



Chapter 1

Ronald Arthur Stilton, nicknamed 'Cheesy' by his old classmates, for obvious reasons, walked quickly along the street, pulling his muffler up around his nose and mouth in an effort to keep warm. The December day was cold and it looked as though the country was in for a hard winter.

'Cheesy', or Ronnie, as he preferred, wasn't sure exactly where he was going but would probably end up at the Salvation Army's soup kitchen where he could be sure of a decent meal.

Life had never been kind to him. Born with an unusual bone formation in his face Ronald was rejected by his unmarried mother who signed him over to Social Services for adoption. It never took place, of course, as prospective parents didn't warm to the idea of a child who appeared quite so ugly. Doubtless there were kind people who could see past the outer shell to a baby who deserved a chance in life and a loving home but unfortunately for Ronnie, they never came his way.

He had a miserable time for years in the Children's Home he was brought up in. The other boys ostracised him and he was never allowed to join in their games. The Staff practically ignored him except to provide him with food, clothing and a small room on the top floor.

It wasn't much better at school except for a teacher named Mrs. Brown who tried to help him and to insist that in her class he was treated as everyone else.

He never had a real friend of his own but at least he had a tolerable time whilst he was at Clicton Infant School. One teacher Mrs Brown had shown him the only

kindness he ever remembered. She tolerated no nonsense in class and every child was treated the same. She always behaved as though Ronnie was just like the other small pupils in her class. If anyone dared to throw something Ron's way then they were made to stand in the corner for a while and then made to apologise.

When it was time to move to Cliction Junior School things were not so good. No one there took much of an interest in him, the teachers didn't seem to know how to treat him and the other pupils behaved as children often do. They either ignored him or laughed at him behind his back. He wasn't stupid and he saw them laughing at him on numerous occasions.

A strong resentment began to build up in 'Cheesy' who vowed that one day they would be sorry. "Who are they to act this way," he frequently mumbled to himself. "It isn't right. I have done nothing to upset them. Why do they have to behave so badly?"

Life at Comprehensive School was worse as some of the boys would follow him when he left school making loud monkey noises and knocked off his cap.

One of them called Denzil Orpington had punched him to the ground on a few occasions and he had bruised badly. Denzil's girlfriend Beth Sleighthouse always stood around laughing and egging on her boyfriend whom she affectionately called 'Bruiser'. Ronnie hated them both and was determined that somehow he would make them and the rest of the gang regret their actions. If he had to spend most of his life planning his revenge, make no mistake, it was going to happen.

When he was fifteen he was sent by the doctor, who visited the home, to see a consultant at the University Hospital. He was offered surgery and was advised to take the opportunity to have some reconstruction work performed on his face. After much persuasion he agreed to it. He would accept anything that would keep him away from school for a lengthy period and at least here he was shown some understanding and kindness. Who could tell? Maybe he would end up looking normal which was all he had ever wanted.

Sadly surgery failed to make him look any better. In fact his once sunken nose now seemed the most prominent facial feature. In Cheesy's opinion he looked worse than before and he refused to entertain the idea of having further surgery.

At last on this cold December evening, he shuffled into the warm hall where Salvation Army Officers served up a decent hot meal. He took his plate and sat at one of the long tables and gratefully ate everything quickly.

He had been one of the lucky ones and was early enough to secure a bed for the night at a nearby hostel. After he had checked in there, he lay on his bed plotting his revenge on some of those who had hurt him in the past. 'Bruiser' and his gang would regret the day they ever met him.

He was twenty two years old now and it was time to plan for his future. "Which way would his life go?" he asked himself. "Could he ever be a success in life or would it be downhill even from this low point. Was there anything he could do to improve his lot in life?"

Chapter 2

Denzil Orpington had progressed well once he knuckled down to work at school. He was from, what he described, as a middle class home and had parents who believed that they had supported him well. It was true that they had encouraged him to follow his dream of becoming an accountant but that's as far as things went. His mother was out a great deal eating, drinking and making merry with her fine friends

while his father never had much time for his son whom he regarded as lazy. A frequent clip round the ear was his way of encouraging his son to work harder.

Perhaps Denzil's eventual choice of profession would seem strange to some of his old classmates but he had always enjoyed maths and had done well in his 'O' and 'A' level examinations which stood him in good stead to go to University to study accountancy.

Once he had qualified he found it relatively easy to land a job with a large firm of accountants in his home town of Clicton. When he had been with the firm for a year he thought that he could now manage to put down a deposit on a house and then look around for a girl with whom to share his life. Beth Sleighthouse had ditched him for some bookworm of a fool called 'Henry'. Well she had never known a good thing when she saw it so as far as he was concerned he was well off without her. He needed a partner who was at least as intelligent as himself. The Blicktons had the gall to live around the corner from him but perhaps he should have checked who lived in the neighbourhood before he bought his house. Well never mind, perhaps she would regret her choice when she saw how well he was doing and what a corker his prospective wife would be.

Denzil's parents still considered that they had been good to him but as far as Nigel was concerned they could have done a great deal more for him and he began to find it oppressive to have his every move scrutinised even though he was now an adult. Feeling that he now needed a place of his own, he had recently arranged a mortgage on a detached house close to the office. He moved and was settling in to a reasonably happy routine when three months later, unknown to him things were about to change.

He left work a little later than usual on Monday evening and as he hurried across the city centre he didn't pay much attention to the figure huddled outside a shop doorway shaking an old baked beans tin in an attempt to beg a few coins from passers by.

Denzil had lost weight and no longer resembled the fat slob who had tormented him in school but as Ronnie glanced up he would have recognised that supercilious fool anywhere.

He got up quickly and followed at a safe distance to see if he could find out where he lived. It didn't take all that long until he saw his quarry enter a smart detached house in Elmer Road. It had the kind of name that suited him well, 'Mon repose'. What an idiot Denzil was Ronnie thought. He still hated him and would make him pay. He was in no rush and intended to think carefully how best to get his revenge. If he could blackmail him he would. If he refused or started to use his old method of punching then he knew what he would do, kill him. He fingered the knife in his pocket and made his way back to the centre to try to beg a few more coins which would ensure him a meal and a bed for the night. Unlike the Salvation Army Hostel, the other in the city charged a small fee. Shivering in the cold he told himself that before long he would be well off. He intended to find a way of getting into that house in Elmer Road and helping himself to a few items before carrying out his plan of blackmail.

Chapter 3

Beth had been surprised the first time she saw Denzil in the vicinity of the city centre and had been going to stop and speak to him but he had given a brief nod and

curt "Hullo" and had passed on quickly. It surprised her but didn't unduly worry her for she had found him too clinging and possessive when she was at school and she felt she had become wiser in her choice of boyfriends after she left school. However, it did disappoint and annoy her a little that she had been more or less ignored by Denzil. Beth did not like to be ignored!

Her husband Henry had been a fellow student on an English course at university and they had been attracted to each other from Freshers' Week. They had enjoyed their time at Bristol University and both succeeded in gaining a degree. They then studied for a B.Ed degree as well and had finally secured teaching jobs in Clifton.

They bought a house near the city centre which was in the next road to Denzil Orpington. Denzil was going to have very little effect on Beth's life unlike her old classmate she knew as 'Cheesy'. Unfortunately for Beth she never thought of the boy she had helped to bully and was completely oblivious of any danger he might pose.

Beth rarely walked anywhere and had never noticed him in his favourite spot for begging, outside Boots the Chemist, just a few streets away from where she lived.

One evening Beth decided she was eating too much and not exercising enough. She took a pride in her appearance so thought as it was a mild evening she would take a short walk. She knew she should change her ways and become more active if she didn't want to become too much overweight. She set off to walk around the neighbourhood and passing Denzil's house she wondered if she should knock the door and attempt to smooth his obviously ruffled feathers. He was probably still annoyed that she had rejected him.

She decided against it at least for this evening. After all tomorrow was another day and she could always change her mind then.

Walking on she hadn't noticed the figure in the hooded duffle coat watching her from across the road. As she continued her circuitous route around the streets she was followed and observed entering her house by none other than 'Cheesy' Stilton. However one day soon she would be made very much aware of his whereabouts

Chapter 4

Bryn Blakely who had been another of the gang had never been academically gifted. When he left school he spent three months looking for a job. He liked money and knew it wouldn't fall into his lap. He needed to work and was delighted when he was offered a place in a large firm of building contractors who had a scheme for training carpenters within the firm.

His chance came when he answered an advertisement at the Job Centre which he diligently visited every day. He had applied and was offered an interview and a week later had been accepted for training. He had been on the minimum wage while serving his apprenticeship but now he was on a reasonable salary for a man of his age.

He still lived in his home town of Clifton and had met his old mate 'Bruiser' when the firm had been asked to make fitted cupboards for the new house in Elmer Road. Good old 'Bruiser' now insisted on being called Denzil. He seemed not too keen on renewing his friendship but that was O.K. by Bryn. He knew his old mate had always been a bit 'stuck up'. He imagined, for some unknown reason, that he was better than the rest of humanity, silly fool. As long as he paid on time Bryn was happy enough. He had plenty of friends both around the area he lived in and at work. He suspected 'Bruiser' was still a loner without any real friends of his own.

The firm had a policy whereby all customers were visited six months after work had been completed to check that they were satisfied and any problems rectified. It

was important for the good name of the business to have happy customers who would then be likely to recommend them to others.

Bryn had been asked to accompany one of the more senior people in the firm to check on the work at 'Bruiser's house early one evening. They were relieved to find the visit short and sweet as Mr. Orpington had been satisfied with the work carried out and had already recommended them to one of the men at the office.

Glad to get away quickly the men went their separate ways. After all there was more to life than work and both men had made plans to enjoy themselves having an evening meal at the pub with friends.

Bryn had no idea that another old classmate of his was watching from the end of the road. He was oblivious too that he was followed all the way home on the twenty minute walk to the housing estate in the older part of Clifton where the residences were considered to be less desirable than those in Elmer Road. Here in Duke Street the houses were older and had been built at the beginning of the last century. Bryn had a flat in his parents house but was currently saving hard to buy his own place probably in the same area. He had been happy living where he did but now he needed his freedom and to get away from the constant watchful eye of his mother. Much as he loved his parents, he felt he needed to live his life without any interference. He had no current girlfriend but was quite taken with a girl who frequented the same pub as he did on a Friday night. It was his intention to ask her out to see a film one evening. If his friendship was to grow he didn't want his parents observing his every move! As he thought of this he turned the key in the lock and went into his flat without seeing 'Cheesy' pass on the other side of the street.

Chapter 5

Ronnie had started keeping a record in a small notebook which he had stolen from a local stationer's. He knew it was a stupid thing to do. If he had been caught they would have called the police and he didn't want that kind of trouble in his life. He had to be certain that there was no police record if he wanted to achieve his dream of exacting revenge for his unhappy childhood. Someone had to pay and he'd make damn sure they did. The honest truth was that he couldn't afford the sixty five pence to buy the book. He wanted to keep a record of names and addresses of his future victims. He needed to know their routine and note down the times they left the house, where they went, how long they stayed and when they arrived home for the night. Planning was everything he decided.

The weeks went by and he had kept a record of the times his ex-classmates left and returned home. He had plenty of pages left for the other two tormentors if he was ever lucky enough to find them. They had not been so unkind to him but they did play their part in egging on the others. He wasn't too worried if he didn't find them but he intended to keep looking. He read what he had written so far and wished he could be neater but that had never been a strong point with him. At least he could read it and that was all that mattered. It read:-

Denzil

Leaves 8.30 a.m. - work

Returns 5.20 p.m.

Leaves 7.30 p.m. - Pub Returns

8.30 p.m. -

Bed 11.0 p.m.

Beth

Leaves 8.20 a.m. - work

Returns 4.30 p.m.

Leaves 8.15 p.m. - Walking

Bed 10.30 p.m.

Beth's Husband

Leaves with Beth at 8.20 a.m. - work

Returns at 5.0 p.m.

Leaves 8.0 p.m. - some kind of keep fit class

Returns 9.15 p.m.

Bryn

Leaves 8.0 a.m. - work

Returns 5.0 p.m.

Leaves 7.30 p.m. - Pub

Returns 9.0 p.m.

Bed - unknown

He decided to observe them for several months before making a move. As far as he had been able to tell the above times were their usual routine on weekdays. The weekends were different and he decided to keep clear as there were too many people about

during the day. Neighbours tended to pop into friends nearby and he didn't want to be noticed by anyone. He would have liked to know Bryn's bedtime as he was planning to visit just before that time to catch him by surprise but as he appeared to have an apartment at the back of the house it wasn't possible to see when lights went on and off.

His next aim was to try and procure a sharp knife but he was never going to have enough money for one. He didn't want to be caught stealing so would have to look around town to see what possibilities arose.

On the following two Saturdays he spent time visiting shops in the centre and on one street leading off the main shopping street, he found a place selling Swiss Army Knives. He spent some time looking in the window and noticed how busy it always became around 10.30 a.m.

He decided that on the next Saturday he would go in. He would wear the only other jacket he possessed as his duffle coat with hood would probably get him noticed in this up market shop. On the day in question he wore a trilby hat which he had stolen from one of the old men in the hostel one night and he looked fairly presentable with his jacket and tie. He entered the shop as soon as there were other customers keeping the owner busy and he browsed around. Besides their main knives they also carried a stock of antique daggers and one caught his eye. It was within easy reach and he decided to grab it when no one was looking. Waiting for his chance he snatched it while the owner was counting out change at the till and other customers were busy examining knives. He quickly secreted it in his inside pocket and quietly made his way to the door. Once outside he hurried as fast as possible to the nearby park where he had hidden his bundle of possessions behind some bushes. Changing back into his old duffle coat he sat on one of the benches grateful to have avoided detection. Fate was obviously on his side.

Chapter 6

Henry Blickton had fancied Beth the moment he saw her at university. He had been a very happy man when she returned his smile. Their romance had flourished quickly and looking back he blessed the day he had the good fortune to apply to the same university as Beth. He thought it strange how relationships happened almost by chance. What if he had been accepted at his second choice university? Would he have met someone else and now be married to her? As things were he thought himself a very lucky man. It seemed they shared everything and his wife had even told him how she had been involved with Denzil Orpinton who seemed a very unsavoury sort at least when he was at school. It seemed he had changed as he grew older and had managed to train for a good career. Well good for him! He admired a man who worked hard to better himself. He hoped Denzil would find happiness with someone else.

He had been surprised and sorry though to learn from Beth that Denzil had been such a bully at school and that Beth had gone along with it for fear of upsetting him. He knew it wasn't really her. She was a kind person at heart. Well children are sometimes drawn into things in an effort to be one of the crowd. They had both changed for the better as often happens with youngsters like that. They grow up and learn about life and how to respect others.

Henry longed for a son of his own but agreed with Beth that they needed to accrue some savings before they even thought of her giving up work for a while to concentrate on motherhood. They were both happy with the way things were at the moment. He knew that some people thought him a bit weird and bookish but he was as aware of the world as anyone else. Heaven help anyone who messed with him, after all he had gained a brown belt in martial arts the previous year. Discipline was the main thing it taught him, not that he really needed teaching that particular skill. He had always believed in behaving as one should. Respect for others and oneself. He was hoping to eventually teach martial arts. If he succeeded in obtaining his black belt early next year he would apply. These days it was good for a man to be prepared. There were some peculiar people walking the streets in every town or city. It was comforting to know that he would be able to protect himself, his wife and any family they had.

One thing Henry was oblivious of because Beth had never actually mentioned it to him, probably being unaware of it herself, was that she had an enemy. If only he had known he would have attempted to diffuse the situation and talk some sense into this would be killer but Henry didn't know. He was a very well rounded character but was completely unaware that he was followed daily and his whereabouts recorded by Ronald Arthur Stilton.

On the other side of town another old classmate of Beth's was about to be revealed to Beth, Denzil, Bryn and 'Cheesy'. Danny Lexington had been in their gang at school and had played his part in supporting 'Bruiser' mostly out of fear. He didn't enjoy hurting people but was too afraid of the class bully to be ostracised by the group. When he left school, he had breathed a sigh of relief, and had no desire to see any of the gang again. By nature he was a gentle soul and had since trained as a hairdresser for male and female clients only. He had trained in a large Salon in Bristol but had recently returned to Clifton where his parents and brother still lived. He had gone into partnership with his uncle Maurice who had spent his life trimming the hair of the local residents. He now hoped to expand their customer base with the skills he knew his nephew possessed. Danny was never going to marry, but

he hoped that somewhere there existed another gentle male who would love him for himself and become his long term partner. Danny had an aptitude for hairdressing. He could cut well, shape and style, perm, colour, in fact he had acquired all the skills a good hairdresser should have. He had recently entered a regional competition and much to his surprise had won. There would soon be a national event and he intended to enter that too. Very luckily for Danny he was about to make peace with an old classmate of his.

Having treated himself to the cinema on Wednesday evening he walked through the centre of town and noticed a figure sitting huddled begging outside of Boots the Chemist. He searched for a £1 coin and put it in the old tin on the pavement. He looked at the figure sitting there and then said, " Good God, Cheesy is that you? Man what's happened to you?" He crouched down and said, "What are you doing here? You're not homeless are you?"

After Ronnie had give a mumbled "Yes," Danny said. "That's hard mate. I hope things get better for you soon. Look I owe you an apology, I'm really sorry about what happened at school. I'm ashamed that I stood by without doing anything when that shit 'Bruiser' laid into you. I was just scared of him. If I can make it up to you in anyway I will. I'm a hairdresser now and work across town but if you want your hair cut at any time come on over and I'll do it free for you."

Ronnie was surprised. He hadn't given much thought to Danny and thought this was one man who had guts unlike the other members of the gang. He had been big enough to apologise and know he had been wrong.

"That's O.K. Danny. You are forgiven. I was scared stiff of 'Bruiser' too. I hope to God I never meet him again. I'd still run a mile to get out of his way. Thanks for the offer too. I may well take you up on it."

"Yes please do Ronnie. It would make me feel a bit better too to try and make amends. Here have one of my cards. It has my address on it. Come on over one day. It's always quiet on a Thursday morning for some reason," and with that he shook hands and hurried home.

'Cheesy' felt a bit unsettled. He had hoped none of his classmates would ever learn his whereabouts but he thought he had covered himself well when he had told Danny that he would run a mile if he saw 'Bruiser' again. Far from it! When he was ready he intended to confront him, corner him and kill him.

Chapter 7

Ronnie lay on his bed at the hostel that night and thought over the events of the day. Even for those down on their luck, as he was, some days could be very surprising. Who would have thought that one of the old gang would turn out to be an 'O.K. kind of guy' like Danny. Never in a million years would he ever have thought someone would apologise for him. It was a first! He might as well take him up on his offer too. No harm in getting a free hair cut so he'd wait a few days and then wander over there to see what the place was like.

The next few days passed as usual for him as he sat in his place in the town centre begging for a few coins to ensure a roof over his head for that night. The days were beginning to get colder and once or twice he had been moved on from his wet weather pitch inside one of the doorways. They said he was blocking the entrance which wasn't really true but he didn't want any trouble with the police so on wet days he made for the park where he found shelter from the weather in an old disused hut.

The roof leaked but at least he could dodge the worst of it by resting in the corner. He passed the time by reading his notebook and jotting down more entries.

On the afternoon of the following Thursday he decided that as he'd already made enough money to pay for his bed at the hostel, he'd walk over to Danny's place and get his hair cut. The day was sunny and a brisk walk would do him good, he thought. Reaching the other side of town he eventually found his way to the smart looking hairdressing shop. He stood outside looking in. There were four chairs facing large mirrors and he could see Danny and someone he guessed was Danny's uncle, busy with customers. There were two other people there waiting their turn. They all seemed to be laughing at something the uncle had said. He wasn't sure what to do. Should he go in now or wait until the customers left. He thought that was best so walked on a little way down the street and then crossed over to the other side where he could spot anyone going in or out of the hairdressing salon. Eventually three of them left so he strolled slowly back and peered in at the window. The uncle was still cutting the hair of the remaining customer and Danny was sweeping up. He suddenly looked up at the window and then waved. He came out, brush in hand, and said, "Ronnie! Glad you made it here mate. Come on in and look around the place."

He ushered Ronnie in and asked him to take a seat while he just finished brushing up and then they'd show him around, cut his hair if he wanted it cut and then all have a chat and a cup of tea. It was almost closing time anyway and they were not likely to get any more customers that day. It had been very busy all day and they'd be glad of an early finish. As soon as the last customer left Danny introduced his old classmate to his Uncle Maurice who shook him warmly by the hand and said, "Good to see you Ron, Danny said you might call by. Now shall I cut your hair while Dan gets us all a cup of tea?"

Not sure what to expect Ronnie took off his duffle coat and left it on the hook provided. Then sitting in one of the chairs, put himself in the hands of Danny's uncle. "Any idea which cut you'd like or do you want to leave it to me to shape it a bit?" asked Maurice who these days pronounced his name 'Maureece' in the French way, believing it gave a more 'classy' feel to the name of the salon.

"I've no idea how to have it cut to be honest. I've never bothered with it much as you can see," replied Ronnie.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, if it's O.K. with you. I'll trim it first of all and get some sort of shape to it and then we'll give it a quick shampoo and you'll be a transformed man!" That O.K. with you mate?"

"Sure, thanks, go ahead I'm all for a bit of improvement," said Ronnie

A half an hour later his look was completely transformed. He'd never be a handsome young man but at least he was now a tidy and presentable one. He thanked the uncle and Danny for this rare treat and then sat down with them to enjoy a cup of tea and the chocolate biscuits provided.

He thought he'd better get back to book in at the hostel and as he was leaving Maurice said, "Look Ron, why don't you come over one evening and we'll all have a meal together. I'm quite a good cook as Danny can vouch. Look at him he's putting on weight. He used to be such a puny kid but at last there is a bit of beef on him!"

"Yes do come over Ronnie, Uncle Maurice is fantastic at rustling up a tasty meal," added Danny.

"Oh thanks! I'd like that," replied Ronnie, hardly able to believe his good luck.

"O.K. make it next Thursday as it seems to be our quietest day and we usually finish work a bit earlier."

"Right I will and thanks so much for the haircut," replied Ronnie as he turned and left the salon.

Chapter 8

The following couple of weeks passed slowly for 'Cheesy' as he continued to monitor the comings and goings of Beth and her husband, Denzil and Bryn. He still intended to carry out his plan to take his revenge on all of them but he had decided that he would not harm Danny in any way. He and his uncle couldn't have been kinder and it looked as though he had his first real friend in Dan. He had firmly believed he would never have a friend of his own and it felt really good to know that someone actually cared about him.

When Thursday arrived at last he made his way over to 'Salon Maurice' at the appointed time. Danny opened the door and appeared to be bursting with news.

"Come in Ronnie, have I got some news to share with you!! You are never going to believe it but I am in the final round of the hairdressing competition!! Uncle Maurice is over the moon with excitement. Even if I don't win he says it will be good for the business as the local newspapers are sure to get hold of it."

"Crumbs Danny that's wonderful, well done, it looks as though you will become famous before long."

"Come on Ron, let's get upstairs and celebrate, uncle decided on roast chicken with all the trimmings for dinner and he bought a couple of bottles of bubbly to celebrate."

"I can't wait, it all sounds delicious," said a hungry 'Cheesy'.

They went up to the living quarters where Maurice was fussing about putting the finishing touches to the table settings.

"Hi Ronnie, have you heard the good news? Come on in, take his coat Danny, and you come and sit here Ron," Maurice said indicating one of the chairs.

"Gosh Mr. Lexington, it all looks wonderful, thanks so much for inviting me. I can't wait to sample it all," replied Ronnie.

"Enough of the 'Mr. Lexington' young man. I think you should call me 'Uncle Maurice' the same as Danny does."

Ronnie smiled and said he'd try to remember. It gave him a good feeling to be accepted as a friend by both of them. His luck had obviously changed.

Within minutes they all tucked into an excellent meal and a few glasses of Champagne after which Danny and Ronnie cleared the table and loaded up the dishwasher.

"Thanks so much Maurice," said Ronnie when they were all comfortably seated later.

"Our pleasure Ron and while you are here there is something we want to discuss with you. Danny is going to be busy now preparing for his trip to London for the finals of the competition and we were wondering whether you would consider helping out here. If it suited you we have a spare room on the floor above and you could have it rent free if you helped a little in the salon by keeping the place tidy and answering the 'phone. We may be able to manage a few quid at the end of the week too especially if the business increases as much as we are hoping. Oh by the way I don't know whether you realise it but there is a separate entrance to the living quarters. It's the front door next to the salon. If you decided to take us up on our offer you can have your own front door key."

"Oh my God! I can't believe you would do that for me," replied an astonished Ronnie.

"The way we see it is that we shall be doing each other a favour if you accept the offer."

"I may not be the most handsome fellow on the block Maurice but I'm not a stupid one and there is no way I can refuse such a generous offer! A million thanks and what's more I don't need to think about it. My answer is 'Yes please'."

"Excellent! Drink up then and Danny can show you the room and you can move in whenever you like."

Danny took his new friend upstairs and Ronnie was surprised at what a pleasant room it was. It was already furnished as a guest room and had a window overlooking the main road. He somehow felt he would be happy here and going downstairs again he explained that he had booked in the hostel for that night but he would love to move in on the following day.

Everyone agreed it would be the best thing to do and now Ron was going to have a permanent address he would be eligible to claim some money from the Government as his income would still be far below the national minimum wage.

Hugging his new friends he thanked them again and said he'd see them the following day and making his way back to the hostel he found it hard to believe that this might well be his last night seeking help from the Salvation Army.

Chapter 9

The following morning after breakfast at the hostel, Ronnie packed his few belongings into a plastic carrier bag he had removed from a rubbish bin at the park and left the hostel for what he hoped was the last time. He was grateful to them for without these places he would probably have died of cold last winter.

It was a fine sunny morning but there was a crisp feel of approaching winter in the air. It was just the weather for walking and as he walked through the park on his way to 'Salon Maurice', he thought he would have to suspend his long term ambition of making his old school tormentors pay. There was no hurry, they could all wait while he settled in his new home and helped out in the salon.

When he arrived at his new accommodation, he spotted Maurice and Danny at work as he passed the window of the salon, then he put proudly the key in the lock, hardly daring to believe he would now have a permanent home and no longer have to wander the streets. He went up the stairs two by two and opened the door to his room. Sitting on his bed he looked around trying to decide where to put his few things. He took his jacket from the plastic carrier bag and placed it on a coat hanger in the wardrobe where he saw a short white jacket and a pair of black trousers on their respective hangers. Danny probably forgot they were there so he'd remind him later. He was concerned that the oriental dagger would be a bit of a problem and decided that he would secrete it under the mattress for the time being. It was still in the original wrapping as he wanted to make sure his finger prints were never found on the weapon.

He noticed a note on a side table and went over to see what it was. It was a note from Maurice who had written, "Welcome to your new home Ron, if you are here before midday as planned, would you go to the kitchen and rustle us up some

corned beef sandwiches and a pot of tea for us all. You'll find the bread in the kitchen cupboard and I've washed some tomatoes and lettuce which are in a bowl in the 'fridge. We can then have a quick lunch before we get back to work. By the way did you see the jacket and trousers in the wardrobe? They are your uniform if you are going to help out in the salon. You seemed a standard medium size so let's hope they fit."

"Ronnie was excited as he took the jacket and trousers from the wardrobe and tried them on. They were almost a perfect fit and with his new hairdo he felt he was at least passable as a normal human being. He changed back into his own clothes, replaced his new uniform and went to the bathroom to freshen up a bit. That done he made his way to the kitchen where he found the things for lunch and had made the sandwiches just before Maurice and Danny arrived for lunch.

They seemed genuinely pleased that he was here and appeared to have settled in.

"Well done Ron these sandwiches are great," said Danny wolfing down the first one swiftly followed by a few mouthfuls of hot sweet tea.

"That's given me an idea," said Maurice. "We ought to diversify and offer our customers a range of sandwiches. Most of them are busy people who call in on their way to or from work. Others take an early lunch hour. They may all be happy to buy a few sandwiches."

"A good idea Uncle Maurice but if Ronnie is to help in the salon, when are we going to have time to make sandwiches. We start work early in the morning now and I don't think we could cope with any less sleep!" replied Danny

"The three of us could join forces and work as a team. We'd make them the night before and store them in the 'fridge until the following morning."

"It seems like a great idea to me," said Ronnie.

"Well we could give it a try for a few weeks, although I think we should wait until after my London trip." suggested Danny.

"Well we can leave it for a week or so until you are back and while Ron settles into the routine of work. When we finish this evening we'll show you what you would need to do each day Ron, but perhaps for this afternoon you could peel the vegetables for dinner? We have some chicken breasts and we can make a large chicken stew with dumplings. How does that sound?"

"Like I've died and gone to Heaven," joked Ronnie. "Only too pleased to help out Uncle Maurice," he chortled.

During the afternoon Ronnie peeled the vegetables as requested then went for a short walk in the park. He sat down on one of the benches and watched as a few people passed by. Nobody paid him any attention which really pleased him. All his life, until he had met Danny and Maurice, people looked back with curiosity if they caught sight of his face. Now with his transformed hairstyle he didn't need his hood to half cover his face. He felt he could look the world in the eye without blinking.

He wished he had had some cookery lessons at school but in those days it was girls only who graced the kitchens of Cliction School. If only he knew how, he'd have attempted to cook the stew for dinner so that it would save Maurice further work. He'd ask him to show him what to do so that he could make it in future.

Arriving back he found that the salon was just closing and he went upstairs to wait for the workers to arrive.

When he explained to Maurice he'd love to learn how to make the stew, Maurice was only too delighted to pass on his knowledge to Ronnie. It was good that

the lad wanted to learn. It would help them all in the future if he spent a little extra time now explaining what to do.

"It's simple really Ron, all you do is chop up all the vegetables finely, fry a chopped onion, and add it all plus the cut up chicken to a large saucepan, add a stock cube and pint and a half of water and bring it all to the boil quickly. Once boiling turn down the heat and simmer until everything is cooked. About thirty to forty minutes should do the trick. Meanwhile we need to make the doughboys with flour, margarine and a pinch of salt and pepper, form them into balls and drop them into the stew for the last twenty minutes," Maurice explained.

"You make it sound simple but I shall write it down after we've eaten and I'll give it a try next time it's on the menu," replied Ronnie.

"Good we'll look forward to it," said Maurice. "Let's have a sit down and a glass of wine while we wait for it to finish cooking. After we've eaten Dan can take you down to the salon and just run through what we'd like you to help with."

After they had eaten a very tasty first course, followed by an apple pie and custard which had been purchased from a small shop further down the street, Danny showed Ron how to sweep up after he and his uncle had cut the hair of each customer. "In this job Ron, we need to smile and be pleasant to the customers whether we take to them or not. They are our bread and butter so we want them to keep coming back. After each one has gone give the washbasins a quick rub over with the wet wipes provided, and take two clean towels from the pile over there and place them the rail at each side of the basin. Another job you could do is to make sure these shampoo bottles are filled from the larger containers over there on the shelf. Always take the bottles over to the sink in the small room over there. Never try to do it at the sinks here in the salon. It doesn't look right and there is quite a skill in filling them without having it overflow and run everywhere. Don't worry about things mate. It isn't rocket science and you'll soon get the hang of it."

Ronnie said he was looking forward to being useful to someone and couldn't wait to get started the following morning. After his brief introduction to the work in the salon, the two friends went back upstairs to relax with Maurice and to watch one of Danny's favourite T.V. programmes.

Chapter 10

Ron was up early the following morning. He had a wash, then donned his new uniform. Going down to the kitchen he found Maurice and Danny already there eating a breakfast of cereal, toast and marmalade.

"Good Morning Ron, are you ready for business?" asked Maurice.

"Sure thing boss, I'm ready, willing and able as you see," replied Ronnie cheerfully.

"Our first customer, Mr. Parsons, is sure to be waiting as he's always outside at 8.0 o'clock on a Friday. He likes to have a trim, every two weeks, on his way to work. Once you get to know the regulars you can open the door and welcome them in. Just watch how it's done when I open the door this morning."

"You'll be fine Ron," said Danny. "They are all quite a decent lot really and will be interested to see you as it's only been uncle and me here until now. Don't be afraid to chat them up a bit if they speak to you. Some of them seem to enjoy the banter."

They cleared up quickly and made their way down to the salon where sure enough Mr. Parsons was waiting. Ronnie watched as Maurice opened the door and said,

"Good morning Mr. Parsons, welcome! Quite a bright day I see, and you have just made it that bit brighter. Come on in and take your usual chair,"

Mr. Parsons smiled and said, "You are always a flatterer Maurice. On with the trim and give me a quick shave today please, I need to look my best as we have visitors at the office this morning. They could be good for business so I want to make a good impression."

"No problem at all, we'll have you looking as great as one of the royal princes," joked Maurice.

"Ah, the one thing even you can't do Maurice is to make me as tall as them! If only....!", he said laughingly.

He spotted Ron, standing in a corner, brush in hand, "Oh do you have a new assistant?"

"Yes this is a friend of ours Ronnie, and it's his first day here."

"Oh good luck Ronnie! You could do much worse than work here. These are good guys and quite talented too. Our Danny is off to London soon I believe?"

"Only for a couple of weeks Mr. Parsons," said Danny. "I wouldn't move there for any amount of money. I love it here."

"Good, well said young man! You see Ronnie that's the kind of loyalty we like about this place. Anyway you settle in and you'll be fine."

"Thanks Mr. Parsons, I will," said Ronnie shyly.

Soon a number of customers came in and took their place in the chairs provided. As Maurice and Danny finished cutting the hair of each one, Ronnie swept up, cleaned the washbasins that had been used, changed the used towels for clean ones and did his best to answer pleasantly when addressed by various customers.

The time seem to pass very quickly and before long Maurice said, "O.K. well done both of you. Turn the sign on the door to 'closed' Ron. It's time to go up for a spot of lunch. Friday afternoon can be quite busy so we need be get down here by 2.0 p.m. sharp.

After enjoying a Pizza Marguerite with salad they returned for the afternoon shift. It went much the same as the morning and Ronnie felt more relaxed and enjoyed the feeling of being useful.

That evening Maurice said he was really pleased with the way things had gone. He was a little concerned at how they would manage while Danny was in London but hoped his customers would not mind waiting a little longer than usual. Now Ronnie was helping out they would probably manage and hopefully not lose any custom.

That next few weeks passed quickly and it was soon time for Danny to make the trip to London. He was given many instructions by Maurice and taking it all in good part he hugged his uncle and asked him to keep his fingers crossed that he would at least do well and come somewhere near the top. If he could achieve that then his name would become known in all the right places.

The three of them went to the station together and eventually the train came in and Danny found a window seat and as the train drew out of the station he waved happily at the two standing on the platform waving frantically and giving a thumbs up sign.

Danny wondered what the future held and prayed he'd do well and make Uncle Maurice proud of him.

Chapter 11

Danny was too tense to relax as his journey started. He was nervous but very excited at the thought of being in the final. His parents would have been so proud of him. He missed them greatly since the car accident which had taken them from him when he was ten years old. What a godsend Uncle Maurice, his father's brother, had been taking him in and loving him like the son he had always wanted. It had taken him some years to get over the shock of losing his parents and he felt it was one reason that he had been persuaded to join Bruiser's gang at school. People are so peculiar at times he thought. Who would have thought poor old Ron would turn out to be a decent fellow. He hoped the others had grown up a bit too and that as adults they were ashamed of their behaviour at school. At least he had been given the opportunity of making it up to Ron.

He ran through in his mind the stages of the competition. First cut and style the fairly long hair of a male model, followed by a female. Then create a unique style for a volunteer for the last stage.

All equipment would be provided at the leading London establishment which was to host the competition. The T.V. cameras would be there and all the finalists were to wear a short sleeved white top and black trousers. Well no change there then. At least that was what he was used to. He had several of his own styles which he could use for the third stage but it would all depend on the shape of his model's face as to which he would use. It was going to be a tense situation and he just prayed he was up to it. Almost before he knew it the train arrived at Paddington Station and he collected his overnight bag and made his way to the exit where he queued for a taxi to take him to the West End of the city where he had been booked into a hotel near the salon.

When he arrived he went to check in and was asked to go to the small lounge just to the left of reception where the other contestants were gathering and where they would be met by two of the organisers. He did as instructed and found that he was the last to arrive. One of the older men approached him and said, "You must be Danny Lexington then?"

"Yes that's right," replied Danny.

"Welcome and good luck for the competition. As you see the other five contestants have arrived so first of all we are all going to have coffee and cakes so that we can chat and get to know each other. Our aim is to get you all as relaxed as possible so that hopefully you will all have a happy stay in London whatever the outcome."

"Thank you, that sounds wonderful," replied Danny.

The coffee cups and cakes had been placed on a table at the side of the room and everyone was asked to help themselves. The six contestants needed no second invitation. They quickly made their way to the refreshments and began talking to each other as they stood around.

One young man was from the Devon, one from Scotland, one from Wales, a young lady from Northern Ireland, another from London and Danny from Clifton. They all seemed friendly and each was thrilled to be here. Each was ready to show their skills to the world.

After a twenty minute break they were all asked to take a seat while the organisers explained how the following day would be organised. In the morning after breakfast they were to assemble in the foyer of the hotel where they would be escorted around the corner to the salon so that they could get a feel of the place. They

would have a short welcome speech from the owners of perhaps the most famous salon in London. After approximately an hour they would be free until lunch time. At 1.30 p.m. they would be taken back to the salon for the first stage of the competition which would be held at 2.0 p.m. when marks would be given but kept secret until the evening. It would all be filmed by the T.V. crew to be shown later that evening just before the final stage.

The contestants enjoyed the day enormously and chatted amicably as they returned to the hotel. After that events went as planned and it seemed that competition day arrived more quickly than anticipated. They soon found themselves standing behind the first of the volunteer models who were already seated in the salon. They were told which model they had been allocated and told to wait for instructions to start.

Soon a voice said, "Are you all ready? Three, two, one, off you go!"

The six finalists started cutting and shaping the head of hair in front of them. Danny had the presence of mind to ask the model if he had any preference regarding style and he said he would like the same cut as the one currently seen on the footballer Beckham. Danny smiled and said he'd do his best. Secretly he was overjoyed that over the last few weeks he had studied the hairstyles of the rich and famous, the football legend being one of them.

Everyone snipped away with care and finally, job done, stood back to admire their handiwork. A spontaneous clapping sounded as those present, including the T.V. crew, showed their approval at the results.

Then the second models took their place in the chairs and the same procedure as before took place. After the countdown Danny asked his model whether there was any style she preferred and she opted for the same as the one she had seen last week on Amanda Holden, singer and T.V. star whom she greatly admired. Again Danny has been blessed by someone above, he thought. This was another style he had studied feeling there was a good chance it may be requested.

The contestants and models were thanked and everyone invited to refreshments. They were reminded that the marks would be made public at that evening.

Chapter 12

The rest of the afternoon seemed to pass very slowly for the contestants as they nervously waited for 6.30 p.m. to arrive. Some of the top names in hairdressing had been invited to the live show and for the winner and runner up of the competition it would be a life changing experience. They would become household names for the chic and beautiful of Britain.

At last it was time! For the last time the small group of six was escorted to the salon, were quickly prepared, by the make up staff, for the cameras and all too soon it seemed they found themselves standing waiting for their models to arrive.

Danny noticed the group of important looking guests seated in a group behind them. They would be watching their every move and would doubtless play a recording of the programme over and over to examine their work from every angle. At last the countdown began from ten to zero. Then they heard, "We are live."

A fanfare of music was heard and the six beautiful young women arrived, as only models do. Slender, chic and confident, they took their places in the chairs provided and it was time to show what the contestants could do.

Danny welcomed his model, speaking quietly to avoid being heard on T. V. then confidently snipped away and shaped her long blonde hair into the style he had been perfecting in his mind for the last few weeks. He called it 'London Bridge,' and it consisted of a bouffant style at the crown, and ringlets falling behind and secured on either side by a plaited strand which held the hair tidily at the back. He secured it with a small jewelled slide that had belonged to Maurice's elderly aunt. Most of the others he noticed had gone for short style and he hoped he hadn't just ruled himself out of the competition.

Soon the allotted time was up and they were told to stop. All had finished and were relieved it was over. Standing back they admired their handiwork and each felt they were in with a chance. It was going to be a nerve wracking few moments now while the judges made their choice.

Finally the owner of the salon was asked to announce the names of the top three contestants in reverse order.

He said, "First of all we all wish to congratulate our six contestants, each of whom should go far in their chosen profession. Well done to all of you for getting this far. Taking this afternoon's marks into consideration and going on your performance this evening these are the people the judges have chosen as our winners. I will announce them in reverse order.

Place number three goes to Anna Chomley of our Mayfair salon. Anna would you please come forward to receive your certificate and cheque for two thousand pounds. Anna pleased to be in the top three but sad it wasn't first place, walked forward with a smile, shook hands with the famous hairdresser and accepted her cheque gracefully. She returned to her place as the audience clapped enthusiastically.

"Awarded second place is Nigel Smith, Nigel would you come forward please to receive your certificate and cheque for five thousand pounds." Nigel stepped forward to warm applause. He had never for a moment thought he would be given second place. He had been sure that he would win and he was not a happy man. Nevertheless he had to smile, act the part, pretend this was the most wonderful result. He accepted his prize and certificate, waving them in the air and smiling.

Finally the winner would be announced and the rest of the candidates dared not believe it could be them. It seemed an eternity for each of them until they heard the announcer say, "Ladies and gentlemen and to all of you at home watching, finally we have our winner of this prestigious competition. First place goes to.....," a fanfare of trumpets sounded and then, "Mr. Danny Lexington from Salon Maurice in Clifton. Danny would you please step forward to receive your certificate and cheque for ten thousand pounds."

Danny's heart turned somersaults and he felt he was about to faint but he took a deep breath and stepped forward to applause. "Danny you look shocked but the judges have all agreed that your choice of style is unusual and each is anxious to try it out for themselves in their own salons. Many congratulations from all of us. Would you care to say a few words to everyone watching."

An astonished Danny thought quickly and said, "I am truly humbled by this experience, delighted of course by this tremendous honour. I'd like to thank the other contestants for being such wonderful folk, each one has made me welcome and we have supported each other through the last few days. I would like to thank the organisers for such a fantastic opportunity for young hairdressers and to the judges for selecting me as the winner. It is going to take some days to sink in. To the audience watching I would like to say if a young chap from Clifton can get this far then whatever your dream, go for it and good luck to each of you."

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