

This is dedicated to
Anna Scott Graham and **Elizabeth Rowan Keith**,
writers who have encouraged me when I was down.
Thank you also to all those readers who have been generous enough to buy my stories.
They encourage me in their own way.

The Builders Report

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Chapter 1

May 2010

“Amanda, would you please get me a list of reputable builders in the Enfield area. I want to add an office extension to my house. Thank you.”

“Of course, Cleo. It may take a while to verify their viability, though.”

“Take a week if you need it. I just want someone competent and trustworthy.”

This was why Amanda loved her job. There was something different to do each day. The time passed quickly and in the two years that she had been Cleo’s assistant, she hadn’t yet had time to be bored. Well, maybe mailings weren’t particularly exciting, but the other girls were always called in to help, and it usually turned into a bit of a laugh.

She’d seen a programme quite recently about ‘cowboy builders’ and had picked up some tips for sussing them. For a start, any builder that was any good was never available immediately. They never asked for money up-front, and they weren’t cheap. She would ask around too and might even take an afternoon or two off to go and inspect the builders’ premises. That would add a notch to their seriousness. A bit of detective work might be fun.

Although she knew Cleo had a flat near to ‘The Lord’s Ground’, holy ground for cricketers, she knew that she was hoping to spend more time in her house in Enfield Town. It was a relatively new acquisition, which is why she wanted work done before encumbering the place with furnishings. Amanda would have given her eye teeth for the London flat, which she had visited once. She couldn’t understand why anyone would want to live out of town and have the bother of commuting when one already had a cosy flat so centrally placed. It was in one of those posh ‘serviced’ blocks of flats with its own concierge. It was the next best thing, in Amanda’s mind, to having a servant. How the other half lived.

Amanda had begun to scrupulously scour the Enfield vicinity for the best builder she could find. She had gone to the area and casually questioned local businesses and even shoppers waiting at bus stops. When a builder was recommended more than once, she put him on her list. Having collected a half a dozen names, she then proceeded to make the rounds to check each of the builder’s yard while taking a photo of it. Once back in the office, she methodically telephoned each one to quiz them on their capabilities, availabilities and prices and to get them to send a brochure if they had one. The final report placed on Cleo’s desk was very comprehensive and Amanda was pleased with the results, but it was only a few days later that Cleo mentioned it.

“Thank you for the Builders Report, Amanda.”

Amanda had been a little disappointed with Cleo’s lack of enthusiasm over the report that had used a good bit of her shoe leather and some of her personal time to make but had then consoled herself with the idea that Cleo never effused over anything. She was a cold fish. Everyone said so. Never mind. A well-paid, interesting job was worth the odd disappointment, she decided. Her mind shifted easily to the coming three day weekend. She was going to Great Yarmouth with Kate, John and Phillip. She went all dreamy as she remembered the evening she had spent with Phillip. What a darling he was. She hadn’t slept with him yet but the weekend at the seaside resort promised to be passionate.

-oOo-

Cleo’s bank holiday weekend was going to be quiet. There was nothing pending that needed her attention. She had just had closure on a very successful advertising campaign that had lasted a year. She was meeting with new potential clients the following week. The on-going advertising drives were running smoothly, showing the predicted results. The talk she would be giving at the local college on Tuesday was just her way of keeping in touch with the real world but as she had given similar talks before, she only needed to look at her notes.

There had never been any question of spending three restless days in the confines of her London flat. So Friday night, she had driven to her virtually empty house in Enfield Town wanting to

enjoy the atmosphere of its early Victorian era. It would be little more than camping but as she also planned to walk about the area to familiarise herself with her future neighbourhood, she wasn't bothered. Her job deprived her of spending much time outdoors, which had been her principle motivation for buying the house in that part of North London. With a ten minute drive she could be surrounded by fields. She could retrace paths that Elizabeth I had taken when out hunting or visit a pub where the hounds had been kept in between hunts. She loved all the old manor houses dating from the seventeenth century and she loved her Victorian house that had been built in 1842. One day, when she had enough money to leave city life behind, she would get a dog. The idea of sharing her life with another person was just a little too far-fetched for her to contemplate, so a dog was the limit to which she could consider devoting herself. It would have to be one with an easy-going nature, like a Labrador, a Dogue de Bordeaux, or why not an Irish Wolfhound? She smiled at the thought of owning one of the largest dogs that existed as an exterior proof of her success in life. Like men who needed a fast, flash car or gold jewellery, it would be her status symbol. She'd get two! Sadly, she admitted that for practical reasons Wolfhounds couldn't really be one of her choices.

Although her house was built in the first years of Victoria's reign, it still had a Georgian look to it. The windows let in a lot of light and the general appearance inside was that of spaciousness. The staircase was a lot wider than later constructions and was graced with a mahogany banister. Of course, the uncarpeted house echoed and smelt of fresh paint now but it imbued her with a sense of tranquillity. From the very first, she had felt at home, in spite of the barrenness of the rooms.

The new flagstone kitchen was the only room in the house that had been completed. As one entered the room, it gave the illusion of stepping back a hundred and fifty years, at least. Although it had been entirely refitted with the most sophisticated equipment on the market, everything either deceptively resembled its Victorian counterpart or was hidden away, including the large fridge/freezer that looked like an ordinary cupboard door. A big, black, gas cooker that looked every inch like a coal-fuelled Victorian stove made a statement, and a deep 'butler's sink with a hardwood draining board had been installed rather than the usual stainless steel. The only concession that had been made in the sink's case had been that a brass tap delivered both hot and cold water and that the sink had been raised to a higher level than it would have been in the original household. People had been shorter in those days. A square oak table had pride of place in the centre of the room and it was on this that Cleo placed the carton she had carried in. It contained a couple of plates, cups, and cutlery, plus staples of tea, instant coffee, coffee whitener, sugar, digestive biscuits and some snacks. The kitchen might be fitted but the cupboards were bare. She had only grabbed what had come to hand in her London flat. As for the food she would need to tide her over on the weekend, she planned on shopping the next morning.

It had been an automatic gesture to take Amanda's report about the builders with her. She was going to have time to put all the builders into perspective in relation to her home. The report was very thorough, she had to admit, because there was even a map with the different builders' yards pinpointed on it. There were a couple that were an easy distance from her road, so she thought she might cast an eye on them tomorrow while she was out and about. When she got back to the office, she must remember to tell Amanda that she had done a good job.

For the duration of her stay, she would sleep on the divan in her sleeping bag. The divan was in the morning room which looked out onto the back garden. If she were lucky, there might be some flowers in bloom for her to see through the French doors when she woke. It really would be like camping or staying in a hostel as she had in her youth and the idea shed years from her weary mind. Before settling down for the night, Cleo began a slow tour of the rooms just so that she could gloat. This was hers. She loved it! She had only herself to thank. But a wry, almost sad smile brushed her lips as she acknowledged that her alcoholic parents and the taunting kids at school had been her incentive, the push that had got her on her way.

When finally she had bedded down, she had been too exhausted to linger over thoughts of past, present *or* future. The complete silence in the house had been a balm to her very being and she slept almost immediately, oblivious to the world.

Chapter 2

1996 – fourteen years earlier

As soon as she had been old enough, Mary Murphy had changed her name. Then, she had moved to London. The combination had been an exhilarating, liberating experience. She was a 'born again' eighteen year old. She didn't consider that the name change had turned a caterpillar into a butterfly but rather a larva into a beetle. Her metamorphosis into Cleo Kingsley had left her encased in a hard shell which not only protected a sturdy pair of wings for getting ahead in life but which also armoured her very essence, against any battles that would ensue. The move to London had assured her of anonymity in a teeming city. She could be as she liked without having a finger pointed at her.

Against all odds, she had risen above her humble social beginnings and escaped the ineffectual parents who had sucked her dry in their never-ending quest for their next bottle or packet of fags. The higher she rose, the lower they seemed to sink but, she realised, that that wasn't really true. They had always been scraping the bottom. For some unknown reason, she had not been cast from the same mould and had, from her earliest recollection, tried to distance herself from the 'Murphy stigma'.

School had been a nightmare. If she had had a brother or sister, it might have been more tolerable knowing that she wasn't on her own but her parents had only been sober long enough to produce her. Social Services had made sure that she was clothed and had a hot meal each day at the canteen; blatant charity which had been hard to accept, even as a child. It was just a shame that it was so obvious that she was a 'social case' because she had been ostracized by all the other pupils. How many times had she overheard whispering about the Murphys or giggling at her expense? Other social cases, who might have had things in common and provided moral support for fellow sufferers, had shied away from each other, perhaps afraid of compounding their misery.

Years later, she wondered why Social Services hadn't taken her away and put her into care but, as unhappy as she had been, it seemed that there had been cases even worse than her own which had had to take priority. At least her parents had been happy drunks who had never lifted a hand to her. 'Perhaps it had been better to be neglected, living in near squalor, than to have had to submit to foul treatment before being put into care,' she was now able to rationalize.

Her father had finished by killing himself on a building site where he'd been hired by some unsuspecting foreman. Although it was doubtful that the company was responsible in any way for the death, they had paid a small amount of compensation to her mother, little suspecting that it would be the knell for her own death.

The money left over after the funeral had paid for a brief reprieve while Bridgette Murphy had splurged on some new clothes and evenings out, but it had been short lived. She had been found in an alley in a coma. It was never determined whether the blow to the head had been accidental or if she had been 'mugged'. It was, however, alcoholic poisoning that had finished her – because she had been blind drunk. Neither parent had reached forty-five.

Guilt had been mixed with relief. Mary had not let any of it show. Many years of neglect had taught her to keep her feelings to herself and even alone in the confines of her own small bed-sit, she had successfully buried any she had. Any feeling might lead to hurting. She was definitely on her own and she had always known that if she were to get anywhere in this world she could only count on herself, the new Cleo Kingsley. Mary Murphy was a thing of the past, a nasty taste in the mouth, a bad dream, a skin shed that took her old identity with it. Her first eighteen years and the miserable memories were left behind as Cleo's ambition took firm hold. It had meant sacrificing any social life for that of work but Cleo had long ago realised that she had survived without 'friends' in her school years and so wasn't about to burden herself with the superficiality of them at any time in the near future. All her energy would be going into advancing herself. It had begun by attending night school straight from her job at the store. No, there wouldn't have been a lot of energy to spare for socializing anyway, because every ounce had gone into her rise in the world and especially her rise above all those kids at school who had made her life so desolate.

Chapter 3

Spring 2010

At thirty-four, Jason Dooley had had more to fill his life than the average fifty-year old. His schooling had been scant simply because he had found it difficult to read. He was to learn later that, besides being left-handed, he was dyslexic. He wasn't illiterate but he found that the great outdoors held more attraction for him than the local library. By the time he was sixteen, he had already got his first job on a building site, his first wage and his freedom. His ability to charm his way through life might have been compensation for his more academic failings, but he had never suffered from an inferiority complex. Why would he have when he'd had his pick of fair women and had never had an issue with men? It was only when he had reached his mid-twenties and had ten years of working experience behind him that it occurred to him there were more important standards in life than how many pints he could drink in an evening or how far all his spent condoms would reach if put end to end.

It was then that he had headed out on his great Canadian adventure, either working or charming his way across North America with his wit, good looks and British accent. He had been willing to turn his hand to anything for experience, so was able to add chauffeur, barman, kitchen hand and gardener to his own trade of brick-layer. He'd lived simply. Although he'd been surrounded by beer drinkers, he had drunk reasonably and had never smoked. Oh, he'd puffed a packet or two in his teens but the taste and the waste had disgusted him, so he was free of that particular vice and had the white teeth to prove it. Having never been one for extravagance, he had been able to accumulate a good sum of money for his return to England. It had been enough to set him up with his own brick-laying business.

He might not be comfortable reading more than the daily newspaper but his mind was keen and ready to assimilate the tiniest piece of information for future use to his advantage. His financial acumen, perhaps as an equilibrium for his dyslexia, stood him in good stead as his small brick-laying business gradually expanded to become that of a building contractor's – Dooley's Brick Builders.

With the expansion of his company and his list of clients never waning, he had finally moved his London builder's yard in Finsbury Park to Enfield, an area that had seen a boom in property prices. London's never-ending stretching had propelled the wealthier to London's outskirts where green fields were still to be seen, figuratively speaking. The larger family homes in Enfield still held promise for expansion and conversion. Jason had moved at the right time to remain in great demand. 'Cowboy' builders, known for their shoddy work, scrounged for jobs offering cut-price rates but people were now wary of the pitfalls of using a bargain builder. Dooley's was not cheap but its reputation guaranteed that every penny spent would be worth it. Jason was a task-master who kept an eye on every one of his contracts. He often spent his time on the sites working along side his men. It was obvious he knew what he was doing, so that it was natural for him to expect top quality work with no slacking from them. He paid well for it and got it. As a result, much of the work his company got came from recommendations, word of mouth. Clients were queuing rather than going with someone less known. His livelihood was assured.

He had an easy-going nature and wasn't too particular as to where he lived. He had been on the move so much of his life that it was often without regret that he could move on. But for once, he had gone so far as to buy a small semi-detached house in one of the culs-de-sac in North London. Inside information had given him a lead to its sale before it had been put on the market; an occasion not to be missed. He hadn't needed anything grand as he would be spending so little time in it but it was on a plot of land that had potential if he wanted to extend. It was a sound investment if he wanted to sell.

Quite unintentionally, he had begun to pick up some of the moss that a rolling stone is not supposed to gather. The local shopkeepers recognised him as being local now that he bought his bread, take-a-ways and tooth paste from them on a fairly regular basis. He was becoming familiar with the neighbours enough to nod with a 'hi ya' as paths crossed. It wouldn't be easy for him to admit it but he had begun to enjoy the idea that this little part of the world was now his territory. Was age catching up and taming him? Na. He'd spent the last two nights with a woman who was cheating on her partner

and he didn't have to feel the least bit guilty. She'd come on to him, so what was a fella to do? One word covered it – oblige.

His first sexual experience in his teens with an older, married woman had made an impression on him. He'd asked her how she could have sex with another person when she was married and her words had, in some twisted way, made sense to him. 'A slice off a cut loaf is rarely missed, love.' Consequently, he had always shied away from girls he had suspected were virgins. They were an unknown quantity to be avoided. Why flirt with trouble when there were so many other experienced women who were willing and able? Another of his 'principles' was not to mix business with pleasure. This he held to strictly.

So, he had never slept with a virgin nor had he slept with any woman connected to work, including his rather lovely secretary, Jill. In principle, it was like switching off a light. Once it was off, there wouldn't be any current at all. Anyway, it just so happened that Jill, as lovely as she was, would never be for him. She was gay, which was a very effective switch off, indeed.

Chapter 4

March 2010 – 14 years later

Cleo had decided very early on that if she were to get ahead in the world, she needed to know about ‘marketing’. This being thoroughly intermeshed with ‘business’ meant that her night classes had been chosen with the view of selling a product, any product, herself included. This line of thought had also led her to ‘psychology’ because if she understood how minds worked, she would be more apt at manipulating them.

She had been lucky. One thing had led to another and she had found herself delving into her fertile imagination and successfully marrying it with her education. Nearly fifteen years after she had taken her first course, she found herself as director of her own marketing and advertising agency. At thirty two, she was a recognised force in the business. She hadn’t been the first to do it – leave the company where she had last worked, taking clients with her. She wouldn’t be the last, which is why she kept a tight rein over anyone working for her. History was always repeating itself and she didn’t want to lose her clients in the same way. There was actually little chance of that happening because, although she was considered ‘cold’— a woman made of steel – she was equally efficient, bordering on brilliant. It was thought that her unemotional approach and analysis of a situation accounted for the more than satisfactory results in any campaign her company handled. Besides, she made sure she was the only one who had any durable contact with the clients.

As cold as she might be, as uninviting as her personality might seem, she had understood early in her climb in the business world that an attractive physical appearance was primordial. She first got a client’s attention by her personal presentation and by her language. She had made a concentrated effort to speak with a ‘BBC accent’ which gave the impression she had come from a better social class than she really had. In Britain, as soon as anyone opened his or her mouth, he or she was classed. Everyone did it, regardless of their own station in life. It was an automatic determining of ‘who’s who’. So, once Cleo had got a client’s attention with her looks and ‘class’, she kept them with her strategies. She had come a long way from that mousy Mary Murphy who had done her best not to draw attention to herself.

She was five foot seven, slender but with full breasts. It hadn’t taken her long to realise that those breasts, which had initially caused her embarrassment, were actually an asset if used wisely. Her dull brown hair had come alive in a rich, dark brown tint that had also added lustre. Although her skin was fair with a tendency to freckle if she got too much sun, she exuded an air of good health and clean living. She wasn’t beautiful but once one had looked into her hazel eyes with their long dark lashes, glanced at her lush mouth with its pink lips, one was unconsciously seduced. Perhaps her stand-offishness was seen as a challenge. Who would be the one to succeed in breaching her defences? Such thoughts became vain conjecture as time moved on, because it had never happened. She did not mix business with pleasure – ever.

-oOo-

The person who might be considered the closest to Cleo, was her personal assistant, Amanda Wade. She was a young woman in her late twenties with all the secretarial skills and experience that Cleo had required but it had been her chirpy, out-going personality which had cinched her position as her P.A. She was personable too. Medium height and shapely with mahogany coloured hair and blue eyes, she epitomized the general public’s idea of the trendy young woman who got ahead in life, as so often seen in TV commercials. Cleo had needed someone who would give a warm welcome to clients to counter-balance her own lack of overt enthusiasm because she would never resort to that synthetic, false camaraderie that Americans used with their clients. She was more than happy to hide behind that ‘good old British phlegm’.

Amanda had worked well and after a couple of years was comfortably ensconced in the company with Cleo, who had come to depend on her considerably. However, for all her efficiency, Amanda was no wiser about Cleo’s personal life than she had been on her first day. Once she was away

from the office, for all intents and purposes, Cleo ceased to exist. Amanda had never dared overstep her position as an employee and ask any questions. She had been aware from the start that she was in an environment where one never spoke about anything personal unless one was spoken to first. Besides, it was only curiosity that sparked any interest she might have because in any circumstances, she had a hard time relating to her boss. What the hell. If the working relationship worked well without sharing confidences, why rock the boat? Anyway, she had too much going on in her own life to worry about her boss'...

Chapter 5

May 2010

Because it was a bank holiday weekend, Jason had closed his yard for the three days. He hadn't made any plans for the weekend simply because the holiday had been upon him before he had had time to realise that it was *this* weekend and not the next. Dressed rather scruffily, he had, nevertheless, taken advantage of the quiet to go down to the yard with the view of checking the status of the various current jobs and giving a quick look at the books. That done, he'd also taken a look at the materials in stock and made sure they wouldn't run short. Silly really, because his yard manager was more than competent. He knew that he was killing time because he was, in fact, feeling at a bit of a loose end. By mid-day, he had had enough and decided he would go to the nearest supermarket and buy some fresh fruit and vegetables. He didn't need anything else.

He had long ago discovered the advantages of having a good freezer which he usually kept filled with every type of 'ready-meal' known to exist. He also had a pantry which boasted jars and tins of every fancy he had ever had, plus boxes of cereals, crackers and biscuits. If ever there were penury of any product in the shops, he wouldn't have to worry for a good while. He knew that this mild form of hoarding was due to his years 'in care' when he had never been able to eat enough to satisfy his hunger but it didn't stop him from keeping the cupboards full.

As he was padlocking the wrought iron gate to his yard, he sensed someone had stopped near to him. He turned and saw a young woman looking up at the large panel with the yard's information on it. Even in jeans, scuffed half-boots and an anorak with a bag on her shoulder, she exuded class, besides being lovely. Having read the board's information, she was turning to leave without a word and Jason had to refrain from grabbing her in an effort to get her attention. Instead, the words rolled off his tongue.

"Can I help ya, love?" He offered her his most beguiling smile, the smile that seduced eight women out of ten.

"Not today." She had replied straight-faced and dismissingly. She began to move away.

She offered a challenge with her rigidity. She was one of the two remaining women out of ten who was immune to his usual flirting procedure. One of the two was usually gay but something about this one had him doubting that she was. He had followed after her enough to place a light hand on her arm without realising it.

"Would 'not today' mean tomorrow, then? I'd be happy to help tomorrow – or the day after..." He continued with a smile, hoping to melt her defences a little with his banter.

"No." She replied without the slightest softening of her features.

"No', for which one?" Pretending to be obtuse, he was still hoping to make headway with her by keeping her talking.

"It means – when and *if* I want your help, I'll ask for it." Not picking up on his attempt at humour, she gently removed his hand and glared at him.

Jason had felt her rebuff as surely as if she had slapped his face *but* instead of terminating their exchange, it had encouraged him to continue. His tone became more conciliatory.

"Sorry. Don't mind me. I'm a bit unpolished when it comes to business. Jason Dooley, of Dooley Brick Builders." He cocked his head in the direction of the panel as he put out his right hand waiting for her to shake it. She looked at the extended hand and for an instant, he wasn't sure she *would* take it. Slowly, she brought her hand forward and clasped his. He saw and felt the change in her as his large, rough hand enveloped her soft, elegant hand. He also felt the change in himself as though the physical touching of her skin to his had prompted some type of osmosis. She was studying his face unabashedly while her hand still held his. Then realising that their hands were still joined, she had released his without looking away. He could see her mind working but hadn't the least idea what she could be thinking. So, he spoke in another bid to keep her attention.

"I was just locking up for the weekend and then I was going for a coffee over there." He indicated the café which was across the road. "May I buy you one for the road?"

His smile was less brash... Cleo was touched by the intense look in his eyes. She recognised the appeal in them and, against her better judgement, decided to accept. Here, she was in the territory she hoped to make hers. People didn't know her and because of that, she could drop her business façade. She could be ordinary. It wasn't as if she'd ever need see the man again. There were other builders on her list.

The soft smile with which she graced him, churned his innards. It was all he could do not to sigh out loud because, until she had smiled, he hadn't really seen just how beautiful she was.

-oOo-

The coffee had turned into more than just a coffee as they had sat getting to know each other. They'd ordered cottage pie and peas and roly-poly pudding with custard for dessert. It wasn't that either was particularly hungry but after the first half hour with their coffees, neither had wanted the moment to end. They had begun to discover that they had more than one thing in common which also included school canteen meals of 'cottage pie and peas and roly-poly pudding with custard'. She seemed so cultivated that he'd been surprised to learn that she hadn't gone to boarding school; she hadn't dwelt on that fact or any other aspect of her school life.

Like one of those films that speed up the development of a seed or some other action, they were the constant that *didn't* move. People came and went around them leaving cups, plates, paper napkins and crumbs on the surrounding tables, only to be cleared away by the café owner until others came to start the process again and again. They sat at their table oblivious to it all for an indeterminable amount of time.

Unfortunately, the call of nature was the factor that broke the spell. Once standing, both stiff from the Formica chairs, they realised that they were also going to have to move on, but to where? Would this be the moment when they went their separate ways? Jason mentioned the supermarket and 'Bingo'! They had both needed to go shopping for the weekend. Because she had walked to his yard earlier, he offered to take her with him in his van.

Cleo didn't remember ever laughing so much. Jason had the knack of turning a supermarket shopping spree into a hilarious outing. His perspicacious analysis of other shoppers had Cleo stifling her laughs into a handkerchief for fear of upsetting anyone. Just when she thought that it wouldn't be possible to be witty yet again, Jason said something else to astonish her. It came to him naturally, just slipped out of his mouth.

He was rough looking. He spoke with a working class accent as one would expect of a builder but his observations and razor-sharp wit belied his origins. She was seeing him with new eyes; looking past the man that gave the impression that he thought he was God's gift to women. There was also a vulnerability to him that she sensed. When she'd asked if he was Irish, because the name Dooley certainly was *and* he had the gift of the gab, he had simply answered that he didn't know, before rapidly changing the subject.

It finally came to the moment when he took her home with her shopping. He quietly admired her house, which *did* put her into a different league from him. It wasn't that he couldn't have afforded a house similar to hers, it was just that he hadn't cared – until now. He suddenly wanted to puff himself up to impress her, while knowing full well that she was immune to superficial displays. He carried a bag of shopping to her front door not knowing how to relinquish his hold on her. He, the smooth talking charmer, was tongue-tied. Realising she wasn't going to invite him in, he somehow found the words to ask her if she were free tomorrow? He would like to take her to visit one of the country manors that wasn't too far away – if she were interested? He saw that she hesitated and it hurt him that the time they had already spent together hadn't been enough for her to want more. *He* was already subjugated.

Cleo hesitated a fraction of a second before answering Jason's proposal to visit one of the nearby manors. She didn't 'date' and this smacked of a date. Did she want to encourage a builder, a workman, a man who seemed to be very sure of himself? She was so used to weighing up all her options before making a decision that she was doing it with Jason. Suddenly, she felt ashamed. He had been charming and it had been the first time ever that she had felt carefree and, yes, happy. It was a

feeling that she wanted to have again even at the risk of accepting a 'date'. She also found that she truly wanted to know him better.

"Yes, I would like that." She replied with enough enthusiasm in her voice for him to feel relieved.

"How 'bout I come for you at 9 o'clock and we can have breakfast at a place I know?" He suggested eagerly. They would remain on neutral ground to avoid any hint of pressure.

She would never know why she had done it. Had there been a certain resonance to his voice that had encouraged her? The twilight had certainly prevented her from seeing him clearly as they stood on her doorstep, so it hadn't been the expression on his face. She had lifted her hand to touch his rough cheek with an intimacy that was completely foreign to her. That almost affectionate gesture sent a thrill through Jason. Instinctively, he knew he mustn't alarm her, so he slowly brought his mouth towards hers to kiss her gently on the lips. She didn't back away, but her responding kiss was infantile. He didn't know what message it was sending but he didn't care. He gave her a second, soft kiss before backing away.

"I'll see ya tomorrow at nine." He hadn't dared add the usual 'love' that finished his phrases because the word had suddenly taken on a whole new meaning and he wasn't sure he wanted to use it light-heartedly.

She had stood on the doorstep and watched him walk down her path to the white van that had turned yellow under the street light. She seemed to be detached from her body, unable to move it. He turned before getting in the van and gave a last wave of his hand. She found the use of her hand again and gave him a little wave, not sure he would see it so far from the lit street. The van may have been gone five minutes, maybe more, before she turned the key which finally gave her entry into her home.

Chapter 6

Jason had slept sporadically. The anticipation of his date the next day had played havoc with his nerves. He had dreamt of driving over to pick Cleo up and then not remembering where she lived. The panic had woken him and once he was awake he had begun to think about everything they had discussed and had then realised that he hadn't asked for, nor had she volunteered, her telephone number. He did know where she lived but he didn't know her surname. How had he been so negligent? Then he started to worry about what he would wear. He had dozed again and then had jerked awake at seven, afraid that he would over-sleep. This time he got up, showered leisurely, and got dressed in some casual black trousers with a blue shirt and black leather jacket. It didn't look too dressy but not scruffy either. He tried to boost his confidence by saying that she had agreed to go out with *him*, not his clothes. He had looked a bit rough yesterday and she hadn't been put off. Somehow, his reasoning hadn't quite worked because he still felt jittery.

Cleo hadn't fared any better. She had ruminated for hours before finally going to sleep. She didn't date because she didn't want the complications that were inevitably created in any relationship. It would end with someone getting hurt; she had seen it happen time and again around her. How often had she been aware of the domestic problems of her employees? *Her* one attempt of 'bonding' had finished with recriminations being hurled back and forth, putting the blame for its failure on the other. If she hadn't swept that experience under the carpet some eight years ago, there would have been little chance that she'd have accepted Jason's invitation. Awake early, she showered. She hadn't thought about clothes when she had agreed to go but now she looked at her limited wardrobe of jeans, jeans and jeans. She just hoped he didn't plan to try and impress her with some expensive, exclusive place that would frown on them.

She sighed, wondering how she had been so weak as to accept his proposition when she normally made a point of keeping her distance from any suggestion of personal involvement. Anyway, she rationalized, it needn't be more than this once. She was hardly making any great sacrifice by spending the day with him. Originally, this was supposed to have been time for herself gardening or visiting the area, however, it was flexible since nothing had been carved into granite. If this day proved to be a waste, there still remained tomorrow to relax and recuperate. The experience could be added to others to reinforce her determination not to date.... This train of thought did not make her feel any easier.

Jason was punctual. The door's knocker had reverberated in the empty hallway despite only two light taps. Cleo had been ready for more than an hour so was prepared to leave without inviting him in. She hadn't wanted to prolong the date in any way but as soon as she had opened the door and found him standing on the doorstep, she was incapable of any reasonable thought. His timid smile had melted all her defences; he had fused her to the spot where she stood.

"Hi Cleo. Ready to go?" He had tilted his head slightly with the question.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from his glossy, raven black hair or his 'oh so blue' eyes or the white teeth, just visible as his smile increased. There was something about him that hypnotized her and she hated to think that it would be so easy to join the queue of women who desired him in some way or other.

"I'm afraid that I only have jeans with me, so I hope that is all right?" It was lucky that she had been able to speak without muttering or stuttering.

"Anything you wear would be all right. You have the bearing to carry it off." He replied perfectly truthfully. It was enough to make her smile and ease her tension. Before she could see it coming, he had taken her hand and pulled her out of the house. She had stiffened, afraid that he was going to kiss her but he had leaned behind her to pull the door shut before pulling her down the path towards his car. His enthusiasm was infectious. She was now looking forward to their breakfast while wondering what he had planned for the rest of the day.

It was easy to see that he favoured black. His Peugeot 406 was black with black leather seats. He merged with the car as he took her down country lanes on a mystery tour to breakfast. He finally pulled in to what must have been a coaching inn in the nineteenth century or earlier. It literally took her

breath away with its low eaves and gables under which sat mullioned windows. Inside, the low, oak beamed ceiling had to be original. The fireplace at one end of the room had a small gas fire in an open grate that imitated perfectly the coal fire of distant times. The wooden tables and chairs, the pews, the framed pictures, the candleholders and plates on the wall and any number of other details added to the illusion of an inn two hundred years ago. Perhaps some of them *were* authentic. As she looked around, through an archway she noted the wooden bar, which was handling the Sunday morning breakfast rush but which would quickly adapt to its drink selling when the 'regulars' began to arrive. A thrill of excitement ran through her and she turned to Jason to congratulate him on knowing about this 'petit bijou', *little jewel*. He was delighted by her obvious appreciation of the place. He took her hand again and pulled her towards the bar saying,

“There’s someone I’d like ya ta meet.”

The manager turned out to be one of his best friends from school days. It explained how he had known about the place but, in fact, it had been more complicated than that because they had lost contact with each other when they had been in their teens. It was thanks to a job that had needed doing, two years ago, that he had rediscovered his friend after sixteen years. He was a regular visitor now, although Mike had let it drop that it was the first time he had come accompanied. The thought had, surprisingly, pleased Cleo.

They found themselves a table for two in a corner near to a window. Breakfast had been delicious and time had passed without them noticing it. They had wandered outside to sit and talk under a May sun and in no time at all they were having a simple ploughman’s lunch with a glass of cider each. They were both a little sorry to leave but it was with promises to Mike that they would be back soon.

Each time Jason took her hand to lead her somewhere, it became more natural, so that by the time they were on their way for the visit of the stately home, he had only had to hold out his hand for her to take it. They were both happy for the excuse to touch hands because it was subconsciously the prelude to something more sensual. Jason’s long strong fingers with their rough skin were masculine to their very tips. His palms might have been callused but they were supple enough to envelop Cleo’s hand and take command. Because she had finally given him her hand voluntarily, it had been the first step to acknowledging his dominance. She already sensed the harnessed force that he contained. It frightened her to lose her usual control but at the same time, it thrilled her. That was the effect he was having on her – frightening and yet thrilling.

As they visited the rooms in the house-cum-museum, her mind kept shifting back to the hand holding hers. For the very first time, she relaxed, free of her years of decision making, of being the one to exact what she wanted. Today, she had only needed to follow, to be led by the big warm hand.

Chapter 7

By early evening, they had begun looking for somewhere to dine so they could rest their feet. The visit to the stately home had been followed by a walk through its beautiful park and woodlands. They had hardly noticed their surroundings because Jason had found a way of getting her to talk. She *didn't* 'talk', unless it was to do with business, but it seemed that that had now changed. He had managed to worm information out of her that wasn't to do with either of their businesses. His easy-going manner had imperceptibly slipped passed her defences so that she had relaxed her guard. For the first time, she found she liked discussing things whose only relevance was for the subject at hand. She knew she was stiff, and yet it hadn't seemed to matter to him as he continued to coax responses from her, continued to make her laugh. It was a beginning, but to what?

They had had a stroke of luck in finding a restaurant that was open; a French restaurant called '*Le Restaurant du Coin*'. Its name was probably due to it being on the corner across from a very popular pub. Even as they approached, they could see a party of people leaving the pub, probably after a pre-prandial drink, and crossing the road in a bee-line for the restaurant. A slight chill had replaced the warm day. Jason naturally put an arm around her shoulders to draw her nearer to him as they too headed for the restaurant. She felt his warmth and actually snuggled a little closer. They were no different from the couple ahead of them, who might have been married. The idea added an extra dose of warmth to Cleo's cheeks.

It had been early evening when they were given a table, but they had lingered until after ten. If the restaurant had had more customers, they might have felt obliged to move on but the 'patron' hadn't seemed anxious to be rid of them, so they only left with the last of the diners. Finding themselves outside again at the end of a fairly long day had left them in a bit of a dilemma. It was Sunday on a 'Bank Holiday' weekend and everything was closed and quiet.

"I'll take you home, Cleo, unless there is somewhere else you would like to go?" Jason suggested.

She just stood there looking at him with an awkwardness that had returned now that she was put in control again. She felt limp and the chill in the air after the warm restaurant made her shiver. He put an arm around her sensing she needed sheltering, and she leaned into him almost unconsciously, indecisive.

"Would you like ta see where I live? 'Tisn't as grand as your place but I've come ta like it." It was said without guile, cautiously, and Cleo picked up on that. She hadn't thought about where he lived until now, but she found that she was suddenly curious to see his environment. She wondered if he'd have any particular type of decoration style. When she thought about it, she couldn't begin to guess his taste in furnishings. 'Please... don't let there be jazzy carpeting or wallpaper', she now hoped quite desperately. She was only too familiar with working class taste and shied away from it instinctively. While she was thinking, it had taken a fraction too long to answer, which affected Jason more than he would have liked.

"You must be tired. I'll take ya home." He had reverted to his original suggestion without much enthusiasm. He didn't want to give her up, and yet, he wasn't really sure that he had her. He began walking back to his car with an arm around her.

"I'd liked to see where you live. I would." They were words said quickly almost as though she wanted to get them out before she could change her mind.

"If you're sure...?" He gave her the chance to back out.

"I would like to, really." The words encouraged him to give her an affectionate squeeze.

-oOo-

It was a semi-detached house in red brick. It was probably a post-war construction like those she'd seen many times. It was exceptional in that it was in a desirable, rather chic neighbourhood and it was sitting on a well-angled piece of land. Its location was near to shops and a train station. As he

pulled up onto the driveway, a fox's eyes shone white in the headlights and then it disappeared over the wall into what must be a garden.

"Did you see it?" She asked Jason excitedly.

"They're all around here. Bet ya have them where ya are too. Guess they've been around for a while 'cause there's a pub not far called 'The Fox' and one of the main roads is called 'Fox Lane'. You're not scared are ya? If so, sit here while I make a bit of a rumpus. They're skittish and don't hang about."

"No, I'm not scared, just a little surprised..."

So, they got out and went to the house. Jason had his key ready for the front door which was an unpretentious, natural hardwood door. For Cleo, it was a good start which continued as he revealed the interior of the house. All the floors were a varnished wood which was darker than pine. Doors, archways, stairs, cupboards, shelves were all of the same wood. As he took her through to the open-plan kitchen, she saw that everything was plain and simple. Walls were a creamy white and the only colours to be seen were blues, mauves and purples in the throw rugs and cushions on the blue, over-stuffed couch at the far end of the room. A wooden table and chairs were interposed between the kitchen and couch. The cool colours in the room went well with the warmth of all the wood. She felt herself relax as she admitted she liked the look of his place, which was sort of countrified.

"Some wine?" Jason proposed. "Or would ya like a coffee liqueur? Otherwise there is always tea and coffee – decaf. perhaps?"

"Wine would be wonderful, if you have red? I prefer white but am afraid that it would chill me too much."

It was probably the word 'chill' that had prompted his movement. Jason came up to her so quickly that she didn't have time to think. As he reached out for her waist he commanded,

"Come here for a cuddle. I'll soon have ya warm enough for white wine if ya want it."

Like a dancer following her partner's lead, she went into his arms and naturally followed his movement. His arms held her against his chest without trapping her and she gradually melted against him, happy to find him comfortable. After a couple of minutes, he let her go.

"Warmer? It was really a sneaky move on my part because I don't have any white wine." He chuckled, pleased with himself.

Cleo laughed and made a gesture to push him away but in a flash, he had caught her hand and had reeled her into his arms again bringing his lips to hers greedily. He was surprised to find that she responded, opening her mouth, allowing him to taste the soft flesh of her lips. She had retained a hint of the coffee from the meal but there was more to her deliciousness than he would be able to define. He wanted to devour her and yet was afraid that she, too, was skittish. He gave one last kiss before putting her away from him and turning to go into the kitchen to get a bottle of red. He hardly knew what he was doing and had to stop and think. 'Ah, yes – a bottle-opener, glasses. What had she done to him?'

Their embrace had affected Cleo too. She'd backed up against a wall for support hoping that Jason wouldn't notice her wobbly legs. He returned with two glasses in one hand, the open bottle in the other and would have continued to the couch but the way Cleo was looking at him, brought him to a staggering halt. He carelessly put everything down on the wooden table, hardly noticing how close to the edge they landed. Without a break in his movement, he took Cleo back into his arms and ravaged her mouth. She gave in to him and within a blinking of an eye returned his ardour, hardly allowing for breath. He caressed her as he kissed. He put both hands on her buttocks to draw her against his hard-on and then groaned because of his tight trousers.

Perhaps it was the groan he had made, or his rigid sex rubbing against her *or* perhaps just the smell of him, which caused Cleo to lose control. She tried to draw him nearer, to absorb him in some way. His tongue had begun to send chills, thrills through her that she could not ever remember experiencing. Her legs were more than wobbly, they were weak but it didn't prevent her from wanting to wrap herself around Jason. Desire blunted her reasoning until she was aware that Jason had pulled her blouse free and was trying to unbutton her jeans.

“No! Stop!” The frantic words somehow escaped from her mouth the instant he had moved to kiss her neck. Her hands, which a second before had been pulling him to her, now tried to push him away.

It didn't matter if it had been the thrust of her hands or the distress in her words that had cut into Jason's desire. The effect was instantaneous. Taken aback, Jason's hands released her, his head dropped and he visibly slumped, his breathing heavy. He took one step back and, without raising his head to look at her, managed to say in a husky voice,

“Sorry, Cleo, sorry.”

To make things worse, Cleo began to cry with her hands to her face. Jason was bewildered and unarmed. This was something he had never experienced and least of all expected, especially as her kisses had been fervent, her body inviting.

“Please don't cry. It's my fault. I thought ya wanted more. Please believe me, I am sorry.” He didn't know what else to say because in his many years of seducing or being seduced, no tears had ever been shed.

Cleo was sobbing, sniffing and wiping her eyes with one corner of the blouse that was loose. Seeing her predicament, Jason backed into the kitchen and got the roll of paper towels. He clumsily tried to give her several squares, one fluttering to the ground but at least one finishing a little crumpled in her hand. Gradually, her sobs disappeared and instinctively Jason went to take her in his arms to comfort her, repeating he was sorry.

She stiffened automatically, making him feel awful again; as if he had forced himself on her or was a threat. No one could accuse him of that. As it was now obvious that the evening was suddenly over, Jason said the only thing he could in the circumstances.

“Come on, Cleo. All I can do now is to take ya home. You've had a long day and I'm so very sorry it has ended badly.”

'Sorry. Such an inadequate, over-used word that is supposed to make everything right', Jason thought. 'How could I have been so wrong?'

Chapter 8

By the time Jason had delivered Cleo home, she had calmed and appeared to be nothing more than a woman who was tired after a long day. He had gone to her door with her to make sure that she got in all right, but they hadn't touched or said more than a few words. For once in his life, he was definitely at a loss for them. Rather than feeling irritated by or even indifferent to the incident, he felt hollow and hesitant. As Cleo opened the door and paused a minute on the doorstep, Jason, nevertheless, felt he couldn't quite let go.

"Will I see ya again?"

Under normal circumstances, he would have kicked himself for the plaintiveness in his voice, the hovering sound of doubt. She didn't answer but gave a vague shrug of her shoulders. In a flash, it took him back to his orphanage days when a similar gesture of indifference had hidden a lack of confidence. It could also mean that one was hiding something. What was Cleo hiding? He had come close enough that he had frightened her into action. It came over him like a wave of relief as he realised that it was really nothing to do with him personally. It was that he had come too close to something that she was, in a sense, protecting or masking. Now he was really intrigued because he had often been exposed to cases of dissimulation by kids in care. Hadn't his own cockiness been a bit of bravado to hide his own insecurity?

He took a card out of his wallet and pencilled his mobile phone number on the back. This was not his work phone number but his personal number, reserved for special people. The test came as he held it out to her. Would she take it and more important, would she use it? He felt obliged to add the clarification.

"It's my personal number. I really would like to see ya again sometime. If ya give me a call we can go to a pub, or... wherever ya like. I'm sorry Cleo if I spoiled anything. The day was good for me."

She slowly took it with a weak smile and a slight nod.

"Thank you, Jason. It *was* a good day. My behaviour is me, how I am. I over-reacted and now I have spoiled what should have been perfect. Give me time. I can't say better than that; until I've slept and am less tired. OK?"

She looked at him frankly and he tried to discern if he should understand more, if he were missing unsaid words. He slowly took her hand between his, gave the back a soft stroke, then a light squeeze and dropped it.

"Good night, Cleo. Do I get a quick, good night kiss?" he dared to ask with a hint of his cheekiness.

She laughed involuntarily at his daring after all the awkwardness. How could she not give this man a kiss? She liked him a lot and no one had ever made her feel quite so contented – until the crossing over of limits...

She leaned towards him and immediately took in the light, fragrant cologne he was wearing with the hint of something exciting. She planted her lips on his and he sighed. All was not lost.

"Good night Jason."

He turned as she did and this time they didn't wave to each other. They were both too lost in thought.

-oOo-

Cleo stood in the barren hallway looking up the uncarpeted stairs and then along the passageway towards the kitchen. There was enough light coming in from the street lamps and possibly the moon, for her to see how empty the place was. A twinge of guilt ran through her as she thought back to her conduct in Jason's house less than an hour ago. She knew her reaction had been exaggerated simply because she had panicked. Why had that happened when she knew deep down that she had nothing to fear from him? He had been drawn to her as she had been to him. She had recognised the mutual attraction from their first cup of coffee and yet, she was plagued by the idea that every man was out to get what he could from a woman, before running. She climbed the staircase with

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