

A SINGLE TEAR

NEMO JAMES

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CHAPTER 1



Tim and Bill were two men connected by silence. For years, they both fished at the same river, in the same spot but not on the same day. Neither knew the other existed. This might have continued indefinitely but feeling in need of a new interest to accompany Tim through the Indian summer of his life, he decided on learning bridge. The only introductory course he could find was held on Tuesdays, a day strictly reserved for fishing. Being a slave to routine, he didn't take the decision lightly as it had a knock-on effect on all his other routines. After careful consideration, Thursday was declared to be his new fishing day.

Thursday came, and after a forty-five-minute drive along ancient English country lanes, he pulled into the fishing club's empty car park. He made his way casually to his regular spot which had been carefully chosen for its inaccessibility. It involved a twenty-minute walk along a path so narrow that at times he had to turn sideways to accommodate his equipment. Then came a small bridge that exuded a death rattle to those brave enough to trust it and finally, a ten-minute battle through

dense undergrowth that even Dr. Livingston would have found challenging. It had been chosen for its solitude, not its convenience or quality of fishing. The chance of finding a fellow human in such a remote place was negligible, which was why, as he pushed the final branch aside, he was horrified to find someone sitting only yards from his usual spot. Choosing the lesser of two evils, he continued nonchalantly with the feeble compromise of sitting as far from the intruder as possible, even if it was only a few yards away. The other evil would have been to find a new location which was unthinkable. It never occurred to him that his horror was mutual and that they were both intruders.

For the rest of the day, they sat in silence, but as time passed, they were relieved to find that neither was inclined to indulge in small talk, nor any other talk for that matter. Despite the hours of close proximity, by the end of the day, all they knew of each other was that they were approximately the same age and that knowledge was gained from instinct rather than visual confirmation.

As they relaxed into the tranquil June afternoon, it occurred to them both for the first time that it wasn't just the solitude that attracted them to that particular place, but its lawlessness. If something decided to grow, it did so with no regard for the planning that has blighted many a natural beauty. Before they sat down each week, it was always necessary to trample down the grass which was determined to remain at knee height regardless of weather or season. The already narrow river was further reduced in size by reeds running alongside its bank rising a few inches above the water. On the far side, some areas were unfishable due to floating weed or overhanging branches that in places appeared to be bending over to drink from the murky water. The overgrowth that surrounded them made fishing difficult, but it offered shelter from the wind and gave them a cosy feeling even during the coldest of winters.

It might be argued that the true connection between them was fishing and not silence, but that was not the case. Neither of them had any great love for fishing and often neglected to bait their hooks when idleness came calling. The spot they chose was the worst that the fishing club had to offer, being plagued with underwater snags for fish to tangle themselves on the rare occasion they managed to hook one. Even the most delusional of us will hesitate to claim that sitting by a river doing nothing all day can be called a pastime, so all that is needed is some fishing equipment and we can claim not only a pastime but a sport. Neither could it be claimed that their connection was nature. Tim loved nature, whereas Bill hardly even noticed it.

As always, Bill left at 6 pm to give himself plenty of time to reach the car park where his taxi would be waiting. He did own a car and had no problem driving, but after a day in the open air and a long walk carrying his heavy equipment, he had no intention of spoiling the exquisite feeling of well-being with a stressful drive home. They parted company without acknowledgement and Tim remained until his regular time of 8 pm, relishing the last two hours of blissful solitude.

The following Thursday came, with Tim having spent the whole week hoping that the intruder's appearance was a one-off. He arrived at his usual time of 10 am and two hearts sank in time when they saw each other, and it became clear that both had chosen this to be their allotted day and place. This went on for months with the only acknowledgement being a slight nod of the head and a half-smile which originally came from duty but turned into something almost genuine. They tacitly accepted that each would have a two-hour window of seclusion at the beginning and end of the day, satisfying their desire for solitude. Months turned into years and to their mutual surprise, when one of them didn't turn up due to a holiday or illness, the other found they missed what passed for company. The silence that had once been a barrier between them gradually became the very thing

that connected them. This situation was destined to continue indefinitely had it not been for the smallest of incidents, although it is often the most trivial incidents that change the world while the grandest of ventures pass into insignificance.

It was a perfect afternoon in early May and the fishing had been even slower than normal when Tim decided it was time for a coffee break. As any fisherman knows, the time one is most likely to get a bite is at the exact moment the top of a thermos flask is removed and pouring begins. Even the laziest of fishermen will spring into action in an effort to hook that fish and Tim had spent many an afternoon sitting in damp, coffee-smelling trousers. On this occasion, he was successful in getting all the coffee into his cup the first time, so he sat back in his chair and prepared himself for a glorious afternoon of nothingness.

In all the years Tim and Bill had sat in that spot, neither had spoken nor even looked at the other, as to do so would have broken what had become a sacred bond. Why on that particular day Tim should have turned his head towards Bill will forever remain a mystery but look he did. Maybe in the same way that a blind person develops other senses to compensate for that which is missing, a prolonged silence between two people develops a sense that has yet to be discovered?

What Tim saw took him by surprise; a single tear fell slowly down Bill's cheek.

It was that single tear that for a short time changed the world and brought people together from every nation on earth. It laughed in the face of technology and gave comfort to those living under the tyranny of depression. It levelled the playing field between children and adults and put mediocrity firmly in its place. All of this and more, from a single tear.

Any doubt that it was a tear was dispelled when Bill wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. This presented Tim with a

dilemma. He knew Bill was in pain and could no sooner ignore it than he could walk past a homeless person without giving them one of the coins he always kept in his pocket for that purpose. On the other hand, going over to talk to him would change their relationship forever which was something neither of them wanted. Despite his uncertainty, there are times when we know that a course of action must be taken regardless of the consequences, and for Tim, this was one of those times. He reeled in his line, picked up his chair, and carried it to where Bill was sitting.

“Do you want to talk about it?” asked Tim.

There was compassion in his voice that said he genuinely cared and was not there to offer meaningless platitudes. It was a while before Bill was able to respond.

“My wife died recently.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Was it sudden?”

“No. She had breast cancer. She had been ill for the last few years.”

Another tear fell down Bill’s cheek as he continued, “It was her who talked me into taking up this stupid sport to get me out of the house for at least one day a week. As always, she was right.”

“How long were you together?”

“Forty years. We met when we were seventeen. People throw the word *soulmates* around like it was confetti, but that is exactly what we were. It is like we were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and now there is a piece missing.”

A sparrow landed on the tip of Bill’s fishing rod and looked at him as if it understood what he was going through. Despite the tragedy of the situation, they smiled as the sparrow bobbed up and down on the rod tip like a child on a seesaw.

“Do you have kids?” asked Tim.

“One daughter. I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

“How is she taking it?”

“They were very close so I know she must be hurting, but she hides it to appear strong for my sake.”

Bill was surprised at how comforting it felt to be talking about it.

“The irony is, it was me who was supposed to die first as I have a rare heart condition. My parents were told when I was eight years old that I could live to be a hundred or I could die at any moment, but they kept it from me until they saw it was getting serious between Olivia and me. I told her I couldn’t marry her with my condition casting a cloud over our lives, and that was the only time we ever argued. Far from calling it off, she insisted we married straight away, saying whatever time I had left she wanted to spend it as my wife. Neither of us considered the possibility that she would go first.”

“Don’t you have to avoid strenuous activity? I would have thought the walk from the car park to here would be risky?”

“Strangely enough, quite the opposite. I was advised to stay active and take up a sport. Fat chance of that considering I spent most of my life avoiding sports.”

Now that they were talking, they were finally able to look at each other properly. It would be hard to imagine two people less likely to become friends. Tim, while not exactly scruffy, treated his clothes like old friends, only parting with them when they showed no further sign of life. While he was not exactly fat, he did choose his shirts carefully to avoid them competing with his stomach for space. His voice was soft and considerate with a hint of London in his accent. Physically, he was not a particularly attractive man, but he had a way of listening and asking the right questions that made him popular with both sexes

which, combined with an indifferent attitude to relationships, made him irresistible to many.

As for Bill, he was always impeccably dressed despite never needing to be. Anyone seeing him set off for his fishing trip would assume he was going to the office. If they had designed a pinstriped suit that didn't look daft on the edge of a riverbank, he would undoubtedly have owned one. He wore designer clothes, not to be ostentatious or in the quest of quality but because he had never known anything different. If someone broke into his house and replaced his Gucci shirts with some from Primark, it was unlikely he would notice. His upper-class accent would have been irritating had it not been for the softness and compassion in his voice. He was taller than Tim, and despite a healthy appetite that he had never had to rein in, he was if anything, a little too thin.

The value of a good listener is well known but less appreciated is that of a good questioner. It was clear that Bill needed to talk about his loss, so Tim laid a path of questions that Bill found comfort in following. Inevitably, there came a time when the subject was exhausted, and with the ice well and truly broken, it was time to learn more about each other.

“So, what do you do for a living?” asked Bill, anxious to steer the conversation away from himself.

“That’s a good question. In answer to what I do, I am a songwriter, but ask me how I make my living and I’d have to say, I am a terrible songwriter.”

Bill had rarely heard an answer so demanding of another question.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to elaborate on that.”

“Have you heard of the song *Sugar Baby*?”

Bill thought for a minute and then winced.

“Don’t tell me you wrote that?” he asked.

“Yes, I am afraid I did.”

“No offence mate but that is a terrible song.”

“I would have been offended if you’d said you like it. It is to music what hammers are to china. Two positive things came from it though, the first is that I achieved my objective of writing the worst song in history, and the second, that I will be able to live on the royalties until fifty years after I am dead.”

“I’m sure there is more to it than that?”

“Not at all. It took exactly nine and a half minutes to write. I timed myself.”

Bill was confused.

“It sounds like a good thing, so why do I get the impression you’re not happy about it?”

“Happy? It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. I was a serious songwriter with a future, but no one took me seriously after *Sugar Baby*.”

It was time to tell the story behind the song which Tim never tired of. Not just because it was amusing, but because, for a short time after, he felt justified for living off the proceeds of what should be made a crime.

“I started writing songs at university in a kind of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen style, and people who actually sat and listened were very impressed. The problem was, I would go to parties with my girlfriend, and invariably a guitar appeared, followed by someone playing the usual pop songs that got everyone singing along. When it came to my turn, I played one of my own compositions. People listened politely but they were not in the mood for anything serious, especially when it was a song they didn’t know.”

Bill had never been stuck in quicksand, but he did once attend a singalong and remembered thinking the experience must be similar.

“My girlfriend liked my original songs well enough but was pissed off with me always bringing the mood of the evening down. She kept on at me to write some *happy music* for when we went to parties. I got so fed up with her nagging me about it that I resolved to write the worst song ever, so when she heard how bad it was, she would stop bothering me.”

On an overhanging branch, there was a row of sparrows looking at them as if they found the story as entertaining as Bill did. Tim also saw them but being accustomed to audiences of various levels of weirdness, he thought nothing more about it.

“So at the next party, I sang *Sugar Baby*, expecting everyone to laugh and jeer and let me go back to being a serious songwriter.”

Bill guessed what was coming but asked anyway.

“But they loved it?”

“No. They went crazy for it. They made me sing it several times that night, and although I was disgusted with myself, I couldn’t deny a little excitement as they all sang along and clapped so enthusiastically.”

Bill understood completely. Although he had no experience of music, he had known people at university who became politicians and was struck by how quickly their dances changed to the music of the crowd.

“The next morning, I woke up with a serious case of crapaholic poisoning and vowed never to sing that song again or go to any party where there was a risk of guitars. I was perfectly happy until a few weeks later my girlfriend turned up with a cheque for £5,000. She had recorded me singing at the party and took the tape to her uncle who was a big knob in the music industry. They were crazy about it and offered me the cheque as an advance against royalties.”

As if on cue, Bill's float disappeared. He struck and found to his amazement he was fighting what was for him a huge fish. They were both consumed with excitement as this was a rare event. The rod arched and Bill skillfully managed to pull the fish away from an underwater snag. Knowing its escape route was unreachable, the fish turned back on itself and with a quick snap of its head, managed to shake itself free of the hook. That is the moment all fishermen dread, but they will all agree that it is better to have caught and lost than never to have caught at all. Bill cast his line out again although Tim noticed he hadn't put any bait on the hook.

"You accepted the money, of course?" asked Bill.

"Couldn't get it in the bank fast enough. I was broke, and that advance saw me through the rest of the year. I was sure that if anyone was crazy enough to release the song, it would flop, so it was money for nothing. I forgot all about it until a few months later when I heard the song on the radio by an unknown band."

"If I remember rightly, the band didn't actually exist?"

"That's right. It was just a bunch of sessions musicians paid £25 each for the session. The record company got to keep 100 per cent of the mechanical royalties and their publishing company 50 per cent of all performing royalties. I get the remaining 50 per cent."

"If you don't mind me asking, how much would that make in a year?" asked Bill.

He wouldn't normally dream of asking such a personal question, but his background was in business and he was intrigued to know more about what appeared to be a licence for making golden geese.

"That's a good question. I have no idea, and it does vary a lot, but I must have earned over a million pounds from that one song. The record and publishing companies have probably made three times that amount."

“What do they do for that money?”

“Virtually nothing. The recording session took one morning. A few hours would have been taken up with meetings and phone calls and job done. They don’t even have to collect the money, as the Performing Rights Society do all the work and send them the cheques.”

Bill was staggered by the figures but had no opinion on the matter as he was in no position to moralise about unearned income.

“What have you done with yourself since then, apart from fishing of course?” asked Bill.

“I never stopped writing songs, but as soon as people found out who I was, all they wanted to hear was *Sugar Baby*. No one would take me seriously.”

“I just remembered something. Wasn’t there a big article about you in one of the nationals? Something about the student who made good without passing an exam? I seem to remember it being very positive.”

“That article hammered the final nail in my career. My friends hated the idea of me making so much money, and my girlfriend left me for being part of the filthy capitalist system, despite her father owning a restaurant chain. I was never that keen on studying anyway, so with no incentive to pass exams, it didn’t take long to talk myself into dropping out.”

“Did you keep up with your music?”

“I always kept up with my songwriting, but in the early years, I worked as a freelance guitarist for lots of different bands and at recording studios. It was fun at the time. I got to travel a lot, but I didn’t need the money, so as soon as a gig became a chore, I packed it in. For the last few years, I have devoted my time to writing and recording my own music.”

“You don’t play live anymore?”

“No, sadly. I only ever wanted to play my own songs, but unless you are an established artist, an audience only wants to hear songs they know.”

It was a world so far removed from Bill’s that he found it difficult to comment on.

“That’s a shame. It must be wonderful to be able to play an instrument and compose music.”

Bill had no interest in doing either, but it seemed the right thing to say. Tim was beginning to lose interest in himself, so he was eager to pass the conversation ball back to Bill. Despite their silence over the years, both of them had always been curious as to what the other did for a living.

“What do you do then?” asked Tim.

Bill had to think for a while. He hardly ever talked to strangers, so the question was rarely asked.

“Very little to be honest. I seem to have a knack for stocks and shares. I spend an hour each morning looking at computer screens, then I give my daughter instructions and after a few mouse clicks here and there, my working day is over.”

“I’m sure you must have worked hard to get to that point though?”

“I can’t think of a single time I have worked hard in my entire life. I also seem to have a knack for passing exams without needing to revise. I went all the way through the education system and the only time I ever broke a sweat was when I was running away from kids wanting to beat me up.”

“It sounds like you have a photographic memory?”

“I’m not sure I even have a good memory, let alone photographic. It’s just that I seem to be able to see the answers along with the questions.”

“You’ve never had a day job then?”

“If you count working for one day, then yes I have.”

“One day?” asked Tim.

“Half a day really, as I didn’t make it to lunchtime. My family was very rich, and my father had lots of businesses. He was desperate for me to take over from him one day, so as soon as I graduated from Cambridge, he insisted I start at the bottom of one of his companies. I spent the morning delivering letters around the office.”

For a few seconds, Tim allowed his mind to wander to his own parents. The greatest gift they ever gave him when growing up was the freedom to do whatever he wanted.

“I assume he wanted to teach you humility. Is that such a bad thing?” asked Tim.

“Not at all, but humility was never an issue. I have never had an ounce of ambition and certainly never thought of myself as being better than anyone else.”

“So what went wrong?”

“I wanted to please my father and did try, but the minute I started pushing that mail trolley around, I remembered I have a debilitating dislike for doing what I have no interest in. Time is just too precious to waste.”

The afternoon drew closer to Bill’s strict departure time, so he started to pack up his things while finishing his story.

“I only delivered half a dozen letters when a woman started shouting at me for giving her letter to someone else with a similar name. You would have thought I’d given her syphilis the way she was carrying on. I left the trolley exactly where it was and went home.”

“I bet your dad liked that.”

“He went ballistic and cut me off without a penny. He was sure I would go crawling back to him when my money ran out, but I had a small legacy from my grandmother that I used to

trade in stocks and shares. It was like shooting fish in a barrel and it wasn't long before I made as much money as I needed. I was no longer reliant on my father's legacy which pissed him off more than ever. To hammer the final nail in the relationship coffin, there is only one thing that I have ever really been interested in."

Bill waited a few seconds for dramatic effect.

"I hope you're going to tell me?" said Tim, implying that the pause had gone on long enough.

"Marionettes," said Bill.

Bill waited for the word to sink in. People usually laughed when he told them of his passion, but to his surprise, Tim's face lit up.

"I love marionettes. Do you operate them?"

"Not really. I try, but I'm pretty hopeless. I just make them."

"I suppose your dad thought they were just toys?"

"*Stupid toys for stupid people* were his exact words. He thought I was throwing my life away, but for me, there is something magical about creating a marionette. While I am carving, it feels like they are telling me what they want. *Nose a bit longer please, these feet are too big.* I swear one of them insisted I left him with nine and a half fingers."

"Half a finger?"

"One was a stump. It was bitten off by a fish."

"So, I assume he was a fisherman?"

"Either that or an alcoholic chef. I went with fisherman."

"I do understand the process. When I'm writing songs, it's like someone is putting the words in my head. There might be words missing, so I go and make a coffee, and just as I turn on the kettle, the word appears from nowhere. It's strange, isn't it."

Bill was happy to hear this as it confirmed the connection he felt they had. He had finished packing but Tim insisted he finish the story.

“What did your wife think about the marionettes?” asked Tim.

“It was one of the main things that drew us together. She loved them as much as I did. It turned out she was very gifted at making their costumes.”

A fresh tear fell down his cheek as memories came trickling back.

“I was never so happy as when we sat together in our workshop, creating our collection.”

“Do you sell them?”

“That would be inconceivable. We never needed the money, and besides, we could no sooner have sold a marionette than sell our precious daughter Rachel.”

“If you don’t operate them, what do you do with them?”

“We were surprised to find that from a very early age, Rachel had an amazing gift in operating them. I swear, if you saw her in action you would think the marionettes are alive.”

“I’m sure I would. Even with the simplest puppets operated badly, I have to keep reminding myself they’re not real.”

“It’s good to talk to someone who understands.”

“Sounds to me like you are one of the luckiest men alive. You don’t have to work for a living, and your family shares your passion.”

“You’re right, of course, but it’s a shame my father never saw it that way.”

Bill would have liked to continue chatting, but he was already fifteen minutes late for his taxi. He held out his hand.

“My name is Bill.”

“Tim.”

It felt strange shaking hands and introducing themselves when they had technically known each for years, but they both had a healthy respect for protocol. Bill was just about to leave when he asked, “Do you have a website where I can hear your music?”

Tim was never far from a business card, so he was always happy to hand one over, even if the request was only made out of politeness.

The return walk to the car park always seemed so much longer than the same walk in the morning, so with great relief, Bill offloaded his equipment into the boot of the waiting taxi and sat in the back seat. He loved his fishing day, but at that moment, he always felt grubby, despite there not being a speck of dirt on him. He always used the same taxi driver who knew that during the drive home, he preferred not to talk other than the customary “how was your day” routine which never lasted more than a minute. On this day, Bill was particularly in need of silence. He had enjoyed his chat with Tim but felt a strange sense of loss. The mystery had gone from their relationship and he was troubled by the thought of returning to his favourite spot with the obligation to talk. Should he avoid meeting Tim again, or run the risk of unwanted communication? Olivia would have known what to do.

Back on the riverbank, Tim fought with the same dilemma. Both of them were leaning towards escape.

CHAPTER 2



Bill sat at the breakfast table, trying to make sense of what had happened the previous day. What surprised him was that the feeling of loss he had experienced the night before, was now replaced by one of gain. He had no idea what it was he had gained and still felt uncomfortable about the change in their relationship, but he no longer had a desire to escape from it.

His post-breakfast routine was always the same. He sat in an armchair, read the newspaper, and did a Sudoku puzzle. It was not a question of whether he could finish the *Times Extra Fiendish* puzzles but how quickly he could do it. That morning he finished the puzzle earlier than he would have liked so was happy to see his daughter Rachel descend the stairs as he was keen to talk to her about Tim. Since losing his wife, conversation at the breakfast table had been a little strained, so it would be good to have something new to talk about.

Rachel was definitely not a morning person. Her normally sweet nature was replaced by one that instilled fear, so Bill waited patiently for the right moment to begin. There was no

hurry, as neither of them ever went anywhere and Bill never tired of looking at her as she reminded him so much of Olivia. Just like her mother, she seemed to be either unaware or have no interest in how attractive she was. Her long dark hair was fastened carelessly at the back, and even in its dishevelled state it still commanded admiration. Although some may have regarded her porcelain skin to be one of her most attractive features, Bill would have given anything to see it with more colour but knew in her situation, it was impossible. To look at her long, fragile fingers, it was hard to imagine the magic they possessed.

After one bowl of muesli and two swear words aimed at the yoghurt carton that Rachel swore tipped itself up on the worktop, her normal self started to shine through.

“What are your plans today?” asked Rachel.

It was not so much a question as a signal that it was now safe to speak.

“You know my weekly fishing trip?” he asked.

“Yes, and don’t even think about packing it in just because Mum’s not here.”

Bill was surprised.

“Why on earth would I do that? You know I enjoy it.”

“I was never quite sure. I thought maybe you just said that to please Mum.”

“That may have been true in the beginning, but it kind of grew on me.”

“I suppose it does have your name written all over it. A hobby where you get to sit on your arse all day and not have to talk to anyone. When Mum suggested a new pastime, she hoped you would make some new friends, or even one friend for that matter.”

Coming from anyone else this might have sounded like a reprimand but there was nothing but concern in her voice.

“As a matter of fact miss smarty pants, I do have a kind of friend. We fish together every week.”

Rachel was amazed.

“Really? So why haven’t you told me about him before?”

“There was nothing to tell. To be honest, we hadn’t actually spoken until yesterday.”

“Let me get this right. You sat next to someone every week in a remote fishing location for months on end, and you never spoke to each other?”

“Not months.”

“Ok, weeks then.”

“Actually... more like five years.”

Saying it aloud, he had to admit, it did sound a bit weird.

Rachel shook her head in disbelief.

“Honestly Dad, that is ridiculous. Were you waiting for someone to come along and introduce you?”

“OK, I know it sounds crazy, but it was the perfect arrangement for both of us. Silent companionship, what more could two loners wish for?”

Rachel smiled.

“I’ve got to admit, I like having a weird father.”

Bill had never understood what young people were talking about, even when he was one of them. How could being weird possibly be a compliment, but that’s what it sounded like.

“What does that mean?” he asked, pretending to be hurt.

“Come on, Dad. That whole silence thing?”

“There are plenty of monasteries where monks spend their whole lives in silence.”

“Bad example. A bunch of men decides that the best way to celebrate one of God’s greatest gifts is not to use it?”

“Ok, maybe that wasn’t such a ...” Rachel hadn’t finished.

“And then, instead of going out and helping people in the way that God preached, they spend their lives sitting in monasteries telling God how great he is in the hope of sweet-talking themselves into heaven.”

Bill pretended to be irritated by the demolishment of his argument, but the truth was he was proud of her. He needed to get back on the subject before the demolition continued.

“What I was trying to say, is we started talking yesterday for the first time.”

“Wow, that’s great news. What broke the silence?”

“Now that was weird. I was sitting there minding my own business when a robin landed on the ground beside me. When you were young, your mother and I used to sit in the garden every afternoon having tea, and within a few minutes, a robin came to join us. We used to throw it crumbs.”

“How lovely. I remember Mum telling me about that.”

“I know it sounds daft, but seeing that robin gave me an overwhelming feeling that your mother was present. I must admit to having shed a little tear.”

His eyes started to mist over. Rachel reached across the table and put her hand on his arm.

“And who’s to say it wasn’t Mum telling you to break the silence. She was always concerned that you had no friends, especially towards the end.”

“It is strange that Tim should choose that exact moment to come over and start talking.”

“That’s his name is it?”

“Yes, Tim.”

“Tell me about him.”

“He seems a very decent sort of chap. He has compassion in his voice that made me feel like he reached inside and felt my pain. It was really quite comforting.”

“I have heard there are people like that, but I’ve never met anyone. What did you talk about?”

“Nothing much. The usual things that strangers talk about when they first meet. Like what we both did for a living.”

“Oh. How did that go down?”

There was rarely a positive reaction from people when they learnt how Bill made a living from stocks and shares. She was not happy with it herself but couldn’t think of what else would have suited him. Besides, she had no doubt that his critics would have done the same if they had half his ability.

“He was really easy to talk to and not in the least bit judgemental.”

Rachel liked the sound of Tim.

“What does he do?”

“He’s a songwriter. Do you know that song, *Sugar Baby*?”

As always happened when Rachel smiled, the room seemed to brighten. It had been a while since Bill had witnessed this phenomenon.

“Tell me it wasn’t him that wrote it?”

“I’m afraid it was.”

“Oh my God! Don’t you remember that program we watched where people voted for the worst song ever? That came second.”

He didn’t remember, but it didn’t surprise him.

“It might be the worst song ever, but it is also one of the most successful. It took him ten minutes to write, and he has been living off it ever since.”

Music royalties were one of those things Bill couldn’t get his head around. Why was it that songwriters got paid every time

their song was played, but artists didn't get a penny from galleries that charged entrance tickets to display their work? He had read of one painting that was sold at auction for over \$2,000,000, but the artist only ever got the original sale price of \$1,200. He didn't really care about the inequity; he was just curious.

Bill explained the story behind the song, which sounded even more amusing now that Rachel was laughing.

"Has he got a website?" Rachel asked enthusiastically.

"Yes, he gave me one of his cards. I was going to ask you to show it to me later."

"I can't wait to see it. Let me get showered first."

As always, she left the table abruptly and without a thought to the debris left behind. Bill couldn't have wished for a more loving and caring daughter, and if her only fault was that she still believed in the tidying up fairy, then he could live with that.

The day had started well for Rachel, so she was eager to see what the rest of it had to offer. She hurried through her usually lethargic bathroom routine and met Bill in his office. They were both keen to look at Tim's website, but they had a strict rule each morning that business came first, and after that, the rest of the day belonged to themselves. They sat behind a large desk with three monitors that were left on permanently. One displayed a live feed of Bill's portfolio at a glance. Another had a news feed showing the stocks or events that interested him, and the third was a working area that Rachel used to get the extra information he required or send emails on his behalf. She was competent with computers, but if there was anything out of the ordinary needed, she called a whiz kid who made the required adjustments remotely. In case of emergencies, an alarm sounded all over the house, not triggered by danger to life but by danger to bank balance. Once a share reached the high or low

price that Bill had set, the alarm sounded, but it rarely happened. He would rather lose a manageable amount of money than have his day disturbed so he set the levels liberally.

Bill was hopeless with computers. It was not that he couldn't have mastered them if he wanted to, it was just that he hated being controlled, and what is more controlling than technology? He was appalled at how mobile phones had kidnapped most of the world and refused to allow people to leave their offices or enjoy a meal without being disturbed. Even those in control were being controlled by technology, but he did accept that it had become a necessity, and he had to sell at least part of his soul to survive. He was also aware that if not for his daughter, he would have had to surrender to technology like the rest of us. Although Rachel enjoyed helping her father, she hated the ethics of trading, but they seldom spent more than an hour on it, so it was a small price to pay for security. There was nothing much happening that morning, so they decided to finish early and move to another room where their personal computer was.

“OK then. Where's the business card?” asked Rachel.

Bill handed it over.

“I know we have his website address, but first I'll do a search to see what kind of web presence he has.”

Bill had no idea what she was talking about and was in awe of her command of this strange language. She typed in Tim's name and hit the enter key a little heavier than normal to add dramatic effect.

“Wow. There are 18,000 hits for that name. You said he changed his name since *Sugar Baby*?”

“Yes. Years ago.”

“I wouldn't have expected so many hits for an unknown artist unless it was connected to something famous like *Sugar Baby*, but there doesn't seem to be any connection.”

They moved onto Tim's website and played some of his songs. It was the first time Rachel had ever heard her father actually listen to music.

"So, what do you think?" asked Rachel after hearing a song she particularly liked.

"I don't know."

For anyone else, this would be a negative comment but not for Bill who usually dismissed most music out of hand. They continued to look around Tim's website. Rachel was surprised.

"I can't believe how much he has written. Look, he has released 12 albums, a book of his song lyrics, a whole section on classical guitar, and even an autobiography. You said he is completely unknown?"

"Yes. Look what it says on his business card," said Bill.

Rachel read it out aloud.

"TIM TAYLOR. His anonymity is legendary."

"He told me he has been writing for thirty years and not made a penny from it. The only success he did have was from the only song he wished he hadn't written."

"I suppose it's not the kind of music people want to hear these days. I like it though," said Rachel.

She had enjoyed the break from routine but wanted to get back to her work. She left the computer displaying a page where Bill could hear all Tim's songs although she had always suspected that he could manage perfectly well without her.

"I will listen to it in the workshop," said Rachel. "It'll be nice to hear music without headphones for a change. You stay here and I'll call you when lunch is ready."

Bill had never been particularly interested in music. He occasionally heard a song and made a favourable comment, but it never occurred to him to buy an album. The music that did

catch his attention was always acoustic-based which was why the more he listened to Tim, the more he liked what he heard. He had always been a big reader, so he was particularly interested in the lyrics. Two hours later, Rachel returned to tell him lunch was ready.

“I can’t believe you are still here. I told you computers are not the work of the devil.”

“Ok, I admit they do have their uses. Take a look at this.”

Rachel found Bill’s enthusiasm heart-warming.

“But lunch is ready.”

“Just this one. *Cat Attack*. It’s really funny.”

She recognised it as a song she heard earlier but didn’t know it was also a video. It was a catchy song with a collection of video clips of cats attacking dogs.

“Dad, are you dancing?” teased Rachel, when she saw small involuntary movements coming from his feet.

“Don’t be silly.”

He might not have been dancing, but his feet certainly were.

A conflict of emotions descended on Rachel. It had been a long time since she last saw her father laugh, but it reminded her of when the three of them were together and the thought that those happy times would never be repeated was painful. She finally managed to tear him away from the computer and led him to the kitchen.

Rachel’s talent with a needle and thread was exceptional, but the same could not be said of her cooking. She had tried to be more adventurous lately with disastrous results, so today, omelette was back on the menu. Her first attempt was sent to that great charcoal pit in the sky when she became distracted by her phone and not for the first time, the smoke alarm doubled as a timer. Rachel poured her second attempt onto their plates, grateful that her father was not a fussy eater. Mercifully they

came to the end of their lunch, so Rachel was finally able to ask the question Bill had been willing her to ask.

“Ok, out with it. What’s on your mind?”

“What I like most about Tim’s music is his storytelling.”

“And?”

“I think it would work really well with our marionettes.”

These unexpected words troubled Rachel. She knew her father’s life was too insular, which was why her mother had pushed him so hard to do something outside the house. Getting involved with Tim and developing other interests would be good for him, but what he was proposing went against everything they had agreed as a family.

“It’s great that you have a friend and you like his music, but we always said that the marionettes were something personal, just between us?”

It was true, although they never fully understood why they came to that decision. The connection they had with their marionettes was almost ethereal. Bill took great pain in the carving and always felt his hand being guided. When complete, he looked at them with wonder as if he had not been present at their creation. Each marionette developed its own character, and it was Rachel that named them. She instinctively knew what nationality they were and what they did. It was when she took hold of the control bar and started operating them that they really came alive. Like Bill, it was the only thing she had ever really been interested in. She practised endlessly, not with a desire for perfection but because they were here friends and she liked spending time with them.

Under normal circumstances, they would have performed with them in public and there was no doubt they would have been a great success, but there was something that held them back. To perform, they would have to act out a story and having

produced marionettes that were unique, it was unthinkable to have them live someone else's story. It would be like asking a child to live someone else's life. If the marionette was unique, the story had to be unique. They tried so hard to write stories of their own but at best, they were mediocre. Rachel was happy to carry on as they were but always suspected her father wanted to take it further. Bill saw her resolve weakening so pressed ahead.

“What always held us back was the lack of original stories, but maybe Tim could write them for us and combine it with his music?”

Rachel found his enthusiasm heart-rending.

“And then what? You know I can't perform in public.”

“Let's worry about that when the time comes. If it works out, we could hire a production company and make videos here in the house?”

She wasn't averse to the idea, but it did scare her.

“Ok. Ask Tim and see what he says,” Rachel gave in. She was counting on Tim rejecting the idea and the decision being taken from their hands.

Now that Bill had Rachel's approval, he was frustrated that he had to wait a week to put his proposal to Tim. He could have phoned, but he hated rushing into things as much as he hated phones. For now, he would have to content himself with their daily routine. He finished tidying the kitchen while Rachel watched him and then they made their way to the workshop.

They lived in a four-story house in Brighton. Most of the houses in that area had been converted into apartments, but not theirs. The two large rooms at the top of the house had been knocked into one. At one end was Bill's working area. It had a long workbench with two vices and a multitude of tools hanging on the wall. There was some shelving with marionettes in various stages of construction and an area where spare limbs

were stored. It was not uncommon for him to spend days working on a pair of legs only to find that when they were attached to a body they didn't look right. He could almost hear the marionette's reaction when he tried them for size. "No maestro. Much too long, and look at those knees, far too knobbly." So he would put the legs on a spare part shelf until the day came when they fit someone else perfectly. He had even on some occasions made marionettes to fit limbs when he felt they had something special that deserved a body to go with them.

There was a well-ventilated cubicle in one corner where he did the sanding. It didn't create a lot of dust, but what there was, he liked to keep contained. That was the theme for his working area, everything in its rightful place so he could find any one of his tools blindfolded if challenged. Pride of place was his collection of wood chisels, lovingly sharpened by oilstone. Many of them would look identical to anyone else, but in his skilled hands each one spoke to him and offered a difference in cut that might not be seen by the naked eye, but to Bill, it meant the difference between mediocrity and perfection.

At the other end of the room was Rachel's work area and a starker contrast it would be hard to find. She had the same table as Bill's except it could not be seen, as every inch was covered with scraps of material. There were boxes with every conceivable dress adornment scattered around the place, and an old Quality Street tin full to the brim with buttons. Bill had put a tool rack on the wall for her, but it was virtually empty. There were two identical sewing machines. She needed both because it was not uncommon for her to be in mid-seam when she had a sudden compulsion to work on something else. On the shelves were more boxes of assorted paraphernalia and some mugs with coffee remnants from days or even weeks gone by. Empty CD cases were scattered around even though she had been using her phone to listen to music for years. In common with most people

who adopt this working method, she insisted she knew where everything was despite spending half her time looking for things. It must be said though that she produced the most breath-taking costumes. As soon as they were complete, Bill moved them to safety in one of the many storage cabinets he had built which were themselves works of art.

Along one side of the workshop, the windows were bricked up, allowing a continuous space for glass cabinets reaching to the ceiling, each containing three rails. Half the storage area was allotted to costumes and the other half to marionettes. Each cabinet had its own lighting controlled from a central switch and each rail was operated electrically so if a costume from the top rail was needed, there was no need to use steps. With such a large collection, one might think that many of the items hung neglected in forgotten places, but that was not the case. After dinner each day Rachel spent two hours with her *family*. She knew each marionette intimately and what they liked to wear, giving each one a turn to walk around the room and indulge in whatever it was they were designed for. She might not have been able to make up stories, but she was able to converse and interact with them. Her favourites were two elderly Spanish drunkards. They met in a bar each day and had heated conversations about the merits of one variety of chorizo over another. They often came to blows which was why one of them had a small portion of ear missing. She had asked her dad to repair it, but he quite rightly pointed out that like with humans, these things happened and as the boxer must bear the scars of his trade, so must the Spanish drunkard.

Bill and Rachel had only two mutually agreed rules that were sacrosanct; neither was allowed to interfere with the other's working space and mobile phones must be turned off. Seeing the chaos in which Rachel worked was difficult for Bill, but he was not a man to impose his own ways on others. Should either of

them feel the need for privacy, they each had their own curtain which stretched from one side of the room to the other.

Rachel continued with her work but was unsettled. She was concerned that Tim might agree to the collaboration so was anxious about how she would deal with the resulting pressure. If Tim didn't agree, she was anxious about how her dad would take the rejection. She was also anxious that the increased risk of anxiety would make her even more anxious.

The rest of the afternoon they spent in their workshop, with Bill doing the finishing touches to a marionette that Rachel had informed him was a Cornish fisherman. Heaven knows how she came to that conclusion, but he had no doubt she was right. Seeing her father in such an enthusiastic mood made her feel guilty for hoping Tim rejected his proposal. Her life was far from how she wanted it to be, but at least she felt safe. She hadn't yet learnt that anxiety is a parasite that will always find something to feed on.

CHAPTER 3



Tim woke around 8 am as usual. With breakfast finished, he settled down to read the newspaper which he did more for entertainment than to be informed. It also helped him to put off the evil moment when he had to perform one of the few things he got no enjoyment from; the daily bathroom ritual which took longer every year. As a child, there was a quick splash of water on his face and the pretence of washing his teeth. Bath night was exactly that, one night of the week. Then came the shaving years, combined with a gradual migration to showering daily. Now the ritual included moisturising and the plucking of hairs in places where they had no right to grow. Then the sprinkling of athlete's foot powder, moving the bathroom scales around until an acceptable weight was shown, and various other duties which depended on the ailment of the day. Tim had always embraced technological innovation, but for him, the pinnacle of human achievement would be the invention of a cubicle he could step into, and at the press of a button he would immerse instantly serviced.

He loved his life and was always eager to get back to his latest project, and couldn't remember a time when he was without one. He also loved his little house, and while it was never going to feature in any magazines, it was kept reasonably tidy and in good repair. Despite an abundance of relationships, his aversion to waking up with someone prevented him from considering anything serious, but he had no regrets. His greatest treasure was the freedom to go anywhere and do anything he wanted at the drop of a hat. Through the years, he had acquired countless acquaintances in many parts of the world, and on the rare occasion he felt lonely, he was never far from company. He got on well with everyone, and the only criticism that some might have made of him was that no one had the right to such an easy life.

As much as he hated *Sugar Baby*, he couldn't deny that without it, his quality of life would have been dramatically reduced. The usual royalty cheques he received were more than enough for him to live on, but it had also been featured in TV programs and films. A royalty payment from just one of those films was large enough to enable him to buy a small house in Goa where he stayed for two months every year. He hated cold weather, so with his love for India and its people, it was the perfect environment for composing. He spent each morning sitting on his terrace facing the sea, writing songs that came effortlessly. By the time he returned to England in March he always had plenty of new material to choose from so he was able to release two albums a year.

During his time in Goa, Tim made friends with an Indian family living nearby who looked after his property while he was away. They even managed to generate an income from it which they shared equally. It was the perfect arrangement, and whenever he was in Goa the family treated him like royalty. If they had their way, they would have had him around for dinner

every day, but they respected his need for privacy and independence.

With bathroom duties out of the way, Tim sat in his studio, preparing to finish a song that was proving unusually stubborn. In his early years, recording was a difficult and costly process. Studios were expensive and hiring musicians financially prohibitive, so he was limited to those who were prepared to play for him as a favour or on a reciprocal basis which often meant they were unreliable. Being limited to three-hour sessions, the results were usually disappointing.

How things had changed. Fitting out his recording studio had been a big layout in the beginning, but now he had unlimited studio time and a world of different instruments at his fingertips. A three-hour orchestral session that would have cost many thousands of pounds in the past, was now available free of charge any time he wanted by using virtual instruments. Of course, they didn't sound as good as real musicians, but few people could tell the difference. If he had a track that needed a real instrument, like a saxophone solo, for example, there was an abundance of musicians for hire on the internet. Tim sent them the track and they played over it for a fraction of what it would have cost thirty years earlier. He might well have been the most unsuccessful songwriter in history but with ambition out of the way, he was certainly one of the most content.

One of Tim's greatest strengths was the ability to focus regardless of distractions and to keep his fingers in shape, he practised the same classical guitar pieces every day while watching television. It was common for him to have a melody pop into his head in the most unlikely surroundings, like a busy airport lounge or even while watching tv, but on that day, he had trouble concentrating with marionettes demanding his attention.

Many years earlier, a delightful Japanese woman invited Tim to a marionette show in which a young boy had lost his shadow.

He loved the simplicity and originality of the story and was surprised at how the marionettes had come to life. Talking to Bill had transported him back to that magical night, memorable not just for the performance but for the sweet scent of youth. Tim did what he always did when he had difficulty in concentrating, he went for a walk, not for miles in the country or anything remotely strenuous but around town, taking in a coffee shop or two. When faced with a problem, he liked to let solutions come to him rather than go chasing after them, as the solution was rarely in the same place as the problem. He walked along a path by the side of the Shoreham houseboats and down to Lancing beach where he occasionally stopped to watch the fisherman not catching anything.

The cause of his disquiet was whether to ask Bill if he would be interested in collaborating with him. He could actually see marionettes in his head acting out his songs, and hear the dialogue as if it were being broadcasted directly into his brain. It made perfect sense and years ago he wouldn't have thought twice about it, but right now he liked his life just as it was. Collaboration would be interesting, but it would bring commitment and a change of routine. What was the point? Even if it all worked out and they produced something brilliant, what would he do with it? In the past, he sent out cassette tapes in the hope of a record deal, and occasionally someone listened to them, but these days no one used tapes or even CDs anymore. Sending emails was tantamount to spamming, so they went straight to junk mail. Whenever he did try promoting something, the only response he ever got was from people trying to sell him something. He hated the fact that the big money these days was not from making music but from selling to people who make music. Agents and managers once generated income from artists and took a percentage. Now they were wise to the fact that they could make money from them without giving anything in return.

A SINGLE TEAR

After much thought and three coffee stops, Tim decided not to pursue the idea. He would continue to make albums and put them on his website, and if the world didn't want to listen to them, it was their loss, not his.

CHAPTER 4



The following Thursday, Bill walked towards his usual fishing spot with a bag full of mixed emotions heavier than the one that contained his fishing equipment. His desire to collaborate with Tim had grown steadily all week, but he didn't even know if Tim would turn up that day. Even if he did turn up, he might not want to collaborate, meaning Bill would have to return to a life where discontent had crept in. If Tim did agree, then Bill worried about the effect it might have on Rachel, who was his number one priority. At times he wished they hadn't started talking, but those times didn't last long. He arrived at his usual spot and after flattened the grass, he sat for a while before unpacking his rod. For the last few weeks, a water vole had welcomed Bill's arrival by poking his head over the riverbank with whiskers twitching, waiting for the slice of bread that Bill always brought for that purpose.

When Tim suddenly appeared from the undergrowth two hours later, Bill was still not sure whether he was happy to see him.

“Good morning Bill. Any bites?”

He already knew the answer, but having established contact, he felt obliged to make the obligatory fisherman's greeting.

"Good morning Tim. Nothing I'm afraid. It's very quiet today."

With the formalities out of the way, they were able to start with the first order of business which was to ignore each other until lunch, their tacitly agreed time for communication.

The morning passed by blissfully, and for a short period, the fish even started to bite, resulting in a few small roach between them which were immediately given their freedom. For years, they always had lunch at the same time, so when that time came, Bill pulled in his line and carried his chair to where Tim was sitting.

"I've been listening to your music all week, and I must say it is very impressive. I particularly like how you tell stories with your songs. Would you be interested in collaborating with me and my marionettes?"

Bill had never been one for small talk.

Tim thought for a while. Despite his initial resolve not to get involved, like Bill, he had also changed his mind a hundred times during the week.

"I'm interested, but why do you need my input? I would have thought there was no shortage of established stories for marionettes. If it's anything like music, people just want to hear the same stories over and over?"

"This is going to sound strange, but we discussed it many times as a family and always agreed, our creations are special, and we don't want to burden them with second-hand stories. We did try a couple of times, but the marionettes refused to cooperate."

"Are you not able to write your own stories?"

"I've tried so many times, but it's just not in me."

It was a conversation with many silences, common in those who like to think before they speak.

“What is your favourite song of mine?” asked Tim.

It was not a question Bill was expecting and feeling it was some kind of test, he was not sure how best to respond.

“It’s difficult to say. I like different songs for different reasons.”

“Go on,” said Tim with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

A week of song playing and video watching flashed through Bill’s head as had happened many times during his sleep. It was a difficult question to answer.

“I loved the video *I Thought I Heard You Crying*. I played it over and over even though I found it quite painful as I envy the relationship you had with your father. *Sing For Your Child* I liked it because it reminded me of when my daughter was young, and I used to sing to her. Although I always had time for her, so I was the opposite of the father in the song. *Special days* I loved. *A Song of Sixpence* wasn’t my favourite musically, but I love nostalgia, so the lyrics hit the spot. *A Simple Love Song* brought tears to my eyes.”

“Ok thanks. I’ve heard enough.”

Bill had passed the test.

“I must apologise, but I need to know if you have really listened to my music properly before I consider your proposal. You are now a fully qualified member of my fan club.”

“Excellent. How many people in the club?”

“Including you?”

“Yes, including me.”

“Three.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. Just you, Raymond and Bobby Two Beers.”

“Bobby Two Beers?”

“That’s right. Great guy and a big drinker. Norwegian. I gave him the nickname when he came around one night for a drink. I got so tired of going backwards and forwards to the fridge that I started bringing him two beers at a time. People often say how much they like my music, but I know they haven’t really listened to it. Bobby was different. He bought a couple of my albums and then came back the next day to discuss them with me, asking questions and even quoting from the lyrics.”

If Tim was going to collaborate with someone, he needed to know that they had a genuine connection to his music and Bill’s answer left him in no doubt.

“I must admit, the thought of collaborating had also occurred to me during the week and I am definitely interested. Let me have a think about it,” said Tim.

“OK. I’ll leave it with you.”

Bill felt deflated as he had Tim down as a spontaneous person and was expecting a quick answer. It had been a long week, and he wasn’t looking forward to more days of uncertainty. In fact, Tim had already made his decision but needed to work out how to proceed. Like with his songs, a project had to come alive in his head before he could start.

“I like to walk while I think,” said Tim as he passed Bill on his way through the undergrowth.

He strolled slowly with both hands behind his back. He stopped, looked up at the sky, continued a while, sat on a tree trunk, continued walking, stopped, filled his mind with nothing, and then continued walking. He laid down on the long grass and looked up at the sky as if the answer could be found in one of the slowly passing clouds. He sat up and looked at the river where dace were rising for flies. He stood up and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the comforting scent of nature that swam in his head and cleansed it in preparation for fresh thoughts. This

went on for two hours while he repeated various combinations of the above. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. He returned to pick up his chair and placed it next to Bill.

“I would be happy to work with you, but I have some conditions.”

“OK?” said Bill, sounding slightly concerned.

“I understand where you’re coming from with the need for originality and that is where I can help, but I don’t want it to be just me writing and you performing. I want us to work together in the creation process.”

“So what do you propose? I am not sure I can be of any help in that department.”

“First, I need to explain my motives.”

There was a long silence while Tim prepared his words carefully. He had a way of working which had become second nature to him, but he had never had to explain it to anyone before. He needed to make sure he understood it himself before continuing.

“After *Sugar Baby*, life was very easy for me. With the income from royalties, I was out most of the time out having fun, and although I was still writing songs, there was nothing special about them. I was advised to put my money in stocks and shares and was doing quite well until the market crashed, and I lost nearly everything. Fortunately, royalties from *Sugar Baby* came to my rescue, but it was a very bad couple of years for me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Bill.

“It served me right. I didn’t know the first thing about stocks and shares, but it was during the Thatcher period when everyone was guaranteed to get rich. I knew it was obscene, but I was there with my nose in the trough just like everyone else. I suppose you got through that period with no trouble?”

“Yes, I managed to get by relatively unscathed.”

Bill didn’t want to say that he made a lot of money during the crash and was astonished that so few people saw it coming.

“The point is, it was during that period, my songwriting really took off, and I believe it was because I was way out of my comfort zone. It forced me to sit at home and write all day and take on gigs that I wouldn’t normally do. Much as I hated the gigs, they did me a lot of good and boosted my confidence on stage.”

“In that case, didn’t you find when things improved that your writing deteriorated?”

“I had been concerned about that but no. On the contrary, it was like I had been taken to a lake of creativity, and now that I knew where it was, I could take a dip whenever I wanted.”

It was getting late, so Tim had to come to the point.

“If we are going to do this, I want us both to be outside our comfort zones. To draw on new experiences that will help us to come up with new ideas.”

Bill’s entire youth had been spent outside his comfort zone. He was bullied incessantly at public school and ostracised at university where unfortunately there was no society available for those who hated societies. Since Cambridge, he had devoted his life to staying firmly in his comfort zone, so Tim was effectively asking a man with a fear of heights to do a bungee jump.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Bill, trying to conceal his fear.

“Don’t worry. I am not talking about anything illegal or perverted. Just to put ourselves in situations we find embarrassing or uncomfortable.”

“OK, but I have to tell you. I have a very low discomfort threshold.”

“Excellent, then you will have the most to gain. But there is one thing we must agree on here and now. No matter what I ask, you have to do it.”

It sounded ominous but exhilarating at the same time.

“Ok, I agree. That is assuming we both suffer equally.”

“Of course, but there won’t be any suffering, only discomfort.”

“So, what’s the next step?” asked Bill.

“We’ll meet for lunch next Tuesday. Let’s exchange phone numbers, and I’ll send you an SMS with the time and place.”

Bill looked worried.

“You mean a message on my phone?”

“Yes. You do have a mobile phone, don’t you?”

“I have a phone, but I’m not very good with messages. To be honest, I’m not much good with phones either. I’ll give you Rachel’s number and she can pass on your message. I’ll give you my number as well, but it’s better to leave that for emergencies.”

“Ok, no problem.”

Bill’s mood changed suddenly. He felt guilty for not bringing something up earlier but hadn’t wanted to spoil the moment.

“There is one thing I need to tell you though. Rachel is one of the loveliest women you will ever meet, but she has agoraphobia. Performing in public would be out of the question.”

Until now, Bill had pretended to himself that Rachel’s situation wouldn’t be a problem but saying it aloud he realised how optimistic he was being.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Tim paused for an agonising minute before continuing.

“But it's not a problem. A good project is like a good horse, it can always find its way home.”

Bill felt a great sense of relief and a little strange due to the unfamiliar sensation of excitement.

“I was going to suggest we started with videos anyway. Then we can see how things develop,” suggested Tim, with Bill’s full approval.

It was already half an hour past Bill’s regular departure time, and although he knew the taxi would be happy to wait and charge him extra, Rachel would be worried about him. He packed his equipment, and after exchanging phone numbers, Tim was left to enjoy the last couple of hours on his own as he had always done. He checked that his hook had no bait and cast his line out. Visions were exploding in his head like firecrackers, and he didn’t want them disturbed.

CHAPTER 5



Rainbow was a hippy long before anyone had invented the word. Born in the late forties, her childhood revolved around love, any music that wasn't popular, and colour. The sixties didn't so much arrive as caught up with her and being so ahead of the game, she was the self-appointed head hippy wherever she went, a position that was never challenged. At school, she was one of the most promising pupils, but as her only ambition was to be a free spirit, she drifted away from conventional education somewhere between her fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays. Summers involved going from one festival to another and winters were spent in India. Apart from the occasional waitressing, she managed to do it all without the tiresome business of working for a living. It was a lifestyle generally only accessible to the very rich or the very attractive, and she was certainly not rich.

The idea that the party would ever end had never occurred to her but end it did, when one morning she felt the familiar sensation of nausea which for once was not down to alcohol or drugs. She loved everything and everyone so there was never

any question of her keeping her baby, and in her naivety, she was sure she could carry on her lifestyle like nothing had ever happened. She had no idea who the father was but did manage to whittle it down to one of four men, all of whom were Indian. She refused to consider any of them as a partner in raising her child as she liked being in control as much as she hated control freaks.

When Raymond was born, she was filled with love for him and had no doubt he would grow up to be a delicate and sensitive child. He would be dedicated to the arts, and they would travel the world together. Her prayers were answered when he grew into the child of her dreams except for one not so small thing, he came packaged in the wrong body.

His growth was normal until he was seven years old when he suddenly shot up in size. Arriving nervously on his first day at secondary school, he towered above everyone else with a stature and appearance that made even the burliest of teachers think twice about antagonising him.

His sports master thought he had struck gold when he first saw Raymond and had visions of rugby and boxing trophies, but Raymond had no interest in either. It was only later on in his school years that he discovered he was very good at squash and possessed a remarkable speed.

Raymond matured and grew quickly, but Rainbow was concerned about his progress at school. Where she had always been top of her class, Raymond was nearly always bottom in most subjects. Where she had always been outgoing and possessed unwavering confidence in herself, Raymond was shy and withdrawn. The main problem was his reading and writing, and despite getting him private tuition that she could ill afford, it made no difference. No one questioned the fact that he was very bright, but those teachers that did voice an opinion put it down to laziness. It wasn't until his last year of school that society started

talking about learning difficulties, and it was discovered that he was severely dyslexic.

It was not just his size that confused Rainbow, but apart from a slight darkness in his skin, there was no hint of being mixed race, despite his father being Indian. If it wasn't for them sharing the same heart-warming smile, Rainbow might have gone along with the thoughtless suggestions from others that her child had got mixed up with another at birth, as did happen in those days.

Leaving school with no exams made finding a job difficult for Raymond which was not helped by his size. Bosses were nervous about hiring someone who looked like they could snuff them out like a candle if they chose to. In reality, he was the gentlest of giants, and the only time he had ever hurt anyone was when he broke someone's wrist blocking their punch. Even then he felt guilty and was determined that the next time it happened, he would try and block with less force. He tried karate in the hope that it would help to control his strength, but he had to stop because too many people were hurting themselves on him. The impact of a blow is determined by mass times velocity. He had no control over his mass and velocity came instinctively, so blocking an attack invariably resulted in a bad end for the attacker.

With his future looking bleak, Rainbow set about finding him a job, not just for his self-esteem but because although she earned a good living making and selling jewellery at a market stall, it was difficult to keep up with the huge amount he ate every day. They tried the jobcentre, but after wrestling with a belligerent computer for over an hour, the only job it came up with was a gravedigger. Out of desperation and feeling bad about not bringing in any money, Raymond was ready to accept anything, but Rainbow knew he had something special to offer and refused to let him go down any path that led to a dead-end. One day she was chatting to a regular customer who knew about

a job that was going as a security guard at an upmarket night club.

“Thanks, but that is out of the question. I know Raymond looks tough, but underneath he is very sensitive and hates any kind of violence.”

“You are thinking of a traditional bouncer. These days, reputable venues employ security guards that are trained to diffuse situations and avoid violence.”

Rainbow was adamant.

“I appreciate your help, but I don’t think that would suit Raymond.”

“Ok, but I’ll text you the owner’s number later in case you change your mind. I know the job sounds seedy but trust me, it could be good for Raymond. He’s a good man and deserves a break.”

Rainbow thanked the customer and thought no more about it until she heard the text message come through that night. She still didn’t think the job was right for her precious boy, but she didn’t know where else to turn. Accepting that he was out of options, Raymond reluctantly agreed, but at the interview, he was surprised at how impressed he was with the club owner, and the feeling was reciprocated. He was taken on with a one-week trial, although that was for Raymond’s benefit as the owner already knew he would make a great security guard.

Raymond loved the job and had at last found his place in the world. As happens to anyone who does their job well, his confidence grew and although he remained shy, it no longer controlled his life. His effectiveness and popularity gained him a reputation that soon spread around the security world, so it wasn’t long before he was being booked for a variety of prestigious events. Club owners loved him because when he was on duty, there was rarely any trouble and customers liked him for his mild and friendly manner and because they felt safe when

he was around. Anyone feeling threatened by his fearsome appearance was instantly disarmed when they saw his smile, which seemed to radiate a warmth of character that few were unaffected by.

A problem for big men is they are often picked on by people trying to make a name for themselves. Troublemakers can't lose because if they beat the giant in a fight, their reputation skyrockets but even if they lose, their mates still look up to them for having a go. Picking a fight with Raymond was a different matter because he refused to be drawn in. He had three simple techniques. He allowed someone to hit him in the hope that when they saw what little effect it had they would back off. If that didn't work, he would move out of the way at lightning speed, making the attacker look silly. As a last resort, he picked them up under one arm and carried them out like naughty children. Troublemakers have no fear of being beaten in a fight, but they do have a terror of being humiliated in front of their mates.

Raymond's situation improved considerably when he met a wealthy businessman from Saudi Arabia who owned an agency providing close protection throughout the Middle East. After seeing Raymond in action, he invited him to become a part of one of his security teams, a position Raymond accepted on the condition that he was not required to carry a fireman. Raymond passed the three-month training course with flying colours and although it was always known his size and demeanour would act as a deterrent for any low-risk attack, it was discovered that he had an extraordinary ability to recognise risks that many of his more experienced colleagues missed. During an observation test, he was required to look at a scene for five seconds, and after turning his back, he had to list everything in the room. He was the only candidate ever to get 100 per cent accuracy which he repeated in a retest. In the field, he continually saw risks that never materialised, but one day he noticed the same two men

turn up at three different locations, and sensing something was wrong, he alerted the rest of the team. They descended on the men and found they were armed and had the worst of intentions. After that incident, Raymond was sent for more training and given a team of his own.

He missed the clubs and the casual working conditions, but the money was so good it meant he and Rainbow were able to live comfortably, and working one month on and two weeks off, they had plenty of free time to enjoy their new home together. He knew how much she had to sacrifice to raise him, and it gave him great pleasure to be able to give something in return. Of course, along with the big money came big stress as he took his responsibilities very seriously, but he was very good at his job and frequently avoided danger without anyone being aware.

Raymond's interests were no less a paradox than the rest of him. He loved cooking and was never as happy as when wearing his chef's hat with a custom made apron and tinkering around in the kitchen. The problem was, despite Rainbow's exotic appearance she was one of those rare people who wasn't really interested in food, and with intoxication no longer holding much interest for her she was perfectly happy with drinking water. Raymond tried his best to tempt her with the most enticing vegetarian recipes he could find, but he knew she only pretended to like them.

He also loved flowers and rarely returned home without a large bunch to make arrangements which he placed on every available surface in the house. He loved Opera but found it difficult to keep his emotions in check. He wasn't afraid of the odd tear, but he knew if he let go, he would start sobbing like a baby, so when he felt overwhelmed, he looked away and tried to think of something else until it passed. He was quite a celebrity at Sadler's Wells. Rather than obscure someone's view he always sat in the back row, but with the improvement in his

financial position, he was able to afford a box that he was happy to share with an ever-growing circle of opera acquaintances.

His greatest love of all was travelling. He worked for nine months of the year so he could travel during the worst winter months. Travelling in economy on long haul flights was a problem for someone of his size, but air hostesses often took pity on him and upgraded him to business class. On one occasion during an Air Emirates flight, he managed to control a very nasty situation when a drunk passenger in first class became violent. The airline was so grateful that he was automatically upgraded on all flights when there was an empty seat.

Despite his popularity and the wide variety of people he came in contact with, he was still very shy and found it difficult to make friends or meet women. It was hard on Rainbow as she was desperate to see him settle down and have the family that she now regretted never having. But on that bright Tuesday morning, his social life didn't seem so bad as he was getting ready to meet his friend Tim.

It was on holiday in Goa that Raymond was walking aimlessly towards the beach when he heard someone singing and playing a guitar. It appeared to be coming from the front of a house, so he sat as close as he could without being detected and listened for nearly an hour. He had no problem tackling a man brandishing a knife or bottle or speaking to someone in the course of his job, but to summon up the courage to approach a stranger in a social situation filled him with terror. He was perfectly happy sitting there by himself, especially when a passing cow also appeared to show an interest in the music and sat down beside him. When the music stopped, he continued to the beach and thought no more about it. The following day he returned, and the music was once again playing. The same cow was sitting in the same place, so either it had arrived there early, or it had not moved from the day before, which is not uncommon for a Goan cow. This went on for a few days when

Raymond felt a tap on his shoulder. In any other country, the suddenness would have put him on alert, but this was India where he always felt safe. He turned around and saw a small Indian man standing beside him.

“Mr. Tim, ask if you like go sit with him?”

Raymond’s first instinct was to decline the invitation and walk away, but if he did, he would be unable to return for what had become the highlight of his day. The man saw Raymond’s discomfort, so he held out his hand.

“My name Abin.”

He shook Raymond’s hand with a warmth that made him feel they had been friends for years.

“My name is Raymond.”

“It is pleasure to meet you, Mr. Raymond. Please come. Tim very good man.”

Abin led the way to the front of the house where Tim was sitting on his wooden terrace. He stood up to welcome his guest.

“Hi. My name is Tim. Please take a seat. Would you like a beer?”

They shook hands, and Raymond sat as instructed. Before he had a chance to respond, Abin had put a beer on the wicker table in front of him and left them to talk. Raymond’s initial discomfort was soon replaced by one of wellbeing. Tim’s house was small, and in common with most houses in that area, not well constructed, but the sea view and deserted beach made it one of the most perfect locations he had ever seen. In front of the terrace was a small garden with two well-shaded sunbeds and a small table in between.

“Abin tells me you’ve been sitting there every day listening to me. Why didn’t you come and introduce yourself?” asked Tim.

“I’m sorry. I find it difficult to approach strangers. I love your music. Are they all your own songs? I don’t recognise any of them.”

“Yes, I only play my own songs these days.”

Tim was used to people complimenting his music, but it was unusual to have someone listen so attentively. They became good friends, and Tim found Raymond’s feedback invaluable. Although he had no musical training, he knew when something didn’t sound right, so Tim would take a closer look and invariably make a change.

Raymond never went to the same place twice on holiday, so they didn’t meet up again in Goa, but they did meet once a month in Brighton. That Tuesday was to be an extra meeting, and as he knew Tim wouldn’t break routine unless he had something planned, the prospect of being part of it filled Raymond with excitement.

CHAPTER 6



Bill and Tim agreed to meet in front of Brighton pier at midday. Bill had prepared himself for a day of discomfort but was surprised how quickly it started when a third person joined them.

“Bill, this is Raymond, Raymond, Bill.”

They shook hands, both of them uncomfortable and disappointed. They had both expected to have Tim to themselves.

“Follow me,” ordered Tim.

Without talking, they followed Tim who appeared to have no idea where he was going. He stopped outside a few cafés but rejected them for no apparent reason. Eventually, he found one that was suitable.

“We’re going to start by having lunch here.”

Tim was surprised by the worried look on Bill’s face.

“Is that a problem?” asked Tim.

“I’m terribly sorry but I can’t. Can we go somewhere else? I know a great little bistro just a few blocks from here,” pleaded Bill.

Tim was surprised at the reaction. Had he misjudged Bill? He didn’t appear to be a snob that was unwilling to eat in a humble café. If he was a snob, working with him would be out of the question.

“Do you have a problem with cafés?” asked Tim.

“No. I mean yes. In a way.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Tim, intrigued.

“It’s personal. I would rather not say.”

This was becoming interesting. Tim needed to make the situation clear.

“If we are going to do this, we need to be completely honest with each other. Remember I said we have to be outside our comfort zone.”

Bill knew Tim was not going to let it rest, so he had to come clean. He looked at the floor and loosened his tie.

“I have a bit of a phobia. Well actually, it’s quite a big phobia.”

“You have a fear of cafés?”

“No, not cafes. You are going to think it is so stupid.”

The pursuing silence confirmed that Bill was not going to be let off the hook.

“I have a fear of sausages.”

Tim and Raymond looked at each other for confirmation that they were not hearing things.

“A fear of sausages?” asked Tim.

“Yes. It’s a genuine condition. It’s called Loukanikophobia.”

Bill always hoped that by giving his condition its rightful name, people would take it seriously, but it was a false hope. Tim considered this for a while. He once knew someone who was terrified of string and had seen what an effect it had on him so was not going to make light of Bill's phobia. He put his hand on Bill's shoulder and pointed through the café window to the first table inside.

"No problem Bill, I understand. We can sit at that table. You sit facing the window, so you won't be able to see anyone else's plate and we promise not to order sausages. That's OK with you isn't it Raymond?"

"Of course. I don't even like English sausages," he replied truthfully.

Bill was relieved they hadn't made fun of him but was still very anxious. He would have preferred to go somewhere else, but he had agreed to accept whatever Tim had planned and didn't want to fall at the first hurdle.

"OK, I'll give it a go, but the first sign of a sausage and I'm out that door," warned Bill who despite the fear, was still able to see the funny side of it.

They entered the café and sat at the table by the window. With Bill's back to the rest of the café, he felt confident he could get through lunch without a serious sausage incident. A waitress with a strong French accent came to take their order. Bill would have liked to talk to her in French but didn't want to appear pretentious. Bill and Raymond were still feeling uncomfortable about having a stranger thrust upon them for the day, and it wasn't helped by the demeanour of the waitress. She was short, and her shoulder-length hair appeared to be kept in place at the back of her head by nothing more than fear of its owner. She was attractive, but with a wildness in her eyes that even Raymond found disconcerting.

They started to order, but it was soon made clear to them that any question concerning the menu was unacceptable. She reluctantly conceded to the request that there be no sausages but on the condition that they all ordered the full English breakfast with no other variation.

Ironically, her hostility and the feeling that they had just taken part in an episode of Fawlty Towers had lightened the mood. Tim turned to Bill.

“As I understand it, phobias are caused by a traumatic event related to the phobia?”

“That’s what I’ve been told, but the only thing I can think of is a bullying incident when I was young. I was in a café with some friends enjoying a fry up when the worst of our many school bullies came up behind me and pushed my face into the plate of food. I could hardly breathe. It was the eggs I remember more than anything but the strange thing it is only sausages that I have a fear of.”

Raymond was keen to offer support.

“There are plenty of people with phobias. I hate spiders.”

Judging by the size of Raymond, it was hard to believe he was afraid of anything, so Bill suspected it was said just to make him feel better.

With the order complete, it was time for Tim to get down to business.

“I expect you are wondering why I asked you here, Raymond. Bill makes marionettes, and his daughter Rachel operates them. We are going to collaborate and would like you to be a part of it.”

Raymond was overwhelmed. Outside of his professional career, no one had ever asked him to be a part of anything.

“There is nothing I’d like more, but I don’t see how I can be of any use to you?”

“To be honest, at the moment neither do I, but that’s the way I work. For me, writing is like baking a cake. I start with some characters, add some situations and a dash of flavouring, put it in the oven, and see what comes out. Don’t let it go to your head, but there’s something special about you and although I have no idea what that is, I know it will make you a valuable ingredient in the cake.”

It was just as well Tim’s words required no answer as Raymond would have been unable to speak.

“I want us to put ourselves into situations which lead to stories and for that to be successful we need to remember one of the most important rules of life,” he waited patiently for the question.

“Ok. What rule is that?” asked Bill.

“We must be able to laugh at ourselves.”

He reached down to the bag he had been carrying and pulled out three hats, each with a green crocodile hanging down the side.

“Welcome to the crocodile club.”

Raymond and Bill were torn between the desire to laugh and the fear of having to wear one of the hats. Tim guessed their thoughts.

“That’s right. As a member of the crocodile club, each of us is required to wear one of these hats for the rest of the day, and it’s going to be a long day.”

Until that moment, Bill would rather have sat naked on broken glass than do something so childish, but he was becoming infected with the unfamiliar spirit of adventure. Tim handed out the remaining two crocodile hats, which were placed on the remaining heads. The bond formed between them by that action was as strong as blood or oath.

“Where on earth did this idea come from,” asked Bill who was not as familiar with Tim’s train of thought as Raymond.

“I’m glad you asked that. When I was young, I was an obnoxious kid. Always top of the class, captain of this, leader of that. My mother saw what I was turning into, so she insisted we go to a Pontins holiday camp for our annual holiday. She offered me £20 if I joined the crocodile club and agreed to wear this hat for the whole two weeks. Worse still, I was not allowed to hit or threaten anyone that laughed at me.”

Tim was interrupted by some customers behind them that were complaining at how long their order was taking. The waitress gave them such a fearsome look that their complaint was short-lived.

“Of course, I refused at first, but I really needed that money, so eventually I agreed.”

“Surely, you could have taken the hat off when your mother wasn’t looking?” asked Raymond.

“No way. It was impossible to get one over on her. Honestly, it was like she had been trained by the CIA, and there was never any second chances like other parents give. What she said, she meant. I was twice the age of anyone else wearing a crocodile hat, so the other kids gave me hell, along with some of the adults, but by the end of the second week, I just didn’t care anymore, and it gave me a tremendous sense of freedom. Until then, I always felt the need to show everyone how clever and tough I was. That hat made me realise none of it mattered, so when I went to university, there was no big adjustment to make when I found myself around people equally or more capable than me. Some kids never recover from their sudden immersion in a big pool.”

Tim was interrupted by his phone.

“Sorry about this. I forgot to turn it off.”

Tim hated it when conversations were interrupted by phone calls, so he wanted to turn it off as quickly as possible, but the phone was deep inside his trouser pocket. He needed to stand up to get to it, but as he did so, he felt an obstacle behind him and turned around. It was the waitress heavily laden with plates serving the table behind. She turned around suddenly, only to be confronted with a strange-looking crocodile just inches from her nose. She screamed, which startled Tim, causing his arm to shoot up involuntarily, knocking the plates out of her hand. Most of the food landing on the floor but just like it was choreographed, a Walls Pork Sausage rolled down Tim's sleeve and made a perfect landing on Bill's lap. Tim wasn't aware of the runaway sausage as he was preoccupied with the waitress who was too busy screaming abuse at him to listen to his apologies. As if the scene wasn't already surreal enough, the waitress they had assumed was French was now being abusive in a thick American accent, Alabama if one were forced to guess. Eventually, she ran out of insults and started clearing up the mess on the floor, which was easier now that the customers had given up and gone to McDonald's.

Tim sat back on his chair, resolving to give the waitress a huge tip. He turned to Bill and was surprised to see him in some kind of catatonic state.

“Are you OK, Bill?”

Bill tried to speak, but no words came out. He wanted to point to the problem, but his arms wouldn't move. Tim was afraid that he might have had a stroke, but then noticed a few scraps of food on Bill's otherwise spotless jacket. He followed the trail of egg yolk which led to the sausage on Bill's lap. All Bill had to do was open his legs and the sausage would have fallen to the floor, but he had lost control of his legs. Tim grabbed the sausage and took it to the counter to have it thrown away. By the time he returned, Bill was able to move, but speech

was still confined to the occasional grunt. Raymond reached across the table.

“Give me your hand.”

Bill placed his hand slowly in Raymond’s, the effect was immediate.

“I’m terribly sorry. I feel so stupid,” said Bill quickly recovering.

“There’s nothing to apologise for,” said Tim. “I brought you here, and it was my fault the waitress dropped the plates. Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“No, I want to stay here and get through this.”

Tim needed to lighten the mood.

“How do you know about the hand thing?” he asked Raymond.

“The first time I ever flew, I was terrified. I started shaking and was close to bursting into tears when the little old lady sitting next to me took my hand and smiled. Never said a word, just held my hand. It was like magic.”

Tim smiled at the thought of a little old lady protecting a man the size of a house. Their food finally arrived, and the waitress practically threw the plates on their table.

“Does anyone want ketchup?” she asked in a tone that said the answer had better be no.

Now that her accent had reverted to French, they would have liked to ask where she was from, but no one had the courage to ask. They ate without further incident although Bill left most of his, not as a result of the sausage incident, but because he had really looked forward to this day and the anticipation had played havoc with his appetite.

Tim left a £5 tip and was not surprised when the waitress accepted it with nothing more than a grunt. Her boss was well

aware she had the people skills of Hannibal Lecter and would have loved to have sacked her, but it wasn't easy finding someone who worked as hard as she did for below minimum wage.

They left the café in high spirits and walked through the lanes until they came to an open-air café in the grounds of the Royal Pavilion. Over a coffee, Tim explained to Raymond how he wanted them to spend the day outside their comfort zones in a kind of team-building exercise.

“I have something planned for both of you and I need you to come up with something for me. Whatever you decide will have to be after eight o'clock tonight as what I have will take up the rest of the day. I'm off for a short walk while you talk it over. See you in half an hour.”

Tim left abruptly, leaving Bill and Raymond looking at each other vacantly.

“I don't know where to start,” said Bill. “He has so much self-confidence, I can't imagine him being uncomfortable anywhere.”

“You're right about that. I spent a few weeks with him in Goa, and it amazed me how wherever he went, he just seemed to fit in and own the place. Let me have a think.”

One of the first things Raymond had learnt from Tim was to think with his legs, so he excused himself and started strolling up and down the path until he stopped suddenly and took out his mobile phone. He made a couple of calls and returned to Bill.

“There's only one thing I can think of that will make Tim uncomfortable, but it needs a bit of organising. Luckily, one of my clients owes me a favour so he is going to make the arrangements. It will be more effective if you don't know about it, so you'll have to trust me.

“That's fine with me.” Bill preferred not to know anyway.

Tim returned and they made their way down to the seafront where he stopped and turned to Bill.

“Before we get started, can you confirm that you are OK with strenuous activity, what with your heart problem?”

“I can assure you my heart is fine, which is more than I can say for my nerves now you’ve asked me that.”

“Ok, then Bill. We’ll start with you.”

CHAPTER 7



They walked along the promenade taking in the occasional stop to enjoy the sea air. There were joggers jogging, strollers strolling and cyclists ignoring the no cycling signs. On the grass area alongside the promenade, there were people flying kites and a father teaching his son how to kick a ball with feet that had only recently got the hang of walking. Tim and Bill often came here after lunch and sat on a bench while they looked out to sea reminiscing about their travels. They turned off the promenade and arrived at a building with an entrance below street level. The slow walk had calmed Bill's nerves to the point where he was looking forward to the challenge until he saw the large sign on the door that read *Brighton and Hove Pro Boxing Club*. They walked through the door and a crowd quickly gathered around Tim who was obviously well known to them. Raymond was not aware of Tim's connection with boxing, but he had ceased to be surprised at anything he did. After introductions were made, a man who appeared to be in charge put his hand on Bill's shoulder.

“Right Bill. The changing rooms are over there. David here will sort you out with some kit.”

What little colour Bill had in his face drained instantly.

“You want me to do boxing?” he asked incredulously.

“That’s right.”

“Are you crazy? Look at me. I’ll get killed.”

“What’s the problem? Haven’t you ever been in a fight before?” asked Tim.

“Not since my schooldays, and I don’t think the technique I used then will be very effective here.”

“What technique was that?”

“I sat on the floor with my legs tucked up to my chest and cried. Not just make-believe crying but real heart-rending sobs. It worked like a charm. It didn’t stop the bullying, but it did stop me getting beaten up. There was not much street cred in fighting such a pathetic kid.”

Raymond felt for him and remembered his school days when he was constantly going to the aid of frightened kids. He moved closer to Bill and put his hand on his shoulder. The size and presumed power of it didn’t help to calm Bill’s nerves.

“We have to trust each other. Tim would never let anything happen to you.”

Although Bill’s physical movements were comparable to an octogenarian tortoise, the same could not be said of his decision making. He had two choices, he could trust Tim and go into the ring, or refuse and end the greatest adventure of his life, it was no contest.

By now, the club was surprisingly full. Tim had called the owner beforehand to tell him what was planned, and word had got around. Bill followed David into the changing room which had a peculiar smell of leather, mixed with sweat and a hint of

feet soaked in gorgonzola smoothies. David sifted through the lost property box and handed Bill a vest and shorts that obviously hadn't been washed since they were last peeled off someone's body. Under normal circumstances, this would have horrified Bill, but the threat of someone else's germs was overshadowed by that of being beaten to a pulp. He put the vest and shorts on, doing his best to ignore the unpleasant odours that were determined to enter his nostrils.

"Sit down and I'll help you with your boots," instructed David.

Once the boots were laced up, David wrapped some bandages around Bill's hands.

"Don't worry, they are just to protect your hands," said David when he saw the look of concern on Bill's face.

Bill couldn't think of any scenario where his hands would get damaged, but he preferred to remain in ignorance.

"That's it. You're ready for action," declared David.

Bill stood in front of a mirror and had to admit he was impressed with his new gladiatorial look, and it made him feel good.

"You look great, but there's something missing," said David.

He went into his own locker and took out a magnificent black robe and put it on Bill.

"There. The finishing touch," said David as he stood back and admired his new protégé.

Bill's spirits moved up a gear as the door was opened for him and he entered the gym. He was struck by how crowded it had become in his absence. A man stood in the centre of the ring holding a microphone. When he saw Bill approaching he announced, "Ladies and Gentlemen. Please make way for Bill Bulldozer Baskin."

The crowd roared when Bill threw himself into the part by walking towards the ring waving his arms like he was the defending world champion. The hood on his boxing robe was far too big for him and kept dropping down over his eyes so David had to guide him towards the ring. His opponent arrived first and sprung into the ring like he had been strapped to a rocket, whereas Bill adopted the *lay on your tummy and roll* method. Tim, who was to be his second, led Bill to a corner and took off his robe to reveal four white matchsticks sticking out from his vest and shorts. Not only was he thin, but he appeared to be devoid of all muscle. His face was pale, but the rest of his body was several shades lighter.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” asked Tim.

“What’s that?”

“Your crocodile hat.”

Tim was still wearing his.

“I can’t wear that while I’m fighting. It won’t stay on.”

Someone ran to the changing room and returned with the hat.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got that covered.”

Tim reached inside the hat and pulled out two pieces of elastic which he fastened under Bill’s chin.

“There you are. No one’s going to hit a man wearing a crocodile.”

“And that’s your plan for my survival, is it? Great planning.”

Tim was a patron of the boxing club and knew each boxer well. The opponent he had chosen for Bill was a young and very talented boxer who had recently turned professional having been the English Amateur boxing champion. Only someone with his skill could excise the level of control that Tim needed for this fight.

The referee called for both boxers to join him in the centre of the ring. Unfortunately, Bill thought it was the start of the fight, so when he got within striking distance, he lunged at his opponent with what might technically be called a right jab. The referee stepped in and said officiously, "You have to wait until you hear the bell."

"I'm terribly sorry. Are you ok?" he asked his opponent who wasn't sure if it had been a punch, or a friendly tap on the shoulder.

"I think I'll survive."

This was bad news for Bill as it had been his best shot. The referee held each boxer by the arm as he gave the customary instructions.

"I want a good clean fight. No hitting below the belt. Go back to your corner and come out fighting when you hear the bell. Understood?"

Both fighters grunted in agreement. Bill was about to turn around when he stopped.

"Excuse me."

"Yes," scowled the referee.

"Are we supposed to be wearing belts?"

"Wearing belts? No, why?"

"You said we mustn't hit below the belt, but I don't have one."

"It's an expression. Don't punch below where you would wear a belt if you had one. Is that clear?"

"Yes, perfectly thank you."

"And do you have any other questions?"

Bill thought for a minute and said, "Now that you mention it, I do have a question."

"What's that?"

The referee would have been irritated if he hadn't been so amused.

"Just to be clear; are we only allowed to punch, or can we kick as well?"

It was a pointless question considering Bill had never kicked anything in his entire life, but he felt obliged to ask.

"Why would you think that?" asked the referee. This was going to be a great story to tell in the bar later.

"I seem to remember being kicked a lot when I was at school. I also remember flicking through the TV channels one day when I saw a few seconds of a boxing match. I definitely saw them kicking each other."

"That would have been kickboxing. This is boxing. Punching only. Is that clear?"

"Yes, perfectly, thank you."

"Good. Any other questions?"

"I'm terribly sorry but there is one last thing. It's not a question though, more of a request."

"And that is?"

"Would you mind introducing us? Being hit by a stranger is so much more unpleasant than by an acquaintance don't you think?"

The referee studied Bill's face for signs of levity, but in the absence of any, he assumed the request was serious.

"Sean, this is Bill. Bill, Sean"

"Pleased to meet you, Sean."

Bill held out his hand to shake but realised it wasn't possible wearing boxing gloves.

"Yeah," replied his bewildered opponent.

Finally, they went back to their corners and Tim put a gumshield in Bill's mouth. Bill had no idea what its purpose was, but it gave him an odd sense of security. The bell rang, and as Sean moved forward, his muscles appeared to increase in size. Bill seriously considered reverting to his *sit on the floor and cry* technique but suspected it would not have the same effect that it did in his schooldays. They started moving around each other and with no immediate attack in sight, Bill's confidence rose to the point where he was able to open his eyes. The spectators were cheering furiously in support of Bill.

Bill watched how Sean was moving around and tried to copy him, but his arms and legs seem to be disconnected from his torso. He looked more like a Morris dancer milking a cow than a boxer. Halfway through the round, with nothing happening, Sean felt obliged to throw a punch but kept it as slow as possible. Bill had plenty of time to get out of the way, but the thought never occurred to him. The punch caught him squarely on the shoulder, causing a ripple effect right down to his toes. He waited for the pain to set in and considered going down for the count but strangely enough, the blow exhilarated him. He had taken a punch and survived; fighting wasn't so bad after all. He heard Tim's voice rise above all the others.

"Come on, Bill. You can do it. Go for his head."

Bill's feet suddenly felt lighter, so he started to move towards his opponent. He threw a couple of punches knowing there was no possible chance of connecting, but it still felt good. Following the advice of the crowd, Bill brought his fists up to protect his head. His opponent was standing by the ropes when Raymond screamed, "Now's your chance, throw a right."

For the first time in his life, Bill experienced the effects of adrenalin as he closed his eyes and threw a right hook which caught Sean on the side of the head. The blow might have been fatal to a 90-year-old woman with heart failure, but Sean hardly

felt it. When the surprise of actually landing a punch finally struck Bill, he was overcome by the fear of retaliation and wondered if it was acceptable to fall to the canvas and be counted out if he hadn't actually been hit. But with Sean not looking murderous or even angry, Bill's confidence returned, so he continued to wave his arms around in Sean's general vicinity until the bell sounded for the end of the first round.

The referee directed Bill to his corner where Tim was waiting with a small stall. He removed Bill's gum shield and poured water over his head. Bill had never felt so exhilarated. Tim gave the customary instructions that seconds give, and although Bill didn't understand a word of it, it did give him confidence and he was even eager to get back to the fight. The bell rang, and both fighters moved towards each other feinting. With no real contact until Sean allowed himself to get caught on the ropes. Bill threw punch after punch at Sean, blissfully unaware of what little effect they were having. They landed on his arms more like snowflakes than punches. He became confused when Sean threw his arms around him in what seemed like a desire to hug, but the referee soon stepped in to separate them. By now, Bill was moving around lightly on his feet, and with the crowd spurring him on, it was time to take action. He moved unexpectedly forwards just as Sean was feinting a gentle jab so technically, Bill hit Sean's glove with his eye. His head jolted backwards, and the referee stepped in quickly as the crowd suddenly went quiet.

"Are you ok?" he asked, clearly concerned.

"Ok? I've never felt so alive. Why have we stopped?"

The experienced referee looked carefully at Bill and being confident that there was no serious damage he instructed the boxers to "fight on."

Bill became a man possessed, and his unique style of footwork and arm swinging was driving the crowd wild. He

screamed and ran towards Sean swinging a huge right hook that missed by a mile, but instinctively he followed up with a left that caught Sean squarely on the chin. Sean fell to the canvas and lay there motionless while the referee started counting. The crowd was going crazy with excitement. Halfway through the referee's count, Sean opened his eyes and winked at Tim who was standing close by. When the count reached that magic number of ten, the ring was invaded with spectators frantic to carry Bill on their shoulders while chanting a two-tone "Bill, Bill." Some of the best fighters in the country had trained and fought at that club, but no one had ever received a reception like this elderly boxer whose bout was a topic of conversation for years to come.

Bill sat in the changing room, sweating profusely and feeling like a world champion. His eye felt sore, but that just added to the euphoria. He showered and changed quickly, and after extravagant congratulations from everyone he passed, the three of them left the club. Of course, he knew Sean had let him win, but he was still determined that he would never again let himself be physically intimidated.

The sunlight was dazzling as they stepped out of the gym and walked along the promenade towards the centre of Brighton. Bill's exhilaration was infectious, and they knew this was going to be a very special day.

CHAPTER 8



Bill and Raymond were caught by surprise when Tim stopped abruptly outside a derelict building. They entered a side door and walked down a narrow corridor before arriving at a large open space with a wooden floor. Music was playing, and people were dancing while someone with a strong South American accent gave instructions. It was a dance class and knowing that the next task was his, Raymond was worried. During his time in Goa, he often used to go with Tim to a large open-air restaurant with some great live music. Tim loved to dance and spent most of the time on the floor, either by himself or with any man, woman, or child who would accompany him. On one occasion he even grabbed a passing dog and held it by the paws while they danced quite a passable cha-cha. Raymond loved those evenings but insisted that even under threat of torture, he would not dance.

A man came over to greet Tim, they appeared to be well acquainted.

“Raymond this is Juan, a good friend of mine. He is the best Latin American dance teacher in the world.”

There was no argument from Juan. Whether there were better teachers in the world was debatable but what was beyond doubt was his eccentricity and the prestige that went with having been one of his pupils. Juan Carlos Magnifico might sound like a name adopted for grandeur, but it was not only his real name, it was one that he grew into. Competition was beneath him, but he had produced more champions than any other teacher. Dancers wanting to open their own schools were guaranteed success if they could only get that treasured diploma that came from the Juan Carlos Magnifico School of Dance. The fee for a place at one of Juan's workshops was astronomical, but they were so popular he had to hold them in secret locations to avoid gate crashers and unauthorised viewing. On this occasion, it was held in a derelict bingo hall.

Juan was mercilessly mercenary unless there was an exceptionally talented pupil from a poor area in which case there was no fee, and he even paid their travel expenses. He had met Tim in a bar in Cusco in Peru during one of Juan's rare performances. Juan's guitar player had surrendered to unconsciousness after several too many pisco sours and an ugly scene was brewing in the audience when Tim picked up the guitar and started playing. Both of them were masters of improvisation blended with humour, so the evening found a place in the Cusco book of unforgettable nights. Juan came to Brighton once a year for workshops and always looked up his crazy Gringo friend. A free lesson with Juan was something many would kill for, but Raymond would have killed to get out of it.

"Tim. Please don't make me do this. I look ridiculous when I dance," pleaded Raymond.

Memories of his friends jeering at him at the school dance came back to him like a knife in the nuts.

“Do my ears hear, right?” said Juan with a voice that made Liberace sound like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

“You afraid to look ridiculous? What can be more ridiculous than not dancing?”

Raymond’s size or his ability to squash him like an ant meant nothing to Juan who had complete control of any situation. He grabbed Bill’s arm and impatiently dismissed everyone from the dance floor. He stood in the centre like a Greek God.

“Lissen class. Raymond says he no can dance. I show no person is alive that no can dance. You must to look and learn.”

He twirled around in an elaborate move which ended with one hand, stretching to the ceiling. Raymond stood there mortified. Juan clapped his hand and gave the order “Musica por favor.”

He started with the simplest of steps, one foot forward and then back in time to the music.

“And one and two and three and four, and one and two and three and four,” he repeated several times. Raymond tried to follow him, but his legs looked like sacks of potatoes, and the music might as well not have been playing as far as keeping time was concerned. Juan could see Raymond’s discomfort but ploughed on regardless, adding his arms to the movement. Raymond tried as hard as he could but only seemed to get worse while the floor shook every time his feet landed. Some of the students were from countries in earthquake zones, so the constant rumbling from the floor unnerved them.

Bill had already grown fond of Raymond and felt bad for him. The objective was to get them out of their comfort zone, not to humiliate them. He started to doubt Tim.

“Trust me,” said Tim with a reassuring smile.

The longer it went on, the more Ray's suffering spread through the spectators. Students who were at first amused and reassured of their superiority were now feeling uncomfortable at having to watch a man being ridiculed. Juan looked around and sensed it was the perfect moment to make his move.

"Musica stop, por favor," he shouted as he clapped his hands.

Every person in that room shared Raymond's look of relief that it was over. His crocodile hat which until then had been a source of amusement now just added to the ridicule. Tim was the only person smiling as if he knew something no one else did. Juan continued as if everything was going to plan.

"Very good. Now we get somewhere."

He walked quickly in a circle around Raymond, lifted his arm, and clicked his fingers. "Chair por favor," he called, and a student eagerly grabbed a chair and stood next to Juan waiting for instructions.

"Put here!"

He signalled a place just in front of Raymond. Juan stepped onto the chair, so they were eye level.

"Musica, por favor. Numero fifteen."

The students looked at each other. Juan gave all his dances a number, and this was one they didn't recognise. It was quite different from anything they had danced to so far, like salsa with a generous sprinkle of jalapeño. Juan took both of Raymond's cheeks and squeezed them together as he leaned forward, so their faces were almost touching. For a terrible moment, Raymond thought Juan was going to kiss him.

"Look at me, Raymond."

Juan was looking deep into his eyes.

"Ok," said Raymond, wondering how he could do otherwise considering his face was being held in a vice-like grip.

“I say, look at me!”

“I am looking at you.”

“No. Not with your eyes. With your soul.”

Raymond was vaguely acquainted with his soul, but not aware it could be used as a visual aid.

“Now close the eyes. Feel the music inside. It goes in ears, and down to every bit of your body.”

With an open palm, Juan started beating time on Raymond’s chest.

“And one and two and three and four and one and two and three... don’t listen, feel. And one and two and three and four.”

Juan gradually increased the force of each blow, not caring that his hands were taking more punishment than Raymond’s chest.

“And one and two and three and four and ...”

He continued for two, long minutes until he sensed something stirring inside Raymond. He stepped slowly off the chair. Raymond’s eyes were still closed, his head involuntarily bobbing up and down.

“Not to resist. Music is master. Surrender to music.”

He signalled for the music to be played louder, which had an immediate effect on Raymond. He felt as light as a feather, dizzy, his skin tingled. His arms started to sway, slowly at first but then with sudden erratic movements as if the music was trying to find a way out of his body through the fingertips. His legs became restless. Suddenly, he threw his arms in the air as his mind relinquished control over his body. He shook his head violently, which sent his crocodile hat flying across the room. He launched himself into a dance that was entirely free from the constraints of his mind. He fought off imaginary warriors and then knelt on one knee, rocking a baby to sleep. He spun around like a top and then stopped suddenly, holding his cheeks as if he

had just found the meaning of life. He skipped through a field of dandelions and threw his arms at the sky with the sheer joy of being a child. He thrashed an imaginary drum kit and then after raising his leg high, he brought it down fiercely like a Zulu warrior. Juan's face was beaming as he relished every second of the harmony between man and music.

Juan's students looked at each other, wondering what on earth to make of it all. Some were smiling and were aware of what was happening while others looked disdainful, questioning why their precious time was being wasted like this. Raymond seemed to know instinctively when the music was going to end, so with a flourish, he crouched on one knee with his head down, breathing heavily. The students clapped politely while Juan couldn't have been more enthusiastic.

"Excellent, excellent. Please stand by side," he said to Raymond, who took a few seconds to reconnect with reality before obeying Juan's order and joining Tim and Bill.

"That was amazing," said Bill, who had been genuinely moved by the performance.

If Raymond's smile had got any wider, his face would have burst.

"I don't know what happened to me. It's like I was possessed, and I was the only person in the world."

Tim was not a gloater by nature, but it was hard to control his look of self-satisfaction.

"Class! Please come to dance floor," ordered Juan as he clapped his hands angrily.

The students obeyed, wary of what was to come as they knew how unpredictable he could be. He was feared as much as he was idolised.

“I see your faces when Raymond dancing. You all sink you are so clever dicky. Now we going to see what you can do. I want you to dance like Raymond.”

The students were horrified. Why on earth would they want to dance like Raymond? They had paid a fortune to improve their dancing with the great Juan Carlos Magnifico, and now they were being asked to dance like a clown. Some wanted to refuse but were afraid. Under the terms of their contract, Juan reserved the right to dismiss a student without compensation and for no reason. It was a take it or leave it clause.

“Musica por favor. Again, numero fifteen.”

Most of the class were just as lost as Raymond when they started. Some made token movements to show they were continuing under protest and Juan tore into them like a Rottweiler. Some tried but looked stiff and awkward. Some obviously had some experience in freestyle dancing, but they just weren't feeling it in the way Raymond had. They moved with the music whereas Raymond became the music. It was an embarrassing display all round. Juan clapped his hands.

“Ok stop music. Class, sit on floor.”

He needed them to be looking up at him for what he was about to say.

“You all good dancers. If not, you not be here. I teach you moves, you make them perfect and you win competitions. All is matemáticas. But if you want to be great dancer, you must have soul like Raymond.”

He hit himself passionately on the chest.

“Here is where music must be. Not in legs or arms or body... here.”

He struck himself even harder but seemed to feel nothing.

“Raymond will never dance salsa, or rumba or merengue good, but when he dance the Raymond, he is best in the world.

He have more passion than all you together. I see in his eyes, first second we meet. We have break now, but when you come back, we dance with soul only. Matemáticas mañana.”

Some of the students took Juan’s criticism badly, but most of them were humbled and understood what he was saying. It is the same with all artistic endeavours, mathematics gives us the answers, but only the truly gifted find the questions.

Juan walked over to Raymond.

“Tim will tell, never I lie. You have something inside. If you have fear, it stay inside, and you die. Make it free, and you live like bird.”

Juan placed a chair in front of Raymond, stepped up, and embraced him. Raymond felt a sense of freedom he had never known before. There was no need for words, but Juan needed to end the lesson.

“Look at me. When I at school you think people not laugh at this funny little boy who can do nothing but dance like a girlie. They give me scars outside, but not inside where is important.”

He kissed Raymond on the forehead and was gone before Tim was able to thank him. It was always like that with Juan, he was like a blast of fresh air that was gone before you had a chance to fill your lungs.

Raymond turned to Tim and Bill.

“Do you mind if I have a few minutes to myself?”

“Of course. Take as long as you like. We’ll wait outside.”

The hall was empty, and Raymond walked slowly to the nearest chair where he sat and looked straight ahead of him as if in a trance. There was total silence apart from the distant echo of a thousand dance and bingo nights from when this neglected building was a vital part of the community. How could this strange man have taken one look at him and seen the torment that even Raymond himself wasn’t fully aware of? He had a scar

just above his right eyebrow that was not the result of a fight as most people assumed but from a squash racquet from an overzealous squash opponent. Apart from that, he had survived youth without a single visible scar, but Juan was right, the wounds were inside, and many had never healed. He thought of all the things he had missed out on and the friendships that never were because of the fear of what people thought of him. As he stood up and made his way to the exit, he clenched his hands in anger and was determined to never again allow himself to be bullied by his own insecurity.

CHAPTER 9



It was early evening when they made their way slowly towards Brighton Pier like three old friends. Raymond was now in charge, and Tim was interested to see what was planned for him, but being blessed with a high discomfort threshold, he felt safe enough. They arrived at the entrance to Brighton Pier and stopped for some freshly made doughnuts. When they had met at the beginning of the day Bill thought that walking on the pier was to be one of the ordeals, but now he was looking forward to it.

“Why did no one ever tell me that doughnuts could taste so good?” said Bill, after sucking the excess sugar from his fingertips.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never eaten doughnuts before?” asked Tim.

“Only those big round things from bakeries that have a token dab of jam inside.”

“Yuk. You can’t beat hot, freshly fried doughnuts. Do you know it has been scientifically proven that they taste better standing up?”

They talked about nothing for a while, oblivious to the people laughing at three men wearing crocodile hats. They strolled slowly past the stalls and stopped at a couple where they tried hard to win the kind of crap they wouldn’t have accepted for free. Tim was desperate to go on the roller coaster, but Raymond was too big for the chair and Bill refused point-blank. They came to a compromise with a ride on the carousel and strangely enough, it was Raymond that seemed the most nervous when mounting his horse. As the carousel started to spin around at a modest speed, Raymond threw his arms tightly around the horse's neck and closed his eyes. The crowd that gathered assumed he was doing it out of showmanship, but although Raymond had many qualities, showmanship was not one of them. After another round of doughnuts, they arrived at Horacio's bar at the end of the pier. The security guards at the door recognised Raymond and gave him a hero's welcome before calling their boss to let him know his guests had arrived.

It was only 9 pm, but the place was already busier than usual. It was a very large pub with a stage at the far end which often featured local bands. A well-dressed man came over to greet Raymond who made the introductions.

“This is Steve who manages the bar. I did some work for him a few years ago.”

“He is being modest. He saved this place from being closed down. We were having a lot of trouble, and it wasn’t until Raymond came in to supervise the bouncers that it was sorted.”

“I appreciate the confidence in me, but it’s really not rocket science. It’s just a matter of separating bouncers from their egos.”

“So, you are Tim?” asked Steve.

They had not been introduced yet, so Tim was wondering how he knew.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Raymond has told us what a great singer you are. We’ve all been looking forward to hearing you play.”

“That’s kind of him to say, but I don’t even have my guitar, let alone the equipment I need to play in such a large place.”

“That’s no problem. It’s karaoke night. Just go and speak to Sam over there and let him know what you want to sing. I’ve put the word around, so there’s going to be an extra-big turnout tonight.”

Tim turned to Raymond.

“You bastard.”

Tim had firmly resolved never to play in a pub or bar again, but either would be infinitely preferable to a karaoke bar. Every cell in his body demanded that he refused to play, but how could he do that after what he had just put them through. Still, how bad could it be? He just had to sing a few songs, and in his considerable experience, no one listened anyway.

The pub was nearly full by the time the karaoke started. Tim’s ear for music had become more acute as he got older, so anything even slightly out of tune felt like someone was poking him in the ear with a chilli tipped chopstick. Singers started taking the stage that ranged from unspeakably bad to well below mediocre and even Bill who had Van Gogh’s ear for music found it painful at times. Raymond relieved Tim of his drink, it was his turn to give the instructions.

“Ok, Tim. You’re up next.”

Tim put his drink down reluctantly and went over to speak to the man running the karaoke who handed him a list of songs. He had never even been to a karaoke bar, much less sang at one, so

he had no idea how it worked. He studied the list but was confused.

“Where does it say what key the song is in?”

“Key? I don’t know nuffin about keys mate. Just choose your songs, we ain’t got all night. Says here you’re going to sing three songs?”

Tim thought it was supposed to be two songs but was past caring. Assuming the recordings were in the same key as the original, he chose songs that he knew were in his vocal range. Just as someone was finishing the destruction of the Rod Stewart song *Sailing*, Steve took the microphone to make an announcement. By now, the place was packed.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We have a very special guest tonight. None other than the writer of the world-famous number one hit, *Sugar Baby*.”

The crowd cheered. Tim was horrified. How could his friend do this to him?

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Let’s hear it for... Tim Taylor.”

The crowd roared as the oh so familiar intro to the song that Tim hated most in the world started up. The words flashed up on a screen in front of him, but he didn’t need them. One of the reasons for the song’s popularity was that the inane lyrics were so easy to remember. The good news was he might as well not have been there as the audience sang over him during the verses and erupted during the choruses. It was just as well no one could hear him as the key was much too high, stretching his vocal cords to the limit. The song finished and the crowd went wild. Tim smiled, expertly hiding his contempt for anyone that could get so carried away with such appalling music. The intro to his next song, *Bobby McGee* started up. The audience went back to talking and drinking, and a few made a half-hearted attempt at the chorus. The next song, John Denver’s *Country Road*, received a little more interest but nothing like as much as *Sugar*

Baby. He was back in the familiar territory of being ignored in a bar, and although it was boring, it was still well within his comfort range. The song would soon be over, and then his task would be complete. If anything, he felt a little deflated that it hadn't been more challenging. To Tim's great relief, the song finally came to its tired ending. Tim was preparing himself to leave the stage when he heard a commotion at the back of the room and a loud roar of approval. A woman who was pushing her way through the crowd, shouted in a strong American accent, "Make way asseholes. Big Mama has arrived. We gonna get this show on the road."

There was a huge cheer which became a steady chant that grew in volume as the woman pushed her way through the crowd.

"BIG MAMA, BIG MAMA," the crowd repeated until she stepped onto the stage when there was an eruption of anticipated fun.

There is a lot of confusion between entertainers and musicians. Someone running around on stage extravagantly waving a guitar around is often referred to as a great guitarist when in reality, many are average at best. There is no doubt they are great entertainers, but that doesn't make them great musicians. On the other hand, a lot of great musicians are terrible entertainers, and their appeal is usually confined to other musicians. Being famous is in itself entertaining, otherwise why else would the public be so preoccupied with celebrities? If you doubt this then ask yourself, is it likely there will ever be a program called *I'm not a celebrity get me out of here*, or *Unknown People Come Dancing*?

Tim was a great musician and songwriter but not a good entertainer. Big Mama, on the other hand, was most definitely not a good singer, but her act was so entertaining, she

commanded a fee far greater than many an excellent singer because she was always assured to bring in a big crowd.

Big Mama was nearly six feet tall and weighed at least eighteen stone. Her shoulder-length purple hair supported a fascinator with a huge ostrich feather sticking out the back. Her breasts were humungous and half-covered by a blue blouse that fell way short of her red, hot pants, leaving a mountain of overhanging blubber. Her thigh-high boots were bright yellow with red stripes and a generous sprinkle of sparkles. Tim applauded with the rest of the audience and stepped off the stage, happy to let her get on with it. Big Mama had other ideas.

“Where you think you going, boy!” she shouted, with one hand on her hip and the other holding a microphone.

“Get your sorry ass back on this stage. You think you gonna get away that easy?”

The crowd started chanting, “Tim, Tim, Tim.” He seriously considered making a run for it until he saw that it was Bill and Raymond who were leading the chant. Accepting defeat, he got back on stage and waited for what seemed like an eternity for the audience to stop cheering. Big Mama put her huge arm around Tim’s shoulder, and like a true professional looked at the audience while she spoke to him.

“I’m gonna tell you something now Tim baby,” she left a long silence for effect, “YOU THE MAN!”

She waited for the cheering to die down before continuing.

“Writing that great song. Just look how happy you made all these fine people. Let’s hear it for THE MAN!”

The audience was still cheering when she called to the DJ.

“OK music, man. Hit it.”

A guitar started strumming which Tim recognised instantly as the intro to Tina Turner’s version of *Proud Mary*, no surprise there.

Big mama started swaying from side to side, which confirmed Tim's fear that it was going to be the long version. He made the mistake of just standing there doing nothing.

"What you think you doing child! You move along with me or you gonna get yo ass whooped!"

The audience gave their full approval for a potential whooping. He moved gently, determined to make the most of it but looking as out of place as a ballet dancer in a Sumo wrestling convention. It was a long intro, with Big Mama talking a lot and building up tension. She started the first verse with a voice so out of tune, if it had not been for the lyrics, the song would have been unrecognisable. The crowd continued to adore her while Tim joined in the chorus along with everyone else in the pub.

During the gap between verses, and still in a slow tempo, they were swaying from side to side in unison when she shouted at Tim,

"Now your turn sugar lips."

Tim knew the song well and sang the second verse confidently while Big Mama demanded that he put more balls into his presentation. At first, he complied through fear, but soon he found himself infected by Big Mama's enthusiasm. The music slowed down and came to a stop.

"ARE YOU READY?" shouted Big Mama. It was a rhetorical question that demanded an answer.

"YEAH!" was the unanimous unnecessary answer.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU! I SAID, ARE YOU REA...DY!"

"YEAHHHH!"

Four snare drum hits took them into a new high-speed tempo, and the audience reacted as if the floor had been hit by lightning. Big Mama stomped from side to side of the long stage with Tim joining in reluctantly at first but quickly getting into it and wonder of all wonders, actually enjoying it. He not only

copied Big Mama's movements but started to exaggerate them, which was no easy task. When Big Mama started the next verse Tim continued moving like a man possessed, animating the audience with his gestures, and they followed him eagerly. He impersonated an early Mick Jagger which earned him a huge smile of approval from Big Mama. Then he was Chuck Berry, then Freddie Mercury, then Elton John. Despite being severely short of breath with a heart that was close to bursting, he shared the last verse with Big Mama. The music got louder and louder as their dancing became more and more frenetic. Totally out of character, both Bill and Raymond joined them on stage, three men stomping up and down wearing crocodile hats. The music ended with a big flourish, and Big Mama threw her arms around Tim, so he was hardly visible. It was not a second too soon as they were all close to collapsing and it was only adrenaline that had kept them going. The crowd was beside themselves, and it felt like the entire pub was going to explode.

Under normal circumstances, the manager would have taken the microphone and wound up the audience to demand an encore, but he was experienced enough to know this was one of those rare occasions when he needed to do the opposite and calm things down. It was just as well because Tim was in no fit state to do anything. He was sweating profusely and breathing like an express train. Adrenaline had pushed him over the edge, and it was only a chair that stood between him and the floor. It was the most unmusical performance of his life but unquestionably the best. It wasn't actually him of course, it was that hidden person that lurks inside us all but rarely, if ever, gets an outing.

A few people went over to congratulate Tim, but it was Big Mama who continued to get the attention and relished the devotion of her admirers. Raymond and Bill stood beside Tim's chair, and when he felt confident that his legs would support him, he stood up and threw his arms around both of them. It was

one of those moments when silence said everything. They thanked Steve and walked out into the cool night air.

They were hungry, but the formality of a restaurant would not have been in keeping with their mood, so they stopped for a slice of pizza and sat on a bench. They were surrounded by the sounds of fairground and a strange concoction of sweet and sour smells from the many food stalls. Bill left them for a few minutes and returned with yet another large bag of doughnuts, and despite the groaning, they each had an equal share in finishing the bag.

“You know, I’ve spent half my life eating at fine dining restaurants, but this is one of the best meals I’ve ever had.”

Bill’s observation was unanimously agreed upon. They started to recount the day and argued about what were the funniest or most memorable moments.

“I have to tell you Raymond, when I first stood on that stage, every bad memory of my music career rolled into one and I hated you with a vengeance, but singing that awful song, I realised how stupid I’ve been running away from it all my life. Karaoke singers were always one rung below the bottom of the ladder for me, but that crazy woman in there finally brought it home to me that entertainment is far more important than music.”

“We’ve all learned something today. It was a great idea, Tim, well done,” said Raymond as they toasted with Coca-Cola.

“I know it’s been a long day and it’s getting late,” said Tim, “but there is one more thing I would like to do. If you think it’s too much we can do it another time but what I have in mind seems like the perfect end to a perfect day.”

“What is that?” they both asked, only too happy to keep the day going.

“I would love to go back to your house Bill and take a look at your Marionettes.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like more,” said Bill truthfully.

Someone with less self-confidence might have been concerned that it was effectively an audition and if he didn’t pass, the whole day would be ruined, but Bill was confident that there was not a person living who wouldn’t be captivated by his marionettes.

“Let’s go then. I don’t live far. It’s just past the clock tower.”

They were halfway up Queens Street when they heard a commotion coming from a shop doorway. As they got closer, they saw a man struggling with a young woman sitting on the floor.

“Let go asshole. It’s mine,” shouted the woman.

The man was trying to wrestle away a sleeping bag and was about to throw a punch when Raymond grabbed his fist and squeezed it so hard the man’s eyes started to water.

“Don’t do that,” said Raymond with a look that had disarmed far tougher men than him.

He led the man by his clamped fist several metres from the woman before releasing it.

“I’ll see you later, bitch,” shouted the man as he walked away.

The three of them looked down at the woman who was sitting with a sleeping bag and rucksack close by. Tim recognised her.

“It’s you. The waitress from the café?”

“Yeah, so what!”

She had lost none of her charm, and now she had a strong cockney accent.

“What are you doing here?”

“Watsit look like?”

“It looks like you are homeless, but you have a job?”

“You fink I can pay rent on what that tosser pays me. We ain’t all got posh ‘ouses like you lot.”

“Have you eaten?” asked Raymond.

“None of your business. Fanks for your ‘elp but now you can all piss off.”

Tim gave the situation careful consideration and called an emergency meeting of the crocodile club. There was only one proposal.

“We have to help this girl,” he said quietly.

The motion was carried unanimously. He returned to the girl.

“We can’t let you stay here. Bill has a house not far from here with lots of spare rooms. You can spend the night there, and we’ll come up with a plan in the morning. Bill had been nodding his head in full agreement until he realised the implications of what Tim had said. He pulled Tim’s arm.

“Can I have a quick word with you?”

They stood a few metres away, talking in whispers.

“Are you crazy? We don’t know the first thing about this girl. She might be an axe murderer for all we know.”

“Hmm, that’s true. Let’s ask her.”

Tim returned to the girl, ignoring Bill’s pleas to treat what he said as a figure of speech.

“You’re not an axe murderer are you?”

“‘Ave yer still got yer balls?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Then I ain’t got no axe ‘ave I?”

“Fair point,” said Tim.

Bill dragged him back into conference.

“I’ll give her some money so she can stay in a hotel,” he reached for his wallet.

“She won’t take it. Look in front of her, there’s nowhere to put money. She’s not begging. She needs help, and this is a special day.”

“Boxing was out of my comfort zone but having a bolshy stranger with multiple foreign accents in my house puts me out of my comfort planet, even if she hasn’t got an axe.”

Raymond, who had been quiet until now put his hand gently on Bill’s shoulder, combined with the compassion in his voice it never failed to get the response he wanted.

“We understand your concern Bill but Tim’s right. There is something about this girl. We need to help her.”

Bill’s resolve was weakening.

“OK, just one night. What is it about that hand of yours? Does it have some kind of magical power?”

“The hand is mightier than the fist.”

Looking at the hand in question, Bill seriously doubted that, but he liked the sentiment. They walked back to the girl who was sitting with her legs tucked between her arms and her head down. Tim knelt down beside her and said gently, “Please let us help you. We have had a fantastic day, and if we leave you here it will spoil it. You’ll be doing us a favour.”

“Bugger off and leave me alone.”

Her words sounded final enough but not the tone in which she said them. It was not sleeping on the streets that troubled her but the continual need to defend herself that wore her down. She looked up.

“Wat you expecting in return? I ain’t no slapper.”

“Nothing, I swear. Bill’s daughter lives at home with him and look at him, have you ever seen anyone so harmless?”

A SINGLE TEAR

Bill nodded, even though it did sound vaguely insulting. Begrudgingly, the girl picked up her meagre belongings and stood beside them.

“Before we go any further, we should know each other’s names. I am Tim, this is Raymond, and this is Bill. Your name is?”

“Sue,” she grunted.

CHAPTER 10



They were still in high spirits when they reached Bill's house, at the top of a hill. They tried to draw Sue into the conversation, but she made it clear she was only there because it was marginally better than sleeping rough. Bill opened the front door and immediately Rachel appeared in the hallway looking concerned and confused.

"Dad, at last. Where have you been? I was really worried about you."

"Sorry Rachel. I got so carried away I forgot to let you know I would be late. Let's go into the living room so we can all get acquainted."

As he stepped forward, the light caught his face and Rachel saw the makings of a black eye.

"My God. What happened to you?"

She also wanted to ask what was with the silly hat, but the black eye took priority.

"Oh, that's nothing. I got into a fight."

They walked into the living room while Rachel was left speechless in the hallway. Her dad in a fight? It was unthinkable. She regained her senses and joined them.

“What do you mean you got into a fight? You don’t know the first thing about fighting.”

“I do now, and what’s more, I won. Now let me introduce you to my new friends.”

Rachel realised she was forgetting her manners which were usually impeccable.

“I am terribly sorry, but this is all a bit of shock. It’s like a space alien has taken possession of my dad.”

She went around introducing herself without waiting for her father to do it formally. When she got to Sue, she was taken aback.

“I’m sorry but do I know you from somewhere?”

“Nah. Don’t fink so,” grunted Sue.

She was determined to maintain her demeanour of world hatred but there was something disarming about Rachel’s smile, and she was unable to hide the fact that she also felt a connection. The recognition of someone from our past is an everyday occurrence, far less common, is the recognition of someone from our future.

“I have invited Sue to stay with us tonight as she has a problem with her accommodation,” said Bill.

It was certainly a night of surprises for Rachel.

“That’s nice,” she said truthfully, “but Dad, before we do anything else, I need to clean your eye.”

“No, don’t fuss. It’s fine. You should see the other chap.”

As far as Bill was concerned, it was a tribal scar that his courage entitled him to wear. The longer it lasted, the happier he would be.

Drinks were served and obligatory snacks placed on a beautiful mosaic coffee table that Rachel had designed, and Bill had made. It was a large living room, and apart from a modest flat-screen television mounted on the wall, it had a timeless feel. It was tastefully decorated with paintings done by Rachel or her mother and small sculptures by Bill. The dark oak floor had rugs placed haphazardly around, and even the lampshades were made in house. Bill's wife Olivia used to host a book club once a month, and the abundance of seating had been kept in the hope that Rachel would take over the hosting from her mother one day, but that was never going to happen. She was not a big reader and couldn't stand the women from the book club.

Having performed the standard duties of a hostess, Rachel was at last able to ask the question that was burning on her lips.

"So tell me about your day, and why are you wearing those stupid hats?"

They all smiled, and although Bill was keen to boast about his adventures, there were other more pressing matters.

"It's a long story. We'll take tomorrow morning off, and I'll tell you all about it."

It was Tim who explained the main purpose of their visit.

"We have come to see these marvellous marionettes that we have heard so much about."

"Now? But it's nearly 11.30?"

Rachel had no idea why she said that because she wasn't tired and rarely had the chance to show off their precious collection so was thrilled to be asked.

"When I tell you about our day, you'll understand why it has to be tonight," said Bill.

Rachel was more intrigued than ever but understood that a good story needed to be slept on. Her smile gave Bill the approval he was desperate for.

“I’ll be right back.”

Bill got up and was about to leave the room when Rachel stopped him.

“Who do you have in mind?”

She would have liked to have gone with him to choose, but it would have been rude to leave their guests alone.

“I thought, Lady Prunella and King Kwabena?”

“Good choice.”

It was touching to see the closeness between them. Bill returned a few minutes later, like a child excited to show off his precious toys.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to present to you... Lady Prunella.”

The room went silent as everyone stared in awe at what can only be described as a work of art. Every feature was carved to perfection, and the paintwork so detailed that it dared its admirers to touch the skin to see if it was real. Her black, satin evening gown flowed gently down her body and lay confidently on the floor waiting to follow its master. This was no ordinary marionette, any more than a beginner playing chopsticks on an upright piano could be compared to Chopin playing on a Steinway Grand.

Bill waited a few seconds for everyone to catch their breath before handing Lady Prunella to Rachel. She took the control rods and wrapped the strings around her delicate fingers. It looked impossibly complicated, but everything was in place within a few seconds. Bill moved the pouffe and coffee table to the side and Lady Prunella curtsied like she was performing at the Royal Variety Performance. She looked around and then walked slowly towards Bill, her evening gown trailing behind her while a thousand flickers of light bounced from the sequins that seemed to be held to the lace by an invisible thread. She

looked sad as she pointed to Bill's eye and wiped an imaginary tear from her eye. She walked over to the coffee table, removed a tissue from a box and returned to Bill. She climbed onto the sofa and standing on his legs, dabbed his eye gently. Everyone laughed as she wagged her finger and silently told him off for being a naughty boy, and telling him not to get into any more fights. She walked towards Tim slowly, and with an extravagant grace befitting a lady of such noble birth held out her hand for him to kiss. He knelt in front her, bowed his head, and kissed her hand gently before returning to his chair, feeling like he had just had an audience with the queen. She returned to the middle of the room and took a bow before returning to her chair. She was far too grand to accept the demands for an encore.

With Lady Prunella taking a well-earned rest, Rachel returned with what appeared to be an African chief, complete with a ceremonial robe adorned with jewels. Bill made the announcement.

“And now it is our great honour to introduce to you, King Kwabena. He will not be taking a bow as he only bows to his superiors, of which there are none. His name means *Born on Tuesday*. When one of our marionettes is finished, we have an official naming ceremony, and each year we celebrate its birthday, hence his name Kwabena.”

King Kwabena walked arrogantly into the middle of the room. Keen to show off his prowess as a great warrior, he brandished his spear, and with a few skilful movements demonstrated why it was a bad idea to mess with him. He walked over to Raymond and studied him carefully. He pointed to his spear and wagged his finger, indicating that no matter how big Raymond was, if he took on King Kwabena, he would be turned into dog meat. Tim started tapping out a rhythm on the coffee table and stomping his feet which resounded on the wooden floorboards. Everyone joined in until the whole room shook with the African beat, and King Kwabena showed his

delight with a fine display of tribal dancing. Tim signalled to stop the rhythm and King Kwabena bowed several times, accepting the applause that was his by birthright.

Bill picked up the marionettes and went to fetch two more.

“Who made those amazing costumes?” asked Raymond who had a feminine side he had no problem with. A sadness came over Rachel as she spoke.

“I made King Kwabena’s costume and my mother, Lady Prunella’s. I think that was her best work ever. I love needlework but will never be in her league.”

It was a noble sentiment but not true. The technical quality of her mother’s work was exceptional, but she lacked the imagination and originality that Rachel had.

“How long does it take to make a marionette?” asked Tim.

“It’s difficult to say as Dad works on more than one at a time. They talk to us with the kind of detailed instructions you would give to a tailor, but sometimes they go quiet, so we put them aside and work on something else. The strange thing is when we go back to them, we usually find they won’t stop talking.”

Bill returned with two more Marionettes.

“Sorry I was so long. We have over 100 to choose from.”

He placed one carefully on a chair and handed the other to Rachel before continuing.

“These two are interesting. They are my favourites, but I have no idea why. This one is called Ivan, one of Russia’s greatest poets.”

Rachel took hold of the control rods and Ivan started to mime to one of his poems. The lack of words didn’t detract from the beauty of the poem, and as Ivan silently explained, the words were in Russian, so they wouldn’t understand them anyway. She gave Ivan back to Bill and took control of his girlfriend, Katina,

the equally famous Russian ballet dancer. Katina displayed her prowess as a dancer and then curtsied to her audience. Everyone applauded enthusiastically, except for Sue who seemed to be troubled. Until then, she had secretly enjoyed the performance more than anyone and was determined not to contribute, but now she found it impossible to hold her tongue.

“I’m sorry,” she said incredulously as she looked around.

“But doesn’t anyone else see it?”

She appeared to be astonished at their inability to share her vision.

“See what?” asked Tim on behalf of everyone.

Not only was Sue’s question confusing, but her rough cockney accent had been replaced by one that was soft and well-spoken.

“She is not Russian. She is Irish, and her name is Mary.”

Bill was a little hurt at the questioning of one of his creations, but it was hard to dismiss Sue’s conviction. She continued.

“And that is not her boyfriend.”

No one knew what to say, so she used the silence to take control.

“Rachel can you please take me to the room where you keep the costumes.”

Rachel put Katina down and led the way. There was something about Sue that inspired trust and confidence.

They climbed the stairs to the top of the house and entered the workshop. The term *Life-Changing Moment* is used so often that it has become trivialised, but this was a moment when the term was entirely justified. When Rachel turned on the light, it was not just their collection that lit up, but Sue’s entire life which had been in darkness for as long as she could remember.

There was row after row of marionettes, each one telling a story of adventure or romance. A street urchin eager to return to Fagin to hand over his ill-gotten gains; a wounded soldier returning from the trenches; a coalman happily going around his arduous rounds; a young girl on her way to her first ballet lesson. Sue went silently from row to row, touching the marionettes as if to confirm they were real. The few people that had seen the collection complimented it extravagantly, but none had been so totally absorbed as Sue. For Rachel, it was a profound moment to finally meet someone who was able to see past the material and into the soul of their creations.

Sue stopped suddenly as if a spell had been broken and started looking amongst the costumes for something in particular. With such a wondrous array to choose from, Rachel was surprised to see her immerge with a plain costume that looked much the worse for wear. It was the 19th-century costume of a woman who although very poor, still took pride in her dress. Some areas of the fabric were worn thin, and the edges were frayed. Rachel hurried to another section and brought back a pair of shoes that were originally black, before scuffing had rendered them a dirty grey.

“How about these to go with it?” asked Rachel, already seeing through Sue’s eyes.

“Perfect. Can you work two marionettes at the same time?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Hold this.”

She handed the costume to Rachel and started looking through the rows of marionettes. She pulled one out, a handsome young man with thick black hair and a white shirt rolled up at the sleeves. His trousers were held up by braces that were so worn they were held together by string in some places.

“Can’t you see? This is Mary’s boyfriend, Tom.”

Rachel looked, but shrugged her shoulders and said apologetically, "Sorry. Not really."

"Don't worry. You will. One last thing."

"What's that?" asked Rachel.

"Do you have a dog?"

"Yes, they are in that row over there."

As expected, there was a large selection of dogs of all shapes and sizes, some adorable, some mischievous, and some that threatened to remove a limb or two. Rachel took one out and wagged its tail.

"This is my favourite. His name is Boris."

It was a Great Dane the size of a small horse and as daft as a brush. All he ever wanted to do was lean on people's legs until they were moved, at which time he simply fell over. Sue fell instantly in love. She hugged him and screamed with delight when she found herself being licked enthusiastically.

"He's amazing, but not right for this," said Sue sadly.

She continued to look through the selection of dogs as if she knew the exact one she wanted despite never having seen it. She stopped suddenly and pulled out a small friendly mongrel who was desperate to be part of the action.

"This is Jasper," announced Sue.

"Ok?"

Rachel had named it Lucky, but what the hell.

They returned to the living room and apologised for the delay. Mary's costume was quickly changed, and the transformation was startling. She appeared to beam with pleasure at having her own clothes returned to her.

Suddenly, Sue changed into a tyrannical director and assumed control.

"You!"

She pointed to Tim as she had forgotten his name.

“You play guitar, don’t you?”

She had overheard them talking in the café.

“Yes, I do.”

“Is there a guitar in the house?” asked Sue as if their lives depended on it.

“There’s one in my room. I’ll go and get it,” said Rachel.

Rachel returned shortly and handed a guitar to Tim. He hadn’t been expecting much, as in this situation someone invariably brought out a cheap guitar with rusty strings, but this was a top of the range, Ramirez Spanish guitar. Rachel had asked for a guitar years earlier and having no idea about these things Bill just asked for the best one in the shop. She had only played it a few times, but although he hadn’t bought it as an investment, it was now worth double what he paid for it. Even when he wasn’t trying, he managed to make money.

Tim tuned the guitar quickly, savouring the deep sensuous tone.

“Some mood music please,” ordered Sue.

Tim started improvising with gentle arpeggios that floated around the room like velvet. Sue had intended to go straight into action but was so moved by the sound she was unable to continue. It was as if the guitar was reaching deep inside her, holding her in a hypnotic trance. Tim could see what was happening, so he changed the mood slightly, causing her to snap back into action.

“You,” she pointed to Bill.

“Take Jasper. I assume you know how to work him?”

“Jasper?”

“The dog.”

The tone of her response implied it was an idiotic question. How could a man not know the name of his own dog?

“Oh, Jasper. Yes. I am not great, but I’ll do my best.”

Sue’s voice changed from tyrannical director to the gentlest of storytellers.

“Rachel. The curtain is up.”

Rachel stood up and held Mary in preparation. The guitar music faded gently away as Sue continued in a flawless Irish accent.

In a small village on the coast of Ireland, there lived a young Irish girl. She came from a poor family, but she was happy because her family was blessed. They had enough to eat, shoes on their feet, and enough love to get them through even the hardest of times. What made her most happy was her sweetheart Tom. She loved him more than anything, and they planned to get married just as soon as he finished building their house. The problem was Tom was also very poor, and although he managed to buy some land, he had no money left for building materials.

While the story was being told, Mary made insignificant but delightful movements.

Mary was always very busy helping her mother with the housework.

Rachel took the cue and Mary mimed the housework.

And milking the cows

Mary’s movements were so lifelike it looked as if milk might appear.

One bright and sunny morning, Mary stepped out of the house to feed the chickens as she always did. Her beloved dog Jasper greeted her as if they had been parted for years even though it had only been a few hours.

Bill took the cue and introduced Jasper who's tail wagged frantically.

When Mary reached the barn, she was surprised to see a note nailed to the door. She pulled the note down and opened it. The more Mary read, the more her world fell apart. The letter was from her sweetheart Tom, saying he was not worthy of her and that he had gone to work in the city where he would make his fortune. He had no idea how long it would take, so he couldn't expect her to wait. She should forget him and find someone else who could give her the life she deserved. Mary dropped the letter on the floor, hid her face in her hands, and started to cry.

By now, Rachel was anticipating perfectly what came next.

Mary's heart was broken. There was no other man in the world for her, but she had no way of telling Tom she would wait for as long as it took. Months passed, and she grew more and more unhappy, until one day, she decided to go and find her beloved Tom. She packed a small bag with food and started the long journey. She wanted to walk alone, but Jasper had no intention of leaving her side.

Sue gave the cue for the music to continue as Mary and Jasper walked up and down the room with occasional stops for food and sleep.

After two days of walking, Mary arrived on the outskirts of Dublin and prayed that her sweetheart was living there. She asked everyone whether they had seen her Tom, a fine-looking man with a small scar just below his right eye. The answer was always the same, no one had seen him.

She had no more food left, and her shoes were worn out with all the walking. Some people took pity and gave her bread and water from their meagre rations. For two days she walked the streets and slept in the park at night, cold and afraid. On the third day, just as she was giving up hope, she came across a

shoe factory, and to her great joy, she saw Tom standing outside.

Rachel picked Tom up from the chair and stood him in front of Mary. Despite the story being improvised, Tim weaved the music around the narration as if it had been written especially for the performance.

“Tom, my love. Why did you leave me?” cried Mary. “You must have known I can’t live without you.”

Tom lowered his head in shame. There was silence. Tom needed to speak but Sue had no voice for him. She glared at Raymond who understood what was needed but sat there frozen. It was unthinkable that he should let the performance collapse, so he summoned up every ounce of courage and spoke with such a soft voice, it was hard to believe it belonged to such a big man.

“Oh, Mary. I have been so stupid. I thought I would make my fortune here, but I have worked so hard and all I have to show for it are these new shoes.”

“I don’t care how poor you are, just as long as we are together. Please come home with me.”

Tom looked up slowly, he moved forward, and they embraced.

“Let’s leave now,” said Tom.

They were preparing to set off when Tom noticed Jasper clawing at Mary’s shoes.

Raymond had overcome his self-consciousness and found himself getting into character.

“But Mary. Look at your shoes. You can’t walk far in those, and your feet are bleeding.”

Tom held his chin, wondering what to do about the shoes. Suddenly an idea came to him. He went into the factory and returned with some tools. He took off his own shoes and started working on them.

Raymond got the message and stepped forward to take off Tom's shoes.

With a skill he didn't know he possessed, Tom altered the shoes until they were a perfect fit for Mary. They walked hand in hand with Jasper bouncing along happily behind them until they arrived back at their village where everyone turned out to greet them. A week later, people came from miles around to celebrate their wedding. Many of their guests were so impressed with Mary's shoes that they asked Tom to make a pair for them. Soon, people were coming from all around to have shoes made by him, and it wasn't long before they had enough money to build their house. On the day they moved in, Mary announced that she was expecting her first child.

Tom and Mary climbed onto the sofa and fell asleep in each other's arms while Tim played them to sleep with a gentle lullaby.

And they all lived happily ever after.

The room went silent. Everyone sat back in their chairs feeling slightly dazed. It was Raymond who spoke first.

"What just happened there?"

The silence continued. They simply didn't know. Tim was familiar with the creative process, but that was one man alone with his muse. How could that manifest itself within a group of people? Sue had never experienced anything like it and found it a little disturbing. They gradually composed themselves, but nothing more was said for fear of breaking the spell.

It was nearly midnight, and as hard as it was to end such a perfect day, they were all very tired. Raymond accepted Bill's offer to stay the night although he had to leave early the next morning for a meeting in London. Tim called for a taxi to take him back to Shoreham. As for Bill, the day suddenly caught up with him and he struggled to get up the stairs to bed. Sue and

Rachel were left downstairs, more interested in getting to know each other than getting to sleep.

“I’m going to make a sandwich, do you want one?” asked Rachel.

She wasn’t hungry but knew Sue must be and didn’t want to make her feel awkward.

“Yes, please. Whatever you’ve got will be great thanks.”

“What an amazing night. Where did that story come from?” asked Rachel.

“I have no idea. I still don’t really understand what happened. It was like I was possessed, and someone was talking through me. I used to like drama at school but have never written a story in my life.”

“Well we have been making marionettes for as long as I can remember and the only time they ever talk to us is to say what they want to look like or wear, never what they want to do.”

“I have always loved puppets of all kinds, but there is something about your marionettes that are different. Their movements, it’s like they are human.”

“I know what you mean. Dad always loved working with wood and became obsessed with marionettes at a very early age, but grandad had big plans for him. Dad didn’t want to go to university but decided if he had to, he would study mechanical engineering so he could incorporate what he learnt into the marionette controls. If you look closely, you will see all sorts of complicated mechanisms to create movements which I am sure are unique.”

“Well, I can’t tell you how much I like them. Can we take a closer look at them tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course, I would love to, but now you have to tell me what on earth my dad has been up to all day? This is all so unlike him.”

“I have no idea. I only met them a couple of hours ago.”

“So how do you know them?”

“I don’t.”

Sue hated telling anyone about her personal life but confiding in Rachel seemed the natural thing to do.

“I served them in a café this lunchtime so when they saw me sitting in a shop doorway tonight I suppose they were curious. I wasn’t very nice to them, especially your dad.”

Rachel had noticed a sleeping bag and rucksack when they arrived, but the idea that Sue had been sleeping rough had never occurred to her.

“If you have a job waitressing, why have you been sleeping on the streets?”

Sadness came over Sue.

“It’s a long story, and I don’t want to spoil tonight’s events.”

Rachel reached across and took Sue’s hand, she couldn’t bear to see anyone in pain.

“Don’t worry. You can tell me all about it tomorrow if you want. If you don’t want to, then that’s ok too.”

Sue looked up and smiled. It had been so long since she had known kindness and was surprised to find it had a pain of its own.

“I would like that. I haven’t spoken to anyone properly in years.”

They gave each other a hug which turned Sue’s misty eyes into tears. When she had recovered sufficiently, Rachel felt it was time to change the mood.

“I’m sorry, but there is one thing that I do have to say.”

“What is that?”

“You really don’t look like a Sue.”

They both laughed.

“Very perceptive of you. That’s not my real name.”

Rachel waited for her real name, but none was forthcoming.

“Ok. What is your real name?”

“I’d rather not say,” said Sue, though her smile said the opposite.

“You don’t seriously think I am going to let you leave this room without telling me?”

“OK, but you promise not to tell anyone?”

“I promise.”

“It’s Bruce.”

“Bruce? That’s not so bad. What is it short for?”

“Nothing. Just Bruce.”

“Bruce. Like the man’s name?”

“That’s right. My dad was a big Johnny Cash fan and, *a mean son of a bitch.*”

She ended the sentence with an exaggerated impersonation of Johnny Cash.

“I think I know where this is going,” said Rachel.

“You got it. He was sure I was going to be a son and was going to call me Sue. You know, after the song *A Boy Named Sue.*”

“Of course I know it.”

“As far as he was concerned, regardless of whether I was a boy or a girl, I had to grow up tough to survive in this world.”

“And your mum was alright with that?”

“Of course not, but she didn’t have much choice. Dad was a tyrant. He said I could call myself what I liked when I got older, but till then, it had to be Bruce.”

“So why, Bruce? Was he a Bruce Lee fan?”

“No, Bruce Willis.”

“And did it toughen you up?”

“Not really. I did grow up tough, but I think that was more to do with my dad’s influence. I’ve got a really bad temper, so kids soon learnt to leave me alone.”

“But now you’re called Sue?”

“I rebelled, and Dad finally accepted a change of name, as long as I called myself Sue. That way at least there was some connection to the song.”

Rachel looked for signs that Sue was having her on but who could make up a story like that?

“And what about you?” asked Sue. “What do you do with yourself when you’re not making amazing costumes?”

“Nothing really.”

Rachel hesitated before continuing. Sue had been very open with her, so she felt the need to do the same.

“I have agoraphobia. I am not able to leave the house.”

Now it was Sue that took Rachel’s hand.

“I am so sorry to hear that. It must be terrible for you.”

Rachel felt comforted. The usual reaction from people was awkwardness.

“How long have you had it?”

“It started at university. Dad was always brilliant at everything, so I wanted to live up to his legacy. I pushed myself too hard until one day I had a panic attack that was so bad they took me to hospital. If I had gone home and taken it easy for a while I might have been alright, but because I had missed a couple of weeks of lectures I pushed myself even harder until I had a complete breakdown.”

“My mother had the same problem, so I do understand how tough it is,” said Sue.

They continued talking for a long time before sleep overcame them. Rachel showed Sue to her room and they hugged goodnight as if they had known each other for years.

CHAPTER 11



Bill woke at his usual time and was not surprised when Rachel didn't join him for breakfast as he had heard them talking late into the night. When she finally came down, Sue was not far behind.

"It's too late for breakfast. Shall I make brunch?" asked Bill.

"Sounds great," was the joint sleepy response.

"I should warn you that Dad's idea of brunch is just breakfast eaten late."

"Don't worry. I've never eaten much in the morning. Cereal and coffee will do me if that's ok?"

It had been a long time since Sue tasted real coffee, and the smell from the percolator pushed any thoughts of food to the back of her mind.

"We'll have the full works thanks, Dad. Boiled egg, cereal, toast, and jam."

What brunch lacked in variety was made up for in quantity, with enough boiled eggs to keep them bound for a week. Bill

waited patiently until they had finished eating before launching into the story of his adventure the previous day. An hour passed in the blink of an eye. When Bill picked up a ketchup bottle and started using it as a microphone whilst strutting up and down the kitchen demonstrating Tim's Mick Jagger impersonation, they lost all control and agreed on a five-minute break to recover. The story gradually petered out, leading to that inevitable moment when laughter is replaced by awkward silence. It was a good opportunity for Sue to say what had to be said.

"I've had such a great time with you and am very grateful, but it is time I went. I don't want to take advantage of your kindness."

Rachel and Bill were taken by surprise. Sue had seamlessly woven herself into their lives, so they had forgotten her situation. Bill was aware of the connection between her and Rachel and with his daughter's well-being always foremost in his mind, the last thing he wanted was for Sue to leave.

"Don't be silly. You are more than welcome here until you get yourself sorted out. I expect Rachel has told you about her situation? You will be doing us both a favour if you stay. Come and go as you want. You can treat this place as your home."

For as long as Sue could remember, she had repressed any emotion that might be construed as weakness. Those few kind and sincere words broke down the barrier she had spent half her life building and she cried as if a dam had burst. *What heartache this poor girl must have endured*, thought Rachel as she put her arm around her, holding back her own tears of compassion.

"I'm so sorry," said Sue. "I don't know what has come over me."

She wanted to tell them that it wasn't just their kindness that had affected her so deeply, but the realisation of what it was to be a family. She knew her parents had loved her, but they were three related people living together, not a close family. That's

what she wanted to tell them, but it sounded hopelessly needy, so she kept it to herself as she had always done.

“If you are sure?”

“Of course we are sure,” said Rachel, who was happy that the invitation had come from her father. “Trust me, if Dad didn’t want you to stay, you wouldn’t be sitting there now. He is not known for his tact.”

Bill pretending to be hurt said, “What do you mean by that? I can be tactful.”

“Oh, yeah. Like the time your cousin came to visit. When she left you said, *come and see us again, but not too soon.*”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that... OK, maybe a little bit. I was just saying...”

“Don’t worry Dad, I know what you meant but most people wouldn’t.”

“That’s settled then. You’ll stay with us for now?” asked Bill.

“OK then, thanks. I really appreciate it.”

Sue started to clear the breakfast things away, and with Rachel feeling obliged to help, Bill smiled at her having to acknowledge that kitchen fairies didn’t really exist. She poked her tongue out at him defiantly.

After quitting her job by text message, Sue announced that with their approval, she would spend the rest of the morning soaking in the bath. That afternoon Bill went for his usual coffee in the North Lanes, leaving the girls with the house to themselves. Rachel had always worked very hard during the day, so it made a pleasant change to relax and get to know her new friend. They were chatting about nothing over a pot of tea that both drank from habit rather than desire, when Rachel approached the delicate subject of Sue’s homelessness.

“I will tell you on one condition,” said Sue. “It’s a lovely day. We have to sit on the front step while I tell you.”

Rachel’s face dropped as she said in a voice that could hardly be heard.

“You know I can’t.”

“Don’t worry. Believe me, I know what you are going through. I will sit on the front step, and you join me when you are ready. Take as long as you like.”

Sue didn’t wait for a response but opened the front door and sat on the step, leaving the door half-open. Rachel stood there frozen. With all her strength, she picked up her tea and walked slowly towards the door. With eyes closed, she felt her way along the wall until Sue held her arm and gently guided her to the step where she sat. Rachel opened her eyes and closed them again, waiting for the adrenaline rush that invariably ended all attempts at trying to take back control of her life. Sue held her hand as she spoke gently.

“Breathe slowly... deeply.”

She exaggerated her breathing so Rachel could follow. They took deep breaths together.

“Fast inhale... slow exhale. In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

The huge wave of fear that had first come over Rachel, slowly dissipated. She knew of this breathing technique and had tried it many times with little effect, but doing it with Sue, it seemed different. Now and then a wave reappeared, but they grew smaller, and she began to accept that they would soon pass and be replaced by calm. Gradually, the gap between waves became longer until eventually there was only a gentle ripple. Sue could see what was happening and knew how important it was to be patient.

“There’s no rush. Let’s just sit here a while and say nothing. If at any time you feel bad, just go back in. There’s no pressure.”

They sat for ages in silence and twice Rachel was on the verge of going indoors, but she fought against it stronger than she had ever done before. She felt embarrassed.

“You must think me so silly.”

“Believe me, I don’t. You know I was in the newspapers once. A woman was being attacked by a man in the street, and I launched into him like a wild animal. When they finally pulled me off, they had to take him to a hospital. Everyone said how brave I was, which was rubbish. Real bravery comes from conquering fear, not from following instinct. To be honest, I think it was more about me seizing the opportunity to let off steam and I felt great for the rest of the day. Sitting on this step and facing your fear is far braver than anything I have ever done.”

“How do you know about all this?” asked Rachel.

It was the perfect cue for Sue to tell her story.

She was an only child in a family that on the surface appeared to be happy. Her father was an honourable man but very strict in his opinions which he presented as facts. In calling her Bruce, it might be assumed that he possessed a streak of playful mischief or even humour, but that was not the case. His father had been a strong believer in tough love, so he followed the example laid down as law in the way sons have done for generations. Despite his apparent detachment, Sue adored her father and wouldn’t have a thing said about him. She loved her mother of course but as often happens during teenage years, reason is replaced by the illusion of independence while the mother stands in the middle.

Her mother had a gift with computers, and after a few years with British Airways she took a local job as network manager at a large college. It was during the time when computers were

starting to be introduced in schools with large sums of money allocated for equipment but very little for support. She was really good at her job, and despite management incompetence, she managed to take the school from being one of the worst networks in the country, to one of the best. The problem was, the more competent staff became with technology, the more of it they wanted but the management wasn't prepared to pay for extra support staff to go with it. The pressure became intolerable and her mental health deteriorated. Despite the college being perfectly aware of her situation, they continued to push her until she had a complete breakdown. They were not able to sack her, so the management changed her job title and made her redundant. It was obviously unfair, and she could have fought to keep her job, but she just didn't have the strength. Thinking that all she needed was a few weeks rest, she was surprised to find the sudden absence of pressure made her feel worse which resulted in depression and agoraphobia. Sue's father was so angry at the way the college had treated her that he found a solicitor willing to take the college to court on a no win no fee basis. Despite having a strong case that was supported by her mother's line manager, the case was dropped by the solicitor for no reason.

It took two years before her mother recovered enough to start looking for another job but as soon as employers discovered that she had started court proceedings against her last employer, they lost interest. She was offered only the most menial employment, and ironically the lack of pressure proved to be almost as damaging as the excess of it. Depression is a terrifying illness in itself but combined with a lack of hope, it becomes life-threatening. By now, Sue's career as a graphic designer was thriving so she no longer had the time or patience with her mother's illness which isolated her even more. One day, Sue returned home from work to find her mother had hanged herself from the bannister rails.

“I am so sorry to hear that. How awful,” said Rachel.

Sue’s mood darkened.

“The only thing that got me through was the anger I felt with my dad. Mum never wanted to go to a solicitor, but he insisted. During her first breakdown, Dad was understanding with her, but he soon lost patience and kept telling her to pull herself together. After Mum died, I couldn’t bear to be in the same room as him, so I went to stay with a friend. I was in a really bad place and must have been unbearable to live with, so we fell out. I lost my job and didn’t want to work with computers anymore after I saw what they had done to my mum. I have been trying to put my life back together ever since. The first few years I was too angry to think about the future, but eventually, I got a job in a café and started saving for a deposit on a flat. The trouble was, that café owner paid me so little, I wasn’t making much progress.”

“I’ll think twice before I feel sorry for myself in future. You’ve made me realise how much I have to be thankful for.”

“You have your own problems. How are you feeling now?” asked Sue, wanting to return to the present.

To Rachel’s surprise, she had been listening so intently that she had become oblivious to the world outside. She focused on the street in front of her and realised the fear she felt only half an hour earlier was no longer there.

“I am OK,” said Rachel surprised with herself, “but there is one thing I would really like you to do for me.”

“Of course. What is that?”

“Can you bring me a cushion. I have lost all feeling in my bum.”

Sue was accustomed to sitting on cold stone steps, so it didn’t bother her, but she went to the living room and returned with two cushions in a show of posterial solidarity.

“From what I gather, your mother also passed away?” asked Sue.

“That’s right. She died from breast cancer a few weeks ago, but she was ill for a long time. It was a relief not to see her suffering anymore.”

“At least you still have your dad. You seem to have a really good relationship with him.”

“Yes, I do, although he has always felt more like a friend than a dad. I don’t remember him ever telling me what to do, and I think he comes to me for advice more than the other way around. He is amazingly clever in some ways and like a child in others. His entire life always revolved around his family, but now there is only me and our marionettes. I worry that he needs something more.”

Bill suddenly appeared at the bottom of the stairs and could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Rachel sitting on the front step. He thought it best not to make a big thing of it so greeted them and went indoors.

The routine was the same every day with Bill going out for coffee in the afternoon, while the girls sat and talked on the front step. One day, Rachel appeared to be so comfortable that Sue thought it was time to take it a stage further.

“You do know what agoraphobia is, don’t you?” asked Sue.

“Like most people, I used to think it was the fear of open spaces until one of my many therapists explained it was the fear of being in a place where I might lose control.”

“So do you understand that there are places outside your house where you might feel safe?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it but even if that is correct, how would I get to those places if I can’t leave the house?”

“Is that your car in the drive?” asked Sue.

“It’s Dad’s, but he rarely uses it.”

“It’s only a few feet away. Do you think you could make it to the car?”

“I don’t understand?”

“I discovered with my mum that it wasn’t being in open spaces that made her anxious but being outside her safe zone. This step is now one of your safe zones. Mum and I found out by accident one day that the car was one of her safe zones.”

Rachel was far from convinced but was prepared to try anything.

“I’ll give it a try, but I don’t know if you are insured to drive Dad’s car.”

“No, we won’t be going anywhere. We’ll just sit there and chat like we do here.”

Rachel had tried so many different therapies, but they all came to nothing. How was it that this strange woman had burst into her life and filled her head with so many possibilities? She went to get the keys and returned.

“Take my arm,” ordered Sue.

Rachel complied and although terrified, she was determined to go through with it. They moved slowly towards the car while she fought the overwhelming desire to run back to the house.

“Breathe deeply, slowly.”

Sue opened the passenger door for Rachel, and when she was safely inside, she went around to the driver’s seat. To Rachel’s great surprise, as soon as she was seated, the fear drained from her, and she felt the same as if she was sitting on the front step.

“You see Rachel. The car is another is one of your safe places, and the beauty is, in a car, you can go anywhere. We can drive somewhere, and you can try getting out. As long as we

don't go far from the car you know you have a safe place to escape to."

Rachel was filled with excitement at the thought of her imprisonment coming to an end.

"Let's go now."

Rachel's courage was running away with her.

"Better to leave it until tomorrow. It is essential that we don't rush things and risk a setback. Let's go back in now. You need time to let your success soak in."

The next day, Sue asked Bill to make sure she was insured to drive his car and he couldn't get to the phone quickly enough. There was nothing in the world he wanted more than to see his precious daughter lead a normal life again.

Over the next couple of weeks, they went on regular trips, and each day Rachel pushed herself a little further until one day they managed to have lunch in a garden pub. It wasn't all plain sailing though. Rachel was frequently consumed by small waves of fear, but each time she came through them it made her more confident. Together they created a map of safe zones and activities and were working on Rachel's physical barriers. They parked on a side road at the Hove Lagoon and walked across the large grass area towards the sea. At first, they only walked fifty yards before needing to return to the car, but gradually they extended the distance like athletes pushing themselves just that little bit harder every day. Rachel was still far from being out of the woods though. Some of her favourite activities, like going to the cinema, were still too much for her. They tried one night, but as soon as the lights went out she panicked and had to leave. Despite the setback, it was encouraging that it hadn't led to a full-scale panic attack and as soon as Rachel was back in the car, she felt alright. Together they were discovering that the road to long-term recovery was paved with a thousand tiny victories.

Bill missed having Rachel about the house but was delighted with the change in her and knew it was all down to Sue. On the upside, he started to go out more and had met Tim several times to discuss the development of their project. At first, Tim was concerned with the physical capabilities of the marionettes and whether they were able to carry out actions required by his stories, but he had yet to ask for something that Bill couldn't produce. Bill was not only a great craftsman but an imaginative inventor and relished any challenge that Tim put to him.

Bill also went to London to visit Raymond a few times and a strong friendship was developing between them. On one visit, Bill suggested that Raymond's mother join them at a restaurant for dinner. Raymond advised against it as his mother's eccentricity might not be compatible with the exclusive restaurant they had chosen, but that just made Bill more determined than ever. There was nothing he liked more than getting up the noses of those who held them aloft.

Whether it was a supermarket or a fine dining restaurant, Rainbow always had to make a grand entrance, so she insisted that Raymond and Bill get to the restaurant half an hour before her. Rainbow arrived wearing a two-part costume, part Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Nightmare Coat, and part Rocky Horror Show. She was painfully thin with long blond hair, and although she was still very attractive, her skin had been ravaged by overexposure to the sun. She refused to walk anywhere without music and insisted that her vintage radio headphones were better than any new-fangled gizmo. The headphones had a large extendible ariel on either side so the overall effect was that of someone having recently landed from planet Zorko. If it hadn't been for Rainbow's name being on the guest list, the restaurant hostess would have had no hesitation in calling security.

Once Bill had recovered from the initial shock and the *I warned you* look from Raymond, it settled down into a delightful evening. Rainbow formed the most unlikely alliances amongst

the other diners, and although they were a little overpowered by her radical use of colour, they soon became enamoured by her innocence and lack of pretension. When a birthday cake arrived at another table, Rainbow elected herself leader of the procession and directed the happy birthday song into a version that for once sounded quite good. For her finale she treated her fellow diners to an exhibition of one of her own choreographies, *Tripping with Butterflies*, in which she played not only chief butterfly but all the other little butterflies as well. As for Raymond, he was used to his mother's eccentricities, and these days, the scales of parental accountability tipped firmly towards pride rather than embarrassment.

Sue was not only proving to be a treasured friend to Rachel but also a valuable member of the team. Her love for the marionettes and their costumes had helped her overcome her hatred of computers. Although her primary skill was in graphic design, she also had a good knowledge of website development and what she didn't know, she soon learnt. She developed a website that not only displayed their large collection but also gave users the opportunity to dress the marionettes themselves. It was a huge project, but she found it far more satisfying than anything she had done before. Bill was delighted with the website and insisted on paying her for the work. As far as he was concerned, he would have given her a blank cheque, but she refused to accept any payment. Eventually, they came to an agreement where apart from food and accommodation, she would receive a small salary, so at least she had financial independence. It was during one of their regular morning coffee meetings that Bill plucked up the courage to ask Sue,

“There's one thing that has been puzzling me. What's with all these different accents you have? The first time we met, it was French, then when you got angry with Tim, it was American. In the shop doorway, it was cockney, and since you've been staying here, you have no particular accent.”

Sue smiled.

“You’ve noticed, have you? The honest answer is I have no idea. I’ve done it all my life and I don’t know when it’s happening. When I was young, it got so bad that my parents sent me to a shrink. The only thing the shrink could come up with was that I was attention-seeking. That was rubbish as I’ve spent most of my life trying to avoid being noticed.”

“How strange. Could it be that your accent changes when you are stressed or unhappy?”

“Maybe, but like I said, I have no idea when I’m doing it. That’s another reason I have trouble forming relationships, it makes people uncomfortable.”

“So when you played the part of Mary that first night, you weren’t aware you had a perfect Irish accent?” asked Bill.

“That’s where it gets even stranger. Yes, I was aware, but it wasn’t a conscious action, it just came out, and for the first time I realised I was doing it.”

“So at the pub last week when you got angry with that man who was pestering us, were you aware that you abused him with a German accent?” asked Rachel.

Sue hid her face in embarrassment.

“I didn’t, did I? So that’s why he told me to piss off back to Germany? I was wondering about that.”

CHAPTER 12



Bill and Tim's weekly fishing routine remained the same. Bill arrived first and Tim came two hours later. They greeted each other and then sat in fishless silence until lunchtime. Tim would pick up his chair and sit beside Bill while they ate lunch. Tim would give an update on their project, and Bill, an update on Rachel's progress.

Tim was working on a series of twelve songs to build videos around. Many of the songs had already been written and just needed to be adapted, while others were written especially for the marionettes they had mutually agreed to include. He had just finished a song for the story they created the first night, and the title *The Gift Inside* was agreed. The concept behind the song was that we all have a special gift within us and just need to find it. Bill and Rachel were busy making the small alterations to their collection that Tim had requested. They were all very excited about the project and Raymond was even taking voice coaching lessons to improve his confidence.

It was on one of their fishing days that Tim broke tradition and moved his chair next to Bill soon after setting up instead of waiting until lunchtime.

“Do you think Rachel could manage a live performance?” asked Tim. Bill looked concerned.

“I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it. She has been doing so well, I would hate for her to have a setback.”

“She is ok in a car now, isn’t she?”

“Yes, no problem at all. They are always going out on trips these days. As long as there are not too many people and the car is close by, she is fine.”

“How about if you build a portable stage with a closed area at the back. We can position the stage on-site beforehand and take the car right up to it, so she walks straight from the car, to backstage?” asked Tim.

“I suppose it could work. What brought this on? I thought we were working towards videos?”

“Yes, that plan hasn’t changed, but a friend of mine runs the Arundel Festival.”

“Dave Walker? Yes, I know him.”

“I’ve known him for years. He loves my music and booked me for the festival a few times. I was telling him about our project, and he said how much he would like to include it in the Arundel Festival this year. I went to Arundel to check it out and found a perfect place to put the stage so we can drive right up to it.”

“Sounds great, but I’ll have to run it past the girls and see what they think,” said Bill.

Tim was relieved that his idea wasn’t rejected outright and returned to his fishing spot.

Arundel is a small market town twenty miles from Brighton, and its festival has become one of the most popular in the UK. For ten days in August every year, they offer a wide range of attractions as well as local artists opening their homes to the general public. Entertainment of all kinds is featured, and as the organisers are always looking for something different, a puppet show with live music sounded like a great attraction for that year. They knew Tim would not be involved in anything unless it was of a very high standard.

That night, Bill explained the plan to Rachel and Sue. He expected nervousness and indecision, but he was surprised to see them both explode with excitement. Rachel even suggested doing the performance without the special stage, but that was out of the question. As in all matters, her health came first, and they didn't want any setbacks.

“That's settled then. The stage is already assembled in my head so it will only take a few days to make.”

Bill was in his element for the rest of the week. Under normal circumstances, he would have liked to spend a year working on it, carving intricate patterns and complicated scenery but even in the few days at his disposal he produced something far more elaborate than was necessary. They drove to Arundel for a dry run and put the stage in position at one end of a large field opposite the castle. Being next to a hedge, they could section off an area for their car and stage, so there was no danger of people getting too close to them. Rachel arrived later and had no problem going from the car to the back of the stage, where she felt perfectly comfortable.

They celebrated the success of the dry run with a lunch at the Black Rabbit pub. Rachel still felt uncomfortable being in crowded places unless she was close to an exit. It was unlikely she would use it, but she just needed to know it was there. She was frustrated at being subject to so many restrictions so she had

to keep reminding herself how far she had come and that it would be a slow process to full recovery.

It seemed natural to Bill that they should do several rehearsals before the big day, but to his surprise, Tim was against it.

“Something special happened that first night and we need to reproduce it. That won’t happen if we over-rehearse. Mistakes can be covered up and usually go unnoticed, but there is nothing that destroys a performance like staleness,” explained Tim.

Tim was concerned that their expectation might be too high. He had done many similar events where people just wander past on their way towards the well-known acts.

They discussed what changes needed to be made since the story was first created. As it was no longer an improvisation, they were able to make sure everything they needed was close to hand on the day. Despite Tim being in the music business for decades, he had virtually no contacts and was hopeless at networking. What fans he did have were scattered around the globe, so it was agreed that Bill would take on the job of promotion, a job he accepted with a casualness that made Tim wonder if he understood what was involved.

As the big day approached, they were all concerned that Rachel might start to get anxious, but she seemed to cope well now that she had the tools to deal with the anxiety that still troubled her, but no longer dominated her life.

On the day of the performance, they all breathed a sigh of relief when they woke up to a cloudless sky. Tim and Bill got there three hours early to make sure everything was in place and working well. Sue and Rachel arrived two hours later and sat at the back of the stage where there was no view of the audience in case it unsettled Rachel. Unknown to Tim, Bill had hired the best PA system and sound engineers he could find and four

cameramen to record a video. There was even a huge screen at the side of the stage for those at the back who might have trouble seeing. Tim felt bad about what it must have cost Bill and would have advised against such expenditure for what was likely to be just a few dozen people, but Bill had done it entirely off his own back.

The early signs for a reasonable audience were good, but as the start time grew nearer, the space in front of them filled out so quickly, it was clear that something unusual was happening. With half an hour left before the performance was due to start, Rainbow appeared from nowhere. She started patrolling the perimeter of the field with the determination of a sheepdog going from side to side, practically pushing people towards the stage. No one had asked her to do it, it was just that she rarely missed an opportunity of being in control and never failed to get the result she wanted. With the large field at almost full capacity, she went to the front of the stage and picked up Tim's microphone from the stand. In his preoccupation with the music, Tim had stupidly forgotten to hire someone to introduce them, and although he knew nothing about Raymond's mother, he did know a woman with confidence when he saw one, so allowed her to continue.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The performance will be starting shortly. Can we please have as many children as possible sitting on the grass at the front."

Children moved forward while the vacant spaces they left behind were quickly filled. She had intended to call stragglers from the far end of the field to come forward, but it was not necessary as there appeared to be no sign of life outside the audience.

The stage was set, but there was a problem. All the focus had been on whether Rachel's nerves would hold up, but it was Raymond who was reduced to a quivering jelly. Rainbow had

anticipated this and was ready with some motherly action, but first, she needed to distract the audience's attention.

"Tim, start your warm-up music," she ordered.

When Tim plucked his first note, it was like an electric shock had passed through the audience, and there was deathly quiet. He started to improvise although no one would have known, as what he played was so melodic. He waited for Rainbow to give the cue to start.

Rainbow put her hand on Raymond's cheek as she spoke.

"Raymond, look at me. Do you remember when you were young, and you were afraid alligators were going to come and eat you during the night?"

"No, I wasn't."

Raymond was not being entirely honest.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. All kids are scared of something, but they learn that there is nothing to be afraid of. Most adults are scared of performing in public, but it is just the alligator inside them."

She might as well have recited the phone book as it was the tranquillity in her voice that took effect and not her words.

"Breathe in... Breathe out... Breathe in... Breathe out..."

Raymond followed her.

"I will sit here by your feet. When the time comes for you to speak, you will be fearless."

Decades dissolved before Raymond's eyes and he looked at his mother with a love that gave them both strength.

"Ok Mum."

Sue and Raymond were sitting on chairs facing the stage, each with a microphone in front of them. Bill was standing side stage and Rachel called from backstage to confirm she was ready. The sheer number of people in front of Tim was

staggering, but it had no effect on his playing. When Rainbow gave him the cue, he started to build up tension by gradually increasing the volume into a crescendo, followed by a long rasping arpeggio played with the tip of his fingernail. It was Raymond's cue to begin.

Raymond remained in his chair, and with the confidence, his mother's words gave him, he found a voice inside that he never knew existed.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and children. The Olivia Puppet Theatre would like to introduce their debut performance of *The Gift Inside*. For those who doubt that a world lies between that which we see, and that which we feel, I ask you to forget all that you know. It is only then you will truly see what is there before your eyes.”

Tim lightened the mood in preparation for Mary's grand entrance. The audience expectation could be felt it was so strong. For Tim, who had spent most of his life performing while people talked and laughed, it was bizarre to see so many people watching in total silence. He gave Sue a cue to begin her narration.

“Once upon a time, in a tiny village on the coast of Ireland lived a young girl called Mary...”

The performance continued with Tim weaving music between gaps in the dialogue. During the long walk to Dublin, he sang verses from the song he wrote especially for the performance. Mary sat on a tree trunk and her dog Jasper, knowing how sad his master was tried to cheer her up by playing with a stick. Thanks to some ingenious engineering from Bill, Jasper was able to throw and fetch the stick by himself. The audience adored it.

The performance lasted half an hour and concluded with an Irish jig played at the wedding. When the final chord sounded, the roar from the audience could be heard for miles around.

A SINGLE TEAR

Mary and Tom took a bow and walked off, but the audience demanded more. Tim started playing the Irish jig again, so Mary and Tom returned to the stage and continued dancing. The entire audience moved to the beat of the music and Rainbow started dancing and dragging people to the front to join in. The children were thrilled when Bill walked Jasper along the front so they could stroke him, and they screamed with delight when he jumped onto their laps and started licking them. At last, the music came to an end and the marionettes took another bow.

Tim and Bill walked to the front and took their bow, followed by Raymond and Sue. The audience still demanded more but to no avail. The cheering began to die down and people started to drift away, knowing they had seen something very special that day. There were some in the audience that thought it strange that everyone took a bow except the puppet master, but it was not a thought they dwelled on. Rachel had intended to take a bow but was so exhausted and overcome by emotion that she just had to sit down. Sue went backstage to see if she was ok and was shocked to see her crying but relieved to discover they were tears of happiness.

They all returned to Bill's house where a case of champagne was ready to toast the success of the Olivia Puppet Company.

CHAPTER 13



Robert rose at his usual time, unable to concentrate on his usual morning routine. He put yoghurt in his coffee instead of his muesli, and after unplugging his mobile phone from the charger, he put it in the fridge. He picked up a newspaper, and having spent twenty minutes reading the same paragraph, he knew there was no point in starting the crossword. He normally relished this time to himself before Ruth joined him, but today he needed her. To his relief, she rose a little earlier than usual, and they hugged each other as they had done most mornings for the past 45 years of a happy marriage. She walked sleepily to the fridge for her usual apple juice wake-me-up.

“Why is your phone in the fridge?”

She laughed and handed it to him. It wasn't an unusual occurrence. When there was something heavy on Robert's mind, his hands became disconnected from his brain, and he put things in the strangest of places. She once found his car keys in the teapot.

As usual, she made a bowl of cut fruit and yoghurt and sat at the table with Robert. It was a large kitchen diner with patio doors opening onto a garden the size of a small park. Robert was torn between the need to wait a reasonable amount of time for Ruth to wake up and the desire to tell her about the previous afternoon. Ten minutes of small talk later, she put down her spoon.

“OK. Now you can tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Who said there was something on my mind?”

“Isn’t there?”

“No.”

The upward inflexion in his voice said yes.

“That’s Ok then. Can you pass the newspaper please.”

“Actually, now you come to mention it, there is something.”

He left the newspaper untouched.

“Yes?”

Her tone told him to stop messing around and spit it out.

“You know I went to the Arundel Festival yesterday?”

“Yes. How was it?”

“The festival was good, but there was a puppet show that was really quite remarkable. I can’t get it off my mind.”

“Don’t tell me. You approached them and asked if you could represent them?”

That had been the scenario for decades.

“No. I was going to, but then I stopped myself. You know I want to retire soon. The last thing I want is to take on a new act and add to my commitments instead of reducing them.”

“Excellent, so you are not going to represent them?”

“But then on the drive home, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I know I’ve made a lot of money and people think of me as

being very successful, but in all those years only one of my artists had something truly special, and you know what happened to him.”

It was a subject they tried not to talk about.

“So, you are going to represent them?” asked Ruth, continuing to play with him.

“I don’t know. I really do want a peaceful life, but it would be great to go out with a big bang.”

Ruth smiled. She knew he had already made up his mind and just wanted her approval despite the fact she had never failed to support him in all their years together.

“What do you think?” asked Robert.

It had been a long time since she had seen such enthusiasm in his eyes.

“I think you should get showered and get on your way, but you should make a firm commitment to yourself that this will be your last project.”

He smiled and hugged her on route to his office on the other side of the house. There were several filing cabinets all meticulously organised. He opened a drawer from a cabinet marked “B List” and flicked through some files until he came to the one he wanted, *Tim Taylor, Singer-Songwriter*. He found Tim’s address and was relieved to find that an internet search confirmed it was still valid. Half an hour later, he pulled out the driveway of his large detached house in Esher and made his way to Shoreham in Sussex.

CHAPTER 14



Tim woke early having had difficulty sleeping. It was unusual for him, but the previous day's events kept repeating themselves in his head. Until then, he had been perfectly content to write and produce songs, and as long as he was happy with them, that was enough for him. Following the Arundel performance, he knew they had something special, but he had thought that so many times before and nothing ever came from it. A part of him was still not sure he even wanted success at this time in his life as it was bound to replace freedom and contentment with stress and commitment.

Tim was normally full of ideas and keen to get back to his studio, but with his head full of conflicting thoughts he decided the best thing to do was to go for a walk. Like magic, he was only gone fifteen minutes when his mind returned to the series of videos he was working on. He and Bill were too old to start touring, so video production was definitely the way to go. After only one coffee stop he made his way home, and as he turned into his street, he noticed someone sitting in a car a few yards from his house. He thought nothing more about it and after

opening his front door, he picked up the letters waiting patiently on the floor. Despite his life being so uneventful in recent years, he had never lost the buzz of letters arriving and the expectation of a pleasant surprise, but the most exciting letter was a reminder that his annual eye test was due. He began the process of preparing himself mentally to start work as although he loved writing and producing music, he wasn't so keen on getting started in the morning. He was on his third and final approach to the studio door when the front doorbell rang. The rarity of it gave him a start. He answered the door and recognised the man as being the one sitting in the car. He looked familiar.

“Good Morning. My name is Robert Blackwood.”

Tim stared in disbelief when it dawned on him who the man was.

“I know who you are. I'm just wondering what you're are doing here?” asked Tim, sounding ruder than intended.

“If I might be allowed in, I will tell you.”

Tim snapped out of his stupor and led Robert to the living room.

“I'm sorry. It's just that I have fantasised about this scene for so many years, it's hard to believe I'm not dreaming. Please sit down. Would you like tea, coffee, juice, or something stronger?”

“Tea will be fine thanks. White, no sugar.”

Tim returned shortly with tea for two. He would have preferred something stronger to steady his nerves but didn't want to give the wrong impression.

“I must have sent you a hundred tapes over the years,” said Tim.

Robert Smiled.

“Eighteen tapes and four CDs to be precise. You might have sent emails as well, but to be honest, they go automatically to junk these days.”

Tim was confused. As he had never had a response he always assumed his tapes ended up in the rubbish bin, so why would one of the country's most successful managers have a record of everything he had sent? Robert decided it was time to stop teasing.

"I saw you at the Arundel Festival yesterday."

This was certainly Tim's day for surprises.

"Have you moved into the area then?"

"No, I still live in Esher. I went specially to see you perform."

Tim's surprise turned to incredulity.

"How did you even know about it?" he asked.

"It was hard to miss the full-page advert in Time Out."

"It was in Time Out?"

"You didn't know?"

Now it was Robert's turn to be confused.

"Not a clue. I knew Bill was going to do some promotion, but I thought it would be a couple of adverts in the local papers."

"It was on several radio stations as well. It must have cost him a fortune."

"I know he's not short of money, but I wasn't expecting him to go to those lengths."

Now Tim understood why so many people had turned up at Arundel. No unknown act would ever get such a turnout without a lot of expensive promotion.

"So, you are interested in puppet shows now?" asked Tim.

"Not by themselves, but in collaboration with you, very much so. You will be surprised to know I have been following your career from the beginning."

“But I wrote to you dozens of times through the years and never had a reply. I assumed you hated my music.”

“On the contrary. I always thought it was great.”

He reeled off a list of the songs that Tim had sent decades earlier.

“Sorry, I am really confused here,” said Tim.

“No, I’m sorry, let me explain. Imagine I receive a hundred cassettes a week from artists looking for management. Sixty of them will be unbelievably bad and thirty will be from artists good enough to work in pubs and clubs but nothing more. If a manager is lucky, once in a lifetime he might discover one of those rare breeds who are born to be stars, artists like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder. Any artist with such extreme talent is guaranteed success, but they usually come with strings attached. They might be volatile, have drug problems, contractual obligations, or something of that nature. In all my years in the business, I only ever found one person like that.”

“Fox Daley.”

“That’s right. I worked so hard and invested half my savings getting him established and just when it started to pay off for both of us... well I am sure you know what happened.”

“He overdosed.”

Tim knew the story well.

“That’s right. He was clean when he first came to me, otherwise I would never have gone near him. He was the last person I expected to self-destruct.”

“Yes, it was very sad. But going back to the one hundred cassettes. What about the remaining ten?” asked Tim.

“That’s where you come in. No disrespect, you are not in the same league as the artists I mentioned, but you definitely deserved a place in the small pile that is the bread and butter of a good manager. Your cassettes were catalogued and kept in my

keep your eye on cabinet. I must admit I have never known anyone surface from that cabinet after being there for so many years. In that cabinet are the artists that are very talented but have nothing to hang it on. For me to promote someone I need something to work with to get publicity. In the old days, it was much easier as there was a multitude of gimmicks yet to be discovered. The Beatles are one of the most successful bands of all time, but when they started, it was not their music that everyone was talked about, but their haircut which unbelievably was regarded as radical at the time. People would have paid to watch Mick Jagger prancing up and down the stage like a chicken on LSD even without the music. Do you remember Gale Blush?"

"The singer who stripped naked in court during her trial for shoplifting?"

"That's right. By a remarkable *coincidence*, there was a reporter in court at the time, and it made the papers the next day which led to a record deal. For heaven's sake, her father was a banker, he could have bought her the shop if she'd asked for it. It was a publicity stunt. Then a year later, she was complaining that the press wouldn't leave her alone. The problem now is that the general public has seen it all before, it's almost impossible to find anything new."

"So you want me to get myself arrested and strip naked in court?" asked Tim, smiling.

"Thank you for that image."

It took Robert a few seconds to recover.

"The point I am trying to make, is your talent was never any use to me without an angle, but now you have one; the puppet show."

Tim was under no illusion about how show business worked, but it was a sobering thought that all his experience and talent came to nothing without a bunch of puppets to back them up.

There was no resentment in his thoughts, only irony. He loved the puppets and certainly didn't regard the talent behind them as being inferior to his. He was in awe of Bill and Rachel and thought himself lucky to be collaborating with them, but it was hard to stomach the fact that without them he was worth nothing to the profession he had devoted his life to.

"Have you seen the YouTube video of the Arundel performance?" asked Robert.

"No. I know Bill had a video made but we haven't even seen it yet, let alone release it."

"This is a mobile phone video from someone in the audience."

"It was so intense yesterday I needed to clear my head this morning. I haven't looked at my computer or even turned my phone on yet. Excuse me."

Tim retrieved his phone from the bedroom and turned it on while Robert gave him more details.

"I have been monitoring the video since last night. You've had over a million hits in less than twenty-four hours. Despite its poor quality, it's gone viral."

It was hard for Tim to take in. He generally had four or five hits a week for his entire YouTube channel. It was time for Robert to get down to business.

"I'll be honest with you. Your act has tremendous potential if handled right, and in the next few days, you are going to be inundated with offers. The difference between them and me is you can trust me entirely. Ask any of my acts and they will all vouch for me."

Tim didn't need to ask anyone. He knew what a good reputation Robert Blackwood had, which is why he was the first choice of any artist looking for management but the least likely to take them on.

“There is no need for that, I know about your reputation. What do you have in mind?”

“I suggest we start with a series of videos and I can guarantee a worldwide distribution deal.”

“That’s lucky. I have already been working on some.”

“It’s not luck is it? You are experienced enough to know that video is the natural progression for this kind of project.”

Tim’s phone rang. People rarely called him these days, and as he didn’t recognise the number, he rejected the call. What with Robert’s reputation and their obvious rapport there was no question of considering anyone else to represent him. Robert smiled when he saw the call being rejected and felt the old familiar buzz he used to get when something big was about to happen.

“I will get you a record deal with one of the majors, and a publishing deal for all your existing material. You have at least seven or eight albums worth of material to produce when the time is right, and the publisher will also get it recorded by other artists. This is going to be my last big project, so I’m going to put everything into it, but it does mean I need sole representation for you and the puppet show.”

Tim knew he was supposed to play it cool, but his reply came long before he engaged his brain.

“That’s ok with me.”

He had long ago given up hope of making any money from his music, so he was certainly not going to start dictating terms. He had owned 100 per cent of nothing for far too long.

“About the YouTube video,” asked Tim, “wouldn’t it be better to release our professionally filmed video rather than have people watching the mobile phone version that was uploaded?”

“No, much better to hold that in reserve until the time is right. You never know when it might come in useful. It is

irritating that someone is making money from your work, but in the long run, they are doing you a favour.”

They shook hands enthusiastically on the deal.

“I need to confirm it with Bill and Rachel first, but I know that won’t be a problem. Are you ok to go and see them now?” asked Tim.

“Perfect. It will be good to meet everyone.”

Tim phoned Bill who was beside himself with excitement and fortunately Raymond was still there from the night before so Robert could meet them all.

Bill opened the door and showed them into the living room where they were all waiting to hear Robert’s proposal. After Tim’s phone call, they had googled Robert Blackwood, so they knew how lucky they were to have him represent them, and Bill, not being one to mess around, immediately accepted his proposal. To Robert’s surprise, no one said a word about percentages which was partly through trusting him but mainly because they weren’t interested. They were all in the fortunate position of having everything they wanted except recognition. Robert presented the contracts and insisted they had a solicitor look through them, but they all signed without a second thought.

“I appreciate your trust in me, but I’d feel more comfortable if you took legal advice,” advised Robert. Rachel was able to reassure him.

“You won’t have noticed, but Dad did take a quick look at the contract, and there’s nothing that gets past him.”

Bill could read a contract or balance sheet like most people read a TV page, one glance, and he knew exactly what it contained.

“There is something that you should know before we continue though,” said Bill.

“What is that?” asked Robert.

Bill explained Rachel’s condition and that although she had made great progress, they would not do anything that jeopardised her recovery. The Arundel Festival had been carefully controlled, and there was no question of making any appearance without exercising the same level of caution. Robert listened with genuine compassion.

“I am sorry to hear that, Rachel. My brother battled with severe depression all his life so believe me, I understand and will do everything I can to protect you.”

And so it was settled. After the customary handshakes and a glass of champagne, Bill insisted on showing off their collection. For Robert, walking through the door of the workshop was like walking into management heaven. He had only ever seen the marionettes from a distant, but now he was up close, he realised he was in the presence of genius. He had always been a confident man, knowing he could rise to any occasion, but for the first time, he was concerned about whether he could do justice to such exquisite works of art. He sat in a chair in the centre of the room while Rachel demonstrated a selection of her favourites and was utterly captivated.

Downstairs, final arrangements were made with an approximate timeline, and it was agreed that Robert would arrange a film crew for the videos when they were ready. Whatever they needed, they would have, and they would get the best in the business.

Robert returned to Esher to make a start on the project, aware that he had to move quickly while the Arundel video was still viral. Back at the Olivia Puppet Company headquarters, they opened more champagne and did a repeat performance of the celebration from the night before. None of them had any expectation of the kind of success that was to follow, and they didn’t really care. What they had achieved so far was reward

enough, and they savoured every minute of it. Success is such a fickle creature. It must be celebrated before it wriggles away or fails to materialise.

CHAPTER 15



Three days later, they were all back in Bill's living room discussing an urgent development that Robert needed to put to them.

"There is going to be a big concert at the beginning of September at the Royal Festival Hall in London. It's some kind of world folk thing. One of the acts has dropped out and it didn't take much to persuade them to let you take their place. It will be televised and broadcast worldwide so it will be the perfect platform to launch you."

"It all sounds very exciting but what about Rachel?" asked Tim.

Rachel was growing tired of everyone fussing over her and was desperate to return to a world where people stood or fell by the risks they took.

"I appreciate everyone's concern, but I am not going to let this thing rule my life. Now that I finally have something to aim for I am determined to beat it even if it kills me."

Bill's heart was bursting with pride for his little girl. If only Olivia was there to share this moment. Robert had thought of everything and was able to offer reassurance. He turned to Rachel and taking care not to put her under any pressure he asked, "I have thought about that and I understand the concept of safe places that you've been working with. Am I right in saying you are ok being driven in a car?"

"Yes, that's right. I can go anywhere as long as the car is close by."

"That's what I thought. I have checked with the Festival Hall, and they confirmed that you can drive right up to the stage door."

Sue was still not convinced.

"So far so good, but it is the tunnels and the huge area backstage that will be a problem."

"They have agreed to have someone meet you at the stage door with an electric car like you see at airports. It will be enclosed so it will feel like you are in a normal car. Your own stage will be put in place, and you can drive right up to it. The only problem will be getting the timing right, but these things have a way of working themselves out. What do you think?"

Bill was concerned, but the decision was Rachel's, and there was no question what she wanted, so it was agreed unanimously. Robert had one last thing he needed approval for.

"Before we start, there is something very important that I need to run past you. Your act is brilliant, and I have no doubt it will be a success, but I need to generate a buzz that is going to get everyone talking about you."

None of them had any great desire for fame and would have been perfectly happy with moderate success, but it was difficult not to get carried away with Robert's enthusiasm.

“Sadly, being talented or having a great act these days isn’t enough. You need to create a news feed that is self-generating. I am fortunate in having one of the best marketing teams in the business, and they have advised me that the best angle to exploit is along the lines of the mystery puppet master. Who is it? Why didn’t they take a bow at Arundel? You see where I am going with this?”

They could see where he was going but didn’t understand why he should want to go there. They looked at each other, and as the unanimous reaction was shoulder-shrugging, they had no objection. They didn’t know that promotion is more about sparking the public’s imagination than logic or reality.

“We will leave it up to you, Robert. You’re the expert,” conceded Bill, voicing the general opinion that if it kept him happy, they would go along with it.

With everything agreed, Robert went home to prepare for what he was determined to be the grand finale of his life in the entertainment business.

As the weeks passed by, the publicity generated from the Arundel Festival seemed to increase rather than tail off. News stories about the Olivia Puppet Company started to appear, at first just a few lines but then increasing in regularity and length. It was only Bill, with his genius for appraising business news, who recognised that the story was being manipulated in the same way that companies generate interest in their stock. The momentum slowly built up until one day, with little happening in the way of real news, one of the tabloids ran a front-page article with the headline “Who is the Mystery Puppet Master?” and the questions being asked were as Robert had predicted, as well as some speculations that were so wild and enticing they could only have been made up by a marketing expert.

Until now, Bill had been amused and a little excited by the news build-up, but this headline worried him. They were no

longer talking about the Puppet Theatre but his vulnerable little girl. Sue was also concerned, but Rachel couldn't have been more delighted, so there was no question of asking Robert to reign in the publicity, even if he was able to do so. Bill grew more concerned when reporters started showing up at their house. Following Raymond's advice, he built a gate at the bottom of the garden leading to the property of a trusted neighbour. It came out on the other side of the block, so it was easy to come and go unnoticed.

Their website was getting so many visitors that the site crashed, which in itself made the news thanks to Robert's PR team. Apart from being able to dress the marionettes online, users could also choose a voice for each one. There was even a marionette café where groups of up to four friends could meet and chat over a coffee. Although Bill was delighted with the attention the website was generating, he was horrified that young people were meeting in virtual cafes instead of real ones, but he accepted that it was just the way things were now.

With six weeks to go and nothing pressing to do, Sue worked hard with Rachel to improve her confidence. They were able to walk the short distance to town and back, and although Rachel often felt uncomfortable, she managed to get through it without returning home prematurely. They went on several day trips, but it was the walks along quiet beaches that Rachel liked the most. The unpredictability of her condition did prove frustrating at times when after going two or three days without a twinge of anxiety, it suddenly reared its ugly head for no reason, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. One day they drove to Worthing, and as soon as Rachel got out of the car she was overcome with a fatigue so strong that she could hardly walk. Sue helped her to a café, and as soon as they sat down, she recovered almost instantly and was completely normal for the rest of the day. Despite these setbacks, there was no doubt she was managing her condition and no longer lived in fear of a panic attack.

For Sue, there was no question that her time with Rachel and Bill had been the happiest of her life, but it did come tainted with sadness. During her childhood, she thought it was normal for families to sit at the table hardly talking to each other, or to be bound by a strict set of rules that had no reason other than to establish authority. Her father never beat or abused her, but she couldn't remember a single occasion when he talked to her kindly or asked her opinion, even about the most trivial of matters.

Her relationship with Rachel puzzled her. They weren't sisters, but she couldn't imagine feeling any closer to her even if they were, so what did it mean to be a sister? She felt a closeness to Bill that she had never felt with her own father, so what did it mean to be a father? Could it really be just down to the blood in our veins and the genes we share? When she sat with Rachel and Bill at the dinner table, why did it feel like she had been doing it all her life?

"Do you think you will ever make it up with your father?" asked Rachel one afternoon while they sat on the front step, a place that had become very dear to them.

"I don't think so. I can never forgive him for pushing Mum away when she needed him. She might still be alive if it wasn't for him."

"Don't you think he might have changed? It sounds like he loved your mum, so he probably knows what a big mistake he made."

"Maybe. I do wonder about that, but he had such rigid ideas. I can't imagine him changing his mind about anything. If you don't mind, I would rather not talk about him. It is still very painful."

"Ok course, I'm sorry I brought it up."

"Don't worry, it's no problem."

It was time to lighten the mood.

“Did you have a boyfriend when you became ill?” asked Sue.

“Yes. I was going out with someone for two years. I can’t say he was the love of my life, but we were happy enough. He came around regularly after I had my breakdown, but it scared him, so he just stopped coming.”

“And other friends?”

“I had a few friends at university but no one close. I suppose I have always been a bit of a loner like my dad. How about you. Any boyfriends?”

“No. I think there’s something wrong with me, not that I give a toss. I just don’t seem to be attracted to men.”

“Women then?”

“Not women either... no offence,” they both laughed. “I slept with a few guys out of curiosity more than anything, but it all seemed so stupid.”

Bill returned from his afternoon coffee and taking a chair from the kitchen sat beside them. They chatted for a while when he said with all the awkwardness of a man brought up to hide his emotions, “Sue. We were both in a dark place when you first exploded into our lives. I just want to tell you how happy I am that you did.”

Rachel knew how hard it was for her dad to talk like that and was deeply moved. Sue hugged him and said in a perfect French accent, “Look at where I waz when we first met. And you are sinking me? You are crazy man.” They both looked at Sue with surprise, and she was surprised by their surprise.

“You do know you just turned French don’t you?” asked Rachel.

Sue put her hand over her mouth and giggled with horror.

“I didn’t, did I?”

They nodded their heads and laughed.

There was just enough time before the Festival Hall concert to get half the videos done. They got off to a bad start when they found the first film crew incompatible. Robert knew the company well. They had produced several award-winning videos, so he was surprised it didn’t work out until Tim explained exactly what they needed.

“Many years ago, before digital photography came along, I had a friend who was one of the top photographers in the country. He had a big studio in Wapping alongside the river, and as a birthday present, he did a publicity photo for me. I was used to photographers taking three or four rolls of film in the hope of getting one or two good shots. This guy put me in front of a huge sheet of black paper that had spotlights behind it, and he cut out areas of the paper until the light fell exactly where he wanted it. He took a couple of polaroids to test, made some adjustments, and then took just two photos. Both of them were perfect. That is what we need from a video company. I am sure the company you sent were brilliant, but they see a production as a series of individual shots. They wanted multiple takes so they could cut and paste the video together like a jigsaw puzzle, but we need it done in one take.”

It was an inconvenient and costly mistake for Robert, but he understood and in some way was relieved that Tim knew exactly what he wanted. He had spent too many years working with prima donnas who only knew what they didn’t want. With the next film crew being briefed with exactly what was expected, they took a lot longer to set up but managed to get all the videos down in one take. As to be expected, there were a few small problems, but they were easily fixed.

With the videos in the can, it was over to Tim to record the songs which accompanied them. Robert had connected him with

a brilliant arranger and producer, so all he had to do was provide the song and a rough idea of the feel he wanted, and the rest was done for him. Once the producer had recorded the backing tracks, all that was left was for Tim to go to London to play on them. It was a great luxury to have people helping him, as he had spent his whole career having to do everything himself. It made him a better musician and songwriter, but it had taken its toll. He was no longer able to spend a lot of time on the computer without it having a bad effect on him. It had been a long time coming but at last, his music was being taken seriously.

CHAPTER 16



On the day of the concert, they all met at Bill's house for lunch. Considering the magnitude of the event they were surprised at how calm they all were, mainly due to the rehearsal the day before going without a hitch. Robert had organised everything like a military commander, so the only thing they had to worry about was their performance, which is as it should be. Even Raymond, who had been a nervous wreck at the Arundel Festival was now calm and composed. He had assumed the role of chief security officer and the fact that no one was aware of it, was a measure of how good he was. The bodyguards that no one notices are more effective than those that strut around like peacocks. Sue and Rachel had wanted to drive to the Festival Hall by themselves, but Raymond insisted on driving them.

The marionettes had been checked at least ten times and had spares for every conceivable problem. Although they had not rehearsed the actual performance, Rachel practised by herself a lot and with the help of some adjustments from Bill, had developed some new moves that were sure to delight the

audience. He had always marvelled at her skill at controlling so many strings at the same time but to do it with both hands had to be seen to be believed. Tiny movements like wiping away a tear or scratching an ear gave the marionette a depth of feeling that put many a live actor to shame.

Bill and Tim went soon after lunch for a soundcheck and to make sure everything was set up correctly in plenty of time. Sue, Rachel, and Raymond left as late as possible to avoid Rachel being subjected to unnecessary waiting around. The plan was to get out of the electric car and go straight onto their portable stage to where she could wait in her safe place. Rachel felt she was confident enough to take a bow at the end of the performance, but Robert advised her not to as it was better to preserve the woman of mystery angle to help with promotion in the weeks leading up to the video releases.

Throughout the afternoon, Raymond was concerned at the build-up of people milling around outside the house and assumed they were reporters. It looked like the *woman of mystery* angle was getting out of hand, but it didn't make sense. He was well aware of the dangers of mass hysteria, but it was usually generated by some kind of personal gain. Who could possibly gain from the discovery of a simple puppet master?

When it came time to leave, two women and a man left through the front door and got into the car parked in their drive. They were swamped by aggressive reporters while at the same time Raymond, Sue, and Rachel went out the back way unnoticed. Raymond drove slowly to keep them relaxed but still arrived twenty minutes earlier than planned, so they waited in the car until the agreed time. It was 8 pm, and the street was surprisingly deserted. He instructed his phone to call Bill to make sure the electric car was in place for their arrival.

“Yes, everything is ready, but give it another fifteen minutes before coming in,” instructed Bill.

Raymond noticed two men standing fifty metres from the stage door. One of them handed a packet to the other. He assumed it was a drug deal which wouldn't affect them, but he still put himself on alert. He knew from bitter experience, wherever there were drugs, there was trouble. He tapped out a short message on his phone and pressed send.

The time came for them to enter the hall. Raymond got out of the car and had a good look around before returning to tell the girls it was safe to proceed. Rachel felt uncomfortable as she stepped onto the pavement but knew she would be ok as soon as she got through the stage door and into the electric car. It was surprisingly quiet, and the sound of their steps on the pavement had an eeriness about it. Everything was going to plan when suddenly, people appeared from nowhere and descended on them like flies, brandishing cameras, and demanding answers.

“Rachel. Is it true that you and Sue are lovers?”

“Do you have a drinking problem?”

“Sue. Are you responsible for your mother's death?”

There had been so much activity on social media that it had been impossible to keep up with all the drivel being said. Following the reporters, came a second wave of people pushing closer to Rachel trying to take selfies. With all the bustling and noise, she grew more and more frightened at being cut off from her safe place. There was a bright flash only inches from her eyes, and she started screaming. Sue was incensed and started biting and kicking anyone who went near her precious friend. To add to the surrealism of the scene, her accent had changed to thick American, but nothing she did made any difference to a mob that had lost all trace of human decency.

Rachel became hysterical and was unable to move her legs, so Raymond picked her up and forced his way backwards to the car door which Sue opened for him. He put her inside and locked the door. He tried to open the driver's door, but someone was

blocking it. He picked the man up and holding him horizontally, used him as a battering ram to push the crowd back before quickly getting into the driver's seat. As for those who made the mistake of getting in Sue's way, they hadn't reckoned on her liberal views on *reasonable force*, so one received multiple teeth wounds while another was left with testicles that never fully recovered.

In the car, Sue put her arms around Rachel, who was crouched over covering her ears with both hands and rocking backwards and forwards in a pitiful state. Raymond sped off but was soon followed by motorcycles.

"Crouch down so that no one can see you from behind," ordered Raymond. Sue didn't understand why as it was obvious they were there, but this was no time to question his authority.

"Siri, call Bill," instructed Raymond.

His phone dialled and was answered instantly.

"Rachel was ambushed outside the hall. The show will have to be cancelled. I'll go to the safe house as agreed."

He instructed his phone to disconnect.

Raymond, being the consummate professional, had insisted that if anything went wrong, they needed a safe house or hotel where he could take Rachel. At the time, Bill laughed and said it was over the top but to keep Raymond happy, he gave the address of a family house that was rarely used. It was in a remote village not far from London and how glad he was now of Raymond's foresight. As soon as Bill put the phone down, he called a friend to prepare the house for visitors.

The problem for Raymond was how to get to the house without being followed by the growing number of cars and motorcycles. People who weren't even there at the beginning of the chase had now joined in just because it looked like fun. Raymond was trained in this situation to make a risk assessment

of the threat to life and act accordingly, but in this case, it was difficult as none of it made any sense. Why were they so desperate to get a photograph of Rachel? They couldn't have all been reporters because some only had mobile phone cameras. There was no obvious threat to life, but when a mob has been whipped up into a frenzy, the outcome can be unpredictable, so Raymond was not taking any chances.

Getting through London was difficult as every time they stopped at traffic lights someone started banging on the car shouting questions and behaving like feral animals. Raymond remained calm.

“Siri. Call Simon Grey”.

His phone dialled out. A man answered.

“I have your position. Interception will be in 18 minutes. Sending coordinates...now.”

“Siri, end call. Open message, Simon Grey.”

“Call disconnected. Simon Grey email opened,” answered his phone.

“Enter Coordinates.”

“Coordinates entered. ETA 16 minutes 20 seconds.”

“Sue. Listen carefully,” ordered Raymond.

“In sixteen minutes, the car will stop suddenly. I need you to get out as quickly as you can and get into the car that will be waiting. Simon will take over from there. You can trust him completely. Have you got that?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Did you hear that, Rachel? Soon we have to change cars, and then we'll be safe,” said Sue.

Rachel continued to rock backwards and forwards in a state of trauma but managed to mumble a response.

Fifteen minutes later, Raymond turned onto a deserted street and started driving erratically. He swayed from side to side and continually altered his speed, making it difficult for his pursuers to follow. They came to a long, deserted stretch of road in what looked like an industrial estate. Raymond saw a quick flash of light in the distance. He opened the glove compartment and took out some dark glasses, resting them on his forehead. A few seconds later, there was another short flash of light. He moved the glasses to his eyes and started counting.

“One, two, three.”

He closed his eyes and slammed his foot on the accelerator just as a blinding flash of light appeared from nowhere. He counted to three again and as he opened his eyes, turned a sharp right where a car immediately blocked the road behind him. The blinding light disorientated his pursuers and those that hadn't crashed into each other were in chaos. He turned another sharp right and then left into a residential street where a car was waiting with a man holding a door open. He stopped abruptly and gave Sue the order.

“Now Sue. Go.”

Sue opened the door and took Rachel's arm.

“Come on, Rachel. We have to go.”

“I can't, I can't,” Rachel cried. She had frozen.

Without a second thought, Raymond got out of the car, picked Rachel up, and ran to the waiting car, putting her gently in the back seat. Sue had anticipated his actions and was already in the car, ready to receive Rachel. The total time for the transfer was nine seconds. Rachel's car sped off and turned several corners before joining a main road and returning to normality.

The pursuers had recovered, but with so many turnings to choose from, by the time they found Raymond's car, their numbers had dwindled considerably. Motorcycles continued the

chase but were prevented from pulling alongside while Raymond swayed from side to side. Suddenly, he turned onto a main road and started cruising casually so his pursuers were able to pull alongside and see that the back seat was empty. Seconds later, he was alone. He pulled over to collect his thoughts.

“Siri, call Bill.”

The phone dialled and Bill answered.

“What’s happening?”

“Everything is ok. Rachel is safely on her way to the safe house. I’ll meet you at the Festival Hall car park in around thirty minutes.”

“But I have to go to the house and be with her.”

“Listen carefully Bill. It is essential that you do not do that as you will be followed. Trust me, the girls are in safe hands.”

“Can I at least phone Sue for an update?”

“They will have been instructed to turn their phones off as a precaution. As soon as Simon is at the safe house and is satisfied that all threats have been contained, he will call. I know it all sounds over the top, but you need to trust me on this.”

For a man as capable as Bill, trust didn’t come easily. It was not so much people’s honesty that he questioned, as their competence, but this was one of the few occasions he was happy to hand over the reins.

Bill and Tim were waiting by their car when Raymond arrived. He explained what had happened and took out his mobile phone to show them his tracking app.

“This is where Simon and the girls are.”

They looked at a blinking light on the screen moving slowly along a road.

“They are forty minutes from the safe house.”

Raymond's phone rang. He could see it was Simon, so put the call on speakerphone.

"Raymond, this is Sue on Simon's phone. I'm just calling to let you know Rachel is alright."

"Are you sure?" asked Bill.

Rachel came on the line.

"Really Dad, I am fine. There's nothing to worry about, but I have to hang up. I'll call you later."

Bill's intense feeling of relief was mixed with anger at himself for putting Rachel at risk even if he did have no choice. It was what she wanted, and he had no right to deny it, but he should have paid more attention to the media attention she was getting.

It is strange how at times of crises an empty stomach will wait patiently in the background until normality returns, at which time it jumps out and demands attention. What better way to discuss the evening's events than with the greatest of traditional English dishes; a curry, and in England, one is never far from a restaurant happy to provide one.

"Robert was brilliant," said Tim after he had recovered from accidentally dipping his poppadum into the chilli pickle instead of the mango chutney.

"He demanded to make an announcement and told the audience we were not able to perform because a member of our group had been attacked by reporters outside the venue. You should have seen the faces on the audience. I don't know if they were more disappointed or angry. Robert already has meetings organised for tomorrow and intends to go after the bastards who attacked Rachel."

Bill took over the story.

“Then Robert had the professional video from the Arundel Festival projected onto the stage. I must say it did look impressive.”

What they weren't aware of was what a profound effect the video had on the audience. They were spellbound by the performance and the fact that a bunch of thugs had denied them the opportunity to see it performed live made them feel as if they themselves had been attacked, and they were angry.

Bill wanted to make his position clear.

“It's been a great adventure, but there's not going to be any more live performances. We can still go ahead with the videos though.”

They all agreed and toasted to friendship. Halfway through the meal, Bill's phone rang. It was Rachel.

“How are you?” asked Bill.

“I'm fine Dad, really. You know how weird this thing is. When those people appeared and were crowding me, I thought I was going to die I felt so bad, but Raymond was amazing. As soon as we got away from them I started to feel better. By the time we got to the house, I was back to normal. There's no need to worry Dad, honest.”

“That's great news. I'll come and see you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 17



It was one of a row of tiny cottages in a quiet side street with each cottage having a large front garden. There was a strong scent of honeysuckle coming from the bush that covered most of the front of the cottage. When they opened the door there was a musty smell, but someone had opened the windows and made the beds so it could have been worse, considering it had not been lived in for years.

The living room was small, with just enough space for a settee, table, and chairs. Rachel had always thought of her home in Brighton as being quiet, but sitting in that room she realised there was a difference between quiet and the complete absence of sound. On the table was a bottle of red wine and a note saying, *white wine and sandwiches in the fridge*. Whoever had unlocked the door must have left the wine. Sue opened the bottle and filled Rachel's glass. She went to fill Simon's, but he held out his hand to stop her.

"Not for me, thanks, although I will make myself a coffee if that's ok?"

“Yes, of course. The kitchen is through there,” said Rachel.

Directions were not really necessary considering there were only two rooms downstairs. Sue poured the wine. A feeling of well-being came over Rachel even before the wine had time to take effect, but Sue was still concerned about her.

“Are you sure you’re ok now?” asked Sue.

“Yes. Perfect thanks. Just like nothing ever happened.”

To those unfamiliar with panic attacks, it is impossible to imagine the fear it instills in the sufferer as it is the absence of a reason that creates the terror. Threatened by a tiger, we will be consumed by fear, but we know if we kill or escape from the tiger, we are safe. Imagine being consumed by that same fear when there is no threat. If there is no reason for the fear, then there is no reason why the fear should cease. That was the difference between Rachel’s previous panic attacks and this one. Her first attack was at a bus stop on her way to university. There was no reason why it started or why it stopped so it was reasonable to assume it would happen again at any time. On this occasion, she knew exactly what caused her fear and it was unlikely to happen again, so she recovered quickly.

“There’s blood on your shirt. Are you ok?” asked Rachel wondering why she hadn’t noticed it earlier.

“Don’t worry, that’s not mine. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of those reporters aren’t queueing up at A&E as we speak,” said Sue.

Simon returned with a coffee. It was the first time they had really noticed him, and although he didn’t look the part of a bodyguard, there was something in his eyes that was disarming. It made them feel uncomfortable at first, but it didn’t take them long to break through his barrier. Sue was keen to find out more about their rescue.

“So, Simon. What was with the Starsky and Hutch routine then?”

He smiled and realised how unreal it must have seemed, so he wanted to explain in detail.

“Raymond and I are part of an elite security team. If we are going into a situation with security risks, we notify the others. Those who are available will be on alert and give their geographical positions. Ninety-five per cent of the time we are not needed, but if anything kicks off we have a set of pre-arranged procedures we follow and what you experienced tonight was one of them. They are normally only used when there is a threat to life so today was overkill, but there’s no such thing as a being a bit secure. Either you are secure, or you are not. Even if it’s a false alarm, it still makes a good training exercise.”

“Have you ever used it when someone’s life was at stake?” asked Rachel.

“Only once, in Saudi Arabia. There was an attempt to kidnap the man we were protecting. In a way, it was much easier then. I was driving, and at the point where the cars were switched, my colleagues opened up with automatic weapons. It’s much harder to get the timing right when all you’ve got to distract the enemy is a flashlight.”

“Yes. What was that horrible light? My eyes still haven’t fully recovered.”

“It was a military-grade flashlight. Get flashed by one of those and you are blinded and disorientated for a few seconds.”

“So why wasn’t Raymond blinded?”

“He was given a cue with a torchlight. He knew the exact second the flashlight would be turned on so he could close his eyes for three seconds until it was turned off. Just in case he

mistimed it, he was wearing special glasses which would have reduced the effect of the flashlight.”

Sue and Rachel were in awe. He made it all sound so casual, like he was explaining how to make a pizza.

“So, what now?” asked Rachel.

“We need to stay here for a few days. I will sleep on the sofa down here.”

“But there are two bedrooms upstairs. Sue and I can share one.”

“Thanks, but I have to sleep near the points of entry. Me sleeping upstairs makes us vulnerable.”

“Is that really necessary? This is such a quiet village in the middle of nowhere. I can’t imagine we will be bothered here,” said Rachel.

“I’m sure you’re right, but until Raymond tells me to stand down, I have to follow procedure.”

The conversation became casual, and they asked each other the kind of questions that people do when they first meet and have a connection. The wine soon took effect and life felt good again. Sue didn’t know if it was an effect of the wine, but there was an unmistakable sparkle in Rachel’s eyes when she looked at Simon. She was searching for a reciprocal sparkle in his eyes when he rose from his chair.

“Excuse me, but I have to take a quick look around outside. I won’t be long.”

The minute he left the house, Sue exploded.

“Oh my God. He’s gorgeous.”

Rachel pretended not to have noticed.

“Yeah, he’s alright.”

“Alright? Take a look in the mirror, you’re dribbling.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s just doing a job. He hasn’t even noticed me,” said Rachel.

Simon returned and they chatted until the early hours when Simon gave *the look* that confirmed that Rachel’s attraction was mutual, and Sue couldn’t have been happier for her dear friend. It was 4 am before they finally went to bed with wine circulating in that part of the brain that would otherwise have been occupied by the Olivia Puppet Theatre.

CHAPTER 18



Sue and Rachel woke late the next morning and made their way downstairs to find that Simon had prepared the breakfast table with quite a presentable selection of cold meats and cheese.

“Someone came around earlier with a bagful of groceries which I assume your dad organised. Would you like coffee or tea?”

They finished breakfast in good spirits when suddenly the mood darkened, and Rachel burst into tears. An overwhelming feeling of sadness had descended on her at the realisation that all her hopes and dreams for their puppet company were gone. Her old life had been comfortable enough at the time, but the thought of going back to it now filled her with emptiness.

“I am useless” she cried, as Sue tried to comfort her and Simon harboured murderous thoughts for those who had done this so gratuitously to her.

“I’ve ruined everything. It was going so well.”

“Don’t be silly. It will all turn out, ok. We still have the videos. They’re going to be great,” but no matter how hard Sue tried, nothing would console her.

“Let’s get you back upstairs and have a lie-down. Yesterday was such a long day; it has taken a lot out of you.”

Rachel lay in bed the rest of the morning quietly sobbing while Sue’s heart was breaking. Simon was used to being in control of situations and always knew what to do, but now there was nothing he could do to help, and it tore him apart. In the few hours, they had spent together, he was already besotted with Rachel. He spent the morning looking at the Arundel Festival video, and when Sue showed him their website and the costumes that Rachel had created, he was in awe of her talent. A whole new world had opened up to him, and whether Rachel was interested in him or not, he wanted to be a part of it.

Sue phoned Bill to ask if she should call a doctor, but he had been through it many times before and advised against it. Doctors usually prescribed her pills which she always refused. For now, they just needed to wait it out.

Bill turned up mid-afternoon, shocked at the state Rachel was in. No amount of reassurance would convince her she wasn’t useless and hadn’t let them down. He was so upset, he called Robert to apologise that there would be no more puppet theatre as he would not risk Rachel’s health. Even the videos were off the tables as all he wanted was to get back to the way things used to be. Robert hid his disappointment as best he could.

“Don’t worry about that, Bill. Just concentrate on getting Rachel better. She’s a great kid.”

He didn’t mention that he had put most of his life savings into the project, which meant at the very least, his longed-for retirement would have to be put on hold. It was his advice to

exploit the *mystery puppet master* angle, but he never dreamt it would get so out of control and he felt terrible about it.

Bill went downstairs and joined Sue and Simon at the table.

“Have you seen the news?” asked Bill.

“No, why?”

“We are in all the headlines. It turned out that one of Festival Hall employees took a photo of Rachel during the rehearsal and tipped off the press. Raymond saw him being handed a wad of cash just as you arrived, but he assumed it was a drug deal. The whole thing has backfired on the reporters though. I don’t know how, but Rachel’s disability has leaked out and now the story is *vulnerable woman attacked by feral mob*. They are savaging those involved. Some MPs are calling for a clampdown on the press and saying it amounts to criminal assault. Sue was angry.

“Not much chance of that is there. If that didn’t happen after Diana, then it certainly won’t for Rachel.”

“Of course not. But it gets worse. Someone posted a reward of £5,000 on Facebook for the first person to produce a selfie with the mystery puppet master. A lot of the attackers last night were not reporters at all but members of the public trying to get selfies. It turned out to be a hoax and there never was a reward. It is finally dawning on people that this kind of mass hysteria generated by press and social media is out of control.”

The good news was that photos of the incident had been published in some of the papers, but instead of sensationalising the story, there was an outpouring of sympathy for Rachel. Two of the men admitted to the hospital with severe bite marks had intended to press charges but changed their minds when they saw the mood of the public. It meant that even if Rachel was traced to the cottage, the chances of her being bothered were minimal.

“Would you be able to hang on here for a few days please Simon, just to be sure? I will continue to pay you of course,” said Bill.

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere.”

Raymond hadn’t mentioned money to Bill, but he assumed anyone involved in Rachel’s rescue would be paid. Simon was relieved, not for the employment, as he wasn’t going to accept payment anyway, but for the chance to spend more time with Rachel. They chatted for a while, and when Bill went to check on Rachel, he was surprised to find her sitting up in bed, looking much better. She was over the worst and what she needed more than anything was a hug which Bill was more than happy to provide.

“Can I ask you for something, Dad?” said Rachel at the end of a mutually satisfying embrace.

“Yes, of course.”

“Promise you won’t laugh.”

“I can promise to try, but if it’s really funny then suppressing a good laugh might finish me off. You know I have to look after the old ticker.”

“Will you tell me a story?”

“Why would that make me laugh? That’s a perfectly normal request.”

“For a normal dad yes, but not for one that is probably the worst storyteller in the world.”

“I am not the worst storyteller in the world. You never heard your uncle Cyril tell stories did you?”

“No, but Mum did, and she said you were worse.”

“I must say you have a funny way of getting me to do something. It’s lucky for you I’m in a storytelling mood.”

Rachel had always suspected that her father's ability to make a children's story sound like the contents of a railway timetable was down to him trying to get out of bedtime duties. Now it was no longer necessary for him to appease her mother she would finally discover the truth. Bill was delighted but still pretended he wanted to get out of it

"But I haven't got any books to read from. What a shame."

"Just make one up."

"But you know I'm no good at all that."

"Please, Dad," she said in her best, five-year-old voice.

"Ok, then."

There was a long pause as he raked his brain for inspiration.

"Once upon a time, there were three bears who lived in a castle. The two older bears were called Paddington and Pooh, and the youngest was called Cinda Bear Ella. Paddington and Pooh were always going out to Karaoke bars and having a good time, leaving Cinda Bear Ella at home to clean and tend to the marijuana plants. Then one day, a wolf came to the castle and threatened to blow it down unless they handed over all their chickens. *What are you talking about stupid fox? We are bears. No one tells us what to do.* But little did they know that this was a super wolf that ate a ton of spinach every day. He drew in a big breath and was just about to blow the castle down when an enormous egg with arms and legs fell off the wall and broke on top of the wolf, drowning him in horrible gooey egg yolk. So that night, Cinda Bear Ella invited her friends Bambi and Peppa to join them for a lovely wolf omelette."

Bill wanted to continue but was unable to with Rachel laughing so much.

"That is the worst story ever."

"I'm sorry, but that is the closest I'll ever get to originality."

She threw her arms around his neck.

“Original? Trust me, you are one in a million. I love you, Dad.”

“And I love you sugar puff.”

She cringed and pushed him away.

“What? You used to love it when I called you that.”

“Yes, when I was five. Go downstairs and leave me in peace. I haven’t finished feeling sorry for myself.”

Bill went downstairs and was happy to inform Sue and Simon of Rachel’s improvement.

“Simon, would you mind if I have a word with Bill alone. It’s a bit personal,” said Sue.

“No problem. Take as long as you like. I’ll be sitting on the bench outside. It’s a lovely day.”

With Simon gone, Bill turned to Sue, intrigued to know what the personal matter was.

“Bill, you know I think the world of Rachel and would never do a thing that might cause her harm, so trust me that what I am going to say is not out of self-interest.”

He looked a little hurt.

“My dear girl, you know I would never think such a thing.”

“I told you what happened to my mum. I know this illness. After Mum committed suicide, I experienced it myself, although nothing like what she or Rachel went through.”

Bill felt guilty that he had been so preoccupied with Rachel, he had not given enough thought to Sue. She continued.

“The biggest problem for Rachel now is self-worth, which is tragic for anyone, but for someone with her skills, I believe it can be very harmful. She has something extraordinary inside her and I hate to think what will happen to her if it has no outlet. I honestly believe the most important thing now is that we continue with the puppet company. She can get through this but

not by shutting herself away. She needs to beat her condition, not escape from it.”

It took a while for Bill to digest Sue’s words.

“I know you’re right, but how can we avoid a repeat of what happened last night?”

“She has agoraphobia which as you know is a fear of being in a situation where she might panic. It is effectively a fear of fear. The one positive thing that came out of yesterday was how brilliant Raymond was. Honestly, it was like being in a James Bond movie. As long as Raymond is with us, Rachel knows she is safe in any situation. A combination of the puppets and Raymond is the key to the prison she is in.”

Bill was impressed and smiled warmly.

“My goodness, where did you learn all this stuff? I paid thousands of pounds for therapists of all shapes and sizes to come to the house and none of it helped. Then you turn up from nowhere and turn her life around.”

“To be fair, her situation is very similar to my mum’s. I lived with it for years, so I think I have a pretty good grasp of it. Therapists have to deal with a multitude of conditions which I wouldn’t have had a clue about. Also, they don’t have the luxury of being with their patients twenty-four hours a day.”

“Ok, I’ll phone around and arrange a meeting for tomorrow. We can discuss it then.”

Sue took his hand.

“I am certain it is the right thing to do. We have something very special here and it would be tragic to waste it.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’d better get going and make the arrangements. I’ll let you know what time we’ll meet tomorrow.”

A thought suddenly occurred to him.

“But what if Rachel is not well enough to meet tomorrow?”

“I am sure she will be once I tell her we are going ahead with the project, but even if she isn’t up to it, we have to start making plans. The more convinced she is we are going ahead, the quicker she will recover.”

“Do you think she might be able to come home soon?” asked Bill. Sue was hesitant and smiled.

“Ah... that’s another thing. I think it might be a good idea for us to stay here for a few days at least.”

“Why is that if she is ok?”

He could smell subterfuge in the air.

“Something is happening between her and Simon. I don’t know the first thing about him, but he seems really nice.”

Bill wasn’t sure of his feelings about this unexpected development. It had been so long since Rachel had a boyfriend and what devoted father doesn’t find it difficult to pass on the torch to another man.

“Well, that’s a surprise. I was talking to Raymond about Simon and he couldn’t have been more complimentary. I suppose that is good news?”

“The best,” she answered.

Simon was trained to spot subterfuge, so he knew there was something behind the sly smile that Bill gave him on his way out. One quick risk assessment later confirmed that whatever lay behind that smile could only be a good thing.

There was no one in the living room when Simon returned, so he assumed Sue was still consoling Rachel upstairs. He sat and waited patiently, happy to be away from the world of stress and unpredictable danger that he normally inhabited. It wasn’t long before Sue came downstairs and his face lit up when he saw Rachel following close behind. When Rachel was told they were going ahead with the puppet theatre, it had been like flicking a

switch and all the ideas that she had put to one side now came flooding back. If anything, she was a little too hyper, so as a precaution, Sue skilfully steered the conversation into calmer waters. She looked fiercely at Simon.

“Why are you just sitting there?” asked Sue, in such an abrupt voice that Simon was mortified that he must have done something wrong.

“What do you mean?”

“Surely you know there’s no more wine in the house?”

“Oh... right. I’ll go and get some.”

Rachel knew that Sue was teasing him but still thought it best to soften the tone.

“There’s an off-licence two miles down the road on the right. Put it on Dad’s tab and don’t mess around with single bottles. Get a couple of cases if we are going to be here for the rest of the week.”

“I assume everyone likes curry?” asked Sue.

After unanimous approval, Sue used a phone app to place an order that bore no relationship to the number of stomachs it had to satiate.

An hour later, the table was filled with silver lids that screamed to be opened and containers that pleaded to be emptied, while reminding them that discomfort is a small price to pay for overindulgence.

Simon had been instructed by Raymond to stand down, but to remain there as a precaution which meant it was ok to drink in moderation. They started talking like old friends and any doubt Sue had of there being something between Rachel and Simon was well and truly laid to rest. She liked Simon but wanted to know more about him.

“So how did you and Raymond meet?”

She knew it was a lame question, but she could hardly start by asking if he was married.

“I suppose you could say on the night he falsely imprisoned me.”

Maybe it wasn't such a lame question after all.

“In all seriousness, I owe my life to Raymond. I was an awful kid and didn't do well at school. On the few occasions I did make an effort I had good results, but most of the time I just couldn't be bothered. All I ever wanted to do was mess around with my mates and the only way I could prove myself was by fighting and causing trouble. It got worse when I left school. The only jobs I could get bored me senseless, so I only felt alive when I was with my mates. Raymond was working as a bouncer and making quite a name for himself. He was the only bouncer anyone knew that never got into a fight. I used to go to the club where he worked and wind him up really badly. I knew he could tear me apart if he wanted to, but I just kept pushing him until one day he picked me up under his arm and carried me into a room like a naughty schoolboy. My street cred went right down the pan.”

Sue poured the last of a bottle of wine into her glass and being on autopilot opened another. None of them were big drinkers but they felt if there was ever a night to have a few too many, this was it. Simon continued.

“He took me to this room where there was nothing but a desk and two chairs. He tied me to one of the chairs and sat opposite. I tried to stop him, but it was like he was brushing an ant off his trousers. Then he just sat and looked at me, not saying anything.”

“Isn't that false imprisonment?” asked Sue.

“That's what I told him. I said I'd report him to the police, but he just laughed. So there we were, me getting angrier and angrier and him just sitting there ignoring me. Finally, when I

realised that shouting was futile, I stopped. You know what he did then?”

“What?”

This was turning into a weird story.

“He asked me what I thought of Mozart.”

“Mozart? No way! What did you say?” asked Rachel.

“I said he was the worst goalkeeper Chelsea ever had.”

Until then, the only concern Sue had about Simon was that he seemed too serious and might be lacking in the sense of humour department, but now he had laid that fear to rest. Simon continued.

“All he did was look at me, saying nothing. I started shouting again, only now I was worried about being trapped inside a room with a nutter and if I didn’t say I liked Mozart, I was done for. So the silence went on for a while when he told me I was free to go as soon as we had a normal conversation without shouting. By now I just wanted to get out of there, so I did my best to talk normally and answered truthfully that I didn’t know the first thing about Mozart. It turned out it wasn’t so much Mozart that he was interested in but the concept of genius. At the time, I hated myself for it, but I couldn’t help being interested in what he was saying.”

“Yes, he is really interesting to talk to. Super intelligent and yet he left school without a single exam. I expect you know he has dyslexia?” asked Rachel.

“Yes, he told me. I’ve known plenty of intelligent people, but the thing about Raymond that night was he talked with me rather than at me. He asked for my opinion on things, and for the first time in my life, it felt like what I said was valued. I even surprised myself saying things I had never thought about before. We ended up talking until long after the club closed, and when

he untied me, he asked if I wanted to come and work alongside him the next night.”

“You told him to get lost, of course?” asked Sue.

“You’re kidding. Raymond was a legend on the night club circuit. I was trying to get street cred by making him fight me, but working with him put me in a whole new league. The funny thing was that after a few nights with him, I lost all interest in street cred. He paid for me to go to karate classes and that’s when my life really started to come together.”

Simon could see that Rachel was getting tired so suggested they called it a night.

“Yes I am tired, but first tell us how you went from doorman to Starsky?” said Rachel.

“Again, through Raymond. His reputation got him a job in security in the Middle East. He did so well there that it wasn’t long before they gave him his own team, and that’s when he invited me to join him. The training was really tough, but I loved it, and the money was great. After that, I was offered all the agency work I wanted.”

“Sounds like Raymond saw something in you the night he abducted you?”

“I suppose he must have done, although I don’t know what it was because I was just a giant pain in the arse.”

“That’s a great story, Simon and we’re happy that it worked out for you but doesn’t your wife mind you being away all the time?”

Sue shuddered at the crudeness of her question, but sleep would have been out of the question without knowing his status.

“I am not married.”

He was delighted to be asked the question as the motive behind it was obvious, but he was concerned that it was Sue that was interested in him until he saw Rachel’s face light up. They

A SINGLE TEAR

said goodnight and hugged each other affectionately, although one of those hugs lingered just long enough to take it past the friendship barrier.

CHAPTER 19



The next morning the air was heavy with curry. Rachel and Simon sat at the breakfast table with nothing more than a coffee, complaining about how heavy the food sat in their stomachs all night, while Sue was surrounded by containers, devouring the substantial remains.

“She does that,” said Rachel. “It doesn’t matter what it is, if there are leftovers from the night before, she will have it for breakfast.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything. Steak, cold fish and chips, curry, whatever it is, she will eat it.”

Simon shook his head and smiled. Sue shrugged her shoulders and carried on eating. She was more interested in her breakfast than talking.

There was no need to ask how Rachel felt because she looked better than she had done for weeks. After breakfast, they went for a long walk along the canal, feeling like they had

known each other for years. Sue was surprised at how many people smiled and greeted them warmly.

“Dad is much loved around here. The house has been in the family for generations, and although we hardly ever use it, Dad always supports the village. A few years back, one of the children was seriously ill, so he paid for them to go to America for treatment. When we do come for a visit he gets embarrassed because no one will let him pay for anything. If you forced me to make one criticism of him, it would be his reluctance to accept gifts.”

Although Rachel had been going out for a few months without any major problem, there was usually a hint of anxiety in the background, but that morning was the first time she felt totally at peace. They stopped at a garden pub for a drink. Sue quickly finished hers, insisting that the two of them stay while she went home to prepare lunch. Her hatred of cooking overcame her desire for Rachel’s happiness.

“Come in an hour or so,” she said and left them alone.

Rachel was not aware of the plot and wondered what on earth it was that Sue knew how to cook that could possibly take an hour, but she was too happy at the prospect of being left alone with Simon to think anything more about it.

Back at the house, Sue called Bill to give him the good news about Rachel’s continued stability and romantic prospects. She laid the table and put out the tuna salad that took her a full five minutes to prepare, although she still managed to cut herself on the tin. She sat on a bench in the front garden, enjoying the sunshine until in the distance, she saw Rachel and Simon returning. When they came closer, she was thrilled to see they were holding hands. She rushed back inside so she could pretend she didn’t know.

It was early-evening when Bill arrived, and Sue gave him a discreet thumbs-up which he correctly took to be an announcement of impending romance. Raymond arrived next with Rainbow who was there to help him prepare a meal for the evening. She went into the kitchen to unpack the multitude of bags they had brought with them. Robert arrived last, and everyone sat around the table. Simon started to get up from his chair.

“I will make myself scarce. This is obviously a family meeting.”

Bill held his arm gently and smiled.

“No. You sit yourself down. We want you to be a part of this.”

As he spoke, he gave Rachel a sly smile, leaving her somewhere between confused and embarrassed. Simon returned to his seat, surprised but delighted. Bill started the proceedings.

“Despite the setback the other night, Rachel has insisted that we continue with the Olivia Puppet Theatre and we have all agreed. Robert will explain where we go from here.”

Sue had never been to a business meeting before and found the process thrilling, just like in the films. Robert spoke with such authority she was ready to agree with whatever he proposed.

“Thank you, Bill. As soon as I was told the great news that you are going ahead, I started making phone calls. At this point, I usually start with a good news, bad news scenario, but in this case, I have nothing but good news. The publicity that was generated after the Festival Hall cancellation was huge, and there is no sign of it abating. The danger now is in trying to exploit this interest without being prepared. We need to build a momentum which is where your videos come in.”

The air grew heavy with anticipation when an intensely annoying fly started buzzing from person to person with no sense of occasion, which is often the case with flies.

“At the moment we have six videos in the can, and they are brilliant. Well done. No one outside this room has seen them, and it must remain that way for now. I have arranged for worldwide distribution, and there will be a big publicity campaign to support it. I need you all to make yourself available for interviews as I have some major chat shows chasing me to have you as guests on their shows. That’s a first for me as it’s usually me doing the chasing. Tim will give you details about the remaining videos.”

Tim was just about to start when right on cue, the fly landed on the tip of his nose. He brushed it off quickly, but it did a perfect arc and landed on his forehead. Fortunately, it moved on voluntarily to less human pastures, so Tim was able to continue.

“We need to start shooting the remaining videos next week. I have finished composing the music, but my producer can’t start until he has the videos to work with.”

Robert continued.

“A different video will be broadcasted at the same time every Sunday night for eleven weeks. There will be a few weeks gap before we present a live televised performance of the grand finale *Come A Little Closer*.”

Bill was excited but concerned.

“Sounds great, but how are we going to protect Rachel? The more hype you create, the more likely there will be a repeat of the Festival Hall debacle.”

“Believe me, that has always been my first consideration. Raymond has come up with a cast-iron plan which he informs me must be on a need to know basis.”

“That has nothing to do with trust but the avoidance of mistakes,” said Raymond. “One innocent word said out of place can result in a serious incident.”

Robert went through the finer details and just as he started handed out some forms, the fly returned with a vengeance. It seemed to be looking for a route through Bill’s ear to the other side of his head. Tim felt it was time to take action against what he regarded as one of life’s most irritating intruders.

“Raymond. You’re in charge of security. Can’t you do something about that bloody fly!”

Sue sprung up from her chair excitedly.

“I’ve got an idea.”

She ran to the kitchen and returned with something in her hand.

“This will soon scare off the fly.”

She put her lightly clenched fist on the table and removed it to reveal a huge spider.

Raymond shot up suddenly, knocking his chair over, and stood at the edge of the room. It was like a mountain fleeing from a molehill.

“Raymond!” said Rachel suspiciously, “are you afraid of spiders?”

“Of course not. I’ve got cramp.”

He started rubbing his leg whilst keeping a close eye on the spider’s movement.

Simon knew about Raymond’s fear of spiders, so he removed it from the table and put it high up in the curtains. Robert was eager to conclude the meeting.

“Thank you. The fly has gone, so can I please have your attention just a little longer.”

He took some papers out of his briefcase.

“I will be negotiating contracts on your behalf. Bill tells me that you will share all royalties equally amongst yourselves.”

Raymond and Sue were taken by surprise.

“I think I speak for Raymond when I say neither of us were expecting a financial reward for any of this and if there is any, we certainly don’t expect an equal share.”

Raymond nodded approval. He would have happily paid to be a part of it. Bill had expected this response.

“I have talked it over with Rachel and Tim, and we are in complete agreement. We are a team, and regardless of what we bring to the table as individuals, each of us is dependent on the other.”

Tim wanted to make his position perfectly clear.

“Look at me. I have been writing songs for thirty-five years and excluding the worst song I ever wrote, I have not made a penny from it. Now, thanks to you guys, Robert tells me record companies are falling over themselves to sign me up. Everything I have written for the puppet theatre, belongs to the puppet theatre and I am proud to be a part of it.”

They were indeed noble thoughts, but it was academic. At no time had any of them really expected to make money from the project, and despite Robert’s optimism, it still seemed inconceivable that they ever would. Robert continued.

“Please fill out the forms in front of you, and be careful that your personal details are correct. I need you to authorise me to negotiate contracts on your behalf. It’s all standard stuff. The most important thing is that you give me your full legal name.”

Sue looked worried.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why on earth not?” asked Robert.

While Sue was trying to make up an excuse, Rachel stepped in.

“There’s a mistake on her birth certificate.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Sue was a little too quick in her confirmation. Robert looked bewildered.

“I see. That’s a new one on me. I am afraid that legally, whatever is written on your birth certificate is your name, and that is what you must write. If you want to change your name officially you can, but that all takes time.”

Damn. There was no way out of this.

“This is confidential, isn’t it? You don’t give the information to anyone else, do you?” asked Sue.

“I can hardly negotiate a contract in your name if I can’t give the other party that name. I’m afraid there’s no way around it.”

Sue accepted defeat. After quickly filling out the form, she put it at the bottom of the pile. Robert gave them a quick look through and one caught his attention.

“Which one of you is Bruce?”

Robert looked around the room. Sue was trapped.

“That’s me, alright. Now can we please move on.”

“Bruce Hank Nelson?”

Robert hadn’t intended to draw the name out, but it was hard not to.

“Hank?” exclaimed Rachel losing the battle with her grin. Sue scowled at her.

Tim, who loved doing cryptic crosswords sprang to life.

“I’ve got it! A boy named Sue. Your dad was a Johnny Cash fan... and a Bruce Lee fan.”

“Bruce Willis,” said Rachel.

“So where does Hank Nelson come in?” asked Robert.

Raymond was sure he had the answer and wanted to get in on the action.

“He also liked Willy Nelson?”

“No, Nelson is Sue’s family name,” said Bill.

“OK. And Hank?” asked Robert.

Sue pretended to be irritated but could see the funny side of it.

“Hank Marvin. He was also a Shadows fan.”

Before Robert had a chance to react, Sue leant forward and snatched the forms.

“Right. That’s it. Let’s look at some other second names.”

Robert thought about retrieving the papers, but he had never been comfortable with physical altercation.

“Aha. Here’s a good one. Tim Luigi Taylor.”

“Luigi. Is there some Italian in your family?” asked Bill.

“Yes, on my mum’s side, but that’s not the connection. It was Dad who saw the name on a packet of lasagne and thought it sounded romantic. It was a shame my schoolmates didn’t agree with him. They used to call me *Luigi the ice cream maker*. I never really understood that. It was meant to be an insult and yet they all loved ice cream.”

“Raymond, you old dark horse.”

Sue had found another name to help distract attention from hers.

“Raymond Krishfredraj Saunders. Where on earth did that name come from?”

It was a story that used to cause Raymond great embarrassment until becoming a member of the crocodile club

helped him to see the funny side of it. He saw Rainbow eavesdropping at the kitchen door.

“Yes Mum. Come in here tell these nice people how my second name came about.”

Rainbow exploded into the room, never missing a chance to be the centre of attention.

“Until I had Raymond, I used to spend the English winters in India. I have a photo taken in Rishikesh with me and Paul McCartney. I got to know him quite well, but we fell out because he insisted on calling me *Butterfly*. He was adamant that I was more of a butterfly than a rainbow, which might have been true, but I was not going to have anyone tell me what to call myself.”

Given a chance, she would have gone on for hours about the summers of love spent in India, so Raymond cleared his throat as a cue for her to get back on subject.

“Sorry, back to the story. I was working in a gallery owned by four Indian artists. When I say working, all I did was hang around the shop pretending to be a tourist and rave on to other tourists about how great the stuff was. I did pretty well from commissions, and they also sold my jewellery which they claimed was made by their grandmothers.”

“And my middle name, Mum?”

“Be patient, I was just getting to that. I was never a one-man woman, and these four artists were gorgeous in their own special ways, so I went with all of them. It was the best summer of my life and I don’t regret it one bit, except maybe towards the end when they started getting jealous of each other. Then one day they got into a big fight over me and ended up destroying their lovely studio. So you see, Raymond’s father could have been one of four men. The most likely was Raymundo, who was of Portuguese descent. He was my favourite, so I gave him pride of place. The other three were called Krishna, Fred, and Rajesh. I

wanted my son to carry a piece of each of them, so I put the three names together to make Krishfredraj.”

“Hang on a minute, you were sleeping with an Indian man called Fred?” asked Bill.

“That’s right. At first, I thought it was a nickname, but he insisted it was real. His father loved all things English so reasoned that when his boy grew up and went to England, he would have a head start on all the other Indians if he had a good traditional English name.”

“And did it work?”

“No. He went to England and returned after two weeks he hated it so much. He said he could put up with the weather but not the food. He moved to Mumbai and became a lawyer, but as nobody wanted to hire a lawyer called Fred, he changed his name to Manish.”

“So the only thing you know for certain, is that Raymond’s father was Indian, and yet he looks more English than any of us?” asked Tim.

“Weird ain’t it. You can see why I’m called Rainbow.”

Robert had enjoyed the stories as much as anyone but didn’t like to mix business with small talk.

“This is all very interesting, but can we move on and have no more Johnny Cash talk.”

“Quite right Robert. We don’t want to end up in a *Ring of Fire*, do we,” said Tim.

Sue growled at him with teeth bared while the room filled with groans. Robert continued.

“I will be giving each of you detailed contracts when everything is settled. I would feel more comfortable if you took legal advice before signing them.”

He knew that was never going to happen, but it was his duty to advise it. Most of his clients had no interest in lawyers because they found them boring, and they were only interested in their music. Money was important to them, but the avoidance of boredom came above all else. This was the first time he had come across a group who were genuinely not interested in money. They were all content with their lives and would be happy to work for nothing if a labour of love can be considered work.

“I think that is everything for now. Are there any questions?”

“Yes. Where’s the champagne?” asked Tim.

Bill stood up to make a speech.

“I’ll get the champagne, but before we get stuck into that, it is my duty to inform you that I have booked rooms for everyone at the Red Lion. We are all going to spend the night drinking, and Raymond is going to cook us one of the finest meals you have ever tasted. No arguments. This has to be a night to remember.”

The only person considering a rejection was Robert as he always thought it unprofessional to get personally involved with his clients, but this was his last project, and it was time he loosened up.

“That’s settled then,” said Bill as he made his way to the kitchen to get the champagne.

A few seconds later, there was a scream and the sound of broken glass. They all ran in to see what had happened. Their worst fears were realised when they saw Bill looking very pale and holding his heart. He was having trouble breathing.

“Call an ambulance,” ordered Rachel who had spent her life dreading this moment.

Robert made the call and was halfway through giving the address when he heard Bill shout, “No! No ambulance!” he gasped, struggling to catch his breath.

“Sorry, can you wait a minute,” Robert told the operator.

Rachel knelt beside her father.

“Dad, we have to call an ambulance. You are having a heart attack.”

Bill shook his head vigorously and being unable to speak, he pointed at something.

“Fridge, fridge,” Bill managed to say. They all looked at the fridge.

“What about the fridge?” asked Rachel.

“Are you still there, sir? It is important that you give us your full address” said the operator.

Robert didn’t know what to do but thought there was no harm in giving the address.

“No Ambulance,” gasped Bill. “Look....” he was trying to catch his breath, “look inside the fridge.”

Sue opened the door and rummaging through the fridge.

“Who left sausages in the fridge?” she said as if she had just found a plate of anthrax. She picked them up and threw them through the kitchen window like they were live hand grenades. Simon spoke sheepishly, sensing that his inclusion in the family business would be very short-lived.

“I’m sorry it was me. Is that a problem?”

“Don’t ask. It’s not your fault,” said Raymond.

It didn’t make Simon feel any better. The operator was beginning to lose what little patience she had started with.

“Sir. Do you still require an ambulance?”

“I’m sorry. There’s been a false alarm,” said Robert.

The operator had heard the commotion and was unconvinced.

“Are you sure, sir? It might be best if we send a paramedic to check the patient over.”

“No, really, he is alright.”

The operator persisted.

“The patient is clearly distressed. Can you please tell me what is the cause of that distress?”

Robert was not often lost for words.

“You’re not going to believe me.”

“Please let me be the judge of that sir.”

“It appears to be a sausage.”

The line went silent for a few seconds.

“Sir. Are you aware that making hoax calls to the emergency services is a criminal offence!” she said, and then hung up.

When Bill had adequately recovered, Rachel led him back to his chair in the living room where the mood changed from tragedy to comedy. Champagne appeared from nowhere, and they toasted to the success of the Olivia Puppet Company.

Robert decided it was time to address the elephant in the room.

“Could someone please tell me what all that was about? If I’m going to be arrested, I would like to know what for.”

Bill accepted that an explanation was due.

“I have a fear of sausages. It is an official condition.”

“It even has a name,” said Sue.

“It’s called Loukanikophobia,” said Raymond.

Tim appeared to be deep in thought and asked in a sombre tone, “I was just wondering, Bill. Now that you’ve had a glass of champagne do you feel better or *wurst*?”

“It’s not a laughing matter,” protested Bill, despite the fact he was laughing more than anyone. The conversation stayed firmly in the phobia and idiosyncrasies court for a while. Sue was keen to offer support.

“Look at me. Because of my changing accents some people think I’ve got a split personality.”

“In that case can you need two glasses of champagne,” said Bill, as he handed her a second glass.

“Hey,” said Simon looking up from his phone. “Flatulophobia is the fear of farting.”

“That one I can understand. I’ve always had a fear of Raymond farting,” said Tim.

Raymond protested.

“You can talk. Have you forgotten the time in Goa when the restaurant had to be evacuated after you let one go?”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration. It was only two tables that went outside for ten minutes.”

Raymond would have liked to have pointed out that when the diners returned, they were unable to finish their meal, but there were more important things on his mind. He stood up and said abruptly, “I’m going to make a start on dinner. You lot go down the pub and come back in an hour.”

There were some half-hearted offers to stay and help but Raymond insisted he and Rainbow could manage perfectly well without them.

It was a short and pleasant walk through the tiny village to the pub and it wasn’t long before word got around that Bill was there, which invariably meant he would be paying for an open bar. Within twenty minutes, there wasn’t a villager left at home and some of them had to help behind the bar to keep up with demand. Simon was concerned about how Rachel would cope with so many people, and she did appear to be uncomfortable.

Although he had no experience with anxiety disorders, he knew all about fight or flight and seeing that her escape route was blocked, he insisted they move to a table next to the fire exit where she immediately felt better.

Someone recognised Tim from his *Sugar Baby* days and produced a guitar from out of thin air. Now that he had finally come to terms with the song being a part of who he was, he sang it with gusto and not a single vocal cord in that pub remained idle. He followed it with *Whisky in the Jar* and customers stomped so hard on the ancient wooden floor that dust fell from the ceiling, an occurrence unknown since the dark days of the blitz. An hour turned into an hour and a half and they were only allowed to leave after negotiating down from two last songs to one. Tim finished with *American Pie* which the locals continued to sing long after they left the pub and could still be heard as they approached the house. In that tiny corner of England, there will forever remain a pub displaying photos from that memorable night.

When they entered the living room, they were astonished to find a table set so elegantly it wouldn't have been out of place at the Ritz. Raymond had hired cutlery, best quality linen, and wine glasses, all laid out impeccably before them. He stood there, face beaming, a giant chef wearing an apron two sizes too small that looked like the victim of an uncontrolled explosion. He also wore a chef's hat that had suffered the same fate as the apron.

"You're late, but no worries, I had anticipated that. Take a seat. I am going to make a speech so shut your mouths."

They did as commanded.

"I love cooking but rarely... well never actually... get the chance to cook for other people and particularly for those who have become such dear friends."

The unexpectedness of these words caused more than one set of eyes to mist over.

“You have already met her, but I would like to officially introduce a very special lady who has helped me prepare tonight’s dinner and would now like to add a little colour to the evening. Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present... Rainbow, also known as... Mum.”

There was a wild round of applause as Rainbow made her entrance from the kitchen. She danced extravagantly several times around the room with arms and legs flying off in all directions following several different rhythms of non-existent music. Whatever had exploded onto Raymond’s apron had also found its way onto Rainbow, but in her case, it blended in perfectly with her unique dress style which tonight included a feather boa and bright orange Ali Baba trousers that were so big they could probably have fit Raymond. Not since the halcyon days of 60’s Goa had she felt so alive and adulated by those around her. She took a bow and returned to the kitchen to help Raymond serve up the first course.

“Mesdames et Messieurs. Pan-roasted asparagus with wild garlic and white bean hummus, spring onion, and hazelnut pesto,” announced Raymond.

The locally bought plonk had been replaced by a selection of Raymond’s favourite wine, and for ambience he played a selection of smooth jazz, delicately sprinkled with his favourite Gregory Porter tracks. The only problem with the scene was it defied words. Each of them had so much they wanted to say, but it was eventually said by Tim who stood up, lifted his glass, and simply said, “To Raymond, an extraordinary man.”

“To Raymond,” everyone repeated with hearts full.

The remaining courses were every bit as exotic as the first, and it wasn’t long before they reached that point in the evening when they were no longer able to appreciate how good the wine was.

“Are you going to be dealing with the social media side of things?” asked Sue during a gap between courses.

“Yes, we use a company that handles social media for all our acts. You are welcome to post yourselves, but if you do, we ask that you do it through us. Plenty of careers have been ruined by careless remarks. All of us say stupid things at times, but we now have the technology to mass-produce our stupidity with no hope of covering it up.”

Bill was keen to boast of his foray into social media.

“I did a twit once.”

“I think you mean a tweet Dad.”

“Yes, that’s it. A tweet. Rachel registered my name years ago to make sure no one else took it, but I never used it. Then one day she insisted I gave it a try.”

“You did one single tweet?” asked Sue.

“Yes. It took me the whole morning to compose.”

“Come on then. We can’t wait to hear what you wrote,” demanded Tim.

“I can’t remember the exact words, but it was something like, *Hello everyone. I just did a shit.*”

“It took you a whole morning to come up with that?” asked Tim.

“I didn’t know what to write, did I? I spent ages looking for inspiration from other people’s twits...”

“Tweets, Dad!”

“Sorry, tweets. People were writing about what they had for breakfast or how many times their babies puked up, so I wanted to make a stand against mundanity.”

Tim raised his wine glass.

“Quite right, Bill. I’m with you there.”

“The funny thing was, ten minutes later I got a message saying someone liked my twit and started following me. I felt really chuffed. Me, with a follower. So I got Rachel to show me the details of this follower. It turned out he was following 30,000 other people.”

“Yes, it’s a farce really,” said Robert. “Unless you’re really famous, the only way to get followers is by using the good old fashioned, *you scratch my back* system. I’ll follow you if you follow me. Unless you are mega-famous no one actually reads tweets, they’re too busy sending them or looking for people to follow. It’s the same for Instagram.”

“Now I understand why I’ve got 130 followers when I only ever did that one nonsensical twit,” said Bill.

“Tweet!” shouted everyone in unison.

Despite feeling the worst for wear, Robert wanted to air one of his pet hates.

“I’ve got a question. Why do songwriters always have to use the word *baby* in their songs? That’s one of the things I love about Tim’s songs, you never hear the word *baby*. Good on ya Tim.”

The raising of his glass was eagerly reciprocated by all present.

“Hear hear.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but now you mention it I suppose half the songs ever written have a baby in there somewhere,” said Raymond.

“Precisely!” said Robert. “Take the irritating line; *I want you to be my baby*. What does that even mean? I want you to shit your pants and wake me up at 4 a.m. every morning? Ladies and gentlemen; to Tim and his babyless songs.”

They toasted Tim and moved onto Rachel, the world’s leading puppet master, and costume designer. It wasn’t until

each of them had been toasted in turn that it dawned on them what an exceptionally talented group of people they were.

“So Rainbow, I assume Raymond inherited his culinary skills from you?” asked Rachel.

“Good God no. I never cook, and to be honest, I’m not really that into food.”

It seemed a strange thing to say, but it did explain why she had picked at her meal while everyone else had attacked theirs like vultures.

“The only thing Raymond got from me was a big heart.”

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly.

As usually happens at great dinner parties, the food was finished long before the guests, so a good host is duty-bound to take over from where the food left off. With no official host, it seemed natural for Tim to accept the responsibility, despite the wine having rendered his tongue semi-conscious. He started by singing an acapella version of his song “I Wish I Was a Has Been” in which he claims it is better to be a *has-been* than a *never-was*. He continued with a story about a gig he did at a nudist camp which was followed by Raymond telling of the time he was hired as a bodyguard to a Chihuahua that kept biting them. Sue recounted her time on the streets when she was continually pestered by a man claiming to be John the Baptist on a mission to baptise her. Robert divulged idiosyncrasies of some of the famous artists he had managed, including the wildest of heavy metal guitarists who refused to go on stage without a picture of his cat taped to the back of his guitar. To finish the night, Rainbow performed a song and dance acapella version of Joni Mitchell’s *Big Yellow Taxi* which in any other situation would have been painfully melodramatic, but on that occasion was perfect.

Bill, being aware of his inability to mix drinking and walking, was careful to pace himself so he could get back to

their pub lodgings unaided, but he hadn't calculated on the landlord insisting they had a nightcap before retiring. The consequence was Robert having to carry him to his room and put him to bed. Raymond had offered to do the carrying, but he was barely able to walk himself.

It was late afternoon the next day before the landlord's breathalyser confirmed they were safe to drive, and so they made their way home. Sue would have liked to go with Bill, but she wanted to wait until Rachel and Simon had sealed their relationship naturally rather than be pushed into it by her absence. Bill had brought her laptop with him, so she had plenty to do working on their website.

The next few days passed as some of the happiest that Sue could ever remember. She separated herself gradually from Rachel and Simon so they could get to know each better, and was surprised to find how the tranquillity and lack of purpose in her long solo walks rejuvenated her. Since she had started living with Bill and Rachel, she had become completely absorbed with the puppet theatre but now that her head was clearing, new ideas came flooding in. Tim's website was fifteen years old and he had designed it himself. He had done a good job as an amateur, but with her expertise and a fresh approach, she could make the website every bit as impressive as his music. Rachel had recently shown her the animated film *Ethel and Ernest* illustrated by Raymond Briggs, and she became completely captivated by it. The thought of doing something similar filled her with excitement, and many of Tim's songs were ideal for video adaptation. The puppet theatre would always come first, but it finally dawned on her that she had a life of her own.

That night, Sue went to her bedroom early on the pretext of working on the website and left Rachel and Simon downstairs. When she woke the next morning and saw that the other side of

the bed hadn't been slept in, she knew her work there was done. She heard Simon pottering around in the kitchen as he always did first thing in the morning, so she went into the other bedroom and threw her arms around Rachel.

“Oh, Sue, I am so happy,” said Rachel.

For Rachel, it was not just the beginning of something special but the final confirmation that the nightmare that had started at university had now come to an end. Sue took Rachel's hand and said gently, “You know I'll always be here for you, but you have to build a life of your own now. It was obvious from the first time I saw you and Simon together that you were made for each other.”

They had breakfast together, and as Sue insisted on walking to the station by herself, they said their goodbyes in the front garden.

Being parted from Sue hit Rachel surprisingly hard at first, and she felt the all too familiar ripples of depression, but she completed a twenty-minute mindfulness body scan and came out feeling much better. We all experience depression throughout our lives but we accept it as an emotion that will pass. For those who have suffered from debilitating depression or other mental illness, time is no longer a dependable cure. Although a sufferer may recover, it usually lingers in the background. In many cases, it can be controlled by simple techniques like meditation and controlled breathing, and it was that knowledge that helped Rachel get through those first few days of separation from her dearest friend.

Simon and Rachel went on various day trips together and with each day that passed, she felt stronger. Simon's understanding of her anxiety disorder was of great value to her. If he said something that made her uncomfortable, he made a mental note of it and either avoided it in the future or helped her

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find a way to deal with it. His greatest contribution to Rachel's well-being was nothing more than understanding.

CHAPTER 20



Life for Robert became difficult from the moment he arrived home from the cottage. He was one of the most experienced artist managers in the country with a great team behind him, but he was no longer the young man he was when he last committed himself to a project of this size. Any doubt that this would be his last big venture was dispelled each morning when he woke to face another day of meetings and problems. Ruth was concerned to see how hard he pushed himself, so to assure her he meant what he said about retiring, he booked them on a flight to Australia when it was all over. They would stay for three months with their daughter who they had seen so little of in the twenty years since she emigrated.

The first thing he did was to create a new company to handle the project and then put into motion the selling of his existing company. He would no longer be able to give his artists the time they needed and wanted to make sure they continued to be well represented.

Arrangements for the puppet theatre were lengthy but straightforward, which was more than could be said for Tim's

affairs. In the past, a songwriter submitted a song to a publisher and the probability of getting a deal might have been one per cent, but since the internet had made song submission free of charge and much easier, the chances were negligible. A publisher is simply an agent for songs, so if a songwriter does manage to get a deal, they have effectively won a publishing lottery where the prize is a ticket for the record deal lottery. If they win the record deal lottery, then the prize is a ticket for the promotion lottery, because a deal without adequate promotion is the same as having no deal. If they win the promotion lottery, then finally there is a chance that they make money and gain recognition. That is the situation for unknown songwriters.

Further up the ladder is the songwriter who is already well known so they might be offered an advance on royalties. As the publisher is reasonably assured of an income from them, they are enticed to sign a contract with a cash advance. At the very top of the ladder, there are songwriters who have songs that are guaranteed success and substantial royalties will be generated by their work until fifty years after their death. It is a licence to print money, so on the rare occasion that such a song or songwriter becomes available, there is a feeding frenzy which usually results in an auction. This ensures the best possible deal for the artist and publishing company.

Having spent his entire career trying to get onto the bottom rung of the ladder, Tim now found himself propelled to the top overnight. *The Gift Inside* was the song behind their first video and was guaranteed success as it had already been licensed to television companies worldwide. Then there were the songs accompanying the other eleven videos including the sixty-minute finale which looked like being nothing short of spectacular. If that wasn't enough, Tim already had twelve albums worth of music recorded but never commercially released. Established artists all over the world who had previously refused to even listen to his music were now falling

over themselves to jump on the bandwagon. Even if only a small percentage of those songs were successful, it still amounted to a fortune. Robert had only ever been involved in one auction, and that was with the Fox Daley smash hit that stayed at number one for nine weeks.

Robert spent the first two weeks negotiating with the multitude of companies involved in the project. Apart from the TV and record companies, there was merchandising, PR, sound equipment, transport, and a variety of other services that few would think of as being connected to the music business. He originally intended to handle the whole thing himself, but it grew so big he had to take on two full-time assistants. In the third week, a meeting of all the interested parties was called, which involved nearly a hundred people and took two days to complete.

A string of television interviews was booked with various combinations of the Olivia Puppet Theatre, but Rachel would not appear in any of them. She was well enough to be interviewed from home, but the PR company insisted she remain a mystery for as long as possible as it was creating rumours that were generating publicity by themselves. Rachel's talent as a puppet master was unsurpassed, and some of her contemporaries claimed that it was not possible to control two puppets at the same time in the way that she did. They insisted it had to be at least two people, or maybe some kind of machine.

With the meetings out of the way and everyone clear about their duties, Robert took a well-earned day off. It was a warm spring afternoon when he sat with Ruth in their garden, enjoying a glass of white wine.

"I'm happy to say we are out of the woods now. I must admit, I was a little worried after that Festival Hall fiasco," said Robert.

"I never doubted you for a minute, darling."

She spotted a rose bush that needed deadheading so with a few deft strokes of her always available secateurs, the job was done. It didn't really need doing, but it was her way of reminding Robert that the lawn needed mowing. Robert was more interested in reflection.

"I don't know why I do it. We already had more than enough to retire comfortably, and there I was gambling it all on one last project."

"It's in your nature. If it wasn't, you would never have been so successful all those years."

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm looking for absolution for what happened to Fox Daley."

"You don't still feel guilty about his death, do you?"

"Nearly every day. I'm haunted by the vision of him walking into my office for the first time. He was so young and fresh, his head full of dreams. I can't help thinking that if I'd not taken him on, he might still be alive."

"An artist with his talent was always going to make it big, so if it wasn't you, it would have been someone else. It was twenty years ago, you have to lay it to rest."

"I know you're right, and I was ok for a while but when Rachel was attacked that night, it brought it all back to me. I couldn't bear it if I was instrumental in another life being destroyed."

Ruth reached across and put her hand on his arm. Even after all those years, it still gave him a feeling of warmth and well-being.

"You are a good man. I have seen other managers come and go without a second thought for their artists. The only thing they cared about was money and prestige, and in one way or another, their artists paid a heavy price. You have been like a father to

your artists and not one of them would have a bad word said against you”.

He reached across and kissed her gently, wondering what on earth a woman like her ever saw in him. She had always given him so much support, and yet he had let her down so many times when something urgent came up. He was more determined than ever that when this project was over, he would devote what time he had left to their life together. Besides, his world had changed beyond all recognition, and it was time to let go.

“I just don’t understand how it works now. It used to be simple in the past. I found someone talented, got them a record deal and they achieved something between moderate success to world fame. Now we all have to be experts in banality. I was looking through Tim’s Facebook page the other day and came across a video he released a few years ago. It was superb. A story of the relationship between him and his father. A perfectly crafted and executed song and you know how many likes he had for it?”

“Tell me.”

“Three. Then I saw a post from one of my girls in PR. It was a picture of her eating a muffin, and it earned her an unbelievable 240 likes with countless comments.”

Ruth could sense one of his rants coming on so needed to head him off.

“Well, it sounds like you are getting out just at the right time. It’s getting late, let’s get ready for dinner.”

Robert got the message. They were going to their favourite restaurant, and he badly needed to forget everything because, from the next morning, the snowball would start to gather momentum.

CHAPTER 21



The first video, *The Gift Inside*, was broadcast on a Sunday night, four weeks before Christmas. People were familiar with the video from YouTube, but that was a low-quality recording done on a mobile phone. Now it was broadcast in high definition with a soundtrack recorded and mastered in a top London studio by a Grammy award-winning producer. To prevent unauthorised streaming, all countries broadcast it at the same time. The result was the same everywhere, an overwhelming success, and one of those rare occasions when critics worldwide were unanimous in their approval. There might have been some that didn't like it, but they wouldn't have dared go against such a strong tide of public approval.

The next week *Sing For Your Child* was broadcast, the story of a father who didn't have enough time for his daughter until she became ill and only then realised how insignificant his career was compared to the life of his child. It featured a large children's choir with a finale that brought tears to even the most

stubborn eyes. It generated even more interest than the first broadcast.

Two weeks before Christmas, the heading of one of the national papers was *MARIONETTE MADNESS*. Despite the large quantities of merchandising produced, everything was sold out two weeks before Christmas. Marionettes were being resold on eBay for three times their original price. In poorer countries, children with no means to buy even the cheapest novelties were making marionettes from bits of wood and string, and although barely recognisable, they were enough to keep their proud owners occupied all day.

It was clear from the beginning that the project was going to be a success, but no one had anticipated the public's unconscious desire to escape from technology. Parents who were concerned about their children's obsession with mobile phones and computer games were delighted to see them put aside in favour of traditional toys. For once, they were not being forced by peer pressure to purchase what they couldn't afford. Those parents who automatically went out and bought the most expensive marionettes were at a disadvantage because the more expensive the marionette, the harder it was to operate. Imaginational wealth was far more important than material wealth. It was also a pastime that could be shared by everyone. Adults were just as hooked on puppet theatre as children, so clubs formed all over the country that welcomed the whole family. Everyone knew it was only a passing fad and it wouldn't be long before the next fad bulldozed its way into the public interest, but for now, parents were happy to see their children talking to each other and interacting instead of staring at a screen all day long.

Another thing they hadn't anticipated was what a big hit Tim and Bill proved to be on chat shows. It was impossible to imagine them spending five years sitting on a riverbank without talking to each other when chat show hosts had trouble getting them to shut up. Their characters were so different that they

formed the perfect double act with a repartee that was endearing. They never appeared without their crocodile hats, and so TV audiences started wearing them in support of the fight against self-importance. There were even calls for politicians to be forced to wear them so the public was reminded that whatever they said shouldn't be taken too seriously.

While all of this was going on, Rachel continued to be kept in the background. Now that Bill was a celebrity, his address was common knowledge, but it was not a problem. Simon was living with them and after spending years having to think ahead of terrorists and highly organised criminals, outwitting a few reporters was child's play. He amused himself for a few days by having them run around in circles chasing their own tails until they gave up and concluded that Rachel wasn't living there, or maybe it was true that she didn't even exist.

The day before the concert, there was a meeting to make sure everyone was clear about their duties and that everything was put in place. The main thrust of the promotion was centred around security and mystery which was more about building up excitement than protecting Rachel who had built up an inner strength that made her unrecognisable from the woman who was once a prisoner of anxiety.

The performance was to be held in an undisclosed location, and up until the last minute, the only people who knew all the details were Robert and Raymond. Even those working at the venue had no idea who would be performing that night. Half the tickets were sold at box offices and the other half by auction at fundraising events with closing bids ranging from between £5000 and £20,000. Fifty per cent of the proceeds from the event was to be donated to various homeless and mental health charities.

All ticket holders were to be picked up from various locations and regardless of where the starting point was, all bus

drivers were instructed to drive for exactly two hours. This meant that some buses required the full two hours to get to the venue while others had to drive in circles until the two hours passed. The bus windows were blackened out, so no one knew where they were, and mobile phones didn't work due to a signal blocking system on every bus. It was completely over the top, but the sense of excitement it created was priceless.

By now, eleven of the videos had been broadcasted, and the results far surpassed all expectations. Although most people had the facility to watch the videos whenever they wanted, part of the magic was to sit down at exactly the same time as the countless millions from all over the world.

As for the production itself, there was no expense spared, and Robert had been given free rein to hire whoever and whatever he wanted. In the past, finding the right people for a job was always half the battle, but with everyone wanting to be part of the greatest show on earth, the problem was who to reject. The London Symphony Orchestra was booked and a fifty-piece choir. A special effects company was employed with technology that Robert didn't even know existed. As Raymond was involved in the performance, Simon was in charge of security, with every member of the elite security team offering their services for free. Robert was amazed at the extraordinary collection of talent at his disposal with people making suggestions he would never have dreamt of and solving problems he didn't even know he had.

As always, Tim had not wanted to rehearse, but when it was explained to him the complexity of the performance and the effects being utilised, he reluctantly agreed. It was only at the rehearsal that Tim understood why it was necessary. Although he was blessed with the ability to concentrate even under the most distracting conditions, during the rehearsal he became so engrossed with the effects that he sometimes lost his place, but

he was experienced enough to find his way back without anyone noticing.

For Rachel, the process was far more complicated due to the interaction between her and the special effects. At times it was necessary to create distance between the two marionettes she was controlling, so one of them would be controlled behind a screen whilst special effects projected it to wherever it was needed. It took two days of rehearsal to get it right, but the effect was stunning.

On the night before the performance, Robert looked out at the countless rows of empty chairs and suddenly realised how tired he was. There was no doubt in his mind that this event would turn out to be everything he had hoped it would be, but for the first time in his life, he just wanted it to be over.

CHAPTER 22



The hours before the start of the performance were surprisingly calm, which is as it should be when true professionals are involved. They will not differentiate between a worldwide event or a community theatre, between a well-paid job or one done for charity. They can no sooner give their second-best than use half their heart.

The first buses started arriving at 7 pm. Guests went straight from the bus and along a wooden corridor to the theatre. They could have been on Mars for all they knew. Even those who might have been familiar with the concert hall wouldn't have recognised it as it had been altered so much. Special effects gave the impression they were in an open-air arena. Where the roof should have been, there were stars and a full moon. There was a gentle sound of waves caressing the seashore and the occasional motor taking a boat out to sea. Wafts of sea air stirred memories of childhood, and an accordion could be heard in the distance. The venue was part of the performance and intensified an already high expectation.

Rachel had arrived with Sue that afternoon and felt perfectly relaxed sitting in her dressing room. They were all more nervous than usual. Even the normally super-cool Bill was suffering, so he went to Rachel's dressing room for a lesson on relaxation. Raymond, as always was a bag of nerves but Rainbow knew the right buttons to push so she managed to keep it under control. It was not just the scale of the event that unnerved Raymond, but it was the first time he was required to sing. He knew he didn't have a good voice, but it was reasonably in tune and fitted the character perfectly.

Robert went to the side of the stage and looked out at the audience as the last few stragglers took their seats. Fifteen thousand tickets had been sold, making the venue full. There was strictly no admittance after the curtain went up, so most people had arrived early. There were also hundreds of people on standby waiting outside in the hopes of taking the place of anyone that didn't turn up. Those who were disappointed would be taken to a side room where they could watch the performance on a large screen. Robert had seen plenty of packed houses before but never such a mixed audience as this as there had been strict conditions on the sale of tickets. Although people paid a lot more at auctions than at box offices, seats were assigned randomly which resulted in each row containing an extraordinary mix of class, ethnicity, and age. People had been asked to dress modestly, so there was no visible display of wealth or ego in keeping with the spirit of the evening.

High up on either side of the stage were two giant screens that displayed similar venues from all over the world that were screening the event.

The orchestra take their seats and start tuning their instruments. A gentle tap from the conductor's baton is the cue for them to stop, which in, turn silences the audience. A

spotlight shines on the left side of the stage, highlighting a small, raised platform with a rowing boat shrouded in mist. A single bass note from an acoustic guitar gently resonates, followed by a second note that slides into a sustained vibrato that tugs at the listener's soul. Slowly the mist clears to reveal Tim sitting in the centre of the boat, resting a guitar on his thigh.

As dawn approaches, the stage slowly becomes visible while the hall is filled with the birdsong that Tim recorded early one morning in Goa the year before. As daylight arrives and the birdsong increases in volume to fill the entire arena, a spotlight shines centre stage, revealing a row of colourful cottages facing a cobblestone street. A door opens and out steps a marionette dressed as a simple fisherman. He stops outside the door and looks around. He looks up and sees a bird whistling in the tree and putting his hand to his mouth, he whistles back. A conversation between bird and fisherman floats above the string section. A flute joins in the conversation followed by celli. An 'ahh' from the choir is processed, so it drifts gently across the stage like a ripple from the kindest of seas.

The fisherman walks slowly down the street. A gentle arpeggio falls from Tim's guitar leading into the first verse.

Each day he wakes

And walks slowly down the sleepy village streets

Till he stands beside his faithful fishing boat

His heart is full

The houses fade away, and a boat appears. He boards the boat. The audience gasps when the laser lights are turned on to reveal the backdrop of an ocean. It is impossible to tell it is only an effect as seawater drips down the side of the boat. Tim

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continues, with the orchestra joining in as the boat sails into open sea.

*He takes the wheel
Glides slowly through the harbour to the sea
Looks around at all he holds so dear
His heart is free*

*God touches those
Who know when they are happy and content
Not crying for the things that they don't need
His heart is touched*

The string section becomes agitated as the boat stops opposite an island.

*There's the island that he's passed a hundred times or more
Something's changed, but what it is he's not quite sure
Then she appears
before his eyes
Like a dream*

The whole orchestra is in full flow as a huge cloud encircles the island. The music slows down and comes to a stop. Again the audience gasps as the cloud clears and the lighting effect does its magic to reveal a woman standing on the rocks. Her beauty and detailed movement make it hard to believe it is a marionette. There is total silence when Sue starts to sing, caressed by a string section that is barely audible.

Please come a little closer

There's no need to be afraid

Those rocks are harmless

Over here is where dreams are made

The woman fades away, and a spectacular light show takes her place. The entire orchestra thunders onto the scene as if to wake the whole world from its slumber. During the decrescendo, gentle guitar arpeggios weave their way through the slowly diminishing orchestra. Tim continues as the boat sails away, and the giant screen at the side of the stage zooms in on the fisherman.

Then she was gone

As quickly as she came, she disappeared

Left him wondering if it had been real

But life goes on

It grows dark. The orchestra guides us through the night with a melody that enters the soul of every person present and remains with them for the rest of their lives. The sun rises. The boat sails out to sea. Tim continues.

Day after day

He sees her and she's singing the same song

He wants to go and meet her, but he's scared

The rocks aren't safe

The melody changes and the tempo increases as they look at each for the first time.

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*Then one day their eyes meet with a feeling strong and true
She tries to fight but knows that there is nothing she can do
She feels so confused as her head begins to spin
But her heart is melted when she hears him sing*

The tempo slows, the orchestra creates suspense. There is total silence as Raymond starts to sing as the fisherman, accompanied by a solo concertina evoking memories of romantic sea shanties.

*I can't come any closer, those rocks will sink my boat
So far from land, I'll be lost without a hope
But you could swim here to my side where we'd both be safe
Then we could be together, riding the waves*

A guitar takes over from the concertina. The woman replies,
*Please come a little closer, there's no need to be afraid
Those rocks are harmless over here is where dreams are
made*

The camera zooms in on the fisherman as sadness descends and he prepares his boat to sail away.

*But he is wise
He shakes his head and slowly sails away
He knows how many lives those rocks have claimed
But his heart aches*

A solo violin taunts the woman. Tim continues,

She stands alone

She knows her world will never be the same

She wants so much to stand there by his side

But she is scared

Night falls again and there is darkness. Again, the orchestra plays a haunting melody while the village sleeps. The sun rises as the boat approaches the island. A sudden appearance of the woman causes the orchestra to become agitated.

The next day when she sees him, she casts caution to the wind

She jumps into the sea and to his boat she swims

The audience gasps as the woman jumps into the water with an exaggerated splash created by special effects. She swims quickly to the boat and as she gets close, she looks up at the fisherman. The fisherman sings.

Please come a little closer

There's no need to be afraid

Here inside this boat with me

That's where dreams are made

She climbs into the boat while special effects create the illusion that seawater is dripping from her clothes. The boat sails

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back to shore and during a long instrumental section, Rachel displays extraordinary skill as the couple walk and play in the street intermingled with holograms of local villagers walking past.

*And so they live
With a love that just gets stronger every day
But there is one thing that she asks of him
That he should see
Where she came from*

The fisherman reluctantly agrees. They board his boat and sail towards her island.

*And so one day they sail up to the island of her birth
Cautiously he waits there, but then he hears her sing.*

The woman sings seductively.

*Please go a little closer
There's no need to be afraid
I know a place to land
it's there, my dream was made*

The fisherman smiles. He loves her so much, how can he deny such a heartfelt wish.

*Against his better judgement, he feels she must be true
For if the rocks were dangerous, then she would perish too*

The boat moves towards the rocks, but as it gets closer, the weather changes. The orchestra warns of impending catastrophe.

*As the boat goes closer, the sea begins to change
He's seen it many times before but nothing quite so strange
He tries so hard to turn away, but there's nothing he can do
The wind is so relentless as the rain obscures his view*

The orchestra becomes louder and more agitated. Cymbal crashes burst the clouds and timpani rolls like thunder. The audience grips their seats. They scream as a sudden spray of water descends from the ceiling. Screams and laughter are intermingled as the seats start to move, rolling from side to side, backwards and forwards. More sea spray descends on them. There is lightning everywhere. Dolphins are jumping all around the fisherman, distressed to see their friend in trouble. Tim's voice returns, heavy with effects. The tempo increases as the music becomes louder.

*Soon the boat is crashing on the unforgiving rocks
He knows beyond a doubt, that this last fight will be lost*

They are both thrown into the sea. The fisherman thrashes around in desperation, but the woman remains calm.

*As the sea take hold of him, he sees his love close by
And with his last remaining strength, he swims there to her
side*

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He puts his arm around her and suddenly, the deafening orchestra is replaced by the gentle arpeggios of a harp. A short recurring melody is passed from instrument to instrument. The fisherman and the woman sink slowly together towards the seabed, their descension followed by the string section.

Then suddenly

Just as they both surrender to the sea

He takes her in his arms and asks her why?

I don't understand

The fisherman pleads with the woman.

Why did you guide me to those rocks now you will die as well?

Why would you trade what we had, for a one-way trip to hell?

The woman replies.

I could not help myself, that is who I am

It's just in my nature, there was no thought or plan

The fisherman pulls away, the woman holds out her arms.

Please come a little closer

There's no need to be afraid

At last, we're together

That's where dreams are made.

A long instrumental section follows as they descend slowly to the seabed. Fish surround them. A dolphin nudges the fisherman for signs of life but is heartbroken to find there is none. The light fades slowly into darkness and silence. The audience is confused. Surely this can't be the end, but nothing seemed to be happening.

Suddenly the stage is filled with light. The audience is transported to a large room filled with fishermen. They have arrived at Fiddler's Green where all good fishermen go when they die if they have served for fifty years or if they have been lured to their death by a Siren.

Music crashes onto the scene, led by an Irish fiddle playing a lively jig, competing with an equally lively flute. The fisherman is joined by another, and they start to dance a complicated routine taking in every inch of the stage. He jumps onto a table, dances a little, and then somersaults back to the floor. Why the strings don't become tangled was something marionette aficionados will talk about for years to come. The stage is filled with holograms of other dancers. Tim goes into the first verse.

Welcome to the party son

This is where good sailors come

When their time on earth is through

There's always time room for one more crew

We usually ask for fifty years

Through stormy seas and bitter tears

But those who answer the siren's call

Are also welcome one and all

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People appear at the front of the stage, encouraging the audience to join in with the chorus.

*Free Rum, Free Beer
A party for every day of the year
Clap your hands and stomp your feet
Dance along to the sailor's beat
A chair is not the place to stay
When the fiddler starts to play
We've only got the rest of time
So jump right in and join the line*

There is not a foot left unstomped as the entire building trembles with the impact.

*Here you're always with your friends
The fun and dancing never ends
A dancer's work is never done
When one tune ends, it's just begun*

*It might seem now that you'll get bored
But you just need to cut the cord
No more storms and no more fear
No more sirens in your ear*

The song goes from chorus to dance and back again several times. A group of Irish dancers take the stage and join the marionettes. The giant screens broadcast similar scenes from all

over the world. A village in Africa, a school in China, dockworkers in Japan, a beach in Rio De Janeiro. When the song finally finishes, the audience leaps to its feet and applaud wildly. The stage goes dark as spotlights flood the orchestra pit. The orchestra bows three times. A spotlight return to centre stage as Sue and Raymond walk on, hand in hand. Bill and Tim were next, and although Bill had not played a big part in the performance, he had appeared on TV with Tim so many times they were both household names. Several bows later, just as the applause was dying down, they all donned their crocodile hats, causing the audience to applaud louder than ever.

Three times they leave the stage only to be forced back by the audience eager to show their appreciation. Eventually, the audience accepts that the end has come, and the applause rapidly dies down. Everything goes quiet, and people are preparing to leave when suddenly a spotlight shines on stage. There is deathly silence. What on earth was coming now?

A man's voice fills the air with a sound so rich it resounds in the listener's stomach.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Please show your appreciation for the puppet master.”

There was a long pause to create suspense.

“Rachel Baskin!”

The curtain moves tantalisingly and then comes one of the greatest moments in entertainment history. Rachel walks slowly and shyly to the front of the stage. Most of the audience had become so absorbed with the performance it had ceased to occur to them that the marionettes were being controlled. Although Rachel had been kept from the public eye, her story had not. Here was a woman who not only possessed a skill that in itself was worthy of public adulation but who until not long ago had been imprisoned in her own home by anxiety and depression. From not being able to leave her house, she has now summoned

the courage to stand in front of the entire world while it stood together to congratulate her. She bursts into tears, covering her face with her hands and bows her head. Bill rushes over, afraid it is all too much for her.

“Are you alright?” he asks. Rachel looks up with a smile drenched in tears.

“I’m fine Dad honestly. I am just so happy.”

Now they are both in tears. Bill steps to her side and holds her hand up to show she is alright. They bow together and now most of the audience is in tears. Through his television appearances, Raymond’s love of flowers had become common knowledge so when he walks to the side of the stage and returns with an enormous bouquet of flowers to present to Rachel, the few eyes that had resisted tears, now succumb to emotion.

The rest of the cast return to the stage and join in with the audience in joint acknowledgement of her courage and skill. As they all walk slowly offstage, recorded music starts playing gently in the background confirming this really is the end of the show. Some of the audience go quickly to the aisles hoping to beat the rush to the exit, but many are too emotionally drained to move. Melodies from the performance are played gently for those who want to preserve the moment for as long as possible. It is not until the lights are turned full on that those who had remained now make their way slowly to the exit.

CHAPTER 23



They all sat in Rachel's dressing room, not knowing if their euphoria was down to the success of the performance, or the bliss of knowing it was all over. For months their entire world had been preoccupied with that performance so it was hard to imagine that they could wake up the next morning with the luxury of nothing to do. Champagne flowed freely while they recounted highlights of the night. They laughed at the impromptu moment when Bill and Tim joined forces with the Irish dancers. Even Raymond had been unable to resist stomping up and down in front of the stage during the last chorus.

Sue returned to the stage, wanting to savour every last second. The theatre was empty but for one solitary man sitting a few rows back from the front. She looked at him curiously. He seemed to be waiting for something or someone. She was straining to get a better look without being noticed when she was startled by a hand on her shoulder. It was Rachel.

“Yes, it is him. Your dad.”

Sue was speechless.

“He told me what really happened with your mother,” said Rachel.

“You went to see him behind my back?” said Sue angrily.

“Please don’t be angry. You know I would never do anything to hurt you. He contacted me a few weeks ago. We met up, and he told me everything. He’s a good man Sue, and he needs you.”

Sue’s anger turned to confusion. Sue walked to the side of the stage and sat down. In recent months she had been happier than she could ever remember, but there was always something in the background that troubled her. Sudden flashbacks triggered memories, but nothing she could hang onto. It was the one flaw in her otherwise perfect new life. She leaned past the curtain and took another look. Surely that wasn’t him, he was so much smaller than the man she remembered. She sat back in the chair. Rachel knelt beside her but said nothing, knowing that Sue needed to digest what was happening. The fog in Sue’s head cleared as painful memories came flooding back to a scene from years before.

“I’m going out, and you’re not going to stop me.”

“No, you are not. That boy is no good. I’m not going to let you throw your life away.”

“Who are you to tell me how to run my life. There’s nothing wrong with you. You just sit in that chair all day like a sad old bitch.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that. Go to your room and stay there.”

“I’m not a kid anymore. You can’t tell me what to do.”

She opened the door and before leaving shouted, “I hate you. I wish you were dead.”

They were the last words she ever said to her mother.

Sue’s thoughts returned to the present as reality smothered her like a lead blanket.

“I’m such a terrible person.”

Rachel held her shoulders and shook her gently.

“No, you are not. You are the kindest person I have ever met. You gave me back my life.”

“But I killed my mum.”

“Of course, you didn’t. You did what teenagers do the world over. I said the same thing to my mum more than once.”

She managed to get Sue to sit upright.

“Your mother was very ill and had been for years, but they hid it from you just how bad it was. It was not your fault. None of it was.”

“But why would she have killed herself if it wasn’t because of me?”

Rachel knew she had to be more assertive.

“Look at me. Don’t you think I wanted to kill myself even though I knew it would destroy my parents? Look!”

She pulled up her shirt sleeve to reveal a small scar on her wrist.

“It was a pretty lame attempt, but that’s how close I got. When depression smothers you, it’s not your loved ones you think of but how you can escape from the hell.”

The others appeared close by and could see something was up. Bill called out to Rachel and Sue.

“We’ll see you back at the hotel.”

“Ok, we’ll see you there,” said Rachel.

“Whatever happened is in the past. Right now, a man is sitting down there that loves you more than anything, and he doesn’t deserve to be shut out. You have to go and speak to him.”

Rachel stood up and held out her hand. Sue took it and stood as if in a daze. She walked slowly down to the man while tears ran down her cheek. He stood and walked towards her. They embraced.

“I am so sorry, Dad. Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. You went through one of the most painful experiences anyone can ever go through.”

“But you were also in pain, and what did I do? I deserted you when you needed me the most. I don’t understand what happened. You treated Mum so patiently and with so much kindness but in my head, it was you that said all those terrible things and behaved so badly.”

“The difference is, I knew what I was getting myself into when I met your mother, but you never had a choice. Have you forgotten how much you helped her when you were younger? How you sat in the car with her for hours sharing her safe zone? You were so patient, but no child should ever have such a burden put on them.”

“But why did she kill herself when she knew how much it would hurt us?”

“Who knows what goes on inside a troubled mind? Maybe she thought it would be best for you in the long run and did it out of love? A lifetime of a burden compared to a period of pain which you would come out of and be able to build your own life. Maybe she was right? Just look at what a success you have become.”

“I’d give it all up tomorrow to have her back.”

There was a long silence while Sue remembered her mother as she would have liked her to be, but her father remembered her as she really was.

“How did you find me?” asked Sue.

“Through Raymond. Rachel asked him to make some enquiries, and it didn’t take long to track me down. He arranged a meeting when she told me everything that happened to you. It broke my heart when I heard what you have been through. I went to a counsellor for advice and was told that the trauma of what you saw caused you to subconsciously transfer blame to me. It is not uncommon. It is no more your fault than having depression was your mother’s fault.”

“But I have put you through so much.”

“That is all in the past. We need to put it behind us.”

He held her hand as he looked into her eyes,

“Please come home.”

“I will, Dad. I promise. But I need time to take this all in.”

“Take all the time you need. I’ll be here waiting.”

They held each other for a while as Sue fought back her tears.

“Your mother would be so proud of you. You filled the hearts of countless millions and for a while, made their lives such a happy place. Think of that as her legacy.”

She gave him one last hug and was on her way back to the dressing room when she turned and said, “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“There is one thing that I do have to say, though.”

“What is that?”

With a faultless Johnny Cash impersonation, she replied, “If I ever have a daughter, I’m gonna call her Ann or Jenny, anything but Bruce.”

A SINGLE TEAR

“Ok that wasn’t one of my best ideas, but you have to admit...” and in his own not so faultless Johnny cash voice he said, “But you gotta admit girl, you sure did put up one hell of a fight.”

CHAPTER 24



It was a beautiful spring day when Tim and Bill sat by the river at their usual place. They often met these days socially, but when fishing they maintained their tacit agreement to sit in silence except during lunch when they discussed developments that became less frequent with each year that passed. As often happened on fishing days, Tim reflected on all that had passed since that fateful night. *Come A Little Closer* won every award going and offers for new productions came fast and furious with outrageous financial incentives, but they agreed unanimously to reject them. It was a once in a lifetime event and to try and repeat it would only ever result in failure. What they hadn't realised in the run-up to that final performance was that it wasn't just the project that was developing but themselves as individuals. The performance had effectively given birth to their new lives.

One of Robert's last jobs before retiring was to secure Raymond a television cookery series with Rainbow as his assistant. It became a smash hit, although with Rainbow involved it was debatable whether it was a cookery program or a

comedy. On one occasion, Rainbow took offence to a perfectly innocent remark that Raymond made and started chasing him around the studio trying to hit him with a spatula. The video clip went viral and remained top of the YouTube charts for two weeks.

With so much money coming in, Raymond was able to attack his bucket list of exotic destinations, and now he could afford to travel first class without having to rely on the kindness of airline staff. Whenever he was in England he stayed with Bill, as they had become the best of friends. Bill had accompanied him on a couple of the less strenuous destinations, but their world cruise together was more to his taste.

Rainbow had never cared much for money and was surprised to find she was perfectly content staying at home and pottering around her garden. She would have liked to continue to make and sell jewellery at her market stall, but she lost heart when people recognised her and bought everything she had to sell within minutes and so she had to return home. Having spent most of her life wanting to be the centre of attention, now that she was a celebrity, she found it rather tiresome.

Tim's first professionally produced album was released and highly acclaimed by the very people who would have rejected it out of hand had he not become so famous through the puppet company. On the first few concerts of his world tour, Tim asked the driver to stop outside the venue while he looked at the queue of people waiting to get in. It was astonishing to think they were coming for the sole reason of watching him perform. For decades he turned up at gigs where people usually didn't know or care who was playing. Some enjoyed his music, but others moved tables to get away from him. Now people were actually paying to hear him play his own songs and calling him back for encores. As if that wasn't luxury enough, all he had to do was turn up and perform. No more carrying heavy equipment and

worrying about the sound balance. He had expected the novelty to wear off, but it never did.

The winter months he spent in his house in Goa where he did his composing, and he now had the luxury of handing his work over to a producer who prepared everything for his return. His love of India flourished, and he was involved in many charitable works around Goa, including the building of a new school.

Bill had continued to make puppets for a couple of years, but although his body was holding up well, his hands gradually lost that special touch they once had. One day he found the wood no longer talked to him, so he hung up his tools for the last time. He had a couple of health scares, so doctors adjusted his medication but assured him the risk of a heart attack was no greater than it had ever been. They didn't tell him that with his heart condition, it was a miracle he had survived as long as he had.

Rachel never lost her skill with the marionettes, but something happened to her that night of the concert. She loved them as much as ever but no longer had the connection with them that she once did. She discussed it with her father, and they decided to open a museum for the large collection they had created. It was a great success, with people coming from all over the world to visit, and regular masterclasses were held where Bill and Rachel enjoyed passing on their skills to others.

Sue reconciled with her father and they became very close. Although they saw each other regularly, she never did move back with him as she bought her own apartment. She was surprised at how much she had enjoyed singing on *Come A Little Closer*, so she accompanied Tim on his world tour. It earned her enough of a name to get solo work and although she knew she would never make the big time, she was perfectly content. She also spent a lot of time helping out at the marionette museum and strangely enough, while Bill and Rachel had drifted away from the marionettes, Sue's connection only got stronger.

Though she would never admit it, she found herself talking to them at times. When working on a website, she liked to sit with three or four of them around her, and together they discussed different aspects of a design. Tim found her a gig as a support artist for a well-known singer and arranged for an acoustic guitarist to accompany her. Their first rehearsal went badly as the attraction between them was so strong they both found it difficult to concentrate but they soon settled down. They became musically and romantically inseparable.

Robert had been only too happy to sell his business and retire. He gave his wife carte blanche to do whatever she wanted with the rest of their lives as long as it didn't involve him organising anything.

Tim's reflections were suddenly interrupted when a young girl ran out from behind the bushes shouting "Grandad!" She jumped into Bill's lap so violently she nearly knocked him off his chair. A few seconds later, Rachel appeared and stood beside her father, waiting for him to unfold the spare seat he always carried in the hope of visits like this. Tim went over to greet them both. He adored his god-daughter and there was always a small corner of his heart that ached at the thought of what he had missed out on. After a discreet amount of time, he returned to his chair. This was a family moment and he didn't want to intrude, despite their protestations that he was one of the family.

"I can't stay long Dad, I've got another television interview today," said Rachel.

They talked for a while and made plans for Bill's birthday dinner the following weekend. When it came time for Rachel to leave, his granddaughter begged to be allowed to stay with him, but she was a handful even during her quietest moments, so the request was lovingly denied.

Tim returned to his reflections and how Rachel's life had turned out since the concert. She had married Simon on the six-month anniversary of the day they first met. Simon had started his own security company and after a couple of difficult years was now doing very well. Rachel was in great demand, not only for marionette demonstrations but for the work she did with mental health charities. She had become a symbol of hope for all those whose lives had been virtually taken from them by mental illness.

The rest of the morning passed by with Tim deep in thought until it was time to join Bill for lunch. They were both in a pensive mood.

"When does an event start?" asked Tim.

"What do you mean?"

"For years we sat here without a word, and then one day the world suddenly changed, not just for us but all those around us. Did the event start the day Olivia died, or the day we started talking or the day we started fishing?"

"I have never really thought about it, although it has occurred to me at times how the tiniest events can change our lives," said Bill.

"Exactly. A friend once told me how in the sixties his brother joined a pen pal club in the hope of finding a girlfriend. He wrote to a girl, she wrote back, and they ended up getting married and living in Worthing where she came from. When my friend's parents retired, they moved to Worthing to be near him. Ten years later, my friend went through a bad patch and lived with his parents for a few months, and while he was there, he met a Croatian woman. They fell in love and got married, and now he lives in a paradise seaside village near Dubrovnik. I often think of the exact second when his brother dropped that letter into the letterbox. It changed not only his life but dozens of

people around him, including mine in a small way as I often visit him and have had some wonderful holidays there. That's what inspired me to write *Special Days*."

"That's one of my favourites," said Bill.

"Mine too. But when I designed the album cover, I couldn't make up my mind when an event starts. For my friend, did it start the day his brother wrote the letter, or when he posted the letter, or when he sat down to write the letter?"

"You could argue it was the day his parents met."

"True, but if you go down that route, you end up at the big bang. I eventually decided to use an image of a hand on a doorknob for the album cover. I suppose all events start with the opening of a door. The important thing is we all have special days in our lives, and we never know when or where they will occur."

"Even when they do occur, we might not know until much later," said Bill.

"That's true. Who would have dreamt on the day we started talking it would lead to the events that followed?"

It occurred to neither of them that the true start of their event was a single tear on Bill's cheek.

"But don't you think it strange," asked Bill "how everything fitted together like it did. You and I lacked the qualities that the other possessed and we met through a sport that we don't particularly like. You asked Raymond to join us without having any idea what his qualities were or if we even needed them. Then we met a homeless girl in a shop window who didn't know herself that she possessed the qualities that we all lacked. It all seems so contrived."

"I have a theory for that," announced Tim.

“My God. You have a theory for everything, don’t you? I bet you even have a theory on why some people have more theories than others.”

“No, but that’s a good idea. I’ll have to think about that one.”

“Please don’t.”

“Actually, it was my dad’s theory. He thought there might be people up there that play us like video games. Nothing to do with God, just beings from another planet or dimension.”

Bill gave this some thought.

“Now that you mention it, I remember when Rachel was young, she had a computer game where she used to do just that. She got really addicted. One year for Christmas, she asked us to buy her virtual clothes for her characters.”

“There you go. My dad had a lot of theories I thought were nuts at the time, but as I got older, I started to wonder about some of them,” said Tim.

It was strange how everything came together, but we are all products of millions of big and small events. Tim was only sitting there because Hitler invaded Poland, which resulted in his father joining the British army and being sent to Italy. One of his father’s friends accidentally fired a Bren gun which shot his finger off, which resulted in him missing a battle the next day where his replacement was killed. He met a woman in Milan, and ten years later, Tim was born. Is that story any more incredible than this? We are all products of the contrivance of fate.

Lunch was over, so Bill baited up his hook and cast his line out. At this point, Tim would normally have gone back to his seat, but he was enjoying their conversation and wanted to continue.

“It was a hell of a ride wasn’t it?” said Tim.

“It was. I still can’t watch the video without getting goosebumps.”

“Do you ever think we should have kept it going?”

“Not for a minute. The videos were as close to perfection as humanly possible, and the concert put them all in a box and wrapped them up with a big bow.”

“Yes, you’re right. There was only one direction we could have gone, and that was downhill.”

Tim stood up and was about to return to his place when Bill stopped him.

“Tim?”

“Yes, Bill?”

“There is something that I never told you.”

“What is that?”

“If I tell you now you have to promise not to respond. You must not say another word for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Ok. You’ve got a deal,” agreed Tim.

There was a long pause.

“Thank you.”

Tim wanted to respond but just smiled and turned around. He understood Bill’s request. Sometimes to reject thanks as being unwarranted or unnecessary is to devalue it. He sat down and cast his line into the water.

It really was one of those perfect afternoons. Life was good. The river flowed gently past while birds flew from tree to tree, singing as if it was the only thing in the world that really mattered. He wondered why birds never sing out of tune and made a mental note to write a song about it. His winter in India had been particularly productive that year and not just his composing. He had met a local woman and became very fond of her. It was no Grand Amour, but the world seemed a much

brighter place when she was around, so he had decided to return earlier than usual that year and maybe even retire there. He could still tour once a year and now it was possible to record anywhere.

He turned and looked at Bill to see if he was asleep yet. He always dropped off in the afternoons, but recently his catnaps had been growing increasingly longer. As always when Bill slept, his head had fallen forward with his mouth open. Tim laughed at the memory of Bill sleeping so soundly once that he hadn't noticed a hedgehog walk across his bare feet until it nipped one of his toes. He had woken up with such a start that his chair tipped over.

Tim continued to rummage through countless happy memories before resting on the thought of how lucky he had been in life. Why was it that some people struggled so hard while others sailed through life without a care? For Tim, there had been decades of disappointment and frustration, but he couldn't remember a time when he wasn't happy.

The light was beginning to fade, and Tim was surprised to see that Bill was still fast asleep. It was unthinkable that Tim should be the first to leave or even that they walked to the car park together. Some traditions are set in stone.

"Bill. Time to go home," he shouted.

There was no response.

"Bill?"

He walked across and put his hand on Bill's shoulder, shaking it gently.

"Bill. Are you ok?"

He got down on one knee so he could take a closer look. Bill's face, pale at the best of times had lost all hint of colour. He took Bill's wrist and felt for a pulse. There was nothing.

“Oh, Bill.”

He stood up and stared at his dearest friend for several minutes, his heart in pieces. He considered calling an ambulance, but there was no question that Bill was dead. Besides, he had always been adamant that he must not be revived and what better way to go than peacefully by the edge of the river that he had grown to love so much. Tim fetched his chair and sat beside Bill as he had done countless times before. The river drifted slowly past as if nothing had happened. How strange that the abundance of life all around them could carry on, oblivious to the fact that a man's life had just come to an end. Night fell, and Tim still hadn't moved. Their lives together drifted gently through his mind in time with the river. His recollections were interrupted by a kingfisher landing on a branch a few metres away. Its head seemed to twitch intermittently as if it had hiccups.

He would call Raymond who would come and carry Bill to the car park. He would leave their fishing equipment where it was and phone someone the next morning to come and collect it and distribute it to whoever needed it most. There was no question of ever returning.

He tried to make the call but knew as soon he did, the door would be closed on the most precious chapter of his life. He would wait just a little longer.

A single tear fell from his eye and rolled slowly down his cheek.

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