

GOODMANS HOTEL

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CHAPTER 1

‘Bloody gearbox is playing up; not supposed to happen with a Porsche.’

Peter Haliburton, first syllable pronounced ‘hail’ as in ‘hail storm’, his wife Caroline, her friend Marie and I stood looking at the delinquent vehicle in a lay-by about seventy kilometres from Poitiers. An hour earlier he had rung Porsche customer services who recommended a garage with an approved Porsche mechanic, but the problem had not been as serious then and he decided against diverting from our scenic route through France.

He was not an easy man to argue with, or to talk to in any way at times like this. A partner – expecting soon to be a senior partner – with a firm of City accountants, the prestigious car was a public statement of his growing status. He doubtless considered it a reward for talent and hard work; office gossip debunked it as the outcome of determined string-pulling.

Marie and I had followed the *de luxe* vehicle from London in my modest Vauxhall. Now he stood glaring at it, his face flushed. Opposite him Caroline forced a thin smile, resigned to the inconvenience. He looked challengingly at each of us in turn, as though one of us might have caused the problem. To break the awkward silence I asked, ‘Has it been playing up for long?’

‘Hmph! If there had been an inkling that something was wrong before we set out I’d have had it seen to,’ he said, as though I had accused him of being negligent. Caroline opened her mouth as though about to speak, then closed it without uttering a sound. His gaze fell on me again. More calmly he said, ‘Everything was perfectly normal until we hit French soil, or French tarmac I should say.’

After glancing briefly at Marie, who looked terrified, he turned to his wife. ‘Bloody thing. Caroline, you try it for a while before I go berserk.’

Five kilometres further on the car pulled up again. Peter got out and walked round to the driver’s door, while Caroline slid over to the passenger seat, carefully holding her finely pleated skirt in place. Evidently he was not satisfied with her ability at the wheel. She must have felt awful. Neither Marie nor I found the courage to go over to her to say a few sympathetic words.

Although outspoken and abrasive, Peter was not usually this offensive. At work he enjoyed controversy, and recklessly disrupted long established practices and relationships. The firm, a staid accountancy practice called Lindler & Haliburton, still bore his grandfather’s name and the family connection allowed him to defy the gentlemanly atmosphere of respectful conduct and play the *enfant terrible*.

The three-year-old Vauxhall reflected my less elevated position. The accountants were the professionals, the firm’s *raison d’être*. Several promotions during my six years’ employment and the high demand for computer experts in the City did not change the fact that I was counted among the ‘support staff’. The most recently recruited trainee accountant was regarded as intrinsically better than me. He might not earn as much to start with, but in a few years time could expect to rise in rank and salary above all us lesser beings.

Marie was a rather frumpy woman of about thirty in an old-fashioned looking dress of flowery cotton whom I had met for the first time that morning. She was not very talkative, but smiled a lot and we exchanged pleasantries now and again. The journey had been fine until Peter’s car developed the transmission problem.

He pulled up for a third time in front of a dilapidated garage converted from what once

must have been a barn. Ahead was a road junction with a small collection of miscellaneous buildings including a few houses and a hotel.

'Bloody woman's made it worse,' he announced to the neighbourhood as he got out of the car. Caroline did not react but sat stiffly, her face expressionless.

'Hello,' he shouted to a man in overalls who walked towards us from the garage. 'You speak English?'

The response was a shake of the head, and I hurried forward to act as translator. The garage owner confirmed that the nearest approved Porsche mechanic was in Poitiers, and that the best plan was to get him to come out with his *équipement de dépannage*. He telephoned to make arrangements, and returned to say that the earliest the mechanic could be with us was eight-thirty next morning. Peter was not satisfied.

'Tell him we need to have the car attended to straight away. How far is it to Poitiers? We'll have a breakdown wagon take the Porsche in. You can drive us all down there in the Vauxhall. Tell him we can't wait until the morning.'

I passed on the message, but after unwillingly making a further telephone call the garage owner returned shaking his head. Whether we stayed where we were or went to Poitiers, the car would not be repaired until the morning, *absolument pas*.

Peter refrained from another outburst, reluctantly turned to me, shook his head and said: 'Is there an inn or hotel of some kind over there?'

Large signs at the front and on the side of the building, clearly visible from where we stood, told us we were looking at the *Hotel des Amis*.

'Looks as though it is.'

'I suppose we'll have to bivouac there for the night. What do you think? Caroline? Marie? Willing to rough it, or should we ask Mark to take us to look for somewhere better?'

'It'll do for one night. At least you'll be on the spot when the car is fixed in the morning,' said Caroline.

'Good girl. Marie?'

'It looks quite respectable from here; these little famil- run hotels in France can be very nice.'

'The garage owner probably runs the hotel too. That would explain why he's arranged things so that we're stuck here for the night.' He looked expectantly at me.

The accusation was groundless, but not worth arguing about. 'Maybe. Do you want me to drive you over and come back for your luggage?'

They decided they could manage the couple of hundred yards to the hotel on foot and I put their bags in the back of the Vauxhall. At reception, Madame, who although middle-aged had retained much of her prettiness, took a handful of keys and showed us up to a large double room on the first floor. Marie and I watched from the corridor as Caroline and Peter inspected it, looked without enthusiasm at the shower and lavatory, but finally pronounced the accommodation acceptable for one night. The allocation of two smaller rooms on the second floor to Marie and myself was then a formality. As we went to get our things from the car we heard Madame call out loudly towards the back of the hotel. 'Georges! Georges!'

A young man of perhaps twenty, his long hair pulled back tightly into an untidy bun, rushed from the dining room to help with our bags. He had smudges of chocolate around his mouth and smears of it on his T-shirt. In the pockets on the outer thighs of his military style trousers were bulky cylindrical objects that made them stick out rather like a clown's costume pants. He looked uncertainly at our assorted collection of baggage until Madame told him to take the two cases nearest the stairs up first. Though Peter looked at him open mouthed,

thankfully he made no comment. Georges' hands looked perfectly clean, but Caroline, unwilling to trust him with her property, was visibly alarmed as he picked up her finely stitched leather suitcase.

In my room, as I took my toilet things from my bag and hung up my jackets and trousers, misgivings about the wisdom of making the trip returned. Peter and I were colleagues, not really friends; he did not even know that I was gay. Our working relationship had been good. My expertise with the firm's computer network was useful to him, and for someone in my position making a good impression on more senior staff was the key to getting on. Until the invitation to spend a week with him at his house in France our social contact had been limited to office celebrations and Thursday lunchtime trips to the swimming baths with other colleagues.

We had started work at the firm on the same day, but did not speak to each other until a year or more later when he needed urgent help with a technical problem that had been souring relations with an important client. I worked extra hours, unasked and without extra pay, to devise foolproof ways to exchange data between the two firms' computer networks, and trained those who would be using the new procedures. Had they failed I would probably not have been given another chance to show my abilities, but luckily there were no hitches. The client was impressed and wrote an approving letter to a very senior partner who congratulated Peter, who in turn congratulated me.

The invitation to join the Thursday lunchtime swimming sessions, attended by half a dozen of the firm's most senior men, followed that success. They rarely said much to me, but simply having my name known to a group of the top men was a useful step. A fortnight later Peter delegated to me the task of contacting everyone to confirm the arrangements, and although most of the time this entailed speaking to their secretaries and sending e-mails, occasionally a partner himself would answer my call. This servile role made me feel awkward, but a few months later my own boss, the head of the information technology unit, handed me a letter from Personnel telling me of my first promotion.

Peter had ambitions he was determined to achieve. Whilst the other partners considered the computer network to be a kind of over-complicated piece of office equipment not worthy of much attention, he saw using the latest technology as a way of attracting business from rival firms that were less up to date. We met several times every week, the two of us often discussing potential new technical developments for an hour or more in his office. Sometimes he took me to meetings with clients to discuss ways of making the firm's service more flexible, more comprehensive, and of eliminating delays.

The conservative kowtowing atmosphere made me decide against revealing that I was gay. Nobody else who worked there had come out, at least not to my knowledge, and my impression was that any kind of sex outside wedlock was considered too sordid to be mentioned. The reaction to an upstart like myself who broke with custom was likely to be haughty disapproval. Also the effect on the partners who attended Thursday afternoon swimming sessions had to be considered. How would the old codgers, as we support staff called the senior men, feel if they learned a gay man had infiltrated their group and been present while they changed into their swimming trunks?

My second promotion brought me responsibility for four staff, and the risk of hostility were I to *come out* was greater than ever. Until practised in my new role, I was vulnerable to anyone who might want to show me up as a novice manager. The firm was a highly competitive place. An individual's status was determined not solely by salary, but also by job title, promotion prospects, houses, cars, family standing, and holiday arrangements. Every time someone

succeeded in pushing himself a little further forward, those close to him fell a little further behind. To 'bend over for someone' was a term used by some of the male staff to mean being subservient, to accept humiliation. To have handicapped myself by declaring myself to be a 'bender' would have been foolhardy.

The electronic warbling of the telephone in my room recalled me to the *Hotel des Amis*. Peter was ringing to say he wanted us all to meet downstairs in ten minutes to go for a walk. He asked me to pass the message on to Marie and to find out from Madame what was on the menu for dinner that evening.

My knowledge of French was probably the only reason he had asked me to join him at his house in the Lot Valley. One day at work his secretary overheard me on the 'phone talking to a friend in French. One or two nearby colleagues knew a few words, but not enough to understand that we were arranging to go to a gay club. She happened to pass by during this call, and a couple of days later he summoned me to his office and asked, 'Don't happen to speak French by any chance, do you?'

I told him about my school exchange visits to a French family. 'Booked your holidays yet?' he asked. 'If not you might like to come down to my house in France near the River Lot sometime. Caroline and I enjoy having company. She'd be delighted to have you as a guest. Languages are not one of my strengths. She knows a bit of French but those little linguistic problems that crop up now and again can be damn embarrassing.'

Not sly enough to invent a fictitious booking for Spain or Greece I mumbled vaguely about not having any definite plans, and when he repeated the invitation a month later I had still not thought of a convincing reason for turning him down. Besides, being more friendly with him could only help my career. Fearing that to spend a whole week with them might prove unbearable, I set up a potential means of escape by saying I had always wanted to visit Bordeaux, and asked if he would mind me fitting in a day or two there.

'Good idea. We know each other well enough now not to have to put up a front. Go with you and have a bit of a fling myself for a few days if I could, but you know what married life is. You're right to make the best of your chances while you can. There will be four of us, Caroline is bringing her friend Marie. Better warn you about Marie, I'm afraid you've no chance in that direction. She's the religious type, fiancé away on missionary work, Philippines or somewhere. Still, you know what the French are like, you won't have to look far if you want a bit of *mademoiselle*.'

At the *Hotel des Amis* Marie smiled bravely when she opened the door of her room, and we went down together to meet Peter and Caroline. We all strolled along a forest path Madame had suggested to a small lake full of fish. We walked around it, joking that the evening meal would probably turn out to have been caught there. On our way back we noticed behind the hotel a large well kept vegetable plot, in which vigorous plants were disciplined into a patchwork of geometrically straight rows, a dozen or so different crops arranged in a neatly executed ground plan. Working steadily, too absorbed in ordering his vegetable brigades to notice us, was Georges, the young man who had helped earlier with our baggage.

That evening at dinner Madame took our order for aperitifs, but it was Georges, in a clean T-shirt, his face freshly washed, though still in his old trousers with their bulging side pockets, who brought them to our table. He uttered a series of odd syllables that made no sense to me, but seeing him pick up the orange juice I gestured towards Marie. The remaining three drinks were all *pastis* and he positioned them carefully on our place mats. As he was on his way back to the kitchen Peter destroyed any hopes that he had forgotten his earlier bad temper. He bellowed in a voice that echoed around the restaurant: 'I hope that half-wit won't be serving

us our dinner.'

He was a quick judge of people, and had realised what my own mind had been groping towards, that Georges had limited mental abilities. Peter's anger was to be mercilessly released on Madame and Georges.

In an instant she was at our table to ask if anything was wrong. Caroline and Marie stared at each other as though daring one another to speak, while I looked unflinchingly at Peter, unsuccessfully willing him to moderate his words. 'Tell her,' he instructed me in a determined tone, 'that in the restaurant I expect to be served by a waiter or waitress, or failing that by Madame herself. I do not expect to be served by the village idiot.'

I squirmed. Her English was not good, but the word idiot is common to both languages; she must have understood it. I ought to have refused, but the vicious nature of the insult he wanted me to deliver shocked me, and fearful of making the situation even worse by infuriating him more, I lamely said to Madame in French, 'Monsieur would prefer it if the young man who brought our drinks did not serve us our dinner.'

In a gentle voice that filled me with shame she replied, 'Georges is my son, Monsieur, he often helps me in the restaurant; but if you prefer, of course I will serve you myself.'

'Forgive us, Madame, thank you.' When she had gone, my voice quavering, I said, 'He's her son.' Caroline's face remained expressionless, but Marie gulped mouthfuls of air and looked as though she was about to cry.

Peter tried to justify himself. 'Being soft with her will do no good. What she has to learn is that the way to make a success of a business such as this, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, is to put the client first, second and third. Exposing customers to a mental defective is only going to put them off. That's the harsh reality of her situation. Country inbreeding, I expect.'

Resolved, too late, to stand up to him I said, 'She's probably been running the place happily and profitably for decades. Why create a problem for her?'

'Look around you,' he said, waving an arm and glancing around the room. 'There are three occupied tables; there would be two if it were not for the complete fluke of our being here. It speaks for itself.' At times when he could not have his own way he had been condescending and rude to people in the office, but never as hateful as he was now.

After the main course I complimented Madame on the food, and said how neatly kept the vegetable patch behind the hotel was. She smiled, and with a brief sulky glare at Peter said that her son cultivated the plot entirely on his own, and that the green salad and tomatoes we had eaten had come from his garden. He might not, she said, be able to do everything that more successful men could, but he worked diligently and deserved respect for his efforts.

'You and Madame seem to be getting along very well,' Peter commented.

'Polite conversation,' I answered grimly, trapped in the hypocrisy of trying to appease Madame without being insubordinate to Peter. When Georges passed our table carrying some empty cartons through the restaurant, I caught his eye and gave him a reassuring smile.

The others went up to their rooms straight after the meal, but I lingered in the hotel lounge over a beer, scolding myself for my stupidity in not refusing Peter's holiday invitation from the first. Putting up with him at work was one thing, but his cruel, pointless dismissal of Georges and the way he had used me in the process were despicable.

On the way up to my room I saw his victim methodically mopping the restaurant floor. Pausing to wish him goodnight, I decided to ask for a final beer. He smiled, did not speak but put down his mop and went into the kitchen to find Madame. She looked tired as she came towards me, but smiled and asked in a gentle, almost coy, voice: 'Would you like your beer in the lounge, or in your room, Monsieur?'

‘Oh – in my room,’ I answered, taking her question to be a hint that she wanted to close up.

‘Yes, certainly. If you want to go up, Georges will bring it for you.’

I could perfectly well have waited the few moments it would take her to bring me a bottle and glass, but she evidently thought it polite to offer me this little service. I went upstairs and sat on down on my bed to wait. Five minutes later Georges knocked.

He stood in the corridor, bottle and opener in one hand, glass in the other. He had let down his hair so that it framed his features, transforming his face, making him much more attractive. I should have reached out to take the beer from him, but amazed by the change in his appearance I hung back. He stepped forwards into the room and put the bottle and glass down on the bedside table, holding out the bottle opener.

‘You want me to open it now?’

‘I suppose so.’

He prised off the bottle’s cap and poured a little beer into the glass, watching the collar of froth rise towards the rim. This effervescence seemed to fascinate him. ‘It’s good beer,’ he said, looking up.

‘Yes.’ What was going on in his mind to give rise to this odd ritual over opening a bottle of beer? Was he curious about me, like a child meeting a stranger? ‘I expect Madame will be waiting for you.’

‘No, she doesn’t wait. If you want I will go, or if not I can stay for a few minutes maybe. *Maman* knows everything I do.’

An inner voice was telling me to be sensible and get rid of him quickly, yet there he was, lingering in my room, saying he could stay for a few minutes. Was he attracted to me sexually? What had he meant by saying that his mother knew everything he did? If he was trying to tell me that he was available for sex, did I want to sleep with someone like him? Would not to do so be to act as a predatory male taking sexual advantage of someone vulnerable?

With his hair down, his warm brown eyes looking at me intently, he did seem very attractive. If we wanted each other, why should a difference in intelligence rule out our making love? If I told him to go because of that, would it not be another unfair rejection, as wrong as Peter’s barring him from serving us in the dining room? Twice I opened my mouth to speak but my thoughts were so muddled I could not formulate any words; when I tried a third time I said in a voice that seemed almost not to be mine, ‘Stay. Sit down.’

He sat on the bed and looked at me with a hunger that was unmistakable. I reached out to touch him, we embraced, began to discover each other physically, and made love. Afterwards for a little while we lay with our arms around each other, but when he sensed that he was in danger of falling asleep he got up. As he dressed I asked him, ‘What have you got in those pockets?’

He unbuttoned them and pulled out two plastic water bottles, the type that cyclists carry on long distance rides. ‘A cyclist was here, he gave me these. Every day I fill two up for him, this one with water, this one zumo de naranja.’

‘Zumo de—?’

‘Zumo de naranja, orange juice, he was a Spanish man.’ ‘Oh I see, of course, Spanish. He was your friend, when he was here?’

‘Yes, he was very good friend to me.’ He folded his arms around himself and made kissing noises, rocking his shoulders. ‘Five nights.’

We smiled at each other, embraced briefly and said good night. Satisfaction and self-assurance had replaced the unhappiness and worry Peter had caused during the meal. I

finished the remains of the beer and settled down to sleep, not sure whether the happiness over purging myself of collusion in Peter's nastiness was justified, or whether I ought to feel guilty for having taken advantage of Georges.

The next day I went down for breakfast loathing the prospect of the week to come. An empty cup and crumpled serviette at the table where Peter and Caroline sat told me Marie had already eaten and returned to her room. Peter was on to me almost before I sat down: 'Look as though you haven't slept. Had a less than perfect night ourselves as it happens. Some bloody couple upstairs thrashing about half the night. You know what the bloody French are like.'

'Bit of tummy trouble in my case,' I lied, hoping to divert any suspicion that I might have been the cause of the noise.

'Poor thing, nothing serious I hope?' Caroline asked. She did not look in the slightest as though she was suffering from the effects of a sleepless night. She had delicately applied a little eye shadow and mascara, and donned a beautifully cut jacket with fine blue and white stripes.

As I shook my head Georges hurried from the kitchen to our table carrying a glass of orange juice. I prayed he was not about to give me away. 'Zumo de naranja,' he said, putting it in front of me and departing at speed back to the kitchen without another word.

'Not that bloody half-wit with his nonsense language again,' Peter said, this time thankfully in a voice not loud enough to be heard in Paris.

'It's not nonsense,' Caroline said, 'it's Spanish for orange juice.'

'What?'

'Zumo de naranja. It's Spanish for orange juice.'

He smiled. 'How on earth could someone like him have picked that up?' The idea seemed so ludicrous to him that he began to laugh. 'Still having trouble with his own language, and they're trying to teach him Spanish!' Again he laughed, at first a little, then with abandon, his shoulders shaking and his eyes becoming moist.

While he was convulsed with amusement at his own joke Caroline said, very softly but distinctly, 'Village idiot knows more Spanish than Peter does.' She had spoken too quietly for him to make out most of her words, but he picked out his name.

'What was that?' he asked.

'I said someone Spanish must have taught him, Peter dear.'

He looked at her quizzically. 'Well, wouldn't have been an Italian, would it?' he said, and was seized by laughter again, shaking his shoulders and creasing up his face.

When the laughing fit subsided he said, 'Better stroll over to the garage and find out what progress has been made. Won't call on you for translation unless I have to, since you're under the weather. Don't worry about the bill. I'll settle up with Madame for all of us.'

When he was out of earshot I leaned across towards Caroline. 'I heard what you said.'

She turned to face me. 'And I've noticed the way you look at attractive men. Wouldn't dream of saying anything to anyone else about it of course.' She gave me a smile so brittle and so forced that it made me cringe inwardly. 'If you'll excuse me,' she said, getting up from the table.

Some hours later Peter rang me in my room to say the Porsche had been pronounced roadworthy. After checking a second time that everything was packed I picked up my bag and turned towards the door. I had been unable to think of a ruse that would enable me to say goodbye to Georges in privacy. The prospect of spending the rest of the week with Peter and Caroline was unbearable. Returning my bag to the luggage stand I went downstairs.

The three of them were looking at a map of the area on a wall near the entrance. 'I'm afraid my stomach is still playing up. I think it would be a bit risky for me to try to drive very far at the moment. If you could take Marie on the back seat, perhaps it would be best for me to join you at the house a little later.'

They fussed over me for a minute or two, offering to fetch a doctor, get me something from the chemist, or take me to a hospital. I declined all offers of help, and assured them that the best thing was for them to go on without me. Marie did not look at all happy at the prospect of sharing the small back seat of the Porsche with several suitcases, and for her to have to endure some uncomfortable hours of travel was unfair, but for me to pretend to be friendly towards Peter and Caroline for five whole days after what had happened at the hotel was impossible. Giving up their protestations about abandoning me, they set off in the heavily laden Porsche.

Two days later I rang Peter to ask how things were at the house, claiming still to be ill but assuring him that the worst was over. 'Come down anyway,' he coaxed, 'you can be ill perfectly well down here. Caroline and Marie will look after you.'

'That's very kind, but I don't want to risk passing this on to you.'

'Perhaps you're right. Come down as soon as you feel up to the journey then.'

I stayed at the *Hotel des Amis* for a further two days, thrashing about, to use Peter's phrase, in my room at night with Georges. He never remained with me until morning. Madame, he said, insisted he return to his room so she could get him up in time to start his day's chores. As well as having his company for an hour or so at night, I spent quite a few hours on his vegetable plot where we picked French beans and weeded between the rows. Conversation was sparse, consisting mainly of him explaining to me how he tended his various crops, but we enjoyed looking at each other as we worked, and would pause to watch the comings and goings at the hotel and the garage. He even taught me a little French, the words for various garden tools, for pinching out the side growths of tomato plants, and that a vegetable garden was called a *jardin potager*.

Madame, as he had claimed, knew we were making love. She and I chatted together during the afternoons; her attitude was not at all disapproving. She had first learned that Georges was gay when he was found 'touching' another boy at school. At first she had been concerned, but he had listened when she lectured him about such things being done only in private, especially with someone of the same sex. He had never shown any interest in girls. Several other male guests at the hotel before me had taken him to their rooms. She wanted more than anything for him to be happy and lead as full a life as possible. At least, she said, she did not have to worry about girls claiming that he had made them pregnant. She wished he could meet someone who would stay with him long term, but accepted this was unlikely in a rural community.

In many small hotels in France the husband is a qualified chef, and he and his wife together undertake the running of the hotel and restaurant. Here, though, Madame ran the hotel alone, and the chef drove in every day from a nearby village. Despite Peter's derogatory comments business seemed to be good. At lunch times the restaurant was packed, and other guests were always in evidence at breakfast time. Madame had a friendly smile for everyone, including me, except for one occasion when she told me off for buying Georges chocolate. 'He makes a pig out of himself with chocolate, Monsieur. Will you be taking him to visit the dentist before you go?'

What I did do for him was to drive him into Poitiers to buy him a couple of good quality shirts and a smart pair of jeans as a present. While there I drew some money from a cash

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