest, she had to ask, “Are you intending to let these two rooms when they are finished?” Of course, she would never be able to afford one, anyway.

“No, that was not my intention. I just want a quiet place for me, and the improvements will make it a good saleable proposition, either as a high-end renting investment property or a really nice family home.”

He could see the look on her face and suspected that there was more than a touch of longing there. Was it fair to ask? Was it even reasonable? Forgetting about her for a moment (if that was even possible), was it a situation that he wanted, or could see himself being happy with? He hesitated, but only for an instant, “Is that the sort of accommodation that you would like? He tried to make it sound as if he was seeking her advice on what he was doing but realised that he was probably failing miserably.

“Yes, of course, who wouldn’t? But it would be way out of my reach. I’m going to have to take a part-time job as it is, just to be able to afford to stay where I am.”

“He weighed his options: Make the offer; would she be shocked? Would her parents be shocked? Would he lose her? From her innocence it would seem quite possible. But then it seemed that she was almost prepared to trust him. Leave it for a while until she was more comfortable with him; But by then she would perhaps have a job, and they would be less in contact. Say nothing: and he would never know what might have been. May as well just go for broke, “What if I were to offer you one of the suites, your choice, in return for your assistance in finishing it off? No charge.”

He could almost see the cogs in her head turning: not just ticking over but whirling around at high speed.

Elizabeth was indeed thinking all the things that Ed had pondered. Parents? Space and Privacy? His proximity? Not having to get a job. Propriety? What other people thought or might think? Why? Why not?

“Are you really serious?” Her question was more to satisfy herself that it was not some, cruel joke that she had misinterpreted as a genuine suggestion.

Remember, *'cause they'll never stay home and they're always alone, even with someone they love.* Even if love is not part of the equation, he has already demonstrated that he is a loner. Could it actually work?

“Absolutely. Speaking personally, I see it as a ‘win win’ all around. And to show that there is no thought of compromise to you, I will even drill a hole through that beautiful oak wood door, put a lock and give you the only key. You would have your own, personal space.”

“My arrangement with the other girls was only verbal and week by week. I’m sure one of their friends will join them – some of them are there most of the time anyway – so I guess I could move as soon as it’s convenient. Yes, I would like to be here, but I would like to pay a share of costs otherwise it would not be fair. When do you think it will be okay to shift in?”

“No, my offer was no cost to you. How much extra do you think it will cost to have one extra person in the house? Almost nothing. Okay, we could share food costs, but if you help with the cooking, that is a big help to me because I can work on the house more quickly and make it better for both of us. If you don’t mind using an unfinished room while we complete your chosen one, you can move in any time you like. How about tomorrow?”

That’s what happened – well, not the very next day – but a week later after we had arranged furniture and sorted out a temporary arrangement of the second spare room. ‘All my worldly possessions’ fitted easily on the back of his truck and there we were, house sharing. I even insisted that he didn’t drill holes in the doors and fit locks – but did concede to a small slide-bolt, just to make him happy!

That then is how we came to meet, start to get to know one-another and take the quantum leap (for both of us in our own ways) of moving in together. Note, I did say moving in – not sleeping together!

The workmanship on the building refurbishment and additions was of a very high standard and it took surprising little time to complete the decorating and within a few weeks I was set up and comfortable in my new home. By the end of October most of the house was finished. With all the tutoring and discussing of cases and legal problems set in our course that Ed had been providing for me, I had steadily improved my grades and now was regularly second or third in the class. I had more available cash so was able to get little things for the house (as well as just my little part of it) and I found that I enjoyed relaxing from time to time, just listening to him playing his Guitar.

My musical education had been classical and on the piano. I played passably but had not touched a keyboard since coming to university. Ed recognised that I could read music and asked what I played so I just said piano. One day when we arrived home, he used some excuse to go upstairs to the soundproof room that had been built up there. There, sitting against one wall was an upright grand piano and a long music stool.

“I thought it might be nice if we could ‘jam’ together sometimes,” was his beaming comment at my look of amazement and delight.” I hope it is okay. They couldn’t get a proper grand up the stairs.”

“Okay? It’s fabulous! All I have ever had at home is a little cottage piano. This is... is... Words fail me. Far too good for me. You should be saving your money. Do you play at all?”

He grinned, “Very little. My Grand-Mother and Mother both play quite well, and they taught me, but it’s at a pretty basic level. The music stool has a lot of sheet music already in it, so there may be something there that you are familiar with. Go ahead, use it as you please.”

I opened the stool, and he was right, sheet music of all types: classics, musicals, popular, even some country and western. “Any free time I might have had is suddenly spoken for,” I couldn’t help myself smiling, “It’s just as well the finishing work on the house is almost completed.”

“I did wait until we had finished this room before getting the piano – I didn’t fancy trying to decorate around it! But I think we are due for some leisure time, don’t you?”

And then I did something that I would never have thought I would ever be tempted to do – and certainly not to a guy, and most certainly not to one who was in reality my landlord. I walked over to him, reached (well stretched up), put my arms around his neck and hugged him tight – my face buried in his chest. I felt him hesitate and then he wrapped his arms around me and held me.

When I finally came to me senses and went to step back, he placed his hands on my shoulders and looked intently into my eyes before kissing me, tenderly, on my forehead. “I have wanted to do that ever since we first met but did not want to run the risk of ruining what I hoped might be something good before we even had a chance to find out if we were compatible. I hope I haven’t offended you in any way by being a little too forward.”

“No – I have had thoughts too, and that is very unusual I can assure you. But I have to admit that I have been secretly hoping that we might be able to be more than just ‘house mates’ at some stage. Nothing binding; nothing formal; but, well, good friends.”

Ed was smiling. “Now and then when something has happened and you are thinking about it, as well as almost seeing the cogs turning in your head, I can see you mouthing something to yourself, and I had worked it out to be the words of a certain western song. In spite of the outward appearance, none of our family are really anything like that, sometimes accurate, generalisation. I think that somewhere deep down there are still remnants of the English nobility remaining in our blood. We don’t just ride off into the sunset without reason and warning. I would like to stay around and see where this takes us – if that is agreeable to you of course.”

I moved my hands up onto Ed’s and squeezed. This is just fine with me. And, not wishing to discourage you at all, but now we are putting our cards on the table I guess I should tell you that, I have always been a cautious, take things slow, kind of girl which has meant that, without putting too fine a point on it, I have never taken it very far.”

“Message received and understood.” Ed again kissed me lightly on the forehead, “Now, how about a tune before we get dinner on the way.”

And with that our friendship turned into an embryo relationship, which to anyone who was not looking too closely, did not in fact change anything very much. We still walked together, but now we were usually holding hands. We still went out for a coffee or a meal, but the air was noticeable more relaxed and there was considerably more gazing into eyes involved. Oh, there was now the added feature of a, more than just an occasional, kiss – but that was not public!

I had told my parents about my move – explained about the better room, privacy, and peace to study, and about Ed being a ‘super student’ who was assisting me greatly to the extent that I was getting excellent grades. I assured them that everything was still within my budget, and I was very happy. I did not go too deeply into the actual relationship between Ed and I, because, although that was still very innocent, I was sure that they would have been, shall we say, un-necessarily anxious about my well-being. I’m not sure exactly how much Ed had passed on to his parents, but he was seemingly always very open about everything he did, and I was positive that there were no issues in that direction. He was, after all, a little over three years my senior and, so far as I could tell, pretty well self-sufficient (although I was yet to find out just how self-sufficient he really was).

Then, one evening in late October, Ed's parents 'phoned. They were having to come to this city on business and wondered if there was a room they could use. I heard one side of the conversation as Ed was apparently confirming the house was as good as finished and all he had to do was build some fences and lay a bit more paving. Then, in his usual happy, up-beat way, "Sure, glad to have you, what day are you arriving. Yep, I will have the room ready. Yes, we get home around 4pm so we'll be here to meet you and I'll have a key for you so you can come and go as you please. Yes, I'm sure Elizabeth will be happy to meet you. No worries. Looking forward to having you here – it's been too long since we were able to have a good chat."

He came over and sat down, "As you will have gathered that was Mum and Dad. They will be arriving next Friday and staying for a few days while they attend to some business here. Good thing I had you to keep me focused and help me getting the place finished or they would have been staying in a bare room and thinking I just lay around doing nothing now that I am away from home."

Ed could see the look on Elizabeth's face becoming more worried as he spoke. "What's the matter, you look upset?"

"What will they think about me being here? What if they feel that it's wrong for us to be living in the same house, un-chaperoned as it were."

"They know all about you and the living arrangements we have. I have sent them photos of you and of us together. Mum already thinks you are just the cutest and can't wait to meet you. They trust me and know I would not hurt you, compromise you or treat you wrong. There is nothing to be concerned about. I know my parents and I am certain that you will get along famously."

And he was right, for, despite my fears, we did all have a great, relaxed, time together, to the extent I found myself quite sorry when they left to go back home.

But the interesting thing was that Ed and I grew even closer together during those few days. To the extent that I was now ready to have him meet my family. I suspected that Ed could see that as well, but he did not push me on the subject – for which I was basically thankful but deep down a little worried and disappointed. Perhaps he didn't want to take what was essentially the next step...

November: The Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks were drawing close. About ten days before we were due to leave, I mentioned that I was going to be going to the bus station to arrange a ticket to travel home and back.

Ed took my hand and asked, "Would you mind if I drove you home and then brought you back after the break?" He paused for a moment – obviously formulating his words, "And, while I fully understand that you will be wanting to spend as much time as possible with your parents, would you possibly be able to spend some time on the ranch with me? Or, if they can get away for a few days, you and your parents? There is plenty of room and I can easily arrange to transport you all, there and back." He grinned and gave a little chuckle, "There are plenty of vehicles – and not all of them are pick-up trucks."

This was of course what I had been wanting. Okay, I had not thought of it in those terms, but the object of Ed meeting my parents would be achieved. I was not sure that, as they don't know about the depth of our relationship, they would be quite prepared for the meet the 'boyfriend' **and** his parents.

“Yes, I would love to have you drive me home, and I do so want you to meet my parents. I’m not sure that they will be ready for your suggestion about going to the Ranch.” I hesitated and then thought we are both legally adults and we could break the ice and talk about it on SKYPE. “Why don’t we set up a link on SKYPE and see what they think of the idea?”

I was suddenly excited about the prospect because I wanted to be able to see Ed in his home environment and if mum and dad could do the same, maybe our relationship would take another step forward. That the reverse could happen never entered my mind – of course everyone would like everyone else and be thrilled for us!

Ed called his parents to confirm that of course there would be no problems if there were an extra couple of people for a few days.

The link was set up and my parents spoke to Ed and me together. We explained that Ed was driving me home for the break and then brining me back. That in itself was fine, but it was obvious that, while Mum was just keen on me being home for a visit, Dad was starting to put two and two together and getting an answer that was adding up to more than four! Our body language probably wasn’t helping either – crouched, as we were, together, in front of the small webcam.

Then Ed dropped the bombshell. “I have asked Elizabeth if she would like to spend a few days with my folks and me. Realising that you would naturally want her to spend as much time as possible with you I wonder if you would like to also spend a few days at the ranch. We have plenty of room and my folks would love to meet you. I can arrange transport and everything if you are available.”

Mum’s eyes grew as big a plates and Dad’s jaw dropped. They obviously had forgotten that they were visible on this call and their faces were pictures. The wheels in their brains were spinning out of control. I squeezed Ed’s hand (out of camera sight) and we waited for them to formulate an answer.

Mum recovered quickest and said, “I’m sure that Dad could take a couple of days holiday and add it to a weekend. That sound as if it would be a lovely break away, together.”

Dad was thus caught not being able to question, disagree or argue. “Oh, ah, yes, well I do have a few days leave available and it shouldn’t be a problem. I will see what I can do and let you know. Okay?”

We chattered for a few minutes and ended the call.

Smiling in a very sexy way, Ed commented, “That went well – I think.”

“I would like to be a fly on their wall at this moment. Mum will be being a typical Mum with wedding bells for her daughter already ringing in her ears and Dad will be a typical Dad who be wanting his daughter to have everything in life she wants - provided it does not include a man in any shape or form.”

Ed looked worried, “I hope I have not made things difficult for you. I would hate to cause problems for you at home.”

“No, I think they will be okay and will not want to miss the opportunity of finding out more about you. I predict a call within forty-eight hours. They know I am normally placid, but they also know

that I will stand up for my rights when I feel strongly about something, so they will not be wanting to upset me. After all, I am legally beyond the age when I can make my own decisions.”

A very telling statement, Ed thought to himself. I have a feeling that there may be strong feelings may be about me. I hope so!

Sure enough, the following evening there was a ‘phone call from Elizabeth’s parents. Would it be suitable if Elizabeth spent Thanksgiving and the Friday with them and then they all came to the ranch on Saturday, returning home on Tuesday or Wednesday? They agreed on Wednesday.

The next evening Ed raised the question of actual travel arrangements. Elizabeth had thought only of a reasonable early start on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and, allowing for the heavy traffic that would be on the roads for the holiday, probably a six-or-seven-hour drive to her home. Initially Ed’s opening comment made her a little worried. “Having ridden in my truck, you know it’s not sprung like a luxury car, how do you feel about travelling in it for so long?”

Was he now suggesting that he was having second thoughts about taking her? Hoping to reassure him that she was not concerned about the comfort, she replied, “It’s not that bad, and it certainly wouldn’t be any worse than spending a day on a bus.”

“I agree it may be better than the bus, but would it perhaps be even better if we spread the trip over two days, did a bit of sight-seeing on the way and stayed overnight somewhere, to break up the trip? There are no lectures from the Wednesday before Thanksgiving until the Wednesday after. We have only one lecture in the week before the University closes and two in the balance of the week after Thanksgiving. With our grades, the availability of the lectures online and the help I can give you, I’m sure we can turn Thanksgiving into two full weeks. What do you think?”

*Several things flashed through Elizabeth’s mind: More time together. – good. What over-night arrangements did he have in mind and was she worried? – Actually, she found herself a little anxious but more excited! What would her parents think, and did she care? - Yes, she cared, but in the long run it was her decision and, well, she was ready to make that decision in her own, adult, way. Was she ready for this? - If I’m not ready now I may never be and, if I think about it, so far there has been nothing mentioned about what accommodation he is intending. There may be no problem. Maybe I just **wish** there was! Control yourself Elizabeth!*

“That sound like a brilliant idea but are you sure it’s alright and what about the extra costs – I insist on paying my way if we do this. I pay almost nothing here and you have the house and the mortgage and everything – it does not seem fair that I get so much from you, and you don’t let me contribute.”

“I think it’s about time for us to have a little talk about a few things. Let’s get something to drink and sit down for a while.”

Ed made coffee and they went through to the lounge room where she went to sit on one of the easy chairs like she usually did in the evening. “Let’s sit together on the couch.” He sat down and, at his bidding, curled up beside him as he put an arm around her shoulders.

“I haven’t mentioned this before because I am well aware that some people get ideas about money and possessions – especially where friendships and relationships are concerned. We have found out a great deal about each other over the past months and I have had more than enough time to satisfy

myself as to the type of person you really are. I think I can safely share some more details about me that you clearly have not yet become aware of.”

Elizabeth turned and looked up at him, not knowing what was coming, but worried at his seriousness.

He bent and kissed her. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing too bad. When I said in passing that this house was mine – every nail and board – I was actually being honest. When I buy anything, I pay cash. There is no mortgage. I’m not saying this to boast or to show that I am not just a penniless cowboy. All my family is the same. A truck, a car, a house, a hundred acres of extra land. Travel, whatever it is. We pay cash. I have never had a credit card, only a debit card. That’s how we are and how I will always be. But don’t worry, we don’t go without anything because there is more than enough cash. We don’t tell everyone that because, you will understand, there are many people who would take advantage of that knowledge and, in particular, potential partners. I’m telling you now because I trust you, I do not want you worrying about this relationship being unfair and because I honestly believe that we have may have a future together. I realise that is not just up to me and I am just hoping that you may also be coming to that way of thinking.” He kissed her again.

He believes that we may have a future together – that is what I have been hoping for! He and his family are rich. Perhaps a bonus, but that’s not why I really like, (maybe, love) him. Okay, he’s not just a poor cowboy or a struggling student lawyer – which may help win over Mum and Dad. To me he is still – what? My potential lover? My future husband? My Ed! The fact that he is wealthy – maybe even a millionaire – is helpful in that it might enable us to move forward quicker without financial worries. I think I would like to move forward – quicker!

“That answers a lot of questions, but changes nothing. I may not be able to be an equal partner, but I still want to hold my self-respect by paying what and where I can. Okay? And for the record, I have, for some time, been coming around to thinking – hoping even – that we may have a future together. But that is because of what you have shown what me you ARE, not what you HAVE.” The kiss and the hug told it all.

“So, having decided that I will not let cost get in the way, and that you will insist on paying your way, and we mutually agree that we more than just like each other, what are your thoughts on a two-day trip to your home?” Ed had moved Elizabeth on to his knees and was holding her in a tight embrace as he punctuated his comments with kisses.

“Yes, I think that would be a lovely idea.”

“Or even three days?”

“Hmmm. Perhaps...”

“That way we could beat the traffic out of the city by leaving on Sunday. I could have you home on Wednesday morning and have plenty of time to drive on to the ranch by Wednesday Night and be home all of Thanksgiving Day. Just to please my folks, of course.”

“I was about to thump you for teasing me, but it would make good sense for you to get home on Wednesday. How long would it take to drive there after dropping me off?”

“Four, perhaps five hours. Depending on weather and traffic.”

“That’s a long time on your own – would you be okay? I wouldn’t want you falling asleep and having an accident.”

“I could always pick up a couple of blond bimbos to help keep me awake.” He was grinning down at her.

“Not if you want to keep me around, you won’t.” Grinning back.

“In that case I will put the AirCon and the Radio on full bore and keep awake that way. Yes, I will be fine.”

Three nights in motels with Ed. Am I comfortable with that? If we had separate rooms, it would be no different to living here. If he was expecting us to share – even a twin room – how would I feel about that? Am I being too much of a prude? I’m not going to dwell on the matter. I’m sure Ed will be a gentleman whatever the outcome. Oh, I had better check my calendar as well...

“Yes, Okay, let’s leave Sunday. We will need to make motel bookings though – it’s too risky just hoping to fluke rooms with so many people travelling. And please, please be very careful driving back on Wednesday.”

*She’s concerned about me – that’s nice, and reassuring. Motel **rooms**, she said. Am I expected to take that as two rooms at each motel or a room at each of several motels? I guess that is going depend very much on what we can get. I don’t want to push her – or embarrass her -but I kind ‘a hope that there is only one room available at each motel.*

“Would you like to stay two nights at one place and one at another or a different place each night? I was thinking that if we are sightseeing, we could take a zig zag journey instead of a straight line. Are there any places that particularly interest you?”

“Let’s look at the internet and see what there is and where we might stay.”

After spending a long time on the internet, they decided that their options were limited by two things: there were not very many places that they did not already know well and where there were sightseeing opportunities at this time of the year; and the shortage of motel or hotel rooms anywhere along the routes that they wanted to take. They also agreed, very much at Elizabeth’s insistence, they should plan to arrive at her home after only a short drive on Wednesday, so that Ed did not have too many hours on the road that day. She did not want him to run any risks of having an accident from being too tired.

With all that in mind the original plan was, by mutual and unhesitating agreement, modified to starting out on Sunday Morning, Driving about two thirds of the distance to a medium sized town where they were to stay in a motel with adjacent, connected rooms for Sunday night, Monday and Monday night, drive to a small town about an hour’s drive from Elizabeth’s home on Tuesday, stay overnight in a motel (that only had a twin room available), and on to her home on Wednesday Morning. Ed would then drive on to the ranch.

Rather than do a round trip on Saturday, Ed arranged to drive to Elizabeth’s town on Friday afternoon, stay in a motel and leave with all of them early on Saturday Morning. He would take them

home on Wednesday afternoon, stay in a motel Wednesday night and drive back to the ranch on Thursday Morning. Elizabeth Insisted that she wanted him safe!

They left making arrangements for the return the University until later – both agreeing that they would see what the holiday brought to light – both having an idea – both hoping they were right!

Life went on with little change until the beginning of their Thanksgiving break. Perhaps that should be ‘with little changes’ – like some more subtle little changes in their relationship – like more intermate kisses and cuddles and even more little snippets of information on their history. And one big change at the University, when Ed received his public apology from the Professor and the Dean, followed by a letter of thanks from the board of Trustees – mainly for the way in which he had handled the problem without going public.

Finally, the holiday. Saturday getting ready to leave and first thing Sunday morning starting off together. They took their time, stopping for a coffee and later lunch, arriving at their first destination mid-afternoon. After checking into their rooms, they took a stroll downtown to check out suitable places for dining. Meandering around a mall just casually looking in random shop windows and casually chatting, Ed was closely watching which shops and what items were interesting Elizabeth the most. He had been half expecting ladies’ fashion; bridal; jewellers; but was interested and impressed to find that it was kitchenware, books, department stores and \$2 shops that appeared to get most of her attention.

Elizabeth had been brought up in a middle-class, hardworking family who had by hard-won education, hard work and careful budgeting, managed to buy a nice house in a good neighbourhood and, by their late forties, managed to get themselves into a reasonably comfortable position financially. Elizabeth was their only child and they had saved to assist her with getting a good tertiary education in her chosen field. She had grown up in a loving, protective environment and had at a very early age learned the value of thrift. Hence, her interests in shops where there was a practical yet not expensive emphasis in their wares.

Money had never been an issue in Ed’s life, but **value** for money was a big factor in his shopping. He was impressed with Elizabeth, but sort of wished that she might show at least some passing interest in such things as, for instance, rings...

What he didn’t know was that Elizabeth had for some time had ideas in her mind about what she liked in rings – and weddings in general - and it was very traditional and modest (in both cost and style). Nevertheless, while she had hopes, she had no preconceived ideas about Ed’s intentions. She was however reasonably sure that by the time this trip was over she would have a better idea where their ‘relationship’ might be heading.

Evening, after dinner. Not much different to their normal living arrangements - except at home there was a lounge and (as they referred to it) the music room in which they can sit and chat before going to their separate rooms. In the Motel there was just their rooms. If they wanted to sit and talk it was in someone’s bedroom.

The rooms were not large, and they did not have anything in the way of comfortable chairs. Elizabeth and Ed wanted to sit, together, and chat while watching TV. So, in Ed’s room, they did, kicking off their shoes and sitting together on top of the counterpane leaning back watching TV and talking. Well, more accurately, sitting together hardly watching TV and hardly talking as the cuddled and kissed. No, make that intimately cuddling and kissing with the TV as background. It was with great reluctance that Elizabeth, needing sleep and wishing to wake up before their room service breakfast was delivered

at 8:30 in the morning, indulged in one last, long, lingering, kiss before moving through the unlocked connecting door to her room and sliding into her bed.

A tapping on the connecting door roused Elizabeth. Even through the heavy curtains it was daylight and a quick look at the clock beside her bed showed her that it was a little after 8:30 am.

“Yes”, she answered as, only half awake, she sat up and swung her feet to the floor, not quite remembering where she was or that she was wearing her usual night attire (a light cotton-lawn, knee length, nightdress), or that Ed was in the room dressed in just a pair of jeans.

“Breakfast has arrived.” He told her – trying very hard to appear to not be looking at the delightful image Elizabeth presented in the half light.

“Oh, Oh, thanks.” Trying to decide which way to stand without looking as if she was obviously endeavouring maintain some degree of modesty.

Ed looked her straight in the eyes and walked towards her, taking her in his arms and hugging her firmly against his solid body. He whispered into her hair, “I have always thought that you were beautiful since the first moment I saw you sitting under that palm tree, but you are actually more stunning than I could ever have imagined.” He bent down and kissed her, and she knew at that moment, beyond any doubt, that he was the one she wanted in her life.

Through the thin fabric of her nightdress, she could feel his hardness pressing against her stomach and blushed as the thought of him actually being inside her flared through her body. “I guess I had better throw something on and come and have breakfast before it gets cold.” She managed to say.

“Why don’t you just slip back under the sheets, and I will serve you breakfast in bed.”

“Thank-you.” She kissed him again, thrilling at the pressure of his firm body against her now tingling breasts.

Ed discreetly turned and left the room as she slid back into bed and arranged the covers in the most modest way she could.

He returned with her breakfast on a tray and arranged it across her knees, putting the drinks on the cabinet beside her.

Returning to his room he collected his meal and returned to sit on a chair at her bedside. They ate and talked as if this was what they did every day.

Undecided as to how they would fill in their day, they elected to shower and dress then go out, while motel cleaning did whatever they had to do, have lunch somewhere and then see what the afternoon brought forth. Ed moved their breakfast things, leaned in and gave her a big kiss, and went back to his room, leaving her to contemplate her feelings and impressions of the morning so far.

Ed had been all gentleman and even with that parting kiss, he had resisted placing his hands where he might have done – given the unintentional invitation that her almost sheer nightdress had offered. Pleased that he was such a gentleman but at the same time strangely disappointed that he had remained so, she was finding it difficult to deal with all the new emotions. Showering, she realised that

her nipples were still taugth which the desires the kiss had engendered, and she relished in that, and other new warm and pleasant feelings!

The weather was not all that clement, but they kept warm as the strolled, arms around each other. They found a small shopping centre which they explored and enjoyed lunch in a little café, where they lingered, appreciating being with each other and away from the stresses of the University. They had been happy and becoming ever closer while living the same house but with no other distractions their relationship was blossoming even more rapidly.

Finding a movie theatre with a somewhat promising film about to start they decided to go in and spent the duration of the show concentrating more on each other than the screen. By the time they came out rain had set in, and they walked back to the motel oblivious of the downpour arriving soaked to the skin and in high spirits – laughing as they entered the room and immediately started casting off their dripping outer garments onto a bathroom floor.

Suddenly realising that they were both standing, dripping wet and in nothing but their underwear, they stopped, blushed, and hesitated, looking at each other to try and gauge reactions. Ed moved first and took Elizabeth into a tight hug. “I think a warm shower is indicated, don’t you?”

Elizabeth’s nipples were straining against the confines of her wet, light cotton, bra and Ed manhood was looking equally likely to burst from his underpants. She dragged her wayward thoughts to the puddle of water on the floor and the fact that this trail would lead to the next room and bathroom if she now moved.

As if reading her thoughts, he continued, looking across the room at the existing trail of wet footprints and down at the heap of their sodden garments on his bathroom floor, “Will that be one shower or two?”

Glancing quickly around, Elizabeth paused for a moment before very quietly replying, “I’m embarrassed, nervous, scared, with a whole range of other unidentifiable worrying thoughts fighting for space in my mind, but.... One?”

Slowly and gently, Ed shifted his hands to updo her bra. He then let her go and stepped back, turning towards the shower, and adjusting the tap to start the warm water flowing.

Elizabeth hesitated only for a moment before adding her bra to the pile of wet clothes. When Ed looked back, he could hardly contain himself – she looked so beautiful. Delicate, blushing, frightened, eyes wide and looking for re-assurance from him.

He took her hand and assisted her into the shower, following her in and drawing the curtain. Turning her away from him, he softly washed her back, shoulders, and arms, then, reaching around, her breasts and stomach, gently pulling her back against himself and stopping at the top of her panties.

They stood for a few moments, his hands holding her at navel level as she leaned back against him, the shower flowing over them both. He kissed her hair and she shyly turned and looked up into his eyes... “I’m okay... If you want to go on...”

He waited for a short time and then carefully slipped her panties down to her feet and held her as she stepped out of them. Pausing again to make sure she was still okay with that action; he very carefully and softly washed all her lower regions.

Elizabeth, already highly aroused, felt almost faint with pleasure and gripped his shoulders as he crouched down and washed all around her pubic area and when he lightly kissed her furry mound she moaned with desire and without hesitation or thought, pressed against him.

Ed stood and held her for some time as the warm water washed over them until, finally, hesitatingly, she said, "My turn?"

"If you want to."

She did not reply but took the soap and began to wash his torso and arms. Then, looking enquiringly into his eyes, she started to ease his underpants over his huge erection and down his legs.

The effect on Ed was instant increased growth and on Elizabeth a combination of desire and intense fear that had her almost fainting at Ed's feet. He lifted her, holding her close, and soothing her.

Turning off the shower, Ed stepped out, wrapped a towel around his middle before handing her out and wrapping a towel around her shoulders and patting the worst of the dampness of her before kissing her and helping her to her room to dress.

Ed dressed quickly, scooped the wet clothes into the shower and flicked the bathmat around the floor to soak up the worst of the dampness. By this time Elizabeth had dressed and came to see what he was doing.

"There is a laundry at the end of this row of units. I will take this lot down and put them through a quick wash and get them dry." Ed informed her, "You see what is offering on the TV if you like."

"No, I'll come with you." She smiled at him, "Please."

They wrapped all the clothes in Ed's jeans and carried them to the laundry, set off two washing machines on quick wash and then loaded several dryers, working together in harmony. It felt good – and natural.

Later, back in the rooms and sitting on a bed watching TV, Elizabeth leaned into Ed, kissed him and said, "Thank you for this-afternoon. Everything." A long pause during which Ed held her very close and stroked her free hand, then, "Ed, I'm not sure if I should say this and I don't want you to feel in any way – ah, pressured or obligated or anything – but – I'm seriously falling in love with you." He felt her stiffen in his arm. With anticipation - or apprehension? She shyly looked down at her feet.

He lifted her chin and kissed her. "I have been in love with you since I first saw you and, believe me, that scared the hell out of me at first because I had always thought love at first sight was a silly myth. I'm not pressured, or anything else but relieved, by what you say. I have been seriously hoping that we might have something permanent here."

She noticeably relaxed into his arms and replied, "That would be nice. I just hope that my parents agree with me. They are very into security. Get your education completed; get a job; get some money behind you before you start thinking about marriage or even a steady relationship. Don't rush into anything – you've got your whole life ahead of you."

Ed just smiled and continued to stroke her hand until, after what seemed a long period of silent contemplation, he spoke. "Am I correct in thinking that is why you are almost twenty-two and just starting your degree. You took a couple of years after finishing school to work and save up to help pay your college fees?"

"Yes. I worked in an office and saved every penny I could. My parents had some money saved for me as well, but to study Law and at this university, even with a small partial scholarship, is more expensive than they had budgeted for. As you know, if you hadn't come along with your kind offer of accommodation and help in my studies, I would have had to get a job and would have had far less time to study. As it is, I can cope financially and, with your help, am second only to you in the class. But even though that is very important to me, it is not why I am falling for you. It is you, the person behind the cowboy, the man who helps puppies and their owners, the man who can stand up to tired old Professors and Deans, the man who is just kind and loving and down-to-earth and gentle. The man who hides his light under a bushel but is always there to help when help is needed. I feel protected and safe and very happy when I know you are around."

Turning toward her, Ed said, "I have something I want to talk to you about but before I do, would you like a drink? I think I saw cocoa as well as tea and coffee in the complimentary tray. What would you fancy?"

While he made the drinks, Elizabeth sat thinking back over the past few months, reflecting on just how much her life had already changed. Never before had she had any real romantic notions about a boy and yet, in a short time, her whole outlook had changed. She recognised love and its possibilities. She had a more optimistic outlook, was less fearful of the future and was now certain in her choice of vocation. In the last few months, she realised, she had grown up.

Ed came back with drinks and set them down on the bedside cabinet nearest her. He sat on the side of the bed and looked her directly in the eyes as he started, "Apart from my parents, my sister and her husband and our lawyer (my uncle), no-one knows what I am about to tell you. I have not mentioned this before because, although I had hopes, I was not sure of your thoughts about us. As we are clearly of the same mind about a relationship, and without wanting to influence you in any way, I want to trust you with a few more details about me." And with that he began to explain just who she had had fallen in love with.

"The ranch with all its land, buildings, equipment and stock is all held in a trust. My parents are the trustees and have a life interest in a share of the profits – which are considerable. The current beneficiaries are my sister and I and when my parents pass on, we will be the trustees and any children either of us have will become beneficiaries – hopefully ad-indefinitum."

"My twin sister and I also receive an income from the profits of the trust and the balance remains in the trust for future expansion or development. I have investments of my own and, as you know, have worked with my uncle for some years. My expenses are minimal, and I have over the years accumulated a fair amount. I have properties and other long-term investments valued at around five million dollars and what you might call cash, meaning cash in the bank or on term deposits, of another five million. For the record, my sister has much the same. My parents are much wealthier in their own right. The trust has cash and assets of well over two billion dollars."

"As you know, I have elected to go into law, and my uncle wishes to retire within the next four or five years – perhaps sooner. I will go into partnership with him when I graduate and take over the, very lucrative, practice when he retires. But I want to live in two worlds, so I will be a lawyer some days and

a rancher some days. I will live on the ranch in my own house as it's only a half hour commute to the office in town."

"I'm telling you this because I want you to understand just what you would be getting into if you finally decide to go along with me. Not boasting and not wishing to scare you off. Just giving you the whole picture and because I know this is important to you and your parents, to assure you that you would never be short of cash and, if we were to marry, you would not be a struggling student or having to wait years until we could afford marry or have a house or a family."

"As you know I tend to dress and, in some ways, act a bit like the stereo-typical cowboy as that is the way most of my friends and acquaintances dress and act and it is therefore comfortable for me. It is also basically what I have always worn on the ranch - it's working clothes if you like. And it is also useful in other ways - people automatically think they are dealing with a country 'hick' and don't realise that I can see right through them. But as you have, I think, discovered for yourself, I have a code that differs in some ways from the perceived norm for cowboys. I guess I am a bit of a paradox, but that's just me and it's a persona that I feel perfectly comfortable with. In a perhaps perverse way, it also suits me to actually be something different to what most people expect when they first meet me." He laughed, "But then I guess you have worked that out for yourself!"

Elizabeth was still trying to come to grips with the first revelations - his actual financial worth - to really take in too much of comment on his dress and moral code but was brought back to earth by his laugh and quip about her working out that he was not all he seemed to be at first sight.

"Yes, when I first saw you, you had me fooled for a few minutes - and then confused - and finally, sometime later, I began to see the real you underneath the image you project and find what I thought was the real you. The truck, the outfit, then the puppy and the little girl (and her mother) and then all the things you did for me personally, and indeed other students by your action in lectures, and your kindness and thoughtfulness in general. But you have now totally floored me with the information about your finances. Okay, I understood that you weren't poor, when you explained about the house, but, to my knowledge, I have never known a millionaire before. Maybe I have and because I had some mistaken idea - or no idea - of what they would be like, I didn't recognise them as such. All I can say is that it makes no difference to how I feel about you.

It does make a difference about how we might proceed from here because all my fears and insecurities about marriage and family and not becoming involved with anyone while I am studying are, as you explained, of no relevance in the circumstances. And one thing I would like to keep, just to ourselves, is you true total worth. I would like my parents to know just that you are financially secure and that I would not be getting into a life of struggle. That has always been their worry and I can't blame them as they have struggled at times and worked hard to better their situation in life. If they know I would not have the same problems throughout my life, then I'm sure they will be happy. Maybe the few days at the ranch will help convince them but I would not like them to feel belittled or overcome by displays of extreme wealth. You do understand, don't you."

"I understand perfectly, and I can assure you that they will be made to feel quite at home. The living area of the ranch is a cluster of houses for various family members - almost like a small village except there are no shops. The equipment buildings are scattered so are not too obvious. My parents and my sister and her husband are a lot like me - you would not guess from the outside who or what they are, and they don't talk money at all."

Leaning over he gave her a warm hug and a long, delicious kiss before saying, “Now, enough talk about such depressingly boring serious things. It’s still raining so what do you suggest we do about dinner tonight?”

“There is the little dining room attached to the motel – that would save going out in the rain. Or we could drive around and see if there is a restaurant that has parking close to the entrance. I guess we could order takeaways – but that would not be my first choice.”

“No, not takeaways. I’m sure we can do better than that. Why don’t we drive around a bit and see what we can find? There is an umbrella in the truck – unless you would like to get soaked again.” He winked with a wicked grin, and she blushed red. “I can take that as a yes, then?” She playfully hit his hand – still blushing.

The early evening saw them finding a cosy little restaurant and enjoying a rather drawn-out dinner before returning to the motel and settling down to watch TV.

For a short while they did watch TV – until Ed realised that Elizabeth was not just leaning against him but had gone to sleep. Not concerned, he continued to watch the programme as she unconsciously snuggled closer, softly breathing against his neck.

The programme finished and she still did not wake. He needed to move so he carefully slid his arm from behind her and then lay her down in his bed. Elizabeth was obviously tired out and sound asleep. She was still quite dressed up from their dinner excursion and her clothes would be crushed if he left her. Should he disturb her?

Thinking back on the afternoon and the shower, Ed decided that he was safe to take the logical step and make her comfortable for the night. He gently sat her half up and removed her blouse. Then, after adjusting the counterpane off the pillows and top of the bed and lay her back down. He then unzipped her skirt and carefully slid it off over her (delicious) hips. Easing her between the sheets and positioning her on her side he covered her, and she had hardly even stirred.

Right, she is clad in just her bra and panties and is sound asleep in my bed. Big decision time!

Ed turned on the bathroom light and left the door ajar, left the connecting door between the two rooms wide open, turned off the room lights and, undressed and put on a pair of boxers, climbed into bed alongside Elizabeth, resisted the temptation to hold her in his arms and instead, moving so that they were back-to-back, forced himself to relax until he finally fell asleep.

Elizabeth awoke to find she was in bed in her underwear. Then, in the half light from the bathroom she became aware that there was someone else in the bed. Slowly she put the pieces together and realised what must have happened. She could see her skirt and blouse hanging neatly on a chair, the door to her room open, the light thoughtfully left on in the bathroom and Ed sleeping beside her. Her outer clothes had been removed but she was still decent with more on than a bikini would have covered. She sighed to herself and relaxed back down, once again grateful that Ed took such great care of her. Thinking these happy thoughts, she drifted back to sleep as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do.

It was after dawn when Ed woke up and immediately, he felt Elizabeth’s back against him. She either did not wake up or decided to stay, he thought to himself. Carefully he rolled over and placed one hand over hers across her tummy, spooning in to fit around her slightly curled up body.

Time meant nothing, but he guessed it was perhaps fifteen minutes later he felt Elizabeth waking up. He leaned down and kissed her neck just below her ear. She lazily rolled over and looked up into his smiling eyes.

“Hi beautiful.” He leaned over and kissed her, pulling her into his arms. “I believe that I would like to wake up every morning like this.”

He could feel her smile against his chest. “I think I might just about get used to it too.”

Glancing across at the clock he said, “Breakfast will be here in about twenty to thirty minutes, how do you want to play this?”

She lay thinking for a moment. “I need to use the bathroom and at some stage I guess we should make the other bed look like it has been used – just for appearances sake.”

“Okay, why don’t you go and have a shower etc and then I will do the same. By then Breakfast should have arrived. Before we leave, we can swap pillows on your bed for the ones you used on this one and wrinkle up your sheets a bit to make it look as though you slept there and only one person slept in this bed.”

She went to move but he held her and kissed her with a passion she returned in full. “I could suggest some other more interesting things to fill in the next little while but will limit myself to this one indulgence.” He unfastened her bra and, gently pulling the cups free, kissed each aroused nipple of her firm, rounded breasts before releasing her. As she stood, she let her bra slide down her arms and caught it in one hand.

He gazed at her appreciatively, “Has anyone ever told you that you are truly beautiful?”

“No-one has ever had the opportunity before.”

“Then thank-you for letting me be the first. He moved off the bed and the bulge in his boxers told her all she needed to know about how appreciative he was of her near-nakedness.”

As she went to go to her room, Elizabeth picked up her blouse and shirt, saying, “Thank you for hanging these up for me. They would have been terribly creased if I had slept in them.”

He gave her a smiling little wink, “The pleasure was all mine.”

After breakfast they packed their few belongings and set off for their next destination, stopping for lunch at a wayside café and arriving at the motel around three pm. They checked into the motel and when they got to their room, they found that it had a double bed, not twin beds as they had originally been told.

“Would you prefer I asked them to change the beds?” Ed asked.

“After yesterday I would say that is not necessary – unless you would prefer to...” Her blushing response was left hanging in the air.

“In that case, what would you like to do for the rest of the afternoon?”

He was teasing her now, and she decided to give like for like. With a straight face she said, “Well, it’s not raining, so we have no excuse to do what we might **like** to do after getting soaking wet, so I guess we will have to do something else – like have a stroll around town and deciding where we could have dinner tonight.”

And, hand-in-hand, they did just that.

Later that evening, when it was definitely getting to the hour when they should adjourn to bed, the tension was high. Elizabeth expecting something but uncertain if she was actually ready and willing to take that step. Ed was ready but unsure if it was the right thing to do at this time. He understood from her comments that she was a virgin, and he knew he was not exactly a small guy in that department. He was pretty sure that she would not be on the pill and although he could get condoms, he was not wanting to risk **having** to get married. He would rather they married because they **wanted** to. In any event, there was nothing official on that front – they weren’t even engaged. Ed was also rather a traditionalist – he would prefer to ask for her hand in marriage, not just take it. He made a decision and would perhaps suggest alternatives to her as the evening progressed.

Elizabeth made the first move towards getting into bed. She squeezed Ed’s hand and moved off the bed where they had been sitting watching TV, got something out of her case and went into the bathroom. Ed could hear the shower running and a little later she came out wearing a cream, waltz-length, satin, buttoned waist-to-neck night-gown that, while not being transparent, did nothing to disguise her curves. She smiled shyly at Ed and slipped between the sheets.

Ed followed her example and soon joined her in bed, wearing boxers. Leaning over he kissed her before snuggling down, drawing her to him. She responded with only minimal restraint, and they lay kissing while Ed slowly massaged her back through the silky softness of her night-gown. Conversation was limited to the odd, “hmmm”, “That’s nice”, “I like the feel of your gown,” and the like.

After a time, Ed moved one hand in between them and started to gently massage her breasts, paying particular attention to the nipples which were hardening rapidly as she started signing with pleasure and gripping him while offering easier access to her chest.

Encouraged by this positive reaction he slowly unbuttoned her gown. Elizabeth momentarily froze, her mind flashing an unwanted warning to her aroused body. She felt Ed hesitate and hastened to re-assure him by kissing him harder and helping him with the buttons. Together they unfastened them all and Ed was able to kiss and suckle her breasts which quickly sent her into a frenzy of passion. She moaned and pressed his face harder onto her now ultra-sensitive bust as he attended to all areas of her now engorged curves. Underneath, on top; all around; and of course, the nipples that now stood proud and hard. Alternating, mouth on one and hand on the other. Nibbling, sucking, stroking, kneading, licking, gently rubbing his slightly whiskered chin against her sensitive skin. Quickly she felt a stirring all through her body and then, without warning, she stiffened, caught her breath and sunk back as the moment passed. Silent, she held Ed tightly to her.

Ed continued to hold her hot breasts against his chest, and she relaxed and began to breathe normally. After a few minutes she opened her eyes, smiled, and kissed him.

“Wow! That was different. What happened, I have never had anything like that happen before.” She was still a little short of breath. “How did you do that?”

“Did you like that? It wasn’t too intense for you?” Ed was asking – concerned.

“It was a shock – I have never imagined anything quite like that. The feeling seemed to suddenly spread right through my whole body and took me completely by surprise. But yes, I must admit I did like it – a lot.” She was blushing furiously, and she whispered, “You can do that any time you like.” Then, realising just what she had said, “Well, anytime that is appropriate, of course.”

“Are you tired?”

“Surprisingly, no. I feel I should be, and I’m not wide awake and ready to run a marathon, just happy and – I don’t know how to describe it – happy is all I can think of. Why?”

“Would you like some more, or more importantly, could you stand more, tonight?”

“I’m not sure. My breasts are still very sensitive and not so much sore, but they feel full and a bit tender.”

“I understand, but I was thinking of a different sort of sensation.”

“Oh.” Thinking that he probably meant ‘going all the way’ and was rather apprehensive about that, having seen him naked and aroused in the shower, “I – I – I’m not certain that I am, ah, ready for that yet.” She was upset because she didn’t really want to say ‘NO’ but couldn’t bring herself to say ‘YES’.

He kissed her tenderly and stroked his hands through her hair. “No, I agree, and I would not even suggest that. I would rather we wait to go all the way. I am not small, and you don’t want to arrive home having to walk with difficulty. And I would hope that someday we can make that a long, slow and very pleasurable experience for both of us. What I had in mind is something far less invasive but perhaps even more scintillating for now. But it is entirely up to you. I don’t want to push you, rush you, and above all tire you.”

She was blushing with embarrassment at her mistake. “I’m sorry – I just immediately thought...”

Ed was wondering at her apparent naivety. She had not realised just how erotic and stimulating the fondling of her breasts would be and she clearly thought that anything else was straight intercourse. Was he rushing things? Should he just cuddle her and have a restful night?

She confirmed his musing by saying, “I’m sorry, I must seem very naïve. I really don’t know anything apart from the pure mechanics of sex. Bracing herself, she blushingly whispered, “But I would be happy to have you teach me, if your last lesson is any indication of where my education is lacking.”

Taking that as a green light, but not wanting to appear too anxious, Ed cuddled her back into his arms for a few minutes before slowly stroking down her body until he reached the hem of the nightgown. Then, allowing her time to adjust to the new activity, he gently stroked back up to her hip, lifting the gown as he went. Gradually he manoeuvred the lower part of the gown up her body until the front was up as far as her navel. Massaging all across her stomach and thighs his hand finally started circling over her furry mound and slowly inched her legs apart.

Once her initial uncertainty seemed to have past and she had relaxed again, his ministrations turned to softly massaging between her legs until he located the already hard nub, which he circled and

gently tweaked with two fingers. Feeling her breathing occasionally quicken, he moved on. Kneeling astride and over her he kissed his way down from her lips to her neck and then down the valley between her breasts to her navel.

Moving himself further down the bed he placed his hands just above her hips as he continued his kissing journey down to just above the triangle of hair and then down one thigh – then the other, moving further to the inside of each leg with each move.

At last, he moved down so that his head was between her legs and, lifting her knees over his shoulders he started to knead and lick her clitoris, over her outer lips, and her perineum – up -down – gently then with more pressure. The last stages were easing her outer lips apart as he continued licking. Holding her open as he continued laving the inner lips and finally parting these final gates to reveal the hymen and the untouched tight entrance to her inner treasures.

Kneading the lips and nub, licking up and down, flicking the tip of his tongue over the exposed entrance to that inner cavern. He felt her start to react as she forced herself harder against his mouth. Licking, sucking, licking, sucking. Harder, teasingly softer until she forced herself upwards again. Harder, quicker. She was moaning – calling his name – pressing his head into her sex. Then her hands went out to the side; her breath caught: she went ridged as her legs involuntarily straightened over his shoulders and down his back – forcing her even harder against his mouth.

The final gasp, her whole-body shuddering with the orgasm that overwhelmed her as she bucked under him. He kept up his licking and sucking as her body lifted from her shoulders to the thighs and he grabbed her buttocks, pulling her to him – prolonging her spasms and the intense reactions for as long as possible.

Finally, the spasms slowed and stopped, exhaustion took over, her body collapsed back on the bed, and she lay panting, recovering her breath. Ed moved to lay beside her, holding her close, gently kneading her mound to ease the blood-flow away from her engorged pussy and relax her. He kissed her forehead and whispered love in her ear.

ED had never heard her cuss before, but when she had recovered her breath and reason had returned, she looked at him, her eyes wide with wonder. “Bloody hell! How does that happen? It must be like taking a cocktail of hallucinogenic drugs. It’s like dying and going to heaven. Oh Ed.”

“Well, I believe that it sometimes referred to as the little death.”

“Oh my God. If I ever get grumpy or anything, just dump me down and do that. All I can think is wonderful thoughts.” She cuddled into him mummering random loving comments and a few minutes later he realised that she was sound asleep. Completely sated.

Morning. The day they needed to move on; Ed taking Elizabeth to her home before he drove on to the ranch.

There was no need for any subterfuge today. No need to pretend that they were sleeping in their separate rooms, no need to be concerned that they were together when breakfast arrived. Ed woke to find Elizabeth spooned in front of him, still sleeping soundly. With at least an hour before breakfast was due to arrive, he lay there, arms around her, watching as she peacefully slept.

She roused about fifteen minutes later, feeling his raging erection spooned in her back. Looking around she saw him looking down at her. “What,” she asked.

“I was just thinking how beautiful you looked.”

“First thing in the morning - hair all over the place – eyes still full of sleep? You must be joking!”

“No, you are even more desirable looking like that.”

“Seeing as how you are probably the main reason that I am dishevelled-looking this morning, it’s just as well you approve of the look.” She was laughing now. No regrets, Ed happily thought.

“Do we have to move yet.” She asked.

“Why? Did you have something in mind?”

“NO! Well yes, but I already ache all over and just lying here I can feel my skin is hyper-sensitive, so I think, given where we are going this morning, the answer had better be no. Unfortunately.” She leaned up on one elbow and kissed him, “Thank you for last night. I’m not sure what one is supposed to say, if anything, after such a night. Is there a protocol? But thank you, sincerely. But I must warn you; I think you may have awoken a sleeping dragon. I didn’t know sex could be anything like that.”

“If truth be known I wouldn’t have known either, but I have done a few things that you probably never considered. I read books that you quite possibly would consider trash and not worthy of consideration and I have been known to watch a bit of porn - which I’m sure you will have never considered. I have no previous real experience but seeing what is possible has provided some ideas. And, it seems, these ideas worked. Perhaps we could explore future ideas together sometime...”

“Perhaps I might agree! It seems to have worked for you, so it may also work for me. I presume there are some reciprocal activities that I might learn so that it is not just a one-way thing?” The question was left for Ed to react to – which he did, by suggesting that their home study may include some extra topics next semester.

“If you like I will have first shower and be ready for the breakfast to arrive. You can lay there for a bit longer then take your time getting showered and dressed.” Ed suggested.

“That would be nice. Thanks.”

Sometime later, as he was waiting for breakfast to arrive, the bathroom door opened and Elizabeth peeped out, “Help!” He looked up – worried. “Inside the lid pocket my case is a white, soft lace, bra. It is much softer than the one I have and has an extra row of hooks. This one is too tight and too hard to be comfortable at the moment.”

He found the Bra and went to hand it to her, but she said, “I need your help too. I will ease the front in if you would fasten it for me. I was relaxing in the shower, allowing the warm water to flow over me and I did not immediately realise what effect that was having on my breasts and in particular my nipples. Now my other bra is not very uncomfortable. This one will fit better once I have it in place.”

When it was finally fastened, he turned her round and very gently kissed the swollen top of each breast before taking her lips. “Sorry”, he said.

“I’m not. This feeling is very pleasant – once I get it all comfortable. I don’t think it’s suitable for every day – too distracting – but it is something I think I might easily learn to enjoy as a special treat from time to time!”

Hint, hint, he thought.

After breakfast they packed their cases, checked out of the motel and driving through light mid-week traffic, arrived at Elizabeth’s home around 10 am. Her father was at work, but her mother greeted them with wild enthusiasm, taking her in a clinging embrace (which Ed noticed made Elizabeth gasp – and he knew why), and shaking Ed’s hand. Before Ed moved on to travel home, they had morning tea, during which he was conscious of being ‘looked over’ and was wondering what sort of grilling Elizabeth might get after he had gone.

Over morning tea, they discussed the planned trip Saturday, and Ed confirmed that he would be traveling up on Friday afternoon and staying in a motel overnight and it was arranged that he would join them for dinner on Friday evening. (Elizabeth felt a little embarrassed that they only had a two-bedroom house and were not able to offer Ed accommodation),

When it came time for Ed to leave, they accompanied him to his truck and, throwing caution to the wind, Elizabeth reached up and gave Ed a kiss on his cheek and quickly whispered, “Thanks for the wonderful road-trip”, and as she stepped back, she winked with the eye that her mother could not see!

As she waved Ed goodbye, her mother commented, “You two appear to be getting on very well together.” A general comment but clearly brim full of meaning and enquiry.

“Yes, we do get on, very well. I wouldn’t be sharing a house with him if we didn’t, and I certainly would not have travelled home with him. I think he is an extremely nice person. Kind, thoughtful and very respectful. I hope you and dad like him.” She did not add to the comment, but she could see that her mother had received the message it carried.

As the day progressed it was clear that her mother was continuing to process this message and Elizabeth found herself quite amused with the not-so-subtle questions, poorly disguised as light, normal, conversation. Elizabeth remained non-committal as she had determined not to try and convince her mother of anything concerning Ed. After all, nothing firm had been decided between them and she wanted to see what the weekend brought forward and to let her parents form their own conclusions once they had had the opportunity to get to know Ed and his family.

Her father was a little less subtle, at least to start with, but meaningful looks from her mother and Elizabeth’s non-committal attitude prevented an inquisition and the evening and throughout Thanksgiving Day settled down to be a normal family get-together.

Ed arrived back in town mid-evening and ‘phoned to confirm arrangements for the morning – and of course to exchange a few loving words with Elizabeth.

Saturday morning around 7:30 Ed arrived to collect Elizabeth and her parents. Given the talks that Ed and she had already had, Elizabeth was not overly surprised when the car Ed was driving was a late model 500 series Mercedes. Big; Black; Spacious; Luxurious. For her parents, however, it was the first real indication of how wealthy the Cantwell family might be, and they had some difficulty keeping the reactions from showing on their faces and in their comments.

The trip was pleasant and after a few minutes the conversation started to flow comfortably. They stopped for morning tea about halfway and arrived just before lunch time.

Their welcome at the ranch left no doubt that they were indeed 'Welcome'. No awkwardness, no pretence, just a big "y'all come in now," type greeting. They all had rooms with on-suites in the huge homestead and were soon all seated around the large family dining table enjoying a sumptuous lunch. Food, the instant icebreaker, and easy conversation quickly had everyone relaxed and feeling at home.

Ed's parents had of course already met Elizabeth and they had made up their mind that she was not a gold-digger, was a very nice young lady and were perfectly happy if Ed wished to take the liaison further.

Elizabeth's parents were still very new to the idea that their daughter might be romantically interested in someone, and their thoughts were a little different. Was Ed a suitable boy? What was his background? What was his future? Was he solvent? This weekend was their opportunity to answer at least some of these questions

It did not take long before Elizabeth's Parents had figured out a great deal about Ed's background and history. They had gleaned that he was already financially well off and had property and investments. They had also deduced that he and his sister would be inheriting the ranch and everything that went with it and that he would be taking over his uncle's very lucrative law firm. Logically they had reasoned that he would not be struggling financially. They had also satisfied themselves that his caring and manners were not put on for show, because he was consistently like that without having to even think about what he was doing. They liked the Cantwells because they were un-pretentious, had made them genuinely welcome and showed sincere interest in them, Elizabeth and everything they did and stood for. They too, were now not so concerned about the possibility of Ed and Elizabeth's liaison possibly developing over time.

Time at the Ranch also gave Elisabeth to see Ed in his home environment with the family, the farm hands and his friends. He introduced her to everyone they met and immediately made her feel part of the family – accepted without question. His lawyer uncle was an instantly likeable, very astute man who in Elizabeth's mind was what she imagined Ed would look like, and be, in middle age. He very quickly summed up the body language between Ed and her and casually dropped into the conversation that his practice was already busier than he could comfortably cope with and with Ed only wanting to be a part-time lawyer and part-time rancher he was going to be needing two partners to take over his business. Hint, hint!

Ed showed her the block of land on the estate that he had tentatively earmarked and the spot where he would like to build his house. He had some initial sketches of how it might look. He drove her the quite short distance into the town where his Uncle's Law firm was, and she was surprised and impressed at how large the town was and the facilities that it offered. There were regular trains and busses and, as Ed pointed out, the ranch had an airstrip and if one needed to get anywhere in a hurry, planes were always available. This was no isolated paradise!

Elizabeth also felt that, even though nobody actually talked about the huge property, the beautiful buildings, the masses of equipment and the obvious evidence of there being plenty of money available in the family, it would be clear to her parents that Ed was not a poor, struggling student who would be spending his three years at university, coming out loaded down with student debt and having

to work for years to even get back to even before making enough money to consider a wife and family. He already had everything necessary - and had it in spades.

And so, when in the course of the many little discussions Ed and Elizabeth had over that few days, Ed enquired if, after seeing where he belonged and where he saw his future, she could see herself being happy to settle into this environment that was so different from her city upbringing, she had all the facts before her upon which to formulate a decision. And in a heartbeat, she knew her answer was YES.

Therefore, early on the Tuesday afternoon when, rugged up against the early winter chill, they were strolling by a little stream not far from the ranch settlement and Ed, very gentlemanly, asked Elizabeth if she would marry him, she had no hesitation in looking him straight in the eye and replying, "Yes, I can think of nothing I would like more."

They went back to the ranch-house and told her (not surprised but a little shocked at the suddenness) parents and, soon after, Ed's (not at all surprised, knowing their son, and extremely excited) parents.

The Tuesday evening dinner turned into an engagement celebration which included Ed's twin sister and her husband and, of course, his uncle (who was grinning from ear-to-ear).

On Wednesday Ed drove Elizabeth and her parents back home as arranged but did not return directly to the ranch as had originally been planned. Instead, he stayed over in a motel until Friday afternoon. During this time, they went shopping for rings (which Elizabeth insisted by neat, sensible, and not too expensive. As she told Ed, just because you might be able to afford more does not have to mean you have to spend more – explaining that she had always know what she liked and would feel very uncomfortable wearing something large and ostentatious and moreover, she wanted something very practical that she could wear to work, and a large ring would tend to get caught on things. One day, perhaps, they might consider an eternity ring that was showier.

Ed also insisted that they open a joint bank account so that she could get things that she saw for the wedding or their home without having to ask for money or dip into her own savings. With some initial resistance she agreed to this, but he had to persuade her much harder before she finally agreed to his also putting a significant sum into her personal bank account to cover the rest of her university fees and enough for a car if she needed one for ease of getting around at any time.

They took Elizabeth's parents and Grandparents out for dinner that evening, before he headed back to the ranch early Thursday morning.

Saturday afternoon Ed drove back and stayed the night in Elizabeth's town and on Sunday they drove in the truck straight back to 'their' little house near the University. The ride was long but in each-other's company that meant nothing. Elizabeth reflected back on Ed's comment about the truck not being like a car to ride in and thought that maybe it was not quite in the style of the Mercedes, but it was cosy and actually very comfortable with a 'curl up in seat'. It ran very smoothly and was quiet and above all it totally fitted in with Ed and all he stood for. And that was just fine with her!

Apart from their new status as an engaged couple, little changed in their life during the three weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. A hectic time of university examinations, preparing for Christmas and, in their few quiet moments, discussing a wedding. After considering, briefly, Christmas –

not really a 'starter'; Easter – possible but too much of a rush with university only being closed for a few days; Summer break - the only really suitable time with some three months to make the final last-minute arrangements, have a wedding, go on a honeymoon and get back to life before lectures started again. Suitable dates were agreed, subject to everything and everybody being available. All to be finalised over Christmas – if possible.

And then Christmas – eleven days that were similar to the earlier winter break. Drive to Elizabeth's on 23rd December, Ed travels home on 24th and they spend Christmas with their respective parents. 28th Ed travels to collect Elizabeth and they go to the ranch on 29th. New Year celebrated at the ranch and on 2nd January they drive directly back to the University.

And wonder upon wonder, apart from a few little details that were easily sorted out before or during Easter, a wedding was planned.

Twelve short but eventful months after they first set eyes on each other, Ed and Elizabeth returned to commence their second year at Law School, but this time as Mr and Mrs Cantwell.

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EARL'S COURTING

Audrey (after Audrey Hepburn, as her mother was often heard to explain, and never let anyone shorten it to Aude), had arrived in London four weeks earlier at the beginning of her belated big 'OE'. At twenty-seven she was probably six to eight years older than most of her fellow New Zealanders who headed to England to find the freedom and excitement that the much-touted Overseas Experience apparently provided. Sure, she was finding the freedom after years of dedicated study was nice, but so far there had not been a lot of excitement and very little freedom.

The OE had been in the life plan since she had started as a university undergraduate, aged eighteen. Studying computer science, she had graduated with such a good honours degree that her professors had convinced her to carry on and do a master's and subsequently a PhD. Throwing herself into her studies she had completed her doctorate in great style, but by then she had passed the magical age of twenty-five, for almost automatic rights to go on a two-year OE to England. Being of 50% English parentage she still had a right to go and work and having been assured that there was a high demand for people with her qualifications in her field, she had set off full of hope. On arrival she found the employment market 'soft' and the most promising job opportunities were in academia but not starting for about six months. Further enquiries revealed that the agents and prospective employers in the commercial arena were concerned that she was overqualified for most jobs they had, and (as one agent had finally admitted to her) been worried that she might take their positions.

And so, in order to create some sort of income in this expensive city, she had turned to something that she had some experience in from her early undergrad' days – waitressing. The owner of a 'middle-of-the-road-class restaurant, that was just within walking distance from her 'digs', recognising her pleasing looks and maturity, offered her a position, but, as is usually the case with such work, at the minimum wage. There was not much in the way of tips but there was frequently a double shift available when someone did not turn up for work. Audrey, with the experience from her student days, lived frugally but adequately, and with very little time, or money, to enjoy the sights on England and its other European neighbours, often took these double shifts.

Thursday had started around 8 am when she crawled out of a not very comfortable bed and into the not very satisfactory shower to try and ease the aches from a long day of still getting accustomed to being on her feet for hours on end. The day was overcast, and a stiff breeze was developing as she arrived at work around 9:30 am to start her shift at 10 am. The restaurant had been busy all day and when one of the other staff had failed to arrive for the evening shift Audrey had agreed to stay on, again, until they finally closed at 11:30 pm. By then it was pouring with rain and her pathetically tiny folding umbrella was doing very little towards keeping any part of her dry as, dog-tired and miserable, she struggled home against the wind that seemed to gust around every corner.

Pausing on a curb in shoe-top deep water for a red light at a pedestrian crossing, a strong gust of wind accompanied by a blast of rain caught her off balance and she felt the umbrella being ripped from her hands as she stumbled to the ground...

About half-a-kilometre – as the crow flies – from the restaurant, in a tall, glass tower-block, James Falkner was also finishing a tiring and trying day. Meetings that were, in his opinion, unjustified and un-necessarily long; indecisiveness on the part of employees and clients and frustration at the delays in getting simple things done, were the main causes of his agitation. Most of the problems were caused by people wishing to look, or feel, important and to impress James.

Referred to in an irreverent manner by his trusted and loyal staff as 'His Lordship', this was in fact his correct and due term of address. The fourteenth Earl in a long and wide line of nobility, he was fortunate in that his forebears had planned and protected their estates wisely to minimise death duties and as a result the fortune and highly successful businesses he had inherited were still largely intact. He had only recently, at the comparatively young age (for modern times at least) of twenty-nine, inherited the Earldom. He had grown up as Viscount Falkner and was well-used to being in a position where people tried to impress him. But this did not necessarily mean he enjoyed it – he would rather everyone got on with getting things done quickly and efficiently and stop wasting time.

His driver and limousine were waiting for him in the basement garage of the building. "Sorry to keep you so late again, Frank," He smiled at the driver as he climbed into the car. "Just take me straight home. I'll work from home tomorrow and in case of having to go out unexpectedly I'll just get a taxi or take my car. You consider it a well-earned day of relaxation for you and your family."

"It's a terrible night out, My Lord; if you have your remote device handy, I'll drive you right into your apartment's garages."

They drove in silence; Frank concentrating on the rain-swept road and James sitting back watching the few people out on the street. As they stopped at a set of traffic lights James glanced at the people waiting to cross the road and saw a young lady stumble and fall as her umbrella was torn from her hands and whipped away by the wind. Without thinking he leapt from the car and springing the few paces through the ankle-deep water in the gutter, grabbed her as she went down on her side – just saving her head from hitting the pavement. Then, picking her up in one sweeping movement he effortlessly carried her back and placed her in the spacious back of the limo.

Audrey looked dazed – perhaps shock, James thought. "Have you got everything?" he asked. She looked at her shoulder bag and nodded. "Where do you live – I can take you to your home?" A quizzical look – almost uncomprehending – and a mumbled close-by address. James knew of the area; cheap rooms with shared facilities and very little privacy - not at all suitable for someone in her condition. "Take us straight to my apartment, Frank, and I can arrange to have her taken care of there."

As they drove the short distance to James' apartment Audrey appeared to drop off into a deep sleep, leaning against his shoulder.

When Audrey awoke it was morning - she knew it was morning because it was starting to get light, despite the heavy drapes across the windows. Hang on – my windows don't have heavy drapes! The sudden realisation that she was not in her room caused a moment of panic as she quickly took stock of her surroundings and tried to remember what had happened. In the half-light she could see that it was a large, elegant room and she was in a large, comfortable bed that was definitely not what she was used to, with high quality fine linen of a type that was most certainly well beyond her budgetary limitations. She went to sit up and her left side was suddenly wracked with pain, and she looked down at her arm that was badly bruised and figured from the pain that her side and leg was probably the same. As she looked down, she realised that she was wearing what appeared to be an oversized, man's, tee shirt and not her regular pyjamas, and, she very quickly realised, nothing else.

Resting back on the pillows she also registered that her neck was sore, as though she had ricked it somehow. Still trying to work out in her mind what had happened and how she had finished up in this strange room, she lay thinking over the end of the day at work. She remembered leaving the restaurant and the pouring rain and then just a vague recollection of standing at a pedestrian crossing – then falling – a stranger - and a car of a size she had never seen before. It was all a jumble and more like a bad dream.

There was a soft knock at the door of the room, and she answered with a tentative, "Hello?"

A middle-aged lady entered, carrying Audrey's folded clothes. She smiled and said, "Ah, you are awake. That is good, how are you feeling now?"

"Okay, but rather sore and very confused. Where am I and how did I get here?"

"The important thing is you are awake and apparently all right. We were beginning to worry that you might have concussion and not just be shocked and exhausted".

Still totally confused, Audrey repeated her question, "Where am I – I can't remember coming here", and then as an afterthought, "What is the time."

"His Lordship carried you in just after mid-night. You were soaked to the skin and so sound asleep we could not wake you. I'm his housekeeper and he called me and a doctor who lives in this building because we thought you may have been concussed. The doctor decided that you were only exhausted, very cold and wet, in a deep sleep and possibly suffering from shock and your body had just shut down. We got you dry, into bed and warm. I have instructions to call the doctor when you woke up as he would like to ensure that you have no other injuries apart from bruising. I was beginning to think I should call the doctor anyway, because you had not shown any signs of waking and it's after three o'clock."

Audrey went sit up with an exclamation, "Oh damn, I'm terribly late for work. I must go." And then gasped again as the pain hit her and she sank back into the bed.

The lady gave her a tolerant, motherly look, "Just relax; his Lordship has taken care of all that. You apparently gave him your address last night and your name was on a card in your bag. He has been to your apartment, found someone who knew where you worked and contacted your boss to explain the situation. You just relax and I will let the doctor know that you are awake. Would you like the drapes open to brighten up the room? That door leads to a bathroom, and you want any assistance to move around just ring that bell by the bed-head." She went out, apparently to call the doctor, who arrived at her room about fifteen minutes later.

Audrey, she thought to herself in the intervening minutes, you are finally getting some excitement and the centre of it all appears to be 'His Lordship', who was presumably the owner of the powerful arms she vaguely remembered picking her up and placing her in an enormous car. But she couldn't even recall a face. Some adventure! And a rather painful one at that.

When the doctor came into the room, accompanied by the housekeeper, he was a middle-aged, cheerful man who she immediately decided looked like a country GP out of a typically British TV programme. He checked her bruised limbs and side and gently felt around her neck. "You have ricked your neck, and I expect that happened when His Lordship grabbed you just as you were about to hit your head on the pavement. He probably lifted you very quickly and your head was still travelling down. Nothing is broken but that bruising is going to be very sore for a few days. You should rest a lot – just try and get some gentle movement going and I would suggest a good long soak in a hot bath if you can manage to get in and out." He looked at the housekeeper, "Can you organise a bath, perhaps with some soda, and see that she gets back into bed. I will leave a mild sedative that will help to relax her and let her sleep, and by tomorrow she should be starting to move a little easier. I will call tomorrow afternoon just to check that everything is going well. In the meantime, I'm sure that Alice will make sure that you are okay. Now, I do need some details for my records: your full name, age, title, next of kin and the like."

"Audrey Elisabeth O'Brien, age twenty-seven; never married. My parents are Mary and Michael O'Brien (and she gave her address in New Zealand)."

“Okay, we have your London address and workplace and I understand that you are a waitress, is that correct.”

“At the moment, until I find a more appropriate job.”

He looked at her quizzically.

“I have a PhD in Computer Science.”

“Ah, that may explain a lot.” He said, “Had you just finished a double shift when you got blown over in the rainstorm? Not yet used to standing all day, over-tired, sore legs and probably not stopped for a decent meal since breakfast – I’m guessing? Even a Doctoral student does not work like that.”

At her blushing half-nod he went on, “I will prescribe a tonic for you as I suspect that your iron levels are also a little low as well. Now, is there anything you would like to know?”

“Well, yes,’ she blushed, “I have no idea where I am; I can’t really stay in the home of a person I don’t know and, to whom you keep referring to ‘His Lordship’. All I know is that some man picked me up out of a puddle and put me in a car. I can’t even recall his face and I have no idea who he is.”

The doctor laughed and Alice tried to look shocked – but couldn’t.

“His Lordship” is the umpteenth Earl of Blackrock – a position that he inherited about a year ago on the death of his Father. He was previously the Viscount Blackrock. This is his London apartment in Mayfair. He and his driver, Frank, brought you here in the early hours of this morning, soaking wet and out like a light. We got you out of your wet clothes, dried you off and he found this tee shirt for you to wear as a night-shirt. We packed you around with hot-water bottles and left you to sleep. He is out at the moment but wants to meet you when you are awake. Don’t be embarrassed about anything and he will call you doctor O’Brien if you call him Lord Blackrock, so don’t be intimidated either. You spent years earning your title, he inherited his. I mean that in the nicest possible way and I think Alice will agree with me when I say you couldn’t hope to meet a nicer and more down to earth person. Oh, and yes, he will insist that you stay here until I say you are well enough to go back to your own residence, and he can be very persuasive!”

Alice came in at this point. “Enough talking – let’s get you soaking in a nice bath and settled down. We’ll organise some dinner and give you the doctor’s sedative so that you can sleep well tonight and then see what the morrow brings forth.”

Soon she found herself luxuriating in a hot tub in a bathroom the like of which she never seen, even in books about elegant houses, and wondering just what one had to do to live in such opulent surroundings. This was far more than just money. Knowing that such things even existed must mean belong to some ‘inner circle’ that was made aware of these luxuries and where they might be obtained, must also be necessary, she reasoned to herself.

Later, resigned to staying in the wonderful bed (although she had to admit it was not too difficult to accept and giving it up would no doubt be far more difficult), in another of his large tee shirts, she was trying to remember just what her knight (no, was much more than a knight, wasn’t he) in shining armour was like. Judging by his tee shirts he must be a big man, but all she could see in her mind was a worried face that was dripping wet! Then there was a tapping on the door, and she automatically said, “Come in.”

And there he was. Something over six feet tall and broad of shoulder; a rugged, tanned face; thick, black hair and the most alluring five-o’clock shadow (and she found herself thinking it strange that an Earl would have

five-o'clock shadow and then thinking, why not!) She suddenly realised that he was saying something and jerked herself to attention.

"How are you feeling now?" The question was asked with obviously sincere concern and in a deep voice that went directly to Audrey's heart.

"Thanks to your remarkably quick action I am probably very lucky to have only a few bruises to worry about. From what the doctor has said you saved me from hitting my head and probably much more serious injury and very likely a dose of the flu to cap it off. I can't thank you enough for coming to my aide. But I feel terrible imposing on your generosity like this and for all the trouble that you have gone to in contacting my employer and everything." She stopped – blushing as her thoughts turned to the handsome man standing looking down at her and remembering that she not even addressed him correctly.

He smiled and her insides felt like they were tying themselves in knots. "I've spoken to the doctor and had a chat with Alice, and we have decided that you are to stay right here until we are all completely satisfied that you are fit enough to return to work or whatever you choose to do. If you need anything from your apartment my driver, Frank, and Alice will fetch it for you, and I have spoken to your employer who sends his best wishes and says your job will be waiting whenever you are ready to return. In the meantime, Alice has some dinner being readied to bring up to you and then you are to rest. Tomorrow, if you are up to it, we can talk some more, but no more thoughts of being an imposition. You are more than welcome here. *All the time thinking, 'very welcome to stay as long as you like – I would rather like to get to know you much better.'* Better even than when we were getting you out of sodden clothes, ensuring you not seriously injured and were warm and as comfortable as possible. Better than I have ever wanted to get to know anyone before!

Audrey did not know what she had expected on meeting the Earl and was surprised to find that she had no problems in talking to him and did not feel at all uncomfortable in his presence - even though she was in bed, and he was towering over her. There was something calming and reassuring about him – and she was quick to admit to herself – he was *very* handsome! But, she reasoned, he no doubt has a beautiful wife and several children back on a family estate somewhere.

Never-the-less, after the best meal she had eaten since arriving in England and being fussed over by Alice, she drifted off to sleep and dreamed about living in a beautiful big house with huge luxurious bathroom and a certain charming man who looked remarkably like the Earl.

Strangely, because he was generally very busy working and was more used to avoiding aspiring, would-like-to-be Countesses on the make, the single, young, James Falkner, Earl of Blackrock, found himself thinking a great deal about his guest and actually wondering how best to go about getting to know more about her and perhaps even trying to form some sort of on-going 'association' – for want of a better word.

The following morning found Audrey awake feeling much refreshed and wondering at the rather unusual (for her) dreams she'd had during the night. On getting out of bed to use the bathroom she found that, although still stiff and sore, she was able to move about with much less difficulty and when she drew back the drapes found that it was a fine, albeit cold-looking, day and that she was looking down into a pretty, park-like, walled garden set in behind the row of apartments. She was sitting on the window seat admiring this view when there was a soft knocking on her door.

Recognising Alice's knock she called out. "Come in." Alice entered, commenting on the fact that she was up and looking much happier. Audrey smiled in greeting and then realised that the Earl was also in the room. Audrey panicked: All she had on was one of his tee shirts and it was big – but not long enough to cover much of her legs, which were clearly on display. She could not move for fear of displaying more of her otherwise naked body. And even more un-nerving was the fact that he stood looking right into her eyes and her insides were

doing flips. He was so – handsome was the proper word, but all she could think of was delicious – absolutely delicious - and she had not even combed her hair and was sitting half naked looking like goodness knows what. She blushed red with her wayward thoughts and tried to keep his eyes on her face by looking directly back at him.

Grinning, but appreciating her dilemma, James gently steered Alice to where she was largely blocking his tantalising view and casually started chatting about how she was feeling, and did she have a list of things she needed from her apartment.

“I have the clothes here that I was wearing when I fell and which Alice has kindly washed and pressed for me so, if I am to stay here beyond today, would it be possible to go with your driver and sort out some things for myself? It would be quicker and much less bother for everyone.”

“If you are certain that you are up to it then I can’t see why not. What do you think, Alice?”

“I will phone the doctor and make sure he agrees.” Alice moved towards the door to go and make the call and James moved so that was not standing in a position that would embarrass both of them.

“By the way, my name is James - James Falkner.” He held out a hand to shake hers and gripped her for a fraction of a second longer than was necessary when he imagined that he felt an electric spark pass between them. “And the good doctor tells me that you are Audrey O’Brien from New Zealand.”

Audrey paused before answering. He had introduced himself as James and it seemed wrong to not use his correct form of address, “The good doctor has told me that you are the Earl of Blackrock and I would uncomfortable calling you by the familiar when all others are using the correct form, My Lord.”

His smile widened even further (and Audrey’s heart skipped a beat) as he answered, “Yes, **Doctor** O’Brien, but I asked you to call me James and we are not in company, so, if you’re happy with Audrey I am more than happy with James, especially as I would like us to be friends.”

She felt her innards do a serious backwards flip at his words and that smile seemed to flow over and right through her. She blushed, not quite knowing how to answer that compliment and the implied suggestion, and wondering why he might ever want to be friends with her – a rather impoverished, over-qualified waitress from the other side of the world with nothing even starting to resemble his breeding and position, or the looks she imagined would be needed to qualify a lady to be escorted around by him.

James, well aware of her probable predicament and not wishing to keep her on edge, continued straight on, “Assuming the doctor has no objections, we will go and get your clothes and anything else you need and then show you around this apartment so that you can be comfortable and feel at home while you recuperate. When you feel up to it, we can have a chat and fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of each other, always remembering, of course, that you are to concentrate on resting. Oh, and if you wish to call home, please feel free to do so, we don’t want your family to start worrying that they have not heard from you.”

For some reason Audrey had grown up with the belief that the British nobility were mainly old, considered to be somewhat remote and aloof, above the normal people and tended to move only within their own limited circles, but James appeared to be none of those things and his actions were catching her off guard. And, because of these preconceived ideas she held, it hadn’t, yet, occurred to her that James might have some personal interest in her. She felt like Dorothy in Oz – waking up in a strange world in which she felt both alien and yet welcome and where one had to expect the unexpected. Very odd!

With the doctor’s blessing, James personally took Audrey in his own rather sporty car to her apartment where she packed a few clothes into a small suitcase, gathered up her laptop and a couple of books, all of which

James packed into the car. "Is there anywhere you need to go on the way back?" he asked as they prepared to drive off.

When Audrey looked a little puzzled, he turned in his seat so that he could look more directly at her and said, "I understand that you may feel that you are intruding on my time, and I really respect you for that, but I want you to understand that if I were truly unable to spare some time I would say so and I would have Frank and or Alice assist you. Contrary to what some people believe, I do take some days off work – as much for the sake of my overworked staff as for myself – and I do sometimes actually take holidays. At this moment I am your disposal, and I am more than happy to take you anywhere you want. So, please, don't feel that you might be imposing on my time. Relax and tell me anything you want – I honestly don't bite!"

Rather overwhelmed, Audrey blushed and tried to formulate a reply. James took her hand, "You're tired, do you feel up to a coffee somewhere or would you rather just go back to my apartment and rest?"

His hand felt so good in hers that her heart flipped again, but she managed to say, "A coffee would be most welcome – if you are sure it's okay," still thinking that there must be a wife and probably children somewhere and not wishing to be seen in any public situation that may be considered compromising.

The coffee lounge they went to was more of an up-market tearoom, and very definitely far superior to the type that Audrey would normally feel comfortable patronising. Table service with silver coffee pots, jugs and plate stands. Sipping superb coffee and partaking of dainty savouries and sandwiches and decadent cakes that were to die for, she slowly over-came her feeling of being out of place and unsuitably dressed for such a fine establishment. Being in James' company seemed to relax her and make everything right.

When they moved to leave James noticed her grimace as the pain in her side hit her, "I think we had better get you home and resting before you get too tired." On arrival he showed her the kitchen, (just in case she needed anything) and a well-stocked Library, saying that he would show her around the rest of the apartment once she had rested.

She slept for a while then, very carefully, showered and changed. The doctor called and was pleased with her progress, saying that the exercise was good and would help ease the stiffness, but that she was to get plenty of rest and eat well because she needed to build herself up a little or she was likely to find the English winter combined with long working hours difficult to cope with.

Over the next three days she started to feel much better and was thinking that it would be wrong to stay on in the Earl's apartment – even if it was very hard to give up the luxury and attention. She did not want to out-stay her welcome, or for anyone to think that she was taking advantage of the situation. James spent some time chatting generally to her and she realised that he had found out a great deal about her background and interests. She, on the other hand, had been a little shy about delving too deeply into his personal life and, although they had never been mentioned, still believed that he must have a wife and family somewhere.

Looking him up on her computer had not revealed very much apart from his lineage and business interests. The fact that his father had died in an accident about a year earlier and he had inherited the title. His mother, the dowager Countess, lived at their country estate and he spent most of his time in London looking after a wide range of business interests. There were no pictures of him escorting beautiful young ladies around the London nightlife, no scandalous stories, but no mention of a wife either. Perhaps he was still single! Anyway, she reminded herself, he wouldn't be interested in the likes of her, would he.

During Wednesday evening, after dining with him at the apartment, they were sitting having coffee when Audrey raised the matter of her going back to her own accommodation and starting work. "I am feeling fine and,

as much as I am enjoying this pampering, I can't in all conscious continue to stay. I must get back to work and pay my way. I don't know how I will ever be able to repay you for all you help and hospitality as it is.

"While I'm glad that you are feeling better, I was hoping that you might be around for a little longer because there are some things that I would very much like to discuss with you, but I was waiting until you were up to talking about serious matters." He paused, gazing directly at her as though trying to gauge her reaction, but all he saw was a cautious but quizzical look. "I am driving down to the estate for the weekend, leaving Friday morning, and was wondering if you would feel up to accompanying me. I would like to show you around and perhaps take the opportunity to have a talk in a different environment. Would you be up to three days in the countryside?"

Every instinct was yelling no, no, no, but her heart did a backwards somersault and, with the wistful, hopeful look in his eyes she found herself saying, "If you are sure that is all right, I would be delighted to spend the weekend with you." The mentally kicking herself for phrasing it that way -It was not the weekend WITH him – it was a weekend in the country as his guest. No, that sounded just as bad. The cheeky grin on his face made it quite clear that he was well aware of her slip-up and was enjoying the idea – if not her obvious embarrassment.

"Well, that's settled. Do you need to go to your lodgings and collect any different clothes or is there anything else that you may need?"

He is so different, she thought to herself – I have never before met any man who would have even thought to ask. "If it's alright I would like to pick up a couple of small items and check my mail."

"Of course – I should have thought of your mail. We will go there first thing tomorrow if that suits you."

There he goes again – if it suits me. Oh, why can't all men be like him?

"Do you have a copy of your CV?"

Why does he want that?

"Only on my computer but I could email it to you, or if you have a printer, I could print one for you."

I'm not going to ask why – or should I?

"If you would like to get your computer and bring it to my office, we can print it now."

Audrey fetched the laptop from 'her' rooms and they printed out the CV and copies of her diplomas and transcripts. *She had to ask!* "Why do you want these – do you know someone who might be looking for someone with my qualifications?"

"I think I might." He had a grin but, frustratingly, he was giving nothing away.

On the way to her lodgings the following morning, wondering about what sort of clothes she was going to need, she plucked up courage to ask. "How formal will it be over the weekend, and will there be many people there?"

"Oh, very informal," James assured her, "it's not one of those weekends at the manor you read about in books with untold numbers of people arriving and everyone dressing for dinner. There will be you and I and Mother and possibly one or two friends of hers. I think casual, unless you feel obligated to bring something else."

Audrey's mind went into panic mode with alarm bells ringing madly. *Just James and I and his mother! All alone in a big house! That sounds far too cosy! Yes, I like him, but, but ...*

He was talking again.

“Those big house parties are not all that common now, which is perhaps a pity because they were a least a justification for the large house in the first place. Now it’s more like having an hotel for family to congregate in on special occasions.”

Breathing a sigh of relief over not requiring formal clothes, as all she had was a little black dress that was bought to wear at her graduation, she was still more than a little concerned at the thought of being practically alone with James in the country house. “Look, James, it’s really nice of you to invite me, but are you sure that it is okay for me to accompany you this weekend? We hardly know each other, and I should not like to cause you any trouble...” she stumbled to a halt, not knowing quite how to express her concerns.

James was quick to see the problem. “I understand what you are saying and can assure you that you are quite safe, and no one is going to be compromised. There are staff everywhere and you will have your own suite of rooms and a maid. It’s a quiet, relaxing few days in the country air to get you fully recovered, and perhaps see some more of the countryside. I’m sorry, I should have realised that you might be worried. Blame it on the fact that I rarely invite anyone ‘home’ because practically everything I do is associated with business and that is best carried out here in my London offices.”

Slightly reassured, but now also concerned about dealing with domestic staff, Audrey decided that it would be churlish to raise any further questions and smilingly accompanied James back to the car and to his Mayfair apartment. On the way he casually enquired how she was travelling for up to a couple of hours by car, explaining that there was the option of taking his car, the limo or going by train. Not being prone to motion sickness and deciding that it was not up to her to influence his travelling arrangements, she simply said that she had no preferences.

But to herself she was again thinking how nice it was to have him considering her feelings. Is he like that with everyone? And I am still a little uncertain about his marital status – not that that is any concern of mine and it’s not as though I would ever be likely to figure in any considerations along those lines anyway. But he is nice...!

The next morning, they travelled south to a small village on the outskirts of which a large and imposing manor house with numerous outbuildings stood behind a stone wall. Entering through iron gates, past a gate house and along a lengthy tree-lined drive to an elegant front entrance where, alerted by the electronic gate, stood a middle-aged lady, a gentleman who was clearly some sort of servant and a young lady who also looked as if she worked at the house.

James got out of the car and walked round to open her door. As she stood up the lady came across and hugged James. “Audrey, I’d like you to meet my mother, Caroline. Mum, Audrey O’Brien”.

Momentarily overcome with the feeling of not remembering how to address James’ mother, who was beaming at her and holding out her hand, Audrey started to stammer something but was saved by Caroline quickly summing up the situation and saying, with a big smile, “Audrey, lovely to meet you. James has spoken of you of course. Welcome, and please, as he has said, I am Caroline – just as James is James and you are Audrey. We make no pretences here.”

And turning, she added, “This is Richard, he runs the household and has forever, and this is Madeline, she will look after your needs while you are here. I’m not sure how they acquired them, but they both have skills way beyond my understanding and can miraculously produce practically anything at a moment’s notice. I will introduce you to the others later, but for now let’s go inside and get you settled and perhaps have some morning tea.”

And with that they entered the most opulent house that Audrey had ever seen or imagined, and James turned to Audrey, saying, "Madeline will show you up to your suite and we can meet in the library in say fifteen to twenty minutes." He turned to Caroline for confirmation and added, "Your things will probably have beaten you to your rooms and Madeline will show you around and bring you to the library. I assure you; you won't get lost as only a small part of the house is open at the moment."

Sure enough, when Madeline showed her into the beautiful suite of rooms that were to be hers for a few days, her case, and the few carried items she had, were waiting for her. Madeline quickly helped her to hang up a few items of clothing and promised to get everything else sorted for her. She freshened up and they went down to the library.

Despite the grandeur of the house and the elegant rooms, Audrey soon felt relaxed and quite at home because Caroline and James were casual and welcoming. There was no awkwardness, and the staff just left the morning tea for Caroline to serve. Conversation was easy and Audrey soon found that between them they had planned out the weekend so that she could get the most benefit from the time she had there.

Caroline excused herself, saying that she had been in the garden when James and she had arrived and was going to freshen up before lunch.

After she had gone, James took Audrey for a short tour of the part of the house that was 'open', explaining that the rest was always kept ready for occupation at short notice if needed, but closed off and under dust covers, so that cleaning could be kept to a minimum.

After lunch James took Audrey out for a drive around a couple of local villages and the immediate environs. They had afternoon tea in one of the larger villages and stopped at a several vantage points to look out over the countryside. From some of the features around the landscape that James indicated Audrey gained some impression of the extent of the family landholdings and was amazed at area that they covered. Having grown up on a sheep farm in New Zealand she was used to large spreads but had always imagined farms in England to be much, much smaller.

Seeing some people on horses off in the distance and recognising that they appeared to be younger riders Audrey asked who they were.

"There is a small gymkhana on tomorrow, that is one of the reasons that I am here this weekend, I would guess that they are practising. Would you like to attend tomorrow's event?"

"If it not any trouble, I would love to."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all. As the patron of the pony club, I am opening it and will be awarding the prizes. Are you interested in horses?"

"I grew up on a sheep station in New Zealand and had a pony of my own from a very young age. The local pony club was a major part of my early social life. I used to train young riders before I went off to University and I still enjoy getting out around the farm on a horse when the opportunity arises."

"In that case you should feel right at home tomorrow – although," (he added as an afterthought), "I don't think it would be a good idea to consider riding. You are supposed to be having a restful weekend."

"I promise I will be quite happy to just watch, but I would love it if, sometime, you could give me the addresses of riding clubs that I might be able to join while I am England. Just to keep my hand in."

“It would my pleasure to personally introduce you to some. When I am quite sure you are quite fit enough.” James smiled as he walked with her back to the car. “In fact, I would be honoured, if you feel up to it, if you would assist me with the prizegiving tomorrow – in your capacity as a special visitor to the Manor.”

A thrill ran through Audrey – both from the invitation and the thought that he considered her a special visitor. She smiled up at him. “I would be delighted to attend and, if you wish, to assist in any way I can.”

Over dinner that evening James was telling Caroline about their arrangements for the next day and mentioned that Audrey was a keen rider, having grown up on a hill country sheep station. Caroline immediately said, “You must come down as soon as you are up to it and spend some time with me. We have horses, spare kit, and acres of land that I like to ride over – but it’s more fun with company. You would feel right at home because most of our property that is not in crops is in sheep. Probably not as hilly or extensive as what you are used to, but it would be interesting to compare notes. Oh, do say you will try and get down often.”

James watched their conversation with great interest. His Mother was clearly just as enamoured with Audrey as he was, as she did not invite just anyone to ride over their property. And it looked as though Audrey was responding keenly. Better and Better!

During the Gymkhana James noticed that Audrey was taking a close interest in the young riders, and she asked several questions about their training. When it was time to announce the winners and present the prizes, she quietly asked James if she might be permitted to have a short chat with the young riders afterwards. Perhaps twenty minutes – half-an-hour at the most. He agreed to ask them but thought it would probably be okay as most did not leave immediately.

James was introduced and gave a short speech, at the end of which he introduced Audrey, saying that she was a visitor at the manor and was a very experienced rider from New Zealand. He explained that she was helping him presenting the prizes and that she was willing to have a short talk to any of the young riders were able to stay for a little while after the prize-giving.

After the prizes had been awarded, James was very pleased to see that all the riders were gathered together to listen to Audrey, and he stood a little to one side as she spoke to the group for a short time and then individually to some of those who had not received awards that day. He was very impressed with the rapport she quickly built up with these young strangers and the way in which she had spotted the main problems each had been having and offered real sound advice in an easily understood and rememberable way. Even though these young people had not won prizes they all went away smiling and excited.

Later, over dinner, James was telling a very interested Caroline about the events and explaining how Audrey had captivated the young riders. “She cleverly picked on problems that even some of today’s winners were experiencing and worked out what most of them were doing wrong. Afterwards she spoke to all the riders about these matters and, of course the more experienced ones all said they knew all about it and just sometimes forgot if something went wrong. Then she took the younger ones aside and gave them some tips and explained in easily understood terms why her suggestions would work. It was mainly about having just a limited number or commands and hand or foot signals for their horse and being consistent in their use so as not to confuse the horse – especially when some little thing went wrong. And she gave them some cool examples of how this works. The kids were so excited, and I can see that the next time they are competing there will be some big improvements.”

“How did you pick up on the problem so quickly?” asked Caroline, clearly impressed.

“Well, I was not having to judge their performances so I could look at the faces of the riders and the actions of their mounts and could see that at times the horses were confused, which either caused a mistake or

made it more difficult to recover from something that may not have otherwise been so noticeable. I figured that it was some inconsistency that was the problem because usually a horse will, with very little training, get to know exactly what is required just by saying one recognisable word or responding to some usual movement by the rider. Sitting differently or using unfamiliar words can so easily upset everything.”

James came in at this point, “The examples that Audrey used were from her own practical experience on the farm and the kids immediately understood and should have no trouble remembering the lessons.”

Seeing that what she had done was meeting with her hosts approval, Audrey elaborated, “When were out all day mustering it was not practical to have to be instructing the horses all the time and they learned to follow a familiar routine unless instructed otherwise. So, to stop them just walking over to every patch of nice-looking grass and having a feed we trained them to eat, or drink, when we said certain words and to expect to be pulled back if we did not want them feeding at that moment. When they knew we would give them plenty of opportunity to eat or drink they followed the rules. We did not spend the whole day holding the reins and directing them. After telling them to walk on we could hook the reins around the saddle horn and just use a gentle pressure of a heel to one or the other side and they would turn accordingly. I rode about six miles each way to school for some years and after school all I would have to do was mount, give her a soothing pat on the neck and say ‘home Betsy” and I could sit back and read a book or study my homework and if it was necessary to change direction for any reason, like something happening on the track we usually used, a gentle pressure with a heel and a reassuring pat to let her know it was okay to change direction was all that was necessary. And I explained the importance of not getting upset when something went wrong and abusing the horse. All that was necessary was to give a reassuring pat and softly use words that they knew, to get things moving in the right direction again. All basic stuff but to make it clearer I likened it to training a dog or even to their own learning at home or school. If the teacher or their parents used different words to what they were used to when they were being asked or told to do something, they would get confused and it was the same for their horse.”

“James also mentioned something about problems when some kids were mounting”, Caroline commented.

“Yes, I noticed that some ponies were a bit skittish when their riders went to mount, and I passed on a little trick that I was taught. When they are instructed to mount, I suggested that they have a short phrase – like ‘we’re off’ that they whisper as they lightly touch behind the ears or along the neck. That way the horse will learn that they are about mount and will not be surprised and will stand calmly as the get up.”

“You know, that is all so basic that I have to admit that I have not made a point of emphasising some of those things to young riders.” Caroline said, “I have just assumed that their parents, or someone else, will have mentioned them or that they will have noticed for themselves. You’re right, so many of the points that are lost in competitions can be put down to poor communications between rider and horse. Of course, unlike you and to a great extent my generation in England, these kids usually do not spend a lot of their lives on their horses and although they are carefully taught how to sit and present their horse and themselves, they are not taught some of the things we take for granted. I guarantee next time you come a see this group riding there will be a great improvement, all thanks to you.”

I am clearly expected to be coming back, thought Audrey to herself – a little worried but overall, rather happy at the thought.

After dinner the three of them were sitting down with coffee and James brought up the subject of Audrey’s qualifications. Something that she had not really expected – even though he had mentioned talking business.

“Last evening, I gave your CV to Caroline to have a look at, explaining that you had come to England on your big OE expecting, from information you had been given back home, that there would have no difficulty in getting a job but had found that the only prospects so far are in academia at the commencement of their new year next August – about seven months’ time. It appeared that most potential employers in the commercial sector were worried that with your qualifications you might finish up by taking their jobs. That is why, at present, you have been working double shifts as a waitress and getting blown away in rainstorms while walking home at ridiculous hours of the night.” He was grinning but Caroline was looking horrified.

“That is ridiculous,” Caroline groaned, “We have been looking for a really qualified programmer for months and nobody had mentioned your availability.

James continued, “And as far as we can tell you have all the qualifications that we need right now and better still, could go well beyond our immediate requirements to the next levels of development that we will be needing very soon. Apart from trying to help your recovery with a bit of fresh air, that is the reason I suggested that you come here this weekend. I was hoping that we might be able to convince you that we could offer something a little better than waitressing. Would you be interested in discussing possible employment that, looking at your PhD research topic, is in the exact area of your expertise?”

Audrey blinked – hardly believing what she was hearing – and replied, “Of course. It would be so much better than waitressing, do you want to discuss it while I am here this weekend?”

“We were hoping that now might be a good time and then you have over-night to think about it and come up with any questions you may have that we can deal with before you go back tomorrow. I had a good look through your CV while you were at the gymkhana, and I know James is comfortable with your qualifications – and we have looked you up on your university web site. We have a proposition all worked out. If you are not too tired after the day out, would you be interested in hearing about it now?”

“If I were drop dead tired, I would still love to hear what you are proposing. This is almost too good to be true. I had given up hope of finding anything in my areas of expertise and was starting to wonder if I would revise my CV to just show my undergraduate degree so that prospective employers would not feel intimidated.”

Caroline and James set out their proposal, explaining that they had a need for a programme for their own business and nothing on the market was entirely suitable. Several companies had suggested that they might modify existing programmes to suit but from experience they had decided they did not feel comfortable with a patched together solution. There was a market for the sort of system they had in mind and the offer that they were making to Audrey was to write a custom programme and maintain it for them and then, when it was marketed, a share of the profits from sales. In addition, she would be responsible for their entire computer installation and security. There was an excellent salary, opportunity for keeping up to date academically – even to the extent of part-time lecturing at the nearby university if she liked, and the work could be done at either the London office or at the manor office – or both – wherever she felt most comfortable. They explained the type of programme they were looking for and that whatever hardware and software was necessary would be made available.

When they had finished, Audrey was having trouble hiding her astonishment. Who in real life received an offer like that out of the blue? Her mind was buzzing the possibilities: living in a small village was very probably less expensive than in London (but then there was the lack of entertainment (one of London’s attractions that she had not yet been able to afford to take advantage of); but there was the pony club and the fresh air; and the chance of having her own proprietary product marketed; and the salary; and the chance to lecture if she wanted to; and the paid opportunities to keep up to date; being essentially her own boss. Who could refuse such an opportunity?

Her thoughts must have shown on her face because the other two laughed and James said, "I think you need supper and a night's sleep. Perhaps we could talk about this in the morning and, if you are interested in taking it further, we can perhaps conclude an arrangement. Of course, if you have any questions, we would be happy to answer them."

In bed, Audrey's mind was turning over the day and particularly the offer she had just received. What an opportunity! Why would she have any doubts about accepting the position? It was what she had spent years training for and had fast been starting to think that the opportunity would never come. And all she did was get blown into a puddle on a stormy night. No, that is silly – of course it was more than that - although nothing else had worked up until then. Where would she prefer to live? Oh, so many questions and so many decisions – but one thing she was sure of – she would be accepting the position!

As they were finishing breakfast the next morning James smiled across the table and asked, "Have you thought about the position?"

"I've thought of little else and, if you are sure that you are happy with me, then I would love to accept. I have been thinking about where I would be based, London or around here. Would it be possible to find an apartment or a small cottage to rent in the village and what is it likely to cost? I would like to be able to compare it with what I am paying in London."

James looked at Caroline and then smiled at Audrey, "Actually Caroline was rather hoping that you would use one of the suites here. She sees a few benefits: company for both of you; availability of horses and the pony clubs; a reason to get me down here more often and a significant saving to you. You would have the full freedom to move around and come and go as you please. There are several cars here if you wish to drive anywhere and there would be no need to feel like a guest – just use it as your home. As far as making a comparison with what you currently have in London, we would hate to think that you would wish to stay where you are and, as you know, there is a huge amount of space in the Mayfair apartment, so the same deal would apply there. Come and go in place to suit yourself. The space is available in either location so it would not cost you anything."

Audrey suddenly has some misgivings, and it must have shown on her face because Caroline said, "I think you may be worried about the suggested arrangements being perhaps compromising but remember there are staff in both houses so there would be no suggestion of any impropriety and you would have your own suite in both places. I can assure you that everything would be quite proper and above-board."

Pausing only for a moment as a thought passed through her mind (*yes, I guess I can trust them -but can I trust myself with James*), she smiled and said, "In that case I am most happy to accept your offers."

Caroline immediately gave her a big hug – James looked for a moment as if he might too, but limited himself to a, perhaps longer than necessary, two-handed handshake and a, "Welcome to the family," Both actions leaving Audrey wondering if this was more than just a job and then trying to convince herself not to try reading anything more into the situation.

As they drove back to London during the late afternoon, James was asking what her rent agreement was at her current rooms and what notice she was required to give at the restaurant. Both were week to week, and she said that she was quite willing to give the required notice to both the following day, being Monday.

"So, apart from getting any mail, there is no need to stay on at your present rooms?"

"No, and any mail is probably only from my parents. I will leave a forwarding address and advise anybody that may send letters of my new one. It should be all right by next Sunday."

“Okay, I will arrange to help you shift the last of your belongings on Sunday, but I have no objections if you would like to move sooner – I think your suite at the apartment is a little more convenient than your present room. It’s your choice.”

“When you put it like that there is no choice to make. Thank you. You are spoiling me.”

“Nonsense! Most graduates are reaping the rewards of all their hard work by your age. You have studied longer and harder, you deserve some breaks. You are really going to be solving some of Mother’s and my problems, so it’s only right that we should help solve some of yours.”

What a refreshingly different and nice attitude towards life. Why can’t more people think like that!

One-week later Audrey started work with the family businesses of the Earl. During the first few days he spent most of the time just showing her around the London office and giving her a broad overview of the different things that the various parts of the organisation did. He explained that the only reason they had the London office was to make it easier to do business with visitors; otherwise, he would be based permanently at the manor. He then spent some time going into a great deal of detail about the business he was requiring a special computer programme for and then setting out exactly what he was wanting her to do. It soon became clear that it would be far easier to do most of the work at the manor and just come up to London when it was necessary for some reason. There were only a few staff in the London Office and apparently most of the work in the estate office was done by Caroline with just part-time help, so there were not a lot of people to get to know.

As was expected, James treated her with normal respect in the office, but she was also a little surprised (and secretly delighted) that he was also very attentive outside the office, and they regularly dined out together and even attended a couple of shows.

Audrey also went shopping for some more suitable London office attire and in anticipation of the move to the estate, some appropriate clothing for use there, - money no longer being quite the worry it had been!

After almost two full weeks in London, they travelled down to the estate where James spent a week going through the office with her and completed showing her how the required programme would fit into the operations that were run almost entirely from there.

To be quite honest, it did not take anything like a week to get to know the estate office perfectly and James and Caroline also spent some time in showing her around the village, getting her organised with a membership to the riding club, introducing her to people that she needed to know around the area and generally ensuring that she quickly felt at home and accepted into the local scene.

Audrey quickly settled into a routine and found that working at the Manner was very pleasant, with minimum distraction and an excellent environment. She and Caroline had meals together and most days spent some time in the village or at the pony club helping the young riders, who were making good progress under her guidance. Caroline had noted when originally looking through Audrey’s CV, that during the undergraduate years she had taken accounting and business studies as elective subjects. She had started discussing various business matters with Audrey and found that she was very quick to grasp the essential features of their enterprises and able to assist in other ways apart from just those related to computers. She had also identified ways in which their existing business records may be better computerised and had made several useful suggestions. Caroline was quick to pass this on to James, who was delighted that their original assessment of Audrey’s talents had turned out correct.

James had taken to coming down from London every weekend – ostensibly to see progress on the programming and cover any queries that she may have. However, she found that on fine days they spent more

time riding around the estate than working and it was soon clear, both from his attentions and Caroline's happy comments, that his more frequent visits had very little to do with work and a great deal to do with the attraction that was rapidly growing between them. An attraction that she had initially, and somewhat reluctantly, tried to ignore on the grounds of their so different backgrounds, but one that she was now finding herself willing to accept, and increasingly happy to encourage, when the supposed differences seemed to not exist in reality. Particularly when it became clear that the entire village and its environs had quickly accepted and believed without question that the two were and 'item'.

Then, after some weeks of being in the country, it became necessary to be up in London for a while and, from Audrey's viewpoint, things appeared to change. James was no different and they still often dined out or had a quick coffee together. Alice was still the same as before and Frank, when he drove them to work or elsewhere, was no different. Even the doctor when they occasionally saw him as they came and went was always friendly and smiling. However, when they attended a show or a function where they were mixing more with the public, Audrey noticed a distinct coolness towards her by some of the other people - especially the young females. It was clear that some saw her as a person who did not belong in their midst and went out of their way to snub her or be quite rude. Not only did this upset her but she felt that it was not fair that James was put in the position of having to try and ease her way through this unpleasantness and still try and enjoy himself.

Then, on one occasion when he suggested that she might like to attend a, very public, function with him, she felt that she must, in fairness to him, decline. He expressed some initial surprise but did not immediately question her as to why - for the time being accepting that she had - as she had said - something else that she wanted to do. Over the next few days James did not directly raise the matter but was careful to take note of little things that came up in conversation and began to suspect that her stated reason for not accepting his invitation was not quite the whole story. Something else was worrying her.

One evening, as they were sitting over coffee after dinner, he casually asked if she was happy in London. No other inferences or suggesting, 'compared to'. Taken of guard she hesitated before tentatively answering, "Yes, why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure, but even with all the options for entertainment, culture, nightlife and so on in London, you seem to be much happier when out in the country. I was just interested as to why, as I don't want to have you leaving us because you would rather not be in the city."

Quickly trying to think of something convincing to say that would not upset James she replied, "Perhaps I'm still just a country girl at heart."

Recognising this as a glib reply, James persisted, "Yes, I can understand that, but after all that time living in a city while at University, and then choosing London to come to on your OE, I can't help feeling that there is more to it than that. I didn't sense that you were not happy in London when we first met, and I can't help wondering if there is something that has upset you on this trip here. You would tell me, wouldn't you...?"

Now Audrey was not sure what to say. If she continued to hide the truth, she felt that he would see right through her lies, but, if she told him of her fears, he would no doubt think that he was stupid - especially if there was actually nothing real between them and his special attention was all in her imagination.

Her hesitation in answering seemed to give him the clue he was looking for. "It's really the way in which some of the people we meet are treating you, isn't it? Here in the city some of the people we have been meeting are obviously not accepting you in the same way as those around the estate, are they? Yes, I have noticed that too, but I have ignored it because I know why and see that reaction all the time. It's not fair, it's not nice, and unfortunately, it's not at all uncommon, but it's a fact that I have had to live with for much of my life. I wish I could tell you to just ignore it, because I know that certain people can make things very unpleasant by just being

their jealous selves, and they don't appear to realise that it will get them nowhere and will win them no friends. All I can say is that my REAL friends will not act like that, and I only wish to have you know them. The others, my 'would-be' friends and those who would like to be able to name-drop because they have been in the same group that I have at some time, I don't wish to know, and if they treat you badly, I am more than happy to remove us, and my real friends, from their company, leaving them out in the cold, as it were. I don't like hurting anyone, but you can be sure that in the long run it will be them and not you or I that is hurt."

"I'm sorry. Perhaps I am being silly, but it is not just me I am thinking of, I don't like seeing you being put in awkward positions either. I just felt that it would be better if I stayed out their way so that you can enjoy yourself better. I am okay with the fact that I do not really belong in your social circle."

"Ah, but that is the point where you are mistaken. You belong just as much as they do – in fact more than many of them do. Most of the ones who are causing you grief are pushing in, in the hopes that they might just catch a titled husband. The ones who, as you put it, belong, know the 'rules', for want of a better phrase. You are invited in, by me, and therefore you will generally be accepted where it matters, and if you are not, then it will be troublemaker that is frozen out, not you. And none of us will have any qualms about doing the freezing! I think I speak for all my friends when I say that, like most people, we are happy to be friends with anyone who follows all the normal rules of any real friendship, but when people try and use us for their own selfish ends or start effectively climbing over each other to gain some personal benefit, we will very quickly 'un-friend' them."

"But..." Audrey didn't know just what to say. This was not what she had envisaged. Okay, she could understand that his friends would close ranks and stick together when called upon to do so, but his solid defence of her had caught her totally unawares.

"No buts. I consider you my friend, and even though I have not had the pleasure of knowing you for very long, I have never for one moment believed that you have, or would, try and use me in any way. Therefore, if some other person wants to be my friend, then it follows that they will be friendly towards you as well. It's a package deal. If they don't like it, then they must convince me, and my other friends, why things should be any different. Having said that, I also know that people in smaller villages are sometimes slower than others to accept strangers in their midst and yet you have been very quickly accepted by everyone within miles of the estate, which says a lot to me. I am also well aware of the "would-be Countesses and Mothers of would-be Countesses" and their nefarious ways and am more than capable to make my own decisions in due time, so, please, try not and let them bother you, because I am more than happy to defend your right to be anywhere with me as my special friend."

Audrey was blushing at James' unusually passionate outburst and was still trying to come to terms with exactly what he was saying when he continued. "I can see, and understand why, you currently feel more comfortable down on the estate and am happy to have you stay working there unless it is essential that you are in London for a short time. I will not be forcing you to put up with any unpleasantness, please rest assured."

Nothing more was said (or, when she thought about it, needed to be said) for during the next ten days while she was in London, she noticed that there was either a complete change in attitude of the persons who had been causing upsets, or they had completely disappeared!

Back on the estate everything continued as usual and practically every weekend James came down – sometimes staying part-way through the week as well. Work progressed and everyone seemed happy.

Then one evening while she and Caroline were just sitting around talking, the 'phone rang. Caroline answered and it was immediately clear that it was James who was calling. Not wishing to appear to be eavesdropping on their conversation, Audrey got up and left the room but, as she was going out of the door, she could not help but hear Caroline reply to something that James had said, with, "Yes, I totally agree, and if you are

sure then I think you had better do something about it very soon. Perhaps you should say something to her this weekend – before something happens to make things difficult or embarrassing...” Audrey moved further away from the door to avoid hearing any more.

Were they talking about her? Was he sure, about what? Was there something very wrong? Had she done something wrong or upset James in some way? Perhaps they were talking about something else. Should I be worried?

After a discrete period, she went back into the lounge and Caroline showed no indication that anything might be concerning her, but still Audrey had worries that would not go away. I’m probably being silly, she thought to herself, but I like it here, I like the job, I like most of the people and ... I like James... Oh, no, if I am honest with myself, I more than LIKE James. But I know that is stupid and, well, we hardly know each other and, and... She mentally shook herself. Stop it Audrey O’Brien – you are being really silly now.

In spite of the fact that there was nothing different in Caroline’s attitude towards her, and the severe ‘talking to’ she had given herself, she could not help but feel more than a little unsettled during the rest of the week and was almost feeling somewhat ill by the time James arrived down on Friday evening.

They all sat down to dinner almost as soon as he arrived and afterwards adjourned to the lounge where, as was usual, over coffee, they caught up with what had been happening during the week. James did not appear to be any different – except that she imagined that he was looking at her more closely as they talked. Nothing seemed strange or strained and, after discussing what they may all do over the weekend, and supper, they all went off to bed as was completely normal. Was she concerned about nothing?

Saturday: and as it had turned out a pleasant early Spring morning, Caroline had elected to spend some time in her gardens while Audrey and James saddled up and set off to ride around some of the estate. Nothing special was planned and they lazily meandered across paddocks and through small streams just enjoying the peace and quiet and chatting inconsequentially.

It started as casual conversation, James asking, “How are you enjoying you stay in England?”

“Very much – thanks to you and Caroline.”

“How long are you intending to stay here? Do you have any specific timelines?”

“Well, I had originally thought two years. But that was based on the probability that any work that I found would be centred around a city and that any free time I had would quite possibly be spent in short trips to various point of interest in Europe. I had figured that by the end of two years I would be anxious to get back to living where I could spend weekends and holidays on the farm. However, I am finding that I am not missing home as much as I thought I would – again thanks to your providing this opportunity to combine work with country life.”

They rode on in companionable silence, with only the odd comment about things of interest that one or the other spotted, until James asked, “So do you think that perhaps you might be able to stand a period of longer than two years in this ‘green and pleasant land’?”

Thinking that he may be looking for some sort of commitment to working for him for a longer term she framed her answer accordingly, “Under current circumstances I am sure I could – although I would certainly want to travel home to visit occasionally, and I still want to do at least some of Europe as that was part of the reason for my coming her in the first place. In some ways the arrangement we have at the moment is a dream and provides far more of what you might call the best of both worlds than I could ever hope to have in New Zealand, but I know that I would be fantasizing to think that something like this could last forever.”

The wound their way down to where there was a small stand of trees beside a little stream and dismounted to give the horses a chance to drink and rest for a time.

James was obviously distracted by something as he was very quiet, standing under a tree, deep in thought. Feeling both a little concerned and somehow a little brave, Audrey tried to lighten the moment; “A penny for your thoughts.”

He slowly raised his head, still looking serious. “I was actually thinking about you and wondering if you might be open to a proposal.”

Audrey did not immediately pick up on the wider implications of the word he had used – thinking that he probably had some sort of employment proposal. “What did you have in mind?” she asked. “I might be persuaded to consider staying longer if you had a need.”

“I’m glad you feel that way about staying, because there is most defiantly a need, as you so nicely put it. I’m just not sure that you realise what that need really is and how you will react when I tell you about it.” He smiled across at her. “I’m sorry, I guess that sounds rather dramatic. It’s just that I have had this on my mind for some months now and not discussed it with you before so it may come a surprise.” He crossed to where she was standing and, facing her, took her hand (which in itself was not for the first time – but the first time in the way he took it), and looking right into her eyes, said very quietly and seriously, “We have known each other for about three-and-a-half months and for at least three months of that time I have been considering this matter. We get on well together, we have many common interests and, as far as I can tell, nothing that we seriously disagree on.”

He paused, apparently looking for some reactions, but Audrey was looking dazed. She thought that she knew where this might be heading and, strangely, she thought, was not disturbed. On the other hand, she was thinking that, if she was miss-interpreting his thoughts, she did not want to say or do anything that might cause either of the embarrassment. So, all she did was nod her agreement and keep as straight a face as she could.

Obviously taking her reaction as positive, James continued, “You may have gathered from earlier events that I enjoy your company and, I think I even used the words that I would un-friend anyone who didn’t treat you well. Actually, what I should have made clear is that I treasure your company – I LOVE you and everything about you. To the extent that I should like to ask you if you would consider becoming my wife. I apologise if this does not seem a very romantic proposal but I do appreciate that we have not known each other for very long and I have probably not made my feelings as clear as I could have – would like to have – but I do not want to jeopardise our ongoing relationship in other ways, if, as you may well think, I am being too hasty in my actions. I want to make my hopes clear, in case you have approaches from other men, but I don’t want to embarrass you if you want to say no or need more time to think about it...” He stopped – looking closely into her eyes - hoping to get some idea of her reaction and, in truth, feeling anxious and terribly tongue-tied.

Audrey was silent for a moment as she tried to gather her racing thoughts. Her immediate reaction was to say YES – an unequivocal Yes. The devil on her shoulder was saying ‘hey, you know that you will never fit in or be accepted by his kind’. Her common sense was telling her that this was all too soon and too sudden. And all the while his eyes were telling her that he was sincere and sure in what he was asking her.

Finally, she said, “I’m sorry, you have taken me completely by surprise and I am having trouble collecting my thoughts. I had felt that perhaps you did have feelings for me, but I forced myself to push them into the background because I was sure that, even though you had made it clear we were friends, I did not want to hurt myself when, as I was sure it would, nothing more came of it. Even though we are both worldly adults, we are from such different worlds it seemed certain you would never find me suitable as anything but a friend and an employee. I had accepted that as a fact. Now I am in a quandary. My cautious, logical self is saying ‘stop right now - this is not your place in life.’ The imp on my shoulder is saying ‘you know you love him so go for it.’ My

own deep inner feeling is telling me that yes, I can see myself with you and I believe that you do perhaps love me, and I could probably overcome my doubts about acceptability and maybe it would all work out, but, and there is a big but, how well do we really know each other after only a few months? Is there such a thing as love at first sight?"

James, feeling obliged to say something, came in with, "I fully understand what you are saying, and this is why I did not simply come out with the full, down on one knee, request for your hand in marriage. I could see that, unlike most of my female acquaintances, who see only my position and title and themselves as a Countess, you are practical and sensible as well as being beautiful and intelligent. And yes, it was great attraction at first sight. An attraction that quickly grew to respect and admiration and, for the first time in my life, love. But, studying you and knowing you as I think I do, I understand why you have doubts. That is why my rather clumsy statement of my affections was an attempt to express these feelings but at the same time letting you have an 'out' if you felt that we could only ever be just friends, because there is no way that I want to run the risk of losing that friendship."

"Have you mentioned this to your mother?"

"Yes, I think you may have been in the room when I telephoned her earlier in the week. I explained my feelings and she immediately said that I should tell you as quickly as possible as she was in total agreement but thought that there were a couple of local young men who were also interested in dating you. I then explained my hesitation and how I was interpreting our earlier discussions as meaning you would have some reservations. She could see what I was saying but did comment that your thinking that way just raised you higher in her estimations and that, if I wanted, she would have a talk with you. I told her that I did not want you to start thinking that I could not act for myself or that it was a family attempt to talk you into anything. However, she says that her offer still stands if you feel that you need to sit down and talk with anyone and that you are to feel free to 'phone your parents, in total privacy, if you wish to."

They were still holding hands and Audrey gripped James tighter as she responded, "I feel that I am being ungrateful and selfish asking this, but would you mind terribly if I asked to have until at least tomorrow to get my head around all the implications of this? You and your mother have been so kind to me, and I want us to be friends and my mind is in a turmoil. Oh, but for the record, even though several of the local young men been flirting, you do not yet have any serious rivals there." Even though it felt like a swarm of butterflies were all doing flips in her stomach, she, for the first time, managed a smile.

Seeing the smile and with her still gripping his hands, James felt quite safe on leaning forward and pressing his lips in a kiss on her forehead.

There was a whispered, "Thank you so much," from Audrey and as they stood apart there was just a glint of moisture in their eyes.

"Shall we start back – perhaps by a different track for a change of scenery?" James' question left an opportunity for her to either stay for a while longer or move away from the moment.

Audrey looked at James, half smiled and blushed, "In the light of what I have just been saying, this is going to sound stupid and contradictory, but I really don't mind what we do right now – just as long as we are doing it together."

"In that case, we will start with this – and then think about trying to convince the horses that it's time to wend our way home." And, so saying, he took Audrey into a long, warm and keenly reciprocated embrace that, ultimately, finished with mutual, lingering kisses.

Back at the Manor house James offered to deal with the houses if she wanted to go and shower and change and, thankful the half-hour or more that he would be engaged with that task, she immediately searched out Caroline to have a quick talk.

Explaining what had transpired, she told Caroline of her thoughts and reservations, hoping that she would understand and perhaps help her settle her fears.

Caroline listened for a few minutes and then cut in; "I know exactly where you are coming from and what you are feeling. When I married my late husband, he was still the Viscount, but the same problems confronted me and thirty-five years ago the class system was still far stricter than now. I was from a very ordinary, very 'working class' family where I was part of the first generation where females had been educated beyond the basic eleven-plus leaving certificate level. I had been extremely lucky to be permitted to carry on with my education and then to be granted a scholarship to university. My brother, who is eighteen months older than me, was at the same university and it was through him that I, very much by chance, happened to meet Richard. For some reason we immediately 'clicked' and the rest is now history. My 'acceptance' if you can call it that, was strange, to put it mildly. I was worried, just like you, and Richard was all casual and off-hand, saying that Father and Mother are decent old sticks, and I would be accepted even if only because he was showing some positive signs of settling down. An attitude that did little to calm my fears.

It was arranged that I come to this very Manor to spend a day and meet Richard's parents. I had no idea about protocol and was rather 'rough-cut', but Richard assured that my clothes and common background were nothing to be concerned about. Which also worried rather than reassured me. Anyway, we arrived, and Richard introduced me and, for what seemed like an eternity, I stood and shook in my shoes as I felt them both appraising me. Looking back, they were not actually staring at me, and I think they may have all been talking – I still can't remember, I was so scared. Richard's Father was a crusty old guy, slightly whiskered, quite imposing and to me absolutely intimidating. I was imagining him glaring down on me and telling someone to remove this trash from his presence. Instead, he stepped forward took my hand and half-whispered, "Welcome Caroline, you are most welcome. It's about time someone introduced some attractive new blood into this family."

This from the Earl really caught me off balance, but before I could make a complete fool of myself, the Countess gave him one of those loving soft punches on the arm that sent him into broad smiles, and said, "Don't mind him. He is right, but you must excuse his blunt way of talking. Let's all stop just standing here feeling awkward and go and get properly acquainted while we have the tea that is waiting in the next room." And that was that. No ceremony: no pomp, no more feeling that I may not belong. If Richard was happy then they were very happy.

"You are in fact far more suited to this life than I was – certainly initially. I was very much a city girl who, at that stage, did not know one end of a horse from the other, and what's more, my parents both worked for their living and did not own a business and lived in a council house. The Countess taught me anything I needed to know which, when boiled down, was not much more than we had all been taught but had never had to strictly follow; good manners, and a bit of common sense when it came to dealing with people. You have impeccable manners, your parents own a business and property, you are educated, you ride beautifully and are happy to share your skills with others, you are naturally attractive (which some people will be jealous of, but that is not your problem) and you have a natural 'way' with people. You can't lose. And if you are worried about the other would-be Countesses; don't be. There are always plenty of people hanging around the fringes of any level of society hoping to join in by marriage. If they actually belong, they will be found naturally, and not get there by climbing over other people to get to what they see as the top. Your decision is really only about how you feel about James: a friend (and I promise you, we will always be friends, regardless), or as a potential husband".

“Oh, and in case you are worried that you have spent years qualifying to do something that you love and would not be able to put all that time and effort to use, don’t be. I can confidently assure you that there will be demand for your services; here of course, at the university (who also like to have titled academics) and even in commerce. The work of the Countess is not full time and is more frequently centred around evenings and weekends, so, if you wished, pursuing your career would still be very possible at least on a part-time basis. Remember, you would be the boss, and, beyond certain obvious duties, that are not compulsory, but are expected, you could do anything you like”.

“Now, James will be finished with the horses soon so why don’t you go and freshen up and think about what you would like to do for the rest of the weekend. Lunch is in about an hour. If it’s not too late to call your parents, feel free to do so if you want to. She gave Audrey a big hug. “No pressure, but I would love to have you as a daughter.”

A short time later, soaking in a relaxing bath and trying to think through the morning’s happenings, Audrey found herself reflecting on the past few months and her feelings as well as James’ actions. The more she thought about it the more she realised that she probably should have seen what was coming.

Should she call her parents? Yes, she decided, but she would leave it until the late evening. It would then be Sunday Morning in New Zealand and in the meantime, she would make up her mind on what she was going to do – although, she admitted to herself, that decision had really already been made. The only objections were in her mind and, if she was honest with herself, they weren’t valid.

She reflected on all the things in her life that she had originally thought she could never achieve and had then overcome all difficulties and succeeded.

Did it matter that they had only known each other for just a few months? In some arranged marriages they couple did not even meet much before the wedding, if at all, and she personally knew of several of those that were more successful than some of the ones where the couple had been courting for years. And she was not being influenced by his title – in fact that was, (or had been) the biggest stumbling block for her. Perhaps it is my chance of happiness and being able to do more for others. When I think about it, I realise that there are some other benefits in it for me as well – like the ability to travel. Why am I only starting to think of these things now? I am starting to believe that my answer must be YES.

Over lunch Caroline kept the conversation light and varied (*thanks, thought Audrey*).

After lunch they decided, on Caroline’s suggestion, to drive down to one of the pony clubs to watch the young riders practicing for an upcoming gymkhana. After which they chatted to the youngsters and answered some of their questions. A relaxed afternoon with no awkward moments.

Immediately after diner Audrey retired to her rooms, saying she was going to call her parents. She ‘phoned and arranged to link on SKYPE a few minutes later.

Looking back on the ensuing conversation, Audrey had to admit to herself that it had been ‘interesting’ and, at times, rather amusing. She was amazed that she had been able to carry it off in a ‘matter-of-fact’ way and very surprised that her parents had, after the initial, ‘You what’ had accepted the news so calmly.

After the ‘Hi, how are you, lovely to hear from you, and be able to see you,’ ‘What have you been doing’ there was the “I have some news”.

“Oh, what is it?” Her mother’s face all lit up and her father calmly waited to see what kind of news she was about to tell them.

“I’ve received a proposal and I have decided to accept it.” Her mother’s face looking puzzled – her father still waiting for the real news.

Mother, “But I thought you were very happy in your job – why would you want to change.”

“Yes, I am happy and I’m not going to be changing my job.” mother looking totally confused but father, starting to comprehend, asks the, by now, obvious question.

“Are you quite sure about this and, although it may not make any difference, would we approve of him?”

Mother now looking shell shocked and father, trying to look serious but grinning behind her.

“Oh, I think so. He is a sheep farmer.” *That was a cheeky reply, but I couldn’t help it.*”

Mother, “But isn’t James, the man you work for, a sheep farmer too?”

“Yes Mum, he is, amongst other things, and he is the one who has proposed to me.”

“Father, “I think there is a lot more to this. Perhaps you need to fill us in on the rest of the details.”

Mother, “You aren’t...”

“No Mum, I’m not. And it’s all quite simple really. James and I hit it off right from the start and we have been spending a lot of time together. Even though it had only been a little over three months since we first met – and I will go into more details about that later – we have both decided after much deliberation on my part – that this is what we both want. For reasons that I will explain later, I was initially very attracted to James but anxious about being anything more than a good friend. I have had time to look at my reasons for that, have carefully considered them, taken expert advice, and decided that my worries were groundless. I will be accepting his proposal in the morning.”

“But are we going to meet him, and his family, before you get married. Where will you get married? Oh, this is all so sudden – and what about all your education. Where will you be living?”

“Slow down Mum. We have not even thought about dates or details about where. Yes, you will meet him – quite soon if I am any judge – and there is nothing to worry about. Just be happy for me, please,”

Father, “Does James have a surname? Can you tell us anything about him so that we can get a better picture of him? I’m sure Mum would like a photograph or something.”

This was the tricky question that Audrey knew would come up and probably cause the biggest shock to everyone back home.

Steeling herself she said, “His name is James Falkner, Lord James, 14th Earl of Blackrock. His Mother, Caroline, of whom I have spoken, is the dowager Countess of Blackrock and the only immediate family member. There is quite a bit of detail about him online if you look it up, which would be easier than me trying to remember it all and explain on this call. And don’t worry, it’s not the title I am marrying, that is what was initially making me doubtful.”

Seeing their stunned and rather worried faces on the screen, she quickly added, “They are both just ordinary people in real life. You will be able to talk sheep, farming, dogs, horses, riding clubs, meat and wool prices, and much more just like you do with all the local farmers. And Mum, Lady Caroline is just Caroline who loves horses and swapping recipes and making Christmas decorations.”

And the conversation continued for about half-an-hour, until finally, apparently all calmed down again, at least for the time being, they had finished the call.

Audrey joined James and Caroline in the lounge for supper, but no reference was made to the call.

Later Caroline, who had obviously correctly interpreted the vibes that were unconsciously emanating from Audrey, said 'good night' and adjourned to bed and while they were on their feet, Audrey, feeling that she could not wait until the morning, and didn't think that James should have to either, turned to him and, blushing, whispered, "Yes, an unequivocal yes. Thank you, and I'm sorry I made you wait."

And with that they fell into each other's arm and kissed. Their first, fully committed, deep, uninhibited kisses. The first real, relaxed, kisses she had shared, without any doubts or concerns, with her husband-to-be. The first kisses that he had not felt a little guilty about perhaps stealing from his beautiful (and, as yet unknown to him, virginal) bride-to-be.

It had taken Audrey a while to become accustomed to having Madeline around to do so much for her. Not wanting to offend her by saying that she could do many of these things for herself, she instead decided to gradually befriend her to the extent that she progressively broke down a little of the natural deference that Madeline had been trained to show and was able to have her sit and talk and share 'things' like would be more usual for two girls of a similar age. The following morning Madeline came in as usual to find Audrey up out of bed, sitting at the window in her robe, smiling at the view.

"You're up early and seem very happy this morning, Miss."

"Yes Madeline, I actually had trouble sleeping but I am happy." She blushed and indicating a chair, said, "Can we have a chat?"

Recognising the signal to drop some of the formality, Madeline replied, "Of course. What's the matter?"

"Well, yesterday morning James (she had grown used to talking to Madeline using first names) and I were out riding and, totally unexpectedly he asked me to marry him. I was caught completely off guard and agreed to give him an answer later in the day. I told him 'Yes' last night. My reluctance was for two reasons. One, because we have only known each other for about three months, but, more importantly, we are from two totally different backgrounds – classes, if you like – and I was - in fact still am- worried that I may not fit in or be accepted by those close to him."

Madelaine looked at her wide-eyed. "You hesitated? Every-one can see how close you are and I'm sure no-one will be surprised. Three months, when you are working in such close proximity is plenty of time to work out if you love someone. As for you not fitting in, well, if you will excuse me saying so, you have been accepted all around this community and it is well known that if his Lordship accepts you then everyone else will because he is very discerning about who he has as friends. I suppose there will a few 'hopefuls' that may feel cheated, but, after all, it's his and your decision. No, I think you will find that acceptance will be automatic. And I know that you will fit in easily just by people's reactions to you already. We get to hear all the village talk and I can assure you that everyone really likes you. Why, the pony club kids, and their parents, are always making nice comments about you. To be accepted in the community at large is what you need on your side for everything to work as it should. Don't give a thought for the 'would-be' Countesses, they would not be after his Lordship for love, just position, and that is not what he needs to continue to be successful with the farms and his other businesses. It's the loyal supportive families and community that makes the real difference."

Audrey was taken aback with Madelaine's comments. Even with the closeness they had developed she was not usually as forthright. It really brought home the fierce loyalty of the staff and community when they

were respected in return. "Thank you. I really appreciated those comments. Both James and Caroline have said the same things but hearing it from you as well gives me much more confidence." And with that she did the almost unheard-of by taking Madelaine in a tight embrace. Which took Madelaine by surprise, but secretly delighted her as well.

"And **congratulations**, Miss. I'm **very** pleased for you and his Lordship, and I know the rest of the staff will be genuinely delighted when the news becomes official."

At breakfast Caroline was ecstatic, to put it mildly. Hugs and kisses and congratulations and have you thought about rings and when you may get married and when (not if) are you going to New Zealand to let everyone meet everyone.

James and Audrey looked at each other. Where did they start? Each knew that they were questions that they had to consider but, of course, they had not been discussed.

Audrey started, "I would like to go to New Zealand so that we can all meet everyone, but that will depend on when is suitable."

James. "Any time is suitable for me because the estate is well managed and staffed. It's more important to consider when is suitable for your parents. Would early winter, before the lambing season be best?"

Audrey. "Perhaps, unless early snow made access difficult."

"Yes, but unless there is a blizzard, we could travel by helicopter."

Why would I never have considered that, thought Audrey to herself. The answer - cost!

Caroline. "Do you do a second shearing?"

"Yes, but it is not a problem for my parents as shearing gangs come in and do most of the work."

"So would late Autumn be best – unless you want to wait until next summer in New Zealand. I guess that will also be dependent upon when you plan to get married."

James. "We could go next month; we are well ahead with the new programme, and it is reasonably quiet here into the summer. Would that work?"

Audrey. "Yes, but I think this must be your decision because I don't know your commitments."

Caroline. "Sweetheart, at the moment our commitments, if any, are secondary to getting everything organised for you and James."

Audrey, overwhelmed. "Well, in that case, over the next month would be fine, if we can get flights."

James. "That will not be a problem. There are always seats." He winked meaningfully at Audrey who took a moment to get his meaning. Depends upon who you are!

James again. "Okay, we can discuss that and get something organised with your parents. Do you have any preferences as to where and when we get married?"

Audrey. "Not really, just as long as we can have the necessary family and close friends there. I suppose that means the least number to travel. We will need to work that out along with a date that is most likely to suit the most people."

Caroline. "That's one of the reasons why so many people like you. For you it's all about pleasing the most people possible and not just about yourself. But remember, it's your wedding so you really have to please yourself for once."

James. "Well, for the moment, that just leaves rings. Have you thought about what you might like?"

Audrey. "I know it may sound strange, but I don't like big flashy rings that stand up high above the finger. My preference is for more practical, flatter settings that are less likely to get caught on things. I'm not sure what is considered fashionable, but that's my preference."

James. "Nobody's going to insist on anything in particular, and you must choose what you like and suits you. And no looking at price tags – cost is not the issue here; your satisfaction is paramount. And naturally, you will also have an option to select from the estate collection if there is anything there that takes your eye."

Audrey's eyes opened wide. "I love old jewellery, perhaps that would be the best place to start looking, if that is alright."

"Of course, it's alright," Caroline assured her, "In fact, why don't we go down after breakfast and get all the collection from the safe. That way you can look at it in comfort and with no rush. And, if you want to look in jewellers, you will know in advance what is in the collection,"

'Down' to where the safe was, Audrey was to discover, through a hidden door in a wall panel, to a basement room which was set up with some comfortable chairs, a table with excellent lighting over it, and a walk-in strong-room in which there were locked safe-like cupboards containing coronets, necklaces, armlets rings and loose precious stones. Another part of the strong room apparently held documents relating to their holdings all over the world and records of the long family history.

Caroline lifted out the many boxes of rings. There were individual rings and sets of all descriptions. James had the history of each and explained which generation they were from.

There was one set that immediately caught Audrey's attention and she kept looking back at it to compare the rings with others that attracted her.

Finally, she put two boxes aside. "These two sets jump out at me, and I would be more than happy with either. Perhaps if you could give me some more background on them it would be easier to decide."

"The Sapphire ring set around with diamonds is the one that my Great-grandfather had made for his bride when he was the Viscount. He inherited the Earldom at quite a young age and both he and his Countess lived to a very old age for the times. The Diamond set is actually from a generation later. It was the ring my Great-Uncle – my grandfather's younger brother – gave to his bride."

"My first choice was the sapphire, but I then thought that perhaps a diamond was more traditional, and I should consider that. However, I still love the Sapphire. It seems to draw me towards it for some reason. It has a warmth and feeling of solidarity that I can't logically explain. The wedding band and eternity ring feel like they enhance that impression; rather than stand out on their own they are complimentary. They look right together."

Caroline looked at James, "Which is exactly what history shows your Great-Grandfather and Mother were to each-other. If that is your choice, it sounds perfect. Now, while we are here, would you like to look at the coronets to see if there is anything that you might like to carry a veil on your wedding day?"

After another mind-blowing experience, but one that, in its own way, served to show her a little more of what she was marrying into. As did the brief look through the other jewellery in that strong room. As Caroline put

it, "If you're going out any time and need something to set off your outfit, there is usually a suitable piece in here somewhere, so it's good to be familiar with what is available at a moment's notice."

Caroline also said that she would have the engagement ring cleaned and the settings double checked, immediately, so she could start to wear it."

They finished the morning by sending engagement notices to the 'Times', the local community paper and to the 'Christchurch Press' in New Zealand. Both the 'Times' and the 'Press' picked up on the titles and included background pieces in their social columns, which both pleased and embarrassed Audrey – not that she told anyone of course.

Bookings to New Zealand were made and the weeks until their departure flew by so quickly that it seemed no time until Audrey found herself with James in a situation that she had never dared to dream about: Sitting the airline lounge at Heathrow waiting to board into the first-class cabin on a flight to Christchurch via Singapore. Not that Audrey had a lot of experience on long-haul flights, but this was so different to anything that she had even imagined, that she felt like it must all be a dream.

By mid-morning on the last Saturday in May they had cleared immigration and customs and walked out into a beautiful Christchurch morning to find her parents waiting to greet them.

Hugs; Handshakes; Congratulations; Admiration of the Ring; All the usual greetings for an arrival and more. Hyper-excitement! And, of course, the sizing up of each other! But, as usual, James's easy manner soon overcame any potential difficulties and the conversation turned to the countryside and farming and the men were in their element, while Audrey and her mother talked about the flight and 'things domestic' at the farm. They made a stop on the way for lunch and arrived at the farmhouse mid-afternoon.

By the time they reached the farm any perceived differences in background had been long forgotten by the men. A common interest in sheep farming – albeit different sheep and different conditions from countries on opposite sides of the world – gave them so much to discuss, even as they drove through the changing countryside, that they were soon so deep in technical discussions that Audrey started to wonder if James even remembered that she was there – but, in reality, the frequent glances at her over his shoulder was all the reassurance she needed!

Just over three hectic weeks of deciding about a wedding; catching up with friends and family and trying to find the time to just 'hang out' and relax. James and her father kept wanting to ride off around the hills (and Audrey wanted to ride off as well – even if just to get away from all the decisions that had to be made).

Lists of wedding invitees were prepared, and it soon became obvious that there would be more from around New Zealand than from the English side. However, when talking to people they naturally asked when and where the wedding would be and, when it was pointed out that there had been no firm decision, almost to the person they said that they were due for a holiday and if it were to be in England they would be there in a flash. Thus, although it had appeared unlikely in the beginning, it was finally decided that the wedding would be in the little church on the manorial estate, and pretty well all of the visiting guests would be staying for at least part of the time in the manor houses.

Three weeks before Christmas was the date set and by the time Audrey and James flew back to London almost everything was arranged.

The manor was fuller than anyone could remember. Additional staff catered for all the guests. The day was one of those fine, crisp, winter rarities that one dreams about, but it is probable that few people noticed with all the celebrations. Then off on a tour around Europe: the Netherlands, Germany, France, Christmas in Vienna,

New Year in Switzerland and finally back to a new life, with a new name, a title and a hitherto undreamed-of future that opened before her.

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ONE FOGGY NIGHT IN LONDON TOWN

It should have been the best of days because I had just arrived in London at the beginning of my long anticipated big Overseas Experience. It was instead the worst of days because the whole city and its immediate environs were shrouded in fog. Thick, dirty, impenetrable fog. Our flight had been diverted from Heathrow because of it; we were late getting to the city because of it; I had missed a whole day of my adventure because of it; and now, because of it, I could still not see anything, but fog.

For some reason the first half-dozen words and the first couple of bars of an old Sinatra tune kept looping through my confused brain. 'A foggy day in London Town' – oh joy, just what I've always dreamed about (*sarcasm*), I'm living a song!

Coming from the outback of Australia (well, not the **way** outback where your nearest neighbour may be several hundred miles away, but far enough away from civilisation to mean that a day's shopping meant reading the latest mail order catalogues), seeing a real city was supposed to be the beginning of this great adventure. Even when I was leaving Australia I did not travel through Sydney, or Melbourne, or Brisbane. And Cairns, the sum of my brief "city experience", did not even start to compare with my impressions of what London would look like from the air and later the ground. I was feeling cheated. Some experience this had turned out to be!

I stood outside Victoria station where the Gatwick Express had deposited us, clutching my suitcase handle and looking at the ghostly images of vehicles and people who seemed to know where they were going, through this eerie vapour. How would I recognise a taxi if one came along? How would I get to my hotel – where they had at least assured me room was still being held.

Out to my left there came the noise of a vehicle that sounded as if it was being driven too fast for the conditions. It flashed through my mind that the driver must know his way around these streets as though blindfolded. Then a van appeared out of the fog. It was travelling half on the footpath and hit the man standing alongside me before swerving across the road and, erratically, driving off.

There was a moan from the man, now on the ground, and I dropped to my knees to see what I might be able to do. From the age of fifteen I had been required by my parents to keep up to date with the Royal Flying Doctors First Aid courses, as family and neighbours so trained were the nearest thing to a Doctor or Emergency Room that existed where we lived.

I checked vitals: breathing; yes, airways not blocked, but seemed a little shallow; pulse – where is it? Okay, steady; Laying on his side – almost in a perfect recovery position - with no signs of broken limbs; no bleeding visible; but apparently still unconscious, eyes closed and no movement. I speak to him, "Sir, can you hear me?" No response. Concussion? I see several people leaning over me and looking. "Does anyone know this area? Is there a hospital close-by and can someone call an ambulance?"

Someone replied, 'There is a hospital about three blocks away and it would be quicker to run there and get help than have an ambulance find its way here in this fog.'

"I have never been in London before today. Can you find your way to the hospital and back? I will stay here and keep an eye on him."

There was a mumbled, “Yes,” and two people walked off into the gloom. Faster, I thought, but of course, in this fog, that was probably not possible – or safe.

I am holding a limp, cold hand (is it just cold because of the cold evening?) and checking for any signs of him stirring. Breathing still ‘Okay’ but I was still worried. Pulse still strong and regular. I couldn’t see my watch to verify the pulse rate, but it didn’t feel too bad. Still no movement though – I hope it’s not a concussion. Oh, hurry up with some real medical assistance!

Off in the distance I heard running feet and what could have been a gurney being trundled, too fast, along an uneven footpath. I whisper to the unconscious man. “Medical assistance is almost here.” I gently add a little pressure to his hand, “Hold on there, we’ll soon have you in the hospital.” At least I hope so, I think to myself.

Two people arrive. A nurse in hospital scrubs, looking cold in this damp atmosphere, and a young man in a suit – a young Doctor? – Probably a registrar. I brief them with what I have observed and what had happened. The nurse looks up and smiles, “Thank you.” And looks back down at the man.

The person who I assume is the Doctor looks as if he is waiting until the nurse had checked the man over and confirmed my findings. The nurse speaks, “Confirmed no visible external injuries and no broken limbs. Probable concussion – little eye reaction to light. Suggest we gently roll him onto his back and get prepared for transfer to stretcher.” The Doctor agrees, just as the gurney, being pulled by a very out-of-breath, young, orderly arrives.

“Can you help us with the lift, please?” the nurse, who appears to be fully in control of the operation, asks me.

“Of course.”

The nurse and the Doctor take his upper body and support his head while the orderly and I prepare to lift his hips and legs.

“Gently, on three: One, two, three.” There is a smooth, gentle transfer to the gurney, where he is strapped on. The Doctor turns to me, “Can you accompany us, please. We may need your help.” I agree and they look a little surprised when I turn to grip my suitcase handle. “I’ve just arrived in London.” I explained. Looking around I also picked up the man’s briefcase and carried it to the Hospital.

As gently but as quickly as possible the patient is transported to the hospital. Trundling the gurney where it was smooth enough, using it like a stretcher over the many rough patches.

Inside the hospital at last. The nurse says, “Have a sit-down and grab a drink and something to eat if you like. We will get the patient organised and then we can have a chat and fill in some of the background details.”

Exhausted after the several days of travel, interrupted sleep, fog, delays, disorientation and the last hour of adrenalin rush, I gratefully pour a coffee and relax into a chair.

After a short while the Nurse returns. “We have him in a ward and the Doctor has organised a scan to check for damage to his head. Apart from some bruising everything else is fine. Are you able to tell us what happened?”

I explained that I had just arrived off a train and, with a small group of people, was standing in the fog trying to decide what to do next. I told her how the van had appeared out of the fog, travelling quickly and partly on the foot path, had hit the man, who was spun around and dropped to the pavement and not moved. “I quickly

checked breathing, vitals and for any visible damage or possible breaks. I asked if anyone else knew about ambulances or near-by hospitals and a couple took off and apparently found you.”

“Are you a nurse?” she asked.

I laughed, “No, far from it. I live in a reasonably remote part of Queensland, Australia. There are no hospitals or Doctors anywhere near, so most families have a first aider, who has been trained by the Flying Doctor Service, to initially deal with accidents and emergencies and to, sometimes, take things even further using instruction over the radio from the hospital. I’m just one of those first aiders.”

“Well, they teach you well. You did all the right things and it looks like Mr Robinson has you to thank for his getting prompt attention.” At my raising my eyebrows at the man’s name, she continued, “He had some bank cards in his jacket pocket and his passport was in the briefcase that you, thoughtfully, picked up and brought to the hospital. You say you are from Australia, so is Mr Robinson, although it appears that he might be living in England at present.”

By now I was really suffering from lack of good sleep. “I had better be going – I still have to find the hotel I am booked at and I have no idea how to get there. Is there any possibility of getting a taxi from here?”

“Which hotel are you going to?”

When I told her she replied, “That’s not too far away. I finish my shift in about fifteen minutes and will see you get there safely.”

“Would it be possible to have the name and address of this hospital – I should like to call, perhaps tomorrow, and see how he is and if there is anything that I can do for him – as a fellow Australian.”

“Certainly, I’ll write down the details for you.”

A long story about something that in fact took only minutes, (okay, and hour or two if you include the sitting around at the hospital), but it was only the beginning of another much more exciting story.

The next day – well to be precise, it was already very early in the morning of the next day when I finally checked into my hotel, so, after lunch that day – I found my way to the hospital and enquired after Mr Robinson and where I would find him. I said I was a friend and the reception told me which room he was in, so I went to see him.

I knocked and went into the room. “Mr Robinson?” I smiled.

He looked back, puzzled, “Yes, do we know each other?” Then he seemed to recognise me. “You’re the young lady who I was standing alongside outside the station last evening.” He was smiling now. “Yes, I’m Frank Robinson, but you have me at a disadvantage because I have no idea who you are. How do you know my name?”

“I helped after you were knocked down by that van and the hospital nurse kindly told me your name. I have just called in to see how you are.”

“And I remember hearing a genuine Queensland voice asking me how I was and then telling me that help was coming. I thought I must have been hallucinating or dreaming because when I mentioned it to the Doctor this morning, he said that I was unconscious. And it was you that gave the summary of what you had found was, or wasn’t, wrong with me when the medics arrived, wasn’t it? All I was conscious of was your voice in my head – almost as though I was looking in on the scene rather than being part of it. The Doctor has told me that it was lucky that you were there at the time and knew what to do. Thank you.”

"It was nothing – the hospital staff who trundled a gurney what seemed to be miles of fog and then carried you most of the way back, are the ones that did the work. But, tell me, what part of Queensland do you hail from?"

"Rockhampton originally, but most recently Port Douglas. What about you?"

"In the middle of nowhere, about 300 kilometres west of Cairns – nearest real town, some 150 kilometres south, is Georgetown, population a massive 250 - give or take a dog or two."

"First time in London?"

"First time anywhere apart from Cairns! But, how are you? What did they find?"

"Mild concussion – no damage showing up the scans. Some rather deep bruising on left arm, ribs and hip and on my left shoulder blade, which looks like it may have been caused by his side mirror. They are just keeping my head under observation for a day or two before letting me loose on the world again. I'll be fine."

"But what about you. I don't even know your name. How long have you been in London? What do you do? Where do you live?"

"My name is Shirley, Shirley Wilson. I arrived in London in the middle of yesterday's fog, after a delay and a diversion. I had just arrived off the Gatwick express when I was standing outside the station last evening. I am booked into an hotel for a few days until I, hopefully, find work and then somewhere not too far away to live. I'm here for the big overseas experience and will stay around until I find work, or the money runs out – which ever comes the sooner. But what has taken you away from the sunny Northern Beach resorts?"

"I came to London about four months ago to undertake some postgraduate research and study with a team here. I expect to be here for eighteen months – give or take. I was walking from landmark to landmark through the fog and, having found the station, was trying to remember which way I needed to walk to get the tube when the decision was taken out of my hands." He laughed, rather painfully, "I live and work in Camden, but that probably does not mean anything to you if you have just arrived here. About 5 miles north as the crow flies. Walkable on a fine day." His smile was infectious, and Shirley had a strange feeling of something more than just wanting to visit a fellow Australian who she had helped get to hospital. She dismissed the feeling as being some sort of homesickness and being tired.

"What sort of work are you looking for?" He was asking her.

"No idea. I'm not trained for anything that is carried on in a big city and was hoping that I could find a job as a waitress, or general office assistant, or a shelf stacker in a store. I'm willing to try anything."

"Oh, from what the Doctor was saying I thought you may have been a nurse or at least something in the medical field."

"No, just a long-time first aider from rural Australia."

"Royal Flying Doctor Service trained; I suppose?"

"Yes, but why did you think that?"

"Oh, it's just that I have heard that people in the outback areas who are trained by the RFDS are able to do much more than basic first aid – in fact in some cases they perform some pretty complicated work just by following directions over the radio. Am I right?"

“There have been some quite dramatic cases, yes, but I’m not in that class – just a few broken bones and a couple of babies delivered, otherwise it’s been straight forward sticking plaster and bandages.”

“I’m not promising anything right now, but if you leave me details of how I can contact you I think I may be able to organise something for you, to at least get you working and able to settle.”

And where I can keep in touch with you so that I can get to know you better, because I am already feeling that she is a lady that I would like to see more of, and it’s unusual for me to feel that and certainly not at what is, in effect, first sight!

Quite excited by the thought – *both of work and further contact with Frank, who she was feeling rather attracted to already* – she replied, “That would be a great help, and if you are able to suggest anything, I would be most grateful. I don’t know if it was the effect of the fog last night or the sheer size of the city, but I am feeling overwhelmed at the moment, and must say I can’t think where to start looking for work or accommodation.”

Frank was smiling and thinking to himself, I know I can suggest guaranteed jobs for her, and I think she would be both keen to take one and be very happy with the work. And if she does go for one of the jobs I know where there is cheap accommodation available that would probably suit her. I’m almost glad that van knocked me down last night!

They amiably chattered for a little longer and Shirley took her leave giving her hotel address and saying that she would call again the following day, by which time she hoped to have arranged a mobile phone.

Frank lay back in the hospital bed, reflecting on Shirley’s visit. He had been half asleep when she knocked on his door and his first impression had been of her framed in the doorway, and the room suddenly appearing far brighter than then he remembered. He judged her to be around five foot six and, even wrapped up in a heavy coat, he could tell she had a slim, curvy body (which was confirmed when she later removed her coat). But the thing that struck him most was her face: Big, clear, alert, intelligent eyes; a radiant, smile; a healthy lightly tanned skin that was glowing slightly from the cold. A beautiful dream? No, she moved and spoke, and he recognised a familiar Queensland accent. Not heavy, but unmistakable. A comfortingly familiar sound. She did not have the tan of the girls who spent their lives in the sun and the surf. Her skin looked naturally olive and her tan was of one who spent her days in the open air but probably under a large shady hat – like, perhaps, an ‘Akubra’ – yes, she looked as if an Akubra would sit perfectly on her pretty head. Yes, it all fitted with her coming from the outback. She was alive and not a bit superficial. Unspoilt – open and as honest as the land she was from. He knew the breed – after all, his family had come from that stock. Her vibrant presence had filled the room and now that she was gone it felt as if the sun had disappeared behind a cloud.

Later in the afternoon Frank had a discussion with the nurse who had been on duty when he was brought in, and afterwards with the person who was referred to him as being the one responsible for recruiting non-medically qualified staff.

That evening Frank made a telephone call to a colleague in Cairns, Australia, who was a senior Doctor at the RFDS headquarters there. He gave Shirley’s details and, explaining why, requested his friend to find her file and fax all relevant information to the name and number he provided for the hospital.

The next morning, he had a visit from the lady who was responsible for recruitment. “We know that you are a Doctor,” she said, and I would be grateful if you could have a look at this file, because I am not familiar with the Royal Flying Doctor Service or the conditions on homesteads in outback Australia, but I am amazed at what this young lady has apparently done and would like your opinion on if it is all genuine experience.”

Frank read the notes with interest. He was well aware of what some of the very basically trained people in these areas did on a fairly regular basis and was not surprised at the cases that she had taken on over a period of almost twelve years. A number of babies delivered, and a few broken bones was the least of it.

“I know it looks unbelievable, but that is not at all uncommon amongst those people.” He explained, “If there is un-flyable weather and an emergency, they will take on almost anything that a Doctor can talk them through, and with the advent of satellite internet there is also a video link that helps Doctors see what is actually happening and give even more guidance. Usually a patient is evacuated out as soon as possible for proper hospital post-operative care, but sometimes even that is not necessary.”

“But some of this work we would not even permit an experienced theatre nurse to attempt.”

“Yes, but if there is nothing else available and a life is at stake, one takes whatever is available. In a way it’s no different to wartime casualties or emergencies on ships at sea. Even someone with only basic training is better than no-one at all.”

“Unfortunately, I could not get her registered as a nurse – even with this record (although she is clearly better able to do much of work than some newly qualified person) – but I am sure that I can get her immediately appointed as a nurse-aid and close to the top of the salary scale. After that we can see what we might be able to do to find her a more appropriate position somewhere. Do you think she would be interested in that?”

“I really don’t know. All I know is that she had no hesitation in assisting me and from the Doctor’s and Nurse’s comments she knew exactly what she was about. She is looking for any sort of work that is available – even suggested waitressing - so my guess is that you probably will be able to interest her.”

“How do I contact her, do you know?”

“I know she is staying at an hotel but she did say that she would call in sometime today to see how I was, so if she turns up, would you like me to send her to see you?”

“Oh, yes please! All hospitals are desperate for staff and someone like her will be quickly snapped up if I don’t get in first. I am here until at least 5 pm and just ask the nursing station to call me and I will come immediately. And thank you. I understand that you are interested in helping her, but you have no idea how hard it is to find suitable people to work in hospitals and any assistance we get is very appreciated.”

It was early afternoon when Shirley came to visit, and Frank was sitting in a chair reading when she arrived at his door.

“Hi, how are you feeling today?” was her cheerful greeting.

“Hello, You’re very cheerful today. Me, Oh I’m fine and they will be sending me home later. And I have some news that may be of interest to you, if you’re still looking for a job.”

“Really! Goodness, I haven’t even started to look. I had a glance at the Yellow Pages to see if there were any employment agencies that did not specialise in particular professions – sort of odd job - anything and everything sort of thing, but everyone looked as if they were too high-and-mighty for the likes of me. What sort of job and where would it be?”

“There is a lady in this building who is very, very anxious to talk to you before anyone else gets a chance and I have strict instructions to let her know when you are here. Shall we go and call her now?”

“But I don’t have a CV, or anything and I’m probably not dressed for any sort of an interview. Also, this is a hospital and I am not qualified to work in a hospital.”

“You don’t need a CV; she will not be at all concerned what you are wearing – and you look very nice to me. And you have no idea what hospitals need. She is a very pleasant lady and I’m sure you will impress her, just as you are.”

They went to the nurses’ station and the employment person told the Nurse to tell Shirley, “Don’t go away, I’ll be there in two minutes.”

And, sure enough, in what seemed only a matter of moments, she was greeting Shirley with a broad smile, winking at Frank, introducing herself as Joyce and asking them both to accompany her to a small office just along the corridor.

Frank was a little surprised but could see some rational about being invited to the interview. Shirley was totally confused – and not only about his being there. What was going on here?

“I’m not sure what Frank has told you,” Joyce started the conversation.

“Nothing, except you wanting to see me about a possible job.”

“Yes, Frank mentioned that you were looking for work and that you had some experience in ‘things medical’. But first, tell me a little about your background, where you live and what you do.”

She gave them a thumb-nail sketch of her life. Brought up on a beef cattle station many miles from anywhere that showed on a map, studied to university matriculation level but did not have any tertiary education. Worked an everything around the farm.

“Do you have a driver’s licence?”

“Shirley laughed, “There are no real roads that you would want to take a car on, so no, I do not have or ever needed a formal licence, but I regularly drive a ute, ATVs, tractors, farm bikes and a thirty-two-wheeler articulated cattle truck around the property. And if they break down, I can do most of the repairs as well. More often I’m on horseback helping move cattle. But I do have full ratings on a Cessna 210, a Baron and a R22 chopper.”

Joyce looked at Frank for clarification.

“A single engine plane, a twin-engine plane and a helicopter. Full rating means she had navigation and night certification and can therefor fly beyond a fifty-mile radius of her home airport and can take passengers.” He looked at Shirley for confirmation.

“Yes, that’s about right, I guess. The chopper is mainly for searching for lost cattle and mustering. The planes for going further afield for urgent supplies and so forth. More useful than cars out there.”

Joyce was looking more awed, but carried on with the interview, “So I have been told you have some First Aid experience. What can you tell me about that?”

“Just what most outback families need. The RFDS provide the training and back up so that people can get basic treatment where necessary and can take care of more serious stuff until the Flying Doctors arrive. Usually just cuts, the odd broken bone and a Mum who decided to deliver in the middle of a storm and the Doctor can’t fly in.”

This is where Joyce, having glanced at Frank for support, revealed that she knew a little more about Shirley’s experience, “According to your file at the Flying Doctor Headquarters, you have actually done quite a lot of more difficult things. Would you like to tell me a little more about those cases?”

Shirley was clearly a little embarrassed when she, depreciatingly, replied, “They really don’t count too much because I always had help from the Doctor on the radio or over the internet connection. There were also several others to help and all I had to do was follow directions and keep explaining what I was doing and finding. I can’t take too much credit for just following step-by-step directions. Some people even describe it as being akin to painting by numbers.”

“But you were doing work that some Doctors would hesitate to do, even with the sort of direction you were receiving.” Frank insisted, “And the patients lived because you did the surgery. You, without any special training, were able to go inside a person and carry out procedures that saved their lives. That is special.”

“Yes, but I just followed directions and the patients were shipped out to hospital for proper treatment as soon as a plane could get in. I didn’t do the specialised nursing or anything.”

“According to your file, you nursed a person, almost around the clock, for four days following your having done surgery, before a plane could get to you and transfer the patient to a hospital and when they arrived the Doctors found everything was progressing perfectly.”

“What you have done can hardly be categorised as ‘nothing’,” Frank looked directly into Shirley’s eyes, “You have received several recognitions for this work, haven’t you?”

“Well, yes, you appear to have all this information, so I can’t deny it, but I did have a lot of help and any person trained by the RFDS and who has lived out in the sticks for so long would have done the same.”

“You are obviously comfortable using a radio as a form of communication as well.”

“Yes, all of my early education was by short wave radio – before the internet became available to us. Radio is sometimes still the only form of communication, especially if there is a big storm around. I can also strip down and repair the radios we use around where we live. Most people can because they are a life-line.”

Raising her eyebrows just a little and smiling, Joyce changed direction a little, “Have you ever thought of becoming a nurse or a Doctor?”

“For a time, when I first finished school, I thought about it, but I never got around to it and now, ten years later, it’s probably too late. I would have had to move to a city, which was rather frightening for a young girl who had never been to a large town on her own. Even now, this is the first time I have been to anywhere bigger than Cairns and it’s all rather overwhelming.”

Cutting to the chase, Joyce said, “You are probably wondering what all this is leading to. The first thing I wanted to do was to ensure that you understood what we already knew about your background. We went looking for this because the nurse and the Doctor who brought Frank in the other night spoke very highly of your actions and knowledge and we are always looking for people with those attributes. They thought that you must have been at least a nurse. Then, after you have visited Frank yesterday and indicated that you were looking for work, he spoke to me and filled in a little more detail and then offered to help with your background information.”

Frank elaborated, “I am actually a Doctor, and although I have not worked directly with the RFDS, I have frequently received patients that they have brought into hospital and know a lot of their staff very well. After talking to Joyce, I took the liberty of speaking to the base in Cairns and when we found out the full extent of your history with them, I asked that they send a copy of your file to Joyce for possible employment purposes. They were more than happy to do so – but I must apologise for not clearing this with first, my excuse is that I did not want you to go looking for a waitress job before we had a chance to discuss other options,”

“Thank you – I think.” Shirley was now looking at the two of them, still uncertain what would come next. “But what could I do in a hospital?”

“We have a number of positions that would be suitable for a first aid trained person, such as Orderly, Nurse Aid, nursing assistant in our rest-home facility. But you come into a different category of potential employee. As well as the basic training, you have some very, hands on, practical experience. What I have in mind is a position quite high up the Nurse Aid scale to start with, to work in the hospital, just until you find your way around, get to know the people and how we work. Then my intention would be to transfer you to a Paramedic posting working on the ambulances. That is where we can't spare a registered nurse to be available to go out but need more than just a first aid person. We need people who have real life experience, initiative, and a willingness to act appropriately and quickly to dynamic situations, make decisions and do whatever is necessary, even if they don't have the formal qualification. You fit that bill perfectly. The Ambulance Service provide such people to work on recoveries and transfers. I can get you into that without any problems. Would you be interested?”

“Yes, but am I really qualified to do that? I mean it sounds interesting and exciting, but surely one has to have special formal qualifications to do that work every day.”

“There are. The minimum requirements are current level one and level two first aid certificates and certification on defibrillation equipment. You have all that and more; much more. All we would need to do is familiarise you with local procedures. People with your skills get the more interesting callouts!”

“If you are sure, then I am very interested. I guess the only question is, will it pay enough for me to be able to live in London?”

“While the Para-Medical profession is not noted as being the highest paid in the country, I can assure you that you would be getting a guaranteed salary way in excess of what you might expect to earn as a waitress, even with tips, right from the word go, and you can be assured that, with your background, you will be in such demand, you can expect to progress up the scale without any difficulty. We would also take care of any extra training costs that may be required as time goes on.”

“Okay, when would I be required to start?”

“Your background details are already confirmed by the RFDS, so it will only take me forty-eight hours at the most to get your appointment approved. When would you be available?”

“As soon as I can find accommodation handy to where I would be working. Where would I be stationed?”

“For the familiarisation period, right here in this hospital. Once you are ready to go onto to the ambulance team, you would probably be up closer to Camden. Both are on the same tube line, so it will not make much difference.”

Frank then spoke, “And I know of a currently vacant, inexpensive, small, studio apartment that has all the hard furniture required and which is in a pleasant, safe area of Camden that I'm sure I could arrange for you, if you are interested.”

“This is all too good to be true. There must be a catch somewhere. When do the clowns jump out and say 'GOTYA?'”

“No clowns and all absolutely true and above-board. You just happened to be in the right place to help the right person at the right time. The right people were around when I was carried in and you impressed them. I just happened to know some people in Australia and Joyce had a need for someone like you. I do have to admit that the apartment is a bit of a co-incidence. It's in the block where I live, and it has just been re-furbished. I was

talking to the Building Manager the day I was knocked over. I phoned him yesterday and he confirmed it is ready to let but not taken. He agreed to hold it until you had seen it and decided. I can take you there this-afternoon, when I am kicked out of here, if you like”

“I still find it hard to believe that I have come into London with no special qualifications, half expecting to be off home again because I was not able to get work, and in two days after a disastrous arrival in thick fog, I am presented with not only a job but probable solution to the question of accommodation. Because all my grandparents and my Mother were from England I had far less trouble getting a work permit than I had expected at my age, but I still was two-minds about coming, half expecting that it may turn out to be just an expensive overseas holiday.”

“You will need to get set up with the Inland Revenue Department and there are a few other formalities that you will be need to get sorted. I will give you the necessary forms to make it easier.” Then, with a knowing look in Frank’s direction, “I’m sure that Frank will be able to advise you if you have any problems. I will ‘phone you as soon as everything is arranged at this end.”

I’m not sure if it’s my imagination or the fact that I am very grateful to Frank, but I think there may be more to his helping me than just because I helped him. He could have just passed the thought on to Joyce, or whoever else was appropriate, and not become involved. DOCTOR Frank is a charmer and he seems to have taken a liking to me – but, I have to acknowledge that I am just fresh from the outback and not used to the smooth (seductive?) ways of city folk and may be reading too much into his actions. BUT. He is rather nice...

Later, after his discharge was arranged, Shirley accompanied Frank to Camden and the apartments where he lived, and she was able to view the studio he had referred to. It was more than just nice, and freshly done up!

“After some of the horror stories I have read about sub-standard rooms and terrible, shared, facilities, this is palatial.” She said, “And the rent is quite reasonable, and it’s so handy to everything. You have no idea how much I appreciate you help in finding this and a job. It’s all like a dream.”

“Well, let’s get this apartment secured for you and then, if you are free and agreeable, can I temp you to dinner somewhere before I accompany you safely back to your hotel?”

“Why, thank you kind Sir.” She couldn’t help herself – having to give a cheeky, flirty, response!

*I think the Doctor likes me. And he **is rather** nice. How could I refuse – even if I wanted to – which I don’t!*

And so that evening saw the pair of them partaking of a pleasant meal in a quiet restaurant, where Shirley was to learn quite a bit more about Frank and Frank was to confirm in his own mind that he would certainly like to see more of Shirley. He accompanied her back to her hotel, where they promised to keep in touch and up to date with her work situation and tentatively agreed to do some sightseeing over the coming weekend – which was only thirty-six hours away.

Hardly more than forty-eight hours in the country and already so many exciting events. Fancy, a fog, an accident and an automatic reaction to someone being hurt had turned a disappointing arrival into an unexpectedly successful start to her big OE – and the thought that current indications were there might be even more pleasurable experiences to come! No, Shirley, don’t push your luck or start getting fanciful ideas that might turn around and hurt you.

Friday saw Shirley searching on her computer and finding her way around parts of this enormous and complicated city to deal with the matters that required attention before she could start work. While out, she found a computer hot-spot and sent a long email to her parents, bringing them up to date with her arrival in

London, finding a job and an apartment – but, not wishing to worry her parents (or get them trying to make too much out of the way he had helped her), not going into too much detail about Frank.

Jet lag, and the almost constant adrenalin rush she had experienced since her arrival, finally caught up with her by Friday afternoon and she crashed on her hotel bed and slept until around dinner time she was woken by the ringing of her phone. It was Frank – did she feel up to dinner? Not keen on dressing to go out she suggested he come to the hotel, and they could have something light in the dining room. (She had initially thought that room service would have been less bother, but then decided that it was perhaps not yet appropriate to invite Frank to her room.)

When she hung up from Frank's call, she realised that there were three missed calls on her phone that she must have slept through: Two earlier ones from Frank and one from Joyce, who had also left a message saying that they were all set for her to start whenever she was ready and asking her to call Monday to let her know how she was progressing with the necessary pre-requisites.

Dinner with Frank was again relaxed and pleasant, with easy conversation and no pressure. Shirley was sure that he was not just being polite and friendly and that he did enjoy her company as much as she was starting to enjoy his. Before leaving he suggested that if she called him in the morning when she woke, he would come and help her shift to her apartment and then, if she felt up to it, he would show her around some of the more important and useful areas of London and help her become more familiar with the underground system. She explained that she only had the luggage that had accompanied her on the trip from Australia, but he argued that juggling even that on the tube, alone, and not being familiar with the stops and stations, would be a chore.

By lunch time they had moved her luggage to the apartment, and she had removed the one set of linen she had brought with her so that she was able to make up the bed and set up the bathroom. Frank pointed out the little supermarket and a laundrette near the underground station and several, safe, diners and takeaways in the immediate area.

Noticing that Shirley seemed quite tired, he suggested that if she wanted to rest, they could perhaps do dinner later and go sightseeing on Sunday – leaving the offer open to go out today if she felt like doing so.

Wanting to get her body in sync with local time, Shirley opted to go out for lunch and do a bit of shopping locally, with a view to being able to fall into bed at a suitable hour and get a normal night's sleep.

Frank accompanied her, pointing out the best places to shop and insisting on carrying her increasing number of packages. When they arrived back at the apartments, Frank took his leave, saying he would call her later to see if she wanted to go out for a quick meal at dinner time.

Quietly sorting out where she wanted things and putting them away, Shirley was relishing having her own little space for the first time in her life. Back home there were always other people around and things were happening. But this was nice. Able to organise space as she wanted and having a peaceful place to escape to after the frantic pace of life outside on the streets. But – she did miss having others around – just a little bit. Then it hit her: yes, she was missing family and familiar faces, but she was also missing Frank – probably more. Don't be silly, she admonished herself, you have only just met and really know very little about him. It's just because he is here and has helped you over the past few days. However, somehow that didn't ring true with her. She, for the first time, felt something stirring inside – something warm – something rather nice and comfortable. Could this be different?

Her telephone rang. Frank. "I am guessing that you will not be wanting to get dressed up just to go out for dinner. There is a rather nice Roast Meal take-away along the road, would you like to come up to my

apartment in, say half-an-hour, and join me for a meal and a movie?" He was hoping that he was not being too forward.

A moment's hesitation – I think he's quite safe, "Yes, that would be lovely, Thanks."

"Great, I'll knock on your door on my way back from the take-away – unless you feel like a short walk with me."

"If I'm okay just as I am, that would be nice, and I can see where the place is. I'll meet you on the stairs in a couple of minutes." A quick look in the mirror, slightly adjust hair, grab a coat, that will do, off out the door.

This must be like having a real boyfriend. I could very easily get to like it.

A casual but tasty meal and more comfortable 'getting to know each other' conversation. Frank had a suitable size TV linked to his computer and he watched a comedy movie, had a coffee and Shirley said goodnight and returned to her apartment of the floor below. All very civilised – no pressure – no complications.

Frank sat thinking back over the past few days. Quite apart from the accident and the resultant spell in hospital, it had been the most enjoyable time he could remember having in many years. He had always wanted to study medicine and had worked extra hard during secondary school to ensure direct entry into medical studies at university. Pushing aside all other distractions he had devoted himself to his studies and then the years as a Junior Doctor and Registrar. When, finally, qualified, he had spent time working in various diverse positions to gain additional experience. Fortunately, money had never been a problem and the smaller income available from taking some of these positions had not been an issue. Following a spell in the Torres Strait Islands he had decided to do post graduate work in tropical medicine. After another spell at James Cook University's Tropical Medical faculty and he had been lucky enough gain a place on a team being set up by the University of London's School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine working on a completely new two-year research project. He had been in London for just four months before he had this accident and met Shirley.

And now, in just a few days, his outlook on life had taken a totally new direction. Oh yes, he was still focused and dedicated to his profession and to the exciting research he was currently assisting with, but suddenly it seemed that his spare time, which in the past he had been more than content in spending in private pursuits that were not likely to interfere with his goals in life, could perhaps be spend more pleasurably, and without adversely affecting his ambitions. Someone had awoken a part of him that he had repressed for over a decade. A decade during which others had followed natural urges. Perhaps being knocked over by a van had been good luck in that it placed directly in his sights an unusual young lady who was clever, multi-talented, down-to-earth, pleasant to be with, not demanding, happy, and, while being strong and toned, was so clearly very feminine and... yes, desirable was the word. A person who he could visualise being with – even perhaps for life. Now, that was a thought that he had never had occasion to consider seriously before. All his previous lady friends had left him feeling that they could never adapt to his planned life and he could not see himself adapting to what they appeared to be looking for. Shirley seemed different. How different he now wanted – no, needed - to find out. And, somehow, he sensed that she might also be a little bit interested in spending more time with him. He sincerely hoped that he was right!

Despite the strange surroundings, strange bed, and strange noises (compared with those of the Australian outback), Shirley slept soundly and awoke refreshed to what appeared to be a beautiful Sunday morning. After a luxurious shower she slipped on her robe and slippers and padded into her tiny kitchenette rustle up a coffee and light breakfast.

The phone rang. Frank asking if she had a good night, and did she want to do any sight-seeing today. "Yes please – if that is okay with you. I seem to have caught up on my sleep and have nothing planned."

“Great, would half-an-hours’ time be too soon?”

“No, that would be fine. Just give a knock on my door when you are ready.” *Thinking, I like the way he asked if half-an-hour was okay, rather than just saying the time. Either he is the gentleman he appears to be, or he is really trying to impress me – and succeeding.*

Frank had clearly sorted out what Shirley would need to know immediately and they spent the first hour or two getting familiar with the underground system, which lines and stations to use when she was going the hospital, explaining the mysteries and the *OYSTER* card and arranging one for her, making sure she had a pocket ‘A to Z’ and a tube map and showing her the nearest branches of the shops that she was most likely to need in the first few weeks in London. They walked through a couple of the main shopping and entertainment areas and then spent time relaxing in and around some of the sights and parks not too far from ‘home’.

Having fully recovered from the flight, Shirley was full of energy and very quick to start getting her bearings – which greatly impressed Frank. She was finding Frank to be thoughtful, attentive (which she was not accustomed to, but appreciated) and **very** pleasant company. Little by little she learned more about his work and found that she liked his outlook and philosophy on life. It also became apparent (although it was not spoken) that he was not exactly poor. In fact, from reading between the lines during some of their conversations, she had a feeling that was part of a well-known Queensland family of the same name.

And so, after a light evening meal, a platonic ‘good-night’, an assurance that she should feel free to call him any time if she had any questions or problems and a squeeze of her hand as he looked directly into her eyes, they parted for the day.

Shirley had a hectic week during which she started work at the hospital and was surprised that, even though it was very different to playing the part of a first aider back home on the station, it was not too difficult to get to grips with the rules, regulations and procedures she now had to work within. Names and places were more difficult, but she found at work it surprisingly easy to get to know the staff and make friends. Frank kept in daily touch and a comfortable relationship was developing between them.

As soon as she was able to set up internet services at home, she organised suitable times to contact with her parents on skype and had great pleasure in ‘showing them around’ her little apartment, by webcam.

Her parents were, of course, interested in how she had managed to get a job and such a nice apartment so quickly and, so as not to get any wrong ideas or worry in their minds, she provided only the short version of events – she helped a man who was knocked over by a van in the fog, the staff at the hospital were impressed with how she had reacted and after some discussion had contacted the RFDS, offered her a good job and she had been pointed in the direction of suitable accommodation... Frank could be introduced into the picture later if anything more came of their friendship.

And so, life settled into a pattern. Mainly work, which she found more and more satisfying, particularly when she was assigned to the ambulance service.

About three months after she had taken up duties with the ambulance service she was sitting at home, with Frank, on one of the evenings when her shifts permitted time for them to get together, and the phone rang. When she answered the man’s voice asked, “Is that Miss Wilson.”

“Yes. Who is this?” She didn’t recognise the voice.

“Miss Shirley Wilson, from Queensland, Australia?”

It was not an Australian accent, and she was a little concerned by this time, so she switched her 'phone on to speaker before answering, "Yes, that's me. What are you wanting?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you, but I wanted to make sure that I had the right person."

Shirley's mind flew into overdrive: Had something happened at home – a family emergency...

But before she could respond, he continued, "My name is Brian Maxwell and I am from the London Air Ambulance Service. I understand that you have been working with the NHS ambulance service for a few months, but I have heard a rumour that you have some wider experience with the RAFDS, is that correct?"

A slightly hesitant, "Yes, I was trained by them."

"And I also believe that you have full commercial ratings on several types of aircraft?" It was more a question, but he obviously had all the facts before him.

"Yes, I do, but I have not had them ratified in the UK yet." All the time thinking that, although she loved flying, she did not have the money to indulge in it while in England.

"Well, as you are probably aware, the ambulance staff crewing our flights are generally seconded from the local NHS ambulance service and anyone with your previous experience is keenly sought after. Further, given that you already have pilot qualifications, we would be very interested in obtaining your services. The arrangements would be made with the NHS, as they employ you, but we would apply to have you available for specialist work in our services and would also arrange to get your licences accepted here and for you to keep up your hours on our aircraft. The fixed wing planes we operate have the same ratings as the ones you already have so the conversions would be straight forward, but the helicopter ones are different and we would have to look at that separately, if you are interested. We would be very keen to talk to you if this interests you."

Because the phone was still speaker, Frank had heard all the conversation and was nodding his head in encouragement.

Trying to sound calm and nonchalant, she responded with, "That sounds very interesting, but how do I arrange it with the NHS services?"

"We will arrange everything. I have already advised the NHS that I would be contacting you and I have their approval (although I have to say they were a bit reluctant to do so to start with). Apparently, you have built up a very high reputation with them already. Anyway, subject to you saying that you were interested, they have agreed that they are willing to release you for duty with us and for flight training. We would be paying you for those hours, and I can tell you that the remuneration is marginally higher, and there would be a further loading when you are operating an aircraft. The usual arrangement is that whoever is on duty when we get a call would be released to come with us, but we may have to have you rostered directly to us on some occasions. This is a little different and we will work out something that is acceptable to everyone. Unless you have any questions, I will let you go and enjoy the rest of your evening and will get back to you when everything has been set up and approved."

"Thank you, very much. I'm rather overwhelmed with the suddenness of all this but, I assure you, very excited and will look forward to your getting back to me."

When the call had ended, Shirley looked at Frank, her eyes wide. Well, that was a surprise. That was the last thing I expected.

Frank smiled, "It shouldn't be. While you just beaver away doing what you do so well, a lot of other people are taking notice and talking. You have already built up a reputation and everyone is vying to have you on their team. You are going to go a long way in this life Miss Wilson, mark my words."

The weeks and months went by with busy shifts on both the NHS and Air Ambulance services and flying training. Especial exciting and uplifting was the first occasion when the flight she was on and the pilot said as they climbed on board, "You're in the right hand seat tonight – we want you to keep your flying hours up and get familiar with local operating procedures so that we have another reserve pilot. You can take the flight out and we will see if two people are required to monitor the patient on the way back; if not you can bring us home as well." Life had never been so good!

Then there was Frank! Now firmly established as her first **real** boyfriend. Frank, in whom she confided her excitement of being able to continue flying. Frank, who understood what she was talking about when she was involved in a particularly tricky but successful recovery of a badly injured or very sick person. Frank who understood her Australian humour. Frank who shared with her his hopes and dreams about how and where he would like to practice medicine and with whom she found herself enthusiastic about, and in some way becoming a part of those aspirations.

Weekends and evenings, when she was not working, they went to dinner, movies or shows, sightseeing and sometimes just sitting in one of the apartments watching a movie or talking. They both felt comfortable and relaxed in each other's company and Frank did not in any way make her feel pressured. But, she noticed, he was very protective of her and always ensured that she was safe, and, in a quiet way, she never wanted for anything. She had enough income to live reasonably easily but he always made sure when they went anywhere, she was not embarrassed by lack of money or unsuitable clothing – paying for her when he intuitively felt that costs may be beyond her means.

When he first suggested that they might go further afield and spend a few days somewhere in Europe her heart skipped a beat. After all, that was one of the reasons that she – indeed both of them – were in England and it would be much more fun to explore new places with company.

Shirley had a work roster that was not geared around what is normally considered to be a working week, so they waited until she had a Friday through Monday break – not starting work until Tuesday Morning – and organised a trip to Belgium. Early Friday morning Euro-Star to Brussels, a day and a night there; train to Bruges - where they wanted to spend some time in the town which they had been told rivalled Venice for its beauty and waterways – for two nights, then back to Brussels and a late evening flight back to London.

The holiday, although brief and full of action, provided some time when they were able to just relax and talk. On the trains and plane, evenings over meals and even when they were walking around sight-seeing. Sharing their feeling about what they saw and what it made them keen to see elsewhere. They found a new depth of understanding of each-other, and both realised that they had a lot more in common than just their shared nationality. They were a couple, enjoying shared experiences and their mutual company.

Then it was back to work. For Shirley that generally meant four on, four off alternating early, late or, night sifts that could involve anything from kids with broken limbs to seriously ill elderly patients; from being driven across the city in otherwise gridlocked traffic in an ambulance with siren screaming, to flying to some assist in a recovery or medical transfer. On some occasions piloting an air ambulance to transfer some seriously ill patient from a point outside of helicopter range to a hospital with more appropriate facilities for their care. The days and weeks passed and whenever they were both free at the same time Shirley and Frank could usually be found together, be it just chilling out in front of the TV or out sightseeing or dining somewhere.

Several month later, as they were enjoying a peaceful night out, Frank suggested that, as they had one of those weekends coming up where they were both not working, how would she like to do another trip somewhere. Shirley was rostered to finish at 11 pm on Thursday and not start again until 7 am on the following Tuesday. They could get a good clear four days again.

They had discussed at length the places that they particularly wanted to see, and it was easy for them to quickly decide upon Vienna. People had told them that there was plenty to do in a reasonably confined area, reasonably priced dining available, excellent cafés and the possibility to see one of those concerts that seemed to be on all the time.

Back home – onto the internet - street / canal maps to see where things were – hotel booked to suit desired sightseeing -concert booked -done! Very early flight on the Friday morning and the last back on the Monday evening.

Three weeks later they were off for an action-packed, minimal sleep, full emersion experience of Vienna.

Fortunately for both of them the following working week was not too full on, because they had also decided to take advantage of the fact that Shirley's four day shift was scheduled to finish at 3 pm on the Friday and they had booked a late flight to Amsterdam where they had planned to spend a more relaxing three-and-a-half days, and return on Tuesday around mid-day (so that she could get some sleep before starting her next shift at 11 pm).

While in Amsterdam, Shirley noticed that Frank appeared to be rather quiet and – thoughtful? Perhaps more serious? No, it was more as though he had something worrying on his mind. She wondered if it was just tiredness from the last ten days, or something about his course or research and initially did not pay it too much attention.

Come Sunday they did the usual things, a little shopping, some sightseeing, relaxing over coffees (usually in some little café they found during their meanderings) and just generally “hanging out”. Shirley could not help but wonder when Frank continued to be distracted – distant -throughout the day and, late in the afternoon, concerned that there was something wrong, took advantage of the fact that they were seated in an almost deserted café and broached the matter. “You are very quiet today, is there something wrong?”

Frank looked suddenly startled and hesitated – half smiling - before answering, “This is going to sound rather stupid, but there is nothing wrong. In fact, what is making me stop and think is that everything so right and I'm not accustomed to that and am having to seriously think about how I am feeling.” And, at her puzzled look, “Yes, as I said, it sounds non-sensical.” He went silent again.

“Would it help to talk about it?”

“Yes. And one the things that has been concerning me is how to start.”

Frank paused for minute and finally, with a half-smile, moved to sit beside Shirley. Gathering himself, he tuned to her and spoke.

“I have to talk to people a lot in my profession – sometimes about very difficult matters – and I am not usually at a loss for words, but there are times when finding the right thing to say is not easy, even when it should be no problem. But I feel that I must take my chances and say this. Although we only met a few months ago, I quickly developed strong feelings for you, and I am now more than certain that I am not just imaging how I feel. I have also spent countless sleepless hours thinking about how my ideas and your background and skills seem to go together.” He paused again. “But I'm waffling, and it's all coming out wrong. I have thought about this and I'm know in my mind that it is right in every possible way from my perspective.” he shifted down on one knee in front of her, “Shirley, would you consider marrying me?”

Shirley had more-or-less worked out where he was heading well before he finished speaking and, while not dismayed at his asking, was not expecting a proposal so soon in their relationship. She very much like the idea but was for some reason reluctant to just say ‘Yes’.

Frank immediately realised that she had been seriously caught off guard and (hoping that he was making matters worse) hurried to add, “I know I’m making a mess of this! Even though I have been working up to it for some time. It all seems so straight forward in one’s head, but I have never even contemplated this before, and it does not seem as easy to get the right words out. That’s wrong too. The situation is that I fell for you the first day you came into the hospital and before I knew anything more about you than that you had helped me. Then, I got to know you better the feelings have become stronger by the day. I know I have not had a lot of prior experience in dating, but I reckon I know love when I feel it and I love you deeply. Then, as I must be quite honest with myself and you, I started to wonder if my intended life plans would suit you. Realistically I know I could go almost anywhere and practice medicine in a range of different ways, but, after experiencing several the different options, I had decided that the strongest calling is what I had already mentioned to you. Would you be interested, and would that life hold any attraction or offer any challenges of the type that I had understood you liked? If not, would I be prepared to change my plans? To both those questions my answer was a great big yes! Then I wondered if your feelings were anything like mine. Perhaps I was reading into our friendship something that I wanted but you may not. I decided that there was one way to find out. I cherish our friendship and would like to think that whatever your answer is we would always be friends. And maybe this approach was too much of a shock too soon...” He staggered to a halt again.

Shirley was by this time smiling broadly and took both of his hand in hers and urged him to his feet. “Relax Frank, I have been thinking along the same lines as you for some time now and was in fact a little worried about your silence over the past few days, wondering if you had grown tired of me being around so much. I would not have wanted to lose your friendship, either. Your proposal was just so sudden and out of the blue that I was lost for words. In answer to your actual question, Yes, I would, very, **very**, seriously, consider marrying you. And I don’t know the etiquette, do I say thank you or just yes or what? But anyway...” and with that she stood slightly on tiptoe and, wrapping her arms around him, kissed his passionately on the lips. The only other people in the café, the staff, discreetly turned the other way, smiling.

Throughout the months Frank had featured more and more in her regular skype links with the family back home and it therefore came as no great shock – just a bit of a surprise – when, in a link up the following day, both her and Frank were in front of the camera announcing their engagement. Immediately after they organised a link to Frank’s parents with the same message and a similar reaction. Many congratulations; many questions. The obvious one that everyone wanted to know, when and where were they thinking of getting married?

Over the next few days announcements were arranged for the Queensland newspapers, making their colleagues at their places of work aware of the engagement and, of course, the very important purchasing of rings. The latter being exciting in the extreme – mainly because neither of them had ever before seriously considered the possibility of undertaking that pleasant task! Carefully considering something that was to their liking, did not stand too high of have easily caught fittings (that might get caught in her gloves, or interfere with any of her work, and – at her insistence and his objection – was not too expensive or too ostentatious. Frank, she had by now confirmed, was from a very wealthy family and was wealthy in his own right, but then her family was also well off and she did not feel any need to go around publicising the fact.

The wedding planning, however, did prove to more of a challenge. Australia or England. Soon, or when Frank had finished his attachment at the Research Centre. And with that the question, where did they intend to settle? Would they stay in England for a while longer? If not, what was their next move to be? Time to consider their future, yes, but in the meantime, they had their current lives to lead and so much more to do and see in and around Europe – and, of course, their work!

Shirley had heard other staff discussing annual performance reviews. Have spent her life up to this point working on the family farm, performance reviews were something quite new and worrying to her. She started to worry about it and Frank, seeing that was upsetting her, asked what the matter was.

“It’s coming up for my annual review and I am hoping I did well enough to be continued because I am enjoying the work and now can’t see myself wanting to do anything else.

“From what I have been hearing over the past year, I don’t think there is going to be any difficulty there”.

“Why, who has been saying what about me”?

“Well, just some of the comments I have seen and heard around are things like:

- The perfect balance between a ‘strict, stickler for the rules registered nurse’ and a ‘practical, we can do this and make things better with whatever we have on hand, first aider.
- More able and useful than many doctors, when faced with a problem or unusual situation out in the field.

And your official record for getting people to hospital alive and in good condition ready for immediate further treatment is very, very high.

- Has been known to very nicely tell a control tower that that jet liner might be one-minute late landing if we go in first, but that minute may be my patients last if I have to wait for them land and their turbulence to settle before I can come in, have that endorsed by the jumbo captain and then get an immediate clearance; calmly land perfectly and clear the runway in a very tight time slot, so no-one was actually late or inconvenienced.

“Well that last one was very brash of me, but it was a really critical case. But how did you know about that”?

“Joyce told me. She thought I may be interested. It **had** been touch-and-go, but the patient recovered well and asked about you. The nurse on that flight had overheard the radio contact and had already credited you with getting there in time and the assistance you had given at the scene. She also told of the radio message from the pilot of that jet liner as you cleared the strip ‘beautifully executed, congratulations and our very best wishes to your patient”.

“Yes, well, having a nice, paved runway and taxiways plus all the fancy landing aids makes it relatively easy compared to a dust strip where the only aid is a windsock and any moment a wheel may hit a hoof mark or even collapse into a rabbit hole. Besides, if you had a jumbo breathing down your neck at more than twice your speed with perhaps 400 passengers on board, you’d make sure you got it right too”.

“Maybe, but various enquiries of the other nurses, first-aiders and the ambulance drivers and pilots have all come up with similar anecdotes and comments. It seems that you have a reputation around the hospitals and with the ambulance services in general, for being the person to have available in difficult or unusual situations. You are a legend around here. Every-one wants you on their team – including me”!

That final remark of course warranted a kiss and a cuddle...

What he did not tell her was that her files from the Flying Doctor service in Australia and all her history while working in the UK was now being carefully documented in great detail by Joyce, the Hospital HR dept., and the ambulance services, working together, and there was already a thick dossier on her in experiences. His comments had just been a few, quite minor extracts from that large and ever-expanding file.

Almost a year had passed since that foggy day when Shirley had arrived in London. Frank’s research attachment had only a couple of months to run – but could be easily extended almost indefinitely. They had been engaged for almost two months and nothing firm had been decided about a wedding or their immediate

future. With one of those weekends coming up when they would both be free, they decided that it was a good time to sit down quietly and get things sorted

Their first thoughts were going back to Australia. But then they realised that, while their families were there, most of the friends and colleagues were in and around London. The next question was where they saw themselves wanting to live in the next few Years. Shirley had grown to love her work and could not see herself going back to a farming life but could envisage continuing her new interests in conjunction with the dreams that Frank had. She and Frank had often talked about life in some of the more remote places where medical facilities were scarce but needed. Frank had not given up on those aspirations but had also developed an interest in further research and learning in the UK.

Discussions with both sets of parents had surprisingly revealed that they were happy to come to England and in fact were looking forward to the excuse to get away and to make a longer trip and look around.

Frank and Shirley had long since shared the ambition to honeymoon around the Mediterranean, and arrangements were very quickly put in place for the wedding and a month-long honeymoon.

And all the while Joyce had been continuing to compile the detailed records of Shirley's career until there was a massive file which had gone forward with many supporting signatures from doctors, co-workers and grateful patients, to the powers that be, with strong recommendations for a formal award.

One June morning about five months after their wedding, they were awoken by an early morning ringing of their telephone. Automatically Shirley reached out to answer it.

"Is that Mrs Shirley Robinson, ah, nee Wilson".

"Yes".

"This is the times newspaper, London. My name Katherine Clements. We are calling to see if you would be available for a short interview sometime today".

"Why? Why would you want to interview me"?

A long pause... "It is regarding your being awarded the MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours. 'For outstanding service in the area of medical first response'.

Your citation and the short version of the background that we have been able to obtain is of great interest and we would very much like to do a human-interest story about the person behind this....."

And in response to this totally unexpected news and request, Shirley was frantically shaking Frank awake, while asking the caller where she had to go and when.

"No, we will come to you. Just tell me what time would suit...."

And all from a chance encounter one evening on a foggy London street corner.

STORMY BEGINNINGS

He was walking away from the hotel reception desk when he spotted her, well rugged up against the raging storm and struggling towards the door with, in addition to the inevitable oversized handbag, a suitcase that looked considerable heavier than she was. The doorman was already assisting a family who had arrived in another taxi, and it was clear that she would have great difficulty in getting her case across the slippery pavement, up the few steps and through the doors. Leaving his own bags by the counter, he hurried across to assist her – smiling as he lifted the heavy case from her hand and holding the doors open so that she could easily enter.

Pausing as he caught up, he asked, “Are you going straight to the check-in?”

Standing there under the bright lights of the foyer she suddenly looked tired, travel worn and almost at the end of her tether. Still a little out of breath from her struggles, she managed a quick smile and to say, “Ah, thanks for the help. I don’t have a booking. I have come from a flight that was diverted because of this storm and someone suggested that they might have a vacancy here. My ‘phone is out, and I could not ring ahead, so I am hoping they still have something, as, apparently, no one else has.”

Ray had arrived at this hotel in the same situation - a diverted flight, a storm, the height of the holiday season, no bookings, and no known vacancies around. Because he was well-known here, he had hoped that they may find a space for him but was told by the apologetic receptionist that the only unoccupied space was one that could only be let in an absolute emergency and nothing else was available. The worst room in the building; top floor by the main lift machinery; small (very small) and not at all up to their normal standards; so infrequently used (or even mentioned) that it was not even on the hotel’s list of rooms. The only things in its favour were that it was available, very cheap and the one tiny window had a great view of the city!

He looked at the forlorn looking, but rather fetching young lady and on an impulse said, “I know that they do not have any rooms available as I have just arrived here and taken their last available space – and even that is not officially a room that they can normally let. Short of sleeping in the foyer or on a park bench, I would imagine that there is nothing else in the city. But, if you are willing to take a chance on me, I am happy to share what I have with you if you just go along with what I say and do. Oh, I’m Ray, Ray Bronson.”

She stared at him as if he were crazy and coolly asked just what he had in mind.

“Pretend that you are my wife. Give me a quick, happy, smile, come to the desk with me and just follow my lead.”

Pausing for only a moment while she absorbed what he’d said, he took her hand, quickly hugged her and walked towards the check-in. She looked stunned but followed and he caught the attention of the receptionist. “I have just taken your last room.”

“Yes, Mr Bronson. Is there a problem?”

“No, actually it is very fortuitous that as I was walking through the foyer my wife came in. She was also on a diverted flight back to our home and finished up here believing that you may have a room available. Can you please change the check-in details to Mr and Mrs Bronson?”

“That’s fine” and after a couple of clicks on her computer, “Here is a second pass key and enjoy your stay.” She smiled at them both and turned back to her work.

They walked back to where their cases were. “What do you think you are doing? Do you think that she will fall for that story? Do you think I am going to stay in the room of a total stranger? I assume that the last room available was not a suite and that you are expecting me to stay in the same confined space as you all night – and possibly until I can get a plane to where I am supposed to be?” She tugged free the hand that he had continued to hold, and he momentarily felt as if he had lost something precious.

“Okay, Okay, I’m not trying to force you into anything that you don’t want to do, but at least come with me so that the entire hotel staff doesn’t think we are standing here fighting. We can sort out the detail’s upstairs. At least we have a roof over our heads and that has to be something good with that storm raging outside.”

More people were coming into the hotel and being told that there were no rooms available, and there was a problem developing at the desk when a couple arrived who had apparently arranged a booking for earlier in the day but when they had not arrived on time and not contacted the hotel, their booking had been considered cancelled and the room given to someone else who was stranded there.

“If you were any sort of a gentleman, you would have given up your room for a lady and slept in the foyer yourself.”

Without a word Ray picked up both of their cases and headed for the lift. She jumped up and hurried after him. As the lift started its climb to the 21st floor, Ray turned to his new, obviously unwilling, companion and said, “At least you could tell me your name – even if you don’t like me or the arrangement that I am suggesting.” He was tired and, while understanding her reluctance to share a room with him, was frustrated to think that she had simply dismissed the idea out of hand, when he could easily have left her in the foyer, or even outside on the footpath, without saying anything and let her find out for herself that there were no more rooms to be had.

“Malinda. My name is Malinda Williamson.” Their lift arrived at the top floor, and he did not answer her as he picked up their cases and headed off towards the room.

Once inside he put down the cases in the small space available and turned to her. The look on her face was almost comical in its dismay and shock.

From the corridor the door had opened into a space about a meter wide and perhaps two meters long and, when one shut the door, a coat closet was reviled to the left, with a space for a suitcase on the floor and a curtain covering the opening. Directly opposite the main door a sliding door that opened into a bathroom where there was a small shower stall, a toilet, and a hand basin with just enough room for one (not over-large) person to turn around.

The 'bedroom' consisted of a space to the right of the door just large enough to accommodate a basic double bed (which, even in the small room, seemed very narrow but still actually protruded part-way across the width of the entrance 'hall'). A very small nightstand stood on each side of the bed head – just wide enough to take a lamp and a clock-radio on one and a lamp and a phone on the other. The space along either side and across the foot of the bed was the width of the nightstand – just enough for an average sized person to walk. A large person would have had to move sideways. No other furniture at all. A television mounted on the wall at the end of the bed (the other side of the bathroom wall), was at a comfortable height to view from the bed but that meant that a person moving along the foot of the bed needed to duck and move their head to one side to avoid hitting the screen. The view (which was indeed remarkable – albeit limited) was through a ridiculously small, fixed, window on the far side of the bed and not easy to get to.

The whole area was more suited to be a storeroom or, at best, perhaps, a very small single room. But for two people who did not know each other and did not really want to be together, it was potentially a nightmare come true! And, from Malinda's face, it looked as if she was thinking that she was currently right in the middle of that nightmare.

In an attempt to calm the situation, Ray refrained from mentioning the obvious – that at least it was warm and dry and away from the storm. Instead, he suggested that things may look brighter if they were to adjourn to the dining room for dinner and perhaps a relaxing drink. He perceived what appeared to be a slight relaxation of the atmosphere. Her face was still set hard, but her shoulders seemed to be a little less squared. Even that had to be an improvement.

Having shed their outdoors gear, they travelled down in the lift to what Ray knew from experience to be an excellent dining room and bar. There were others in the lift with them and they did not converse, but once settled with drinks at the Bar, Malinda asked, "So, having told the reception that I am Mrs Bronson, is there actually such a person who is likely to come and pound on the door asking who I am?"

"Well, there is my mother, but if you are asking whether or not I am married, the answer is no and to pre-empt the obvious next questions, no, I have never been married and nor am I engaged to be married. As to why, I guess it is almost certainly because I have spent most of the past ten years continuously travelling for work and have never managed to find a good enough reason to stay in one place long enough to consider marriage."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's telling it as it is!" and then in an almost understanding tone, "Have you ever had any regrets at how life has turned out for you?" Followed quickly by, "I'm sorry, that is getting far too personal."

"Not at all, you can ask whatever you like about me for, as much as we may not find the current circumstances exactly to our liking, they are what they are, and you have every right to find out as much about me as you wish."

Malinda sipped her drink thoughtfully. Ray imagined that he could see the beginnings of a smile as she said, "No, it's not the ideal situation and the room does not make it any easier, but I guess we could try and make it work for a night. I have never slept in the same bed with anyone, let alone a male, so I don't know if I move around and might keep you awake or something. And there is not much

privacy so would have to trust you to not take advantage of the situation – in any way....” She stopped, blushing, and Ray immediately picked up on where the conversation was going – or not going, as she was too embarrassed to put her thoughts into words.

“Look, I can’t claim to be a saint, but I assure you that I don’t go around raping hapless females or deflowering maidens in distress and while I acknowledge that this situation may appear compromising, I can promise you that I will not go around telling everyone about our time together. And don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I find you in any way unappealing – Um, anything but – I would simply never talk about any lady in that way.”

“Okay, but there will still have to be some rules.” There was that faint blush again.

“Yes, I agree, but let’s discuss rules after we have had an opportunity to properly assess the problems, and in the meantime, we should get ourselves around a good meal. I’m sure everything will look much better after that.”

They lingered over a meal and wine and afterwards coffee, discussing trivia but both trying to get a better understanding of the other without appearing to do so. To the casual onlooker they could well have appeared as a married couple – although certainly not newlyweds – but closer observation would have revealed an unease between them. As time went on silences became longer and tension increased until Ray finally said, “Why don’t we just go up, sort out what we are going to do to get some sleep and then I will leave you in peace for, say, half-an-hour while you get organised and then come up and get to bed myself. Will that work for you?”

Silence for a moment while this was processed – possibly, Ray wondered to himself, overthought – and then a rather softly spoken, “I guess so”.

Up in the room Ray looked at the bed and suddenly started to remove the covers, “Give me a hand to turn this bed into two separate sleeping spaces – something like sleeping bags,”

He quickly removed all the covers and the top sheet. Untucking the bottom sheet, he folded it in half along the length of the bed so that it formed a separate sleeping space and then he did the same on the other side of the bed with the top sheet. Placing the covers back over these two folded sheets and tucking it all in along the sides and foot he finished up with what looked like a normal double bed but with two quite separate sleeping cocoons.

“You can choose which side you want – I don’t mind at all. Is half an hour enough or would you like more time?”

“That will be fine. But please knock before you come in just in case.” She still looked a little wary as he moved towards the door.

“Okay, and just in case you are already asleep when I come back, kick me if I start snoring or looking like I am intruding on your space.” He briefly touched her hand and went out into the hallway towards the lift, intending to spend the next half-hour in the bar.

Ray lingered over a drink, and it was almost 45 minutes later when he returned to the room to find Malinda in bed but not asleep. She had left the lamp on next to what was clearly to be his side of the bed and turned towards him with a half-smile as he came in. "Is that comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you. But it feels very different. I guess like a sleeping bag – although I have never slept in one." Ray involuntarily raised one eyebrow at the last comment, and she hastened to add, "My family were never into camping or..." she hesitated, "Well... You might say, 'roughing it.'"

To Ray, who had grown up spending most holidays outdoors – much of the time under canvas - her comment came as rather a surprise, but he said nothing, thinking that there was lot more that he would like to know about this rather interesting young lady that he was about to, at least technically, sleep with and who was becoming more fascinating by the minute. Perhaps, he thought, it may be quite interesting if the storm did go on for a few days.

In the bathroom he changed into something suitable for bed (being more accustomed to sleeping nude) and slipped into his space, extinguished the light and settled down with a soft 'good night' (to which there was no audible reply), dropping off to sleep quite quickly.

Waking, apparently before her, in the morning he quietly arose, showered, and dressed in the tiny bathroom and wrote a note saying that he was going down to check the weather, the papers and what was happening with flights, before having breakfast. If there was any urgency to get going or to sort out rescheduled flights, he would phone up to her, otherwise he would stay in the dining room or reading room until she came down. Thinking that would give her time to get up and organised without having to rush in case he suddenly came into the room while she was dressing.

In fact, Malinda was awake and feigning sleep before he left the room and, as soon as he was gone, she sat up, read his note, showered, and dressed, organised her belongings, and carefully changed the arrangement of the sheets back to normal, (in case room service came to do the room), before also heading for the dining room to have breakfast.

Outside the storm continued to rage and the news was reporting widespread damage and disruption. The airport was still closed and there was no indication of when flights may resume. Many people were sitting around the lobby and lounges of the hotel with their luggage, and it was reported that all hotels were in the same situation with no rooms available but not turning people out onto the streets. Malinda was quietly reflecting on her luck when she spotted Ray sitting in the dining room. She went over and he stood to meet her. "The hotel is short staffed as many employees are having difficulty getting to work so there is only a buffet breakfast. Can I help you get something?"

They ate together, and Ray brought coffee for them both to a spare settee in one corner of the lounge, as they vacated their table to let some of the overflow of people camped in the lobby take advantage of the dining room.

"Did you manage to sleep alright?" Ray asked.

"Yes, thank you. I think I must have been exhausted as I didn't appear to have moved all night. I hope that I did not disturb you."

“No. I slept well and was only concerned that I might have disturbed you when I got up this morning.”

There was a silence between them until Malinda said, “I have to apologise about how I spoke to you last evening. I have no excuses and you have acted like a perfect gentleman throughout. When I looked around the lobby this morning, I realised just how fortunate I have been. Thank you.”

Ray’s mind flashed back to how, when he had woken this morning, her soft back pressed against his, his immediate thoughts had been anything but gentlemanly as he had great difficulty in resisting rolling over and touching that soft body – albeit through the two thicknesses of sheeting and whatever she was wearing. “I’m glad everything worked out because it looks very much as though this situation may last for at least another night and, if the storm is still moving towards where we are going, it could be even longer before the airlines are back in business and can move all the backlog of passengers.

Malinda was silent and, he thought, looked a little worried.

“Look, seeing that the hotel believe that we are married, and it is probable that we will be remain thrust together for a while longer, perhaps it would be as well if we knew a bit more about each other so that we can at least give the impression that we have not just met. Where were you headed when you were diverted here?”

After some minutes conversation it transpired that, although they had come from slightly different directions, they were both headed for the same town; he returning home from a business trip, and her for the first time, to spend a few weeks with a married, younger, sister who had recently moved there.

“What is your sister’s name?”

“Suzanne. Suzanne Grey.”

“Not the wife of Brian Grey by any chance.”

“She is. Do you know him?”

“Yes. He works at the same company as I do. He’s a nice guy and very well respected. I have not met his wife but was supposed to be doing so early next week at the company Christmas party. If we get back in time, that is.”

“This is so weird. What are the chances of meeting like this? Brian has asked me to go with them to that party as a guest.”

“Ah, I remember Brian mentioning that he might bring a guest. Well, if we make it back in time, you will at least know someone else there. And if not, we can have our own party and pretend that Brian introduced us, and we hit it off. We do sort of hit it off, don’t we?”

“I guess we do in a way. At least I know that you appear to be a gentleman and if, ultimately, you turn out not to be, then I know that I can complain to Brian”. Behind a hint of a little laugh, there was more than a hint of a blush, as Malinda said this.

Ray kept quiet. It was not the appropriate time to tell her that in fact it was his company and Brian worked for him. That sort of information may have scared her off and she was jumpy enough as it was. He was beginning to quite like his unwilling roommate and did not wish to complicate matters any more than they already were

A call to the Airline confirmed that it was expected to be at least two days and very probably three, before anything was likely to be moving towards their destination and that would be dependent upon the actual track of the storm and the amount of damage that it did to communications and the airport facilities along the way.

“Hey,” Ray changed the subject, “The hotel is full of miserable people and there is a quite nice shopping centre just along the road. Provided people have been able to get to work this morning, it may be more fun to spend the day – or at least the morning, browsing around some shops and perhaps having a coffee, rather than staying holed up here all day.”

That brought agreement and another smile from Malinda, and they went to the room to collect suitable warm clothing before heading out into the storm.

They found the Mall open for the most part and spent some hours just looking around and having lunch before venturing back out into the street. The storm had largely abated, and they walked back through the little rows of shops along the streets towards the hotel. Ray pointed out a small restaurant that he knew from previous visits was very good and suggested that they eat there for dinner as the hotel would no doubt be full of guests and those squatting the foyer. Malinda readily agreed and they went and booked before going back to the hotel to check again with the airline and change to go back out to dine.

The news from the airline office was both good and bad: They were confirmed booked on a flight and the airline was confident that all would be operating and back to normal by the new scheduled departure, however that departure was forty-eight hours away! Two more nights in their rather cramped room.

“Look on the bright side”, Ray commented, “It seems as though we will be there in time for that Christmas Party after all.”

Malinda was trying hard to maintain a slightly disgruntled air – purely for effect - and only permitted herself a brief smile, for inside she was more than a little pleased at this added delay – she was finding Ray to be great company; an extremely likable person; someone who, even after such a short time, she could see herself becoming very fond of – a feeling that she had never before experienced, or at least to this intensity! She was keen to see if that new, more than just a little wonderful, feeling might last for a day or two more – and perhaps even some indications that it was reciprocated...

Later, over a long, quiet dinner Malinda simply let herself relax and enjoy the pleasant atmosphere of the restaurant and the gentlemanly attentions of Ray. The staff clearly knew him, and they received the best of service which lingered on to relaxing coffee and liqueurs after the sumptuous meal and well-chosen wine.

The storm had moved on, leaving a calm starry night and Malinda allowed Ray to take her hand as he helped her down the few stairs from the restaurant to the street – and then continued to hold it throughout the slow stroll back to the hotel. Nothing was said about the action, and both let it happen in a natural way.

Upon arrival back at the hotel Ray enquired if she wanted a nightcap.

“I probably don’t *neeed* one - but it sounds like a nice idea.”

“Let’s try the house lounge bar. There don’t seem to be quite so many people sleeping in the foyers tonight so perhaps there won’t be too many in there either.”

The lounge was indeed reasonably quiet, and they found a snug corner, ordered drinks and relaxed back in comfortable chairs.

Conversation now came easily, and they both felt relaxed as they chatted on over range of totally inconsequential topics for more than an hour. Finally, unable to suppress a yawn, Malinda admitted that she simple had to go up to bed before she fell asleep in the warm comfort of the lounge.

“You go on up and I will follow in, say, half an hour – if that is okay,” Ray suggested. “Unless you need a hand in sorting out the bed sheets.”

“Oh, I had quite forgotten about that. I’m sure I can manage.” There was more than just a hint of a blush as she turned towards the lifts.

When Ray went up to the room sometime later, he found Malinda apparently sound asleep and when he climbed into bed the only reaction was a soft, contented sounding, sigh as she moved slightly.

That certainly sounded like she is much more relaxed about this arrangement than she was last night, he thought to himself, pleased.

Come morning and Ray’s actions were the same as the previous day. He got up and showed and dressed early and went down to get the latest update on the storm and have breakfast. There had been a newscast on when he had entered the foyer and he stood and watched this. The storm had again changed course and he immediately called the airline to see what was happening to his flight. The change in the path of the storm had delayed the opening of his destination airport by another day but they were able to confirm that both he and Malinda were now rebooked on a new flight in the late afternoon, two days hence.

As he was walking towards the dining room the receptionist called him over and asked if he had confirmed onward travel arranged yet. She explained that one room was being vacated during the morning as the occupants had managed to rent a car and were driving on their destination. Before letting it to someone from the stranded people in the lobby she had wondered (seeing as he was a regular, good, client) if he and his wife might like the room and she would re-let his current one to a single lady who was also stranded for several more days. She also confirmed that there were still no other rooms available in the town.

Without giving it a second thought, he accepted, and it was once again heading to the dining room when Malinda came out of the lift. She smiled and commented that he was looking very happy this morning.

“Well, you just came down at the right time,” he said. “I had received some bad news earlier and probably was not smiling then, but I have now received some good news and so I am happy again.”

“Are there personal matters or can you share this news?”

“Well, the bad news is that the storm has changed direction again and our flight has been delayed for a further 30 hours.”

There was the faintest hint of a smile behind the expressed dismay, “Oh no.”

The good news is that a ‘proper’ room is becoming available this morning and reception has asked if we would like to move and she will put a single lady, who is in the foyer, into the one we currently have. As it is still the only room in town, I have said yes please.”

This time her smile was unmistakable.

“Hey, I didn’t think that I was all that bad a roommate in a small room,” Ray joked.

“No, you aren’t – but before you get a big head, that’s not why I was smiling. Come on, let’s go and have breakfast.”

While they were eating Malinda commented that she should call her sister and update her about the latest change of flights.”

“Have you told her about your accommodation arrangements?” Ray asked her.

“No. I think that is not in the ‘need to know’ basket for the moment. Maybe sometime in the future, but not now.”

“Okay, I can respect that.”

“Why do I detect a look of relief on your face when you say that?”

Not so much relief – more a feeling that you may have made the right decision. It’s a large town but the residents still have a small-town ability to know every one’s business. It could be embarrassing for you – and perhaps for your sister and brother-in-law, if that sort of information were to be widespread before you even arrived. I have been there too long for it to hurt me, but I do not wish to see you in any way compromised.”

“Ah. Thank you, I think... And you don’t know my sister. She can make one plus one add up to anything she might like it to. No, at least for now, I just had a room at the Inn. And when we arrive on the same flight it is just a co-incidence. If anyone notices that we know each other, we met on the plane or while waiting at the airport. I am quite comfortable with that, for now.”

They ate and discussed how they might fill in the day-and-a-half (and without saying so, the two more nights), they had before moving on.

“I could see if there are any cars available for hire and show you some of the local sights if you like.”

“That would be nice, but it’s not necessary,” Malinda replied – hoping that he would insist.

“Come on, it’s worth a try and it may be the only opportunity you get to see this part of the country – especially with a personal guide.” The glint in his eyes smothered any false resistance she may have had.

“Okay!”

Ray called a couple of car rental companies and finally managed to get hold of a small (what turned out to be a very small, two-door) car for the day. They collected up some outdoor clothing, closed their cases ready for the hotel to shift to the new room, and headed out for a day in which Ray at least hoped would further break down some of the restraint that still existed between them.

They covered a good mileage as they drove around as much of the storm-ravaged district as was accessible, stopping for lunch at a quaint little café in a nearby village and browsing through a few of the touristy shops they came across. Ray knew the area well and pointed out places of note as they drove, stopping at some special spots and picking up on things that appeared to particularly interest her. All the time adding to his knowledge about his newfound and, he considered, rather delightful companion.

Meanwhile Malinda realised that she too was starting to relax and enjoy the day – and the company – as they sat, very close together, in the very intimate interior of their tiny rental car. This was turning into a forced, joint, adventure holiday, that was going to be difficult to forget!

Late afternoon they returned the car and went back to the hotel, collected the keys to their new room and went up to find what Malinda delighted declared was ‘SPACE’ as she flopped into one of the two luxurious armchairs that were set up to look out of the large picture window that presented a panoramic view of the town.

Ray stood beside the chair and pointed to a little cluster of buildings not far from the hotel. “There is a very exclusive little restaurant at this end of that building and it’s only a short walk. Would you like to try it?”

“Do we have to dress up?”

“No, smart casual is all that is required and I’m pretty sure that I can arrange a table if you are up to going out to eat again.”

“So long as we’re not out too late. I’m not sure I can stay awake for long, after all the activity today.”

A quick phone call and, “Can you get ready in about half an hour?”

Without any hesitation Malinda replied, “Yes.”

Rather to Ray’s surprise, Malinda quickly opened her suitcase, took out her toilet bag and a few clothes and headed for the bathroom and soon he heard the shower. No question of asking him to leave the room for a while and no apparent embarrassment.

Ten minutes later she came back into the room with a cheery, "It's all yours – I just need to do my hair and face and I'll be ready."

Ray had a very quick shave and shower and on coming back to the room found Malinda putting the finishing touches to her makeup – totally at ease and like he imagined it might be if they were a couple getting ready for an ordinary night out.

By the time Ray had finished getting shoes on and organising a jacket Malinda was also ready and they went out with Ray offering his arm and Malinda taking it without any hesitation. The night was still cool, and Malinda clung on tight to keep from getting cold during the short walk to the Restaurant, where they were met by the owner, who was clearly well acquainted with Ray and welcomed them in and seated them at a quiet table.

There was a piano being softly played in a corner alongside a small dance floor diagonally opposite them and perhaps twenty tables of which only half were currently occupied, but which, by the time they had ordered their meal, were all filled.

The atmosphere was relaxed, warm and pleasant. The music was soft and unobtrusive. The meal and wine excellent and the patrons all appeared to appreciate what a special place this was. While they waited for desert to be served, they danced for a while. They lingered over coffee and when they finally they walked slowly, arm-in-arm, back to the hotel – hardly noticing that the wind was coming up and there were no stars visible in the night sky.

Up in their room they sat in the luxury of the armchairs looking out across the lights of the town and, using the convenience of the coffee making facilities and the mini bar in the new room, prepared a final relaxing drink before both finally agreed that rather than fall asleep in the chairs, they should take advantage of the king-size bed and get some sleep.

Malinda was not drunk – well, perhaps just a 'wee bit' tiddly and very relaxed. She did feel a little light-headed and completely free of any of the inhibitions that she might have felt at a time like this (if there had ever been 'a time like this' before). All her usual caution – alright, downright prudishness – appeared to have gone out for the night – not that she had ever noticed having been a prude or that anything was different tonight. She had never been in this position before so had nothing to compare it with. She didn't think about it and just followed her head. No. That is not quite correct. What Malinda generally did, when she stayed in an hotel (not that she often stayed in hotels) was change in the bathroom – because other people in the hotel had passkeys and, who knows, a room service person could knock, she may not hear because she had her jumper up over her head, they might come in and everyone would be embarrassed. She was just doing what came naturally to her.

Ray said he would re-arrange the sheets, but Malinda took his arm and said, "I'm too tired to wait for you to do that. That bed is enormous, and I think by now I can trust you to not make any unwanted moves. Let's just go to bed."

So-saying, she gathered up her night things and went into the bathroom to change, as if that was what she did every night. No warning voice in her head suggested that this was very unlike Malinda. No qualms. No second thoughts. No feeling that she was doing anything but what was normal for her.

On the other hand, Ray was more than a little bemused by this sudden change in character. Two days ago, she had been suspicious, shy, and super careful about everything concerned with him and especially their sleeping arrangement. He hoped that she was not about to do something that they might both be embarrassed about or regret later - or was in fact more intoxicated than she appeared to be.

Half expecting her to suddenly come rushing out of the bathroom having woken up to what she was doing, Ray considered staying fully dressed., but when she did not come straight back out and he heard water running, he quickly changed into his boxers, thinking that if she was in night attire and found him still dressed, she might get very embarrassed and upset. It was a risk either way.

When she emerged from the Bathroom Malinda stopped dead and gazed at Ray sitting on the end of the bed clad in just his boxers. Having only seen him only in the half light, through almost closed eyes as she had pretended to be asleep while watching him get out of bed each morning, she was aware that he appeared to have a fine, toned body, but she was totally blown away with the ribbed, muscled and tanned form that she saw for the first time in the full light of the room and it took several moments for her to move or speak.

Ray had purposely not looked up too quickly as she came into the room, in case she suddenly took fright, but even from the corner of his eye he could not help but notice the spectacle that was Malinda, framed in the doorway and silhouetted by the light behind her and totally unaware of the picture that she presented. Her nightdress was pale blue, fine pima cotton lawn, waltz length with a smocked bodice, a prim button to neck front and a little collar. The garment, while modest, was rendered almost transparent from the waist down revealing a figure that Ray had already guessed was close to perfect and the fact that she was only wearing brief panties beneath. Surprisingly she had not even thought to put on the soft terry robe kindly provided by the Hotel.

He didn't know what he had been expecting. Perhaps thick, button up pyjamas or neck to floor flannel nightdress – although neither really seemed likely to be her probable night attire. But his immediate problem was that his totally uncontrollable lower regions immediately responded very favourably to this delectable sight, and he was not sure that he could get up off the bed and make it to the bathroom without Malinda noticing his dilemma. But then, the look on Malinda's face and particularly in her eyes as she stood motionless in the doorway sort of indicated that she too was not dismayed by what she could see either. Perhaps he should not be too worried.

Malinda moved from the doorway towards one side of the bed, quickly pulled the covers further back and slipped between the sheets. There was the tint of pink in her cheeks and the wide-eyed look remained as she finally spoke. "I'm so sorry that I just stood and gawked at you just now, but I have never seen such a sculptured torso before. You probably think I am stupid or have lived in a cave all my life" She stopped and looked even more embarrassed as her blush intensified.

Stuck for something appropriate to say and wanting to keep the situation as light as possible, Ray simply replied, "Well thank you. I have never had such a nice compliment. And if I appeared to be looking a little intensely at you, I make no apology, because I can truly say that I have never before, under any circumstances, had the pleasure of the company of woman so naturally beautiful in all

respects and so pleasant to be with.” So-saying and keeping his back to her as much as possible, he stood and adjourned quickly to the bathroom.

Relaxing back on the soft pillows in the luxurious king-sized bed, Malinda lay turning over in her mind what had just transpired. Her head still felt a little fuzzy and her thoughts were rather jumbled. She had never thought of herself as unusually attractive. Okay, she was not fat or ugly - but nor was she tall, blond, and built like a magazine model.

She had certainly not been very nice company when they had first met, but, on the other hand, the past few days had been very pleasant, and they did seem to get on quite well together now. And tonight, well, tonight had been wonderful!

But then, after saying such nice things to her, he had just turned his back and walked off to the bathroom without a further word. Why the sudden change? And then the little lightbulb in her head flashed on! Oh dear - did I do that to him? Her mind went back to her coming out of the bathroom. She had completely forgotten about the light. What must he be thinking of her? How embarrassing – for them both. But, on reflection, how nice that he complimented her in the way he did – he could have just said nothing, or worse, just been obvious about having a good look at her expense.

These conflicting thoughts were still buzzing around her head when Ray came out of the Bathroom and turned off the overhead lights, just leaving the two bedside lamps on. He slid into the bed, and she risked a quick, surreptitious look to see if her earlier suspicions were correct, noticing that he was still keeping that part of his anatomy carefully turned away. A wicked little inward glow caught her unawares as she realised that she had never consciously been responsible for that happening to a guy before. This was certainly turning into a holiday of firsts.

Are you comfortable? It was a polite question, she realised, and not just referring to the feel of the bed or pillows! Strangely she did not feel at all uncomfortable laying there so close to him. Alright, it was a king size bed and there was probably a metre or more between them, but she did not have any doubts that she was quite safe, and the Ray would not abuse the situation in any way.

And then, totally out of left field, the thought entered her mind that she may feel that way because she realised that she would not have felt upset if Ray had touched her. Indeed, she was surprised to find that she almost wanted him to reach out to her. And her mind no longer felt confused. She was wide awake. She was thinking clearly and logically.

She had never had these sorts of thoughts before, and she wondered if this was normal, or lust, or – what! This was completely new territory for her, and she was totally out of her depth – but wonderfully so. It should have been frightening – but it wasn't. Was this what her girlfriends had sometimes spoken of, and she had had no idea what they were on about? Wouldn't her baby sister be surprised if she could see her like this!

“Yes. This is so much better than the last little box. It makes one really appreciate this type of room. Then again, on reflection, that was certainly preferable to the hotel lobby or worse, an airport lounge.”

“Okay, it’s not a suite, but I guess we are both comfortable with that now, do you think?” There was a kind, gentle smile in Ray’s eyes that clearly indicated that, although he remembered her comment about a suite on the first evening, he figured that they had both moved on from that unfortunate start.

“Well, we only have one more day to fill in and one more night in town, so I guess we should try and make the most of it. Have you any thoughts on what you might like to do?”

Before Malinda could answer – and before she had a chance to consider the possible innuendo in that comment - there was a loud whining noise as an aircraft passed low over the town, obviously climbing away from the airport.

She changed what she had been about to say to, “Sounds as if some people have already managed to get away – I hope that means that everyone else will be able to fly out on their new schedules.” Seconds later another aircraft passed over them.

“I thought that there was a curfew this late at night,” Ray said, thoughtfully, “They must have lifted it to enable people to move on more quickly.” And then, as yet another plane went over, “I wonder where they are headed to.” Several more planes passed over the before Ray added, “That must have been about all that there were at the airport – I hope they are sending one back to collect us!”

“I guess that there will be more room in the hotels with that number of flights already gone. Some people will be happy to get somewhere comfortable to lie down – even for just a few hours.” Malinda had hardly started to say this when she wondered and hoped that Rod would not think she wanted to move out to a separate room, so she quickly added,

“About tomorrow, can you suggest anything that we might both enjoy?”

Noting the slight emphasis on the “we” and ignoring the possible double entendre in her question, Ray refrained from suggesting the obvious and instead proposed that, seeing that the weather had apparently lifted enough for the planes to fly, some of the other roads may be open and they could explore a little further afield by car. There was no apparent objection to that and Ray, much to Malinda’s delight, lent over, squeezed her hand, whispered, “Good night,” and rolled over, turned off his bedside light and lay down.

“G’night Ray,” and Malinda followed suite.

Soon Ray’s breathing became slower and softer as he drifted into a deep sleep, but Malinda lay awake for some time, her mind turning over the day’s happenings and the conversations that they had had over the past few hours – and how strangely intimate that squeeze of her hand had felt.

“Ray. Ray. Wake up.” Malinda was shaking his shoulder and almost yelling in his ear. Rousing from a deep sleep Ray was conscious of a loud roaring noise and a crashing and banging as he glanced at the time on the clock radio beside the bed. 4 am.

Gathering his thoughts, he registered who was shaking him and why she was in bed with him but had not worked out what the noise was.

“What is causing that? It woke me up and all I could think of was a tornado or an earthquake, but I’ve never been in anything like that.”

Ray slid out of bed and Malinda’s thoughts briefly went from the noise to the image of him moving quickly towards the window.

Pulling back the drapes he quickly saw that the wind had built up to gale force and the noise was all manner of things being tossed around the streets by the wind and the driving rain was beating against the windows and lightning flashing through the partly open curtains.

“The storm appears to have returned with a vengeance. All that noise is wind, thunder and driving rain. It looks as though we may be stuck here for a little longer than we thought. I guess that is why the planes were all leaving late last night. This sort of storm could well have caused damage to aircraft parked in the open.”

Malinda was listening to this explanation but was concentrating more on the fact that Ray looked magnificent silhouetted by the lighting flashes and the feel of him under her hand as she was shaking him awake - and the fact that they may be together for more time and... Her involuntary gasp caught Ray’s attention and he turned back from the window and hurried to her side, taking her hand and reassuring her that it was all okay and they were quite safe in the hotel.

Even though her thoughts had nothing to do with safety, she did appreciate his comforting words – and his holding her hand. Something in the back of her mind was also wishing that he would hold her and comfort her in a closer, more intimate way. She really needed a cuddle at that moment! And, as she never remembered having needed a cuddle to comfort her, she was at a loss to understand where the thought had come from.

“There’s nothing that we can do, and I guess it is perfectly safe or the hotel staff would have had everyone awake and up by now. We may as well just snuggle down and try to sleep through it and hope the storm moves away quickly.” Ray tried to sound as reassuring as he could, but he noticed the slightly worried look on Malinda’s face.

Not that Malinda was too worried about the storm now that she understood what the noises were. No, her look was more questioning her own reactions to what Ray had just said and the fact that her brain had only latched on to one part of his statement - *we might as well just snuggle down* and had gone into overdrive with vivid and highly erotic visions of snuggling down with him.

This was NOT like her. What was happening? Was there something in the water here that had affected her brain? The brave, independent, totally self-sufficient, used to being on her own and not being worried about electrical storms Malinda had never needed to, or consciously wanted to, snuggle down with anyone before!

They both lay down again but after a few minutes Malinda found that she could not resist the temptation to tentatively slide one hand towards Ray and grip his arm. He responded by shifting slightly and taking her hand in his. Much was thought by both, but nothing was said and eventually they drifted off to sleep again.

By morning the worst of the storm had again passed away, leaving litter and rubbish all over the streets and a grey, unpleasant-looking day outside their hotel window. Ray had again woken before Malinda but had decided not to get up immediately. Her hand was still loosely resting in his and, rather than risk waking her, he enjoyed the pleasant feeling and the sight of her face in the half-light of the room.

She was, in reality, only half asleep and, as soon as she realised that he was awake and still had her hand in hers, she started to wonder what she should do. He obviously was not upset with the situation (and, she had to admit, neither was she). Should she roll over, as if she was still asleep, taking her hand away as she did so? She could just lay still and wait to see what he did. Or she could let him know that she was awake and see what his reaction was. She somehow sensed that he was probably watching her, and that, she realised, pleased, rather than worried her.

In the end she just slowly opened her eyes as is she was just waking up and looked over at Ray. "Hello Sleeping Beauty." He greeted her.

"Have you been watching me?"

"You might say that. I would put more like I was enjoying the sort of view I would like to wake up to more often." There, he'd said it. Would she slap his face or smile? Would this be the last time he got to enjoy the pleasant thought he had been thinking, or would she respond favourably?

She squeezed his hand and smiled, "So you aren't cross that I disturbed your sleep during that storm?"

Positive reaction, he thought, "Anything but. In fact, I'm glad you did."

"Glad? Why?"

"It finally enabled me to confirm something that I had been wondering about for some time." His reply was delivered with what he hoped was a cheeky grin and not a lustful leer.

"Oh, and what might that be?" She was grinning now, but inside she was hoping she had read his last comment correctly.

"What I was missing from my evenings, nights and mornings. I have a nice house with nice views and nice things around me, but it was not feeling like a home. I now realise that I do not have anything apart from a very unattractive alarm clock to wake up to." With that he sat up, leaned over, kissed her lightly on the forehead and quickly slipped out of bed and headed for the bathroom before his unruly lower regions again betrayed his emotions to the world.

Malinda sat up in bed pondering what she would do. She could get up and dress but decided that it would be better to have a shower before dressing. She could get up and put on one of the hotel robes. Or, she decided, she could just stay where she was for the time being! So, she straightened the pillows, fluffed her fingers through her hair, checked to ensure that her nightgown was still properly buttoned up and relaxed back.

When Ray came back into the room wearing his long trousers and no shirt, he was wondering what he would find, but was certainly not expecting to find Malinda still in bed, sitting up and looking

good enough to eat! She, on the other hand, found herself again fantasising over his ribbed torso and imaging things that until a few days ago had scarcely crossed her mind.

Although he had intended to sit down and chat about what they might do to catch up on the storm situation and then perhaps fill in the day, Ray figured that it may be safer from both their points of view to just put on a shirt and jacket and go down to the front desk to make some enquiries.

As he went to the wardrobe he said, almost over his shoulder, "I will go down and find out how last night's storm has upset our travel arrangements and will meet you in the dining room – unless you would rather have room service." With that he smiled and left the room – feeling that he had somehow not played that encounter very well.

Damn, Malinda muttered to herself, beginning to wish that he was not always such a gentleman, I've scared him off. She got up out of bed, gathered up her clothes and went to shower and dress.

Just as he closed the door, Ray heard her mutters curse and smiled to himself. Yes, she was just as interested in their being together as he was. Time to stop their mutual guessing game and try to bring everything out into the open – without scaring her off, of course!

Down in the lobby the news was not good. The storm had now completely blown itself out and its brief return had been predicted just early enough for the airlines to get all except one of the aircraft out, however they had had to be moved quickly and had therefore left empty. One plane had not been able to get out in time and had suffered some minor damage from flying debris. Although there had not been a large amount of damage around the area, there was a considerable clean-up required.

There were no problems at their destination airport, but all the planes had been pressed back into yet another new schedule of moving stranded passengers from other airports and it was now going to be at least an extra day before any returned to ferry Ray and all the other passengers stranded here, from their enforced stop-over.

Ray was not too worried. They would still be back home two days before the company's Christmas Party, and he had another day in which to get closer to Malinda.

When she came down to Breakfast and Ray passed on the news about further delays, Malinda's heart gave a little skip of joy, and she had some difficulty in not blushing at the thoughts that flashed through her mind.

"Okay, we have two more days to fill in. What can we do to pass the time?" Ray asked the reception when he went to confirm that they would be staying for another two nights. Malinda's heart again skipped a beat – two more nights, never mind the days! This just got better and better.

The receptionist was doubtful if they would be able to fluke a rental car and could only suggest the places that they had already visited and that were within walking distance of the hotel. Sure enough, not even the small two door car was available and so it was that they found themselves retracing their steps to the mall, several restaurants, and even taking in a movie.

Although she may not have said it out loud to anyone (except, perhaps, (but not very likely) her sister), Malinda felt as though she was a grown-up teen-ager and briefly wondered why she had never

felt like this before – even as a teen-ager. And then decided that the question was irrelevant and that she would just go along with the rather enjoyable sensation of being with someone who was pleasant, kind, fun, good looking, attentive, caring – Hey, where was this going? Next, she would be thinking that she might be in love! At that moment they were walking back into the hotel, holding hands (which had become automatic and not at all awkward). She stopped and looked up into his face. She was still on the step below him, and he looked back down at her with a quizzical look.

“What is happening here?” She was half smiling, but still looking a little puzzled.

“If you’re asking the question that I think you are then I don’t know any more than you.” Ray paused before going on. “I have been trying to work it out in my own mind and have come to the conclusion that fate appears to have put us together and, in spite of – or perhaps because of - the rather shaky start and the unusual circumstances, fate is decreeing that we get more time to see what we make of the situation. All I can say is that I am very grateful to fate for causing us to meet and for the opportunity to get to know each other and for repeatedly delaying the planes so that we have more time to work out what is happening. What do you make of the situation?”

“I don’t know and that is mainly because I have never, ever, been in the position where I have feeling like I have had over the past few days. I guess you are right, fate has thrown us together and it is up to us to see where it leads us. Are you enjoying our time together?”

“That’s easy to answer. An unqualified, yes. Are you?”

“Yes. I can’t think when I have enjoyed myself so much before. Apart from that first half hour that is. It’s been almost like a naughty adventure that has turned into something else that I have not yet been able to define but have an inkling of what it might be and that thought makes me very happy.”

She smiled – a little tentatively he thought - but it was quite enough to encourage him to lean forward and kiss her forehead before giving a slight pull on her hand and suggesting that inside the hotel might be more comfortable than standing on the entrance steps.

Inside and up to the room to shed their rather bulky and inhibiting, warm outdoor clothing.

“Do you fancy something to drink - hot, cold, something a little stronger?”

“It’s still a couple of hours until dinner. Is there time for a cocktail and perhaps some crackers and cheese?”

“Let’s see what the mini-bar has for us. Otherwise, the lounge bar usually has a nice selection at this time of the day.” So-saying he opened the bar to show her what was available.

“Do you think they might have a better selection downstairs – or am I being too ‘picky’ or extravagant?”

“I’m sure we can do better than this.” Ray replied, “Even if they are short staffed because of the storm, I think they will have the means to provide something a little more special.”

“Just give me a minute to freshen up then. I don’t think we need to change, do we.”

Malanda disappeared into the bathroom and Ray sat down to gaze out the window at the now cloudless early evening winter sky and wonder again at the unpredictable storm that had caught everyone unawares with its many direction changes and how it had affected their two lives in such a short space of time.

He rose and turned as Malinda came out of the bathroom and moved towards her as she paused, looking beautiful and just a little coy. Placing his hands on her shoulders and gazing into her eyes he was looking for any sign that she may not be approving of what he was thinking and, seeing none, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Soft and gentle at first, but, as she put her arms around him, he held her firm and close with one arm and placed his other behind her head as he deepened the kiss until involuntarily her lips started to part and their tongues found each other.

The break was slow, and they were still holding each other tightly, Malinda's face into his shoulder and his hand still resting lightly on the back of her head. She moved her head back and looked searchingly into his eyes and kissed him, encouraging him, holding him, trusting him...

As they slowly parted, she took his hand and with a smile a mile wide, moved towards the door. "I don't know about you, but I think I need that drink you suggested."

In the lounge it was surprisingly quiet, and they had a cosy little corner to themselves. Ray took the opportunity to raise a question that had been on his mind for much of the day. "Do you think that perhaps it is time we both knew a little more about each other?"

He was asking the question because he genuinely wanted to know more about the woman that he was defiantly starting to get beyond the stage of just 'liking', but also to see if his interest would be reciprocated in the way he hoped, by her indicating a greater interest in him.

"I would like that," she paused, "In some ways it feels like we have known each other for a long time, but there are certainly many things that we could not possibly know about."

They chatted together about families, backgrounds, work, interests and hobbies and quickly realised that they had more in common than had become apparent just from their shared times together over the past few days.

Cocktails and snacks followed by a leisurely dinner with coffee and liquors in the lounge afterwards. Sitting back in the warm room and comfortable chairs, both what might be described as silly grins on their faces and clearly savouring the moment. To any onlooker, they were obviously love struck.

It was Malinda who suggested it was time to move and there was again no question of her going up along with Ray following later. They went up, hand-in-hand and when, they had closed the room door behind them, she willingly moved into his embrace and a moments later turned her face up, briefly kissed him and moved away to get her night things and move to the bathroom to change. When she came out of the bathroom she immediately climbed between the sheets and Ray went to prepare for bed.

As Ray slid into bed, Malinda, who was facing away from him, shyly whispered, "I'm not suggesting anything else, but last night when you mentioned snuggling down and going to sleep, I had to wonder what I had been missing." A long pause and then, even more hesitantly, "Would you very much mind snuggling down with me - and going to sleep?"

Ray roiled towards her and sensed her involuntary tensing. Gently running his hand through her hair, he lightly kissed her neck, spooned in behind her and placed one arm across her waist and took one of her hands. Once she started to relax, he gradually let more of his weight press against her soft back and adjusted his breathing rate to synchronise with hers. Slowly Malinda appeared to totally melt against his body, and she soon succumbed to sleep.

His body, his traitorous manhood, did not relax and persisted in reacting to the soft, warm feel of her buttocks pressing into him and he wondered how long he could keep from giving into his base desire to go where no man had gone before.

At some point he must have dropped off to sleep as the next thing he registered was Malinda moving slightly and gripping his hand – and a feeling of numbness in his other arm where he had been sleeping on it. Not wanting to disturb Malinda he very slowly moved to adjust his position and was surprised when she whispered, "it's okay, I'm awake too."

He rolled onto his back, as did Malinda, thereby ensuring that she was still holding his hand – although it was now resting on her stomach instead of on the bed.

"I've been thinking about our discussion last night," she whispered in the still darkness of the early morning, "You found out a lot about me but there are still things that I do not know about you."

"Like what?"

"Like what you do for a living, for example. Which no doubt will raise other questions."

"I work in computers."

"Yes, I guessed that. At the same place as my brother-in-law. But what do you do? What does the firm do exactly? Where do you fit into the picture?"

This was the very question that Ray had been avoiding, but now that it had been asked so directly, he had to answer. "I own the company, along with several others that are complimentary in various ways. I also lecture part-time in the Computer Science Department of the University. I also have qualifications in other fields and have created niche markets in my areas of specialisation so we can design customise and maintain programmes especially for them. I employ a staff to work on programming, and some installations while I do the marketing and design and some of the follow up work."

"So, Brian works for you and not just with you."

"Yes. Is that likely to be a problem?"

There was a pause before she answered, "I don't think so – now that I know and can act accordingly and not put my foot in it by saying something inappropriate. If I had not known the

situation things may have been different. What made me ask was your comment several days ago when we talked about telling them about our arrangements here and you saying that it could be embarrassing for me or my sister. I felt that there was more behind that comment. I now understand. What I still don't understand is why you didn't tell me sooner."

"Would it have changed anything if I had?"

"I'm not sure - probably not. But you obviously had your reasons for not telling me and that does worry me a little."

"My reason was probably selfish and, in retrospect, perhaps silly. I already thought that we might have something more going for us than just a few days and nights to share, because there seemed to be a spark that indicated we might have a longer-term future. I did not want to scare you off, for any reason, because you already appeared to be very suspicious of me and every move I made."

"And now - what do you think now?" She stopped gripping his hand but did not push it away and turned to look straight into his eyes.

"Now I'm sure that there is more than just a spark and I would like to continue, what I now view as a definite relationship and see if we can develop it into something more, hopefully, permanent." He gazed back into her eyes, "Do you think there is a chance of that happening?"

Malinda turned her head back and looked straight up towards the ceiling as she considered her reply, but Ray took some encouragement from the fact that she was blushing deeply.

"I would like that too. In fact, I have been hoping that you were also thinking along those lines - otherwise I would not have had the courage to be so forward over the last few days. It was totally out of character and very uncomfortable for me, but I suspect that you could see that, and you made it so much easier. My worry was that I was being too subtle, and you would not see what I was wanting, or worse, you would think that I was asking for you to... well, go faster or further or..." Blushing she stopped. "Anyway, you remained the gentleman that I thought you were."

"You took a risk - what if I had pushed you further - after all, I am just a normal, red-blooded male?"

"I suspect that you might have already guessed the answer to that. I told you the first night we were here that I am - well - without putting too fine a point on it - totally unexperienced, so I simply had no idea of what, if any, protocols apply in these situations and, to avoid losing out on any possibility of keeping you around, I think I would have probably gone along with whatever you did or suggested. Not without some reservations I hasten to assure you, but you did not push me so I guess we will never know. My girlfriends talk, of course - well not everything - but I have never consciously listened and understood." She looked at him with a self-conscious smile, "But you did only what I asked and what I was prepared to try and feel comfortable with - even though I'm sure from what I think I saw and what I know I felt, you were having a hard time being so restrained. Thank you."

Ray gathered her into his arms as they lay there and whispered into her ear as she buried her face into his shoulder, "So do we agree that we have the start of a relationship that, we both hope, may develop into something more?"

Her initial answer was a long, lingering, and relaxed kiss. “Oh, I do hope so and there is the remainder of my three-week holiday to kick-start that journey, starting with at least another day and night here, alone, before we have to get back to the reality of having friends and family around to get in our way.” She hugged him even tighter, and he knew she was sincere when he felt her rock-hard engorged nipples pressing through the light fabric of her nightgown into his bare chest.

He could not resist pressing his hand against her backside and pressing her against his hard erection as he gently rubbed his chest against her breasts and whispered, “I’m glad to feel that it not just **my** body that so obviously reveals its feelings.” This was answered with a muffled giggle from her.

Sometime later, driven by the demands of the hour – not the least of all being the need for food – they kissed and parted, him to shave and shower and her to sort out what she was going to wear for the day. When Ray came out with just a towel wrapped around his waist, she softly blushed and then briefly touched his hand as she went into the bathroom.

They went down to breakfast together and then checked with the airline to confirm that there were no changes to their scheduled departure the next day before heading out to spend the day around the town, in the mall, having endless coffees and generally being a couple that was intent on getting to know as much about each other as they could in the shortest possible time.

They dined at the Hotel again that evening and afterwards, over coffee back in their room, they discussed how they were going to explain their friendship when being met at their destination tomorrow by Brian and Suzanne.

Keep it as simple as possible, they decided. They met in the hotel, got into a discussion, two people stranded – thrown together as it were (no, let’s not express it that way) – got into conversation, decided to kill some time looking around together and found that they enjoyed each other’s company. End of story for now. The Greys, or anyone else, could make of that whatever they would and in the meantime, they could continue getting better acquainted. What could be simpler?

Malinda was not too sure if her sister would be satisfied with that explanation, given her previous lack of experience with (or apparent interest in) men. But it was all quite true – just leaving out one, pertinent, fact that had a great deal to do with precisely how friendly they had become in such a short time!

That one pertinent fact that again saw them sleeping in a similar position to the previous night, with both wondering if the other might take things further and both deciding that, as much as they would like to, it was probably better that they didn’t at that stage.

In the morning the same casual showering and dressing ritual, the same long, passionate kisses and the shared agreement that it was going to be difficult going back to sleeping alone. Oh, how so much had changed, for them both in just five nights!

They had breakfast and Ray settled the hotel account while Malinda went up to the room to start packing the last few things, before they had to leave.

They had finished packing and still had a little time to just sit down before the taxi was due to transport them to the airport. Ray lifted their cases to the door, ready for the porter to collect them,

and turned and held his arms out to Malinda, who readily came to him for another deep kiss. “You know,” he said, “I almost wish we didn’t have to go.”

“Exactly my thoughts,” she responded with a squeeze of his hand. “I know that this past few days has not been normal in the sense that under ordinary circumstances we may never have met like this, but it was fated that we would meet at your Christmas party and this has just given us time to get to know each other in a way that we may not have ever done. I’m glad we had this advance opportunity because we may not have done much more than just meet at the party and not had the occasion or opportunity to get to know each other at all. I am glad in so many ways that you came to my rescue that night – even if I made a bad impression to start with.”

“Yes, well I did not act totally in character then either. I just thought of some way in which I might help; decided that the wife angle was the best; never considered your possible reaction to such a suggestion and went ahead. Looking back, I wouldn’t have blamed you if you had slapped my face.”

“The thought did cross my mind – briefly – but even then, something stopped me. I have never believed it when people have spoken about it before, but when you took my hand to go up to the reception, I would swear that I felt a spark. I tried telling myself it was just static electricity from my woollen coat and the wind, but when you finally let go of my hand it seemed as though I had suddenly lost something.”

Ray reflected back to that same moment and said, “I felt those things too. And now all I want is to keep on feeling them. After only four days and five nights I don’t want to let you go. Love at first sight has always seemed like some romantic myth dreamt up sappy romance writers to sell more books, but I find myself having to consider that it might be real after all and hoping that it is.”

Before either could act on those shared sentiments there was a knock at the door and cases were being collected. They went to the taxi and on to the airport, holding hands in the back of the cab, checked in and on to the gate lounge to await their departure.

The flight was less than an hour in duration and they sat, clutching hands, making small talk, each wishing that this was not the end of their effectively living together and dreading the feeling of enforced separation the end of the journey would bring.

An all-to-brief kiss and hug before they collected their bags and walked out together, but not touching, to the surprised looks of Brian and Suzanne who were waiting for Malinda.

Suzanne moved forward hug Malinda – and to whisper in her ear, “Is that magnificent hunk a friend of yours?” To which Malinda simply replied, “That hunk, as you called him, is your husband’s boss.”

Brian shook Ray’s hand, “Hi. We weren’t sure if you would be on this flight or not.” And then the question that he could not resist, and he knew Suzanne would be dying to find out, “I didn’t know that you and Malinda knew each other.”

Straight faced, Ray replied, “We didn’t. We just met and started talking during the stay-over.”

Malinda and Ray had difficulty in keeping from laughing at the looks that were passing between Brian and Suzanne as Brian offered to drop Ray home to save him having to get a taxi and then Ray held both the curb-side doors open for Suzanne to get in the front while Malinda got in the back – followed by him. It was clear that Suzanne had been intending to sit with Malinda to do some catching up as they drove home.

During the drive Ray and Malinda clasped hands, hidden under her handbag and coat and the look they exchanged when he got out at his home clearly had Suzanne's mind racing because she jumped out of the car and into the back seat he had vacated before he could shut the door.

Ray wondered to himself just how Malinda would cope with the interrogation that was obviously about to take place as soon as he was out of the way. Later he would send her a text message to see how she was.

So that was Sunday, and late in the evening he received a text from Malinda that confirmed his suspicion that Suzanne had been working to get as much gossip as she could. She had given Suzanne the agreed version and felt it was convincing but was certain that Suzanne had already added it up to be wedding bells and thought that they must have known each other for months without letting on.

He considered for a moment texting back 'why don't we just make her thoughts of wedding bells come true' but hesitated to do so in writing in case Suzanne happened to see it or, worse, Malinda started to think he was moving too quickly. He might drop it into a private conversation over the next few days if it seemed appropriate – assuming they did get some private time!

Monday: Back to work for Ray, after being away far longer than he had intended and finding more work piled up than he had hoped for. Delegate, he thought to himself, I want some time off over the next three weeks. Sorting out what was urgent and that which only he could attend to he made an executive decision! A text to Malinda, *If you would like to meet for lunch at, say 12:00 there is a nice mall just a short walk from your house. Go out the gate, turn right and keep on the same road for two blocks. x*

Minutes later, *yes please! See you at 12:00. xx*

Ensnared in a small restaurant with a light lunch (after having greeted her with all three kisses in their texts), their smiles said it all. Apart for such a short time and already missing each other Ray was anxious to catch up on all that had happened since Brian had dropped him off the previous afternoon.

"Very much as I had expected and I'm quite sure Suzanne would have liked to stay home from work today and keep up her interrogation! She has arranged to have next week and the week after off, to spend some time with me and I'm certain her questions, direct and veiled, will not have stopped by them. I love her to bits, but she acts more like a big sister rather than one who is almost eight years younger than me, and it is already becoming quite wearing."

"Did you want to put everything on hold while you are here? Give yourself an easier time with Suzanne and Brian and yourself a bit of a holiday?"

“NO”, she reached across the table and gripped his hand – then slowly, reluctantly withdrew it again, wondering if that is what he now wanted, “No, anything but that. I don’t want anything to keep us apart if I can avoid it.” And then, tentatively, “unless that is what you want.”

“Absolutely not! I was just thinking of making life a bit easier for you.”

Blushing and again taking his hand, “That would not be making it easier for me. I don’t want you to think I am being forward or presumptuous, but now that I have found you, I would like every opportunity to see where it can take us”

Hmmm. I think it is safe to just go for it Ray thought to himself and, trying to still keep things sounding light, but still convincing, he squeezed her hand as he said, “I almost texted you back last evening to say something like ‘why not just make Suzanne’s thoughts of a wedding come true’ but I thought that you might think I was being too forward, or it would make your holiday with your sister too much of an ordeal.”

Still holding his hand, Malinda looked him straight in the eye for a moment and then, with a cheeky look that he had not seen on her before, she replied, “To some people it might seem like it’s too soon for that, but we are both well beyond teenage crushes and we probably have a more intimate knowledge of each other than most people who have dated for months. Are you suggesting some sort of unofficial engagement so that it would be easy to end things if we found that we had rushed ahead too quickly?”

“If that is what you would prefer, sure. But I had in mind a proper engagement.” Ray raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner. “For real.”

“Was that a proposal I just heard?”

“No, not exactly, it was more like a proposal that I would propose if you thought that you might see it you heart to listen to a proposal.”

“Ahhh.” There was that cheeky look again, “Weeell, I might just consider listening to a proposal from you, if you think you are ready for that step in your life.”

In an instant Ray was up from the table, round to her side and down on one knee. “I know it’s not been long since we met, but we have covered a lot of ground in a short space of time, and I am asking if you would consider doing me the honour of becoming my bride.” He smiled up, head to one side rather like a hopeful puppy-dog.

Malinda leaned forward and kissed him, “Yes, I would rather like that. Thank you.”

Ray kissed her and sat back down again. “Now, where do we go from here? How and when – and what-do we tell Suzanne and Brian. What about the rest of your family? Would you like an engagement party here and/or at home? I should like to take you out and let you select rings. The list goes on and on. I have had a multitude of things that I thought I needed to ask you about, buzzing around in my mind since last night and I know it may seem that I am overwhelming you with questions I’m sure you will be far better than I am at sorting out all these into some logical order but I couldn’t help myself and I don’t know if it’s nerves, excitement or what!”

“That’s exactly the sort of thing that amazes me about you. Most men that I have ever met would not have spared a thought for any of those questions. I guess that I should call my parents and at least let them know that I am engaged. (I do like the sound of that). I can’t imagine what their reaction will be. That will be an interesting conversation. Of course, we will have to tell Brian and Susanne too. Actually – and I don’t want to press you in any way - but I would rather like to drop that on them in much the same way a Suzanne told me about her engagement. She just came in wearing a ring and waited to see how long it took for someone to notice it! As for the rest of your questions and the many others that I’m sure will come up over the next few days, let’s do what we have been doing for the last week – just see what happens and go with that.”

“I’m sure I don’t know how you manage to be so calm and sensible – my mind is in a whirl.”

“Me, calm? I’m certainly not calm,” Malinda paused, “I feel a bit like that swimming duck, people talk about. It looks calm and serene on the top, but underneath its paddling furiously. I think my mind is trying process too much at once and I think I might have started to freewheel and let it go blank.” She paused again – shook her head, and asked, “Do you have time for another coffee?”

They ordered coffee and sat quietly, each trying to collect their thoughts.

“The Christmas party is tomorrow night,” Ray tentatively stated to say, “Would that be a suitable time to come out wearing a ring?”

“Now, that is a **great** suggestion. But it also reminds me that this afternoon I was going to look for a suitable dress to wear. Can you suggest a shop, or shops, where I might find something?” I’m not sure that we will have time to go ring-shopping as well though. Where are the jewellery shops?”

“Shopping for a dress will be reasonably easy I think as there are a good number of ladies’ dress shops around. However, unless you want the whole town to know before you have a chance to let Suzanne notice you are wearing a ring, I would not suggest that we go looking around here. It’s only just after 1 pm, what are you doing this afternoon?”

“Oh dear, I already know that look. You are about to make some way-out suggestion that I am going to find impossible to say no to.”

“I hope so! I can be free for the rest of the afternoon. The next town, about 30 minutes’ drive away, is bigger and had a large mall with all the usual dress shops and jewellers with a much bigger range to choose from. What say we go now and see what we can achieve in an afternoon? We can be back before anyone misses us and if anything needs alteration I can nip over in the morning and collect it, so nobody will be any the wiser.”

“Impulsive isn’t your middle name, is it? Which reminds me, that is something else we don’t know each other – names. You know, we have rushed into an engagement and there are so many things we don’t know. Is that bad, do you think?”

“Only if one of us has a dark, ugly, past hidden away. I know that I don’t and I’m reasonably sure that you don’t look like the sort of young lady that has anything bad in your recent history.”

“Okay, that sounds like fun, if you are sure you’re really free. We could even catch up on some of the things we should perhaps know about each other on the way.”

Ray hurried back to his office to get his car while Malinda powdered her nose and spent a couple of minutes looking in a jeweller’s window to try and formulate some ideas about rings, having never really thought much about such things before.

During the drive they exchanged information on such basic things as names; Raymond James [not generally impulsive] Bronson and Malinda Anne Williamson, Birthdays and finding that although he was 32 and she was 31 their birthdays were only five months apart; both had two parents and four grandparents and one, female, sibling (both younger and married). They discussed their jobs (although Ray did not elaborate too much on what he had already told her). Then Malinda, shyly, turned to him and said, “I suppose I should have asked earlier, what I have been told is the \$64 question. Are you going to be able to support me in the manner to which I would like to become accustomed?”

Despite his trying to look serious, there was a grin behind the muttered, “I hope I can, from what I have seen and heard so far I think I might just about manage.”

Not totally sure if he was joking or not, Malinda hastened to reassure him that she was not obsessed with how much money he did, or did not, have, “I didn’t really mean anything by that question. I’m not worried about living the high life and I don’t want an expensive ring or anything like that.”

Smiling now, Ray reached across the seat and squeezed her hand, “I was having you on. However, and without wanting to appear like I am out to impress anyone, unless you are far stronger than you appeared to be when struggling with that suitcase of yours, I don’t think you will want to wear a ring that is beyond my ability to buy for you. Here we are, let’s go shopping. In the interests of time, perhaps we should go looking for a suitable dress that will mark you out as the boss’s fiancée at a swanky Christmas Party, and, in case you have any worries about cost, this is on me – no arguments. You look at the dresses, not the price tags!”

Still Trying to absorb all this new information, Malinda just nodded, dumbly, and went with Ray in the large and rather flash Mall. He grabbed one of the Mall Directories as they went in.

“Do any of these dress shops sound familiar and likely to have the sort of thing you need?”

They sorted out three possibilities and went in search of *‘the dress’*.

Feeling like a princess, trying dresses that she loved the look of but would never bothered trying before because the price tag would have screamed “NO” before she even had it off the rack, Malinda lost herself in the glorious moment.

After about an hour she had settled on a perfectly fitting number that not only made her feel like a million dollars but had, she carefully noted, had Ray’s face lit up with delight. He also insisted that she buy long white gloves, a white stole and suitable lingerie to go with the dress (the latter both thrilled and intrigued her with his insight and thoughtfulness and the wonder of what else he might have in mind that would make such a purchase interesting to him).

“Ring sets - and I have one particular jeweller who I know manufactures most of their own to one-off designs. Would you like to have a look there first?”

Ring sets – another insightful suggestion on his part when all she had thought about up until then was an engagement ring.

“That would be lovely – do we have time?”

“If I am any judge I would not be surprised if the owner took one look at you, asked one or two questions and presented you with three or four options that you would be unable to resist.”

To her surprise he was right. Even though she had seen a few rings during the morning, and they browsed along the counters while waiting for the suggested sets to be brought out for their consideration, she was totally overwhelmed with the four suggestions he presented and immediately fell in love with one that seemed to have been made just with her in mind. A small size adjustment to the engagement ring later and they left the shop with the set all beautifully boxed and a note that would enable that ring to be cleaned and all of them resized as necessary just before the wedding.

Back at the car Ray took the engagement ring from its box and carefully placed it on her finger. “You might like to get used to the feel on the way home. Then it’s up to you when you choose to put it on tomorrow evening. Under the gloves before you leave or after you arrive and start to mingle. Go for the impact which will give **you** the biggest thrill.”

Back at Brian and Suzanne’s home he helped her inside with the packages and kissed her goodbye, leaving her just enough time to put everything away and settle her racing mind before her sister arrived home.

“How have you filled in your day,” was Suzanne’s immediate question as she came into the house. I tried phoning you this afternoon to see if you were bored but there was no answer.”

“I strolled into town and spent hours just looking around the shops, had some lunch and enjoyed the stress-free feeling that one gets when on holiday and has no timetable to keep to.” She tried to keep it as matter of fact and light as possible, but it was clear that Suzanne was suspicious.

“Brian said that Ray went out during the morning and did not come back until late, and nobody seemed to know where he was. I don’t suppose that you know anything about that.”

“I did see him while I was having lunch, but it looked as if he was engaged in something important.” Well, that was not a lie, she thought, I did see him, and he was engaged, and it was important – just not what I suspect Suzanne is hinting at and Brian seems to have confirmed in her mind, I just hope They don’t start their interrogation again when Brian get home.

Having made it through Monday evening without too much trouble Malinda adjourned to bed after sending Ray a quick text, *Goodnight, thank you for a perfect day, I love you. XXX*

Almost immediately his reply, *the pleasure was all mine! I have never had such a great day ‘at work’. Sweet dreams my love. XXX*

Tuesday and Suzanne had gone to work for the morning but took part of the afternoon off to prepare for the party. No sneaking off to lunch today, but she had already discussed this with Ray, and both knew that it at the party they could be together and then everyone would know and there need be no more hiding.

“Have you got a suitable outfit for tonight?” Suzanne was talking and Malinda’s thoughts were straying, “I gather that it is a very ‘posh’ affair, and everyone is dressed up.”

“I’m sure that what I have is very suitable and will not shame you in any way.” That may have sounded a little curt, so she quickly added, “Both you and Brian have been telling me for weeks that I needed to have something really nice, and I have an outfit that will make you wonder if I am the same sister that you think you know, so stop worrying, everything will be great, trust me.”

They made it through the afternoon without too much fuss and, after an early light snack, they went to get ready for the party. Malinda opted for putting on the ring under her glove but twisting it, so the setting was more to the underside of her finger and not causing a noticeable lump under her glove. When she entered the lounge where Suzanne and Brian were almost ready to depart there was an audible gasp of surprise from them both. She glowed inside with pleasure but looked shocked as she said, “What’s wrong, is this not good enough?”

“On the contrary, I suspect that you will probably be the Belle of the Ball,” was Brian’s response.

Suzanne just looked, fluttering her eyes as if she were trying to see properly, before finally saying. “You look gorgeous. I don’t think I have ever seen you look so beautiful. That outfit is stunning and so very ‘you’ even though it is so different to anything I can ever remember seeing you in. Come on, I just can’t wait to show you off and see everyone’s reactions.”

Malinda just smiled as they departed, thinking to herself, *you ain’t seen nothing yet, sister!*

Ray hired a reception lounge for this annual event and the rooms were decorated for Christmas, including an enormous tree, under which were gift for all the guests. There was a small orchestra playing; there was a large open area where people could mix and mingle; off to one side of a dining area all set up for a banquet and space for dancing. He was waiting at the door greeting the guests as they arrived.

There were already quite a number in the lounge when Brian, Suzanne and Malinda arrived, and Suzanne was quick to notice how his eyes lit up when he saw them walking into the building. He greeted them in the same way as all the other guest who were arriving at the same time but Suzanne, radar finally tuned, was aware of the special smile and surreptitious wink that he gave Malinda and was quick to give her a little nudge of encouragement.

As soon as they were inside Suzanne whispered to Malinda, “He certainly has eyes for you tonight. You should take advantage of that – he would be a terrific catch.”

Malinda just smiled serenely back at her and fluttered her eyelashes. “Do you think so?” This had the effect of frustrating Suzanne and amusing Brian who was watching the interplay between the sisters.

“Leave her alone and stop matchmaking.” He grinned, having also observed the interaction between Ray and Malinda, “She probably knows Ray better than you do – remember you only met him for the first time at the airport on Sunday.”

Still just smiling, Malinda responded, “Thank you Ray. I have been taking lessons from my little sister, the acknowledged expert in these matters, and I think I know what I am doing. If Ray is interested, I’m sure he will say something.”

At that moment Ray came over, “Suzanne, Malinda, come and I will introduce you to some of the other wives. Ray will not know most of them either so now would be a good time to mix for a while and get in the party mood.” He led them over to the nearest group of guests and started to introduce them.

As they moved around Malinda took a moment to whisper to Ray that she was intending removing her gloves when they went into dine and to watch for the reactions then. He whispered back, squeezing her hand, that as she was seated next to him, she could be sure that he was indeed watching – as would Suzanne and Brian, who were seated directly opposite!

A little later Brian moved over beside the orchestra and picked up a microphone. He welcomed all the staff and friends, making the usual sort of Christmas speech from the Boss, and invited everyone to find their places at the banqueting table as dinner was about to be served.

Staff from the lounge assisted everyone to their seats and soon there was a buzz of conversation around the huge table as they waited for the first courses to be served. Malinda was chatting to Ray and another gentleman to her right, while sliding her gloves off her hands. Still not looking, she rotated the ring so that the stone was showing, carrying on talking and glancing out of the corner of her eye across the table.

She heard rather than saw the moment when Suzanne registered. A gasp that was audible across the table. Ray touched her knee, signalled with his eyes and she saw Suzanne nudge Brian.

Instead of immediately letting on that she had heard the gasp, she turned to Ray, quietly saying, “Do you think she noticed which finger it is on? If so, even though she hardly knows anyone here, I think the fire has been lit and the news will be broadcast around the world by morning.” She leaned against him and whispered, “No more need to hide, anything.”

“It looks as if the news has already started to circulate around the table – any minute now you will be told that the boss is engaged.” Sure enough, she could see the message being whispered from guest to guest.

Between courses Suzanne, who had clearly been impatiently waiting for an opportunity, left her seat and come around to where Malinda and Ray were sitting, eyes sparkling, but guns blazing,

“You sneaky devils, why didn’t you say anything? When did this happen? Do Mum and Dad know?”

Malinda, realising that there were going to be an endless string of questions and the next course was being served, cut her short, “It happened yesterday, and we thought that as it was a party tonight it seemed like a great time to make it public. No, I will be calling Mum and Dad later and bringing them up

to date. Now go and enjoy the rest of the party and we will catch up later.” She leaned up to kiss her sister and clasped her hand.

Fortunately, the fact that the dinner was progressing prevented too many other people from coming over, although those in the immediate vicinity were all leaning over and offering congratulations (which was the one thing that both Ray and Malinda noticed Suzanne had not done – Perhaps she was too busy asking questions, or too stunned.)

Immediately after dinner there was the dishing out of presents; dancing; mingling; talking; merry-making and all the good things that go to make a party great. It appeared that Brian had calmed Suzanne down and everyone was enjoying themselves. Malinda managed to get a couple of dances with Ray, who, as host, was obligated to dance with other wives and guests.

Malinda stood with Ray as the guests were saying their goodbyes and there were many congratulations. Brian and Suzanne stayed back until all the other guests had departed and only lounge staff were left.

Suzanne had apparently come to terms with the engagement and was now all congratulations, wanting to see the ring and, very obviously, anxious to find out more about this event that had come upon her out of the blue.

Brian suggested they all go back to his place for a drink and Ray agreed (despite having hoped that he might be able to get some time alone with Malinda).

Over coffee and other stronger things to their various tastes, Suzanne had the opportunity to ask all the questions that she had been aching to get answers to – but only after Malinda had phoned her parents (who were delighted, if a little puzzled how it had all happened without them knowing anything about it) and then opened up the conversation with, “Just remember who is the big sister here.”

Suzanne stopped at that, appearing to think through the ramifications of that statement so Brian stepped in. “I guess this was such a sudden surprise that we would like to catch up on all the usual, normal, things that people want to know. Where, how and when did you meet? There is not much more that is of relevance to anyone else, is there? Everything else is personal to them, right?”

Malinda mouthed a “thank you,” towards Brian before turning to Ray, “You start, and I will come in as necessary.”

“It all started when the plane I was supposed to coming home on was diverted because of that storm. I went the hotel I generally stay at and managed to get, what turned out to be their last available room. At this point I must point out that I have never believed in love at first sight, sparks, seeing someone across a crowded room or any of those romantic clichés. As I was walking away from the hotel desk I glanced across the crowded lobby towards the door and noticed this rather diminutive lady struggling with a suitcase that looked bigger than her.”

At this Suzanne laughed, “That would be Malinda - never been known to travel light.”

“Any way, the doorman was busy, and she looked as if she would either slip over on the icy wet pavement or not be able to get up the step into the hotel lobby. I dropped everything and went to help

her. I did feel a spark as I took the case from her but put it down to static electricity from the wind. When got safely inside I asked if she was going directly to check in and she said that she didn't have a booking, having been unexpectedly diverted because of the storm."

Malinda expanded on this by adding, "There was no cell phone service available, and I could not call ahead. Someone told me that this hotel might have a room, so I went there, only to find that Ray had the last one available."

"I have to admit that, unusually for me, I had immediately taken a liking to this rather bedraggled young lady that I had helped in out of the storm but, regrettable, it was quite clear that it was not love at first sight for her. I suggested what we might share the room I had. This way, I, obviously incorrectly, reasoned that we would both have warmth and shelter and could more comfortable than sleeping in the hotel foyer, which many people were already starting to arrange. I even went so far as to arrange it with the reception."

"At which stage I lost it completely," Malinda confirmed, "I called him everything but a gentleman and was totally unpleasant. Despite all that he carried my case up to the room, proposed a solution that was totally acceptable for one night, then, keeping every promise that he had made, ensured that I had a good night's sleep and, rising before I was even awake, left the room without disturbing me and was waiting in the dining room when I came down to breakfast,"

Between them they explained how one night extended to five and the way in which Ray had arranged to entertain her throughout the days that followed.

"We both soon realised that that spark was for real," Malinda summed up, "We had a lot in common, didn't really disagree enough to bother about on anything, had very similar tastes and attitudes towards life and quickly settled into having each other around. So much so that being apart on Sunday Night had us both convinced that we would like to be together permanently. We are not hormone charged, susceptible teenagers and it is not some sudden 'crush'."

"Having discussed and considered the possibility of Malinda accepting a proposal from me I simply got down on one knee and here we are."

"But that was only yesterday," Suzanne was obviously still struggling with the speed at which all this had taken place, "How did you organise the ring so quickly?"

"As you no doubt noticed, I was not in the office yesterday afternoon. I dragged Malinda, kicking and screaming, out of town to a place I know, and we went shopping for a nice party outfit and rings. Quite simple when people both agree on what they like and go for it."

Brian was grinning, agreeing, and congratulating them both. He had gone through months of wooing Suzanne because that was what she had needed (or thought she wanted) and had at times wished the chase had not been as long. He had already realised that Ray and Malinda probably knew more about each other after one week that he and Suzanne had after many months of being too busy trying impress to get to know one another properly.

Suzanne on the other hand had enjoyed appearing to play hard to get and felt her sister missed out on something exciting. Never-the-less, she had to accept the facts and adored her big sister, so, of course, congratulations were in order.

Finally, Malinda gave Suzanne a meaningful look, "I know I am staying here for three weeks, but I would like you to remember after you got engaged you, much to Mum's consternation, sometimes – then permanently - stayed over at Brian's." Nothing more was said, or needed to be, but Ray's pulse kicked up a notch, especially when it became clear that tonight was to be one of those nights.

As they drove to Ray's home, they decided that the evening had been a success in all ways, despite Suzanne having her doubts. Ray was still happy, but surprised, Malinda had proposed spending some nights at his place but did not say anything apart from matter-of-factly asking if there was anywhere, they should stop on the way home – as they were approaching a late-night convenience store.

Malinda gave him a knowing look and smiled.

He stopped!

Ray's house was everything he had described: Large, rambling, a work in progress but beautiful. It was a home: comfortable, inviting, warm and lived in. He showed her some sketches of planned renovations, and she was delighted to see the thought that had gone into retaining the character of the building while adding all the modern comforts.

The night was long, exquisite and both were exhausted by the time they should have been up and about with Ray heading off for work, but everything else in life was to take a very distant second place until after noon. If that was the first night of the rest of my life then bring on the rest of my life, was Malinda's lingering thought. Ray had been gentle and slow when that was required and demanding when she was desperate for more. When they did surface there was a long sexually charged shower before dressing and finally sitting down to a meal that could have been said to combine breakfast, lunch, and afternoon tea.

As they sat and picked at their food, thoughts on much more exciting things, Ray suggested that they could go to the bank and open a joint account for wedding expenses.

"But we have not even considered setting a date yet."

"No, but I'm sure we don't want to leave it too long and there will probably be things that you see or think of which could be purchased on the spot. Come on; let's call it the first step in the planning process."

Later in the afternoon, before the banks closed but far too late in the day for Ray to even bother thinking about going in to work, they opened an account and Ray deposited what he called a starter amount.

When Malinda saw the size of the deposit she almost fell off her chair. "Weddings don't cost that much!"

"Maybe, maybe not - If there is anything left over, I'm sure we can find a use for it."

“Yes, but that’s about three years of my salary.”

“Well then, you are getting grossly underpaid – we will have to do something about that, too,”

“May I know just what I am marrying? I didn’t realise that you were on the rich-list.”

“Rich list compilers have a theory based on what they believe a person’s businesses and known assets are worth, but they don’t know about my international interests, investments and cash reserves. They are a long way short of my true net worth and they have not even costed in the value of you yet, either.”

“But I’m not worth much. In fact, I might be considered more of a liability than an asset.”

“I don’t believe that - but even if it were true, I would be grateful, as I could do with some tax deductions.”

“Oh, so that’s how you see me – a tax deduction.” And laughing, playfully punched him on the arm.

“Now, seriously, one day we will sit down and discuss finances in great detail – before the wedding, perhaps when we are drawing up our wills, but in the meantime, have you got a wedding planner in mind or is this something we can do ourselves – together?”

“And speaking of together!” With a shy smile she took his proffered hand and they headed back to car and home – to start planning an early summer wedding - or something like that!

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UPGRADED

Annette always made a point of arriving at the airport to check in for a flight as early as possible. She hated standing in long queues of families with overexcited, fractious children and then lining up again at passport control and security only to arrive at the gate lounge tired and still having to wait around in a uncomfortable seat (assuming one was still available), before facing a battle to get on board a flight, in the only seats she could afford – ‘cattle class’- the cheapest, non-refundable, non-changeable deals that were available for the places she wanted to go to. Not that she travelled often – just as often and as far as she could afford! Travel was her hobby – the passion in which she indulged as frequently as her limited finances permitted.

Today she has caught an earlier than necessary *Airporter* bus, but it had been held up on the way because of an accident ahead in the morning traffic. Arriving at the departures area with her maximum two suitcases, (which she was almost certain would turn out to be overweight despite her careful weighing), she struggled to the check-in area only to find the long queue had already formed. Edging her way awkwardly forward as the line moved painfully slowly, she felt herself almost falling asleep. No wonder, she thought. Up early to get a bus from her North Shore apartment into the Auckland central city to catch the airport bus to the Mangere. With the check-in time being three hours before the 13:30 departure of the 10-hour first leg of her 28-hour journey to London – probably with no sleep – she would doubtless be spending the first day of her three-week holiday flaked out on an hotel bed.

When she finally reached the counter, the assistant took her ticket, pulled her booking up on the computer and gave her a beaming smile, saying, “We have a very full flight today and as a frequent flyer, travelling alone, we are offering you a free upgrade to Business Class, right through to London. We will check you in here, route your luggage through to the Business check-in lanes and issue you a lounge pass so that you can go and relax in comfort while you wait for the departure call. A stewardess will advise you when the flight is ready to board and escort you directly to the gate. You will be amongst the first people in the lounge for this flight as the people booked in Business Class will not normally be checking in for at least another half-an- hour, so sit back and relax. Have a great flight.”

Marvelling at her incredible luck, Annette followed the directions that she had been given and navigated her way to the lounge where she found complimentary snacks and drinks, relaxing chairs, magazines, and a calm, quiet atmosphere. So, this is how the other half lives, she thought, I could certainly get used to travelling under these conditions. When it was time to board a stewardess called the people for that flight and led them down a quiet corridor that took them directly to the gate lounge, from where they were first onto the aircraft and were immediately helped to their seats, made comfortable and offered pre-take-off drinks and snacks while they got themselves organised and relaxed. So different to the crush in the other part of the plane where a full load of passengers would be fighting for locker space and trying to get into too small seats, all climbing over each other.

In the Business Class cabin, she was personally welcomed by name and shown to her seat. Every one of the twenty luxurious seats were on an aisle and there was so much space between them she had not noticed a man sit down beside her as she was gazing around at the opulence of this cabin. When she did look around, she hoped that he did not think her rude for not acknowledging him immediately, but there was so much distance between them that it seemed probable that he may not have noticed her either, as he was talking to the steward. Looking around, Annette was glad that she was not one of those travellers who just dressed in floppy tee shirts and sweatpants; always choosing to look a little more presentable. She had no desire to be mistaken for some possible drug carrying back-packer and always used proper suitcases, tidy hand luggage and wore a nice, albeit crush resistant dress or perhaps a smart pantsuit.

Twenty passengers, two stewardesses and the purser to look after them almost exclusively, this was bliss. She lounged back in the luxurious seat, sipping an orange drink, and watching the safety demonstration as the push-back got under way and the engines were started. Peace and relaxation, instead of trying to get comfortable and adjust hand luggage around your feet with the seat belt fastened and the rest of the row of packed-in passengers all trying to do the same. Already she was starting to think about how she might be able to always travel this way in the future. Save harder, go without a few other luxuries, use more of her frequent flyer points on upgrading instead of going further – it might be worth it in the long run!

The man alongside rested his drink on the small table in the front of the wide armrest and spoke, “Hi, I’m Frank Simmons. As we are going to be, as it were, sitting together, I guess it’s nice to know who one’s travelling companion is.”

“Annette Williams”, she quickly smiled to cover her embarrassment from almost being struck dumb from shock. Shock because no one had ever formally introduced themselves to her on a plane before. Shock because she realised when he turned to face her that he was not a middle-aged businessman (as she had imagined from the smart suit she had spotted out of the corner of her eye) but a very attractive guy that she guessed to be about her age – late twenties. An attractive looking, wealthy-looking, fit-looking man with an intriguing, very British, accent which was so different to the Kiwi drawl she was accustomed to hearing. Shock, because her heart did an involuntary skip, of the sort she had only heard about but never personally experienced!

Further talking became difficult for a few minutes as the aircraft engines were wound up to full pitch and the plane surged down the runway and climbed steeply away from Mangere and turned towards the North-West, across the Gulf Islands and Auckland’s northern suburbs, heading towards Singapore. During this time Frank was quietly reflecting on his first impression of this young lady beside him. He had been pleasantly surprised when he had first seen her as she gazed around the cabin. Attractive, young, and vital, absorbed in what he took as being a new experience for her and above all someone who for the first time in memory had made him stop and look – twice – and then wonder at the unaccustomed feeling the sight of her had immediately stirred in him.

As the climb began to level off the seat belt signs were extinguished and the hostesses came around to see if anyone wanted anything, before they served a light lunch in about an hour’s time. Another nice touch, Annette thought, no pressure to eat and drink at prescribed times – if you need anything, at any time, just call.

She took a pot of tea and several dainty little sandwiches and relaxed back. Frank was also ordering something, and she decided against speaking to him in case he thought her too forward.

He, however, turned towards her and asked, "Are you going to Singapore or travelling further afield?"

"I'm only transiting for a couple of hours in Singapore, on-route to London. And you?"

"It looks as if we may be travelling together all the way, as that is my itinerary as well. Are you going to England to work or are you on holiday?"

Something about Frank made her feel comfortable talking to him. A kind face; a friendly tone of voice; eyes that seemed to be telling you that he was paying attention to what you said, as if you really mattered to him and he was not just being polite. Magnetic – to the extent that she felt completely comfortable telling him that it was a three-week holiday, and she was hoping to see a little more of England in addition to the six-day Netherland bus tour that was booked.

"Goodness, you are trying to pack a lot into three weeks. Have you made any specific plans for around the UK?"

I have an hotel booked for the 24 hours following my arrival tomorrow and will then be off to Amsterdam to start that tour. When I get back to London, I again have an hotel for a night and will then go from place to place by train and find accommodation when get there. I don't use back-packer hostels but there is generally a B&B or a small hotel with a single room. I've been around the southern counties and some of those just north of London on previous trips and I hope to get further north – particularly around the Lake District - this time, as there are so many things that I would love to see in and around that area. I will spend my last day back in London as I am flying out late evening. I may get back to London a day early and try to get one of those last minutes tickets to a show. I will have to see how time and costs turn out. Experience has taught me that I have to be flexible if I am going to make the most of the time I have."

Frank was absorbing all this with great interest, intrigued by this intrepid young lady and, not wanting to discourage her chatting, was wondering how he might keep her opening up to him without appearing too inquisitive. He found himself wanting to know more and to get to know this unusual travelling companion who he had found himself seated alongside. "What in particular attracts you to the Lake District?"

"Where do I start? Everything I have seen and heard about the history, the poets and writers that have lived there and the natural beauty of area. The lakes and waters, the wild hills, the wildlife, the unspoilt little villages, it all looks so interesting and exciting. And I hope to be able to find an uncle of my father's, who we believe still lives somewhere in the area." She stopped, a little embarrassed at her impassioned outburst.

"I know the area well and fully understand what you mean. It is however not well-served by rail and much of it does not have a great major road system either, so getting around will not be easy unless you pick up a rental car to get from village to village – and even then, there is so much that you could easily miss."

Apart from sleeping and eating, much of the next twenty-four hours in the quiet luxury of her ultra-comfortable seat was spent talking with Frank, who, without her realising it, had found out all about her love of travel, the places she had visited, what she worked at, her hopes and aspirations – in fact practically everything there was to know about her. He found her intriguing, refreshing and totally unlike any of the many young ladies who he had met and who, for various reasons - all, in his mind, invalid - tended to pursue him. This was the sort of young lady he had been searching for but never seemed to meet.

On the other hand, although Annette thought she had found out all about him, and the conversation had not been entirely one-sided, in fact there was much she did not know. She did know that he lived in Cumbria, he travelled a great deal with his work (even though she did not understand what it was he did), and he lived in a big house and was not married. She had decided that he was a great traveling companion, had a wicked sense of humour, was treated like royalty by the cabin crew (which tended to also rub off onto her), and she had decided that she liked him – a great deal!

Towards the end of the flight into London Frank said, "I'll give you my card when we get organised to disembark. I'd like to help you get to see as much as possible of the Lake District as one can in the short time you have available, and I will be there when you are planning to visit. Please contact me when you get back from Holland and I will have sorted out a suggested itinerary for you to consider."

Annette started to protest but Frank insisted, "I have thoroughly enjoyed your company on this trip. In return I should like to ensure that you get as much as possible from your visit and since I am a position to help, I would consider it a privilege to be of some assistance. Do please contact me as soon as you get back to London so that I can pass on some suggestions,"

Taking his card without looking at it too closely, they said their goodbyes and went their separate ways. Frank had considered offering her a ride to her hotel but decided against it, as he had one piece of personal information that he had decided he was not ready to share just yet. Yes, he had certainly felt a sudden and unaccustomed stirring when they had first seen each other, and it had not gone away. He would like to know if Annette had felt the same about him. He thought she might have, by the way she opened up and talked, but he was not going to push his luck until he knew a bit more and she had had time to sort out her feelings. He would be waiting for her call.

After checking in to her hotel, Annette organised her belongings ready for the Dutch tour, having arranged to leave one suitcase in storage at the hotel for a week and travelling with just the necessities in one smaller case. The following morning, she set off on that leg of her journey, and six days later, tired but excited from all that she had done and seen, she arrived back at the hotel in readiness for the next stage of her holiday. She was looking forward to contacting Frank. He had struck her as being the sort of person she would like to get to know better, and that was unusual for her. She did not often get that feeling about men, but Frank had awoken thoughts that she had not experienced to any great degree before and was cautiously keen to see if they might continue outside the confined space of the plane.

Sitting down to relax before again reorganising her cases, she took out the card that Frank had written on and studied it carefully for the first time:

But Frank to you, Annette, and do, please, call me, (and his personal number).

Turning it over, puzzled by this hand-written note, she found that it was on the reverse of his formal card:

Viscount Simmons: followed by his business contact details...

Annette sat staring the card. Frank was not just Mr Frank Simmons; he was Viscount Simmons. Diving for her laptop she quickly searched for 'Viscount' to see just what that meant in the pecking order. Shocked at what she found about the levels of the Peerage, she then went looking for Viscount Simmons and soon realised that he was the son of an Earl and would presumably one day take on his father's title. And that one should call him 'Lord'.

How could she possibly simply telephone and speak to Frank in the way she had been on the plane. But then he had insisted and given her his card with his private number plus that hand-written note. It would be the height of rudeness to not call. And what if he had made some arrangements for her and she didn't call. Worse still if she did not call him and then he saw her in her travels! Goodness, what a dilemma – how should she address him on the phone? Looking back at the laptop she quickly realised that she could hardly use the prescribed form of address after the way they had been talking only a week ago – especially since he has specifically said not to. Besides, she had been thinking a lot about Frank during the past week and looking forward to meeting up again – why should she let this make any difference?

Hesitating, while digesting all this and trying to collect her thoughts before calling him, she reflected on her mother's comments when she had told her about the flight and the nice young man she had met on the plane and his offer to help her with exploring the Lake District. *Please be careful – you don't really know anything about him.* Well, she was right there – she certainly had no idea that he was nobility!

Plucking up courage, she dialled his number and was taken by surprise when he answered after just one ring, "Simmons."

"Ah, hello, this is Annette. You may recall that we..."

But, before she could finish, he said, "Annette! I have been hoping that you would call this evening as I have sorted out some things - subject of course to your approval - and, if you are agreeable, we could start as early as tomorrow if that fits in with your plans." *Did I sound too anxious or 'pushy'? Did it sound as if I had been sitting waiting for her to call – hopping all week that she would? Even hearing her voice over the 'phone sent those shocks down my spine.*

"I was just about to start looking for train timetables and work out which station the trains left from and how to get there." *Hang on a minute – he said WE could start as early as tomorrow.*

"Don't get too concerned about details like that. There are good high-speed trains to Lancaster, just south of the area, from where it is easy to get around. I'm in London and was thinking I may catch the train that leaves Euston around 9:30. It gets into Lancaster just before lunch time. Could you be ready to leave the hotel at 9 am or is that too early."

So, he **was** talking about WE. How can he know that is exactly what I want? “No, that is not too early. The bus tour around Holland was leaving the hotels at 7 am. Do I have to give the taxi driver any special instructions about which entrance to the station I need to use?”

“There will be a car waiting for you at the hotel entrance at 9 am. And don’t worry about trying to leave any luggage in London; there is plenty of room to bring everything.”

Calm yourself Annette, those butterflies in your stomach are telling you this is good. “Are you sure? It does seem to be a lot of bother to go to.”

“Perfectly sure! Do not give it a second thought. Now, have you had dinner?”

“Not yet; I was going to go down after ‘phoning you, to see what I could find.” Thinking it was probably no use asking if he knew of any cheap restaurants because he would certainly not know about things like that.

“If you’re not too tired, would you like to accompany me to somewhere quiet and not too formal? I could call for you in, say, half-an-hour. I know a lot of interesting little places around London. No need to get dressed up – smart casual and comfortable. Which hotel are you at and I will meet you in the foyer?”

Thinking it would probably very bad manners to refuse, besides being intrigued and flattered by this attention from such an exulted personage, and really wanting to anyway, she agreed to meet as suggested. *Could this be a sort of, date?*

Half-an-hour later Annette found herself sitting alongside a Viscount (who seemed even more handsome than she recalled), in the back of the biggest car she could remember having seen, chauffeur driven around little streets that appeared far too narrow, to a cosy little restaurant which she would never have found on her own (and even if she had, would have hesitated to enter), where they welcomed like family friends and personally seated at a quiet table, by the owner, who appeared to be on first name terms with Frank.

By way of explanation Frank said, “Back in my student days we always managed to find the most cosy, welcoming, eating places with the best food and this is one of the finest. The owner remembers everyone, and we are always welcomed back. I hope you will like it.”

Much, much, later, after one of the best meals she had ever eaten, in the most congenial of company, they went back to the car (that had mysteriously re-appeared from somewhere) and were driven back to the hotel. They had talked about everything and nothing. They had drunk excellent wine, finished with coffee and liquors, said hearty farewells to the owner and his staff, and sat in comfortable silence during the short ride to her hotel.

The doorman opened the car door for her, and, with a cheery, ‘Thank you so much, good night, see you at 9 am’, they parted. It was not until she was back in her room that Annette realised that she had not even thought about the fact that she had been the partner of a (extraordinarily charming) member of the Peerage and that, apart from the excellent restaurant service and the car, it had been like going out with a good friend from home. No, it had been better, and that had a great deal to do

with the fact that she had never before been accompanied by such a charming, handsome, attentive, man! A man who she could rapidly see herself becoming **very** attached to!

Sitting thinking about the evening, the things that had impressed her most were his ability and willingness to talk to anyone as an equal, (having always had the impression that persons of his social standing might be too superior to associate with 'lesser beings' – like her), and his impeccable manners, that were in no way forced. Breeding, she supposed, plus the right schools and mixing with people of similar backgrounds from birth, probably made it second nature. But it all combined to make time spent in his company so pleasant. Pleasant enough to seriously dream about...

Promptly at 9am in the morning Annette was not surprised to see the big, black, Daimler limousine, with Frank, waiting at her hotel and within minutes they were at Euston station boarding their train. Frank had already purchased the train tickets and refused to accept payment from Annette on the basis that, as he had organised it, he was not expecting her to contribute. Although this made Annette feel a little awkward, she was secretly pleased because she had already looked at the difference in cost between first class on a fast train and what she would normally be expecting to pay!

Frank was again the consummate travelling companion, comfortably chatting, pointing out things of interest as the train sped along and having light refreshments appear around halfway through the journey. Oh, that all travel could be like this. (*Then, maybe it can!*)

On arrival in Lancaster at Noon, there was another one of those big, black cars waiting for them as they left the station. "It's about an hour's drive to Windermere. Would you like some lunch and/or a look around at some of the sights here before we drive on, or is it better that we go straight there? There is no particular time-table so we can do whatever suits you."

"Well, I guess that I should at least try and arrange accommodation for the night, before it gets too late, and sort out what I am going to do tomorrow, so would it be better to go straight on?"

"Might I suggest that we go to a nice little café that I know and have a little something while I explain a few things that I may have glossed over?" At Annette's cautious nod he instructed the driver.

Meanwhile Annette was quietly starting to panic - just a little. The butterflies had gone and been replaced by a sinking feeling. What was going on – was she being kidnapped – had her mother been right in warning her to be careful – had she been too easily taken in by this stranger's manner? She thought of jumping out of the car and running, but that would have meant losing all her luggage and more than likely injuring herself. No, not an option!

She was still thinking along these lines when they stopped outside a rather charming little tea shop of the sort that one reads about in century-old books and can rarely find in real life.

Inside, he, of course, knew the elderly lady owner, to whom he introduced Annette. They were fussed over as if they were royalty (which she supposed he was, in a way), with the lady saying to Annette as they left that it was always a pleasure to have his Lordship, visit them – he was such a nice man." Annette could almost see Frank squirm with embarrassment. (*But it did help to serve to confirm that he was who he said he was and it as not some sort of a trap to kidnap her off to – who knows where. Well, so she hoped.*)

During the lunch, or at least in the intervals when they were actually left alone, Frank had explained what he had meant when he said he had arranged a few things for her – all subject to her approval. In essence, it was centred on her staying at his manor house and choosing from a wide selection of available activities each day for almost two weeks. Some were just spending the day touring around, several involved off-road excursions and even hiking, riding or taking an ATV to places of interest. All the different things she had mentioned when they were on the plane had been included and more – even some excursions on several of the lakes. Finally, he asked if there was any particular show she wanted to see back in London, so that he could arrange for tickets.

To top it all off, just as she was starting to wonder what all this was going to cost her and how she could explain that she could not possibly afford all the things he was suggesting, he finished by saying that, “Naturally, you will be doing this as my guest,” then, brushing aside the objection that he could see forming on her lips. “I often get asked to do something like this for some visiting dignitary who is not particularly interested and probably does not have the stamina to enjoy half of the possible options. For someone with your genuine interest and enthusiasm it will be a rare privilege to be able to show you around my home territory. Oh, while I remember, what is the name of that relative you were hoping to find? I think I might be able to help you there.”

“This is all so unexpected that it feels like I am dreaming. How could I possibly turn down such a generous offer? But it all seems like such an imposition on you in time and, well, in all respects. Are you absolutely certain that I am not going to be a bother?”

“Absolutely! I assure you, am looking forward to this fortnight. Please, no more thoughts of being a bother, as you put it. It will be my privilege.” *Besides, although she may well be getting a holiday she did not expect, I get to spend more time in her company and, if she shares my feelings, who knows where a two-week vacation may lead to.*

After a drive around some of the places of interest in Lancaster they headed for Frank’s home, where Annette was introduced to several staff members and shown to her rooms. Yes rooms! The door looked just like any other door off the ornate passageway, but led to not one bedroom, but a very pleasant little lounge off which there was a beautiful bedroom, an on-suite bathroom, a walk-through wardrobe / dressing room and a small alcove where one could make tea or coffee or even a light snack, and which included a small desk all set up to plug in a computer – including an internet connection. Better than most hotel suites.

Make yourself at home and get settled in. Feel free to have a look around anywhere. I am going to get the finding of your great uncle under way. Dinner will be at 7:30 but there is no need to dress up as there will just be the two of us. I will be in my office for a while, so if you need anything just push that bell and one of our staff will help you or will be able to show you where to find me.

Standing looking around, unpacking, and getting settled in, as he had put it, Annette felt like she was in a beautiful dream – especially when a young woman knocked and asked if there was anything that needed washing or ironing when she unpacked. All this luxury – even for only a couple of weeks – was more than she had ever imagined in all her many dreams about holidays. And Frank – that charming, handsome – she ran out of adjectives and just let the feelings take over...

To Annette the next ten days were like a non-stop ‘complete immersion’ course in Cumbria. On fine days they did the outdoors stuff. On less clement days they visited museums, preserved houses of interest, historic sites, numerous little tea shops and cosy restaurants, met local historians and even some rather famous people. Frank was the perfect guide; he knew the area like the back of his hand; he knew all the little places that most tourists would never find; he was known and welcomed everywhere they went, and she was welcomed into his world like a member of the family. While expecting to be overawed by his parents, with whom they dined on several occasions at their own, huge, manor house, she found them to be just like their son – down to earth, proud of their home county and above all, welcoming and (after the initial shock of coming face to face with this level of nobility) not at all intimidating. Especially as, when she was first being introduced and had started to address them in the correct manner, they had both immediately said, “Enough of that, when we are being family, we prefer real names.”

(Although, what she did not know, was that they were most impressed by the fact that she had in fact known the correct way to address them and had started to do so.)

Her Great Uncle had been located and she enjoyed a pleasant afternoon with him and his wife, swapping photographs and stories of family and filling in missing links in their family tree.

During their excursions Frank had continued to be impressed with her zest for life, her uninhibited delight in all the things that they did and the beauty and charm that seemed to radiate from her towards everyone that she met. He was, in a word, smitten! Oh yes, seriously smitten... Trekking on horseback over hills that rarely saw people – least of all tourists: trail biking over tracks that led to parts of his estate that were usually only seen by shepherds: hiking alongside quiet lakes that the average tourist never had the opportunity to get to – never mind explore, she had such a love of life and nature, and was so accomplished in these outdoors pursuits that he loved. He had never before met a lady who so enthusiastically shared his passions for these things.

His parents, too (although nothing had been said to Frank), had found her charming and were quietly delighted that Frank looked as if he might finally have met someone that he truly liked – and, it appeared, possibly even loved – and who could, if he played his cards right, easily fill the role of a new Viscountess and, in due course, be a very suitable successor to the position of Countess.

Totally unaware of all this, Annette was finding her time with Frank to be absolute bliss. His apparent anticipation of her every wish and his charm, had made her feel so very appreciated as a person. She also had not failed to notice how fit he was when they were tramping around the hills, how he filled out clothes to perfection regardless of what he happened to be wearing and how her body responded to his touch when he took her hand to assist her on stairs, up hills or in and out of cars.

Then there all the little things about his manners that she found so refreshing. Things that made her feel like a lady; respected; even ‘wanted’. Things that created deep down inside feelings she had never experienced. Try as she might to calm these feelings – because she knew the holiday and the dream must end – her body simply refused to co-operate, and every moment with Frank had her emotions in turmoil. All her waking hours and all her dreams were filled with Frank.

As the time to go back up to London loomed, Annette started to consider booking an hotel and making travel arrangements. When she asked Frank about the best places to organise these, his answer was (as she was almost starting to expect), "Leave it to me. When would you like to go?"

"Frank, you have done so much for me – I can't let you go on like this. How could I ever repay your kindness?"

Fearing that perhaps she had not yet understood the way he felt about her, he hastened to add, "Perhaps I have been a little too backward in explain why I have been doing this. True, I am always happy to show people around this area. But when I met you on the plane, something caused a spark that made me want to get to know you better and hopefully to have you get to know and understand me. I did not want to immediately scare you off, so I did not tell you who I was. I hoped, and still hope, that you might like my company and we could get to know each other better."

Sensing where this might be leading, Annette, a little unwillingly, replied, "Frank, I have loved everything you have done for me and I have to admit that from almost before we had completed the Auckland to Singapore leg of that flight, I have had feelings for you that I have never experienced before. But, realistically, I am a small-town New Zealand girl – a lowly accountant – a nobody in the great scheme of things. You are an exalted member of the British Peerage – the gentry – with history, breeding, responsibilities way beyond my understanding, and duties to your forebears and successors, and, it seems, to half the population of Cumbria. I would never be accepted in your society, and you would suffer as a result." Saying this made her feel like bursting into tears and running, but something in Frank's look made her just stand frozen to the spot. He looked as if he completely understood what she was saying. As if he knew what she must be feeling and even as if he might have been expecting her to feel that way and had something to say that would make all her fears vanish.

"I think, no, I **know**, that you are wrong. At the highest level of Royalty marriage outside of the old class structure has been welcomed and, indeed, encouraged. My Father was, is still, in trade. I am in trade. My mother is the daughter of a man of trade who was later in life knighted for his contribution to his field of enterprise. There is no law, of lore, that prevents me from marrying outside of the, so called, gentry. More importantly, you have been accepted, without question, locally, and that in itself is no mean feat. It often takes years for locals to accept outsiders, and some are never fully integrated. And they would not accept you just because you are with me. I would soon know if you were considered wrong for the area. Not that it is necessary, but I have not mentioned this to my parents, and yet they have seen how I feel about you and have said outright that they would welcome you into the family at any time if I went down that path and you were to accept me. The ultimate choice is, of course, yours. I don't seek any immediate answers from you – just a promise to let us see where this leads us. Just keep an open mind and know that I would like to explore the possibilities further. Please."

At that, Frank took Annette into his embrace and, after a long, exploring, kiss, she relaxed into his arms with a contented sigh, saying, "I am more than happy to see where this may lead. I just hope everyone else is as understanding as your parents. But, despite my initial feelings, we have only known each other for a few short weeks and, although we are not foolish teenagers, is that really long enough to be able to make the sort of commitments you are intimating?" Despite the logical comments she was making, Annette could feel herself melting into his embrace with her insides reacting in delightful ways to the warmth of his arms and the hardness of his body pressing against her.

“We sat together on the plane for nearly 30 hours – technically one could say that we slept together - we have probably spent more time together in the last few weeks and talked more and experienced more than many couples – if you will excuse the term – have done in twelve months. I think we might say we know each other very well, despite our short association. For my part I know exactly how I feel about you. But enough about me. On a wider front I can tell from their reactions that my parents have also fallen in love with you, and I am of course wondering, what about your parents. What do they know about me?”

“I told them I had met this nice young man on the flight over and that we were going to meet up again. My Mother warned me to be careful because I did not know anything about you. Since coming up here all I have said is that I am staying in a nice house and am very busy seeing more than I had ever hoped to see and having a great time. I thought if mentioned anything else they would worry that I was going to get hurt.”

“And would you have been hurt if we had just gone our separate ways when we first arrived in London, or at the end of your holiday here?”

“Without a doubt, even though I never had any expectations, but being with you for even that short time made it seem worthwhile. To be quite honest, I **was** hurting when we parted at the airport. But, and you must know this, I was so shocked and, well, cross with you when I finally got around to looking properly at the card you gave me, I nearly did not call you. I took the card out of my handbag and only looked at the hand-written note and it seemed odd that you had written ‘*But to you, Frank*’. If you had not put that I would probably not have turned the card over to try and understand what you meant. Imagine my thoughts when I discovered your real title was not plain Mr Simmons. I did not know how to address you and it felt wrong to just say Frank. I had spent a week dreaming about this nice man and then suddenly discovered that he was so out of my league that all my dreams had been in vain. It was humiliating, and I was really hurt at that point.”

“I’m so sorry, that was all my fault, and I only did it because I did not want to scare you off before we had the chance of meeting up again.” He squeezed her tighter in his arms and she revelled in the warmth and comfort of that embrace. “I get a great number of people – including ones you might call eligible young ladies – trying to get to know me simply because of my title and what that acquaintance could bring to them. You had no idea who I was, and I found talking with you to be so fresh and exciting that I wanted to get to know you better. I find you exciting, and charming, and much, much more. I believe that there is a spark between us, and I think that you, underneath all your adorable but groundless concerns, might feel the same?” It was a question but Annette, too overcome to give a proper verbal answer, simply nodded, and held him closer.

Later, sitting close together and enjoying mugs of steaming hot chocolate, he again broached the subject of her leaving, this time, in a quite different manner.

“Today is Sunday. We fly out on Thursday evening, and I have booked seats for one of the shows that you wanted to see for Wednesday night.”

Annette suddenly registered the **WE** fly out. There was that ‘we’, again – could that mean what it has last time he had used the term? Those butterflies started flitting around her overheating body. “What do you mean, WE? What else have you not told me?”

“Oh, it slipped out unintentionally. I was planning that as a surprise. I thought that I should chaperone you home in case you happened to be sitting beside some other young man and got talking and he managed to outclass me and steal you away.” He squeezed her hand and the warmth spread to her very core.

“Not much chance of that where I am sitting. You should know that I was only in Business Class on that flight because the plane was full, and I was ‘bumped up’ because I was a frequent flyer travelling alone. No one has ever spoken more than a few words to me before on a flight.”

“Lucky me and more fool them, I say. Anyway, we are travelling business again. Even if you had not seen fit to give me a chance, I had already used up a few of my tens of thousands of unused Frequent Flyer miles on having you upgraded. For three reasons: you deserve the comfort that I could see you were enjoying on the flight over (I could tell it was your first time in Business Class and you were genuinely enjoying it) and I figured that you could use the extra baggage allowance.” He grinned. “There are certain benefits of belonging to this “privileged class” – people tend to want to help, even when perhaps they should not. The airline was happy to change your unchangeable ticket when they knew who was calling.”

“You said three reasons”. She held her breath – the butterflies flew faster.

“Ah, yes, well I sort of anticipated your reactions about only having known each other for a short time and also your misgivings about my background, so I figured that getting to know each other better, on your home turf, where I am not known by all and sundry, might be beneficial to the cause, as one might say.”

She just looked at him aghast, “I’m speechless. How does one even start to respond to reasoning like that? Well, I suppose we must get back to more mundane things like when to go up to London. Seeing as you are clearly intent on being an integral part of this, what day suits you best; tomorrow or Tuesday?” *Oh dear, did that sound too terse? I want this to work but...*

“Is there anything else that you would like to see or do around here?”

“I could spend a year here and still not see everything. Thinking about it, and having some ideas now about how you operate, I am guessing that the seats to the show are not up in the ‘gods’ where I would be sitting in jeans and an all-concealing overcoat. I suppose I should be thinking about looking round for something more suitable, but inexpensive, to wear. Perhaps I should go up on Monday so that I will have time to look around and get any alterations done.”

Something about the look on Frank’s face made her stop. “From that look, I am wondering what you have done now.”

“I guessed that you would not have brought anything like that with you, so I was very naughty and had your housemaid check. When she confirmed that there was nothing of that nature in your wardrobe, I had her check the sizes on your clothes, and I may just have arranged with a place that I know of to have some items looked out for you to select from on either Tuesday or Wednesday. Any alterations required can be done on the spot. I hope you don’t mind too much.”

“What am I to do with you, Frank?”

“I have a few interesting suggestions if you are short on ideas!”

The super-hot feeling spread through her again, “I’m sure you have, and I would rather like to hear them, but right now I need to concentrate on just what all this means to my luggage; my bank account; my parents; my sanity!”

“Relax; it’s all about enjoying the ride. You are not paying for anything because I have dropped this on you, and it is my place to pay. As far as the service goes, you could say it is all part of the privilege ‘thing’, but it goes much further than that. The shops want to be able to say I had Lord X in today arranging for –whatever it is. It’s good for their business. And they will tell all their customers or potential customers and they will want to buy from there as well. They may give what might appear like big discounts, but you be assured that they will still be making outlandish profits and the difference in price will be charged to advertising. You are an accountant – work it out! In the meantime, you get to receive service as you may never have known it. It’s a win all around.

As for the luggage, there will not be any excess to pay –that I CAN guarantee. And as for you personally, you get to feel good, enjoy the experience, get exactly what you want and not have to worry about anything. Your parents are another matter. I don’t know them. But if my parents are anything to go by, pleased for you, would be what they will feel – at least when they have had the change to think about it. All I am thinking about is making sure that YOU get what you would like by enabling you to see and experience the sorts of choices that are out there.”

“You will not need an hotel as the family have a nice little apartment in Mayfair – where you will have your own rooms. If you feel that is a step too far, too soon, then of course you may have an hotel room. It’s all your choice and I will not make you feel pressured in any way. All I insist upon is, once you have made the choices, all of them, I will be paying. Not to pressure you; not to make you feel obligated; not to impress you, but because it gives me enormous pleasure to do so and I very much like seeing you happy too.”

“What times do the trains go up to London?” By now all Annette could register was a feeling of being out-manuevered and losing control. She was not sure whether she could cope, or if she was happy with the situation. While feeling so very right, it also felt totally wrong. But, deep, deep down she was feeling like just letting go and falling in with whatever Frank’s plans might bring – they all seemed to be heading in the direction that her body was desperately trying to tell her far too logical brain, was really what she wanted.

“The most convenient in terms of departure time is at 12:30 pm. No need to rush out early and one still gets into Euston by mid-afternoon.”

“Then, if it’s okay, shall we go on Monday afternoon? That will give me time to get something done with my hair as well. Hiking around the hills has done nothing to make it look nice.” She paused, looking at Frank, “Oh no, you have thought of that too. This is fast becoming too much.” *Too much like I could enjoy being treated like this for ever. Oh, still my foolish heart.*

“No, I can’t take the credit for that. Mother suggested that if you were going out you would probably want to get your hair done and suggested a stylist that would take you at a moment’s notice. Actually, she suggested it when I asked her about the best place to shop for a dress and accessories.

Okay, Monday afternoon it is. I will arrange for tickets and Richard to drive us to Lancaster and let the building supervisor know to expect us at the apartment during the afternoon. In the morning I will call the boutique to arrange for a showing on Tuesday sometime and the stylist on Wednesday. Would you like to speak to them when I call? I have very little knowledge about these things!”

“Yes, please. Otherwise I can see myself being overcome and making a complete fool of myself. This is all so far out of my league.”

“Oh, and Mother would like you to select a few pieces of the estate jewellery to wear on Wednesday night. It’s one of those things that are expected. People like to be able to see that sort of thing, so I am told. She will help you. There is a large choice, and we have a secure safe in the apartment for after. She has asked us over for a meal tonight, perhaps you can do that before dinner. In the meantime, is there anything else you would like to do?”

“I think I would like to have a long soak in a hot bath in the hope that I can clear my whirling brain. It is on the verge of spinning out of control because of overload!”

“Sound like a good idea. I’ll be thinking of you!” There was that wicked grin again!

It was perhaps not the most overtly sexual thing he had done or said since they met – but Annette was thrilled, inside. On the outside she could not help but blush as she registered what Frank was saying and those butterflies were all out of control again!

As she soaked in the bath it was that comment which was fixed in her mind –and she smiled!

By Monday morning hints of concern had again started to invade Annette’s thoughts. Looking at the huge collection of priceless heirloom jewellery on Sunday evening proved to be an experience of the sort that she had never in her wildest dreams contemplated. Choosing was impossible and she relied entirely on the guidance of the Countess (for that was still the only way she could comfortably envisage her). Then, as they were chauffeured to the train station and they again sat in the first-class carriage, the feelings of unreality returned. Climbing through the hills, driving around back country lanes, and discovering quaint little tea rooms had a reality that she was at least familiar with (albeit not previously in the company of such a charming man), whereas this sort of luxury was, still, way out of her comfort zone. But she had to admit, very nice – for a change.

The Mayfair apartment was all luxury and when she thought back to the tiny apartment that she had lived in for three years while at University she had to wonder how the two totally different dwellings could be covered by the same title.

Tuesday’s several hours at the boutique continued the dream-like unreality of her situation as she was shown a range of gowns and accessories by models and then tried on a selection until they settled on the one everyone else felt most suitable – and she felt she could be comfortable wearing. Then of course there were the absolutely necessary accessories and undergarments. She was by this time beyond trying to make a decision – everything was, in her eyes, perfect. Normally she would have looked at a few items, perhaps tried on a couple, selected one and taken it home to make any alterations required. This time every detail was checked, and double checked. The final selection was tucked and pinned for tiny alterations that she would not have considered necessary, and they would have been done while she waited – except that she had found it necessary to escape the fawning

attention for a few minutes and creep un-noticed into a small coffee shop to unwind with something hot, sweet and decadent. And to think about Frank!

Wednesday's visit to the stylist to have her hair (her nails, her eyebrows, her face, and her makeup) done was an experience in pure, exquisite, pampering which Annette enjoyed, even though she still felt that it was not her receiving all that attention – again, more like an 'out of body' sequence from a beautiful dream.

And then the show, one that she had dreamed of seeing but never thought that she would ever be able to get a seat that she could afford. Feeling like a Princess seated in a private box; introduced to other dignitaries; getting to meet with some of the stars; joining several other titled couples afterwards for supper; finally arriving back at the apartment elated but physically exhausted.

Underneath all the excitement and glamour, was the worrying thought that, in reality, she was just another *Elisa Doolittle*. A feeling that another of those deep, passionate, body melting kisses drove away for the moment, but which returned when she was alone in the quiet of her room.

Usually an early riser, Annette slept through until after 9am on Thursday. Waking with a start from yet another beautifully erotic dream, she looked at the bedside clock, leaped out of bed, found her robe, and went looking for Frank.

She found him sitting in the reception room reading the morning papers. Rising as she came in, his smile quickly turned to a worried frown when he saw how drawn she looked.

"Are you all right?" his voice concerned, as he took her hands and gazed into her sad eyes.

"Yes, I think I woke up too quickly and just rushed down thinking I might have slept in too late and would be causing a problem." *I can't tell him the real reason.*

Although her answer did not convince him, he let the matter slide with a change of subject. "Would you like some breakfast? We have plenty of time to fill in before even thinking about getting to the airport. Our car will collect us at 4 pm. Would you like to do anything today?" He had taken her into his arms again and despite the lingering reservations, she could not help but be drawn into their comforting feel.

Annette paused before answering – trying to put into words what she was feeling but did not want to say. "Just something light for breakfast and then I need to shower and dress." Another long pause, then, "Can we do something ordinary today, please? The sort of thing ordinary people, like me, do; anonymously; without any special treatment. Something which will enable me to get grounded and prepared to re-join the world I belong in." *But that am fast wishing that I didn't.*

She stalled, unable to say what was really on her mind. Not willing to let Frank down by again trying to explain that she did not belong in his world. She had loved the time in Cumbria; she had felt good about where their short relationship appeared to be going; and even the special attention she had been privileged to receive because of him while they toured around had been fine. But since Sunday night everything had overwhelmed her to the extent that she doubted her ability to cope with that sort of life in the longer term. Her feelings and opinions of Frank and his family had not altered but she could not see how their sort of life could be hers.

“Travel by tube to somewhere where an ordinary tourist goes – I don’t know, just a walk perhaps.”

Sensing what was probably behind the requests, Frank attempted to keep the situation as light as possible. “Let’s go and rustle up some breakfast together and then we can see what there is out there to keep us out of the limelight for the rest of the day.” Taking her hands again he looked deeply into her eyes, and seeing doubt, but no resistance, he lent forward and gently kissed her on the forehead before leading her off to the kitchen.

As soon as Annette went upstairs to shower and dress, Frank took the papers he had been reading and slipped them into his briefcase. Each paper had an article in the social columns - all along the same general lines; *Spotted last night at XXX, Viscount Simmons with a stunning but unknown young lady, looking every inch the loving couple. Lord Simmons, who is rarely seen out, was in the charming company of an as yet unidentified young lady, looking like he may well have found the perfect Viscountess to match that beautiful part of the country from which he comes. We have not yet been able to find out exactly who the exquisite young lady is who has clearly charmed one of the most eligible bachelors in the country. None of our face-fit computers has yet come up with a name, but Lord Simmons is known to travel extensively abroad and the talk around the office is that she may be from overseas -. One of the guests at the after show gathering, has told us simply that she was introduced as Annette and that she was a charming, and clearly learned addition to the evening. She felt from her international accent that she may be foreign. Watch this space!*

In each paper there was more along the same theme – with photographs – some in colour. The fashion writers had been called in to pass (fortunately very favourable) judgement of her clothes. Society editors were impressed, intrigued, and wanted more and from his experience, within a few days at the most, they would know who she was and have great pleasure in announcing it to the world. He was sure that was not she wanted to see at this precise moment in time. Maybe later, when she feels more in control of her emotions, but for the moment he thought it would be too much for her to cope with.

The spent a few hours being ‘typical overseas tourists’ – or at least as far as that was possible - walking around places that tourists went but that were not frequented so much by locals, especially those who were likely to recognise them. Lunch was in a sandwich bar that appeared to be patronised only by local office workers. Annette felt that Frank made a better job than she did at blending in because she had been reluctant to spoil her beautiful hairdo by dragging on a beanie. Frank noticed several girls taking second looks at her and probably wondering if she was the lady that they had seen in the papers that morning.

By early afternoon they were back in the apartment and readying themselves for the journey back to Auckland.

Throughout the drive to Heathrow, the check-in, and the boarding process, Annette was subdued, and Frank was not sure if it was the end of the holiday or the deeper fears that she had intimated she held concerning her ability to fit in with the sort of life that he led.

The lady at the check-in had taken Frank’s ticket, commented that the booking showed two people travelling, acknowledged Annette, and done a double take. Frank suspected that she recognised

her from the newspapers and had made a note of her name to pass on to some columnist, along with the information of where she was travelling and her passport nationality. He just hoped that the news did not beat them to New Zealand.

Once their 8 pm departure flight was under way, dinner was served and both of them settled down to get some sleep.

Annette was restless – debating if she was prepared to give up on any chance with Frank because of her feeling of what, she had to admit to herself, was personal inadequacy and being undeserving of such a place in society.

Frank was restless – debating whether he should just show the newspaper articles to Annette so that she could see what a great hit she was, in what had been her début outing, or if that would scare her off even more. Finally, he decided to produce the papers during their short stop-over in Singapore. At least then she would have seen them from him and not stumbled upon them herself and found him wanting for keeping them hidden.

Some hours later Annette roused and noticed that Frank was working on his laptop. Being at the wrong angle to see what he was doing – and not wanting to interfere with his work -she squinted through sleep-filled eyes to try and read the flickering TV screen at her feet that was showing the flight tracking information. Frank noticed what she was doing and whispered, “Somewhere to the west of India, I think. Still some hours to go, would you like a drink or something to eat?”

Stretching and attempting to sit up, Annette found an attentive hostess immediately at her side assisting her to adjust her seat. In the hazy back of her mind she again found herself wishing that travel was always like this. Then it hit her. It could be, IF. If she were to overcome her fears – if Frank was really that interested in her – if she were to let herself learn to accept and embrace this kind of lifestyle. Was she being stupid by worrying that she was not worthy of his style of living?

She smiled appreciatively at the hostess, “May I please have an Earl Grey tea?”

“Would you like something to eat with that? We have some club sandwiches, or savouries’, or something more substantial perhaps.” Oh, what bliss, she thought – choices at this time of the night.

“Would it be alright if I had a savoury and a sandwich?”

“Of course, Miss Williamson, I will be right back.” And five minutes later she was back with a lovely, warm, savoury and a beautiful fresh sandwich, served on proper crockery, plus a little pot of tea, all delivered on a silver tray.

“Thank you so much.”

I will never, ever, travel back there in economy again, come what may. Annette promised herself. Why would anyone willingly give up this? But then, why would I give up Frank? It's much the same really.

“You are looking a little brighter,” Frank’s concern was evident, “Has the sleep helped?”

“Yes, when I finally settled, I must have gone into a deep sleep. I don’t usually do that when travelling. The last few days must have got me down more than I realised.”

Franks had been noticing the looks that the cabin crew had been giving Annette and realised that she had been identified. There were papers on the plane and sooner or later someone was going to say something. Better do something about that now. “Are you up to some interesting news?” he asked.

Cautiously, “Ah, what sort of interesting would that be?”

“That would depend upon how you read it. Actually, it is extraordinarily good news when you understand the people behind it and the context in which it has been written. You may not immediately see it that way, I fear, but I can assure you that it is better than I have ever seen before, and I am now sure that tomorrow’s will be even better.”

“Now you are going to have to show me –or tell me – whatever it is! But I warn you, if you are having me on, I will not be responsible for what I may do to you – even if I finish up handcuffed to the seat for the rest of the flight,”

Frank produced the newspapers, all opened to the pages concerned, his heart racing

Annette read them through – several times – in silence, but Frank could see her turning white and shaking her head as the shock and what sometimes looked like anger, increased.

“Last night, when we got back to the apartment, I was elated at the marvellous evening we had experienced but could not help feeling like fraud - like Eliza Doolittle after being hailed as a Princess. Probably about to be debunked as such and made to feel humiliated. This just proved I was right. I don’t think I can face the shame. Why did you encourage me to do this when you knew what was likely to happen? Maybe the show would have been alright, but you should not have taken me to supper with all those other people. That was where I felt that I was put on display and felt totally out of place – a fraud. Everyone MUST have realised that I was an outsider!” She felt almost on the verge of tears.”

“If that is what you feared was happening, you can rest assured that these articles would not have been written in this vein. You would have been brought down by that type of society reporter, indeed by all the columnists, and not built up in this way. The others at the show and afterwards would have ‘downed you’ if they had not seen that you were genuine, not praised you. You were accepted - 100 per cent. I suspect that the morning papers will be reporting who you are and still praising you. I guarantee that you have been accepted and welcomed without question by everyone, except perhaps one or two individuals who had their own personal ideas about my future with them. I realise that you could see a risk that you might be crucified, but I was more than certain that would not be the case, or I would not have let put you in the position of anything bad happening. And I can assure you that my parents – certainly mother - would have not encouraged you either.”

Annette was about to say something – caustic – when one of the hostesses came back. “Is everything alright? Can I get you something else?”

Frank turned to her and asked, “Have you seen these newspapers?”

“Oh yes, they have been a hot topic of conversation - so exciting. And when we were advised that you were both on this flight, well, what an honour,” and, turning to Annette, “You looked so beautiful, and everyone was saying and writing such nice things about you – and they were right. It’s such a pleasure you have you on this flight. You know, some people are not very nice to us, but you have been wonderful and of course Lord Simmons is always such a pleasant passenger.”

By this time Annette could feel herself blushing and was aware that the other stewardess was also beside her and several other passengers who were awake were looking at them. Thank goodness the cabin was dimmed. She felt Frank reach over and take her hand, reassuringly squeezing.

“I don’t know what to say,” she was addressing the stewardesses, “I’m not really anyone special – just an ordinary, small-town Kiwi girl who happened to be unwittingly thrown into the limelight for one night.”

From a seat behind them, someone could be heard to say, sotto-voice, “If you are the average, ordinary, small-town, kiwi girl I am defiantly immigrating to New Zealand. I must be double Lord Simmons’ age and I have yet to meet a young lady who could have fitted in and been accepted like that without a lifetime of training.”

Annette could feel the blush getting hotter and the hostesses noticed her embarrassment, “Can we get you something to drink, perhaps?”

Annette looked to Frank for support.

“Would you like a brandy?”

“Oh, yes please. With dry ginger ale, please. That would be nice.”

Still clutching Frank’s hand, she settled back in her chair while she recovered her equilibrium.

She sipped the drink, thoughtfully, and after some time turned to Frank. “Truthfully, are these people just being nice because I am embarrassed, or did I really pass some sort of a test last night?”

“The Society Press did not immediately shoot you down in flames, so you can be certain that you have met whatever criteria they use to determine a person’s acceptability. By now today’s papers will be starting to hit the streets and they will be announcing your identity to those who are interested. They probably will have dug around to try and find anything they can about your background, but they are also well versed in the laws of liable and will be guarded about anything they might find out. I will get the articles emailed to me in Auckland, but I am certain, beyond doubt, that you will come out of all this being heralded as the beautiful, unspoilt young lady that they had already decided you are.”

Half pulling her towards him, he leaned over so that he was just able to kiss her forehead. “Call me bias if you like, but I think that, despite your current misgivings, you may have found your true place in life.” He kissed her again and she slumped back in her seat – was all this still a dream from which she was yet to awake? She was, cautiously, starting to hope that it was all real but was still unwilling to really believe it.

The hours to Singapore; the short stopover there; the flight on to their 11 am arrival in Auckland passed in a haze of short periods of sleep, when she mind seemed to be constantly replaying flashes of

events from the past two weeks, inter-disbursed with food and drinks and recurring bouts of happiness and concern, the latter Frank seemed to sense and frequently reached across to squeeze her hand reassuringly.

They talked – very much on general, safe, subjects, but Annette’s mind kept returning to a new worry that she was hesitant to discuss with Frank. What if her parents were waiting for her at the airport? They only lived a couple of hours drive out of Auckland and often come up to meet her when she arrived home from a trip abroad, to catch up on all her news. How would she introduce Frank? What would she say? How would her parents react? Why should she be so worried – she was twenty-eight after all, and free to do whatever she wanted? But she did not wish to upset or shock anyone.

Finally, she turned to Frank, “Sometimes my parents come to meet me at the airport. I have no idea if they will be there today, but I have a feeling they might. What do you want me to say?”

“It’s entirely up to you. You can say whatever you feel comfortable with, and I will back you up. Or, if you see them and want me to fade into the background for a while, then that is okay with me. Just let me know where I can contact you later. I am quite happy to meet them straight away and be just Frank. I will follow your lead and you play it as you see fit at the time.” He leaned across and gently kissed her, “I only want you to be comfortable and will do anything to ensure that.”

Nothing else had been discussed about what was going to happen when they arrived in Auckland. Where was Frank intending to stay; how would they keep in contact; with Annette due to start work again on Monday, what was Frank going to be doing during the days he was in Auckland; how long was he intending to stay?

With all the other matters that Annette had been dealing with in her mind over the past few days these sorts of details had not even entered her thoughts. Frank always appeared to have things so sorted she had, almost unconsciously, assumed that he must have taken care of all these little details. Having got this far she did not want to risk losing him at the airport all because of her, probably groundless, fears.

Reaching for a note pad, she wrote her address and New Zealand mobile number, and her work contact details. Frank seeing what she was doing, took out a card with his New Zealand mobile number and wrote on the back the details of the hotel he would be staying at.

“If it seems that we should be moving off in separate directions I will contact you this evening or you can call me anytime you like,” Frank smiled as she exchanged information, “It may take a bit of adjusting to a sudden addition to the party. But if you want me to say around, just give me the nod.”

They landed, cleared customs and Immigration, collected their luggage, and walked out into the arrivals area side by side - but not necessarily together. Sure enough, there were her parents sitting talking, not expecting to see her coming through so quickly.

Making up her mind she turned to Frank, “Come on, we will sneak up behind them while they are not looking,” and they set off on a course that would momentarily take them out of her parent’s line of sight and, walking up behind them, she said, “Fancy meeting you here. Have you been waiting long?”

They both turned around in surprise. “How on earth did you get through so quickly? We were not expecting to see you for perhaps an hour?”

“I have a secret weapon that helps overcome queues and delays. It’s called Business Class.”

Puzzled looks and then raised eyebrows as they realised that there is a man standing there who is obviously with Annette.

“Mum, Dad, I would like you to meet my travelling companion, tour guide and **very** good friend, Frank, Viscount Simmons.”

Right on cue, Frank stepped forward to fill the ensuing, stunned, silence, “As I keep telling Annette, Frank is just fine. It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

With the ice broken – well, at least cracked – first name introductions were completed, and the conversation continued, although it was clear that Annette’s parents were having some difficulty in getting their heads around the sudden and unexpected addition to the number of people they were meeting and trying to get some idea on exactly what the relationship was between Frank (*a Viscount?*) and their daughter.

Recognising the dilemma and not wishing to place Annette under any more strain than necessary, Frank suggested, “Well, you will all be anxious to catch up so I will leave you to get on while I get to my hotel.” He went to shake hands and take his leave.

At that both of Annette’s parents, Margaret and James, started to say, “No, we will be taking Annette to her apartment and can easily drop you off at your hotel, there is plenty of room in the car.”

With the customary ‘are you sure’, and confirmation that it was ‘no trouble’, they moved to the car park and thence through to the central city, where they left Frank at his hotel, and on to Annette’s apartment on the North Shore. Frank had held the rear door of the Car open for Annette to get in and, not unexpectedly, Margaret had also climbed in beside her, which left Frank riding in the front with James.

However, when they arrived at the hotel Annette also got out of the car to say goodbye to Frank and to give his hand a quick squeeze and she whispered, “I will call you later tonight and fill you in with what is happening.”

As they drove away Annette and Frank waved and Margaret commented in a voice that was both enquiring and, to Annette’s currently rather sensitive feelings, almost accusative. “You two seem very friendly.”

“He is a charming man from a family that was very good to me and helped me to see and do more than I had ever imagined was possible in the few weeks I had in England. Yes, we did become friendly – very friendly. But, don’t worry, I have my eyes open and we are still at the ‘we are just good friends’ stage with no commitments or promises.”

James: “It seems like quite a commitment to travel back with you after such a short acquaintance.” It was just a statement of fact, but with the same undertones as Margaret’s.

“He also has business interests here.” Just a statement of fact.

“Oh, what sort of business is he engaged in?” her father seemed to be surprised, and clearly sceptical, that Frank was a businessman.

“Dad, he is a Viscount, his father is an Earl, and they have many and varied interests in different parts of the world, which go back to his grandparents’ time or even earlier – just like a good number of the peerage, do. They have huge land holdings in Cumbria which are farmed. What does it matter so long as he is not a drug or arms dealer? Why are you so worried about my being friendly with him? Can’t you just be happy that I had a great holiday and that I met a nice, safe, presentable, respected person to enjoy it with. I am happy, and have no preconceived expectations, and neither does Frank. Can’t we just leave it like that for now?”

“Okay, it’s just such a surprise to us both. You have never shown much interest in boys before – even when they have been obviously chasing after you. Now you arrive home with a stranger and, while he certainly appears to be a very nice chap, he is so different to most of the people you know.” Her mother was clearly indicating more than surprise and Annette had a notion where this was leading.

“You mean he is different because he comes from a different stratum of society – class, if you like – than we do. Well, that may be on the surface, but I now understand from first-hand experience, that is not the barrier you may think. In the past fortnight I have mixed with a lot of different people, and I can tell you that I have been accepted, along with many others, by everyone I have met – regardless of what, so called, class they may have been. You never brought me up to have any bias or prejudice and I am surprised that this has been brought up now. I’m not going to argue with you, but I am 28, I have lived, I have travelled and mixed with all sorts of people, and I think I am capable of knowing if Frank is a suitable person to be with. I hope you can accept that – regardless of where this friendship may or may not lead.”

“We accept all that,” responded her mother, “It was just such a surprise and not knowing in advance that he was coming with you.”

“That was my decision – mainly because I feared a reception like this. The decision for him to come now and not in a few weeks’ time when he was scheduled to travel anyway, was not made until last weekend. The decision to have him arrive with me was mine and I only decided about an hour out from Auckland. I could have just come through by myself and kept Frank away from all this strain until some later date but thought that would be worse than your meeting him straight off. I am beginning to wonder what he thinks of you now and whether I should have let him stay in the background. I received a far better reception from all his friends, and they knew nothing about me. What does that say about Kiwi friendliness?”

Annette could see that this conversation was going nowhere and decided to change the subject in an attempt to restore the peace. “Did you come up to Auckland this morning?”

“Yes, we thought we might stay over tonight and go back home late Sunday.”

“Great, I have so much to show and tell you and some brilliant photographs that we can run through on the screen tonight.” Her parents appeared to have accepted her ultimatum on Frank and the matter was dropped – even throughout the showing of photographs later in the evening.

Back on an even keel, the rest of the day went well, and Annette had an opportunity to speak to Frank later in the afternoon and again, after her parents had gone late in the evening, just before retiring, bringing him up to date on the happenings of the rest of the day and arranging to meet up with him during Sunday afternoon once her mother and father had left to travel back to their home.

Annette had checked her car on Saturday to ensure the battery was not flat after being left for three weeks and on Sunday afternoon she drove to Frank's hotel to spend the rest of the day in his company. They elected to go out for afternoon tea and then see what they might do later. As they drove off, she was suddenly very aware that her little, very basic, ten-year old second or third-hand car was a significant step down from what Frank must have been used to for all his life, but quickly put the thought aside, reasoning that it was his suggestion that they get to know each other on her turf.

For Frank, who had been able to observe Annette in Business class on a plane, in a limousine, on horseback and driving an ATV, being able to watch her nipping around the suburbs of Auckland in her little car was yet another confirmation of her adaptability. But above all, even on her 'home turf' she seemed to shine with the same light as when discovering new – even somewhat scary – things while travelling around.

They dined at his hotel and arranged to meet at a café close to where she worked for lunch the next day. She called him when she arrived back at her apartment – just to let him know she had arrived safely. That took at least half an hour on the 'phone!

When they met on Monday for lunch, Frank had the emailed extracts from the London papers social columns since their departure. As expected, they had found out just who she was and quite a lot about her, and as predicted, all had turned out to be well accepted and very favourable. Not only had she been accepted by Frank's friends and acquaintances, but the often-scandalous press had hailed her as a delightful and welcome addition to society's elite.

"Just as I said," commented Frank after she had finished reading through the reports, "You are officially "IN", even after having dug up all your antipodean history. You never had to worry, but the fact that you were concerned makes you even more attractive in my eyes." He took her hand across the table and looked into her (rather damp) eyes, "Can we now put that worry behind us and start enjoying each other's company for a while?"

"Can we just walk for a while before I have to get back to work? Annette was smiling while still blinking back 'almost' tears. "The Mall is quiet today, and we can just talk without any fear of being overheard."

They left the café and strolled, arms around each other, "I haven't mentioned anything about the papers to my parents. It may a bit too much, too soon, for them to accept without another inquisition which I can well do without. If anything gets into the local press then I will deal with it, but in the meantime..."

"In the meantime?" he questioned.

"In the meantime, let's just enjoy being together and seeing where we can lead this to."

"I like the positive way you phrased that – lead on!"

"How long are you in New Zealand for? Are you going to be out of Auckland at all? What are you going to be doing during the day when I am at work?" Are you going to be free in the evenings and any weekends you are here? (You are going to be here more than a few days, aren't you)?"

"I am booked to fly back home in four weeks. I will be in Auckland for most of that time and I could arrange it so the time I was leaving the city was over weekends. I have some people to see and

some of those meetings could be lunch or dinner ones –but they are not of a nature that would exclude you, in fact your presence would be very welcome.” He gathered her into his arms and delivered one of those delicious kisses that she so longed for. “What is your favourite restaurant, and we will dine there tonight, if you would like that?”

They exchanged ideas and arranged for him to collect her after work before parting with another kiss. I am beginning to like this more and more, Annette thought to herself. I think I want this to lead to what I believe may be his desired conclusion!

The next weeks were a whirl of lunches, dinners, long ‘phone calls late into the evening. A courtship compressed into too few short days.

One evening they dined with Annette’s sister and her husband (who were rather overwhelmed to start with, but soon saw that Frank was indeed human). They returned the evening by taking them to Frank’s hotel for dinner.

The second weekend they travelled to visit James and Margaret – who now seemed reconciled to the unexpected friendship, to the extent that Annette decided to share the newspaper reports with them. That soon changed any doubts in their minds about the match!

The next weekend she travelled to Wellington with Frank and was his companion to a lunch and another dinner with business associates of his. More importantly, she had a couple of intimate, delightful, nights with the man who was now constantly in her dreams. The man who she was now more than delighted to give her long-held virginity to in a sensational weekend of sweet seduction that would be forever imprinted in her mind. The man who went down on one knee and proposed to her, and whom she now readily accepted without any hesitation or second thoughts. The ring Frank had for her was, as he put it, a symbol, and she would be able to choose exactly what she wanted when they both had the opportunity to spend the time needed to make such a decision. Annette, however considered the stunning antique diamond from the estate collection so perfect that there was no way she wanted any other to ever replace it.

Long telephone calls to both sets of parents – with heartfelt congratulations from the English connection and somewhat more subdued ones from the still rather stunned New Zealand parents. Annette’s sister and brother-in-law were ‘over the moon’ and the news was passed on to the great uncle and aunt in Cumbria who called them with their congratulations.

Staff in the office where she worked had soon noticed that she was a much brighter person after her holiday and were quick to start wondering why. When she was spotted, on several occasions, with a man, they were even quicker to start putting two and two together, but the real shocker was when Annette walked into work on the Monday morning of the last week of Frank’s stay, wearing an engagement ring that looked as if it had come out of a royal collection. No one in the office had taken particular note of the notice in the Saturday *Herald*:

The engagement is announced between Francis Charles, Viscount Simmons, son of The Earl and Countess Simmons, of Windermere, England, and Annette Margaret, elder daughter of James and Margaret Williams, of Hamilton, New Zealand.

When it became known that she was the Annette of the engagement notice, her standing in the office instantly went up many notches. The partners, several of whom she was much more academically qualified than anyway, and who had never treated her as anything more than the ‘token female among

their employed accountants, were already hinting of a partnership (knowing what an impact that would have on their letterhead).

Frank and Annette, of course, had other, **much** more interesting, plans in mind!

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VOYAGE OF REDISCOVERY

Raewyn had booked this cruise at the last minute and very much on an impulse, with the sole purpose of getting even further away from what she saw as her ruined life in the small country town where she had grown up. Everything, but everything, that could go wrong to upset and humiliate her and her family in that 'everybody-knows-everyone-else's-business' town, had gone wrong in spades.

In the space of just one year, she had broken up with her boyfriend of almost three years – right when she had thought he was about to propose - and had rebounded into the arms of a guy who she had immediately thought was the perfect man in every way and who fate had destined her to be with for ever. He was kind and considerate, had all the same interests, likes and dislikes and loved her like she had never been loved before. Or so she had thought.

It later surfaced that 'Mr Perfect' had somehow known her parents were very wealthy and had maliciously started a rumour that her, now ex, boyfriend was seeing another girl in a neighbouring town and, at the same time, hinted around the town that she was also two-timing him. Then, at the crucial moment, he had ingratiated him-self into her, and her parent's, life, all sweet and charming.

After only six months he had proposed, and she had happily accepted. They had rented a delightful apartment and moved into together. They had been careless, she had fallen pregnant, but was happy about that. It then turned out he had other ideas about children and become so angry that he had forcefully taken back the engagement ring – literally dragging it off her finger - and physically thrown her out of the apartment – which she then found out was rented in his name only - but the rent and all the utilities had been direct debited to her bank account and she had to run around and cancel them, as she found out – after payments had been made. She had, miserably, moved back into her parent's home and tried to put it all behind her. Resigned to being a twenty-seven-year-old failure at life; a romantic that was now spoiled for any future suitor and doomed to the life of being yet another single mother.

He had then proceeded to spread the story around amongst his friends that she had tricked him into the engagement and deliberately gotten pregnant. A story that he had made sound so plausible that it quickly spread all over town. She had been so humiliated and upset that she had become very sick, depressed and as a result had miscarried.

She was so ashamed of herself and the way it had upset her parents that she had fled the town and moved to Auckland as soon as she thought she was well enough. Serious depression had caught up with her and she had not been up to even trying to apply for jobs and was still living in a hostel until she felt up to finding work, at which time she had intended to rent an apartment close to wherever her new job turned out to be.

One afternoon, while walking aimlessly down a central city street she had chanced to look in the window of a travel agency and happened to actually read one of the many advertisements. *Single berths in shared cabins available on the MV Island Pride, for a three-week luxury cruise around an*

exciting sounding list of tropical Pacific Islands, departing in just six days' time and at special, last minute discounted prices. She went into the agency, purchased the last remaining berth in a double share, upper deck, outside cabin, where, she was assured, the other occupant was a pleasant, middle-aged single lady who regularly cruised with them. For the first time in months, she had felt almost excited as she went back to her 'digs' to start packing. Even the thought of such an exotic holiday seemed to cheer her up as over the next few days she went about purchasing a few suitable clothes to supplement her wardrobe and then dreamed each night about the upcoming adventure.

Not wishing to miss out on one moment of the experience, Raewyn was among the first people to board the ship in the early afternoon. Along with other passengers she was greeted as she stepped aboard and escorted to the cabin where, to her surprise, her roommate, a mature lady called Eileen, was already settling in. They were introduced, and Eileen commented that she too always liked to board early and get settled, so that she could look around before there were too many others rushing to get to their cabins. Apparently, she was a regular traveller and 'knew the ropes', so to speak. Raewyn thought that the agency referring to her as middle-aged might have been a little generous, but she was certainly a bubbly, agile and immediately likable person.

Eileen waited for Raewyn to get herself organised and then offered to show her around the ship, having cruised on it previously. As they walked along the maze of corridors Raewyn caught a glimpse of a face that seemed familiar, but immediately dismissed it as being probably just a 'tribal' face, because the person she had thought it might have been was most unlikely to be anywhere near a cruise boat.

They watched as other passengers boarded. Took afternoon tea on one of the sunshine decks, stood by the rails as the ship moved away from the wharf with everyone waving and watched the panorama as they sailed down the harbour, along the channel and out to sea.

Later in the evening she went with Eileen to the main dining room where they enjoyed a sumptuous meal before taking a last stroll around the deck and retiring for the night.

Morning, far out of sight of land on a beautiful calm day, Eileen introduced her to the many delights that were available for passengers to help occupy the hours as they sailed between the various ports. Later, sitting on their balcony, soaking up the sun and reading her book, Raewyn was not in a position to notice any of the passengers and crew moving around. It was lunch time before she drifted down to the afterdeck where drinks and light meals were available and sat enjoying the peace of knowing she was away from everyone who knew about her and her troubles over the past year.

Nibbling on her meal, sipping at a long, cool, drink, and still reading her book she was unaware of the movement of people around her, lost in her own little world and enjoying the relaxation that had seemed to have been impossible for so long.

Across the other side of the deck, partly obscured by people and equipment, a young man stood watching her. She looked familiar but there were differences, so he was unsure. Her hair was in a different style – and a different colour. She was thinner than the person he remembered. Her features were so similar but, again, he was unsure. He contemplated speaking to her but decided against it – he needed to be certain and there was plenty of time. This was only day one of a three-week cruise and he did not want to make a fool of himself – again – or to unnecessarily upset someone else – again!

He moved away just as she looked up and caught a brief glimpse of his departing profile. No, it could not be **him**. This guy seemed older, taller, more lined, different haircut, wearing a uniform. Even from one brief look she was certain. Well, almost certain. No, there was no way that it could possibly be him. She put the matter aside and went back to enjoying her lunch and the book she was engrossed in.

The next morning, he was going through his passenger list searching for a name. After a restless night he wanted to be sure. There, cabin 10A. Upper deck, outside. Raewyn Sanderson. But what was she doing here? Did she know he was working on this ship? He had heard somewhere that she was married, but, if that were true, why she was using her maiden name on this cruise? What had transpired since he moved away and changed occupation – what had happened in the past months that he had not been aware of? More importantly, he was certain to come into contact with her sometime over the next three weeks – how was he going to handle that?

Raewyn had settled down to the relaxing life on the ship and Eileen was proving to be an ideal travelling companion – always ready to help or advise but not forcing her company on her. They had occasionally dined together but generally their interests during the day had been quite different; Eileen socialising with people more of her own age and interests and Raewyn tending to curl up with a book, in the sun, just relaxing. Her plan was to use the time at sea before their first port of call, unwinding and, so far as possible, putting aside all thoughts of the past months. She would go ashore for the day in Suva and then, perhaps, start joining in some of the activities that were provided day and night for passengers' entertainment.

After docking in Suva very early in the morning, passengers were starting to assemble around the disembarkation areas to process through the various authorities and go ashore. Several crew members were assisting in providing information, maps of Suva, answering endless and often needless questions about boarding and sailing times and a host of other matters that passengers seemed to need help with (even though these were well covered in the information provided in all cabins).

Standing a small group with Eileen and a couple of her new acquaintances, Raewyn was waiting for the people ahead to move off when an, almost questioning, but familiar voice said, "Raewyn, Raewyn Sanderson?"

She froze before turning very slowly. Standing there, James did not look as different as he had from the brief, distant glimpses she had several days earlier. Yes, more lined, and dressed in a smart uniform with a peaked cap and what she assumed were ships officer epaulets, he did look older and seemed taller, but yes, it was unmistakably James Turner. Blushing profusely, she found her voice, "Hello, I did not expect to see you here. What are you doing?" *What a stupid comment – he will think I am stupid, as well as whatever else he already thinks of me.*

"Left my accounting job when I moved from town and became a ships purser," his tone was brisker and more authoritative than she remembered, "I am now head purser on this ship. What about you? Are you with a group on this trip or travelling alone?" *He felt the desire to find out what her story was but already had the distinct impression that his approaching her was an intrusion into some privacy that she thought she had.*

“It was really an impulse decision. Walking down the street – saw the advertisement in a travel agent’s window – found they had one last berth available and here I am.” *There, that answered his question. Now he knows I am alone. Should I have made it that clear?* “I’m just going ashore for a few hours with the person I am sharing the cabin with and some of her acquaintances.” *There, that makes it perfectly clear I have some company.*

“Enjoy your day. With two cruises in port today it will be crowded, so, if you get tired or can’t find somewhere to have a quiet coffee, remember that we will have all normal dining and afternoon tea facilities operating. Not all our passengers wish to go ashore at every port, and we cater fully for anyone staying on board.”

*He spoke to the group she was with and had made it sound like useful information that he would have given to any passengers, but Raewyn felt that it was being presented to her as some sort of invitation. Was he suggesting they might talk? Well, there was nothing that she had to say to **him**. She vowed to herself to stay ashore until the last possible minute.*

The town was crowded and everywhere there were very persistent people endeavouring to sell them ‘genuine old traditional artefacts’, and shopkeepers trying to entice them into their stores. James had been right about the restaurants and cafés being full and they had great difficulty finding anywhere that they considered desirable enough to try. Finally, Eileen and her friends had decided to wend their way back to the ship, but Raewyn said that there were a couple more things that she would like to have a quick look at and stayed on walking around.

She soon found that the touts were quick to spot a woman on her own and pestered her even more. Thoroughly fed up with feeling hot, thirsty, pressured, and tired (especially her feet), she too opted to seek some comfort and nourishment back of the ship.

Eileen was not in the cabin and Raewyn showered and changed before taking up her book and going one of the quiet, comfortable, air-conditioned lounges where she knew that drinks and snacks would be available. She ordered and sat back in a quiet corner to read.

James was generally busy while a ship was in port and much of his day was taken up with work. One part of this was to monitor the coming and going of passengers and to ensure that everyone was on board before sailing time. The system was largely automated but today he was casually glancing from time to time to see if Raewyn had come back. When he saw she had returned he figured that she would either stay in her cabin to relax or, more probably, knowing her preference for nice clean, comfortable eateries, would be looking for somewhere quiet to curl up with a book and some something to eat and drink.

An hour later he was not surprised to spot her in a lounge which was deserted apart from one other person in an opposite corner, also reading. Not immediately having time to stop and chat, he decided that he would at least show his willingness to be polite and friendly. He entered the lounge and, removing his cap, walked over to where Raewyn was sitting.

“Good afternoon. I see you have opted to get out of the humidity and madding crowd. How did you enjoy your time ashore?”

Raewyn looked up – her deliberately bland expression hiding the unwelcome internal smile she felt. “It was different – to be polite – but you were right; hot; humid; crowded and without anywhere to escape the touts and tourists. I couldn’t live here, if for no other reason I would miss quiet, clean, cafés.”

“Yes, Suva is perhaps not the most attractive stop on this voyage and I’m sure you will enjoy some of the others much more. Suva is not too bad on a normal day and the hotels are the best places to find a good meal but finding one that is not too busy is the hard part.” Change the subject. “Is everything good here? He was referring to food and service.

“Yes, thank-you, I just felt like some peace and quiet and something that I could trust to eat and drink.” *Was that too much of a hint that I wanted to be left in peace?*

‘Okay, I will get back to my duties.’ He wanted to keep this now half-open conversational door at least partly open, “Don’t tell everyone, but supposedly I am the ultimate ‘go-to’ person on this ship if you have any queries or complaints or need any special assistance at any time. That is my job, and I am always happy to help.”

I do hope that did not sound too stiff and like a put-down. Oh well, it’s said and all I can do is keep being friendly. Maybe by the end of the cruise she will feel like speaking to me.

As we walked away Raewyn suddenly felt a momentary sense of loss. *Don’t be silly – he has walked away from you once; you don’t want to get bitten a second time.*

Later, restless and unable to sleep, Raewyn was mulling over her reaction to James’ talking to her. *Perhaps he didn’t walk away any more than I walked away from him. We broke up, acrimoniously, and lots of nasty things were said on both sides. But, apparently, none of it was true. I certainly was not cheating on him, and he was probably not going out with anyone else either. Oh, what a mess. When she finally did get to sleep it was troubled and, the following day, she was tired and listless. She did not see James, and for some reason that felt like something was missing.*

James did see her around the ship but kept his distance, sure that she had made it clear that she was not interested in talking and he was not wishing to create a scene. Underneath he had to admit that he still had strong feelings for Raewyn, and a desire to find out exactly what her situation was now. Open fraternisation between crew and passengers was not encouraged but it was appropriate for officers to dine with groups in the evenings. Not perhaps the best time to get into deep conversations but it might be a chance to learn a little more about her current position.

Raewyn, on the other hand, while not wishing to appear anxious to talk was becoming more confident that perhaps there was reason to open up discussion. She was beginning to wonder if, perhaps, both of them had been so taken in by the falsehoods that had been spread about that they had over-reacted. James had also moved away, and it was possible that he still did not know the full story. Maybe, just maybe, there might be some merit in sitting down to, as it were, clear the air, if for no other reason than enable them to at least be friends. She was seriously in need of a friend in her life!

During the next week of cruising and a couple of ports their paths did not cross often – although it would be fair to say that they might have, had they not seen one or the other first and changed direction. Neither of them wanted to be the first to make a move, even though both were desiring to.

Finally, almost two weeks through the cruise, they were spending the day at a small port when James' attention was not required for a myriad of tasks that often took up his time while berthed. He went ashore on a minor errand, leaving two of his assistants on board, and deliberately kept an eye open for Raewyn.

Spotting her going into a little café he waited for a couple of minutes and entered – just as she was moving away from the counter and taking a seat at an empty table. He ordered, not letting on that he had seen her, and then looked around to ensure that she had no one sitting with her before asking if he could join her. She looked up with a startled look – almost like a possum caught in the headlights of a car. He felt sorry for her and started to move away saying that he understood if it was too awkward.

“No, it's alright, really. I was far away, and you caught me daydreaming. Please, sit down.”

Lowering himself into the chair opposite her he commented, “I see you have found the best café in town.”

“It appeared nice and clean when I looked in and the air-conditioning feels so much better than sitting outside at some of the other places I passed.” Then, thinking it was odd that he was ashore and in the same café, “How did you manage to get some time off today?” She hoped that didn't sound too catty.

Sometimes with small ports there is nothing much to take on board and I can leave things to the assistants. It is rather unusual and very pleasant to get some time to oneself during a cruise. How are you enjoying yourself?”

“I had absolutely no idea what to expect when I started out, but it has been very relaxing – just what I needed.” *Maybe I should not have said that!* “Everything seems designed to make life stress free and I'm sure I have never eaten so much in such a short time before. I think I could really get to enjoy this kind of life for a while – until it became boring, I suppose.” *I'm rambling again.*

He stepped in to help, “We have had a very smooth trip and that has helped. But yes, I guess that one could get very bored if the cruise was too long and if there were not the odd port to break the weeks up. Like you, I had no idea what life on a ship would be like, but then I have work to do and for me it is just doing a job in a different place. I see passengers sitting around relaxing and think ‘that would be nice’ but then wonder if the novelty would wear off after a while. Actually, I find it rather nice to get home and away from the structured routine of ship life. It's good to get back on board, but I need a break every so often.” They went on and discussed the leave that he got and what he did when he was ashore for a few weeks.

“Are you still working in the same place?” His question answered Brook's thoughts about how much – or little - he knew of her life since he had left town.

“No, I am living in the city now and have not yet started a job. This cruise is a rather in the way of a break between a past and a new beginning. As I mentioned, it was spur of the moment and, I guess, an opportunity to do something quite different before I return to the 9 to 5 routine.” *There, that does not actually tell him anything but will make him wonder,*

There was an uneasy pause in conversation and they both covered this with taking sips of their drinks. Both realising that there was more – much more - that probably needed to be said, but not sure how to open the topic.

Finally, James decided that he may as well 'go for broke'. "I know that we have had what are, probably insurmountable, differences over the past year or so, but would you be open to at least talking about them instead of us endlessly skirting around them like we are now. I know some terrible things have been said and I appreciate that I have said far too many of them, but I would like us to still be at least friends. We used to be able to talk about anything - can we try and get all the past out in the open and behind us, please." It was a plea from the heart and Raewyn found herself having to fight back the urge to cry.

"I would like that too." Was all she could say without breaking down and James could see what an effort it had been for her to say those few words.

"Shall I start?" He raised his eyebrows with his question.

She just nodded.

"From my side I know what was being said about me and I think I know who started the stories. As to why – I can only guess. What was being said about you appeared to be unbelievable and I should have had the guts to go into things deeper, but we had got to the stage that we both were finding it impossible to talk to each other, and the rumours were spread in such a way as it was hard for anyone to doubt their veracity. When we had our break-up, I walked away – no, I ran away, like a coward and did not stop to try and scotch the stories. I ran and kept going, through the city and on to a ship. Since then, I have only heard on the grapevine that you had married and had a child. That is all I have heard. I know that you may find it hard to believe me, but there was and never has been anyone but you in my life."

"I had started to work that out for myself, but my life has been hell for a year, and I have got to the stage that I did not know what or who to trust. That is why I am not working – I have been incapable of doing so after having a nervous breakdown." And with that she proceeded to tell James everything that had happened over the past year or so,

As she spoke James could see her quickly getting close to tears and moved his chair so that he was able to take her hand – which she quickly grasped and held tight. She stopped, unable to continue, and he asked if she would like another coffee. She nodded but did not let go his hand. Glancing up he noticed the waitress looking at them. He caught her attention and indicated that they would like more coffee. She must have realised that Raewyn was upset and came over to take their orders, for which James thanked her profusely.

"So that has been my year. A total failure and I have lost everything including my self-respect, the respect of my parents and friends, you, my job. I very nearly reached the point of ending it - all because of that b**t**d." She sobbed to a stop again.

"And I am as much to blame for not coming to your aide. Alright, we had words, but I should have hung around to see exactly what was going on. I may have been able to find out something that would have enabled you to avoid some of the trouble and heartache."

“No,” Raewyn Protested, “We were both taken in, as was everyone else, and we argued to the extent that more than likely neither of us would have listened to each other or our own common sense. It was a carefully planned and executed scheme that even had my parents completely fooled for a while. If I hadn’t become pregnant who knows what the outcome may have been – but I am sure it would not have turned out any better in the long run.”

Still holding his hand tightly, she turned, looked directly into his eyes and appeared to be considering her next words carefully. Finally, hesitantly, she made her decision and spoke. “James, I desperately need a friend who I can talk to. I have let everyone, including you, down and have no one to confide in. I know that, under the circumstances, it is a lot to ask, but will you be my friend?”

James could see that she was on the brink of tears and without hesitation he took her in his arms and held her tight. I would like that and was hoping that we might go back to being friends again. I would be glad – honoured – to be friends again. No conditions; no expectations; no recriminations. Best friends and let what ever happen just happen.” Still holding her, he kissed her forehead.

The waitress came with their drinks, and he turned slightly and mouthed, “Thank you.” In his arms he could feel Raewyn quietly sobbing.

After some minutes she looked up at him, red eyed and tearstained face, whispering in a choked voice, “Thank you so much. I have been so scared and lonely. I was so sure that you would turn me down after all that has happened, but I had to ask.” She still looked frightened and a broken image of the girl to whom he had been so close to proposing marriage.

“Do you feel up to joining me at my table for dinner tonight? Probably because I am younger than most of the officers and although it is largely my choice, I generally seem to attract a younger group of people who would like to dine with me, and you would be able to meet with passengers more of your own age instead of the older ones that I know you have been dining with to date. No stories, no awkward situations, just, perhaps, a little more fun and relaxed.”

He could see her considering his suggestion and finally she smiled (more like the smiles he remembered of old) and relied, “Yes, I would like that – if you are sure that it is not a problem. I know there are rules about fraternisation.”

“If I were suggesting an intimate dinner in my cabin there would be all sorts of questions, but as one of a group of guests at my table there is nothing to worry about and I promise that you will not be put in a position to be embarrassed.”

Even the casual mention of an intimate dinner in his cabin had sent her delicate emotions into overdrive and she felt herself blushing. James pretended not to notice as he continued, “Will that be okay with you?”

Raewyn mentally pulled herself together and responded, “Yes, yes I would like that. And thank you again for being so reasonable about everything. I really do appreciate it. I can’t promise that I will be scintillating company, but I do look forward to it. What time should I come to the dining room?”

“I normally go to the cocktail lounge around 7:30 and anyone looking for me will be directed there. Some of my invitees also go to the lounge but others come later and go directly to the table

where there will already be place-cards set out. I will leave it up to you, but I know that your favourite pre-dinner cocktail is mixed very well in our lounge.” He left the obvious invitation hanging.

Her heart did a little flutter as she acknowledged to herself that he remembered her favourite cocktail. “I’ll certainly bear that in mind.” She was almost smiling this time, and James suddenly felt as if a load, that had been weighing him down for the past year, was now starting to lift from his mind. He too had been having a less than perfect year and, although clearly not having gone through as much as her, he had been carrying a terrible guilt that he should have tried to do more to save the situation.

Dinner, that was not taken alone, or with company that was not generations older than her, proved to be relaxing and just the sort of change that she needed. Seated directly opposite James, he caught his eye at one point and mouthed, “Thank you.” And he gave her a conspiratorial wink in return. It was that wink and the look that accompanied it that was in her dreams that night – the first sweet dreams, and so distinct from nightmares, that she’d had in many months.

For the rest of the cruise, she ate her evening meal at James table and at some time during each day they managed to have a short chat – even if it was looking over the rail of the ship supposedly gazing at something in the distance. It was during these moments she learned of his roster for the next few months. He had a one day turn around in Auckland and a ten-day cruise which was the end of a long period of sea time, followed by a three-week shore-leave period. Facts that Raewyn pondered in her quiet moments alone!

By the penultimate day of the cruise, she had decided to ask James where he spent his time when ashore on leave. Hiding his inward smile, he told her that he had purchased an apartment in the city where he tended to hide away. Occasionally he might spend a day or two driving to some other place of interest, but generally he just chilled out from what was essentially a twenty-four hour a day post on the ship and to try and live a quiet ‘normal’ city life.

Raewyn reflected on this during the next 24 hours, and James, hoping that he had understood correctly where her question might have been leading to, was thinking how he might best react to the next question he was expecting she may ask.

He decided to make the approach himself and during the following morning he sought her out and asked, “When I am ashore, would you like to meet up for a meal, or an outing, or just some time together – or all of the above?” Adding the last bit, hoping it did not sound too desperate,

She didn’t seem to be at all put off by his sudden approach and in fact blushed a little as she replied, “Actually I was trying to work out how I might ask you the same thing without looking as if I were pushing my luck or sounding desperately pathetic.”

Raewyn went to take his hand but realised that in public view it was probably not a great idea and instead pretended to brush her hair back as she smiled up at him.

James, relieved that she had been thinking along the same lines but also surprised that, in view of their history, had so readily agreed to the suggestion, did take her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, “I will give you my address and phone number and details of the actual dates I will be ashore. Will you be working by then?”

"I probably should be, but I might just decide that an extra few weeks off may not be a bad idea." *Or am I being too anxious about trying to make our friendship work again, she thought to herself?* 'Just to make sure that I am not going to regress, with the return of all the day-to-day stress, after this relaxing cruise. I am contemplating getting out more in public places like malls and cinemas.'" She added quickly – for clarity!

"It's totally your call of course, but, if you feel that I can be of any help, just call me any time. I don't want to impose but would like to help in any way I can." He again squeezed her hand.

She smiled up into his eyes, "Thank-you, I really appreciate that."

Before she disembarked, they exchanged addresses and 'phone numbers and he made a special point of seeing her off the ship. This latter action did not go un-noticed by Eileen and her group of friends who commented that she appeared to have acquired a ship-board admirer. She did not tell them that he had nearly been her fiancé in an earlier time.

During the next ten days Raewyn kept an eye on the shipping news and when it was confirmed that the *Island Pride* was arriving on schedule at 8 am in the morning, she went down to the docks to watch it berth and waited until she saw James look in her direction and waved. He acknowledged her wave and a few minutes later her mobile 'phone rang. "I'll be off duty from Noon, do you want to meet?"

"If you are not too busy, I would like that. Where would be suitable?"

"Right where you are now - I should be off by 12:15, and we could go and have some lunch somewhere if you like."

"Okay, if you're sure it's not too much trouble I will be back here at 12:15." A pause and a rather shy, "I am looking forward to meeting up again."

She could see him looking down at her. He blew her a kiss and then spoke again, "Me too – it's been too long and the more I think about it, for all the wrong reasons."

With a wave, he had hung up and was back at work assisting the passengers off the ship before dealing with the myriad of other tasks that needed his attention before he handed over to the relief purser at Noon.

As he came down from the ship, in full uniform, Raewyn could not help thinking how distinguished he looked and how happy she felt when he took her hands and leaned over to kiss her lightly – but affectionately – on her cheek.

They walked, hand-in-hand, to a small café/restaurant where they enjoyed a lunch, with a glass of wine and lingered over a coffee, making small talk over such things as how the trip had been and what she had been doing for the past ten days. Each weighing up the other – each trying to gauge the feelings of the other and trying to guess if this was just a polite meal together, or the potential start of a reconciliation that might – hopefully – see them back in a serious relationship. Each not daring to express that thought in case it ruined any chance of them ever being a couple again.

After a thoughtful pause, James took the plunge and just asked, “Am I being too presumptuous or too hasty in making assumptions when I take the fact that you came to meet the ship today as an indication that we might be able to put the recent past behind us and perhaps move on to a resumption of a meaningful relationship? I don’t want you to feel in any way pressured and I know it will take time and commitment to rebuild trust, but I truly feel that we had something special, and I would be very keen to see if that could be rebuilt. Do you think that might be possible – even if it took a while?”

“I think it could and, after a lot of calm and considered thought, I believe that it may not take as long as you are suggesting. We did have something very special, and we were able to talk openly about anything and everything. If we can still do that then, I think, that anything is possible – and I would like to try.” Raewyn waited to see what James’ reaction might be.

“In that case I have some news for you that I hope will be good news. My last cruise was an extra, that was not supposed to be mine, but the relief was not able to travel because of ill health and I carried on and did it. That took me almost up to a further week’s leave. My next cruise is not due to start until four days after my leave expires and will be four weeks long as it carries on to Hong Kong where the ship is to start the northern cruise season. There is the offer open to me to stay on as Head Purser for the northern season. So, I have a full month off and I am at your disposal all during that time if you want anything.”

“Do you think we might be able to work something out in a month if we put our minds to it? I mean one way or the other, no pre-conceived ideas, just see how things go?” Raewyn’s reply was said in such a way as to leave all doors wide open – but she really had already made up her mind that James was almost certainly who she wanted and was willing to work at any opportunity to rekindle their relationship.

“I would certainly like to think so and, whatever you think may help our cause I am willing to try.”

They walked up the street to where there was a taxi stand where James was intending to get a taxi to take Raewyn to her hostel and then carry on to his apartment. However, Raewyn suggested that she was in no hurry to get back to her room and would he mind if she came with him to see where he lived. As that suited James (perfectly), they did just that.

As soon as they were in the apartment door, Raewyn said, “No expectations, no promises, no demands, but what I really want – no, **need** – is a real, reassuring, cuddle with no one liable to be watching us.”

And James, happy to oblige, took her in his arms, saying, “When I left on the last trip, I was cursing myself for having agreed to do that extra trip because, in the circumstances, it may have looked as if I was running away again as soon as we had met. I did not want you to get the wrong idea and I certainly didn’t want to lose the opportunity of us getting back together.”

After the first week of James’ leave, during which they happily spent a great deal of each day and evening together, it was clear to both of them that the spark between them was just as strong as it had been more than a year earlier – in fact there was even a greater depth of understanding and affinity. So

much so that James felt comfortable in raising another matter that he had held back on discussing until it seemed likely that their relationship was going to rekindle.

“Have you given any thought to what you would like to do when you go back to work?” His question was casual and was raised as part of a general conversation.

“I guess I will go back into retail, although I don’t expect to immediately get a job as a buyer or a manager. There are plenty of shop assistant positions available and suppose I will have to try and work my way up again from the bottom again.”

“Why I ask is because the lady who has the concession for the boutique and gift shop on the boat is looking for a suitable person to run her shop for most – perhaps all - of the northern cruising season. I spoke to her about you, and she was very interested because of your background and, if you were interested, I can let her know and it could all be finalised when the ship finishes the current cruise. There is a two-day stopover in Auckland so that would give a suitable handover. There is free accommodation, a good base wage plus commissions on turnover. The hours, although different to those in Malls, are not too bad and of course there is no travelling time to and from work. You have seen the shop, so you know the set-up and the sort of things they sell. Do you think you might be interested?”

“It sounds wonderful, but are you sure that our relationship is ready for us to thrown together in such close proximity for long periods of time without causing problems?”

“I would have thought so and even if problems did arise there is still enough space to enable us to not be in too close contact if we didn’t want to. I suspect that we have both learned a lot from the past year or so and I can’t see us making the same mistakes again and I think the past few weeks have proved that we are both adults enough to talk about things rationally and come to peaceful resolutions, don’t you?”

“Would we be able to spend our free time together without restrictions?”

“Oh yes. There would be no problems there – although sometimes my table might be full, and we may not always be able to have dinner together. However, quiet, intimate meals when we are both off duty would be the compensation.”

“How long is the northern season?”

“From Auckland back to Auckland will be almost six months. The voyage to Hong Kong; about four months of cruises based off Hong Kong; and a cruise that goes San Francisco, Hawaii, Tahiti, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji and on to Auckland. A couple of breaks could be arranged in Hong Kong if you felt the need, but the whole six months is available if you wanted.”

Raewyn desperately wanted to say yes but was still worried that the current new-found bliss could suddenly turn sour for some reason, and she did not want to run the risk of another major upset in her life. James could see the indecision in her face as she tried to formulate an answer and said, “You don’t need to decide right now. Think about it for a few days and we will just treat it as an option that you may like to take.”

And think Raewyn did – for four days the thought kept coming back: The pros and cons; the opportunity of being with James; the travel; the job with travel; free travel with James. Finally, she decided that, regardless of the final outcome, she owed to herself and to James to take this opportunity and see where it took her – them”

That evening as they sat over dinner Raewyn raised the matter, “About that cruise job – I think I would like to take up the offer if the Lady will have me. I have thought about it and us, and I really can’t imagine you going away for so long just as we appear to be getting our friendship – even potentially our relationship – back on a sound basis. Also, the job sounds fascinating. I had not thought about it too much when I was on the ship, but looking back, it was a fascinating little shop, and the hours were not too bad. I believe that I should enjoy it and the responsibility would be a good introduction for future positions. Can you please see if the lady is still interested in me?”

“I had an email yesterday asking if I had discussed the position with you, and I can tell you she is interested. I will get a reply off to her as soon as we get back to my apartment.”

By the following evening it was all arranged. All the required documentation had been processed and approved and the shipping company had put in hand all the arrangements for the necessary identification passes. In two weeks’, she would be setting sail, running a business, and continuing to be close to James. All was coming right with the world again.

A quick trip home to see her parents and bring them up to date with what was happening, was supposed to be a happy event, but it started off being a disaster!

It was bad enough her going off to sea but when James was entered into the equation her mother’s tirade was almost enough to send her back to the city in tears. He father spoke up for her and commented that he had never believed all the stories put about concerning James and that later events had proved all the malicious lies had been a terrible trick to get at them through Raewyn. James visited the following day and came dressed in his officers’ uniform, which had some pacifying effect on her mother, but the air was still blue.

When it was time to go back to the city, her father took her aside, saying that he understood, and her mother would come around eventually but was still smarting over the whole unhappy incident that had hurt a lot of people. His advice was to be a little cautious but to follow her heart. Put the past behind her and try and recapture her happy life and enjoy her extended cruising experience.

She left with hugs and a little apprehension but determined to keep on top of things from then on.

Then, six days before they were due to sail – four days before she was scheduled to meet the owner of the boutique and take over the management – they were sitting in a small café having lunch when James asked a question that set Raewyn’s insides churning with the serious manner in which he spoke, “Do you think that we have made real progress in restoring the trust and feelings between us over the past few weeks?” His face showed no emotion and she immediately felt that there was a problem.

“I thought we had, in fact I felt we might have almost progressed back to where we were a year ago and, in some ways, even beyond that. Why do you ask?”

“I have been thinking that we had, but I had to be sure, because there is something that I must ask you.”

Raewyn’s appetite now totally disappeared as she waited for the bomb to be dropped. He was about to end it all – or worse, ask something about her shattered relationship with, “Mr Perfect,” that would ruin everything she thought was starting to come right in her life.

Almost on the point of tears, she responded with one word, “What?”

With that, James started to smile, broadly, as he reached across the table and took her hand. “A little over a year ago I made an investment, and I was about to share it with you when our lives fell apart. I think and hope that it might just be about time to pick up where we left off and continue with what I had hoped would be the beginning of something really special.”

With that, and still holding her hand, he stood and then got down on one knee, saying, “Raewyn, I have been praying that one day I might be lucky enough to get to do this and now I want to make sure that I don’t miss the opportunity ever again. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife? Will you marry me?”

Caught completely by surprise, Raewyn could only sit a stare at him – her face a picture of confusion. She shook her head to break the trance and, recovering her voice, replied, “But I thought we might only ever return to becoming friends and that I had ruined my chances of anything else with you. Are you sure about what you are asking?” She was shaking with anticipation as she awaited his answer.

“Totally sure and, while I have also wondered if we could ever be more than friends again, I find that my feelings for you are as strong, if not stronger, than ever. I have thought long and hard about asking as I was not sure if you would be feeling the same about me. But in the end, I had to stake this step. If we are to be just friends I needed to know, but equally I needed you to know that my love for you is as strong and certain as it ever was and I believe that we can, quickly, become the couple we once were.” He stopped, his words hanging in the air as she looked deeply into his eyes, glazed with moisture.

She realised that her own eyes were also full of tears that would burst forth any second and she squeezed his hand and replied, “Yes, yes I will marry you.” As her self-control failed, she leaned forward to cry with happiness on his shoulder.

As they both recovered, they realised that their food was largely un-eaten, and drinks were cold. “Would you like something a little stronger to drink and perhaps some bar food to carry us over to dinner time?” James suggested.

Sitting in a quiet pub with some snacks and a wine, James returned to the Investment had had made over a year earlier. “I put some money in a savings account to cover the cost of rings and something towards a wedding. It has grown somewhat because I get quite a good salary and have no real expenses on the ship. My apartment is mine (and the mortgage companies of course) but outgoings are small and, as I am not there a lot, very small compared to most people’s. So, if you have not decided to change your mind about me, would you like to go looking at rings this afternoon?”

“Of course – I’d love to. Oh, this all seems so unreal – perhaps a ring would help bring it all into focus. But, please, not too expensive, it’s not necessary and there are more important things to consider.”

“If you start getting too far up the price range, I will let you know – but I’m sure that there is plenty in the account to get something that you like and is really nice. Not just one that will ‘do’!”

He reached across and laid his hand on her knee, which had often happened in the past, but the spark the shot through her body and settled in her innermost core, was something that she had never experienced the likes of before. She realised in that instant that what she had once thought she and James had; and certainly, what she had believed that she and ‘Mr Perfect’ had; was never of this intensity. Never before had she felt love of this depth and she realised in that moment that much of the hurt and anger she had felt over the past year was not because of the betrayals or humility, but because she had believed that she had irretrievably lost James.

Noticing the tears again welling up in her eyes, James pulled her into his shoulder and whispered in her ear, “In spite of everything that happened I found that I could not stop feeling anything but love for you and I am now really kicking myself for not coming back to see if I could try and fix things months ago. But we are here now, so let’s just be thankful that fate put us on that boat at the same time and move on together. The past will eventually become just a bad blip in history, and we can be stronger for the experience. I love you.” And he kissed her damp cheek.

The next few days were quite frantic. Buying rings – informing parents (who were a little shocked – very surprised and, secretly, pleased), arranging to take up the management of the concession on the ship and getting ready to sail.

But very soon all that last-minute rush was behind them, and life settled down to the shipboard routine. This, to their surprise and delight, enabled them to spend quite a bit of time together and with the complete change of environment and few outside distractions they quickly overcame the pressures and any lingering uncertainty about their rapid engagement faded.

By the time they reached Hong Kong Raewyn was totally comfortable with all aspects of the running of the shop and the Manager was happy to have her continue for the rest of the season and finally right back to Auckland. She soon fitted in with other concession holders and the crew and felt right at home.

As the weeks and months passed, they started to seriously think about a wedding and started to tentatively plan dates during the leave that they would be due when they arrived back in New Zealand. They also began discussing what they would do after they were married. Would James continue working on the cruise boats and would she get a job ashore and, importantly, how did they feel about the separations that would result from that arrangement. Then, out of the blue, when with a group of the crew they were sitting around talking, someone asked if they had ever thought about a wedding on the ship.

That was a few days prior to their arrival back in Hong Kong before the final stage of their cruising back via San Francisco and the Pacific Island to New Zealand. There, was waiting for them another surprise. The owner of the shop franchise had decided to sell and, as Raewyn had made such a

good job of running it and seemed to enjoy the work, she was making the first offer to her. Hurried consultations with James and they decided that they would 'go for it'. That also crystallised their thinking on the wedding and, after discussions with the Captain about what was required, many telephone calls and visits to consular offices, it was arranged.

There were two cabins available from Honolulu to Auckland and both sets of parents were to fly to meet the ship in Honolulu. On the leg between Honolulu and Tahiti they were to be married. After arrival in Auckland, they were to take a month's honeymoon, during which time the previous owner of the boutique had agreed to manage it for them. And then off to a season of cruising the South Pacific for the southern season and the start of a new life together as husband and wife.

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