



**MURDERS BY A DEADLY SILK**

**By**

**ROSALYN**

**RICHARDSON**

## **Preface**

Rosie Ibbotson is a young woman who works for a group of Solicitors in London called “Lewis, Connor and Hamlyn” as a legal secretary. Her manager is called Mrs Bakewell.

Rosie works as part of a large team in office administration.

Rosie shares a flat with best friend Emmy in Kingston Upon Thames.

It was at the office Christmas Party that Rosie met Stefan Wellborough, or more precisely, Barrister Wellborough. From then on the rest is history.

Unbeknown to everyone, this silk became deadly as he started to weave his evil web with women and tragedy always followed. This continued procedure had been long underway before he finally trapped Rosie entirely. Captured by this older man, with his suaveness and explicit sexual prowess, Rosie became hooked. However, this was not a romance as she had naively first thought. Rosie was his prey, and his captive, as she later found out.

This Silk was deadly!

Would Rosie come out alive or her life terminated like many others?

# Chapter 1

Hi. I'm Rosie.

I am 25 years old, and I have worked for Lewis, Carrington, and Hamlyn Solicitors as a legal secretary since I was 18.

Emmy and I had met at secondary school and had both gone on to study at college. I studied business and administration. Emmy had lived with her family in Surbiton, a few miles out of Kingston and I had grown up in Woking in Surrey.

Emmy and I kept in regular contact after leaving college and we would regularly meet up for nights out. I was still at home, but Emmy told me she was moving to Kingston to live in a rented flat with her boyfriend Alexander, or Al as he preferred to be called.

Emmy worked as a reporter for a well know London newspaper, but Al, I never really did find out what he did, if he did anything!

Not surprisingly it didn't work out for them, and Emmy kicked him out. It was shortly after that while Emmy and I were having a coffee together one Saturday that she told me that she couldn't afford to keep the flat on her own and, so she was advertising for a house mate. That's how she and ended up with me!

Yes, I did have a boyfriend called Richie, but we didn't live together in fact perish the thought, bless him.

Lewis Carrington and Hamlyn were based in West London, I have the daily hustle and bustle of catching the tube each morning. It was like being in a sardine can, and it is a chance of luck which tube a person can manage to cram in to.

In Hammerton Row, where I am based, much of the Public-Sector establishments are sectioned together, i.e., the banks are all in one section, building societies in another and then we also are

sandwiched in a line of Solicitors and legal companies. It's like a village in itself!

Even though I have worked here some years, I still don't know everyone by name for various reasons but mainly because I am based on the second floor and do not generally see anyone outside my own team. The relevance of this statement will become clearer as my story unfolds.

My manager is Mrs Lauren Bakewell, and is in her early forties. Her senior is Mrs Samantha Gerrard a family law solicitor related to one of the partners, Angus Hamilton.

Mrs Bakewell is married with two children a boy, and a girl. She is tall and slender with shoulder length silky looking blond hair and not one out of place as the saying goes and with piercing green eyes.

I started my contract of employment there almost the same week as she did. I remember her arriving in the car park, as I watched out of the office kitchen window. Mrs Bakewell carefully reversed her Audi TT in to her parking space. I read her private registration plate, LB22.

I never did know what the 22 stood for!

I sighed momentarily in a wistful fashion. Life seemed so perfect for her, even her husband when I met him at the office one evening as we were all leaving, added to this fairy tale life that I imagined she had. Christian, or Mr Bakewell, was tall and dark haired donned in an expensive looking suit.

Not that my life was drab by any means, but I often mused where my life would be in a few years, and if I would be another Mrs Bakewell so to speak.

I had made good friends with Martine, who was Mrs Wood's legal secretary.

Emmy never seemed to mind Richie coming around, but he didn't often stop overnight, but I would stop over at his place where he lived with his mum, and that I think tells the tale about our relationship.

As far as I knew, we were just there for each other and good friends more than anything, but nothing heavy as it were.

We had been "together" for around 18 months now. Richie was a woman's dream. He was very attentive, lovable, and affectionate with a cracking sense of humour. That was it though. He was dependable, very rarely lost his temper – well not in front of me anyway. He was a loving son who was obviously adored. We had "loosely" talked of getting engaged, but it was always me who changed the subject. I longed for that bit of spice and excitement in a man. A man that had Richie's qualities but had that enigma side to him and unpredictable.

I had begun to feel that we were more like brother and sister, and our sexual life, if you could call it that, had just fizzled out. That was fine by me and didn't seem to bother Richie, but he kept trying to force my hand into marriage. He was ever the optimistic, that we would work it out eventually and we just needed to be together. Perhaps that was the problem, he was getting needy. Gradually, we grew apart.

Richie and I stayed good friends and kept in touch now and again. Later I would learn how much I needed him and his protection.

## **Chapter 2**

The floor above us at work, was mainly chambers for Barristers of various standings, but it was very rare that we saw them.

Life was always hectic in this work, but I liked being busy.

My parents, and I would speak on the telephone, usually twice a week, but my mum would always remind me, that I should come home more often to visit than I did. I never took it as controlling, just maternal and being protective about me, and not just because I was the youngest of four and the only girl.

I agreed one weekend to travel the forty miles up to their house, early one Sunday morning and have lunch with them.

Amongst other subjects while I was helping my mum wash up, was inevitably Richie, and was there someone else on the horizon.

Richie's mum and mine were good friends. They had been at medical school together during their nurse's training. It was through that friendship and contact that inevitably my mum had found out that our "romantic" relationship was at an end.

I assured mum that no, there wasn't anybody else, we had just grown apart. I was quite enjoying just being me – whoever that was.

Mum looked disappointed, but she was respectful of my views and didn't interfere.

Her final word of advice as I went to leave was, that surprise and spontaneity were exciting, but dependability is also safe as is predictability.

I just humoured her that I understood, but I was soon to find out that I had no idea and to my peril.

### **Chapter 3**

Before we knew it, Christmas was racing like a train towards us.

Normally, each section of the firm organized their own parties. There were approximately thirty staff on our floor, and we usually had separate office events to the rest of the firm, and ours was usually at

our local football club where it was easy to hire one of their function rooms. To cut the cost, we usually shared the catering side, but had the use of the internal bar.

This year, however, was going to be a twenty years

It was an anniversary celebration year, as suggested by the “men at the top” or the hierarchy of Barristers on the floor above.

It was announced by Samantha Gerrard at our weekly morning meeting before we opened to the public.

Mrs Gerrard said that we had all been invited to the Christmas function as usual but this year it was going to be at the “Olive Tree Mansion” This was an exclusive and very expensive restaurant that most of us had heard of, but that’s where it ended. Most of us on that floor had not even stepped over the threshold of the establishment.

This year it was to be a formal dinner party, paid for by the Barristers to mark the occasion of the anniversary.

The other secretaries and office staff alike, were excited, a little childishly, at the thought of the oncoming event. After all, it was like a dream to be invited there – and especially not having to worry about the price!

Martine and I and other females in the office kept talking about what we were going to wear. Most of us agreed to go casual but glamorous.

Well, finally the 21<sup>st</sup> of December arrived, and was our last day at work.

It wasn’t just going to be a magnificent event that would be etched in my brain, but the man I was about to meet there.

## Chapter 4

On that final workday, the security guards locked the doors to the public at exactly 2pm.

We had all been told that the office function was to begin at 7.30pm and that those of us who needed transport -which was most of us, were to be picked up from the office for 6pm. Taxis had been arranged to transport us to the venue, but from then on, we had to arrange individually to arrange our transport back home or wherever each of us was going to stay.

Although Martine only lived a short walk from me, she had kindly invited me to stop at her flat. I gratefully accepted. It would be good for Emmy too as I wouldn't disturb her getting in at the early hours of the morning.

Dinner was set for 8pm, so the first half hour was mainly spent having our first drinks and making sure we had all turned up!

There was a large poster board with a list of names and which table everyone had been assigned to.

I did a quick calculation which showed there were a total of 120 guests altogether. Although there were many other employees, it was obvious that probably some had other arrangements or were possibly travelling to see their families.

Also, I noticed from the board, that, whoever had thoughtfully arranged it, that we were integrated with not just our office colleagues, but other employees from the firm in other departments.

Samantha Gerrard made her way to the front of the guests and clapped her hands together as a teacher to get everybody's attention. Obedient silence followed.

"Ladies and Gentlemen" she politely and professionally proceeded.



“I hope you have had chance to look at the seating arrangements” she announced.

There were a few blank looks and lost glances. I fortunately had already had a “peek” and was extremely pleased to be next to Martine.

The large doors were opened to the dining room by two very smartly dressed butlers with white gloves on.

We were asked to step forward in pairs due to the large gathering.

The dining room was extensive and expensive.

The ceilings were high with elaborate patterns embroidered into them. The curtains were expensive green velvet and heavy brocade. The carpet, which was immaculate and must have been cleaned daily was of top quality, probably a manufacturer I had never even heard of!

There were five long tables arranged around the parameters of the room with a spacious gap in between for the butlers and waitresses to enter as necessary.

As Martine and I sat down on our designated seats, she complimented me on my appearance.

I had arranged a wash and blow dry for the event, and did, feel quite at ease with my wavy brunette hair that at times had a way of its own. My hairdresser was very artistic and had a real knack with taming my hair.

I had a red chiffon style short sleeved dress, which was quite figure hugging for me. My mum had kindly lent me my grandmother’s pearl necklace and matching pearl drop earrings, (I think she had been quite moved by the occasion).

I had treated myself to a pair of cream high heeled shoes to match and had for once had my make up styled professionally at the same place as my hairdresser.

Samantha Gerrard then stood up as we were all seated and started her opening speech. She thanked us on behalf of all for our hard work during the years and mentioned, as we all knew, that this was a special year. She raised her glass and we all said “cheers” in unison.

There were some very exotic starters, some I had never even heard of. There were also mussels and oysters etc., but I played safe and settled with smoked salmon terrine.

Martine and I chatted away covering a variety of subjects as we made our way through our starters. There was a hum of chatter and the occasional outbursts of laughter some quite raucous at different decibel levels. Suddenly, Martine nudged me and said, “Someone’s watching you” and then she giggled. I didn’t tell her that I already had experienced that feeling.

I then became more aware of my vision and glances.

I asked her, “and who might that be Miss Holmes, the new detective?”

“Look straight across” she said.

“Where?” I asked amused.

But as I did so, my eyes suddenly locked as the man’s eyes before me, fixed on to mine and a wry smile emanated from him.

I guessed at first glance, that he was older than me, perhaps mid-forties. He had greying black hair, and he looked very distinguished in his navy-blue suit with a complimentary bow tie to an expensive looking white shirt.

I quickly averted my eyes and turned my attention to the waitress now collecting our plates.

“Who is he anyway? Do you know him by any chance?” I questioned Martine.

“No, I’ve only seen him the once. He came to see Mrs Wood about a client. I think his chambers is in the very last building on this street. I do know his name though. He’s Stefan Wellborough. He’s apparently a top-notch senior Barrister. I’ve heard he has a real knack of wheedling out information from the defence, not to mention his way with the ladies!” Martine added mischievously.

“Well, considering you don’t know him, and you have only seen him from a distance, you seem to know a lot about him” I responded.

“Oh, you know, you get to hear different things” she said grinning.

“You mean gossip!” I said to annoy her.

“Touché” she said, nudging me playfully.

From time to time I dared to glance across at Mr Wellborough, and inevitably, my looks were returned with a warm smile with a teasing glint in those eyes.

Eventually our meal was finished, and we all made our way to what looked like a ballroom where soft music, a mixture of classical and easy listening was being played by a small band. Some decided to dance, including Martine. I preferred to chat with different ones from the office and then made my way to the bar when the queue was lessening, and ordered my usual, a glass of white pinot grigio. It was at that exact time; I became aware of a presence of someone behind me. Before I had time to turn around, the deep voice instructed, “I’ll get that”.

I looked behind me and there he was, Stefan Wellborough.

“Thank you” I said, slightly faltering in surprise.

At last, I get to meet ‘the lady in red’. I’ve been wanting to speak to you ever since you arrived this evening”

“Oh” I responded, for once lost for words.

He extended his hand. “I’m sorry, that was very rude of me not to introduce myself first, I’m Stefan Wellborough”

I shook his hand in response but didn’t tell him that I already knew who he was.

“I’m Rosie Ibbotson” I replied.

To my amazement, he responded,

“I know, I asked Mrs Bakewell your name”

I must admit, I felt a slight irritation at this comment, but quickly dismissed it.

Just then, one of Stefan’s fellow colleagues, or I presumed he was, came along and apologised to me for taking him away. The gentleman and then looked at Stefan and asked him if he could meet a young man who was starting his training on the Monday morning.

After that, I only saw Stefan from a distance. That was until our taxi driver that Martine had arranged came to pick us up at 2am.

Mr Wellborough then made his way across to me, and he softly sang, with a surprisingly toned voice, “I hardly know this beauty by my side” from the lyrics of “Lady in Red” I flushed as he gently kissed my hand as I turned to leave.

As you may guess, Martine and I found it hard to talk about anything else on the way back to her flat. I certainly was beginning to see her description of Stefan starting to show, especially the bit about him being a lady’s man anyway!

Both Martine and I were exhausted and had a few glasses of wine inside us, so sleep came rapidly upon us.

The next morning, Stefan, and our strange meeting, all be it short and sweet, did keep creeping into my mind. I told myself that it must have been the alcohol, and it had been a fluke meeting.

However, that wasn't going to be the case at all, as I was soon to find out on my return to work after Christmas.

## **Chapter 5**

Once down at my parents, my Christmas became very relaxing.

Two of my brothers couldn't make it home this year but had sent some very well thought out presents for us all. One of my brothers, Robert, worked on an oilrig so was only able to take time off at set times and my other brother, Jordan, was a doctor and was possibly going to make it back for new year. But I did get to see my youngest brother Josh who lived in Cheshire with his wife, Ellie, and children, two teenage boys, Harry and Joe. I had a lovely time and played different computer games with them and rarely had time to dwell on Mr Wellborough.

However, I was not to get away lightly which I was prepared for. My mum and I did have a good mother/daughter relationship, and as expected, there would be our usual catch up in the kitchen after dinner.

I did tell her about my unusual but brief encounter with Stefan, and the brief description that Martine had given me. I saw her smile fade slightly.

"Do be careful" she expressed with concern.

"Charmers are usually not all they seem" she added abruptly.

"I know mum. It was probably just a bit of fun"

"Well think on" my mum responded seriously.

My Dad never said a lot, he was the thinker. However, that look in his eye when my mother had filled him in with the latest, and the big hug as I said goodbye for now, spoke volumes.

## Chapter 6

The first part of week was busy but not too eventful until Thursday morning.

I had taken turns with Gloria, one of our other secretaries on our section, in opening the morning's mail. As a rule, we opened official letters, but not personal ones. This morning, a small square parcel had been delivered. It was addressed to me, and the label was handwritten in italic style writing. The wrapping paper around it was of a scarlet red colour.

"That looks intriguing" said Gloria immediately catching sight of it.

"Um" was all I said nodding in agreement.

I decided not to open it until my lunch hour and left it in my drawer for the time being. Part of me already had an idea who it was from as the comments about lady in red and this strikingly red coloured wrapping paper, was a bit of a giveaway. The fact too was that it had been sent to my work, so this person knew where I worked, obviously, and didn't know my home address.

Despite my curiosity, and despite Gloria's regular presence at my desk for one excuse or another, I resisted the temptation and decided to open the parcel when I arrived home.

Emmy had finished early and had very kindly made tea for both of us.

I sat at the small dining table after freshening up from my day's work and journey home. As always, when we weren't like ships in the night, coming and going at opposite times, we would have our catch-up conversations on how our day had been.

Emmy's day had been quiet; hence she had been able to finish early.

"How about you Rosie, how has your day been?" Emmy asked considerately, as we tucked into a very appetising lasagne and side salad, complimented with an Italian white wine.

I bent down for my bag, and as I went to sit upright, I said,

"This arrived in the post at work this morning", and I placed the small red package on the table.

"And you haven't even opened it yet?" asked Emmy shrieked in disbelief.

"I do have an idea where it's from" I responded half serious, half in excitement.

"It won't open itself" Emmy said cajolingly.

I carefully unwrapped the parcel which oddly enough contained a CD by a famous artist. On the front, the list of tracks started with "The Lady in Red". A small card underneath read, "I hardly know you, but desperately want to" S.W.

"As I expected, it's from that Stefan Wellborough that I told you about the other week. I wish I had never worn that red dress now" I huffed.

Emmy laughed, "Don't be such a party pooper. I think it's rather romantic, and he'd have noticed you whatever you had been wearing."

"I don't know about that Emmy! It seemed a bit of fun at the time and flattering but now this, it's a bit in my face and he is very sure of himself"

"That's to your advantage in a way though" Emmy replied comfortingly.

I looked puzzled.

“Well,” continued Emmy, “You can put the brakes on in a manner of speaking, at any time. You’re in charge don’t forget”

We left it at that and didn’t mention Stefan again that evening, well at least for the time being.

However, Stefan Wellborough made sure he was still going to be very much in my presence and my life from now on.

## **Chapter 7**

The following week, I was startled to see Stefan enter our office floor, let alone making a point of smiling and proceeding to approach my desk. He paused and asked how I was. I replied that I was fine thanking him for asking. He smiled and said he was pleased to hear that I was well., after which he made his way to Samantha Gerrard’s office.

I tried to ignore the tittering in the background from some female staff.

I had an advantage as to where my desk was located as I could see Mrs Gerrard’s office. It was quite modern and was surrounded by large glass windows and doors. Great for having the odd innocent look up here and there.

I couldn’t resist keep glancing across to see what was happening during Stefan’s visit. I did note that there was quite a lot of laughter in between conversations emanating from the office. Stefan seemed very relaxed and Helen, the office junior took them in their morning coffee and biscuits.

Martine came across to see me and light heartedly commented in her observations, “Well for someone who makes out makes out that she’s not interested in Mr Wellborough, you aren’t very convincing!”

I didn’t reply but just pulled a face.



The meeting ended and once again, Stefan stopped at my desk on his way out and said,

“Well Miss Ibbotson, it looks like we will be seeing each other again shortly”

He gave me an enigmatic smile and departed. Within a few moments, Mrs Gerrard requested me to come into her office.

“Now Rosie” she began, “As you know, other Solicitors and Barristers share information about ongoing cases and clients. When Mr Wellborough was here today, he requested some files that he needs for a court case that we do possess, and he has asked that you personally deliver them tomorrow to his chambers” Mrs Gerrard continued seriously.

“I see. Whatever is acceptable to you Mrs Gerrard, I will do” was all I could say in reply.

“I’m quite confident of that. However, it is usually the Manager that decides who to send in such circumstances, but Mr Wellborough has specifically requested you to go, and I have agreed as long as this is within your power so to speak.”

With that last comment, which I thought was extremely subtle, that I needed to do this task anyway. I could feel my face and neck respond with a sudden blush.

“These are the two particular files he needs if you could locate them for me” handing me a piece of paper with the details on.

“Of course, Mrs Gerrard, I will start straight away” I responded.

Martine beckoned me over as I went back to my desk temporarily.

“Who’s the lucky one then?” She asked teasingly.

I scowled at first and then quickly changed to a smile.

“I’ll see you later” I said cheekily.

## Chapter 8

I decided to put my sheepskin coat on although I was only walking down the end of the street. The cold February wind was biting, and threats of snow looked imminent in the grey, yellow sky. Our offices were always warm with the heating, but as soon as you stepped outside, it really hit you that it was winter!

I immediately caught sight of my destination. The building was quite old fashioned compared to ours.

On reception a mature looking lady, with greying brown hair met me and greeted me. Before I had chance to open my mouth she said,

“You must be Rosie, I’m Maureen”

I nodded and shook her extended hand.

Maureen then continued; I’ll take you up in the lift to Mr Wellborough’s chambers. He is on the fourth floor”.

“Thank you” I replied.

I thanked Maureen as we stood outside Stefan’s door, clearly marked with his name.

Maureen smiled encouragingly as she knocked on the door for me.

“Come in” said Stefan’s familiar voice.

As he saw my face, he summonsed me with a gesture to sit down on the large captain’s office chair opposite him, with a shiny, immaculately polished teak table positioned between us.

Stefan politely thanked Maureen for her services and she shut the door gently behind her.

A thought suddenly raced through my head. I was glad that I had chosen my dark green and blue kilt with matching pale green jumper – I don’t think I could stand any more comments about red!

“At last, I get to see you again” Stefan began confidently but making me feel on edge.

I averted his gaze and kept my eyes fixed on the two files as I replied, “I think you will find these are the ones that you requested”.

“Ah, I hope you are not always forever the professional” he remarked, and then continued,

“Please would you give me the pleasure of joining me for coffee”

I felt my feathers ruffle at his outright impertinence, but I remained polite as I replied:

“Thank you very much Mr Wellborough, but I am sure Mrs Bakewell will be expecting me back” I politely declined, although I was aware I probably sounded like a schoolgirl reporting back to the teacher.

“I’m quite sure our Mrs Bakewell will be quite happy for you to stop for morning coffee” Stefan replied persuasively. Without further ado he picked up his telephone to alert reception that there would be an extra coffee needed.

“Come and join me at my veranda table. We can take in the “vista” of the concrete scenery by the French windows. It can be quite picturesque in a funny sort of way, despite being surrounded by office buildings and the hustle and bustle of activity. I always like to take my morning break here when possible. I like to see the world spinning round about me and I’m just relaxing amidst it all”

That comment already added to my other observations about him, Mr Wellborough was quite a complex character.

As I sat down on one of the soft reclining chairs, there was a knock at the door, and a young girl, probably an office junior I suspected, came in with a tray of China cups and a cafetiere of coffee with biscuits.

“Thank you” he said with a smile as she deftly positioned the tray on the glass coffee table. She returned his smile and then left the room.

“Now, then. First things first, can I call you Rosie?” Stefan asked as he poured the coffee.

“If that is your wish” I replied formerly.

“Ok, Rosie, you can call me Stefan” he replied.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly do that” I quickly responded.

“Now come on Rosie. I’ve invited you to call me Stefan, because I would like you to do so” he said encouragingly.

“Well, I suppose if you put it like that” I agreed.

Stefan calmed my nerves as he started the conversation by briefly telling me how he had decided to go down the root of being a Barrister. Stefan and his younger sister had been born in Hertfordshire. His father was a doctor at the local hospital where he met his mother who worked at a local nursery at the time. His sister had also decided to train in the medical field and now lived in Aberdeen, but he decided to break the mould and study law. That was as far as he went and then he turned his attention to my family and started asking questions.

I told Stefan that my mum was a nurse. My father had his own garage. My four brothers and I had all been brought up in Woking.

I explained how my four brothers had decided to all go their separate ways and my father had then later sold the garage business. This had quite, understandably upset my father at the time but he advertised for apprentices and carried on the business until her recently retired.

I surprised myself how relaxed I suddenly felt and aware that I had been freely chatting away. I did feel more at ease with him, and I was

drawn to his kindly persona as I was aware that his eyes were examining my face.

Just then, the office telephone rang. It made me jump and realise that I must get back to work.

The call was short and sweet and as Stefan replaced the receiver, I rose from the chair.

“I must get back. Thank you for the coffee” I said politely.

“You’re very welcome. I’ve enjoyed every minute of your company. Let me escort you downstairs” Stefan responded.

Stefan accompanied me to the lift which soon arrived, and we stepped inside.

Although the journey down to the ground floor was swift, I was aware of his presence and his body standing extremely close to mine, and the feel of his breath on my skin, and then, all too soon it seemed, the lift ground to a halt and the doors opened.

Stefan turned to me and spoke:

“I’ll have to make sure we meet up again soon” As he uttered those words, he took hold of my delicate hand and gently stroked it with his other hand. His hands were warm and firm. I felt a tingle down my spine as he did so. He slowly let go of my hand.

“See you soon” he said as we parted.

As I stood outside once more in the chill of the breeze, I thought over the last hour and it all just seemed surreal.

Martine was on my case so to speak as soon as I arrived back, but I just annoyed her by saying the traditional answer, “no comment”.

## **Chapter 9**

Emmy looked surprisingly chirpy when I arrived home and she had some news for me.

“You know I did a report for that art exhibition in Whitehall the other week, just before Christmas?” She asked excitedly.

“Yes, I remember” I replied.

“Well, it was there that I met a foreign student, a mature student I should add” She blushed slightly.

“And?” I asked with bated breath.

“He’s called Carlos. Today, when I was out having my lunchbreak, I passed the main Post Office near our offices, and I saw three coaches all parked by the side of the road. I couldn’t believe it when one of the passengers coming off a coach was Carlos!”

Emmy explained that she called out to Carlos and waved and met up with each other and then went and had lunch in which time they had exchanged mobile numbers. The next is history as the saying goes.

“He’s staying at Howden student hostel” she continued. Carlos and Emmy were going out for a meal tomorrow evening.

I had to give it to her, she was certainly a fast mover!

I was thrilled for her. It was about time she had some excitement in her life which had mostly been just work.

The following morning, Jenny from the other side of the office, came over to my desk and said there was a call for me and that she would transfer it to my extension. Immediately, I recognised that voice and that tingling began again. Yes, it was Stefan.

“Will you meet me for lunch tomorrow? I thought we could go to the ‘Blue Cargo’. It’s not far from work” he said invitingly.

“Er, yes, thank you” I replied before having time to think about it.

“Great. I’ll wait outside for you at 12pm tomorrow. I look forward to it Rosie” he said confidently as usual.

I didn’t say anything to Martine or anyone else for that matter.

Right on time, I left the office. I put on my sheepskin coat, and I also wore my black leather gloves and took my black leather handbag to match.

I couldn’t miss Stefan. He was sat in his black Bentley. He quickly got out of the car to open the passenger door and usher me in. Before I knew it, we were parked in the car park of the Blue Cargo.

I stuck to my safe drink of lemonade and lime and Stefan had a red wine.

For lunch, I stuck to a simple sandwich as my stomach was churning with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. I’d already been given the vibes that this was not an ordinary situation, and it seemed strange to be out with a much older man, but I loved the thrill of it. It was like a new adventure.

It was Stefan who led our conversation, but that was normal anyway.

He was straight to the point and asked if I was in a relationship at present. I briefly told him about Richie and that I had been the one to realise we needed to just be good friends. I said we did keep in touch from time to time. It was then that, looking back on his reaction to my comment, that I first saw the darker side of his personality, for his eyes narrowed and flashed as I said that I still communicated with Richie.

Our conversation changed slightly to more mundane things, but as we walked back to his car, I felt I still knew hardly anything about Stefan.

As he pulled up outside the office buildings, he said that he would see me the following day as he was coming back to see Samantha

Gerrard. He boldly informed me that his visit was to ask if Mrs Gerrard could spare me for a while to help him as his secretary was indisposed for a while. The shock and surprise must have shown in my expression and his reaction in return was a beaming smile.

I thanked him for lunch and rapidly turned heel and made my way back to my desk.

I was glad in a way that Martine had finished early as she would be, wanting to know all the details. I suppose my situation was a bit unusual, but it was something personal to me that I wasn't prepared to discuss at present.

I didn't get chance to say anything to Emmy, even if I had wanted to. Emmy was in a tizzy getting ready for her date with Carlos. I assured her how lovely she looked. Although her attire wasn't something I would personally choose, it was Emmy. Not only that, but it was also not appropriate for late winter. She had a natural beauty. There she stood in a long flowery dress with vivid white flowers. It helped that she was tall and so suited that style. She was wearing dark blue sandals. Her hair was a gorgeous red colour and her piercing blue eyes and fresh delicate skin, all complimented her appearance.

The next thing we knew, the doorbell had rung.

Emmy was like an excited schoolgirl as she rushed to the front door.

Carlos came through to the living room with her and smiled at me as he did so, extending his hand in a greeting. As we shook hands, Emmy introduced us to each other. With an Italian accent, Carlos said he was very pleased to meet me, and I returned the compliment likewise.

Carlos was very casually dressed. He was slightly shorter than Emmy, and his thick black hair, rested on his shoulders in tousled fashion.

A sudden thought went through my mind, that, how different this young man was to Stefan in comparison. Carlos looked so laid back



with a carefree attitude to life which became apparent as he chatted away. Yet Stefan on the other hand, was naturally business like, smartly dressed and upper crust. I quickly scolded myself in my judgemental thoughts. I didn't know the first thing about Carlos, but I didn't really know anything about Stefan either.

Emmy brought me down to earth as she apologised for the brevity of our introduction and explained that the taxi she had ordered was now outside. I wished them an enjoyable evening and off they went.

Suddenly, I began to feel quite restless.

I ran myself a bath and added the so called "stress relief" bath gel, and then snuggled down into the soothing warm water.

After a good twenty minutes, I roused myself and emerged from the water and put on my comfy pyjamas.

I thought I would treat myself and poured a glass of my favourite Chardonnay, and sprawled out on the sofa, picking up the remote television control as I did so. I mindlessly flicked around the channels to find something that seemed even remotely of interest. In the end, I decided to go to bed and read instead. That didn't work either as my brain wasn't registering the contents. Finally, I decided to turn on my radio and see if that relaxed my mood and help me drift off to sleep.

After a few minutes, I couldn't believe the song that suddenly was playing on the radio. Yes, it was Lady in Red!

That certainly didn't help to detach my thoughts about the events of the day and about Stefan. I then began to ponder about his request for my help in his office, and I was soon to find out that he had ulterior motives in mind.

## **Chapter 10**

Emmy had her head in the clouds with Carlos and was now out most nights after work.

I did, however, get chance to speak to her before the Friday and ask what she thought about the offer of my new work venture. Emmy made it sound so simple!

“Rosie, if you don’t grab the opportunity, you may always regret it, and it’s only temporary. You will also be helping someone else, you know that new girl, to have an opportunity to progress. I doubt whether it will be like a binding contract, so you don’t have to commit yourself. As to this Mr Wellborough’s charm and persona, that might just be his general style – not necessarily targeted at you”

“I suppose” I replied unconvinced.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence though Emmy” I carried on.

“What?” she looked surprised.

“Well, saying that it might just be his style and not necessarily my effect on him. That’s really boosted my confidence!” I retorted trying to sound serious but laughing at the same time.

“Oh Rosie. What are you like!”

“I know. I’m just a bit wary but excited at the same time” I replied and smiled.

“You know what my mum would say? ‘don’t worry about anything until there is something to worry about’ and there’s a lot of sense in that simple saying” Emmy said.

“You’re absolutely right” I agreed.

## **Chapter 11**

On the Friday just after morning break, Samantha Gerrard and Mrs Bakewell invited me into the office.

“Right” Mrs Gerrard started. “I think you already know what Mrs Bakewell and I are going to ask you”

“I think so Mrs Gerrard” I replied respectfully.

“I believe Mr Wellborough has already given you a hint of what he is coming to discuss with us today” She continued.

“Yes, Mr Wellborough did mention in passing the reason he was coming back to see you” I responded.

“Mr Wellborough discussed his proposition and made his request on the telephone to me this morning.” Mrs Gerrard explained.

I felt a surge of annoyance come over me that I was a point of discussion without even knowing it!

Mrs Gerrard said, “I’d like you to go home and think about it this evening. Mr Wellborough would like you to work for him two days a week and the rest of the time you will still be here as usual. Mr Wellborough is coming in tomorrow morning, and we’ll discuss the formalities if you decide to proceed”

I thanked Mrs Gerrard and assured her that I would think about it and let her know the following morning.

The journey home was a blur.

I would have liked to have talked to Emmy. She was always a person that looked at situations logically and had good reasoning skills. However, as usual she was out with Carlos when I arrived back. I didn’t feel I could talk to Martine about it yet and I certainly wouldn’t ring my mother!

However, despite everything, I awoke surprisingly refreshed and quite confident about that morning’s meeting.

I was surprised when Mrs Gerrard and Mrs Bakewell requested me to go into the office as soon as I arrived at work.

Mrs Gerrard began first.

“Have you had a good think about Mr Wellborough’ s proposition and decided what you think is best for you?” she asked.

“Yes, I have” I replied suddenly quite confidently.

“Well then, please proceed and tell me what your thoughts have been and your decision” Mrs Gerrard said with anticipation.

“I’ve decided I would like to take the opportunity to take up the temporary post as it will be a new experience and as it is only two days a week” I made sure I emphasised the “temporary” word!

I couldn’t help but notice Mrs Gerrard and Mrs Bakewell quickly exchange glances.

“I’m glad you have come to a decision. I will call Mr Wellborough now. When he arrives, we can arrange between us which two days you will be available to work there” Mrs Gerrard said decisively.

“Thank you, Mrs Gerrard,” and I looked at Mrs Bakewell and said thank you to her as well as I rose to my feet to go back to my desk.

As soon as I sat down, Martine immediately pleaded with me,

“Go on, please tell me what that was about”.

I then went on to explain.

“I’m really pleased for you Rosie, and please don’t think I’m jealous, but he does have a bit of a reputation with the women. You know how gossip spreads and the little I’ve heard about him is just that. I just want you to be aware” Martine said and did seem to be quite genuinely to be looking out for me as they say.

I grinned and shook my head.

“Thank you, Martine. I am just doing this work on a temporary basis, and I don’t get the impression from Mrs Gerrard that I am

committed in any way. Please don't worry and thank you for your concern"

## **Chapter 12**

Within the hour, Mr Wellborough had arrived, and Mrs Gerrard called me back into her office to inform me that I was to work for Mr Wellborough on Thursdays and Fridays each week, and to be fair she did ask me if that was convenient to me.

I agreed, and Stefan Wellborough entered the office, and the temporary terms were agreed between the management.

That morning I had dressed in formal office wear. I wore my navy-blue suit with pencil skirt, crisp white shirt, and neck scarf with high heeled navy-blue shoes.

I was quite surprised when Mr Wellborough met me in the reception area of the chambers.

He suggested we take the lift as we had done previously.

I felt very self-conscious as usual when we entered the lift and being in such proximity. My response was typically English and stuck to safe subjects – the weather. Even though we were experiencing the usual winter chill, I started with saying how cold it was today despite the bright sunshine. I saw him respond with a wry smile as if he could read my thoughts!

I remembered from my previous visit that Mr Wellborough's chambers looked dated in comparison to ours.

They were like something out of a 1930's film that I had seen.

All the furniture was in dark wood. There was a large dark, heavy looking wood table with a dark wood captain's chair on one side and

two 'Queen Anne' chairs which were complimented by emerald, green cushions on the opposite side.

The carpet was a plush green patterned carpet and at one side of the room was a large dark wood bookcase that covered an entire wall, stacked with file upon file and reference books, or so I assumed. The windows were quite small and had a leaded pattern across them.

Behind the captain's chair there was an unused fire grate which, as you can guess, was surrounded by a large dark wood fireplace and a dark wood clock with Roman numerals and a pendulum on the mantle.

The radiators were the large, piped ones they reminded me of my very first days in primary school. In fact, it looked quite a formidable room for clients to come into. A bit like an old-fashioned headmaster's room. It was all so different to the office and building I worked in which was so modern in comparison and light. Our windows were large and so everywhere was light and our furniture was bright and modern.

Mr Wellborough showed me to the room I was to be working in. I couldn't help drawing a silent sigh when I immediately saw the long table in the office absolutely covered in files and stacks of papers and letters which looked as though they started out in orderly piles but had now become like scattered paper mountains.

Mr Wellborough gave an amused smile and then said.

"I think you can now appreciate why I need an assistant. This is going to be quite a formidable task to sort out, but I have every confidence that you can do it"

Then he said encouragingly,

"Come, let me introduce you to the rest of the staff"

There were three other Barristers in the building apparently. I say that as when Mr Wellborough knocked on two of the doors, there was no reply, but there were two other male Barristers he said and the final door he knocked on was an older lady called Mrs Crabtree. She was on the telephone at the time and so Mr Wellborough mouthed "See you see her later"

He didn't take me to meet the secretaries, but maybe that wasn't the thing to do. All he did was to assure me that he would get someone to help me on my first day and show me where everything was.

"I think that's about it, until next Thursday" he said assuring me.

"Yes. I will see you next Thursday" I replied.

"I will see you down to reception" he insisted.

Again, once in the lift I felt quite apprehensive, and even more so when Mr Wellborough turned to me just before the lift doors opened and said,

"I would like to take you out to lunch on Thursday as a celebration of the beginning of your start here"

Amazingly, before I had time to think, mesmerised, I accepted his offer.

Mr Wellborough didn't come out of the lift with me but just reiterated that he would see me on Thursday and gave that smile where his eyes sparkled and that look that must seem quite alluring to the ladies.

I said goodbye to Maureen and made my way out into the bitter but bright atmosphere and walked back to the office.

On the Friday, my last full week at the office, Mrs Bakewell had thoughtfully arranged a special "afternoon tea" for me. She had arranged a skeletal staff duty so that those who I worked more

closely with and knew me, could have their breaks with me. That included Martine.

I did appreciate the thought, but I remember saying to Martine that it did seem rather premature as I wasn't leaving but just reducing my hours for the time being. Martine gave me a big hug and told me to look after myself. I was later to find out that I would be grateful for that assurance.

## **Chapter 13**

The Thursday of my new start soon came around.

That butterfly feeling in my stomach was a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

I was greeted as usual by Maureen and an internal call was made to Mr Wellborough's office to announce my arrival.

Within minutes, Mr Wellborough sauntered across the reception area and extended his hand in welcome in a professional manner. His hand was warm, and his grip was firm, and his smile was enigmatic.

"Miss Ibbotson" he said in greeting. With his other hand he directed me towards the lift.

Once again in that situation of proximity, I was hit by the lightening flash of my feelings which had suddenly become orgasmic. I don't know why but I had a fetish for men in black trousers, and there he stood in black trousers with an expensive leather belt around his hips. A white shirt complimented these and the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows which revealed his slender and dark hairy arms. He stood provocatively close and at an angle towards me holding the lift's handrail. He was so close that I could feel his breath upon me, and my nostrils breathed in the delicate and spicy scent of his aftershave. For a moment my mind drifted and I thought of films in



familiar situations and what often went on behind closed doors! I almost felt he read my mind as my eyes met his and a sensual smile appeared on his face.

Nothing was said as we walked along the short corridor to his office to which he gallantly proceeded to open the door for me.

Mr Wellborough broke the silence.

“As you saw the other day, there are literally mountains of papers to sort through and files which I would be extremely grateful for you to undertake”

Although I had already had a glimpse last week of my work ahead, it was still quite daunting. I was quite aghast at how all this had become such a huge mess in such a short space of time.

However, I didn't know the events that had led up to his Personal Assistant becoming ill!

At first, I felt a little annoyed that my first and foremost task was to sort the filing out, that was something office juniors had to sort out at our office, and I had moved up the ladder since then!

Mr Wellborough gently touched my arm,

“Please don't worry” he said in earnest. “Just take your time and I'm only in the opposite room and you can ask me anything if you are struggling” he reassured me.

“I can always ask one of the others if I can borrow someone to help you for a few hours” he offered.

“Thankyou” I responded. “I'll make a start and will let you know how I am getting on” I replied assertively.

He nodded and gave a broad smile.

By 11am which was coffee time, I had made a good headway. I had been aware of an occasional glance in my direction, which was natural in the circumstances.

Mr Wellborough came into the room and politely asked me if I would join him for coffee. I said I would.

We sat in the same place as we before overlooking the concrete “vista” of London.

Mr Wellborough began. “I am going to leave you a spare key in reception as there will be some days or even weeks when I will be presiding at court”

“Thank you. I appreciate that” I responded. I felt quite honoured to have my own key so soon.

“It would also make sense if we exchanged our mobile phone numbers so that we can contact each other when needs be” he said in a down to earth manner but at the same time his deep brown eyes looked tantalising.

“Yes, it does” I agreed. At that we exchanged numbers accordingly.

“Just one last thing before you go back to work, can I call you Rosie from now? I hate being formal when there’s no need to be. Gosh, my work is 100% formal!” he stated.

“Yes of course” I responded automatically.

“Good. Well please call me Stefan” he requested.

“I will, thank you” I said in agreement.

I then carried on wading through the filing until Stefan came into the other room at lunchtime.

In the background I heard the landline ring although I could hear Stefan’s voice occasionally, it wasn’t audible. The receiver was replaced, and his footsteps came towards me.

“I’m really sorry but I will have to go out on an emergency. There’s been a problem with today’s hearing. I probably won’t be back until after 5pm. Jo, Mike Tindale’s secretary will bob in and see that you are ok”

“Thank you” I replied.

“I’ll see you tomorrow then Rosie” Stefan said as he picked up a file from the table and rushed out of the door.

As he left, my mood began to change. I found I missed his presence.

Just then there was a knock at the door and a woman about the same age as I entered the room. She was very bright and cheery as she introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m Jo, it’s Rosie, isn’t it?” She extended her hand, and we shook hands.

“I’ve brought you a spare key” she said as she placed it in my hand.

Before I had chance to respond she continued.

“Would you like to come and join me for lunch in the kitchen downstairs and I can show you where everything is. I think Elsie has some sandwiches on today but as a rule I bring my own” Jo offered.

“That sounds like a good idea” I agreed.

It wasn’t a large kitchen but had all the necessary basics, which included a coffee pot that was almost full.

Apparently, Elsie had worked there for many years ago but had recently retired. Jo said Elsie came in around three days a week at lunchtime and brought a variety of sandwiches and cakes and did a quick clean round taking towels and tea towels on a regular basis to be washed.

“Elsie does all this voluntarily. I think it gets her out and she also has some company. We have insisted that we contribute towards the

food we eat as she won't take any money otherwise, and what we do contribute goes into the cancer research collection box on the table there. We certainly appreciate her coming in, that's for sure" Jo explained.

The sandwiches looked delicious. I picked a ham salad one and poured myself a coffee out of the machine and placed some money in the contribution box.

As we sat down at a table to eat our lunch, Jo asked,

"So how are you enjoying your work here Rosie?"

"It's certainly challenging" I immediately responded.

"I couldn't believe the mess that paperwork has got into" I said with a sigh.

"I can imagine" Jo agreed. She then continued to tell me about the circumstances surrounding the mystery of what had led up to the mass of work that had been suddenly left.

"It was all very strange about Jenny (Stefan's previous secretary). She was just like any of us when she started here. She used to be a real laugh at lunch and break times and our "Secretary lunches" that we occasionally went on. Her company was always enjoyable with her funny sense of humour" Jo continued.

"Then what happened?" I asked eagerly.

"I don't really know" replied Jo honestly.

"Jenny suddenly started to become more and more withdrawn, and we hardly saw her down here in the end. She began to look ill as well, you know, pale and thin and a bag of nerves as though she was on edge all the time" Jo stated.

"Maybe she had problems at home" I began presumptuously and then regretted my contributory comment.

“Nobody really knows” replied Jo. “All I do know is what we all observed. She stopped coming into work regularly and then not at all. There’s always gossip at work as you will already know, but there is talk that she’s suffered a nervous breakdown, hence the length of time on her sick note. I personally, and don’t quote me on this, doubt that she’ll be back at all” Jo revealed in confidence.

“That sounds dreadful” I added.

“It does” agreed Jo. “It’s just strange that she seemed to lead a normal life from what she told us. She did have a bit of a downer after she split up with her last boyfriend Adam when he wanted to emigrate to Australia, and she didn’t. Jenny seemed to cope with it reasonably well though and still came out with us on our nights out together. Maybe she didn’t get over Adam as well as we thought. On the other hand, there has been talk that it was working with Mr Wellborough, but I think it was someone just being spiteful. There’s always one!”

“Oh dear, I don’t know what to make of that” I replied.

“I wouldn’t try to. Just go with the flow” she advised sensibly.

After that we just made general conversation and got to know each other a bit more.

However, when I went back to the office again, Martine’s words rattled round in my brain regarding ‘looking out for me’. It was good to know that she was a true friend and meant what she said. I would need her support even more as time went on.

## **Chapter 14**

I arrived back at the flat to find a note from Emmy which read, “gone out for dinner, not sure what time we’ll be back”

I took the “we” to mean Carlos would be staying again.

While having a leisurely soak in the bath, I tried not to dwell on the day's events and mainly my conversation with Jo earlier that day.

An early night was what I needed as my head had begun to ache and my eyes felt sore with examining and sorting out all that paperwork and I must have eventually drifted off into a peaceful sleep as I was abruptly woken by Emmy and Carlos arriving back home at around 3am. I was extremely irritated but put my radio on and earphones to drown out any activities that might be forthcoming!

The next morning, I was on the train to work long before I imagined that Emmy would stir. I wasn't resentful or jealous of Emmy, but I found myself getting slightly irritated with her and Carlos and their carefree lifestyle while I was taken up with Stefan and trying to work out his curious and personality that I longed to know about.

## **Chapter 15**

Martine and I stayed close friends and I trusted her implicitly and I'm sure she felt likewise.

I was touched how every Monday morning when I went to our office, she would check how work had been but also how Stefan had conducted himself. With recent events and my curiosity that surrounded Jenny's sudden exit and diagnosed nervous breakdown, I needed to talk to someone, and I trusted Martine and knew she wouldn't let me down.

It was with that in mind that we both agreed to go out on Wednesday tea times each week to a local bistro which by coincidence was called "The Grapevine"

We tried as far as possible not to "talk shop" but it was inevitable, and our conversation always had Stefan as the main topic. Martine

agreed that she would keep me informed if any information about him came her way.

I asked Martine a rhetorical question,

“Why would Jenny let her work get in such a mess?” I followed this with, “She certainly had snapped, but the build-up of this disaster must have been going on for some time and Stefan must have known this was happening, and why didn’t he get some extra help for her?” It was almost as if everything was being kept behind closed doors.

Martine came to the same question that I had when we had been in conversation the other day ‘could Stefan have had anything to do with it?’ He was indeed a dark horse. Then Martine suddenly laughed, “Come on, we sound like detectives” I responded, but deep down I later tried to start piecing this jigsaw together. I realised I knew so little about this man who had practically railroaded his presence into my life and, yet he was still such a mystery.

However, there were going to be shocks and surprises to follow, and not all pleasant ones, that was for sure!

## **Chapter 16**

Over the next few days, I saw little of Stefan as he was presiding at court most of the time.

He did leave me notes on some days with a list of tasks to undertake.

I beavered away and eventually had everything neatly filed away and in its proper place.

At lunch times I would join the other secretaries including Jo.

It was probably office policy, but at times I did find it slightly disappointing that the topics of conversation were dominated by

holidays, fashion news and yes of course, boyfriends and partners. I suppose, deep down I would have liked to have known more about their bosses, or should I say to hear anything I could about Stefan to enlighten me.

I also had to admit to myself that I had begun to miss Stefan and his attention. That however was soon to be remedied the next morning.

A note was on my desk when I arrived, and Stefan said that he would pick me up at lunchtime at 12pm and take me out to lunch. I suddenly felt a flush of pleasure wash over my body at the thought of being with him and almost like a date.

That morning I felt restless and kept clock watching.

However, I was proud of myself that I had managed to accomplish what I had set out to achieve and clear the back log of work and get everything up to date, and of course to please Stefan.

It did flash through my mind that having accomplished all that I probably would no longer be needed, after all I had been told from the beginning from Mrs Gerrard that this was a temporary post. A feeling of sadness surprisingly crossed my mind.

Right on time, Stefan was stood leaning against the passenger door of his spotlessly clean Bentley. He was looking down at his mobile which was in his right hand. I quickly took stock of this man who I was accompanying to lunch.

Despite his maturing years, he was demur in his appearance and shocking myself in my thoughts, magnetically sexy. He just oozed confidence and as I approached him, I felt a strange sensation flow over me as he touched my shoulder and the hairs on my arms began to bristle with pleasure as he leaned across me to open the car door.

As Stefan drove the short distance to “The Loch and Lobster” a popular sea food restaurant, he made non-intrusive conversation and asked how work had been and if there had been any problems,



although he did assure me that he had every confidence in me that everything had gone smoothly during his absence.

As we entered the restaurant, a young man who looked in his thirties approached us, and his accent was just like Carlos, well spoken with a strong Italian sound to his accent.

“Mr Stefan, it is good to see you”

He turned to me and said “Mademoiselle, it is good to see you too”.

“Come I will show you to a cosy table over here” and guided us both across to it.

Stefan chose a suitable wine to accompany our food.

Without speaking he turned to me and gave me a loving smile. I knew that this man was addictive and whatever his reputation with the ladies were, I could certainly understand them falling for his magnetism.

I was glad when Stefan finally began to talk about his personal life for once.

He revealed that he had been married for just four years to a young woman called “Marie”.

They had met at Law school and Marie was studying to be a Solicitor too, but Stefan said that it had always been his goal to eventually become a Barrister.

He went on to tell me that they he thought they had been too young to marry when he looked back. Money had been an issue and they had spent very little time together as they had both taken on temporary weekend work to try and raise their income. Stefan drew a deep breath before he carried on as if it was hard to relate his next sentence.

Stefan went on to say that due to their busy lifestyle, they didn't eat that healthily and often eat on the go. At night they would often be

too tired to cook, and so fast food was many evenings the option. He said Maire started a downward spiral when someone at her work made a throw away remark that she was “filling out quite a bit” and she then went on to develop anorexia, “little did I know that it was Stefan that made a remark and it wasn’t polite as he suggested above.

What with finances, studying and then Marie’s condition, it became a big strain on their relationship, and the fact that she was in and out of hospital was a continual worry. The final time that she was admitted for a month to try and build her up as she had become dangerously and painfully thin. She never came home again. Stefan said that he had been to see her the night she died. She was asleep, and her breathing was aided with a ventilator which suddenly stopped. By the time he had managed to call one of the nurses, she had taken her last breath. She was just 26 years old.

I gasped in shock and emotion at how dreadful it must have been to go through seeing someone you loved so much, die before your eyes.

“I’m so sorry. You must have felt so helpless” I softly uttered with empathy.

“Yes, that is exactly how I felt” Stefan agreed.

For a moment, he looked as though he was miles away, in the distance as he seemed to ponder on that thought for a moment.

On my part I just felt that there was a deep well inside the mind and heart of this man, that only someone with expertise could dredge out. Would that be me? Probably not.

I didn’t know how to proceed, and Stefan seemed reluctant to add any more contribution to the conversation, so I decided to be brave and approach the subject of work.

“I gather Mr, I mean Stefan” I started a little falteringly. “That now everything is in order and up to date, I assume I will now be back to Lewis, Hamilton and Connor’s full time as of next week?”

“Well, you assumed wrong” he quickly responded.

I decided not to reply due to his rapid and rather cutting response and let him enlighten me further.

His face then broke into a bewitching smile, which made me feel more relaxed.

“No, that isn’t the plan” he said as he gently put his hand over mine and held it firmly on the table.

“Rosie, I want to thank you for all you’ve done these past few weeks and turning a jumble into a pristine and orderly office. I would like to offer you more” Stefan said softly.

I slightly gulped nervously preparing myself for the complete and unexpected words that were to follow.

Stefan continued. “Not only would I like to offer you a permanent full-time position here, but on a personal level, I would also like to get to know you more as a person” His eyes were looked at me lovingly.

“What about Jenny though? I can’t just walk into her job. I don’t really understand what happened with her and nobody seems to mention her” I questioned, aware that I was beginning to babble and that I was crossing territory that I knew he wouldn’t answer on his principles.

I saw his eyes narrow slightly as I had witnessed once before, and I felt aware that I had touched a nerve.

“Jenny was a strange creature” Stefan began.

I hated that expression when people were describing a person’s personality as if the person wasn’t human!

I inadvertently sighed.

Stefan continued, “She was full of herself when she first came – bubbly and confident, then she just seemed to change over time” he said it such a matter-of-fact way.

I decided to persist now we were discussing Jenny and try and delve further.

“Did she ever give you a clue as to why she was struggling over all these weeks?” I asked candidly.

He shook his head.

“I’ll never really know probably. It must have been boyfriend or family trouble. People don’t always like discussing matters of the heart” he said looking me straight in the eyes.

“I hope it’s not catching!” I remarked trying to lighten the conversation.

Stefan didn’t seem to appreciate my humour and I saw his eyes flash at me immediately followed by a smile briefly began to emerge.

He totally disregarded my comments and changed the subject straight away.

“Rosie” he started as he rose to his feet. “Why don’t I arrange a meeting with Samantha Gerrard and Mrs Bakewell for Monday morning, with you being present of course, and we can arrange a formal start date for you at my chambers”

He witnessed my hesitation.

“I apologise, I will of course suggest that you have time to make your own choice if necessary”

“Yes, that sounds fine” I replied.

As we approached Stefan’s car, he went towards the passenger door to open it for me as he had before, then held back. He gently pressed

me up against the door and puts his hands softly around my shoulders to pull me closer to his body. As he did so, he gently pressed his lips on to mine and I felt a tingling sensation through my body which had now become relaxed, and our kiss became long and hard and I felt his tongue caressing mine and I responded.

I was amazed at my body's reaction as my breasts began to throb with pleasure.

He pulled away slowly.

"I've been wanting to do that since the day I met you" he whispered in my ear and then added "That's what I meant by wanting to get to know you better" and gently stroked my cheek with his fingers.

Stefan then opened the door.

"Would you like me to run you home?" he offered.

I didn't know whether that was a loaded question, as if he was inviting himself round, or at least to see where I lived, or just a straightforward offer of a lift. I decided to decline.

"I wouldn't mind going back to the office. I've some papers to go through before Monday, so if you wouldn't mind dropping me off there, I would be grateful" I continued.

"That's fine" Stefan answered turning to me and smiling.

Although it was only a short distance back to work, I decided to chat away generally. I told him that Sara and Carlos would probably be there and, so I was going to have some retail therapy on my way back.

Stefan smiled knowingly.

"Ok, I'll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend" he said as he pulled up outside the office buildings.

"You too" I replied, and then he was gone.

I didn't go back into the office in the end, nor did I do any retail therapy! I just made my way back home in a bit of a daze.

There was no sign of Emmy and Carlos when I arrived back home.

Although it was still afternoon, I decided to pour myself a glass of wine and sit out on the veranda in the pleasant but still cold March sunshine.

I made myself comfortable and had a sip of wine before placing my glass on the small picnic table. It was then that I noticed that my mobile was notifying me of a new voicemail. I already had an idea that it would probably be my mum. I hadn't been in regular contact with her over the past two to three weeks, and she was a worrier, but not a controller.

Yes, sure enough it was from my mum. She expressed her concern that I hadn't been in regular contact as usual and urged me to contact her as soon as I was free.

"No time like the present" I mused and rang her back with my apologies. I explained that I had taken on extra work and continued to tell her about Monday's meeting to discuss my official transfer to Stefan's chambers.

Mum didn't seem as thrilled as I thought she would be.

Her response was' "I thought you were happy at your usual post and office. You have people there of your age and friends. What has that new job to offer you in comparison?"

"Mum, I look upon it as a promotion. I'm going to be Stefan Wellborough's Personal Assistant at his chambers" I replied confidently.

"Right, and what do you really know about this Mr Wellborough?" she asked bluntly.

"Mum you are impossible at times." I said with a sigh.

I then went on to explain.

“Mum. He’s a ‘Silk or Barrister’ as they are more usually known, and a rather successful and prominent one for quite a few years at that” I continued.

“I’m not thick” Mum retorted.

“I do know what a silk is or stands for” she replied curtly then she added:

“Quite a few years?” Mum questioned. “How old is he?”

“At a guess I would say he is about 45 years old. He is a senior Barrister” I said in defence.

“What does your manager think about it all then?” Mum continued.

“Mrs Gerrard must be quite happy about it as they have allowed Mr Wellborough to arrange the meeting to discuss it” I answered.

“Do be careful all the same. It’s a big change” Mum said sounding concerned.

“I will. Don’t fret so much” I reassured her.

“Rosie, it’s not far off Spring bank holiday. Why don’t you come down for the weekend and you can tell us all about it, or sooner if you can manage it?” Mum asked appealingly.

“I’ll see what I can arrange” I responded.

I heard a slight irritation in her voice when she persisted, “Oh come on Rosie, it can’t be that difficult to arrange, the office won’t even be open, it’s a bank holiday remember!

“I’ll come; I promise” I said positively trying to appease her.

Our conversation then turned to general things and mum told me how the rest of the family were.

Eventually I came off the phone and shook my head. I knew she was only being caring and being the youngest and the only girl in the family made her overprotective at times.

Just then, as I reached to pick up my glass of wine again, my mobile beeped its message alert. I thought it might be Martine. My heart missed a beat in surprise as I read the message and immediately identified the sender by the contents.

“I think I’m falling in love with you” Stefan xxxxx

I smiled and having had the conversation with my mum just now, thought, “I’m not letting my mother get a whiff of this, God knows how she will react!”

## **Chapter 17**

I saw little of Emmy over the weekend. She breezed in and out a few times, usually with Carlos in tow! Emmy just seemed totally consumed in her new relationship, and I was pleased for her.

My thoughts were all over the place that weekend, wrestling with my feelings and trying to come to a sensible and calculated decision as to the offer of Stefan’s and the steady and reliable post that I had been in for some years now plus the fact that this man had now also declared his love for me!

Breathing in the smell of the spring flowers was intoxicatingly sublime as I took my evening stroll through the local park. The fresh air made me feel quite relaxed and feeling that my walk had been beneficial. I felt almost normal!

When I arrived back, I decided a long soak in the bath would be therapeutic.

Laying out my clothes for my important day tomorrow, I decided I would dress smartly as usual. I decided on my good quality floral



dress as it was now spring and my cream jacket with matching high heels.

I then proceeded to sink into the inviting bath filled with my herbal oils.

My brain was still going at full speed in anticipation of the following meeting tomorrow morning which I knew, either way would shape my career future. Of course, my thoughts were about Stefan and his unexpected but welcome display of affection, as if sealing a deal between us.

As if by telepathy, I heard my phone bleep it's familiar message tone. I resisted the urge to jump out of the bath and read it like an excited teenager, but the urge was almost unbearable!

Once donned in my pyjamas and fluffy white dressing gown and slippers, I picked up my mobile in excited anticipation.

Sure enough, it was Stefan.

“Did I tell you that I love you? See you tomorrow love Stefan xxxx”

Half of me wondered if this was a ploy to get me agree to the proposed arrangement tomorrow. Even so I did reply in the affirmative.

“Yes, you did. See you tomorrow” I returned in reply.

I wasn't going to return the affection on tap. I wasn't going to be budged mentally, even if physically and emotionally I was responding without his knowledge”

Just then my peace and thoughts were interrupted by Emmy and Carlos giggling as they entered the living room.

I hastily made my retreat from the bathroom.

I made a snap decision to go through to the kitchen and make myself a drink to take to bed and leave Emmy and Carlos to themselves.

As I opened the living room door, there they both were in an embrace and rigorously showing their passion for each other.

I gave a gentle cough to make them aware of my presence.

They slowly broke away from each other, obviously not embarrassed by my presence.

“Hi Rosie, are you ok? I haven’t seen you for a while” Emmy asked.

“Yes, I’m fine Emmy. How are you? “I asked out of politeness but didn’t really need to as it was obvious, she was ok.

“I am too Sonora Rosie” she replied. I gathered that they were both well laced with alcohol.

“I’m just going to make myself a drink and then get to bed for an early night. I’ve a lot on tomorrow” I replied, wanting to get to bed and get a good rest.

I quickly headed towards the kitchen.

As I filled the kettle with water, I could vaguely hear in the background, Emmy said to Carlos, “Just give me a minute. I just want to see if Rosie is ok. I don’t see a lot of her lately”

“Ci” came the reply.

Emmy gently pushed the kitchen door to close and then approached me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Are you ok?” she persisted.

“Of course, I am” I responded, letting out a slight laugh.

“I feel bad that I’ve not seen you and have a catch up like we used to” Emmy said apologetically.

“Don’t be daft” I responded quickly. “You look and seem very happy. I am pleased for you” I replied reassuringly.

“Thank you. We are both happy” Emmy responded with her eyes sparkling brightly as she spoke.

“Why don’t you join us for a meal one day this week and I’ll cook? I do worry about you” Emmy uttered caringly.

“Honestly Emmy, you are not my mother!” I chided her and then we both laughed. Rosie had met my mother hen!

“I’m glad I’m not” she replied laughing.

“Right. Mother’s aside, I have had a real rollicking from mine today”

I began and then briefly led into my important meeting the following morning.

Emmy’s response was:

“This calls for opening a bottle of bubbly to celebrate your new post. You sit there while I go and fetch the glasses.”

I made my way back into the living room where Carlos sat patiently, and we made conversation in the meantime in “broken English”.

It was good to have some light-hearted time together and take my mind of everything.

Gradually, as the bubbly began to take effect, I managed to excuse myself and head for my bed. Emmy gave me a hug and wished me all the best.

I set my alarm for the morning. In the process of this, another text message came through from Stefan, “Goodnight my darling, I love you xx”

I pondered over this and thought this was probably totally unethical, but Stefan was becoming like a drug. This “Silk” was getting under my skin. I felt flattered though, never mind becoming aroused and enjoying his attention. But as time went on, was to find to my peril, this Silk was deadly.

## Chapter 18

I didn't need the alarm that morning. I had been awake for a while and events just kept milling around in my mind.

On the train to work, I text Martine, asking if she would meet up with me early before work and go for a breakfast coffee across from our offices in the square. I wanted to tell her before anyone else about my new proposed post.

Martine replied straight away, and we agreed to meet up at 8.30am prompt in the café on the square.

Martine's face said it all as we sat down together at a table.

She spoke before I had chance to, "I get the gist, you're leaving our office to work for Stefan Wellborough full time"

"Yes, I am. The contracts are going to be signed this morning as a matter of fact" I replied quite confidently.

"I'll miss you" Martine said in a melancholy voice.

"I'm only going to be down the road and we are still going to have our regularly nights out" I retorted.

"I know, but I will still have my concerns and rightly so. It's a big step Rosie. You're going from an office filled with people, many of whom are a similar age to us and all the hustle and bustle, to a totally different environment and to work mainly in the company of Stefan Wellborough of all people!" Martine said slightly raising her voice.

"Give over" I chided her.

After our coffee we made the short walk to the office and discussed more mundane topics.

I set about clearing my desk and locker. The office engineer came across and took me off the computer system and I duly handed in my

Identification Card for the computer I had used. Reality really was starting to kick in.

At around 9.45am, Mrs Bakewell came up to me and said that Mrs Gerrard would like to have a few words with me before the official meeting at 10am.

Samantha Gerrard smiled sweetly at me as I entered her office.

“Come and have a seat Rosie” she invited.

“Mrs Bakewell will join us in a minute”

Then she said something that really took me by complete surprise,

“Rosie, I try to always have a healthy balance between mutual respect for my staff, but there is always a part of me that makes me protective of them, especially the younger ladies on my team”

I must admit I was rather flabbergasted by this revelation and wondered what Mrs Gerrard was going to say next!

I decided to reply to her statement and said, “That’s very kind and we respect you accordingly”

Samantha smiled again and nodded.

“I know. I just felt that I should remind you that this is a big step as I know you are aware, and the environment to what you have been used to here. I’m sure you will take it all in your stride however”

“Just a minute” I thought to myself, “this is just like a repetition of what Martine has just been saying”

Somehow it sounded more formidable coming from Mrs Gerrard, but I did realise that they were both showing their caring side but from different angles.

Samantha then continued. “The other thing is, as you know, that Stefan Wellborough is a much-respected Senior Barrister, and his experience along with his results are admired by many. However, no-

one is faultless and one of his known weaknesses seems to be women!” As she said this she grinned slightly.

“If only she knew” I thought to myself.

“He is a charmer, but he needs to remember his boundaries and as a Barrister, and an excellent one at that, he should remember that” she said gently and with feeling.

“I also want you to know that out of sight certainly isn’t out of mind does not apply to me. If ever you should need advice, you know where I am.” Samantha said with conviction, but also making me suddenly question if this really was the right step to take.

“That kiss, his revelation over lunch regarding getting to know me better and his message to me, was this all part of a plan to get me on the hook before this morning?” I suddenly asked myself. “Surely he wouldn’t be that scheming?”

My thoughts were interrupted by Mrs Bakewell knocking on the door. She came and sat next to me, and she was followed in quick succession by Stefan, looking as alluring as ever.

Samantha took the lead and started our meeting.

She seemed like the foreman of the jury when that person is asked “Have you reached a verdict that you all agree on?”

Samantha formerly asked me if I had reached a decision on the proposed contract. I agreed that I had, and that I would like to go ahead with the contract. I said that I would like to go ahead.

Samantha turned to Mrs Bakewell and Stefan and smiled and then looked back at me and asked, “Have you and questions you would like to ask before we sign the contracts?”

“I don’t think so” I replied now feeling a bit more nervous.

With that Stefan then produced a bundle of papers from his briefcase, which I rightly assumed to be the contracts.

Samantha signed the copies, then Stefan and finally me. One of the copies was then handed to me for safe possession.

A few minutes later Stefan rose from his chair and shook Samantha's hand and then Mrs Bakewell's and thanked them for holding the meeting.

He then approached me and said, "Right Miss Ibbotson, I will see you at 9am tomorrow" I gave the affirmative and thanked him and then he was gone.

I also shook hands with Samantha and Laura and thanked them for their support and everything they had done for me and how much I had enjoyed working there.

The rest of the day I spent helping the young woman who was replacing me with some of her duties and helping her with anything that she was finding difficult.

Also, over the day, cards started to accumulate on my desk from colleagues wishing me all the best in my new venture.

Just before 5pm, Mrs Gerrard came out of her office and took command in the centre of the office floor and proceeded to give a short speech saying "Rosie, we have had a collection around the office, and I wish to present this to you as a leaving present"

"Thank you" I blurted out with my knees now feeling like jelly with the shock and surprise.

I opened the thick embossed envelope and took out the voucher from a famous store. I was well and truly overcome by the generosity of them all and made sure that I voiced that.

As I turned to pick up my bag and collect my coat, Mrs Gerrard approached me and said in a soft voice, "Rosie, remember what I said earlier won't you? Good luck and don't forget where we are"

I smiled and said, "Of course and thank you"

I went across to Martine and gave her a big hug and asked her to keep in touch and arranged to have our usual Wednesday meeting in the café after work.

As I made my way out of the building, my thoughts immediately turned to Stefan. All the comments that I had heard about him over the last few months had mostly been negative. I felt as though everybody knew him better than me and then I stopped myself.

“Well, I’m a big girl now and I can look after myself” I thought with defiance. But was I?

## **Chapter 19**

I arrived home.

It looked and sounded like Emmy too had come home earlier.

Going into the kitchen, I groaned as I saw a pile of plates and various utensils piled up in the sink and on the hob, with the remains of what looked like a spaghetti bolognese in a saucepan.

I felt irritated at the mess but decided to go into relax mode. My first call of the day was my favourite Chardonnay that I would normally keep for the weekend but decided today would be just as good.

Opening the fridge, my feathers immediately began to ruffle.

As I opened the door and looked on the bottom shelf, I saw that most of my bottle of wine had already been consumed, obviously by Emmy and Carlos.

I poured myself the last glass which emptied the bottle. Having a quick sip, I decided to tackle the washing up and made sure that I made plenty of noise in the process.



Shortly afterwards Emmy sailed into the kitchen, completely phase less in her dressing gown.

“Sorry Rosie” she uttered apologetically.

“I should have cleaned up, but Carlos and I have been rather busy” she added quite innocently.

“So, I see” I replied rather curtly.

“Actually” Emmy began, “We are thinking of going on a sabbatical”

“Nice for some” I retorted with a hint of sarcasm.

That was Emmy these days, carefree.

I decided to tell Emmy about my new contract. She did seem pleased for me.

I was also pleased for Emmy and Carlos, but their hit and miss lifestyle I had begun to find quite irritating as it was now becoming to infringe on mine. I would later be given an answer to the problem as will become apparent further on in this story.

## **Chapter 20**

I slept amazingly well that night and arose early to prepare myself for my official first day in my new role.

On the train to work my mobile beeped its message alert. On reading it, I realised it was Stefan.

“Looking forward to our new start together” xx

I arrived in reception at the chambers and was greeted by Stefan himself.

He looked stunning. His usual aroma of woodland spice filled the air. I immediately felt drawn to look at his chin and his delicious lips. This was returned with a knowing smile.

Again, once in the lift he stood remarkably close to me, and my body gave a pleasurable shiver and other emotional internal pleasurable feelings. I knew that being an older man and with his experience he would know exactly the effect he was having on me. Suddenly, he pulled me in close to him and passionately kissed me. A kiss that I didn't want to end. "He must have timed the lift stops just right!"

As we stepped out the lift together, he immediately went into professional mode, leaving my head reeling as well as my body.

The morning passed quite quickly, and I couldn't help but notice that he was on the telephone most of the time. In fact, he didn't even stop for our normal coffee break as in the past, and so I had my break alone.

I saw very little of Stefan that week. Quite a few clients were coming and going. Although I knew it was the confidentiality agreement not to "eavesdrop" on clients, I could tell by the tone of Stefan's voice that he knew exactly how to handle people and get them to put their full trust in him as a Barrister.

When it came to him as an individual, he was such a mixture.

I would get romantic messages from him, and I would yearn for him to go further and demonstrate his feelings more openly. Yet he was still ever the professional – while we were at work but even, so I was getting mixed signals.

However, the following morning I received an unexpected but pleasant surprise.

When I arrived the following morning, he was already there.

"Come Rosie" he said invitingly, "Let's start our morning with a coffee. I've a proposition to put to you" Stefan said with his eyes sparkling,

My ears certainly pricked up and I was excited in anticipation.

Stefan had put the coffee on ready to percolate and sat opposite me on the veranda.

“Rosie” he began. “Every so often I attend conferences at different places over the year. This next one has been scheduled near Alderley Edge in Cheshire. I thought you might like to accompany me, especially as my fellow Barristers and their secretaries are also attending.

I must have looked gormless as I attempted to take in this latest introduction.

Stefan carried on, “I thought it might broaden your experience and that you might actually enjoy the challenge along with the other ladies”

I was disappointed at first. I thought it would have been something more personal and not business related. There wasn't a hint of romance or affection as I had hoped. I did however agree to go.

“Great” Stefan responded, “I will let Mandy, the Court Usher know. She will be able to book our rooms at the nearby hotel as it is going to be more than a day or two that we will need to be present.

“Yes, that will be fine” I replied with little else to comment.

The following week, Stefan met me at Euston Station in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

Stefan was casually dressed. He was in chinos with a dark blue open shirt which revealed the top of his divinely dark hairy chest.

He must have read my thoughts when he saw the look on my face.

There I was dressed for court in my black jacket and matching trousers with office style blouse and scarf. I felt so out of place beside him.

“Don’t worry” he said. “The case hearing doesn’t start until after lunch. I’m quite sure that you have some casual wear with you – nice effort though” he said smiling but almost sarcastically.

“The bone faced cheek” I felt because of his comments.

I realised that Stefan couldn’t reveal all about the case, but he did drip feed me parts of it so that I could get a grip of the situation.

Apparently, the other two ladies that were going to be present, were not the ones I had met previously during my temporary work there.

According to Stefan, the secretaries would be allowed time off when only the Barristers needed to be present, and we could go shopping or whatever we wanted to do in between.

The Court rooms were situated right in the middle of town, but the hotel itself was within walking distance and set back off the road.

“How are your parents?” Stefan suddenly asked me and took me by surprise.

“They are fine thank you. I spoke to my mother on Saturday, and they seem well”

I light-heartedly made conversation telling him that my mum was anxious for me to get down to see them and that I had agreed to go down for spring bank in May, which was now only about five weeks away.

I couldn’t help but pick up on the immediate pout on his face as I uttered those words.

“I thought this would be a good time to go with the office being closed” trying to ignore his facial expressions

“We might not be!” Stefan retorted childishly.

“What do you mean?” I asked bewildered.

“I might want you to spend it with me” he quickly replied, and I felt very presumptuously.

I shook my head but smiling at the same time,

“What are you like?” I said

That was it though. I didn't really know what he was like. This deadly silk character and his control was totally unknown.

## **Chapter 21**

We arrived at 'Langford Lodge'.

On the first glimpse it looked quite grandiose from the outside.

It was so I had been told, an old, converted country house. To reach it Stefan had to drive a long and winding tree lined drive with flanked with immaculately kept gardens, which, now at this time of year looked particularly stunning in their spring splendour.

Stefan parked outside the front entrance where two rather grandly sculptured concrete white lions stood on guard on either side of the porch.

A man, about Stefan's age or maybe older, donned in an expensive looking black suit with tails and a crisp white shirt with frills and a red bow tie complimented with a black top hat, approached Stefan.

The man spoke to me courteously first,

“Good morning, Miss” and held the door open for me to alight the car.

Stefan, by this time was at the back of the car with the boot open. These new modern sensors fascinated me. He just had to run his foot along the underneath part of the boot, and it would instantly open. What a fete of technology!

Stefan handed the gentleman his key and as of the norm, so I had been told, the luggage would be unloaded for us and brought to our room in person and the porter would park the car for Stefan.

As we made our way into the reception area, I couldn't help but notice the elaborate Chandeliers and the spectacular cornices with their engraved figures. The marble flooring was immaculate and shone brightly. Certain famous figures of history down the line were displayed on a mural on one of the walls.

Stefan checked us both in on the register. Another gentleman was promptly at our side and ushered us towards one of those lifts with two old fashioned iron gates, which instantly reminded me of the "Titanic" film. A pity that the romance part didn't compare!

Stefan, almost in an afterthought fashion, then told me that lunch was going to be in the 'Grosvenor Suite' downstairs and that it would be at 12pm.

On arrival to our floor, the porter showed me first to my room and then presumably showed Stefan to his.

I stood in my room which was very welcoming. The four-poster bed with eiderdown and tapestry bedspread with matching pillowcases, was impressive.

The curtains were long and heavy with matching patterns.

There was an old-fashioned dressing table with a welcome present of a fruit bowl which was laden with all sorts of fruit even exotic varieties. Next to this was a silver pail with ice and a bottle of still water with cut glasses next to it.

Of course, there was the modern extras, a remote-control television on the wall and the usual telephone next to the bed with codes for outside lines etc.,

The en-suite bathroom was as luxurious. It had a jacuzzi and separate shower, a bidet and toilet and large wash basin, complimented by a tray selection of different shampoos, conditioners, hand creams and the like.

Opposite the bed was a lounge settee with 2 large fluffy white towels that had been sculptured to sit in the shape of swans, and smaller towels neatly stacked next to them.

The French windows led on to a small balcony which looked out onto green fields and in the far distance a motorway ran alongside the parameters. Totally different to the concrete vista from Stefan's office!

Next to the bathroom door was a small fridge stocked with bottled water and juices.

On the table adjacent to this was a large silver tray with a percolator and all the trimmings, and yes, my favourite – a China cup and saucer.

I had been in places like this before. My parents had taken me away for luxurious weekends on occasions, so it wasn't something that I had never experienced, but I suddenly felt quite alone and to be honest, abandoned by Stefan. Already I had begun to feel he was playing with my feelings.

After my inspection of the room, I slipped off my shoes and flopped onto the extremely comfortable bed. In fact, it was so comfortable that I drifted off to sleep. I can remember thoughts going through my head before this. My feelings were of irritation and annoyance towards Stefan. I was already getting tired of his attention towards me as a woman to be blowing hot and cold when it suited him. I also thought about my closest friend, Martine and how I missed her and working with her, and the gossip too. With these thoughts in mind, I must have drifted off.

I awoke to the sound of my phone. It was a text message from Stefan. “Just checking you are ok. See you shortly xx”

After a quick freshen up, I made my way downstairs.

I made sure I had my office laptop with me as I gathered, we would be going straight on to the conference after lunch.

I felt a little apprehensive as I reached the dining area. I knew I was about to meet the other two secretaries, and I did feel quite vulnerable. These were senior secretaries that were from an agency but had worked together on a few occasions and knew the other two Barristers, so I did feel like an outsider to begin with.

I drew a deep breath as I entered the room. Stefan came across, but in his official capacity – to make introductions.

He firstly introduced me to Mr Atkinson. I was told that he too was a senior Barrister. I guessed that he was older than Stefan and looked nearer retiring age. Then came Mr McGowan. I would say he wasn't all that much older than me, probably in his early thirties. I exchanged hands with both as Stefan introduced me to them.

That was the easy bit. Stefan now guided me to the other side of the table where the two secretaries were standing in conversation with each other. Mrs Carrington was the first one. She looked nearer Stefan's age. She had a warm and friendly smile as Stefan introduced me, but I wasn't as fortunate as I was introduced to Mrs Smyth who looked older than both of us. She really did come across as high and mighty.

As we made our way towards the centre table, Mrs Carrington pulled out a chair beside her and Mrs Smyth fortunately sat at the other side to her. As we sat down Mrs Carrington began, “Rosie, please call me Fiona”

“Thank you. It's good to meet you Fiona” I replied.



The two other Barristers and Stefan sat at the top of the table, and the three of us were sat further down.

As I looked across the room, I saw a long table that was filled with an exquisite platter of a variety of cold meats, cheeses, fish and quiches. A young woman dressed in her waitress uniform came and took our orders for refreshments – no alcohol though!

I chatted to Fiona and we both tried to include Eleanor Smyth in conversation, but with little success. I expect if she had her way she would be sat with Stefan and his colleagues.

Once lunch was finished, we filed across the short walk to the court conference room, where the three of us all sat dutifully with our laptops posed for action.

At about 5.30pm we made our way back to the hotel. As we entered the reception area, Stefan approached us and said that dinner would be at 7.30pm in the main dining room and smiled at the three of us.

Fiona asked me if I would like to go for a coffee as we had time to spend in the meantime to which I agreed.

Mrs Smyth was asked to accompany us out of politeness, but we were both quite relieved when she declined. I could imagine her thoughts, “I’m not going out with juniors”

Fiona asked me how I was settling into my new position. I told her that I did find it so different to being in a large office that was full of bustling activity and that at times I did feel quite isolated. I did add though, that I was glad that I had been invited to join in this week’s events and meet new people such as herself.

She gave one of those infectious smiles again. However, Fiona did take me by surprise when she asked me out of the blue, “How are you finding working with our Mr Wellborough?” That was followed by “I get the impression that he can be a perfectionist, as well as a bit of a one with the ladies!”

My brain went into quick response.

“I must admit that he’s been quite patient with me up to press. I can’t say that I wasn’t aware of his reputation. I’ve had a few people make comments from where I worked before but all in good humour, (although I wasn’t sure that was so) All I can say is that he is professional and a gentleman in his manner so far” I was determined not to elaborate or give any information away.

Fiona gave another sweet smile and then said after checking her watch, “Shall we head back and “preen” ourselves ready for dinner?”

After my shower I decided to put on my emerald, green dress with a small white daisy pattern. It was short but not over the top and a lightweight white jacket. I also put on my favourite green earrings that sparkled as they dangled from my ears. I took more time than usual over my make up and put on my usual perfume that I had been complimented on several times. I suppose in short, I hoped that Stefan would look and take notice of me as he had on our first meeting at the office party.

The evening passed without incident. It still seemed them very much and us though. In fact, I began to feel I would rather be back at home. That was saying something, living in the chaos with Emmy and Carlos.

Meeting Fiona had been a bonus. I was glad that I hadn’t had to spend my time with Mrs Smyth alone. It had also occurred to me that I may be able to find a bit more regarding Stefan as Fiona seemed to know about his reputation.

The next day passed very similarly to the previous one. However, the three of us were dismissed early that afternoon and Fiona and I decided to have a look round the shopping centre. Eleanor Smyth had retired to her room after lunch and didn’t join us for dinner that evening. I don’t think it was due to her attitude as I had noticed she

didn't look that well and Fiona agreed and said that she would check on her later.

In course of conversation as Fiona and I strolled around the centre, I swerved the topic round to talking about Stefan. I was keen to know if she knew what an earth had suddenly gone wrong in Jenny's life. I didn't feel that was unreasonable seen as I was now taking her place. I didn't get very far though as Fiona only told me what I already knew from Jo.

When Fiona came down for dinner that evening, she told the rest of us that Eleanor had a migraine that was taking time to settle down and that she apologised for her absence.

Fiona and I resumed our conversation over dinner. She had worked from the age of sixteen years old at a local Solicitors and progressed in her career. Then much later when she had her twin sons, she went on to agency work to fit in with their childcare and schooling. She excitedly told me that she was soon to be a grandma for the first time. The son who was soon to be a father, lived only streets away from her but her other son and his wife lived in Italy where they ran a hotel.

Just as I was about to excuse myself and head for my room, Mr Atkinson stood up to make an announcement. He went on to tell us that we may be discharged early from the conference as between them they had managed to gain most of the information and statements that they needed, but this would be confirmed in the morning.

I felt somewhat relieved.

With that I politely excused myself and said that I had enjoyed my evening and that I would see everyone the following morning. I didn't look Stefan directly in the eye as I spoke. I was quite hurt that I

had been more like a spare part during this time away. I knew he was busy, but there was just no interaction whatsoever or any messages.

When I arrived in my room, I sat on the bed for a few minutes, and then decided to ring Martine.

“Hello Martine. I hope I’m not disturbing you” I started when she answered.

“No of course not. Come on Rosie, are you? I know there’s something – you normally text me” She replied perfectly rationally.

“Ok. I’ll come clean” I sighed and took a deep breath in.

I then set about telling her about Stefan kissing me out of the blue and all the feelings that came to the surface. I also braved it and told her that he had professed his love to me several times in his messages. Then I went on to tell her the feeling as though he was blowing hot and cold, especially over these last few days and feeling that I was being treated like a fish with its bait, waiting for it to be caught. The trouble was I was getting well and truly hooked!

When Martine could get a word in edgeways, she insisted, “Let me ring you back.

“No” I resisted. I can hear familiar voices coming up the corridor and I don’t want to be overheard. Thank you for the thought though and thank you for listening. I’ll catch up with you when I get back”

“Please be careful Rosie. Let’s have our usual meeting on Wednesday after work” Martine advised.

“Sounds good. I better go there’s someone at the door, bye” I quickly replied.

I was puzzled though as to who would be knocking on my door at this time in the evening.

I put my phone down on the bedside table and rose to my feet.

As I opened the door, the shock must have shown in my facial expression when I saw that it was Stefan.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. May I come in?” He asked in that velvet tone of voice.

“Of course,” I replied a little startled at first.

“Oh Rosie. How I’ve missed you” he uttered starting to gently kiss my neck making my hairs bristle in response.

“You’ve a funny way of showing it” I said.

Stefan smiled, that irresistible smile which then turned in to a grin which I couldn’t resist responding to.

“I can’t work you out. One minute I feel like a spare part and then you shower your love on me?”

“Do I feel that ‘the lady’ is protesting?” Stefan replied teasingly.

“Of course not!” I replied adamantly.

“That’s good, as there is no reason to” he replied gently resuming the kissing of my neck”

I realised that he was almost playing his court tactics and tying me in knots, but I didn’t care tonight, I just wanted him.

Then started the explicit and excitable long-awaited start of our first lovemaking.

As Stefan began to unbutton my blouse, I started to suck my finger in anticipation. This really started to light Stefan’s fire! We undressed each other at speed, and then proceeded to the bed.

He began to caress me, and I became aroused.

My heart rate began to rise, and I could feel his as I arched my body upon him.

I now sat astride him, and my breasts were responding to the excitement, becoming erect and hard.

I could feel my feminine parts throbbing and aching for him.

I suddenly felt that pleasurable moment of climax as Stefan did also and we both experienced a flush of warmth over us.

We then laid in each other's arms and fell into a deep sleep.

When we awoke at sunrise, Stefan gently whispered,

"I'm sorry I have been so pre-occupied lately. That doesn't mean I haven't been thinking about you any less Rosie" he said earnestly.

I nodded entranced by this man before me.

"I better go to my room before everyone gets up" he continued.

Stefan gave me a long kiss and then left my room.

This 'Silk' was weaving his web around me and capturing me. I was too smitten to resist.

One day though, I would look back and find how deadly he truly was.

## **Chapter 22**

I was abruptly awoken by my mobile alarm. Just as I went to turn it off, I could see a neatly folded man's handkerchief with Stefan's initials on the corner which carried the scent of his woodland spice aftershave, laid on my pillow.

My mobile phone began to ring. It was Martine.

"Are you ok? I've been worried about you"

Of course, a lot had changed since last night and my conversation with Martine.

"I'm fine" I said cheerily.

“You didn’t sound fine last night. Don’t let him get to you and don’t let him use you like a toy he can pick up when he is bored. Stand up for yourself girl!”

I felt my stomach churn as I recalled the blissful night we had spent together. There was absolutely no way I could tell Martine about the previous night and its events. Our friendship would certainly dissolve rapidly.

“Yes, I’m fine thank you. I’m sorry about disturbing you last night. I’m ok honestly” I replied trying not to give a hint of anything in my tone of voice.

“Ok” replied Martine, sounding only half convinced.

“Why don’t we have our usual catch up on Wednesday after work at 5.30? Shall we go to “The Grapevine” as usual?”

“That will be great” I confirmed.

I’d just said goodbye to Martine when I received a text from Stefan.

“Thank you for last night. I’ll see you down at breakfast shortly xx”

I gave a little giggle to myself and made my way into the shower to get ready.

At breakfast Stefan took charge.

“My fellow Barristers and I would just like to say how much we have appreciated your presence and support, but we can now disband our visit as no further information is needed so we can head for home”

“Some have had more fun than others” I thought impishly.

We had our final breakfast together. Eleanor Smyth was very quiet, but I didn’t take it as rude. Fiona seemed rather concerned about her too.

Breakfast was over quite soon.

I immediately went up to my room and packed my bag.

In the corridor I said goodbye to Fiona and then to Eleanor, who I must admit, didn't look that well. I had witnessed how vulnerable Eleanor now seemed. I wondered if she should have retired but wasn't ready to but physically needed to.

When I arrived outside the hotel, Stefan's car had been brought round to the front entrance for him and the same gentleman ushered me into the car as before. It wasn't long before Stefan appeared and had his few last words with the other two Barristers before coming across to his car.

As he started the engine and we pulled out of the drive, I was thinking of something to talk about, but Stefan remedied that.

"Let's have the rest of the day to ourselves. That gorgeous spring sunshine is very welcoming, and I know a scenic route home and a place to stop off on the way back"

"Sounds good to me" I responded.

It wasn't long before we stopped at what looked like a barn conversion that was now a café. I had noticed on my travels that these were starting to spring up in quite a few places. In the little pockets of countryside that were dotted about you were almost sure to see one of these.

We ordered our morning coffee and sat opposite each other at the well-worn wooden table between us. Stefan took both my hands and cradled them in his. He said earnestly, "Rosie I think I have fallen in love with you, and I want you to realise that"

I nodded, and teasingly said, "Why do you only think that you are?"

"I really want us to be in a serious relationship, not a casual one" he continued.

"I don't do casual" I said seriously.



Stefan chuckled.

“You sound so serious” he said.

“That’s because I am!” I replied indignantly.

“Well, how about it? Are we an item as they say?” he asked in earnest.

I was a bit taken aback suddenly, after all it had been a bit of a whirlwind start, but then I responded in the affirmative. “Yes” I replied. That was quickly followed by the practical, “What about work though”

Stefan looked slightly puzzled as he quizzed, “Works work”

“You know that famous saying, ‘you shouldn’t mix business with pleasure. That must have been said for a reason” I explained.

“Yes, I’ve heard it. I’ve also heard the one about ‘don’t work with animals or children!”

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “Point taken” I said amused.

“Right Miss Ibbotson, I better watch my step” he said mockingly but at the same time stroking my cheek.

I became aware of a few giggles from a table in the corner that was occupied by four senior ladies. One of the group then became the mouthpiece for them.

“Sorry love, we thought he must be your dad!” and continued to giggle.

Stefan was totally unfazed by it all, but replied, “No, I’m not but I would feel privileged if that had had been the case”

I blushed.

Soon we were back on the road again towards home.

Stefan parked up outside the flat and lifted my bags out of the car for me. He kissed me on my cheek and said that he would like to take me out for dinner the following evening, to which I agreed and then he left.

All was quiet as I walked in the door. Emmy and Carlos must have been out as there was no other evidence to suggest otherwise.

I unpacked my case and started my washing.

My mind was miles away and especially when I dwelt on my trip to the stars and back last night with Stefan. I was excited to know what the future had in store for us.

I was in my dressing gown when Emmy and Carlos arrived back.

Emmy was full of herself. I felt a bit like a spare piece of furniture and at first as though Emmy hadn't even noticed my absence. She and Carlos were full of their plans to have a year's sabbatical and backpack over part of Australia.

Emmy must have then realised I was back and remembered the business trip I had been on with Stefan and asked how it had gone.

I decided to keep it low key about the obvious parts of the trip, but if only she knew I mused to myself.

Later, I was just about to retire to bed when a message came through to my phone from Stefan.

"I hope you don't mind if I introduce you to some other people tomorrow when we have dinner. I thought it would be good to have dinner at my house. Love you as always, Stefan xx"

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I didn't know whether I felt ready to be on 'display' yet.

## **Chapter 23**

The weather was improving and, so I decided to dress accordingly as I went into town.

I had decided to push the boat out for tonight and made a last-minute appointment at the hairdressers and went to the expense of having my nails polished with extensions and my makeup professionally applied. I wanted to feel confident as I met Stefan's friends. I was now his girlfriend and not just his Personal Assistant at work, so I felt I needed to look the part.

A taxi, or rather a chauffeur arrived exactly at 7pm.

My mind was all over the place thinking of intelligent conversations to make with Stefan's guests, and in the end, I gave up and, unlike me, decided to go with the flow.

I had already decided that Stefan's house would be impressive with him being a Barrister, but I was quite relieved when we arrived that from the outside it wasn't over the top.

As the driver opened my door and I began to get out of the car, I was surprised as the lack of cars on the drive and wondered if I had the time wrong.

I rang the brass doorbell.

A man, who I would estimate to be in his sixties answered the door.

He was dressed in smart black trousers. His shirt was a short sleeved casual one in a cornflower blue. His smile was broad and welcoming.

"Hello. I'm Bill, Stefan's houseman. You must be the lovely Rosie that my wife and I have heard so much about"

"Hello" I responded and felt a flush come over my face at the compliment.

"It's good to meet you Bill" I responded.

At that moment, a grey-haired lady with sparkling blue eyes came around the corner, in a smart dark blue skirt and matching blouse with a cream apron over the top.

“Hello Rosie” she said in a friendly manner. “I’m Elizabeth, but my friends call me ‘Lizzy’. I’m Bill’s wife”

“it’s lovely to meet you both” I responded graciously.

Then I threw in my question,

“Am I early? I thought the drive would be packed with all these visitors coming!” I declared.

Bill and Lizzy gave each other a knowing look.

Then Lizzy said,

“Honestly, that’s typical Stefan. If there’s a party of people coming, I don’t know about it until the last minute. I’ve only made food for the two of you”

I must admit that I was slightly annoyed that they had obviously been aware of this evening’s ‘dinner for two’ and I wasn’t, but on the other hand I was relieved. I just wished Stefan had told me his plans.

Stefan suddenly appeared from a room on the right. He smiled at the three of us and then cheekily turned to me and said,

“I’m glad you’ve met Bill and Lizzy, now come and meet the rest of the family”

Bill and Lizzy laughed, and Bill gave me a quick wink.

Stefan gently put his arm around me and guided me into a quite sizeable room which I took to be a study with bookcase after bookcase lining the walls.

“I see your well-read Mr Wellborough” I commented with a hint of sarcasm.

“Ha, you sound quite sarcastic about my library and I” Stefan retorted to which I gave a laugh.

I glanced at the open fire and its grate. It obviously wasn't lit as the weather had been exceptionally kind to us, but I had always had a yearning for open fires.

In one corner of the room was a snooker table, all neatly laid out ready for use.

I sat down in a leather armchair sparkling with polish.

As Stefan sat down opposite me, I decided to challenge him.

“I was expecting a large cocktail party and meeting your friends and family”

“Expecting or presuming?” he said levelling his eyes with mine.

“Now you're sounding in Barrister mode” I threw back avoiding the question.

“You've already met part of my family” he returned, avoiding my question.

“I've met Bill and Lizzy” I commented.

“There you go then. They are like my family” he replied slightly defensively I thought.

With that he clicked his fingers, and two rather adorable cocker spaniels came hastily to his side.

“Meet Molly and Matilda” he introduced them.

My heart wanted to melt. I had always loved cocker spaniels. It made me remember Sam, he was our pet when I was around 5 years old.

“They are gorgeous Stefan” and put my hands out to them. Molly was jet black and Matilda was chocolate brown.

“The girls” as Stefan referred to them, were well behaved as I had one sat either side of me.

“And what about you Stefan?” I questioned him daringly, hoping that he might at least be willing to share some more about his immediate family.

Stefan didn’t seem to be ruffled at my question but said

“Come Rosie. Why don’t we chat over dinner?” he requested

We came out of the room and turned right down the hall and into a large dining kitchen. Lizzy was busy making sure everything was laid out properly on the table.

“Oh lovely” I remarked as she put the prepared food on the table. A gorgeous homemade quiche with an exotic salad and baked potatoes.

Lizzy smiled at my voice of approval. I responded, “You can’t beat homemade food, especially as appetising as this”

“Enjoy” was Lizzy’s response. She looked over at Bill who followed with chilled champagne professionally placed in a silver wine holder.

Stefan encouraged me to start and poured us both a glass of champagne.

“I’ll answer your question over our meal” he started.

I said nothing but just let him continue at his own pace while I listened intently.

“My parents died in a car accident when I was 25 years old” Stefan explained. “They used to like to go to this restaurant called “The Country Fox”. It was on the hills, out of the way over the moors.

My father was always a good and sensible driver but had taken rather a risk which was unlike him, to go to the restaurant for Sunday lunch. The road that leads up to it is notorious in winter for low lying

fog and snow and ice due to it being narrow and a line of rocks on one side which had a deep back drop behind it”

Stefan stopped for a moment and closed his eyes momentarily as if he was composing himself for a moment. I kept quiet but gently put my hands around his.

Stefan then continued.

“It was late-autumn and there had been a heavy frost followed by torrential rain that morning. Nobody really knows what happened. Did the car skid? They were both found at the bottom of the ravine” he sighed. “I suppose the only bearable thing, is that they did die together. They were practically inseparable. I nodded and stroked his hand.

“I think you mentioned you had a sister?” I asked

“Yes. I have a younger sister called Lauren, but I haven’t seen her for years. After our parents died, she moved up to Aberdeen to carry on her studies to eventually be a Vet. We simply just lost touch.”

“That’s the thing. With all the best intentions, we do tend to lose touch with family at times” I said sympathetically. I did find it strange though that, so many years had gone by without contact. I know I didn’t see a lot of my brothers, but we did try and meet up two or three times a year, and I always sent a card on for Christmas and birthdays with a letter and would phone them as well. It was almost as if Stefan and his sister had cut each other off on purpose.

I had experienced a chink in Stefan’s armour and had a brief glimpse in to his past which up to press was quite sad. He was still a stranger though.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and Bill put his head round and asked if we were ready for desserts. I was full to the brim, but Lizzy brought in a delicious looking chocolate cake with two China plates. Stefan promised we would have some as soon as we could.

Stefan then rose to his feet and came across, bending his head down and put his lips on mine and kissed me.

“Would you like a tour of my abode” he said almost seriously.

“Rather!” I agreed with enthusiasm.

At the back of the house was a large sized terrace with three steps down to the start of the garden. A large lawn took up a good amount of the garden which was kept immaculately which had been mown into professional stripes. On the left-hand side opposite the lawn was a vegetable patch with a wide variety of different vegetables, and on the opposite side was a perfect line of fruit trees which were mostly now in bud. Beyond this was a tall fence. At the end of the garden was a greenhouse. Stefan told me that Bill was interested in growing all different flavoured and types of tomatoes and other plants and flowers that needed more delicate care from the elements.

I stood in awe at the sight.

“No wonder they seem like family. They both take such a pride in what they do” I said full of praise.

Stefan smiled sweetly in approval.

“I know. I don’t know what I would do without them” he uttered poignantly.

The evening sunshine was almost quite warm as we returned to the dining room.

“Let me continue our tour” urged Stefan.

As we went back down the hall, we passed a door on the right.

Although we didn’t go inside it, Stefan explained that it was Bill and Lizzy’s bathroom. The other room on the right which looked quite a good size from the outside, was Bill and Lizzy’s bed sit.



Stefan explained that Bill and Lizzy had access to all the rooms for obvious reasons but having most of the downstairs to themselves gave them privacy. Stefan also said that he insisted that they have use of the bedrooms upstairs for family and friends that wanted to stay overnight on occasions.

I felt I was really falling more and more in love with this man. He really does care about those close to him. As a professional I realised he would not be allowed to be emotionally involved at any time, but he was a caring person” (or so I chose to think at the time).

The stairs were based in the middle of the hall. It was quite an old-fashioned staircase and had two levels to it. It was covered in a good quality pile carpet.

At the top of the stairs to the left, was a large bathroom with a jacuzzi. The carpet was cream, and the pile was luxurious.

There were four bedrooms which Stefan passed three of them off as guest rooms but turned my attention to the largest bedroom which was his. It was en-suite as expected. The curtains were a lime green colour with a delicate cream pattern. Lattice windows were situated at three different areas of the room.

A king-sized bed was situated in the middle of the room. It had golden coloured bed steeds and the thick duvet matched the colour and pattern of the curtains.

The wardrobes had built in wardrobes with sliding doors. The walls had paintings which I readily recognised were by Turner.

His house was like a show house in some respects. I did however find it strange that there wasn't one family photograph on display of the rooms that I had seen.

Stefan then came close to me and put his hands on my shoulders and said gently and pleadingly:

“Please stay with me tonight”

“I can’t Stefan, I’ve haven’t anything with me”

“That’s ok. You can have on of my T shirts to slip in to, and tomorrow I will get you back home early enough for you to get changed” he said persuading.

Stefan succeeded.

I showered in Stefan’s room and changed into a light blue T shirt, which I was glad to find, covered my backside.

“Come and lay here with me” encouraged Stefan beckoning me over to lay next to him.

“I certainly will” I responded. “I’ll just text Emmy to let her know I won’t be back tonight”.

I glanced up and could see that familiar look again, the narrowing of the eyes as they flashed in disapproval.

“Is something that matter Stefan?” I asked as innocently as possible.

“It’s just that you sound as though you are reporting back to mummy” he replied mockingly.

His words stung me slightly, but I was determined not to bite. I put on a sweet smile and said,

“Surely you must understand that girls look out for each other today. If one of us is going away, Emmy or I always let each other know especially as we share a flat together, we would worry otherwise. It’s polite as well” I explained firmly.

I had a sense that he still either didn’t quite understand, either because he chose not to, or it irritated him. However, he chose politely not to make this too obvious.

I sent Emmy my message. He remained silent but patted the bed again waiting for me to respond.

After another night of amazing passion and unbelievable love making, we fell asleep again in each other's arms.

The early morning sunshine was blazing through the window as I awoke.

Stefan was already shaved, showered, and dressed.

He was sat in the corner of his bedroom in the Queen Anne style chair as if waiting for me to wake up. He came across and kissed me tenderly.

"I'll go and get Lizzy on with our breakfast. See you shortly"

"Ok" I quickly replied. I was slightly apprehensive as to what Bill and Lizzy would think when they realised, I had stopped overnight.

They were ever discreet as usual though. There was no hint of surprise or knowing glances between Bill and Lizzy, and they were just as welcoming as they had been the previous evening.

Lizzy had prepared a hearty English breakfast with a large pot of tea in a classic China tea pot and matching tea cups.

Stefan's conversation was more work related this morning.

As we stood up from the table, almost on cue, Bill and Lizzy appeared. I thanked Lizzy for the wonderful food that I had enjoyed and how good it had been to meet them both.

Lizzy's response was to give me a motherly hug and to say that she looked forward to seeing me again soon. Bill gave me one of those handshakes that it was so firm that I knew he was genuine. I had always been "advised" in business that people were genuine when they gave you a firm handshake. That's not always the case though as I later found out. Stefan smiled in approval.

He turned to Lizzy and said that he wouldn't be too late back but to just make him a ham salad for dinner.

I felt a bit sub conscious as we arrived at the flat. Yes, Surbiton was a leafy suburb and the mansion like houses that surrounded our flat made it look spectacular, but we were in a small flat off the main road behind a small row of shops in the centre.

As Stefan pulled up outside the flat, he said with a pan expression, "So this is your humble abode" and then gave a smirk.

I glared at him but said nothing.

Stefan burst into sudden laughter.

"You're very easy to wind up" he responded.

"And I get the feeling that you are a typical snob" I said in retaliation.

I was glad that his engine was still running as I took that to mean he was going straight off.

Stefan leaned across me and kissed me lovingly and informed me,

"I probably won't be in the office until the end of the week as I am at court, but I will email what I need you to do next week" he said without feeling.

"Thank you" I responded, equally unfeeling.

He then caught my hand and then informed me, much to my surprise and delight:

"I've a lovely surprise for you on my return" he revealed.

"I look forward to that" I replied in anticipation.

"I love you" uttered Stefan.

He gave me a soft kiss on my cheek.

In a few days I was to find out that his coming surprise wasn't going to be all that pleasant.

## Chapter 25

Despite his absence, Stefan regularly text and rang me regularly.

I did start to begin that he was keeping track of my movements but didn't let it concern me.

I had in the meantime, had a chance to see Emmy on her own one evening. Now that Carlos was a 'permanent fixture' those girly chats were getting rare.

That evening when I arrived back home, I was surprised to see Emmy in the kitchen up to her eyes in cooking with a variety of ingredients around her and surrounded by utensils and avidly reading from a cookery book.

"That smells gorgeous" I commended Emmy. She was a good cook but since Carlos had been here, they seemed to live on take away meals most of the time.

"Thank you, Rosie, it's 'Ligurian Pasta Trenette'. It might sound complicated. I've never made it before but thought I would try. I'm also trying to make some Focaccia bread with garlic.

"By the way Rosie, I better just warn you that Carlos in the bath having a soak before tea" remembered Emmy.

"Ok" I replied.

"Come on sit yourself down" Emmy patted the kitchen stool next to the breakfast table in encouragement.

Emmy continued, "I'm just having a glass of Shiraz. I know you aren't that keen on red wine, but I will pour you one all the same"

"You make it sound so tempting, so I will join you, thank you" I said with a smile.

Emmy then pulled the other stool across and sat down next to me.

She led the conversation. “Thanks for letting me know you were ok the other night. I was quite surprised you were already staying at night at Stefan’s, it’s not my business but, stop the world and let me get off: it’s been quite rapid”

I just nodded, “Look who’s talking!”

Emmy ignored my comment and continued. “Whereabouts is his house” Emmy first wanted to know.

I told her and explained about the previous evening.

Emmy picked up on Bill and Lizzy first.

“He has servants?” she remarked excitedly.

I replied in the fashion that Stefan had to me, that they were like his family. I also decided to tell her about his parents and his sister.

“Is that all?” responded Emmy looking rather disappointed.

“Look Rosie” she continued. “I’m quite sure a man of his age, and public stature must have had previous relationships?”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to talk about it yet and I’m certainly not going to ask any invasive questions” I said in defence. I chose not to mention about Marie at this time.

“Well, I just think it would be common sense to find out. You never know, he might be hiding a dark secret” Emmy said menacingly but then gave one of her famous giggles.

Then she continued, more seriously this time:

“Seriously though, you do really need to get to know Stefan better for your own good”

Emmy sounded like an older sister now.

I felt slightly niggled but knew she was perfectly right.

“Says she who’s practically joined at the hip to Carlos” I replied teasingly.

Just as I said that Carlos appeared and put his head round the door.

“Did someone mention my name?” he asked brightly.

Emmy rushed over to the door to reveal Carlos with just a towel wrapped round his lower half.

“Go and get your clothes on” She instructed.

“Dinner’s nearly ready and I’m sure Rosie would like to join us and be my other guinea pig of my cooking” she said bossily.

I smiled and made my way to the table. Emmy’s voice whispered in my ear, “Think on Rosie” With that she quickly retreated to the kitchen.

Emmy’s attempt at her latest dish was very acceptable and it was good to have some time in the company of two people who generated such a light-hearted atmosphere.

Eventually I called time and went to bed.

I lay in bed and my thoughts were playing havoc with each other. Observing Emmy and Carlos, how they interreacted with each other so easily and their frequent bouts of laughter. I wasn’t jealous, just a bit troubled when I examined my relationship with Stefan. Ours was an intense relationship. He was the total opposite of Richie. Stefan made me feel very special when we made love, but there was no in between stage which did bother me slightly.

Just then a message came through on my phone and it was right on time as usual – 10.30pm.

Was this just force of habit or control and checking up on me as he always seemed to expect a reply in quick succession?

## Chapter 26

The following afternoon as I was just performing my usual ritual of washing, drying, and ironing – getting ready for the week ahead, my phone rang, and it was Stefan.

I was relieved that Emmy and Carlos had gone out on their bicycles along the canal on this beautiful May afternoon.

“Hello beautiful” Stefan began.

“Hello Stefan” I replied.

“I wanted to hear that soft voice” Stefan said flatteringly.

Then he continued. “I’ve emailed you the work that I need you to complete over the next week as it looks as though I’m going to be at Court most of the week. Pack a bag for Friday though” he said firmly.

“Pack a bag?” I repeated in a puzzled voice.

“Yes, that’s my surprise. I’m whisking you away to a lovely hotel that I know in Loch Lomond. You’ll love it. The views are fantastic, and the food is homemade and delicious. I’ve booked Friday through to Monday as it’s bank holiday”

“Stefan that is quite a surprise” I responded, but at the same time rather livid at his presumptuousness. I didn’t feel we were at that point in our relationship to go away together so soon.

“I’m afraid I can’t Stefan. I’m so sorry” I replied apologetically.

“What do you mean you can’t?” I could hear the irritation in his voice and imagined that steely flash of his eyes that I had witnessed when he was crossed.

“Stefan, I did mention about two weeks ago that I was going down to see my parents for the Spring Bank holiday weekend. I haven’t seen them since Christmas, and I can’t disappoint them. Please understand” I explained.



Stefan completely took me by surprise and cut me to the quick when he reacted, "I do understand Rosie, who you would rather be with!" he snapped. "I'll see you next Tuesday morning"

The phone then went dead as he rapidly ended our call.

Over the next few days, I went to work and ploughed my way through all that he had left me to complete.

The positive aspect of Stefan's absence was that it allowed me time to spend with the other secretaries. I had felt at times that Stefan kept me away from associating with them but had thought I could handle it.

I didn't hear from Stefan until the Thursday afternoon when I answered the office phone and realised it was him.

I had emailed him a couple of times, updating him about work, but he hadn't replied.

"Hello" said Stefan. "Thanks for your emails"

"You're welcome" I replied politely.

Stefan sounded quite bright when I asked how things were with him.

"Fine, we are getting there"

"Look, I'm going to be coming in on Friday morning. What time are you setting off to your parents? He asked, his tone seeming more reasonable now.

"My train goes at 4pm" I informed him.

"Well, how about I bring something in for lunch and then I'll drive you to the station?" he suggested.

"Sounds good" I replied brightly.

"Ok then. I'll see you in the morning," said Stefan.

I boarded my train to work as usual but this time with a small suitcase and my vanity case for my weekend away.

I started on my morning's work, and then went for my morning coffee at 11am, but this time, as I had been doing all week, in the company of the girls' downstairs.

We had our usual round of gossip and were laughing at one of the girls jokes when Stefan walked in. As he did so, silence filled the room.

I immediately rose to my feet and smiled at the girls before I left to follow Stefan back to his office.

As we entered the room he made a curt remark, "I didn't think you would have time to chatter away but I was obviously mistaken".

I was irritated by this remark but refused to show it and didn't respond.

"All the files are up to date that you asked me to complete. There is a pile of letters for you to sign in the outward tray, and an inward pile in the other tray for your attention" I said trying to sound competent.

"Very professional" murmured Stefan but didn't sound as though he meant it.

The office telephone rang. I'd noticed that I very rarely had chance to answer it like a normal secretary would. Usually, if Stefan was going to be away, he would divert calls to his mobile. That did seem strange.

Stefan made notes as he conversed with the caller. After that he made a call to someone else.

I didn't have much to do now and so just tried to look busy in the meantime.

About 12.30pm Stefan suggested that we get off for lunch. He said in a matter-of-fact voice that he had prepared a picnic hamper.

Stefan drove out into the countryside.

I noticed his conversation was mainly about the latest news than anything personal.

Eventually he parked up and proceeded to lay a tablecloth on the grass and brought out two large cushions before placing the hamper in the middle.

I sat down on one of the cushions in silence, as did Stefan as he began to unpack the hamper. He took out two mini bottles of champagne and filled up two glasses after which he then said, "Help yourself"

I took the plunge.

"Stefan, would you tell me what's on your mind. You seem distant now?" I tried to coax him into conversing with me.

Stefan shrugged his shoulders in a childish manner.

"I just have a lot on my mind now" he replied but avoiding my gaze.

"Is there anything I can help with?" I tried to encourage him to talk.

To my surprise he suddenly came back on the attack.

"What have you been talking about with the other secretaries?" he asked with concern.

Taken by surprise, I replied, "Nothing of any importance, just 'girly' talk as they say"

"Well, your so-called girly talk can have damaging consequences" he replied sharply.

"If you are referring to our relationship, no I haven't said anything. In fact, I've been the one doing all the listening. I wouldn't get a word in

edge ways if I tried” I said trying to reassure him but puzzled why he had reacted in that way.

A look of almost relief came over his face. Stefan quickly followed by asking “I suppose they’ve said things about me though. That’s the trouble when women get together” he rudely remarked.

“Now just a minute” I replied showing my annoyance.

“That is highly uncalled for and misogynistic. Don’t think that you are so important for us to want to discuss you on our break!” I could feel my anger rising.

“I’m sorry” he replied. “I just didn’t expect to see you there”

I didn’t respond.

Stefan suddenly changed the subject.

“Well, it’s certainly looking quite promising weather for the weekend. I suppose we better get packed up and get you on your way”

“Yes, it could well be” I agreed. “Well thank you for a lovely picnic” I said gratefully.

Stefan talked mainly about the following weeks work and again seem detached with me.

He drove into the station car park and took my two small cases out of his boot and as he brought them to me said,

“Have a good journey and a good time with your family”

I noticed he never gave away how he was going to be spending the weekend – whether he was still going to Loch Lomond or not.

He made no attempt to come to the platform with me, and as I thanked him for the lift, he just gave a slight smile and said, “You’re welcome”

He did give me a slight kiss on the cheek, but not with any real feeling, more out of duty.

I waved as I walked away and noticed him get quickly into his car, rev his engine, and speed off into the distance.

Feeling quite bewildered, I made my way to the station platform.

I was glad the journey wouldn't be too long and that my dad would meet me at the other end.

The train soon came, and I boarded. I drifted off to sleep momentarily despite the relatively short journey.

My faithful dad was stood there waiting to greet me as my train pulled in. As soon as I saw him, he gave me a beaming smile and outstretched his arms ready to hug me.

"I'm so pleased to see you dad" I said with a slight tone of emotion in my voice.

Suddenly, I felt vulnerable like a child, but made a promise to myself that I was going to hide the jumble inside my head and not spoil the weekend.

"And likewise, to you my lovely girl" dad replied.

Thankfully on the drive home, dad started to fill me in on my brother's news and how mum was.

Mum was ecstatic to see me and after hugging her, I made my way up to my old room and started to unpack my clothes. I decided to turn my phone off and cut myself off emotionally from home and work.

I'd brought my laptop with me, but deliberately left it switched off for self-preservation reasons.

Mum was her usual "fuss pot" self. As much as I deeply loved her, I just wasn't in the mood, and all I wanted to do was shut myself away

in the bedroom and try and relax my brain in peace. Fortunately, my ever loving and astute dad must have read my thoughts and expressions.

At times my dad had indulged in a glass or two of port at bedtimes, mainly at Christmas but sometimes on occasions when the family were round. I did sometimes partake and had experienced the lovely warm feeling and sleepiness that followed. This was an occasion when dad poured me a glass of port, almost as if he knew instinctively that there was a hint of turmoil in my life, and I needed a good night's sleep.

I had survived the questions of my mother, keen to know how my new job was progressing and how I was settling in.

I tried to fob her off slightly with telling her about the different duties that I had and how pleasant the other girls had been and made me feel at home.

“And what about Stefan?” she pointedly asked.

I was already prepared for that question that I knew she wouldn't be able to resist asking.

“Yes, he's ok” I responded and put on a smile as I did so.

Mum came over and gave me a hug. “I'll run you a bath” I knew mum would be thinking, “Rosie doesn't feel like talking tonight, but I've all weekend!”

I went to see my dad who was pottering about in the garden, to say goodnight.

It was good to relax in the bath. The chamomile shampoo was so good to soak in. Although it was still light, the aroma from the incense burning candles was quite sleep inducing.

As I walked in the bedroom, I could see that mum had made me a drink of Ovaltine.

As I sat up in bed, I gingerly picked up my phone, and pondered whether to switch it on. I desperately wanted to see if Stefan had left me any messages as he normally did but didn't expect too much with the mood he had been in earlier.

I waited with bated breath as I switched my mobile on. Alas the message that came through was from Martine which read:

"Hi Rosie, hope you arrived safely. I didn't like to ring and disturb you, but I have some important news to tell you about Stefan"

I rang Martine back straight away.

As soon as she heard my voice she replied, "Hi Rosie. I'm glad you arrived safely and I'm sorry to bother you, but I didn't feel it could wait until I met up with you on Wednesday after work. I feel you ought to know about Stefan" I let Marine continue. "He's been married before"

"Yes – and?" I replied with a hint of sarcasm.

"Well, that's all been kept very quiet" Martine justified her statement.

"I see. How did you find that out?" I asked stringing Martine along slightly.

"You remember Annabelle who works in finance?" Martine continued.

"Yes" I replied

"Her mum is friends with Elsie, the cleaner at your place, and Elsie mentioned that Stefan has a new Personal Secretary, and the rest is history as they say" Martine explained.

"Quite a hive of gossip is what you really mean" I said rather defensively.

“No!” objected Martine. “I thought you should know for your own good”

I gave a slight chuckle to lighten the atmosphere.

“I do appreciate your concern Martine, thank you. However, Stefan has told me that he was very young when he married Marie. He also told me about her anorexia and how it eventually cost her life” I said reassuringly.

“I’m glad it was Stefan that told you. I must admit I was worried that he hadn’t” she replied genuinely.

“Thank you for looking out for me Martine. I hope we will always be there for each other” I said with feeling.

“We will. Don’t you worry” Martine said assuring me.

I went on to tell Martine about Stefan’s parents and his sister in Aberdeen who doesn’t communicate with him.

“Well, despite my reservations about him, I will give him credit that he is beginning to reveal more about himself and letting you get to know him better” Martine said encouragingly.

I paused before I continued.

“Martine, there is something I would like to share with you”

I decided to tell her about Stefan’s ‘tantrum’ about my going to my parents instead of going away with him.

“I keep telling you that I am suspicious that he has a darker side to him. Please take care” Martine said concerned.

“I will” I replied. “Have a good weekend and I’ll see you on Wednesday as usual”

## **Chapter 27**



I really did have a lovely time at my parents and managed to switch off from Stefan mode, even if only slightly.

When my mum tried to dig deep into my private life, I made sure that I talked mainly about Emmy and Carlos, and assured her that Martine and I met up regularly so that she would know I still had good friends around me.

I kept checking my phone from time to time, but there were no messages from Stefan. It was almost like emotional torture.

Suddenly, the night before I was due to go back home, my phone beeped just before midnight with a message. It was from Stefan.

He apologised for not being in touch, and that he had been busy. I noticed that it would have been too much for him to apologise for his childish behaviour the other day.

Stefan asked me to let him know what time my train was due in and that he would pick me up.

He finished by saying that he loved me and couldn't wait to see me.

The following day after lunch, I packed up my case and came into the hall where my parents were waiting for me.

Mum made me promise that I wouldn't leave it so long before I came again and to keep in touch by phone regularly.

My train arrived in Surbiton station at 3pm and Stefan was there waiting.

He walked briskly over towards me and gave me a short but tender kiss with his hands gently resting on my cheeks.

Stefan picked up my bags and we walked across to the car park.

Stefan put my cases in the boot of his car and then, without a care who was around to see, came around to my side and pressed me up against the car door and leaned into me and gave me a long all-

consuming kiss. I felt my body respond almost instantly and prepare itself for lovemaking.

As he pulled away from me, he put his hand in one of his pockets and took out a small velvet oblong box and handed it to me.

“Go on. Please open it” he insisted almost impatiently.

Inside was a golden locket on a chain with the picture of a key on the surface.

Before I could speak, he said, “I’ve had that key engraved to symbolise the key to your heart, and on the back, is a message that I always want you to remember” Stefan said tenderly.

I turned the locket over to reveal the message on the back which read, “Love you for always, Stefan xx”.

“I’m overwhelmed, thank you” were my first words in response.

“Here let me put it on you” Stefan reached out for the locket.

When we were both seated in the car, Stefan said that he would like to take me to “The White well Inn” for dinner that evening and that he had tentatively booked a room. “That’s if the lady consents” he said smiling furtively at me.

“Yes, that’s a lovely thought. Could I just stop at the flat on the way back though? I need to pick up some clean clothes” I asked apprehensively.

“We certainly can” Stefan said cheerily. “We can go straight on to work from there”

Stefan waited in the car while I went into the flat. I was glad for that as these days with Emmy and Carlos, I never knew what to expect when I walked through the door!

Sure, enough, and true to form, the place was a tip!

No-one seemed to be about. I quickly repacked my case with clean clothes and quickly sent Emma a text to say that I was sorry that I had missed her, but that I would be back the following day at teatime.

Once back in the car with Stefan, we made our way to the hotel. Stefan collected the key, and we made our way up to the room.

As we entered, we both noticed that there was a bottle of champagne and two crystal cut flute glasses on a silver tray and a large bouquet of flowers on a small oak table by the dressing table.

There was a small card by the side of the flowers which read, "I've missed you so much, only half of me has been alive. I love you so much xx"

I was momentarily speechless until I said, "I wasn't expecting this" "I know" replied Stefan. "That's what makes it twice as special" he whispered at the back of my neck making my hairs stand up with anticipation and excitement.

After our long embrace of affection that was followed by a long session of love making, we drifted off to sleep.

I awoke first and was still in Stefan's warm and strong arms. I had a good look at his face. He looked so peaceful and relaxed.

Suddenly, his eyes opened, and he gave me a gentle smile and a soft kiss on my lips. He gazed into my eyes and said, "We better get ready for dinner and get our energy up for tonight"

I gave a giggle and with that made my way towards the shower.

As we sat and eat our evening meal, we could look across the gardens and the lake at the back of the hotel.

"Let's have a stroll round after that delightful meal" Stefan suggested.

It was now early June and for once the weather was being kind to us, and as we strolled around the gardens, the flowers and shrubs yielded their delightful scent.

I suddenly took it upon myself to use this relaxed and ideal situation to probe a little more into Stefan's past.

"I know you haven't mentioned children, but did you and Marie ever consider having a child?" I quickly added, "I mean before Marie became ill"

I suddenly felt awkward somehow for posing that question and rapidly apologised.

"Don't be sorry" Stefan reassured me and put his finger under my chin to tilt my face towards his and then kissed me

"It's not something we dwelt on or really discussed seriously. I put my career first" Stefan continued.

Stefan suddenly stopped in his tracks and then his eyes levelled with me.

"Are you trying to talk to me about children for obvious reasons – that you are planning ahead already?" he said in reply but not with a hint of irritation.

"No of course not" I said adamantly. "I haven't even thought about children! I'm not ready to settle down and be a mother for a while yet" I said trying to reassure him and feeling a little embarrassed.

"That's quite a relief. I can have you to myself for a bit longer then!" Stefan replied looking amused.

Unthinkingly, because the persona was continuing to be lighthearted, I retorted teasingly, "Who said it would be with you?"

I then witnessed that familiar dark stare cross his face and I began to feel uneasy.

“I’m only joking” I quickly added.

I rapidly changed the direction of the conversation.

“Did you ever feel the desire to marry again, or did you understandably feel that you couldn’t go through that again with all the heartache you had endured?”

“Whoa! What’s with all the questions? He suddenly sounded startled.

“I just thought that over the years that maybe you had met someone that you felt you could be with, and maybe even eventually marry. I’m sorry that sounds insensitive. You may not have wanted to marry again after losing Marie” I said fumbling for words and wished I hadn’t asked in the first place.

“No. No way” Stefan quickly returned.

“I admit, I have had a few short-term relationships. But I haven’t met anyone that I have been willing to commit myself to, that is, until I met you”

Little was I to know then that here was another of Stefan’s outright and dangerous lies to me.

## **Chapter 28**

It was now Tuesday evening and Stefan was dropping me off back home after our weekend away and our first day back at work after the bank holiday.

“Thank you for the lovely weekend” I said raising my hand towards the locket around my neck and continued, “and this is a lovely present that I will cherish”

“I love you” Stefan said softly, and we exchanged a long and passionate farewell kiss.

I didn't see much of Stefan the following day, which was now Wednesday, as he was at Court.

Just before 5pm I went into the ladies and replenished my make up slightly and made sure my hair was tidy. As I came out of the door, Stefan was coming the other way down the corridor towards his office. He stopped in his tracks. When he caught sight of me, he didn't look best pleased as the expression goes.

"Are you going out somewhere?" he asked in a sharp voice and didn't wait for my reply but continued, "You look as though you have been preening yourself in the toilets for some reason". His manner was cold and distasteful.

I felt the irritation rise in my throat and came back at him,  
"I'm not a bird!"

I took a deep breath.

"Why should I explain where I am going?" I thought to myself with annoyance. However, to keep the peace and I didn't have the inclination to argue, I told him exactly where I was going.

"I always meet Martine after work on Wednesdays. We have had this arrangement for months now and she has been my closest friend for years"

That familiar scowl appeared on his face.

"I was going to take you to that new Italian place just out of the centre" Stefan replied like a spoilt child.

I stood my ground.

"I'm sorry Stefan but she's expecting me. How about tomorrow night?" I said trying to appease him.

It had occurred to me that maybe he didn't like poor Martine, maybe out of jealousy of my time with her. Maybe he was just insecure.

However, also, lurking in the background, maybe he didn't like me mixing with her for fear of her enlightening me about him in some way. She was very protective of me after all.

Stefan didn't reply to my alternative suggestion, but I stuck to my guns and as cheerful as I could be, said that I would see him in the morning, and promptly left the building.

As I walked around the corner, I quickly removed the locket from my neck and placed it securely in my pocket. I didn't feel ready to explain to Martine about it just yet.

As predicted, our conversation was dominated by Stefan.

I "loosely" went over the events of our time away at the convention. Martine kept me up to date with her social life and how things were going at work. I did feel a pang of nostalgia and missing my time with Martine and others at my old workplace.

When it was time for us to go our separate ways, Martine gave me a tight and unexpected hug with a warning.

Martine expressed that she now considered Stefan wasn't just a problem as a womaniser although that was almost acceptable, but it was the danger that she sensed he posed. Martine was concerned that there was an underlying and a subtle controlling pattern where Stefan was concerned, and assured me that she was always there, but to watch my back!

Amazingly, just as I had laid down in bed that night, a message came through to my phone. It read: "I'm sorry, please forgive me, I love you from Stefan xx"

I was amazed. He never said "Sorry". Maybe I was changing him? I asked myself naively.

## **Chapter 29**

The following weeks passed without too much incident and Stefan even seemed to have backed off with his objections of me meeting up with Martine whether he liked it or not. All seemed quite peaceful and enjoyable.

I did enjoy my work but sometimes when Stefan was at Court, often for a full working week at a time, I did feel quite isolated.

I noticed on these occasions; he would usually redirect his landline to his mobile. I did confront him about this as I thought that answering the telephone was part of a secretary's duties. Stefan dismissed it though and made out that it was totally different to where I had previously worked, and that Barrister's had a different agenda to ordinary "Solicitors". He said that Judges would often ring directly from time to time so that it was better that they were able to reach him directly. I suppose I did become convinced of his explanation.

I stopped over quite regularly at Stefan's now. I enjoyed seeing Bill and Lizzie who had really made me feel part of the family as such.

Life at home was beginning to get unbearable though.

Although I was by no means exemplary in housework, I did more than my fair share of it and did at least keep my own room clean and tidy and did more than contribute to keep the communal areas up to standard. Emmy seemed to overlook this since Carlos had moved in.

Often, I would come home to a sink full of half-eaten take away rubbish bags or get up in the morning to face them and a pile of washing up. I did raise the issue as discreetly as possible to Emmy to which her reply was that we need a dishwasher. I suggested that Carlos do his share, but this fell on deaf ears.

This coupled with the late hours they kept became too much and I was concerned about the affect it may have on my physical health.



The final straw was when, two weeks previously, I arrived back home to meet Giovanni, Carlos' younger brother, asleep on the settee, and at his feet was a puppy, fast asleep too!

I knew Emmy wasn't deliberately trying to annoy me, but I really was getting to breaking point with the mess and the noise and now the overcrowding with new lodgers!

I decided to keep my cool and let her explain when she eventually appeared.

Emmy breezed in about 15 minutes later with Carlos closely in tow.

"Rosie, I was hoping to see you and explain" Emmy said without flinching.

In the meantime, Carlos nudged his brother on his head, and he sleepily roused.

"Rosie, this is Geovanni"

I shook his hand out of politeness.

Just then there was a knock at the door and Carlos made his way to the door and came back with a carrier bag full of Italian food.

"Will you join us, Rosie? You are more than welcome" she asked invitingly.

Reluctantly, I decided to accept. At least I might find out during conversation what the immediate plans for the future were.

The puppy sat quietly on the hearth rug and occasionally making those cute little snoring sounds that puppies make.

Carlos' English had remarkably improved I noticed when he started acting as interpreter for his younger brother.

I had to admit that it was good to see Emmy enjoying life after the messy break up she had been through before.

Apparently, Giovanni had really been looking forward to coming over to England and making a new life for himself as his brother had.

Emmy quickly added that he was trying to get into University and thus get student accommodation as soon as possible.

I gracefully joined in and said that I was genuinely pleased for him.

Eventually I politely excused myself and made my way to bed.

My nightly message came through from Stefan.

“Sending you my goodnight kiss to my beautiful girlfriend whom I love with all my heart. Forever yours, Stefan xx”

Normally I’d text back and usually with a humorous ditty of some kind. Tonight, I felt overwrought, and it overwhelmed me. Suddenly, I started to cry.

My unusual delay in reply must have alerted Stefan, as he then proceeded to ring me.

“Rosie are you ok?” he asked obviously concerned.

I quickly tried to collect myself together, but Stefan knew me better than I thought.

“Tell me my darling, is there something wrong. You sounded unhappy earlier or am I imagining it?” he asked kindly.

My temperament had always been sensitive to others, but when it came to my own unhappy times was unable to cry. When I did, it was like the floodgates opening as though letting all my pent-up emotions flow out at once.

Before I had time or composure to reply, Stefan worriedly asked

“What the hell is that noise?” Stefan text back.

“It’s just Geovanni. Its Carlos’ brother has arrived, and his puppy dog is rather noisy” I quickly explained.

“That’s it” Stefan said adamantly. “I’m on my way round”

“No please don’t” I pleaded. “I talk to you in the morning. I love you Stefan” I pleaded.

When I arrived at the office, Stefan was there with a large bunch of flowers and his arms were outstretched to welcome and embrace me.

“Come here and have a hug” he invited.

I practically ran into his arms.

Between sobs I explained about the happenings of the previous night at the flat.

Stefan kept his arms around me and whispered softly,

“This is all soon fixed. Move in with me for a while and have a break. Look, if you feel more comfortable, why don’t you stay with me until they have all sorted themselves out and then decide what you feel you would like to do. No strings attached.”

I looked up at his loving face and suddenly felt very vulnerable.

“I couldn’t do that” I protested. “That’s running away” I said still tearful.

“No, it isn’t. It’s making a stand for yourself and not being walked over” he said reassuringly.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right” I said in agreement, coming around to the idea as an immediate solution.

“Thank you” I responded gratefully and hugged him tightly.

“I’m not going to stand by and see the love of my life in torture” Stefan said with conviction.

When I had composed myself a few hours later, I sent Emmy a message from work.

I softened it by saying that Stefan had invited me over for a few days and that we had quite a bit of entertaining to do with the help of Bill and Lizzy, and that I was needed there.

I said I would come and get some of my things later. I was amazed when Rosie replied and found the time to reply so promptly.

“Have we upset you?” she asked in her text.

I replied, “No Emmy, you would never upset me. You will always be a special friend. I just need a break and a bit of a change. Please keep in touch, Rosie x”

After work, Stefan offered to take me back to the flat and wait for me while I packed a few more belongings and clothes etc.,

Emmy wasn't in, but Geovanni was with his little puppy companion.

I saw Stefan glance up at the window and knew that he wouldn't take kindly to seeing a male in my presence. I quickly packed a few more essential items and said a polite goodbye and left.

“What peasants” Stefan muttered as we drove away from the flat.

I ignored his comment. All I could think of was peace at last. Another chapter was beginning, but I didn't realise at that time how much I would rely on Martine and Emmy so much.

## **Chapter 30**

I didn't say much on our way to Stefan's, and he seemed to respect my silence and let me be alone in my thoughts without question or comment.

However, I broke the silence as Stefan pulled up in his drive,

“Stefan, I don't know whether this is the answer. It's not exactly a romantic reason to come and live with you” I stated now questioning my reactions to the following evening.

Stefan delicately pulled me towards him and kissed the top of my head.

“I’ll let you into a secret. I was going to ask you to move in with me, it was just picking the right moment without pushing you away in the process” he confessed.

Stefan immediately noticed my bottom lip starting to quiver and leant across and kissed it as though to steady it.

“Come, dry those tears before we go in” he said as he handed me a cotton handkerchief with his initials on it.

“I don’t want Bill and Lizzy to think I’ve been making you cry now do I?” he stated with a slight hint of amusement.

No-one was about as we walked through the door.

Stefan instructed me to go through to the library and make myself comfortable and he would bring me an aperitif.

I could hear muffled voices in the distance and guessed that Stefan was explaining to Bill and Lizzy that I would be staying for a while.

When the door finally opened, Molly and Matilda bounced in and came straight to me. My anxious mood lifted with their warm welcome and affection.

Stefan was soon back in the room with a silver serving dish in his hand with two crystal glasses with ice inside and a decanter containing what looked like whisky inside it.

He placed it gently on the table opposite me and poured a small amount of liquid into each of the glasses.

“Here” he said as he passed a glass to me.

“Scotch on the rocks as they say”

I giggled.

“What’s so funny” he suddenly looked bewildered.

“Oh, nothing really. That phrase just reminded me of happier times when I was younger. My parents used to take my brother and I for a week’s holiday on the Norfolk Broads. We used to visit this pub each year and it became known to us as ‘Uncle Simon’s’. Simon was the landlord and I used to ask for ‘Scotch on the Rocks’ which was really orange juice with ice. It made me feel so grown up”

Stef wistfully glanced at me and put his arm round my shoulders as he said:

“Come” he said invitingly, “Have a nightcap with me. It will help you sleep, and I think that is what you are in desperate need of right now”

I nodded silently in a childlike manner.

As Stefan sat next to me by the soothing fire as it hypnotically danced it’s flames about, he began the conversation.

“It looks like our two girls have made up their mind to get you to stay!”

Molly and Matilda nestled themselves at either side of my lap and tucked into the armchair, and this was comforting.

I took a sip of the whisky. Although I was far from being a connoisseur, I could tell that it was a good quality one by its aroma of fruit and slightly peaty scent. I knew it would be expensive knowing Stefan.

“This is extremely quality whisky” I remarked, slightly gasping with the strength of it as it started it’s journey down my oesophagus.

Stefan grinned at my reaction.

“Oh, it is” he agreed. “It’s a mature malt; a 25 brand”

I admired the way Stefan didn't suddenly go into detail about it or brag about the price, even if I was silently quite inquisitive.

We didn't say much but just relaxed in the warm atmosphere which did make me feel incredibly sleepy.

"I think you should get some rest" Stefan suddenly advised.

"I'll get Bill to bring your bags up. I asked Lizzy to warm the bedroom opposite for you. I think you need some undisturbed rest. You've had an emotional and tiring day, so you need some peace and quiet" Stefan advised me.

I was quite taken aback but also touched by his concern and care for me.

He showed me through to the opposite bedroom and with mixed feelings I felt touched that he hadn't taken advantage of me staying at his house and obviously respected me from that point of view but slightly disappointed that he had not invited me to his bed.

Stefan then extended his arms to me lovingly and pulled me in towards his chest. He put one hand up towards my head and gently stroked my hair and then my right cheekbone. I felt safe and at ease and cared for.

"Now then. Get into bed. Switch that phone off, so you are not disturbed and get snuggled down and to sleep, I won't call you in the morning, as I would like you to just wake up naturally. We've nothing pressing to complete at work tomorrow, so just get some rest"

"Yes dad" I replied cheekily.

Stefan smiled and turned and walked out of the door closing it gently.

I did as I was told and switched off my phone. I wasn't sure whether Emmy would ring or not, but tonight I felt warm and comfortable and felt I wouldn't be offended if she didn't.

As everything stood as it was, I felt life was almost like a fairy tale being with the man of my dreams. Little did I know that this same man would turn out to be a monster!

## **Chapter 31**

Stefan and I had a wonderful few days together. He was very attentive and certainly didn't over burden me with work. He was at my beck and call and I lavished in it!

Wednesday came. I reminded Stef that it was my usual weekly meet up day with Martine. He wasn't too pleased, but I made allowances for our new circumstances.

I met Martine at our usual place on Wednesday after work.

I must admit, she did seem slightly edgy.

"Rosie, I'm your really close friend as you know but I'm worried now that you have moved in with Stefan and that means you are finally under his control"

"I appreciate what you mean Martine, but you worry too much. I'm fine. See you next Wednesday as usual" I replied.

The next few days were perfect as was our intimate relationship that had now resumed.

The next week was near perfect.

Work was manageable as were cases that were coming through.

However, my home life began to take a turn that wasn't going to be a pleasant journey.

## **Chapter 32**



The “honeymoon” period gradually came to an end.

I obviously knew that life would not be perfect and that Stefan would have our disagreements. I had sampled his moodiness before we became partners, but I had always been able to get through these times and he always seemed apologetic for his outbursts.

I’d had a bad night. From time to time I suffered from restless legs and couldn’t get comfortable. This was the first time that I had experienced the problem since moving in with Stefan. I didn’t want to disturb him and so went into the spare room that I had slept in before. Eventually I managed to sleep.

I awoke to Stefan’s voice talking to one of his fellow barristers on the phone. I was quite surprised and sort of disappointed when I heard his footsteps walk straight past the bedroom door and down the stairs. I had expected him to knock and see if I was alright. Then I supposed that he might have been trying to be considerate in case I was still asleep. I quickly looked at my watch and realised I had overslept and needed to quickly get ready for work. After a shower and getting dressed, I made my way down to the kitchen.

Stefan was eating his cooked breakfast and reading the headlines of the daily paper that had been delivered. He didn’t look straight up at me in a welcoming manner as he usually did with a smile and a gentle kiss on my cheek as I sat down beside him.

I said good morning to Lizzy who was as always bright and breezy. As with Stefan him and he just about managed to tear himself away from his paper and looked up expressionless at me.

“I am sorry Stefan. I’m a bit late.” I began. I started to explain how I came to sleep in the other room. I

realised that he wasn’t listening or taking any interest in what I said.

Lizzy did seem to be listening and said that I was going into the local health shop to get something natural to try and solve the problem.

Lizzy nodded and smiled and then asked me what I would like for my breakfast.

Before I had chance to reply, Stefan answered, "I think toast would be fine Lizzy. We need to get off to work"

I looked at Lizzy to see her reaction, but there wasn't any, certainly no registration in her face or eyes that Stefan was taking over, and his mood was rather grim to say the least. It was almost as if she was used to it!

The muscles in my stomach felt like a rope being wound tighter and tighter, which certainly affected my appetite, and I just took a few small mouthfuls of toast, knowing that my digestion wasn't at its best.

Stefan then stood up and then levelled his eyes with mine and said, "Right. When you're ready we need to be off. I've a busy day"

Like a child, I quickly scuttled around getting my jacket and handbag together. I felt like a dagger had pierced my heart at this rather uncomfortable start to the day.

Autumn was now approaching, and the scenery was rather beautiful as we travelled along the route to work. The attractive array of the variety of bronze colours of the leaves on the trees and bushes that would soon yield their foliage. The sun was still warm and soothing, unlike the company I was in.

I decided to just take things in my stride as they came and let Stefan speak to me first.

He entered his office first and I followed apprehensively.

As soon as we were both sat at our desks, Stefan went into professional mood straight away, almost as if someone had flicked a switch.

“Right. Can you find me the Phillip Rotherham’s file please? I’m attending court tomorrow and just want to check over a few details”

“I suppose he could at least have said “please” I thought to myself.

Stefan was on and off the phone most of the morning and I worked my way through the letter tray and filing.

Suddenly Stefan came across to me and put his arm round my shoulders and said:

“Come on, let’s have lunch out” I noticed that his smile had returned to normal mode and that made me relax slightly.

Stefan decided to go to a café around the corner. It was a popular one and was rather busy, but we managed to get a table all the same.

Stefan spoke first and took hold of my hand as he did so.

“I’m sorry I was a little curt this morning. I’ve a lot on my mind and this client is making this case harder than it should be. I do apologise”

Stefan sounded quite genuine, but I was quite surprised at his apology which I hadn’t expected. I did notice though that he didn’t ask how I was feeling and take any interest as to how I had felt after my broken night’s sleep.

“That’s ok” I replied. “It must be quite challenging at times when matters aren’t as straight forward as they should be” I added sympathetically.

“I manage” Stefan replied with confidence.

I left it at that and enjoyed my lunch.

Stefan said that he thought we should finish early and insisted taking me to a popular shopping centre where there was a particular ladies’ boutique known for its selection of expensive clothing.

I tried to object as I thought it was unnecessary, but Stefan insisted.

Stefan wasn't like most men who go clothes shopping with their wives. I'd often seen men sat outside different stores or at certain places within them, sitting on benches and sofas patiently waiting.

No, Stefan came in with me and started looking through the rails of a variety of outfits. I admit, I did find it rather disconcerting.

Nothing really "jumped" out at me. I think the prices irked me as I was used to buying quality clothes at a fraction of these ones.

Suddenly Stefan exclaimed "ah ha" as he pulled out a black and red mixed fabric dress. The top was black and then from the waist down it was red with different shades of green intertwined. It was also mid-calf length. It certainly wasn't the type of dress I would wear.

One main reason was the length. I always wore shorter dresses, either on the knee or slightly above due to my being only of average height. This dress would suit someone much taller. Also, it looked as though it would suit someone of a mature age rather than me. I didn't want to offend him and made the wrong decision to try and get out of it by being shocked at the price which was £420! Stefan seemed irritated by this and said, "Well I want to buy it for you and, so I will. The price doesn't matter – you're worth it. Don't embarrass me either!" I felt a groan within as he marched up to the counter and purchased it.

I thought that it was better to go along with everything to keep the peace. He probably was genuinely trying to make up for his behaviour at breakfast.

After our evening meal, Stefan was sat in the library reading up on further notes for the following day. I was sat with Molly and Matilda in the front room, watching one of my favourite programmes that I had always followed in the past, that of a favourite Vet and his day-to-day series of patients. I also enjoyed watching it as his surgery was

based not far from where I had grown up and I enjoyed recognising the various venues. This was to be short-lived.

Stefan appeared and immediately turned the programme over to a science one that he often watched. There wasn't any thought of asking me if I minded or manners about the way he acted.

I felt the annoyance and irritation rise inside me but tried to ignore it.

Stefan laid himself out on the opposite sofa and soon drifted off to sleep.

As soon as possible, I left the room and made myself a drink and then went and relaxed in a nice warm bath before getting ready for bed.

I went back down to the library and found myself a book to read. It contained a collection of poems by famous writers. I had always wanted to write a book, and this suddenly gave me an idea. I decided that I would buy a hard backed note book and sketch a few ideas down first.

I was sat up in bed, reading through this book when Stefan eventually came in the bedroom.

He seemed quite cheerful and the relief for this was calming.

Stefan asked me what I was reading, and I explained to him about the idea I had about the book, and he seemed quite enthusiastic.

He was tired and, so we snuggled down in bed, and he kissed me on my forehead and said goodnight.

## **Chapter 33**

It was now Tuesday morning.

Stefan seemed his old self and we chatted quite normally over breakfast, which I might add, was back to normal and I was able to enjoy my poached eggs that Lizzy knew I liked.

He dropped me off at work with a list of tasks to complete and made sure that I had ample money to get back if he was later than expected.

I felt chirpy as I entered the office.

Stefan wasn't late, and so I was able to go back with him.

As we sat enjoying Lizzy's usual brilliant evening meal, Stefan casually informed me that we were dining out the following evening with Paul Thompson and his wife, one of his friends from university that he hadn't seen for quite some time. I reminded Stefan that I always met up with Martine on a Wednesday. Stefan said that I would have to change it to another evening and that the table was already booked, and that Paul could only make it tomorrow. Then, just as if he had said something totally insignificant, he went on to chatter about his day.

I had to make exceptional effort to kerb my anger at this, but somehow just about managed.

Then Stefan added, "and by the way, wear your new dress"

Once again Stefan had his head in the newspaper, and I quickly excused myself and went upstairs.

I immediately rang Martine.

I found it hard to sound upbeat but felt I had to. Martine wasn't convinced, she knew me too well.

"This has gone far enough Rosie. Look at the situation. He's doing this deliberately"

I weakened and told her about the dress and the other situations that had occurred.

“Rosie, you need to get out and sooner rather than later” Martine said with concern and feeling.

“I do love him though. Maybe he is telling me the truth. Maybe Paul can’t make it any other night” I said trying to sound convincing.

Martine wasn’t convinced though. “I’m sorry, but I’ve had a bad feeling about this all the long”

“Please don’t say that” I pleaded. “I’ll definitely be there next Wednesday”

“We’ll see. I wouldn’t like to bet on it. Just you be careful. You really are starting to worry me Emma” Martine added.

## **Chapter 34**

After work the following day, the Wednesday evening, I again had a relaxing bath before I dressed for the evening.

Reluctantly, I put on the dress, and immediately knew that it didn’t look or feel right.

Stefan came in the room and inspected me.

“Come on, do a twirl” he said almost playfully.

“You look a million dollars” he said complimenting me.

I knew that I certainly didn’t!

Just then Lizzy came into the hall.

“You look absolutely beautiful” she exclaimed.

I couldn’t make out whether she really meant it or had been primed to say it by Stefan.

With a big smile on his face, Stefan ushered me through the door and to the car.

As we arrived, Stefan's phone alerted him to a message.

"That's a shame. Margaret can't make it tonight. Paul says she has a stomach bug, so he will meet us on his own"

I was relieved in a way, not that Margaret was ill, but I felt less obliged to make as much conversation with someone I had never met and knew that Stefan would certainly dominate the occasion.

Paul was a likeable character. He was quieter to Stefan but polite and when he could get a word in edgeways was interesting to listen to.

Margaret was a primary school teacher but was soon to retire. They had moved up to Yorkshire not long after getting married but were considering relocating back South. They had one child, a son who had moved to London once he had graduated and he too was a teacher but at a university. He and his wife had a daughter who was 15 and a son who was 13.

Stefan excused himself and went to the gents.

I tried to sound genuine, but couldn't help myself when I said to Paul, "I'm so sorry Margaret is poorly, especially when you have such a long journey home tomorrow, it's such a long way up to Yorkshire in one stint especially when Margaret isn't feeling well"

"Tomorrow?" queried Paul looking confused. "I must have got it wrong. I thought Stefan said you were going back tomorrow" I said, really knowing that Stefan hadn't misunderstood at all!

"No, we have only just come down here and we are here for another week yet. Our grandchildren don't go back to school until next week, so we couldn't resist being here at this time" Paul explained.

I nodded and smiled and though I already half expected that answer, I was hoping that Paul didn't mention the so called "misunderstanding" to Stefan. Thankfully he didn't. I had already decided that I liked Paul, and he was so opposite to Stefan.



Paul didn't stay long as Stefan probably expected and explained that he thought it was only right that he should get back to see how Margaret was. I wistfully remembered how, at one point, Stefan would have been the same, unlike now.

On the way back, to make conversation I expressed how sad it was that Margaret had been unable to join us. I did mean it as I would have liked to have met her in the circumstances. Stefan was quite derogative of her.

"Oh, she's a pain in the neck. I pity Paul. She's always talking"

At that comment, I really did feel sorry that Margaret hadn't been there, and Paul certainly didn't seem like a hen-pecked husband!

"Well, it will be good to meet up with them another time" I remarked positively.

Stefan shook his head but made no comment.

I also made no comment about his outright lie of having to meet on the Wednesday or not at all. Now I really knew that Martine was right, that he was trying to keep us apart, almost through fear or jealousy of what might come to light.

## **Chapter 35**

As I dressed for work the next morning, my thoughts turned to Emmy and the disappointment that she hadn't been in touch with me. I knew though that Emmy wasn't a person that held grudges and that her life was chaotic and, so she probably hadn't had chance. I almost began to miss that chaos. Emmy was so happy, and Carlos treated her like a princess. I knew that she would be in touch eventually, and I was to be proved right sometime in the future.

Life with Stefan was on an even keel for a few weeks.

I noticed that Lizzy and Bill remained their usual selves every day. They never seemed to have differences with Stefan, unless they did when I wasn't around. I did at times feel that they were play acting and might even be a bit afraid to cross Stefan, but I couldn't prove it.

Our intimate life was very hit and miss. There were weeks when Stefan was very distant, and I tried to excuse this on the depth of his work that he was taking on.

At other times he seemed quite demanding, and I began to feel that this was no longer an equal relationship, loving or even expressional sex.

It was more about his pleasure and dominance than gentleness and equality.

After one such session, which had left my backside profusely bleeding and saw which happened to be a Tuesday, Stefan even suggested that I have my usual weekly meet up with Martine. I was amazed! However, I had begun to realise that, by no means through conscience – Stefan didn't have one, but after he had been abusive to me in one way or another, he would make up for it

I didn't mention this to Martine and tried to enjoy my bit of freedom.

We had some light-hearted laughs together, but the conversation often turned to Stefan.

“Look Rosie, I might as well be honest with you. I've one or two leads with people I know who are willing to reveal more about Stefan and I think you need to know who he really is. You're my real and true friend and Stefan is following a pattern as he has done with other women from the past. I care about you and don't want you to come to harm. Despite my advice, you don't make any effort to leave him and, so I feel I need to step in” Martine advised.

I gulped as I fought back my tears.

“Thank you, Martine, for being such a true friend, but I can’t leave him. I still have a great attraction for him, (I didn’t tell her about the previous night and his domineering sexual behaviour).

As much as I think of Emmy, she hasn’t been in touch with me, and I need a bedroom to go back to! For pity’s sake, I am not paying for Carlos or his brother, or to live there”

“I understand that but I’m looking out for you. I’m not happy with the situation” Martine stated.

We parted with a hug, and I made my way back deep in thought.

## **Chapter 36**

The following morning, I arrived down to breakfast.

Stefan as usual was already at the breakfast table.

He seemed just like normal. A beam on his face but quite attentive, greeted me with a kiss on my cheek and unusually for these days, asked me how I was.

Lizzy brought my poached eggs to the table with an almost fixed smile on her face.

I cordially thanked her and asked her how she was, half out of politeness, half out of curiosity as to her answer. Her answer was almost like a recording as I had heard it so many times. “Absolutely fine as usual Miss Rosie”

In front of Lizzy, he expressed his distain at my choice of skirt.

“Don’t you think that your skirt is a little inappropriate for today. We have a meeting at Layside Chambers this morning”

“Yes, I remember” I replied.

“What’s wrong with my skirt?” I asked surprised.

“It’s too short. I don’t want them thinking you’re a tart” Stefan replied insultingly.

“Stefan” I replied. “I’ve worn this skirt to work before, and you haven’t made any comment. It’s only just above the knee, it’s not a mini skirt” I said in defence.

I gave a slight glance across to Lizzy who conveniently didn’t look up from her loading of the dishwasher.

“You might have done” replied Stefan, “Bit this is not appropriate for today – understand?” he retorted.

“I’ll change then” I said compliantly.

As I mounted the stairs I felt a mixture of sadness – I really didn’t know this man, and anger that he could treat me this way.

I changed into a longer skirt.

The time at the chambers passed quite quickly for which I was extremely grateful.

## **Chapter 37**

Again, the next few weeks passed without incidence, apart from the fact that I no longer enjoyed our sexual relationship although it was now dominant and aggressive, no longer romantic or loving but more of a duty to keep the peace.

I used to just go with the flow to keep things peaceful. Deep down inside though, I knew that it was over inside and my original magnetic attraction to Stefan was now growing progressively cold.

Stefan continued to criticise my choice of clothes. At first, I thought it was because of our age gap but then I began to realise that it was his obsession of other men looking at me.

I began to feel entirely suffocated and realised that Stefan was controlling my association with other people. I just about managed to keep my contact with Martine on a Wednesday night, but this wasn't a regular occasion as it had been.

He started to be more derogative about my clothes and my appearance.

This I found hard to understand as he used to be so attentive and complimentary in the past.

## **Chapter 38**

Christmas was soon approaching.

The same dining suite was booked for this year.

My only contact now with Martine, was via our phones, our conversations had become mainly negative, and Stefan became the usual subject.

Around two weeks before the office party, Stefan took me to the same boutique to buy my outfit. I already knew it would be something Stefan would choose and that I wouldn't like. He had decided that this year, he would just have a small Christmas gathering and being his own business, there would be few to invite.

As per usual, he found a red dress with a black velvet sash around the middle.

I did express that it wasn't really my style, but he insisted that he liked it and paid an extortionate amount for it, making me feel as though I had to wear it out of politeness.

As we entered the dining hall I wished that time could unravel itself to last year and that I was sat next to Martine again.

Instead, I was sat next to Stefan who I thought last year, was going to be the love of my life.

Stefan was sat next to his work colleagues from various places, and I felt totally out on a limb.

I looked across at Martine several times and she looked at me but now it was with pity. I longed to swap places and be back to the way we were.

Suddenly, Stefan decided to introduce me to one of his companions, a barrister from Leeds called Adam. At first Stefan was quite polite but, then he rudely remarked on my clothing. "She really is a lovely person, a great secretary and partner, even if she does look like a post box this evening!" He then gave a hearty laugh.

Adam looked embarrassed for me. I was placed next to Adam at the table.

I smiled and then excused myself.

Once in the ladies, as expected, Martine appeared.

Without comment, she pulled me towards her and hugged me tightly.

"I heard Stefan's remark and the way he was putting you down. I need to step in and rescue you, this can't go on"

"Please don't Martine" I pleaded with her, "Tonight isn't the time"

"Ok. I'll respect tonight, but I'm doing my homework on Stefan. You need protecting, I'm telling you" She insisted.

I nodded my head in agreement.

My thoughts raced inside my head from Martine earlier when she said with urgency:

"You know you can always come and stay with me. My mum would understand you know"

“That’s very kind Martine, but I don’t want to run away. I need to work a better exit strategy than that” I responded.

“Remember, the offers always there. Also, don’t forget, I will be in touch as soon as I have some more news about my findings about Stefan Wellborough. I’ll be discreet, I promise”.

We then made our way back to the party.

## **Chapter 39**

The next few days passed quietly and without any event. However, I was aware that my letter to my parents, excusing my usual stay at Christmas was going to totally flaw them. I made up a few excuses and tried not to arouse suspicion that my personal life was in totally chaos. My mother had called me a few times, but my phone had been switched off due to me being at work and Stefan getting heated if I left it on. I knew I would have to ring her. I had sent the letter because I knew she would detect in my voice something was wrong. It was all such a mess.

My mother knew I had moved in the Stefan, and at that time everything was just right, and she could tell how happy I was. Now I was like a prisoner. I had little time to myself and realised that working and living together as well, was not ideal to say the least, especially with someone like him.

Thankfully he was due at Court for a few days this week, and that should give me a chance for me to ring my mum.

Stefan gave strict instructions for me to beaver away at the work he had left me to, and not to go downstairs and “gossip or mix” with the other secretaries. He said he would order my coffee to be brought up each morning at 11am on a tray.

I did pluck up the courage and put on my best carefree sounding voice that I would.

The first chance I had; I rang my mother. She was devastated that I wouldn't be going down for Christmas. That would be the first time since I had left home. I managed to keep up the veneer and promised that I would try and get to see them over the new year period, already knowing in my heart that this would probably be virtually impossible.

## **Chapter 40**

Christmas arrived.

Stefan had booked to go to Perth and stay at a grandiose hotel, The Cardreena, which was famous for its golf courses. Not that he played much, but occasionally he would. I was quite relieved to be going. Not that I enjoyed his company that much these days, but it was a break from the prison of his house and his work chambers, even though it was now a different kind of prison!

I think I was finally beginning to accept what my heart had been trying to tell my mind for some time now that Stefan Wellborough was an out and out misogynist. I was now his victim of domestic violence. This was to be confirmed when I eventually had a couple of hours freedom as I sat in one of the lounges having my morning coffee as he was out on the golf course.

Martine couldn't have chosen a better time to text me.

"Can I ring you. I really need to speak to you asap"

"Yes of course. He's out on the golf course" I quickly replied.

Just before my mobile rang, I moved to a quiet corner of the lounge where I couldn't be overheard or disturbed.



“Are you alright?” I asked Martine as soon as I answered my phone, but in my heart, I knew she was probably ringing to warn me and update with more information regarding Stefan, and I was right.

“Annabelle was round at her mother’s and Elsie was having her tea there. Elsie knows that you used to work at the same chambers as Annabelle when she mentioned you. She was saying that you don’t seem to mix with the other girls at breaks and lunchtimes, very similar to how Jenny’s pattern, Stefan’s previous secretary had begun to develop” Martine explained.

“I had heard that Jenny used to be quite a party girl before she began to go into herself” I agreed.

“I’m not sure whether Jenny and Stefan were in a personal relationship or just a business one, but the other girls and Elsie became aware of his treatment of her. Elsie, being the cleaner, would have reason to work upstairs and could hear a lot of what was going on. The shouting, things being thrown about the room, the insults. This went on day in and day out for months. Stefan stopped her coming down for her breaks and kept her in his office, just like he does with you” Martine explained further.

“Stefan would be extremely critical of her work and seem to enjoy using the word “useless” when he spoke to her. Elsie said she often heard him call her “fat and lazy and totally incompetent”, she really was the butt of his anger and moods”

I suddenly had a thought. “He said she was fat?” I asked Martine for confirmation of that statement.

“Yes, he did, frequently apparently yet she was anything but”

“That’s just made me think of his late wife Marie. He told me she became anorexic, and it was that that finally became the cause of Marie’s death. There’s too much of a coincidence there” I replied.

I then continued. “Stefan told me that Jenny went to pieces when her fiancé decided to emigrate, and she didn’t want to”

“I don’t know about that. No boyfriend was mentioned, and believe me, Elsie bless her, would know if there had have been a boyfriend in Jenny’s life.”

Martine confirmed.

“The cause of her breakdown was almost certainly due to Stefan” Martine said plainly, and then added, “It would also make sense that Jenny has absolutely no intention whatsoever of coming back there to work, and who would blame her?”

“This is like a jig saw and the pieces are beginning to fit” I said slowly and with thought.

At that moment, Stefan entered the lounge. I quickly told Martine that I would have to go and hoped that he hadn’t seen me using my phone.

I was now prepared for him though. I had always carried a spare mobile with me. It was only a cheap pay as you go one from a supermarket, but especially used it when I had been on my travels. I always made sure I had it with me. I already had feelings that something sinister was going to happen.

Stefan had seen me on my phone. Fortunately, it was on the spare one. He came and stood by me.

“I see you have been conversing with someone. I might guess it probably was Martine or one of your other cronies, even mummy. Let’s have it he commanded” with a nasty tone in his voice.

I did so without comment.

He snatched it from me and without comment, made his way over to the gents. As he did so, he stopped to talk to one of the butlers and had a laugh and a joke as though everything was normal.

With a heavy sigh, I felt relieved that my personal phone with all my messages etc., was tucked away in my bag out of sight. Yes, on my other phone there was a log of my calls, but nothing to incriminate me.

Stefan eventually came out of the gents with his handkerchief in his hand. He then proceeded to pass me it and its contents. As I unwrapped, there was my phone, smashed to absolute pieces.

With a false smile he said, “Perhaps one day you will learn your lesson”.

I willed myself not to show any emotion.

At that point, the butler brought us a coffee each. I smiled and politely thanked him as he put mine down on the brightly polished table in front of me.

Stefan gave me a sweet smile and said he thought we should have a rest before dinner. I knew what his “rest” would mean, and my stomach turned in dread, not that of enjoyment as had been in the past. Those days had long gone, ever to return.

There was no affection or romance in our sexual relationship and Stefan made sure that he was dominating and cruel, but he now added a new style to the occasion. As he thrust himself upon me, he began to slap my face, and the pain this caused me and the consequential redness to my skin seemed to give him great enjoyment.

“I saw you looking at that butler and smiling at him. You’re nothing but a tart and a slut” Stefan said in a threatening voice, and then proceeded to subject me to his violence once more.

I tried to think of anything to take my mind off the situation and the ugly, cruel face that was now staring at me and grinning with pleasure. That face that was once so gentle and caring, had all been a mask of what was really lurking within.

Thankfully it was soon time to go down for dinner.

My face looked such a mess, so I tried some cover my skin with foundation hoping to disguise the inflammation including the fingerprint of his hand.

I was wary of saying much in general conversation and was now becoming introvert. I would strike up a conversation about anything making sure it was a neutral subject. It was such a cruel ravine of emotion. Not only did I have to watch every subject of conversation, If I didn't say much it was punishable by Stefan. Then there was the mental torment of getting my brain to function quickly enough so as not to avoid long gaps in our communication. Along with this was criticism of my vocabulary. Stefan having been through Oxford, his abundance of the English language was impeccable, but although I did pride myself on being well spoken it wasn't as polished as his.

He would also try to baffle me with words. He would use legal jargon to try and tie me in verbal knots, a bit like a doctor could when using medical terminology when conversing with another doctor but then having to break it down to patient terms or language. Stefan enjoyed this cat and mouse game over dinner. When he uttered something, I didn't understand and he knew I wouldn't, he would laugh out loud. He would then kick me under the table and mutter under his breath "Smile or laugh" Some guests would look over at us and probably thought we were having a whale of a time and how happy we looked!

One evening while we were dining, his phone rang, and I gathered it was Bill. It sounded as though Bill was giving an update, almost like a report, of what he and Lizzy had been doing whilst Stefan was away.

"Come on. Let's go in the lounge and have our coffee" he instructed.

It was packed with other guests, but Stefan managed to find a table, opposite another couple.

Stefan put on his sweetest voice and asked, “Would you mind if we share your table?”

The couple looked as though they could be in there late 60’s and possibly of retiring age. The gentleman was of average stature and smartly dressed. His wife had silvery white hair which was immaculately styled.

“Of course,” replied the gentleman.

Stefan immediately jumped into his professional spiel and introduced himself and then me, but as his secretary.

The couple in return introduced themselves as Trevor and Gwen. They had travelled up from the Cardiff for a few days. They didn’t have any children or close family that were still alive and, so they usually had their Christmas here.

Stefan then went into his usual mode. He talked about the places he had travelled and his abundance of knowledge about these places. He obviously couldn’t say much in detail about his work, but he made sure they knew he was a Barrister, and a senior one at that.

Finally, his attention turned to me.

“Rosie’s my secretary. She looks rather forlorn and dozy at the best of times so I thought she might like it up here for a change”

With that Stefan quickly turned his head to beckon a waiter for some more drinks. It was at that point that Trevor and Gwen exchanged glances and then she gave me a sympathetic smile.

As our drinks arrived, I felt that Trevor and Gwen were taking the opportunity to excuse themselves.

However, embarrassing that situation had been, it had given me an idea when I had been admiring Gwen’s hairstyle. I was aware that I hadn’t had the opportunity to have my hair trimmed and styled over those last few weeks and that might be an opportunity I legitimately

needed to get out from under Stefan's grip of control, and at least give me a breather to think straight.

I made up my mind that as soon as we were back at Stefan's, I would suggest it.

Things were not going to go to plan though.

## **Chapter 41**

After breakfast, Stefan informed me that he was having a round of golf with a friend he had made on the course and that he would be about an hour. He said that I should be packed up and ready to roll for the journey back.

He looked amazingly confident as he swaggered out of the hotel reception area. "Yes, you might swagger, you don't know I still have contact with the outside world, Martine" I triumphantly thought to myself.

I made my way back up to the room and quickly made sure everything was packed in the suitcases.

I then rang Martine and quickly updated her.

Martine was horrified, and I detected a tearful tone to her voice and one of compassion and fear for me. I had to be the strong one for once.

"Martine, I feel as though I need to try and muddle through. It's almost as if I need to expose him and protect other women from him in the future. Please understand" I pleaded.

Martine reluctantly agreed, and I said I would contact her next as I couldn't risk Stefan knowing I had a phone. I also told her of my plan to get to my usual hairdressers near where I worked and perhaps

Martine could meet me there as I knew that our Wednesday meetings were now to be a thing of the past.

After briefly rowing the suitcases up on the bed ready for take-off, I took a deep breath and made my way downstairs with my purse and notepad and pen. I had begun my book of poems in rough and decided to continue with this quite innocently whilst waiting for Stefan's return.

I went and ordered my morning coffee and opened my book. I made sure that my poetry was about everyday subjects so as not to arouse suspicion. Even so, I did enjoy my compositions and it took my mind and emotions out of the present and was therapeutic.

Unfortunately, this must have looked too obvious.

I must have emitted a slight air of contentment or relaxation without knowing it. I knew I hadn't to worry about my phone and thought Stefan would turn a blind but sarcastic eye to my sitting there composing my poems. I was wrong!

Stefan made his way slowly across the lounge floor, saying a false but polite greeting to whoever crossed his path on the way. He sat down beside me.

"So, are we all packed up ready to roll?" he asked with a commanding voice.

"Yes, we are" I stated and gave a slight smile.

"So, what have you been doing in my absence?" he asked with an air of sinister assumption.

I truthfully replied, "Oh I've just been carrying on with my poetry"

Whether it was my misplaced air of confidence that annoyed him or the fact that I might have been "enjoying" myself, I will never know.

"It's an ideal setting for inspiring writing. It's so beautiful and quiet" I commented.

“Is it really?” Stefan suddenly asked mockingly, and I suddenly realised that I had unknowingly made a bad move.

“Give that here now” he demanded pointing at my notebook.

My gut feeling knew that I needed to go along with him, but my heart wrenched beyond belief.

I obediently handed it to him.

At that moment, he snatched it from me, walked across to one of the large open log fires and threw my notebook into it.

A lady sat by the fire relaxing looked at Stefan strangely and so he commented, “I always like open fires. They are so effective at getting rid of rubbish”

She didn’t respond but just looked at him blankly and almost in a state of shock.

I really was beginning to eventually realise that Stefan Wellborough was a true monster and I needed to and expose him for what he was but at the same time, I needed my friends behind me and that certainly included Martine.

## **Chapter 42**

It was almost as if I was invisible.

Stefan hardly spoke to me now unless it was to be unkind and his gifts of his fake pleas for forgiveness after his acts of domestic violence, started to dwindle too. Yes, I was facing the hard truth that I was a victim of domestic violence, and I certainly wasn’t the first. I just couldn’t understand why, if he hated me as much as he showed he did, why did he have to control my every movement and keep me like a prisoner?



I decided to slightly tilt my seat back and shut my eyes. I was tired, but I also felt that if I tried to sleep it would help the journey go quicker and make the long silences pass quicker.

It must have been as soon as Stefan was aware of this, he suddenly turned on the radio and on to his favourite classical music programme and made sure that it was at unbearably audible level. I tried to cope with it and remain with my eyes closed but my ears were throbbing as was my head and I had to give in and sit back up in my seat. Within a few minutes he had turned the volume back down and gave a slight guffaw.

After many painful hours of travelling and speaking only when I was spoken to and this included not responding negatively to insults that flew my way, we arrived back at Stefan's house around 8pm.

Lizzy and Bill welcomed us as usual, but it was almost as if their smiles were fake which I hadn't noticed before.

Lizzie had prepared a cold meat salad and quiche which would normally have been appetizing but had no appeal tonight.

Bill took our cases upstairs and Lizzy fussed round us as Stefan waded his way through the post over the last few days.

My only saviours of sanity were Molly and Matilda who had taken a genuine affection to me.

I was extremely tired but when I awoke, I realised Stefan was already downstairs. I quickly showered and dressed ready for work and went downstairs.

As I approached the kitchen, Lizzy as usual had her "fixed" smile on and said she would poach me some eggs. I thanked her appreciatively.

Stefan then looked at me as though I was someone he had only just met and instructed, "You don't need to come into work with me this

morning, Bill is going to take you to “Head Start” today at 11am to have your hair tidied up”

“I really appreciate that, but I’ve been going to “Curly Cuts” for years now, Lillie knows just how I like it. With it being thick and unmanageable at times” I bravely protested.

“Well, I’m afraid not. Bill is taken you to where I’ve instructed him to which is just around the corner from here. I’m sure the lady there will do a good job”

“No. Bill will escort you and stay with you. Pauline is very experienced, particularly with **older** women’s hair”

I made no comment. Stefan obviously didn’t want me having contact with anyone I knew and didn’t want me to have my usual hair style. However, I suspected it was the first excuse that prevailed.

I tried to continue to think positive though. If Bill was taking me then maybe, the isolated chance of having him on my own, one to one, I might be able to get a breakthrough as to the reason of this awful existence. However, my hopes had been too high.

After breakfast, Stefan came across as almost normal. He gave me quite a tender kiss on the cheek and said he would see me later and that he hoped I would enjoy having my hair done. I gave a brief smile and said that I would see him later.

I busied myself upstairs for a while and then took Matilda and Molly around the acres of land that lay behind Stefan’s land. Even they too were prisoners on the face of it and had no need to leave the grounds for their exercise.

Just after 10.30am, Bill advised me that he was waiting out in the car ready to take me to the salon.

It wasn't going to be a long journey and so what I had to say needed to be quick and to the point but that was going to be easier said than done and especially a conversation that needed "tact".

I descended the stairs and met Bill who ushered me to the car.

It was now early January so there was still a significant chill in the air, but it was a bright and crisp morning.

"How long have you known Stefan? I don't think he has ever really told me?" I braved the question.

"A long time now. I believe Stefan told you that we are like family to him" Bill replied rather guardedly.

"He's quite a character. I was telling him that I like to go to my original hairdressers that I have been to for years, but he didn't seem too keen for some reason" I ventured.

All I received in reply was "Well Mr Stefan knows best"

I then began to realise that he and Lizzy were almost programmed with their answers and obliged to turn a blind eye to his antics to keep a roof over their heads.

The hairdresser's shop was small and rather old fashioned in appearance.

A lady called Pauline came forward and seemed to know that I was "Rosie"

She was welcoming and chatty which helped.

Pauline already seemed to know what she was doing with my hair as she never asked me, and it was though it was "cut to order". She said she knew Stefan and that he had his cut by Sharon most of the time. She did seem genuinely pleasant but programmed like Bill and Lizzy and that Stefan had more than admirably paid in advance for her services.

Bill sat patiently in the seating area, reading the daily newspaper and intermittently answer his texts which were undoubtedly mainly from Stefan.

Pauline, despite being as I already suspected aware to my situation, was quite a likeable character and seemed to chat away at ease, especially when my “locks” of hair were being considerably reduced and covered with a type of perming substance that I had never experienced before.

I didn't blame her. She was just like Bill and Lizzy really, a cog in Stefan's wheel that could be pulled out at any time.

Eventually I was ready. My hair looked awful for my age. I looked like someone out of a famous television street. However, I didn't comment despite my terrific anxiety, and Bill paid her and with a tip no less!

Lizzy was at the door as we drove in.

“You look fantastic” she commented.

Little did Lizzy know that I was well educated in English and ‘fantastic’ wasn't the ideal word. Fantastic actually meant ‘fanciful, wild, and non sensical’ Not as you would imagine and not complimentary!

I gave a brief smile and went up to the bedroom.

I could hear Bill on the phone minutes later checking up whether everything had gone to plan.

I didn't dare look in the mirror as the pain in my heart was too deep.

However, I was determined to carry on despite everything.

Stefan returned around 7pm and came up to the bedroom to get changed for dinner.

I must have fallen asleep, more from emotional weariness than anything else.

He had an enormous bunch of flowers in an expensive display in his hands.

He almost sounded normal as he presented them to me.

“I’ve managed to land the Wright contract” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Well done” I replied automatically, the words tripping off my tongue.

Wrights were a large haulage company who had several claims made against them and, so it was almost in the bag for Stefan to be involved in the case. I could at least understand his positive change in mood.

For a few moments, I saw a flashback of the old Stefan that I had known and loved.

## **Chapter 43**

The following morning, I was surprised that Stefan said he needed me at work. He had kept me away from the office and imprisoned me at his house for some days.

Stefan seemed quite open when he said that he needed quite a few cases typing up as it was a busy period, and he must keep on track.

I welcomed the opportunity to be out of the house even though I was not allowed to mix with the other staff or use the landline.

He drove me to the chambers, and as we entered reception, immediately went across to have his now usual “quiet” word with Maureen who now had changed to from a pleasant receptionist that I had first met known to an informer.

Stefan then pushed the lift button and walked me to his office, unlocking the door.

“I think you’ve enough to keep you going today. I’ll be back by 4pm so make sure you’re in reception when I get back” Stefan commanded. He then rose his hand and stroked my cheek gently. I felt my blood run cold and a shiver down my back. I never knew these days whether his hand would stroke my cheek or strike it.

I waded my way through my tasks.

As usual my morning coffee was delivered at 11 am on time so that I didn’t go downstairs.

I dangerously though, let my curiosity run wild.

I began, deftly, to start opening his office drawers.

Mostly they were secured and locked.

However, there was one that Stefan obviously hadn’t remembered to lock.

I carefully pulled out one of the tiny drawers in the bookcase beside his desk. There laid on the top was a reminder bill from Surrey County Council. It was for a payment for £3000.00 for January’s expenses for the accommodation and support of “Anne Wellborough” in ‘Lovelace Residential’

My heart raced.

I knew nothing of Anne Wellborough or how she had ended up in care!

I immediately text Martine and asked her to research this for me.

I then secured my phone in its case and into my makeup bag, hoping this would still be a safe place to keep it and an unlikely place for Stefan to search.

I was beginning to piece together the plan of Stefan's and how he might be deadly.

## **Chapter 44**

I eventually received a text from Martine who said she would pay a visit to Lovelace Care as soon as she could. She begged me to be careful.

As instructed, I was in reception by 4pm.

Stefan pulled up outside and went again to have a quiet word with Maureen, no doubt to check up on my movements throughout the day.

Stefan seemed almost normal and quite upbeat on the drive back to his house.

He chatted incessantly away about this new contract and seemed to boost his already inflated ego even more.

I tried to sound interested but couldn't help my thoughts drifting back to my findings of the day and wishing time would accelerate to when I would next hear from Martine.

The evening was near to 'pleasant' as possible these days.

Stefan must have already informed Bill and Lizzy of his coming success as Lizzy fussed round him.

"I expect you're thrilled for Stefan" she stated as she looked at me.

I felt pressurised to agree.

After dinner, Stefan told me that he was going into the library room as he needed to go on the computer and do some research for this new project.

I nodded and gave him a smile.

“Is it ok if I go into the lounge and watch television for a while?” I asked almost feebly. I shouldn’t have to ask, but if it would please him to do so for the mean time, I would.

“Yes, take the girls with you” he instructed.

I took his girls, the dogs with me, and felt comforted by their affection.

My mind was restless, and I didn’t take in the programme I was watching. My mind kept wandering and wondering what Martine could find out and now hoping that it would lead to my freedom once and for all.

It wasn’t that long before my heart sank as I heard Stefan’s footsteps approaching.

The glass dome carriage clock chimed 9pm and at that Stefan beckoned the dogs to his side and said I should get to bed.

I said goodnight and climbed the stairs.

Stefan had informed me after our return from Perth that I would now be moving into one of the guest rooms, the one that I had slept in on two occasions. I was to stay to stay there from now on. I was relieved to say the least as this had suggested that the intimate side of our so-called relationship was waning. I did however realise that I would have to walk past his door if I was to leave the bedroom, even to go to the communal bathroom.

I switched on the shower prior to checking my phone so that it couldn’t be detected as I did so. I was amazed when I saw a message from Emmy!

Emmy apologised for not being in touch sooner and that she had wondered how I was. She had been concerned that I hadn’t been in touch as I normally would.



She explained that she and Carlos had been working away for quite a few weeks but were now back to base and she finished by saying that she would like to hear from me.

I felt a pang of yearning and wanting to be back among the familiar chaos that had at one time annoyed me intensely.

I quickly replied, explaining that things had gone wrong, but I wasn't able to explain. I said that I would ask Martine to send her an update and an explanation of the current circumstances and asked for Sara's permission to forward her telephone number. I finished the text by saying how good it was to hear from her and hopefully I would be able to see her soon.

Emmy agreed and said she was thinking of me and to be careful.

I quickly replaced my phone back into its hiding place.

The next morning, I joined Stefan for breakfast. I had noticed recently that although he was always smartly dressed, even when he wasn't due to attend court, these days he seemed to take extra time on his preening, and I became more aware of the scent of aftershave. I was aware that maybe his roving eyes had moved on. That was fine by me, but on the other hand what was my fate going to be?

## **Chapter 45**

Although Stefan was out every day, he made sure that he was always back in an evening and at various times.

Occasionally he would take me to the office with him, which despite the downside of being in his company, it would pass the time.

When I had to stop in, I did at least manage to persuade Bill to let me do some jobs in the garden.

It was now almost a week since I had heard from Martine, and I was getting anxious. I knew she wouldn't let me down, but time was ticking away too slowly for me.

That evening Stefan was going to be in late. I only knew this because Lizzy informed me, and she did so as I would always have to wait until he came in for his meal before I could eat.

I casually told Lizzy that I was going to have a nice relaxing bath before I dressed for dinner. I always locked the bathroom door in the evening. I knew Bill wouldn't walk in on me, but Lizzy might. I'd put my phone in my dressing gown pocket.

As I ran my bath, I sat on the toilet seat, and checked my phone for messages, and was delighted to see there was one at last.

Martine had managed to visit Lovelace Care. The receptionist had asked who she was, and, far against her principles, she made out that she was Mrs Wellborough's niece, visiting from America. She also fabricated that she hadn't been able to get across before now due to family commitments. I would have no idea how long Stefan's wife had been in care.

The receptionist had been rather reluctant to let Martine in without identification, but by a miracle, she let her in because Mrs Wellborough's nephew was there with her, so she thought that we would know each other.

Martine plucked up all her courage as the receptionist accompanied her down to the bedroom.

"Hello" she uttered cheerfully, then added "I don't know whether you remember me, Martine? I remember you" she bluffed as she extended her hand to the young man sat beside his aunt's bed.

Content with that, the receptionist went back to her desk.

Martine quickly took in the situation.

The woman before her, laid still without any movement whatsoever and no flicker of emotion or expression. Martine guessed that she was probably in her mid to late forties but looked considerably older.

Martine's attention then turned to Mrs Wellborough's nephew.

She apologised for her intrusion but pleaded on the young gentleman's empathy and asked if he would accompany her to the Resident's lounge and explained that it was of vital importance that she talk to him and thankfully he agreed.

He took his aunt's hand and said he would return shortly.

Martine said that she would buy the afternoon tea.

Martine said that she introduced herself properly and explained briefly why she was there and mentioned my name.

Jason, the nephew, looked distraught, but seemed willing to talk.

Martine apologised for guising as his cousin but very briefly explained her reason for being there under cover.

Jason immediately responded positively and spoke openly and unafraid.

Apparently, his auntie Anne had met Stefan at a wedding, some five years earlier. The couple had been a distant relative of Anne and she had no idea how Stefan came to be there, but she was enchanted by him from the beginning.

They became inseparable.

Anne was an accountant at a local bureau and Stefan took a natural interest in her knowledge and practice of her business acumen.

Jason said that the relationship progressed rapidly, and they married within the year, very shortly after Marie's death.

As far as Jason was aware, his auntie Anne had become his official accountant from then on.

Her brother, Roger, Jason's father, had become increasingly worried about Anne when she married Stefan and the definite change in her persona and lack of communication with her family.

Jason went on to explain the increased anxiety of the family and the treatment of Stefan towards Anne.

This came to a head when an ambulance had been called 18 months ago when Anne had fallen down the wooden staircase after a sudden blackout. Stefan had gone to hospital with her and portrayed as the attentive husband. According to Jason, his aunt had suffered several arguments and insults and it was inconclusive how she had fallen down the long wooden staircase. Tests had not revealed any specific reason for her "assumed" blackout.

Jason was adamant that Stefan had pushed her, and Martine admitted that she was now aware he was capable of that.

Jason began with obvious emotion stated that the injuries were far more serious than first observed. Anne had apparently fallen from the first step and lost her footing and had landed at the bottom on the corner of the post of the handrail at the bottom as she tried to save herself according to Stefan. He didn't deny that he had been upstairs at the same time as Anne, but he said he was using the bathroom when he became aware of her fall.

Stefan apparently had called the emergency services straight away.

His Aunt was in a comma for several days and with several tests, eventually diagnosed as paraplegic. She was fully alert mentally, but her only movement and response were with her eyes.

Martine said she could almost feel his pain and Anne's.

Martine revealed to him about me and about Marie and she told him that she was in the progress of getting Stefan Wellborough exposed!"

Jason seemed to trust Martine and let rip about his knowledge of Stefan. It was limited due to his aunt's loyalty to Stefan, but he and his family had already decided that he was bad news never mind dangerous!

Martine asked Jason if he or his aunt had known about Stefan's first wife Marie. Jason confirmed that he did have limited knowledge of Marie becoming ill and her subsequent death. Apparently other members of the family couldn't prove it, but there had been rumours that, although her death was eventually expected, the life support system was going to be kept in place for the present.

Apparently, Marie had died suddenly while she was alone with Stephan one evening by her side at teatime when the ward was particularly busy. Nothing however was investigated and would have been hard to prove anyway. There was always that doubt, and now with his aunt's situation things were now beginning to stack up.

Martine concluded by saying that at least we now had some evidence against him at last.

Martine expressed her deep concern for me and that I needed to get out before something deadly happened to me which undoubtedly it would.

I just sent her a brief message of extreme gratitude and that I would have to now get ready for my expected late meal with him. I assured her that now I was fully aware of his tricks, I would be extra vigilant, but he needed exposing and quickly. Then I could be free!

Stefan came in at 8pm and we had our meal together. I pretended to be interested and enthusiastic about his new project which seemed to appease him.

Bill and Lizzy now seemed pathetic to me, how they scurried around him and pacified him. Deep down though, I also felt empathy

towards them. He was a monster, and they were caught in his web as, so many others had been.

## Chapter 46

The following day Stefan instructed me to get ready and accompany him into work. There was a lot of paperwork to be completed for the new project.

Stefan did at least seem more even tempered, and his distractions with his work, possibly otherwise were keeping him busy paying less attention to me, but that was welcome. I too was feeling a little more relaxed as I could see an end in sight, but just wasn't sure how and when. I didn't let myself think of the negatives that my escape might be like Anne and Marie, maybe I was his next victim and would end up dead. I made myself think positively.

My next secret communication on my phone came two days later. This time Stefan was at Court, and I had been allowed out into the garden. Lizzy was baking, and Bill was busy in the shed trying to repair the Hoover.

I positioned myself beside one of the rose bushes that needed pruning. With secateurs in one hand and my mobile in the other, I daringly looked at my new message from Martine.

She had been in contact with Emmy, and they had a plan for my escape, but it was to be expertly finalised.

Emmy was going to drive over to Stefan's with Carlos and Geovanni along with Martine. She said that she couldn't really tell me more, but I would need to confirm that Stefan was out, preferably at work. Martine said she would give me the exact day and that's all I needed to know for now, but to be ready when the doorbell rang.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Bill suddenly appeared. I had an apron on and quickly slipped my phone into the pocket.

“You’re making heavy work of that my girl” he remarked with a wry smile. I knew he was checking up on me.

“I’m afraid I am no expert when it comes to gardening! I’m going slowly in case I take too much off” I said with a forced laugh.

Bill turned to walk away and shook his head playfully.

## **Chapter 47**

I had an extremely restless night.

I hoped Stefan didn’t notice my fidgeting at breakfast which I found hard to control.

He looked up from his paper and suddenly announced that the day after next, we were going on a little trip and possibly staying overnight so to have my case packed and ready to roll.

I felt a rise of panic in my throat and stomach.

“Where are we going?” I asked and tried to sound light-hearted in anticipation.

“That’s a surprise” he answered, his eyes shining brightly and touching the tip of my nose as he did so.

My panic increased but I tried to keep it under control. I didn’t like the sound of that. His surprises to the women in his life had always been “deadly!”.

I said that I better start packing then and gave him the sweetest smile I could muster.

As I climbed the stairs, my legs felt as though they would buckle under me with intense fear and dread creeping its way over my body.

I immediately made a start on my packing. As soon as Stefan went out the door and drove out of the drive, I would do my usual, and go and secure myself behind the toilet door in the bedroom.

Not long afterwards I heard the roar of his Porsche.

Once secured behind the locked door, I pulled out my phone and sent a message to Martine regarding the fate that now awaited me.

Shortly, to my relief Martine soon replied.

Martine said that she couldn't go into all the details, but to follow her instructions to the letter.

Emmy and the crew were going to be outside the house and across the driveway at 12.30pm, (I had previously given Martine the address and an approximate time that Lizzy was usually busy in the kitchen).

Emmy would stay in the car with the doors open.

Martine and the two others would call at the door, and obviously Bill would answer it.

I was to stay as close to the door as I could and then somehow, they would get me past Bill and out to freedom.

I said that I would probably be in the front lounge area with Molly and Matilda and to assure everyone that they were quite harmless and welcomed visitors!

That evening, although my nerves were on edge, I felt positive and full of hope for the following day.



Stefan noticed the lift in my spirits and with a cunning look in his eye remarked, “I’m so glad that you seem to be looking forward to my surprise for you. You won’t be disappointed, and I certainly won’t”

That evil twinkle in his eye returned, and by the tone of his voice and the choice of his words, I couldn’t help but think that this wasn’t a nice surprise that he had planned.

Lizzy simpered round him and sounded so childlike when she said that she “loved” surprises and how fortunate I was that Stefan was so considerate.

I just smiled and excused myself saying that I was just going to do some last-minute checks that I had everything.

I wearily made my way up the stairs and showered before climbing into bed.

Tonight, was going to be a long night that was for sure.

## **Chapter 48**

I was so weary when I awoke but knew that I must go along with “respectfully” eating with Stefan. I hoped this would be the last time now.

Stefan did seem quite bright and asked how I slept, which he hadn’t asked or shown any concern for months now.

“Not too bad thank you” I replied.

“Good. I’ve found somewhere to stay tomorrow night. I’ve been to this hotel a few times. I can guarantee you will sleep well there” he said with confidence.

“That’s good. I look forward to it” I replied trying to sound convinced.

With that he shut his brief case that was open on the table and said goodnight to Bill and Lizzy and ignored me completely.

12.30pm couldn't come soon enough. I realised I would have to leave all my belongings behind that were now packed up in the suitcase, but that was a small price to pay.

I made sure that I wore sensible clothing – suitable for a getaway. I put on some comfortable jeans and flat shoes and a warm jumper. All I had on me was a small wallet that I had purchased a long time ago and transferred my money and cards into that and put in one pocket and my mobile in the other.

I asked Bill, just as I would on an ordinary day, if I could have another go at the roses. Amused he agreed and told me where to find anything I needed in the shed.

Time ticked by so slowly, but it was good to be out in the fresh air and away from their immediate checking.

My mobile signalled its alert and I quickly read Martine's message, "Everything is going to plan. Be ready to roll"

I came in from the garden at 11.45am.

Lizzy was doing her usual routine in a morning. Making lunch and preparing the evening meal.

I went and washed my hands in the laundry room and entered the kitchen.

Making general conversation with Lizzy as a distraction, I kept my eye on the clock. When the time got to 12.15pm I told Lizzy that I was going to listen to the news and tried, as hard as I could to casually walk down the hallway to the lounge. Molly and Matilda followed me and sat up in the armchair.

Exactly at 12.30pm as promised, Emmys car pulled across the drive.

I could see from the window, Martine, Carlos, and Giovanni approach the door and then the ring of the bell.

Bill was still in the shed, and I heard his footsteps quicken towards the door. He unlocked the door with its old-fashioned black key which he kept in his pocket always. I then heard the familiar bolts being pulled back to open the big heavy door.

Bill was his usual efficient self, “Can I help you? We are not expecting any callers today and I should remove your vehicle from this drive. You are trespassing on private ground”

It sounded like Carlo’s voice which in response replied excitedly – but in Italian.

Bill started to sound irritated now.

“I haven’t a clue what you are saying. Now please remove yourselves”

The familiar voice repeated itself with even more excitement.

Bill again replied. “I’ve told you. I don’t know what you are saying, but I will give you one last chance to go”

I quickly seized the opportunity.

Opening the lounge door and then shutting the dogs in, I came towards Bill and made out that I could speak Italian, and could I help.

I couldn’t really but guessed by the position of the car and the two men pointing at the car as Carlos spoke, that they were trying to convince Bill that they had broken down and looking at their gestures, trying to explain that they needed to use the phone as theirs had been lost.

I edged nearer to Bill and nearer to the door.

At that moment we all had a surprise as Jason walked up the drive. Martine had been in touch with him and told him the plan of action. The hatred in his eyes as he looked at Bill was menacing but understanding.

Bill's face drained of colour and at that moment I knew that he knew who Jason was.

"Remove yourselves now or I will call the police" Bill commanded as he pulled his mobile out of his pocket and Lizzy suddenly came scuttling down the hall to see what was going on.

It was at that point that Martine intervened.

"You don't have to call the police Bill; they are already on their way. Let Rosie go now while you still have your dignity. By the way, don't worry about protecting Stefan, the Police have been informed about him too and know where he works and that he is a wanted murderer"

Rather dazed he stood motionless and silent as I walked my walk of freedom towards Emmy's car.

I overheard Jason lashing verbally into Bill as we all piled into the car.

The blue flashing lights of the police car parked up against Emmy's. One of the policemen came up to the driver's window and assured us that it was alright to proceed with our departure.

My mind was racing and so was my heart.

Martine sat in the back with me and had her arm reassuringly around me.

Emmy spoke first.

"Don't worry Rosie. Martine has told them everything and it was decent that Jason turned up. He'll try his best to get justice for his aunt and it will all be good evidence for you and what you have endured. Surely Silks are not above retribution, even deadly Stefan!"

I began to sob, and the months of built-in emotion and torture began to flow like a river. I was glad that nobody tried to intervene or to comment.

Emmy eventually said that we were going back to the flat and that Richie was going to be there waiting for me to immediately drive me back to my parents. She said I needed to have complete time to myself and be with those who were closest to me. I couldn't agree more.

Emmy reassured me that my parents knew nothing of the circumstances, but that Richie had said that they were on their way down.

I hadn't ever been so grateful to see Richie.

With lots of hugs and kisses and expressions of appreciation, I got into Richie's car and headed for home.

Richie was the ultimate gentleman. There were no reproaches or questions. He kept the conversations light and neutral and let me sleep as I wished due to the exhaustion of months of fear and fighting.

We eventually arrived back home, and my parents were ecstatic to see me.

I was too tired and dazed from it all and so asked Richie to explain which he duly did.

My parents were horrified and wanted to call the Police and Solicitors straight away, but Richie managed to delay them and said that Jason was perfectly able to take care of that.

I did hear from Jason that he had taken his story to the newspapers to get Stefan arrested for attempted murder and for the assaults on me. He said he would keep me informed and kindly wished me all the best.

The last I heard that the case was being investigated, but that Stefan Wellborough had left the Country with his new Secretary, Jo no less.

So, Jo who I had sat and eaten my lunch with, had been aware of everything and all part of the plan.

I hadn't the heart to hate her for her lies and deceit but felt sorry for her because Stefan would turn against her like he had with everyone else, and she might not be as fortunate as I had been to escape before further harm came to her.

I later read that his luxury house had been promptly put on the market and was being converted to a small care home for the mentally ill no less!

I on the other hand I kept in constant touch with Martine who had saved my life and Emmy.

Richie and I remained good and loyal friends.

I now needed to explore a new field of work and start again. My hopes were high, but I was also aware to be very wary, particularly of Stefan's status in life.

He really was a deadly silk, but one that was conveniently still on the loose.

Stefan Wellborough's case was now to be investigated and so was his accomplice "Jo"!

## **Chapter 49**

It felt so good to eventually give evidence against Stephen Wellborough in the court case against him. No Longer did his special vocabulary weed him out of his convictions.

He was sent down for manslaughter of one of his victims and I was awarded some compensation as a victim to his crimes – thank God they would now be curtailed. Jo, who I thought of as a friend in the chambers was convicted as an ancillary.

Martine very kindly told me of a new vacancy, similar to my previous position had become available and Mrs Hammond was more than pleased for me to resume this. It was almost as if she had a sixth sense about it all.

Stephan is now behind bars, probably still trying his charms with the female prison officers but at least womenkind will be safe in the meantime.

- The End -