

NORMAN HALL

GOOD GIRL

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*For Nicky*



## CHAPTER 1

Sujay Bahadur Gurung stood patiently on the edge of the trail, gaze fixed on the lone figure standing on a ridge a hundred metres away. He was weighed down by two backpacks: his own small daypack and the larger, heavier one belonging to his charge. It was not unusual for him to provide such assistance to foreign trekkers, as they invariably brought more than they could easily carry themselves, or usefully need. But he had been standing there a while and even his strong, broad shoulders were beginning to ache a little. He knew he faced the prospect of lugging both of them most of the way back, so he lowered the heavier of the two to the ground and checked his watch.

It was just after 5 p.m. and the sun was steadily going down behind Langtang Lirung, at 7,227 metres the tallest mountain in the valley. The light would deteriorate rapidly over the next hour and it would be dark within two. They had a three-hour trek back to the village where food, beer and a bunk in a teahouse awaited them, and although there was no inherent danger walking at night, he knew the temperature would drop dramatically.

He also knew that despite the weight of his backpack, his charge was not properly equipped for an extended walk in the Himalayan night air, even if it was downhill most of the way. But he had agreed to take the old gentleman to the place he wanted to go to – had insisted on going to – and despite his better judgement, he had felt obliged to take the job.

He hoped for, but did not expect, a big tip, his natural humility precluding any thought that it be taken for granted, and, even though his customer seemed like an honourable gentleman from England, he had been disappointed many times before.

But time was pressing, and he looked at his watch again: 5.09. He would have to call time soon. His experience taught him that staying any longer was going to make things difficult for them both; and, after all, the old gentleman had been up there for thirty minutes. What was there to see any more?

Sujay could envisage the view from the ridge down into the valley basin, but he had no need to go up there himself and take another look. He had seen it many times, both before and after the terrible events of April, and he wanted to remember it as it had been. Before. His charge was standing ramrod straight, binoculars raised to his eyes, slowly panning the valley below, left, right, up, down and back again. There was nothing there, Sujay knew. It was time.

Up on the ridge, the old gentleman peered intently down the barrels of his glasses, hope gradually receding that he might finally find some clue as to what he was looking for. The valley floor was four hundred metres below him, Langtang Lirung and the rest of the Himal range towering over it like giants, their forbidding and foreboding presence threatening, but currently benign and inert. And from Langtang Lirung itself, sweeping into the valley from two thirds of the way up its massive slopes, a continuous trail of scree and rock that extended right across the valley and beyond.

In the valley basin, there was little sign of life and no evidence of anything untoward or unusual; an otherwise natural scene, disturbed here and there by a random splash of colour, a red or yellow or white speck, a blue flash, incongruous in the brown and barren wasteland. Nothing, other than a solitary abandoned building, standing proud but forlorn, nestled up close to the base of the mountain. He didn't know what he had expected to see and had been told

by those who knew better, his guide included, there was, in fact, nothing to see. But he knew he had to come here.

The guide had tried to talk him out of it, but he had been insistent, uncompromising; and eventually, as ever, money swayed the decision. After all, Sujay had a young wife and child and this was his job. A young wife and child, he thought with a sad irony. Now there's something worth fighting for.

He panned across the valley again and then up at the mountain to the north, a swirl of evening cloud around its peak. He could hear nothing but the chattering of birds and the faint rush of the breeze, a distant howl of wind as it swirled around the valley, and as time wore on, he sensed it getting noticeably cooler. The scene could be idyllic, was idyllic, and without the knowledge of what had happened here four months ago, uplifting.

New life was forming below him, replacing the old, the endless cycle continuing. Relentless. *Immortality is temporary, young man*. Indeed. The words came back to haunt him, had been in his consciousness for many years, and now stabbed him like a dagger to the heart. His concentration was suddenly broken by the sound of a distant voice.

“Colonel Peter, sir? Please, we must go now.” The cry sounded plaintive, or perhaps it was just the accent.

Without turning, Colonel Peter Jeffries, Intelligence Corps (retired), slowly lowered his binoculars, although his eyes remained fixed on the scene below. Maybe it was the temperature together with the wind chill, or even the altitude, but his eyes were glassy and moist. There could be no other explanation. Dammit. Dammit to hell!

Reluctantly, he stood down. Involuntarily, his body sagged, his shoulders drooped and his head slowly tilted forward, eyes trying to focus on the blurry image of the dusty ground at his feet. The pain was almost overwhelming. It was over.

## CHAPTER 2

Jess wiped her brow with a bare arm and returned to the task of trying to remove the stain on the carpet. Squatting on the floor, alone in the boardroom of Walkers Limited, suppliers of plastic mouldings to the furniture trade, *By Appointment to Her Majesty the Queen*, she dabbed at the dark patch on the carpet with her chemically doused sponge.

Clive had told her to carry out her usual vacuuming–washroom–bins–desks routine and then go into the boardroom and try and get rid of some nasty mark, coffee presumably, that the chairman’s PA had reported. She had done her best, but it would take more than one application of cleaning fluid and a lot more dabbing if she was to avoid taking the colour out of the carpet as well, so she would report progress, such as it was, and try again tomorrow.

It was 7 a.m., nearing the end of her four-hour shift, and although she had no urgent desire to get home, she knew she had other tasks to perform today and needed to get on with them. She would text Clive and no doubt he would moan at her. She could only do her best, but for Clive her best was never good enough. Given a choice, she would tell him what to do with his job. She had no choice.

She packed away her cleaning kit in the storeroom, put on her coat and left the building, touching her key fob to the alarm panel as she left. The building was still empty, and unless some extremely diligent office worker wanted to get an early start, she usually worked there alone, which was the way she preferred it. The staff at Walkers would not be arriving for another hour or so, and she had neither the time nor the desire to chitchat with anyone, at any time. She had nothing to say and work to do.

She crossed the car park just as the industrial estate was coming to life, vans arriving at various warehouse units and

the occasional sound of metal shutters rattling upwards, heralding the start of a new working day. She turned left out of the factory gates, hands in pockets, and set off on her thirty-minute walk home.

She could get the bus, and provided she didn't have to wait more than ten minutes for it, she would save another ten on the overall journey time; but that cost money, and money was something she just didn't have. She had plenty of time, though. Plenty of time before her next job, and she was content to walk in the cool morning air and see the new day unfolding.

The traffic was building up, many commuters trying to get a head start on the motorised mayhem that was a regular feature of life in Wellingford, as elsewhere. She knew nothing about cars, had never owned one and never driven. Her dad had had one once, she recalled, and she remembered it crammed with possessions when they had moved up from London, but it had been taken away many years ago.

She passed a parade of shops, all still closed apart from the newsagents and the ubiquitous coffee bars doing a brisk trade in takeaway cappuccinos and pastries. She loved the smell of coffee, and often thought she might indulge herself in the luxury of a latte or an Americano, whatever they were, but not today. Maybe another time.

The bus she didn't get overtook her as she passed the two giant gasometers bordering the cricket ground. It had been five minutes late and would still have been a slightly quicker option, but she had saved £1.60 and that was worth it. And she was in no hurry.

She was home by 7.30 a.m., back to her tiny two-bed terraced house in one of the myriad narrow backstreets, her quiet place of refuge, her open prison. She never left the lights on when she was out at work, she couldn't afford it, and so the gloom and silence she had left five hours earlier was still there to greet her return.

She closed and locked the front door behind her, shrugged off her coat, tossed it over the back of the sofa and then trudged straight upstairs for a shower. Normally she would only have a forty-five-minute turnaround before leaving for the office, but today was Tuesday so she had more time. She didn't start till 12 noon on a Tuesday and worked through till 8 p.m. – a concession generously granted by Derek, as he often reminded her, but an arrangement she knew suited him just as well.

She dressed plainly, as usual, in white blouse, black trousers. Office wear. Neutral, colourless, innocuous, anonymous. She wished she could be anonymous, wished she could simply disappear, disconnect, go off-grid, escape this miserable existence and the relentless flow of bad things that had haunted her continuously for the last four or five months. Existence was pretty much all she had, and she didn't much care for it.

Tidy as ever, she made the bed. A double, but only one side needed attention as only one side was ever slept in. She went downstairs into the tiny but spotlessly clean kitchen, and turned on the radio. For a twenty-three-year old, listening to Radio 4's *Today* programme would be regarded by most people as unusual, to say the least. But Jess had no desire to be bombarded by puerile, contrived banter and inane pop music. She would much rather be in touch with what was going on in the world, and, perversely, the incessant diet of doom, gloom and despondency – the health service, the railways, the police, prison service, teaching, the economy ... you name it, it was in crisis – helped to put her own situation into some sort of perspective.

She put a cup of water in the kettle and flicked the switch. She opened the fridge door. Half a bottle of milk, half a white sliced loaf, a couple of yoghurt pots and a small piece of cheese. The fridge was never full; it didn't need to be. She didn't eat much, and she was on her own. She popped a single slice of thin white bread into the toaster and

took a small jar of Marmite from the cupboard it shared with a half jar of marmalade, some tea bags and a couple of tins of baked beans.

She sat at her kitchen table, sipping her tea, her wet hair slowly drying, looking out at the back garden through the half-glass kitchen door. The radio burred on in the background with an item about poverty.

“Define poverty,” the presenter asked the lady from the Joseph Rowntree Trust.

“Poverty is when you don’t have enough to get by, when you have to make a choice between heating and eating.”

Jess heard the words but they didn’t register. She didn’t need anyone to explain. That was just for the ones who didn’t know, so they could feel a rush of concern before they got back to their comfortable lives.

“The official definition is living on less than sixty per cent of the average income,” she continued. Jess heard that one and looked at the radio with a frown. She was no maths scholar, but poverty as this woman had defined it sounded pretty good to her. She knew what poverty was. She had her own definition, and it had little to do with money.

Her eyes strayed to the framed photograph of a young girl, three years old, which sat permanently on the kitchen table. Long brown hair, big brown eyes, smiling, happy. It wasn’t a complete picture as it only filled the left-hand side of the frame, a ragged edge the boundary between it and the black backing card. And on the little girl’s shoulder, an adult hand. Large, brown-skinned, a signet ring and a fragment of gold watch at the edge, its owner invisible, expunged from the scene.

Jess often looked at the picture and thought about packing it away out of sight, or even throwing it away, but couldn’t bring herself to. The picture was there, and it would always be there, a lesson from the past, for as long as she lived; however long that might be. Leila would stay with her forever.

Her attention was also drawn to the letter that lay on the table in front of the photo. It had landed on the mat yesterday while she was at work. She had read it once last night and much of the small print made no sense to her, but that didn't affect its meaning or her understanding of it. It bore the official seal of Wellingford County Court and the heading was unambiguous: "Notice of Eviction" addressed to "M Y Khalid and J A Khalid" as well as "The Occupiers", a catch-all in the event the owners were not the only residents of 14 Spencer Street.

She had received many letters over the past few months warning about non-payment of mortgage arrears, each stronger and more threatening than the last, but she had not been able to do anything about them. She knew it was simply part of a process, and she had no idea how long the process would take; but, inevitably, time was up. The bank had applied to the court and, according to the letter in front of her, she had to leave the house within four weeks with all her belongings; otherwise, they would be taken out for her and stacked on the pavement.

She scanned the letter again and gazed out of the kitchen window at her ramshackle back garden. This could have been a nice house – was a nice house – with a nice family, and things could have been so much better, but what little hope remained had dissolved in the text of the letter. It was final and there was no going back. Not for the first time in her life did she reflect on the fact that the actions of others had driven her to the edge of a precipice and were about to push her off. And not for the first time did she feel numb and impotent in the face of this latest adversity.

She put the letter down on the kitchen table next to the photograph of the young girl and went upstairs to finish drying her hair and prepare herself for the Tuesday morning ordeal. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and made a vain attempt to smarten her long brown hair, first tying it back with a band and then flicking out a few strands

in an effort to counter the starkness of her pale, emaciated face. There was an attractive young woman under the ghostly pallor, but it was rarely seen.

When she had done all she could do, she returned downstairs to the sitting room. She heard the 9 a.m. pips on the radio. It was time to go. She switched off the radio, threw on her tatty black coat and, picking up a supermarket carrier bag containing her few personal possessions, let herself out of the house.

It was a forty-minute bus ride to Brinfield, and she sat alone on the top deck as the fields flashed by outside. It was turning into a bright and sunny day. She should be feeling good, she thought.

## CHAPTER 3

Tracey Shepherd sat alone behind the reception desk of Debita Debt Management, opening the mail. Blonde, petite, bustling, and prone to being a little overzealous in the make-up department, she sliced open the envelopes with her paper knife and unfolded the contents one by one, sorting the paper into distinct piles for distribution.

The quantity of physical mail was steadily reducing in volume, but there were a number of established clients who still preferred the old method. Wellingford Borough Council was one of them.

Her employer was retained under contract by Wellingford to collect council tax arrears and ultimately, if necessary, take action through the County Court for the recovery of unpaid tax. Wellingford was a “Caring, Sharing in the Community” borough and its chief executive felt it unseemly, or more likely politically imprudent, to be seen to be harassing its citizens, especially the poorer ones, for unpaid debt, so preferred to outsource the dirty work to a third party. The mailbag, slight though it was, usually contained one or two letters from Wellingford formally advising of another miscreant council taxpayer, and there was nothing different about today’s.

Except that today, one such letter had caught Tracey’s eye and she studied it intently, wishing it were not true. She hoped there had been an error, a case of mistaken identity, but there was no doubt. She looked up into space for a moment and bit her bottom lip, pondering the implications, until she was distracted by the appearance of Derek’s PA, Jane, passing through reception clutching a bundle of files.

“Jane?” she called out, and Jane turned and approached reception. Tracey handed over the letter. “I think Derek had

better see this.” Jane scanned the letter briefly and looked back at Tracey with the same expression of concern.

“Oh dear. Okay, no problem,” she said before exiting reception through the glass double doors. Tracey sat back in her chair and sighed. She carried on with her work but within five minutes the reception phone rang. Internal call. Tracey pressed the button to answer.

“Yes, Derek?”

“Where is she?”

“She’s on lates. She’ll be in at 12.”

“Tell her I want to see her the moment she gets in.”

“Yes, Derek.”

*Oh no.* Tracey couldn’t help feeling guilty, somehow responsible for betraying her friend. But what could she have done?

## CHAPTER 4

Jess finished the last 200 yards of her journey on foot, turning into a busy car park, the entrance to which bore a large white sign: “St James Nursing Home – Compassionate Caring For All.” Tuesday. Her least favourite day of the week. But she had promised, and that was that.

She trudged up to the front door and rang the bell. St James had a primitive but robust attitude to security. No one could get in through the front door without a key, and keys were only available to staff. After a moment, the door opened and an Asian woman in a nurse’s uniform greeted her fondly with a big smile.

“Oh hello, Jess! How are you today?” said Nisha, beaming from ear to ear as she held the door to let Jess enter the vestibule.

“Fine thanks, Nisha. Are you well?” replied Jess with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. She liked Nisha a great deal. She was always smiling and happy and courteous, and she seemed to enjoy her work, however traumatic that must be. Jess always wondered how anyone could be so unremittingly cheerful when confronted day in, day out by death and dying and hopelessness. It should put her own position into some sort of perspective, she told herself. But it didn’t. Anyway, seeing Nisha again would no doubt be the highlight of her day and she should savour it while she could.

“I’m very well, thank you,” replied Nisha, seeming genuinely grateful for the enquiry into her health and with that little side-to-side shake of the head that for Hindus signalled the affirmative rather than the contrary.

“How is he?” asked Jess automatically as she leant over the visitors’ book to sign herself in. The same conversation each week. The same answer.

“Oh, he’s okay,” the word “considering” left unsaid, as always. But unusually, Nisha did have something to add. “But he has a mild chest infection, so the doctor has given him antibiotics.”

Jess put down the pen and considered this new information for a moment. A mild chest infection in someone confined to a nursing home had a somewhat greater significance than it did for most people. Still, action was being taken, and that was no more and no less than she expected at St James.

“Okay, thanks,” said Jess, then she exited through the internal glass doors.

Nisha dutifully maintained her smile as Jess left, but it quickly evaporated as she watched her walk down the corridor and turn left up the stairs to the first floor.

Nisha thought Jess a troubled girl, but she was very fond of her and was concerned. *So sad*. She was less enamoured with her father but then she had experienced abuse in one form or another all her life, from back home in Rajasthan to the moment she had set foot in Britain, and ever since. It was just something you got used to and had to deal with. *So sad to think Jess may not be visiting again*. The sound of the doorbell ringing startled her out of her thoughts, and the beaming smile returned.

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Joe Butler was up and dressed but asleep in his chair. It was a fitful sleep punctuated by coughing and snorting and wheezing, interspersed by a vague and incoherent mumbling; confirmation, as if Jess needed it, that Joe was indeed a bit under the weather.

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