

THE WORLD OF NICHOLAS MALLET.

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When being driven by my sister, with my mother who loved an afternoon drive, near the New Forest, we came across a large mansion with a front pediment, down a long driveway, I thought the colour of the mansion garish. But it was set in a lovely dell and surrounded by old trees. I also imagined a small river behind the mansion. We were there just briefly only passing slowly. When my sister delivered us safely home I got fingers to laptop. As I was on holiday from Australia I must have got a little home sick! Well yes I could had thought of another name other than Nicholas but I didn't! By the way I have lovely siblings, so this story is based on imagination only! Or did someone whisper it in my ear, perhaps Alex!

Chapter One. Looking for a home.

Beneath the bower of two tulip trees, two figures lay peacefully side-by-side, their fingers entwined, both listening to the sound of the leaves brushing against one another in the summer breeze. A fourth honeymoon to celebrate, some real time together.

After a while they began their exertions once again. Eight months and fourteen days later a son was born, the fourth boy, fifth in line after the daughter who was three years older. They named him Nicholas, but were still bitterly disappointed. They had wanted another girl after all to take care of the hand me downs and to even up the children.

Shirley and Bill forked out the old baby clothes once again; the pram stroller was decrepit, but would at a pinch last for one more time. So the old clothes and fifth hand stroller would follow young Nick throughout his childhood, always the smallest and the easiest to cloth. Often dressed in an assortment of his sibling's old clothes. Nick would be easy to find with his cream coloured bubbly hair and high-pitched voice. Made louder as the elders constantly teased him unmercifully. After all, who would wear an old dress over a patched pair of shorts? Gary was the worst, just four years older, taller and slimmer and a bully to boot.

Tamara would side with Gary, whenever Nick complained, she took the side of the elder who ever that might be, and thus Nick was looked upon as an inveterate liar.

The Estate Agent drove quickly through the narrow lanes with barely a glance at the autumn colours.

"Soon be there Mr. Mallet" he eyed his client's golden head. The head merely nodded.

They seemed to have travelled an age through these country roads. Nick wasn't surprised that they seemed to slow down at every house or farm for sale. He supposed the agent was sizing up the opposition and how many properties were on their books. He smiled inwardly nothing so far seen had interested him.

"A bit run down, but you'd expect that after a few decades of absence. But the grounds are extensive with the Avon running near the boundary. And water rights as well." The Agent quickly glanced at him but no reaction. Strange one this he thought.

"Village about a mile away, down stream if you get my meaning, but it's a fair price, buy it myself if I had the loot!"

Nick nodded, uninhabited for decades, run down, extensive gardens probably over grown, priced to sell quickly, it seemed a snip at the price but that was the problem. Still worth a look, New Forest and all that. Far from the maddening crowd. Now who said that?

But he just nodded and as they reached a gravel road with sprouts of grass seeping up.

"Far is it now?"

"Just along here."

Just along here took another ten minutes and a bumpy rutted track. They slowed as two stone piers beside a two rusty metal gates came into view. The Agent got out and pushes the gates wide open then drove through.

"Not locked?"

"No need round here, nobody would come this way, they'd rupture their suspension."

"Locals?"

"None as far as I know one foresters house bit further over the bridge. But turn left at the start of the gravel leads you to the village. Well you said you wanted somewhere substantial and quite"

"I did indeed Mr. Denton, by the way I did not see your Agents sign here."

"Well we did have one, in fact we put five in all, but they keep getting blown away!"

Denton drove down a narrow curved tarmac road set between a wide avenue of huge beech trees. Soon a palladium style house came into view, Denton stopped the car by the imposing front steps.

"Think I'll sit over there on that garden seat whilst you peruse the house in your own time" Denton handed over the house keys and locking the car strolled over to a bench seat.

Nick clambered up the four stone steps and used the large door key to turn the lock, then pushed. The solid oak door didn't budge so he turned the key

back and pushed again, this time the door swung open. To his surprise an elderly man in black stood patiently waiting for him.

“What an idiot I am. It was already unlocked; you must be the agent’s man to show me around. I trust we haven’t kept you waiting.”

“Indeed not Sir, you have both arrived on time, and in good time.” He bowed and then ushered Nick into the house. “Feel free to wander about as you wish, I would suggest the attic rooms first and then down to each floor.” “How many are there?”

“Three floors, no basement as the water table is high and the house itself was built upon a plateau, thus the steps outside. If you would come this way, the servants staircase and is most useful to reach all floors.”

Nick traversed the various floors without incidence, one of the attic bedrooms had a small glass pane missing and shards of glass lay on the inside, a blackbird’s nest lay in the corner with five little beaks actively searching for food. A small pebble had caught under the door when he had first opened it and had scraped floor, he picked the pebble up and put it into his pocket. When he returned to the ground floor the caretaker had disappeared so he closed the front door and joined Denton on the bench.

“No furniture to speak of but I didn’t expect any not for the asking price, have you had many people interested in the property?”

“We’ve had a fair number look over it, but take a walk down by the river and just see what you get, admittedly the garden is unkempt but there’s 500 acres in the property as a whole, a worthwhile investment I’d say”

“Here are your keys to the house, didn’t need them really as the caretaker had unlocked the door already, seemed a nice sort of chap.”

Denton blanched but said nothing, so Nick strolled off along the path toward the river. He thought he smelt smoke as the pathway veered around the house rear and on down to the riverbank. There lay a decrepit boat ramp half submerged and a small wood fire burning brightly in a rock circle by a roughly made bivouac. Nick peeked inside and found two overcoats in the back. He heard voices coming toward him and two lads came along the riverbank. They were startled when they saw him and were ready to run.

“No just hold on there, I’m just a visitor here, do you guys live here?”

“We live over there, the white cottage but we come here to fish.”

“And get away from the family no doubt!” said Nick.

“No just fish, and cook as well, you see our fire.”

“Indeed and looks a pretty safe to me surrounded by river rocks and pebbles.” Nick dug into his pocket, “I’ve got this purple one to add to your fire surround.”

Before he could place one of the boys took it from him.

“My best one, Ash here nicked it last summer, didn’t you?” The boy turned to the younger one.

“I lost it Jack.” Replied the other sheepishly.

“I found a broken pane up in the attic there, the stone was in the room.”

“You won’t say anything will you to the gentleman in the house will you sir, he advised us we could build our shelter and fire here and we wouldn’t want to be asked to leave.”

“No I wont say anything. But tell me what you know about this place?”

“You thinking of buying it then?” Jack the elder put a small branch on the fire and placed a fish carefully on top.

“I guess it would be better to skewer the fish so you can rotate it.” Nick grabbed a piece of willow branch and cleaned off the leaves, then handed to Jack who lifted the fish from the fire and thrust the stick through the mouth and tail.

“Where did you learn that?”

“A long way south of here,” Nick smiled as the lads sat down to cook their fish.

“No rod.” Nick said more to himself but the boys pointed up stream where they had come from.

“The road bridge just up there, that’s how we get here from the cottage, if you want to know more ask Dad and Mum they’ve been here years, you can see our cottage through those birch trees.” Jack pointed across the river.

“Indeed I can, I have to go now, the Estate Agent is waiting, and I may pop in tomorrow if that’s convenient. Please ask your parents.”

“Best make the evening, Dad be home then.”

Nick nodded and returned up the pathway to rejoin Denton, who had moved into the car.

“Well any interest in the place”, he looked across at Nick when the passenger he was seated.

“Maybe, perhaps, but one more visit tomorrow. No don’t worry I have a hire car to bring me, just have a chat to the neighbours. Incidentally I’m surprised no one has taken a fancy to it, seems a great buy for the price.”

Denton stopped the car and got out to open the gates, he then got in again and drove through.

“I’ll close them,” said Nick and got out and swung the rusty iron gates closed.

“Probably because no one lives there any more, the atmosphere of the place if you get my meaning.” Denton looked squarely at Nick, “We don’t have a caretaker in the house nor any colleague of mine. You are the fifth one to tell me about an aged gentleman showing you around.”

“Well he didn’t actually, just pointed to the staff staircase and left me.”

“And how did the house feel on your perambulations through it?”

“Right, a bit of dust here and there, rooms seemed empty, save for a desk and chair in one plus a broken pane of glass up in the attic.”

“Right so how did the house feel about you?”

“That’s an odd question, but I’d say welcoming.”

“Really, most of those interested in viewing had found it the opposite. To be truthful I wouldn’t feel right about selling it without asking you that question. I myself have only been through the one time and to be frank once was enough!”

“You didn’t see the old gentleman then?”

“No but I got the distinct impression I was not wanted!”

“May I ask who will be the beneficiaries of the sale, are there family members left?”

“Of the Malling family, possibly not. In fact the estate was willed to the village as a whole, presumably for upkeep of the various facilities, such as the playing fields and memorial hall. You would need to ask around the village we are only interested getting it off our books quickly.”

“Thus the reduced price.”

Denton shrugged and drove them back through the forest now gloomy in the dusk.

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Chapter Two. A home is found, complete with a resident family.

Nick found the road bridge and turned into the track that led to the white cottage. There was a Forestry Land rover parked on the small lawn so he drove in beside it. A short stout man came out the cottage and signalled him to come inside.

“Names Trent, Tom Trent and this here is my wife Florence. Jack told us you would come by, thinking of buying the old manor house he told us.”

Jack was sitting at the kitchen table and nodded. There was no sign of Ash and presumed as he was the younger he was in bed. He looked at his watch and it was past nine.

“I apologise for it being so late and this will only take a few minutes.”

“If it’s about the boys building a shelter on the bank over there, they were given permission by the old caretaker. Florence can’t understand why they couldn’t build in our yard but still that’s lads.”

“ I was just after some information on the property and the people who used to own it. The lads are welcome as I also saw the old gentleman and he seemed a pleasant sort of chap.”

“Well then,” Florence beckoned to the table, “have a sit now. Tom has been here thirty years now and he’s never been over the once. I went over when we married just to introduce myself and got short shift from them. Rang that huge bell and rattled that massive door, but never a peep. Felt quite eerie that place, spooked me up. I come from the village and heard all sorts of stories about the place, none of them pleasant.”

Nick nodded, Florence continued.

“Sometimes at night we see lights on in the upper floors, but we know nothing other than when its sold the village will gets its proceeds. What did you say your name was?”

“Nick Mallet.”

All this time Tom Trent had been nodding his agreement so Nick decided to leave them and he was ushered out into the night. He shook Tom’s hand and he whispered.

“Florrie’s not herself these days, we cope though.”

Just then they heard a high-pitched voice come from the barn.

“Be that you Uncle Tom?”

“Me and Mr. Mallet both, he’s come about the big house, now you get some sleep now young Ash and school tomorrow.” Tom turned to Nick,

“Sleeps in the barn, Florrie won’t have him in the house poor lad, not since he dropped her ruby glass, he be my dead sisters lad, now so we have him here. Company for our Jack you see.”

“Thank you Tom, I’ll pop over to the Manor another time but I am interested in it, goodnight.” Nick drove back over the bridge and was just about to turn

towards the Ringwood road when he spotted the old caretaker by the roadside. He stopped and opened the window.

“Do you want a lift Mr.?”

“Dunning Sir, just Dunning, and yes that be most welcome. Just turn here the right and you’ll see our entrance a little way along.”

They drove through the old iron gates and down the beech drive stopping in front of the steps.

“Be obliged if you could come in for a moment Mr. Mallet.” Nick followed Dunning up the steps into the house. The ground floor was ablaze with candles perched on three and two branched silver candlesticks on the floor.

“My apologies Master Nick we couldn’t place them any higher.”

“No furniture?”

Dunning nodded.

“Just along here to the kitchen, I’m sure Alice will have made a nice cup of tea.”

“Alice?”

“My wife”

They passed the main staircase and preceded along a side corridor, and then they came to a glass-panelled door and wonders of wonders a long refectory table with a dozen chairs and a large candle spluttering in a dish.

“Very medieval, and a Ray-burn to boot! Pleased to meet you Mrs. Dunning I do hope we have not put you to any trouble.” Mrs Dunning turned to a cream coloured teapot and poured a cup, which she then gently pushed toward him.

“Please do sit down Master Nick” Dunning indicated a chair. “Could you please advise me of your intentions to purchase the manor?”

“I can understand you wanting to ask me intentions but I can assure you both your jobs would be secure if I did buy the property.”

“That’s kind of you Sir, to consider us, however I’m asking on behalf of the Master and Mistress.”

“Of this house you mean?”

“Indeed.”

“I am seriously considering the property but cannot understand why it is so cheap, I wonder if I should engage surveyor, perhaps its roof or foundations are at fault. There’s an old saying in civil law about a buyer should be wary of a deal that seems too good.”

“Of course it’s a dam good deal my boy, and there absolutely nothing wrong with the house.” Nick spun round in his chair and there seated at the end of the table sat a middle aged man dressed in tweeds. The problem was that Nick could plainly see the chair back behind the man.

“ Ah, so the place is haunted that rather explains the cheap price and the strange goings on as reported by Mrs. Trent. Where do you keep the coffins then, do I run to fetch my gun, or stake, perhaps a silver bullet? ”

“Don’t talk absolute nonsense Mr Mallet, and never mention Florence Trent’s name in this house. Certainly I am not as I would seem, but I can assure I have no intention of harming you. Apologies for the shock, however we are getting rather fed up at the constant visitations and no sale.”

“May I ask who you are?”

“The names Malling, not too different from your own. We took a vote yesterday and have decided to offer the position, in short, part owner of the house.”

Nick’s mouth dropped.

“Now drink your tea. Alice has made it very sweet which I understand is good for shock.” Malling then lifted his arm and swept it over the other chairs, two women and two young men suddenly appeared.

“Father, I wish you wouldn’t swish us in so fast it affects the balance of my ectoplasm whatever it’s called.”

“Ectoplasm” said the elder.

“Peter” he said nodding to Nick

“Alex” said the younger.

“My wife Lady Celia and my daughter in law Joan, Peter’s wife” Malling flourished his hands again and two ladies came into view, he wondered how many more spectres were to appear. But the younger lady kept flickering on and off.

“My wife is somewhat shy of strangers, but that’s the family” Peter smiled.

“You mind read as well.”

They all nodded.

“Presumably you gave everyone else the rattling chains and groans?” Nick looked at Lady Celia.

“I did no such thing young man, but I cannot vouch for the others.”

“There’s another thing Sir Horace.” Dunning raised his frame slowly from his seat.

“Indeed Dunning, but first things first, Mr. Mallet do you have enough cash or whatever to purchase the manor and its land and provide furniture to restore the house.’

”I do have sufficient funds to cover the sale and legal fees. Plus enough left over to rewire the house for electricity and maybe furnish a small flat.”

“Then that is decided, we welcome you into our home, you will be joint owner with myself. In future you can call me HE.”

“His Excellency? ”

“Don’t be frivolous Nick, my name is Sir Horace Edgar. We shall call you Nick. Everybody in agreement say Aye?” and there was a chorus of Ayes. Nick wondered what he had let himself in for but managed to say Aye to himself, at least Peter would have heard.

“Yes I did” came Peter’s far off disappearing voice. The Dunnings were still there.

“What was the other, Mr Dunning”?

“Well Master Nick, it concerns one of the boys over the river, but I think the master is more concerned with wrapping up the property, no doubt the other will come up soon enough.”

“You will excuse me if I ask if you were both employed by the Malling family?”

“Once Master Nick, we keep ourselves to ourselves here. We have a small cottage just behind the house in the shrubbery. We do have electricity installed both in both buildings obviously we keep the house switched off to save charges. The master before he passed over had made several provisions for our wages and maintenance. But we are getting older and would like to see the manor restored to its former glory. We have a spare room and you are most welcome to stay.”

“Thank you, but I’ll go back to the hotel and sign the contracts tomorrow, that way everybody will be happy, seems I have no option!”

“Forgive me for asking, but you seemed quite calm with tonight’s proceedings.”

“Well goodnight to you both, I have to admit the shock was tempered by Mrs Dunning thick sweet tea, I had felt a sort of kinship with this house and now I know why. No please don’t show me out, I can see Alex waiting for me at the doorway.”

Nick came out of the hall and followed Alex across the dark hall to the door. Nick’s hand brushed through that of Alex as he tried to shake hands.

“Try it again and let me concentrate,” Alex laughed.

This time the handshake was firm. Nick found his car had been turned to face up the driveway.

“You’ll have to watch Peter, always did love motor cars, I think yours is safe, it’s not too sporty!” Alex waved as Nick climbed in and drove off, the gates were open and then slowly closed behind him after he drove through. He shrugged his shoulders in disbelief and continued down the track.

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Chapter Three. Settling in and a new friend.

Three weeks passed and Nick finally had the keys in his hands, a depleted bank balance and certified deeds in his solicitors hands. In the meantime he had purchased a car, trawled the various auction rooms and pending house sales, and purchased some linen and towels to see him over the foreseeable future. He had run down to a Southampton shipping agency to organise the delivery of his trunks to the manor.

It was a bright hot morning when loaded with his baggage and the keys he drove down the beech drive and parked. The house was quite as he bought up his cases and purchases, which he left in the hallway. The door had obviously been left unlocked for him. He came outside and walked down to the riverbank and found the two lads larking about on the broken boat ramp. "You guys should be a bit careful on that old ramp, the timbers seem pretty rotten to me" he yelled.

Startled both lads attempted to jump clear of the timber boards and in doing so the impetus caused one plank to splinter. Jack managed to scramble free but Ash slipped and fell between the planks his hands vainly flaying the neighbouring planks. Nick leapt forward and lying on his stomach managed to grasp Ash's arm then he squirmed forward and putting his arms under Ash's armpits hauled him out. Ash was drenched, Nick fell back into the flowing water, pulling Ash into his arms, and then carried him to the bank where Jack helped them both up the slope. Ash had gone pale and was shivering and sobbing.

"You are safe now Ash lets get these wet clothes off you before you get hypothermia."

Jack and Nick started to take Ash's faded jumper off but he resisted. After some wrestling they managed to turn Ash over on his front and pull the heavy cotton jumper over his head. Ash's whole back was covered in red welts. Nick was astonished and he looked at Jack accusingly. But Jack's own stare was enough.

"Well who then, your Dad?" Nick asked as he pulled down the sodden jeans to reveal more welts.

"Not Dad, he wouldn't hurt a fly, me and Ash always bring him stray injured animals and such. "

"Someone has been giving him a belting, stop struggling Ash and rest awhile in the sun over there by your shelter. Jack just place those wet clothes on the branches of the tree over there after I wring them out. I've got a bath towel in the hallway I'll get it now." Nick ran as quickly as he could and retrieved a large white towel, hurrying back he quickly wrapped it around a still shaking Ash.

“Aunt Florence will skin me alive I’ve wet me clothes and there’s a tear on my new jeans which Jack has just found.”

“I reckon a nail must have torn it Sir,” yelled Jack sitting astride the tree branch where he was laying out the clothes. “It’s the left leg that’s torn.”

“I’ll have to check your left leg Ash just in case” Nick lifted up the towel and found a long pink abrasion running over more deep welts. Something struck him as odd and he examined the right leg as well more closely.

“He has a scrape Jack its not deep I’ll need to put some antiseptic on it once Ash is dry now. By the way what do you guys wear to school, shorts or longs?”

“Shorts, why?” came the answer.

Nick didn’t reply but crouched down and lifted Ash into his arms.

Remembering the Dunnings had a cottage somewhere along the back of the house, he called Jack down from the branch to guide him. They walked some distance through dense undergrowth and eventually found the cottage. Jack knocked on the door and Alice Dunning appeared and seeing Ash in a state took immediate charge and laid the boy gently on the sofa.

“Alice do you any antiseptic cream please, you can see Ash has an abrasion on his thigh.”

“Aye I do indeed Master Nick but I can see a whole lot more on that upper leg.” She turned Ash on his side, he still making an occasional sob, so she gently lifted his trunk and stared.

“Jack Trent away with you this instant to Dr. Matheson, You hold him with the abrasion upwards Master Nick and I’ll get the cream. He’ll need an injection for tetanus that’s for sure but it’s the other that worries me. The Master will have to be told.”

“Already done Alice,” Lady Celia stepped inside and moving Nick and Alice aside checked the boy, and then gently laid her hand on his forehead. Ash’s sobs and sniffing stopped. Alice collected her tube of cream from her medical box and Lady Celia gently applied it on the abrasion.

“Alice you and Dunning will need to keep the boy here for the time being, let me know what the fool of a Doctor has to say. She brushed Ash’s spiky golden hair and turned to Nick.

“Take the lad up to the spare bedroom and settle him down Nick. A nice sweet cup of tea will help Alice. Nick stay with the boy until Jack Trent returns.” With that she vanished and Nick wondered if he would ever get used to the comings and goings of the Malling family.

“Course you will” said Alex following up the stairs to the cottage attic bedrooms.

“For heavens sake Alex you scared the living daylights out of me.”

“I expect you did the same shouting at the lads as they gallivanted on the old pier.”

“It’s a bloody death trap Alex should have been taken down years ago.”

“Peter and I used to paddle our canoes from there.”

“Don’t change the subject, now what are we going to do about young Ash?”

“Nothing, well for the moment at least.”

“Nothing?”

“I expect Father has it well in hand now Nick, I’ve been asked to take a trip to our local Social Dept. to gather some forms. Don’t ask me what or why. Mother said you were to wait for the doctor and if my ears do not deceive me I hear a car pulling up. Bye for now.”

“Who was that Mr. Nick, the voice I mean?” Ash was peering about as Nick laid him gently into the spare bed.

“Did you not see him?”

“No I just heard a voice that was not yours.”

“Well Ash he’s a good friend of mine and worried about you as we all are, but here comes the doctor to check you out.”

“Uncle says he’s useless.”

“Be that as it may you will need an injection in case you get a decease so try to be brave you are in safe hands now.”

“Will I have to go back, I heard your car and voice when you came to see Uncle last time?”

Before Nick could reply the Doctor bustled in and pushing Nick roughly aside said brusquely

“What the problem with this little pest?”

Nick had come down stairs to leave the doctor and Alice to examine Ash. Jack came through the door loaded with Ash’s clothes.

“They seem nearly dry Mr. Mallet, except for his sandals, I’ve left them to dry on the widow sill outside the stone sill is quite warm.” As Jack finished Alice and the doctor came down.

“Can I go and see Ash please Mrs. Dunning?”

“Of course Jack and take up his clothes please will you, I see you have collected them and I hope they are really dry. He has to go into town for his injection. Master Nick can you fetch your car here and take him please, the doctor will give you the prescription and pick up a jar of skin repair cream from the pharmacy.”

Nick went out to fetch his car and met Dunning coming down the cottage drive.

“The master wants to see the Doctor in his study Master Nick.”

When Nick drove round he saw a furious Dr Matheson climbing into his car. Nick went over to see what it was that obviously inflamed the doctor.

“That dimwit Dunning has asked me to call in to see his Master, I understood that you had bought the property, who and what is he talking about Mallet?”

“Well Doctor, I have bought the manor house but with the help of my Uncle Horace, and I presume he wants to ask about the lads wounds. I’m sure it would be best to pop in as he can get quite testy being a magistrate and all that.”

“Oh quite so, I will drive round then, perhaps a glass or two might be offered. I’ll have my surgery nurse send the bill tomorrow, and you’ll need to pay for the tetanus injection yourself, its not on the health.”

“Right” and so Nick went inside to collect Ash who was dressed and still looking pale.

“Can I come with you as well?” asked Jack.

“Jack, I believe Master Nicks uncle wants a word with you my lad so you best go up to the house and wait till the Doctor leaves, is that correct Master Nick?”

“If HE wants it that way, come on Ash lets get the puncturing over and done with.” As they got into the car, Ash turned nervously to Nick.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of an injection, why should I have to one?”

“It’s a precaution against lock jaw, a nasty thing to catch, its possible the nail could be contaminated, it’s for the best Ash and I’ll be with you if they’ll let me.”

So Ash had his injection an hour later and Nick had time to get the skin cream, a large half litre pot. As he left the pharmacy a whisper asked him to pick up a package from the Council social department, he got there just before they closed and collected the envelope, someone had scrawled his name across it. Mystified they returned to the Dunnings cottage where Alice was waiting for them.

“Sir Horace has said Ash is to stay here for a few days, he has sent Jack home with a message to ask Mr Trent to come here this evening, I’m to take the envelope to the Master. Could you put the cream on Ash Master Nick and here’s a towel to protect the sheet and mattress when its finished.”

Nick helped Ash up the stairs to the spare room and whilst Ash undressed, Nick opened the sheets up and spread the old towel onto the lower sheet. He then asked Ash to lie on his front and proceeded to gently rub the ointment into the deep welts.

“Let me know if I touch something that hurts Ash”

“No its OK I can take it but my upper leg is sore.”

“The one with the nail scrape?”

“No the other thigh.”

After having smoothed over Ash’s back and buttocks, Nick turned him slowly over and checked his right upper thigh. Here the welts were deeper and obviously newer. He ran his finger gently following one deep red marking and it led past the buttock up to the shoulder blade. Nick measured with his stretched hand over hand. It measured at least two and a half feet, over sixty millimetres. It looked likely to be an adult’s leather belt. The welt marks were deep but hadn’t cut the skin except a small piece near the shoulder bone which he did not cover in cream but left to dry naturally.

“I guess I’ll have to do this tomorrow if you don’t mind Ash. You will stay for a few days as my Uncle has asked Mrs Dunning to care for you. He is also to talk your uncle tonight so we will know what will happen to you. By the way I do apologise for frightening you when you and Jack were on the boat ramp pier,” He covered Ash up with a blanket and sat down beside the bed. Ash turned on his side so his head was close to Nicks.

“No, you shouted because we were in danger, and in fact the planks were rotten, so it’s not your fault Mr. Nick.”

“Just call me Nick, everybody does, how old are you anyway.”

“Twelve going on thirteen. Mr and Mrs Dunning call you Master Nick”

“Well they won’t change their ways but there you go, I’m only twice your age and a touch more.” Nick smiled.

“Can I ask you something Mr. Nick, I mean Nick. Have you bought this place and who are your family, they seemed to arrive earlier than you. Jack and I were expecting to see you weeks ago.”

“Well firstly I had some legal business to attend to, and as for the family I seem to be adopted by them, which I have to admit was totally unexpected but still rather nice.”

“I wish I was adopted, I mean Uncle Tom is great to me and Jack but I hated living in the barn and getting.” Ash stopped there.

“And?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, but I broke the favourite china figure, it was my fault I can be so ham fisted sometimes. Could you go and collect my bag and satchel from the barn please Nick.”

“Are you sure you are twelve you seem so much younger?” Nick had noted a thin body as he had rubbed the ointment in.

“It strikes me that Jack was always catching you fish, cooking it and you eating it. And Jack didn’t have any. Were you hungry?”

“I was never given dinner so Jack would sometimes nip out to the barn and bring food with him that he had taken from the pantry. On weekends we

fished and I ate. Like the day you came and showed us how to cook on the stick. In my bag are all my things and my birth certificate, it says where and when I was born.”

“When do you want them?”

“Now please, I want to show you things. Nick you won’t go far away after you get my things.”

“Are you hungry?”

Ash nodded.

“I’ll go and find Jack and get your things, he was told to wait in the hall as Uncle Horace wanted to see him, if I’m quick I’ll catch him. I’ll ask Alice to make you some, well some what?”

“Soup would do please.”

“Now Ash what would you really like?” Nick rose and brushed Ash’s yellow fringe from his forehead.

“Bacon and eggs then please. Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Why have you got dark brown hair with light streaks?”

“I guess since I was the last of five children, all the colour genes had nearly all been used up when they finally got to me Ash!”

“Was that this family.”

“No this is my new family, my other family I lost contact with when I migrated to Australia. Now no more questions young man I’ll order your meal, then I’m off to find Jack.”

“You will come back soon.”

Nick pulled the blanket high up to Ash’s chin then went down to see Alice. He found the doctors car gone and Jack just coming down the steps. He asked Jack if he could come with him and pick up Ash’s bags and Jack looked tired and troubled, but agreed.

“We will have to be quick as Dad will be home soon Mr. Nick, your uncles a fearsome man, I think my Dad is in hot water this time.”

“Because Ash has been beaten.”

“Ash has kept that really quite, I think he dead scared of my mother and she’s as nice as pie with me and Dad, so perhaps he felt he wouldn’t get too far complaining.”

“I’m just as staggered as the rest of you though your Aunt seemed a lovely lady and gave me a hug when I left.”

They crossed over the bridge and went into the barn where Jacks dad was waiting for them.

“Where is Ash.” He turned to Nick and grabbed his collar. “Where is my nephew, have you all gone mad?”

“Let me go Tom, we will explain.” Nick threw off Tom’s rough hands and pointed to the wall. Hanging there on a nail was a broken three-foot leather thong used for tethering horses.

“Yours I suppose,” Nick said coldly

“The Doc rang me on the mobile and told me things I could not believe. You don’t think I had anything to do with this Mr Mallet.”

“Alas Tom, I’ve been sent over to fetch Ash’s things and Jack has a message from my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“Newly found but a magistrate to boot, I suggest your early compliance. If you want to know I don’t think you knew anything about this. Ash kept quite and that’s between your nephew and you.”

“OK I’ll come with you, you Jack better clean up for your supper, and your mother will be wondering where you are. If I’m not back by supper time you best tell Mother what its all about.”

Nick picked up Ash’s packs and climbed into the Forestry Range Rover. They drove to the Manor where Tom Trent was ushered by Nick into Sir Horace’s study.

“Can’t stop now Ash, back soon.” Nick dived past Alice who had bought up a steaming tray of egg, bacon and chips. And a glass of orange juice, which Nick quickly took a sip.

“Not for you Master Nick, yours will be ready when you return. The Master has suggested you stay here until we get some furniture in the house and Dunning has bought your bags and that.” Alice put the tray down and pointed to a wood box like apparatus. Nick could just make out some canvas leaves sticking through.

“It’s the Masters campaign bed, folds up you see.”

“Fine I better get onto a furniture search straight away tomorrow.”

“I think Ash is looking forward to some company, he’s a great one for questioning that one.”

“Oh Nick I forgot one more thing it’s a small box I hide under one of the straw bales, I’d be lost without it.” Ash said between mouthfuls.

“I’ll get a lift with your Uncle. So this is my first day in residence and I have not stopped.

OK Ash don’t worry, don’t wait up for me, but I promise I will back.” Nick dashed out and ran along the cottage road till he reached the manor. He opened the door and Dunning came out of the kitchen.

“Mr Trent is still with Sir Horace, but I heard a scraping of a chair so he may not be long. The study door opened and HE called out.

“Dunning show Tom out please. Did you want to see me Nick?”

“No HE just a lift from Tom to collect Ash’s cardboard box hidden in the hay somewhere.”

“You won’t regret Tom, I wish you well and please come and see me at any time.”

“Thanks Sir Horace, come along Nick we will see if we can find that box for young Ash.”

They hurried down the steps and found Toms Land Rover was already pulsating with life.

Nick spotted Peter behind the wheel.

“Get in the back you two, move it” yelled Peter and gunned the vehicle as soon as they climbed in.

“What the dickens!” gasped Tom somewhat aghast at Peters taking his vehicle.

“My cousin Peter, it must be urgent Tom” Nick yelled above the clash of gears and a vicious left turn outside of the gates.

“Wrong way Peter” yelled Nick

“No, he knows the local way alright, it might be a bridal way but its sure the quickest way to my cottage.” Yelled back Tom and they held on to the roof handles as Peter weaved this way and that to miss as many potholes as he could. Soon they onto the main road and tarmac, over the bridge with an almighty thump to the suspension, then a controlled skid into Tom’s yard.

“The house go.” yelled Peter, but his was not the only yelling and it was coming from the cottage. Tom jumped out and ran to the cottage and threw open the door with Nick not far behind. In the corner of the small dining room lay Jack sprawled beneath his mothers fierce gaze who held the leather strap above her head and as strange malevolent look which turned to abject misery as Tom struck her hand to release the strap. He turned and threw it into the fireplace, then strode out to the kitchen bringing with him a can of paraffin. All this is happening in a sort slow motion, thought Nick, and with the supper plates already filled upon the table. Tom poured the fluid into the hearth and struck a match from the box on the mantle. Florence had not moved but Jack had begun to sob and shake, his father picked him up and passed him to Nick.

“Let him calm down Mr. Mallet and perhaps you and he would like to finish the meal on the table.”

“And what about me Tom Trent, all that evil in that mansion poisoning our child's mind,

And that clumsy vicious scum of a half nephew of yours, from that sordid sister not even married.” Florence’s eyes were as fierce as Toms as she

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