

Pain, Pain Go Away!

By

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***To anyone who has ever suffered physical and mental abuse,
have courage, you have survived – use the experience to make you
stronger!***

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Suze is the product of a broken home, literally, bullied and physically abused by her stepfather. Suze believes the taunts and threats of her peers. And then she meets Alastair and falls in love. But, an horrific tragedy means that Suze's life is thrown in turmoil, can she recover what was lost or is she forever destined to suffer the consequences of her earlier abuse.

Chapter 1

'Beep, Beep, the monitor sounded again, and Suze knew exactly what that meant. Just minutes before, as she had sat at her sister Lissette's bedside, Lissette's husband Tyler was sitting on the opposite side, they had both been aware of how shallow Lissette's breathing had become. It wasn't unexpected, they had known for some months now that her time was limited. At just 37, Lissette had been diagnosed with a brain tumour; it was inoperable and the last few weeks of her life had been spent in a semi-comatose state for much of the time. She had been pregnant when she was diagnosed, but the pregnancy was far too advanced to consider a termination. This had resulted in treatment being delayed, which may or may not have shortened her life, it was impossible to say. Lissette hadn't spoken to either of them for the past 24 hours, but they had both spoken to her. They were both hoping that some small glimmer of recognition was still there and that she could hear them say their goodbyes, taking with her their love and promises to meet again one day.

Lissette was actually Suze's stepsister. She was 6 years older and they hadn't always been close, although in the last few years they had become much more so, largely as a result of Lissette having given birth to children that Suze adored. In the last few years Suze had been a regular visitor to Lissette's home, even taking care of the children for entire weekends whilst their parents had had taken off for short breaks. It had taken time for them to get the relationship that both had eventually cherished and it was thanks largely to Tyler who had been instrumental in helping Lissette build bridges with Suze. There was a great deal of water under the bridges but at the end, they had finally made peace and had forged a strong bond. Suze was glad that she had let Lissette go with her knowing that she had loved her, despite all the earlier mistrust and lack of friendship, and Lissette knew that Suze would do everything she could to support Tyler and the kids, Chloe, just 5, Jenna aged 3 and the baby, Jack, who was just a few months old.

It was Tyler who spoke first.

'I have to tell the children, how do I tell them that their Mummy's dead?' he asked Suze with the air of expectancy that she would somehow know the answer. She didn't but she offered him her help.

'I don't know yet Tyler, but we'll do it together, don't worry, we'll find the words together,' she promised, wondering if she could really carry out what she had just offered.

Nurses came hurrying in to the room, which was a private one that they had procured for Lisette just a couple of days earlier. Both she and Tyler had known that the end was near and they both needed to spend as much time as they could with her. Between the two of them they had made sure that Lisette had never been alone, taking shifts to make sure that one or other of them was always around whilst the children were cared for in between by friends and neighbours and also Tyler's mother, all of whom had so kindly rallied round to fill in the gaps.

A sad-eyed nurse checked Lisette's monitor and without confirming what they clearly knew for themselves, she said that they would need to leave the room so that a doctor could be called to verify Lisette's status. She advised them to go into the visitor room and get themselves drinks, telling them that she would call them back when the doctor and nurses had done what was necessary with Lisette. Suze knew that she meant that they would be removing all the equipment and essentially cleaning Lisette up in the time-honoured manner of the laying out of her still and lifeless body.

Tyler seemed reluctant to leave and Suze came round to his side of the bed and removed his hand from Lisette's, placing it gently down on the bed. She placed her arm around his shoulder and patted it in a gesture of comfort, urging him to come with her and get a drink. A little shell-shocked, he rose and followed her out of the room, turning at the last minute to glance at the inert form of his now deceased wife.

The visitor room was furnished as if it were a small sitting room, complete with a sofa, arm chairs, a sideboard and coffee table, and with pretty but neutral rugs on the floor and pictures of sunsets and waterfalls hanging on the walls. On the sideboard was a tea tray with a kettle and a selection of

sachets of tea, coffee etc. Suze made them both tea and placed a mug in Tyler's hand, encouraging him to drink. So far, neither of them had shed a tear. The reality was of course that the tears had been shed many times, starting months ago, at the point of diagnosis and during the progression of the disease that had so cruelly ravaged Lisette's once beautiful body. In the last weeks, Lisette had aged considerably, and seeing her lying on her hospital bed, it would have been difficult to see the once young and vibrant woman that had so mercilessly teased Tyler before she finally relented and agreed to go out with him. He had certainly had to work hard to get her, and to keep her. Lisette was a good mother but Tyler was never entirely trusting of her, she was always flirting; even after her diagnosis he came home one day and found her dallying with the plumber who was constructing a bathroom on the ground floor for her sole use. They were already anticipating the longer-term situation and Tyler had determined that creating a ground floor bedroom area for her would be in the best interests of everyone. It had meant that the children lost their playroom but as they were so young it was no hardship, they could and did play anywhere and everywhere.

'Do you want to ring your mother Tyler, or would you prefer me to do it?' asked Suze, taking in Tyler's manner and trying to ascertain how long he would hold up.

'Would you do it please Suze, tell her I'll ring her later but I can't talk at the moment. I need to get my head together, my thoughts are all over the place and I can't work out what I'm feeling.

Suze agreed and went outside in the corridor where she telephoned Lorna, Tyler's mother, who was both saddened and relieved, the relief being that Lisette was no longer suffering.

When she came back, she sat quietly for a moment, carefully studying Tyler. At 34 he was younger than her stepsister, good looking, in fact some would say he was great looking, and she would include herself in thinking so. With his soft, floppy brown hair and large green eyes, he had the sort of face that told you he was kind, no pushover, but fair and kind. He was usually quite a smiley person, the laughter lines around his eyes paying testament to that fact. He wasn't the sort that Lisette had normally gone for, which was the type with film star good looks and oodles of charm and charisma. He wasn't especially tall at around 5'10" but he was strong and fit, not your body

building-type but representative of the sort of man who played a bit of sport and had an active job without taking exercise too seriously, and without the compulsive drive of vanity to want to do anymore.

They sat in silence for a while, Suze automatically refreshing Tyler's mug without asking him if he wanted her to. He sipped slowly, looking down at the floor most of the time, his thoughts evidently elsewhere. Suddenly he stopped and looked at Suze, as if suddenly becoming aware of her presence.

'How am I going to look after the children Suze? There'll be some insurance money and the mortgage insurance cover means that the house will be paid off but it still won't be enough for me to give up working. How am I going to be able to run a house, take care of the kids and earn a living at the same time?' he asked anxiously, panic evident in his voice.

Suze had long been considering this herself. She had tried to talk to Tyler about this during Lisette's illness but he had always been reluctant to engage in the topic of conversation, usually deflecting the question away by suggesting that things would work themselves out. It wasn't that he wasn't aware of what was likely to happen he just didn't want to have to deal with planning ahead in this way. Suze had spoken with Lisette and between them they had discussed an idea that might work but would involve her sacrificing, or at least revising, some of her career aspirations for a period.

'I have a plan where I can help out for a while, at least for a few months, maybe even until the children are all at school, depending on how it works out and of course whether you even want to consider it. How would it feel if I moved in with you all? I've been focusing on working more from home for quite a time so keeping my career going would revolve initially around me setting up some systems and alerting people to my change of location. If we could make some minor adjustments so that I could use your conservatory as a room for my counselling therapies for a few hours during the week for my face-to-face work, then I could still see those clients that prefer to work that way. I could see other people via skype during the evening.'

Tyler was giving her full attention and was clearly surprised by the proposal. Suze continued.

I could still see a fair number of clients whilst Chloe and Jenna were at school and I could pull in a few more sessions for one or more evenings a week when you are at home to watch the kids in the evening. Do you think your mother would have the baby for one day a week? If she could I could keep my career going, give the kids attention, run the house, with your help of course, and hopefully between us we'd get everyone through this.'

'You'd do that for me Suze?' asked Tyler, the hint of a tear forming in his big green eyes. 'I can't tell you what a relief it would be if you could, although I hate the fact that you would have to risk your job to help me out this way.'

Suze dismissed his concerns, confirming that because of her reputation she had clients willing to pay her fees, which were not inconsiderable. She wanted eventually to limit the client contact and undertake research work anyway, which was something that would more easily fit across a week. Tyler nodded appreciatively but knew that Suze was trying to make it easy for him to accept her help, but knew also that he would take up her offer unreservedly.

'You know how much the kids love you Suze, and it would help me enormously knowing that they were being looked after by someone who loved them instead of me having to try and employ a stranger to take care of them. I'm certain that my mother would have no problem taking Jack for a day or two a week, maybe take the girls too during the holiday periods to give you a break, although she and I are both aware that she's not up to doing it full time. '

'It won't just be me that would appreciate a break Tyler, if I'm at home all day I undoubtedly would like a bit of time to myself but you'll also need it Tyler. I don't have any doubt that you will continue to be the good father you've always been and you'll be working full time too. I've seen enough of stress consequences and grief consequences to know how important it is for both of us to ensure that we give the kids what they need but also take care of ourselves too.'

Tyler nodded his understanding and began expressing some thoughts of his own.

'I think that I could work from home one day a week, some weeks it could be a couple of days, so that would take at least some of the pressure off you, I wouldn't expect you to do everything, I would pull my weight'

Suze smiled, 'I know you would Tyler, you're a good father and you've been a good husband.' Suze knew from her own observations that Tyler had always been hands on, and that included bathing, changing nappies, cooking, cleaning, including washing and ironing but also doing fun things with the kids.

'Maybe' said Tyler, not particularly confident in what Suze had said. 'Hopefully I could rearrange my working hours a little more as well so that they're a bit more regular. Do you really think we could make this work?'

Suze confirmed that she could only try to make it work, she would certainly give it her best shot anyway. Privately she was thinking that there really wasn't much option but to do it the way she proposed, although she wasn't without reservations about the idea. She knew that there was the probability that in a couple of years down the line Tyler would want to find himself someone new and she could find herself in the position of having put her life on hold and then suddenly having it all turned upside again. She asked herself if she was prepared for that, and whether she could cope with once again giving up what she wanted whilst knowing that the long-term outcome would, as was her experience to date, not necessarily turn out to be in her favour.

At 32 Suze was a survivor. She had not had the best childhood and certainly, there were few happy memories that she held. Her birth father had left her mother when she was very young and although she had vague memories of him she couldn't conjure up a precise picture in her head of what he looked like anymore, although she recalled that he did have the same honey-blond hair colour as her own. He had blue eyes she thought, or possibly, they were grey, but she couldn't be sure. She knew that she had the soft brown eyes of her mother and also her mother's mouth and chin. Her figure she assumed she got from her father's side as she was relatively tall and naturally slim, her curves were in the right place, unlike her mother who was short and straight up and down.

People always said that Suze was pretty, but she had an air about her that some would see as being a warning light that she was untouchable. There was some truth in it, she had suffered during her life and had created a protective shell around herself to ensure that no-one would get close enough to hurt her again. When her mother had remarried when Suze was 10 years old, she had learned what it had meant to be hurt. She had taken the bruises and carried the scars of the regular beatings she gained at the hands of her stepfather, Steve.

Suze was practical and efficient, she had learned to be so from childhood, she knew that they couldn't stay at the hospital all day but also knew that Tyler would want to say goodbye to his wife one more time. She told him she was going to check the situation out with a nurse and see what was happening. Tyler didn't respond, but continued to nurse the now empty mug of tea in his hands.

However, before she reached the door to go and find a nurse a doctor entered the room.

'Mr Granger?' he asked.

Tyler sat up, suddenly paying attention and he nodded to confirm his identity.

'I'm Dr Malek. I've just examined your wife and I'm so very sorry to confirm that there are no vital signs apparent. The nurses are getting your wife prepared so that you can go in and see her again in a few moments. Before you do, perhaps we can have a brief chat about some things you now need to do. I've signed a document certifying cause and time of death and you will need to take this down to Patient affairs office here in the hospital. They will give you some papers to take to the local registry office so that the death can be formally registered. Without these steps being taken, you won't be able to arrange a funeral so it's important that this is done fairly quickly.'

He glanced at Tyler who was appearing to have transported himself mentally to another time and place.

Do you understand Mr Granger?'

Tyler nodded that he did and Suze stepped in to confirm that she was familiar with the process, having dealt with such matters many times in helping out patients when she worked in a hospital herself.

Following further advice and instruction, Dr Malek left them alone, and with a nurse popping her head around the door to say that Mrs Granger was now ready to be seen, he advised that Tyler spend whatever time he needed before his wife was taken down to the mortuary. It was at the mention of the word mortuary that Tyler momentarily broke down and Suze was left with him to try and offer physical and emotional comfort. She held him and tried to soothe him, with some success, but it was hard for both of them, the finality of it all. Once she had calmed him down sufficiently she led him back to Lisette and left him alone with her, telling him she was going to the restaurant to get a meal and that he should join her when he was ready to do so.

It was less than half an hour later when a misty-eyed Tyler walked into the hospital restaurant to find Suze sitting alone, nursing an almost full plate of food for which she had no appetite.

‘How was it Tyler?’ she asked, looking into his eyes for some acknowledgement of whether there had been any solace in his experience.

‘I can’t believe she’s gone,’ he whispered, fighting back tears. ‘She was always so vibrant, so full of life. To see her lying there, so still and cold, it’s not an image I want of her but I don’t think it will ever go away.’

Suze nodded her understanding. ‘It’s okay, I can guess how you must feel but the image will fade, it will take time, but after a while you will remember her as she was. Don’t dwell on it if you can avoid it. When we get back to your house, we’ll get out the photograph albums and see if that will help a little. Do you want me to get you a meal? You will need to keep your strength up, there’s a lot to have to organise over the next few days.’

Tyler shook his head. ‘No, I don’t want anything, not at the moment anyway.’

He glanced at Suze’s plate of food in front of her. ‘It looks like you couldn’t either.’

Suze could only shrug her shoulders.

'Let's just go home and get started, it will be a distraction and there are things that have to be dealt with as soon as possible. The girls will both have been collected from school by now so we'd better get back and talk to them both. Chloe will be hardest because she's at the age of understanding, I'm not sure Jenna will really get what's happened, at least not at first, so we'll talk about what we should say on the drive back.'

Chapter 2

It had been difficult explaining to the children what had happened. Chloe wanted to know if her Mummy was now an angel in heaven and Tyler had told her that, yes, she was, and she would be looking down on them all still. Suze encouraged her to think of her Mummy as a star in the sky and told her that whenever she wanted to talk to her, all she had to do was think about her and her Mummy would know that Chloe wanted her to hear what she had to say.

Suze stayed overnight and the following day Tyler went with to her apartment and he helped her to move everything that she would need, the rest she left in the apartment, having arranged for a former colleague to rent the place for the next few months in the first instance. The funeral arrangements were made in the next couple of days and the burial was scheduled for ten days hence. Suze dealt with much of the detail, being aware of what Lisette and she had discussed in the previous months. Although Tyler had not engaged much in those discussions, Lisette had fortunately spelled out at least some of her wishes to Suze. Tyler appeared to be holding up as well as could be expected, largely as a consequence of having the children and dealing with the day to day living activities. As far as he was concerned he was more than happy to let Suze take control of matters during this difficult period. He took compassionate leave from work and it was good that both Tyler and Suze were at home at the same time. They had carefully observed the situation over the children and agreed that it was best for them to go back to school soon after the funeral. They were there for each other and for Jack but also it helped Suze to have Tyler there to run through all the various routines with her, or more often, for Suze to begin to establish new ones. It was agreed that Suze would move into Lisette's downstairs bedroom and have the baby in with her until he was settled enough to move into his own room upstairs. Suze thought a few weeks should do it, little by little, inch by inch. The last few months had been really disruptive for Jack and he was a fretful child, probably because he hadn't properly bonded with his mother as she was not well enough to give him the attention he needed. Tyler had taken care of him but due to the distraction of his wife's

illness he had not been able to give as much time as he needed. Jack had thus been passed around more than any child should be subjected to; nonetheless he was a lovely little boy but needed a lot of love and reassurance. Tyler was feeling guilty that he had been too busy dealing with the day to day matters and supporting his wife to have paid him the attention he deserved, although he was trying hard to make it up to him. Suze had also done her best but her regular visits were still not enough for him to have fully bonded with her either, although she was making good and rapid progress and it was to her that he cried out for comfort and love. She felt she had good reason to be fully optimistic about the resilience of young children such as him and felt that there was every chance that he would settle down and grow into the happy little boy he was meant to be. In the interim, she fully intended to give him as much attention as she could and would encourage Tyler to do the same. The girls also needed her time and dealing with them and supporting Tyler was good for her too as it left so little time for her to dwell on her own grief. She kept her grieving for when she was alone, during the night when she could let her tears fall and cry for the loss of her sister, for the loss of Tyler's wife and the loss of the children's mother.

The next few days were spent on practical matters, Suze arranging her office in Tyler's conservatory, he having been very accommodating in re-arranging things to suit not just Suze, but at her insistence, the whole family. She had got a pre-packed hideaway desk/office construction and Tyler had very quickly put it together for her. That way she could keep all her work related matters confidential without alienating the rest of the family when she was not working. She had sent out dozens of emails alerting everyone that needed to know of her change of address details.

The house had been neglected for the past week or so and she and Tyler spent considerable effort catching up with the outstanding housework and laundry that was threatening to overrun the place. She also did her best to placate the often tearful Chloe and to support Tyler who often appeared to retreat into himself. She utilised her entire toolbox of skills in getting him to talk about how he was feeling but he was not always forthcoming. Jenna had not yet understood the fact that Mummy wouldn't be coming home again and the baby, Jack, didn't know any differently. All in all

though she realised that she and Tyler were becoming a good team and she felt that there was no reason why the temporary arrangement shouldn't work out for all concerned.

Soon it was time for the funeral and Tyler had decided that he didn't want the children to attend, Baby Jack excepted, the grounds being that he was becoming so attached to Suze and didn't like it when she wasn't around. There was no reason for him not to be there, safe in either his father's or more often, Suze's arms. They had arranged the time of the funeral to be during the morning when Chloe and Jenna were at school. Tyler had felt it would be too traumatic for them but he planned to take them to the cemetery once a headstone had been installed and he let them choose their own flowers that would be put on her coffin. The church wasn't full but there was a good number of people in attendance, including many of Tyler's friends and quite a few of their neighbours. Lisette had only a handful of friends and only half of these attended; her friends being largely out of town and with children of their own, which meant it was difficult for them to make arrangements to travel. Apart from Suze there was no other family member to mourn her, at least no-one well enough to attend. Her father, Steve, was still regarded as a threat to both himself and others and was permanently detained under the mental health act. Her stepmother, Suze's Mum, was not especially close to Lisette but would have attended had her health been better at the time. Suze stood beside Tyler and his parents, the baby sat contentedly in his buggy, hugging the new toy rabbit that Suze had bought for him and which he now wouldn't go to sleep without. He slept for much of the time but cried for Suze, wanting to be cuddled, when he was awake.

Afterwards, everyone went to the cemetery and it was a solemn and intense experience watching the coffin containing Lisette's body being lowered into the deep hole in the ground. Suze wondered how the fact that it was a double plot and that Tyler may perhaps be joining her there one day himself affected him. There was a traditional post-burial lunch of sandwiches, tea and cakes and various nibbles and the time was spent in eating, drinking and reminiscing. Tyler had shed tears at the burial, which was entirely expected, and his mother and Suze had comforted him. No-one comforted Suze who held back her own tears until she was alone in Lisette's former bedroom when

she was able to cry for Lisette, but most of all to cry for herself. It was yet another person to whom she had become close to who had left her life.

And so a new phase had begun. Suze became surrogate mother to Tyler and Lisette's children. She took care of all their needs and got two days off in the week to concentrate on her own career as a therapist whilst Tyler took over the running of the house for one day a week. They shared responsibilities at the weekend and Tyler made a point of taking everyone out to lunch on Sundays so that Suze had at least one day off from cooking, but also to create a semblance of normal family life. Suze was organised and she attempted to remove as much pressure from Tyler as possible, although he never shirked from anything he was asked or was required to do. On his day working from home it usually meant that he would deal with Jack but would also keep Suze going with coffee and the odd plate of biscuits between meals, which usually she had prepared in advance and put in the freezer. As Jack had regular naps and was happy to play with his toys in between, Tyler was able to work on updating his files and accounts at home and his mother would come over and take Jack away for one day a week. At the weekends, they pulled together and appeared to the outside world as if they were a little family getting on with things. It was, in general terms, a good arrangement and on the surface, everyone seemed as happy as the circumstances could allow. It was Suze though that dealt with Chloe's tears, and Jack's fretfulness at night, and she did her best to prop up Tyler when he got *that* expression on his face, the one she read as he was thinking of Lisette.

'Why don't you go out with your friends sometime,' asked Tyler, surprising her one evening as she sat making repairs to a pile of clothes, mending little tears and stitching up hems and fixing loose or missing buttons on Tyler's business shirts.

She hesitated before replying.

'I've kind of lost touch with many of my friends, Claudia excepted, and she's busy with her family during the evenings. It's the downside of working from home, things become a bit insular.'

The truth was that she didn't want to go out, she was happy to make phone calls to the couple of friends she valued but as they were several hours drive away she had no plans to visit any time soon

and she was not actively seeking to start making new friends. What would be the point, she wasn't very good company and she wasn't good at making new friends anyway. She was happiest dealing with her clients, she didn't have to form relationships with them, except in the professional sense.

'I worry about you, you know how much I appreciate you being here, and God knows what I would do without you, but I worry that you are giving up the opportunity to find someone special for yourself. Have you never thought about getting married yourself?'

Suze was taken aback by this. Clearly, Tyler didn't know that she had been married, it was a long time ago and not something that she particularly liked to talk about, but she had assumed that Lisette might have said something. She was a little shocked that she had apparently not felt it important enough to mention to him.

'I guess when the time is right, maybe Mr Right will come along, until then I've no plans to go looking for him,' she answered, knowing that it was only a fraction of the truth. The truth was that she would like very much to be married, she had always wanted to have children, but the reality was that she didn't think she would ever find anyone who would understand her enough to want to stay with her. And as for children, well, she knew it was unlikely that she would ever become a mother in her own right.

Tyler had stirred up memories she had long been trying to suppress and alone in her bed that night she recalled how she had met Alastair, her husband.

Chapter 3

She had been just fifteen when she met Alastair a few weeks before the long summer holiday from school began. He was tall, skinny and had the sort of lop-sided cheeky grin that made you smile by just looking at him. She had met him in the local park, a place where she sometimes went to get a bit of solace and get away from things. It had been a beautiful, bright and sunny day and she had taken herself off for a walk along the canal towpath and cut across the field which led to the park; it was just a few hundred yards away from where she lived. Her stepfather was sleeping off his latest drinking session, on top of her bed, and she was feeling sick at the thought of later having to sleep in a bed that he had contaminated. He knew it upset her and she swore he did it on purpose but her mother accepted his explanation that Suze's room was the quietest in the house during the day. The thing was that he didn't do it every day, just now and then, enough to ensure that she never knew whether she could go to her own room or not. Whatever he claimed, she knew it was a power thing with him and she now needed to get out the house and keep out until he got up and went off again for his evening drinking stint. Her mother was working one of her three jobs and Suze had done all the tasks that she had been asked to complete whilst she was out. Consequently, she had washed and hung the laundry on the line, ironed shirts for her stepfather, swept floors with the broom that had the broken handle and which Steve wouldn't or couldn't fix, and had washed all the dishes and put them away; what was left of them that is, there were no longer any matching dishes as Steve had smashed most of them in his frequent drunken rages. No doubt, what she had done would not meet her stepfather's exacting standards but at the moment she didn't care, she would just have to wait and see what the consequences were later, there weren't many days when there weren't consequences.

She had been sitting alone on a park bench, quietly reading a romance novel she had borrowed from the library, she had kept it hidden at home, her stepfather being prone to tear up such reading matter, irrespective of the fact that it was library property. The reading matter gave her an escape,

some hope for a better future. She could dream that one day she might meet her own Prince Charming and everything would be okay. She knew that when she did leave home she would ensure that she chose a good man and that her children's welfare would be paramount, if there were any signs that her husband might turn out like Steve she would take action against him.

Alastair had ridden by on his bike, had seen her sitting alone and had circled her once or twice. She had pretended not to notice, thinking that if she made eye contact he would not go away. It occurred to her only that he would start tormenting her, perhaps try to pick a fight. That had been her experience to date with boys, usually ones who were being egged on by a group of girls that she knew and were hiding somewhere in the distance.

'What are you reading?' he asked, getting off his bike and leaning it against the back of the bench.

Suze ignored him.

Alastair was not the sort to be ignored.

'Double wedding ring?, what's it about then?' he asked, peering at the book cover.

'Leave me alone, please,' asked Suze, carefully avoiding letting her voice plead.

'Sounds like it could be a love story, my mother's always reading those sorts of stories, tries to get me to read some of her books occasionally but I never have. I prefer thrillers myself but I get why girls like romantic stuff.'

Suze gave him her most withering look but she still refused to engage in conversation with him.

'I've not seen you here before, but then I don't come here very often any more. I'm usually helping my Dad out, he's a builder and he gets me to do the labouring for him, especially during the holidays so I expect to be busy over the next few weeks. I live over on the Boulevard, do you know it?'

Suze shook her head.

'You're pretty, I like your hair, it's a lovely colour, like warm honey,' he offered as his next riposte.

Suze didn't want him to talk to her but she also didn't want him to think she was totally impolite.

'Thank you.' she muttered, looking up from her book and making eye contact with him for the first time. She noted the detail of him, he was tall and rangy, no longer a boy but not quite a man. He had pale blue eyes which were framed with long, dark eyelashes which contrasted sharply with his pale blonde hair which fell forward carelessly across his forehead. She decided that perhaps he wasn't out to cause her grief but still she didn't want to play games with him. Her experiences of boys to date was not especially good.

'You have pretty eyes too, when you look up from your book so that I can see them that is. Do you fancy getting a cold drink? I can get us a Cola each from the ice cream van?'

'No, thank you, I'm fine,' she answered, hoping he would go and get a drink for himself and then go away.

'I'm getting myself one, will you watch my bike whilst I go and get it?'

Feeling she had no alternative, and remembering that she had instinctive good manners, Suze nodded that she would. Five minutes later, he came back, clutching two bottles of Cola which he had tucked under his arm, but also in each hand he was carrying an ice cream with a chocolate flake temptingly inserted into the thick creamy mix.

'You'd better take one of these ice creams from me or I'm not going to be able to stop myself from dropping the bottles in your lap,' he laughed.

Suze had no alternative but to accept the ice cream, saying thanks but adding that he really shouldn't have spent his money on her.

'I wanted to spend my money on you. You look nice, not only pretty but you seem a nice girl and my mother told me only to talk to nice girls,' he grinned. Suze was forced to smile warily back at him and could only note that he had a lovely smile.

'So, pretty girl, what's your name? Mine's Alastair, Al for short, but I think I'd prefer it if you called me by my full name.'

Suze was still a bit bewildered that he was paying her attention and was wondering when it would change, but eventually she decided that it wouldn't hurt to have a chat with him. No doubt, he would soon get bored and disappear.

'My name's Suze, short for Susannah. I prefer Suze.'

Alastair put out his hand in greeting and Suze reluctantly took it; he then shaking it fairly vigorously and holding on to her hand for much longer than was necessary.

'Good to meet you Suze. Now we've introduced ourselves properly perhaps we can now start to be friends. Do you ever go to the club on the estate?'

'No, I've not been there. My stepfather would never let me go,' she lied. The truth was that she had never been invited to go with anyone, although she knew it was a very popular place for teenagers to hang out and a place where girls would get off with boys. If her stepfather thought she would go, he would most definitely forbid her to do so, just because he liked to stop her doing things that would give her pleasure.

'What if I came by and asked him to let you come with me? I can be very charming when I want,' he smiled.

Suze laughed out loud. 'Not if hell was to freeze over. You could be as charming as you like but he would still say no. But thanks for offering...'

'Okay, I get it. Strict stepfather with strict rules, I get it. So the club is out. What about coming to the pictures with me then?'

Suze laughed again. 'You said you'd got it, but you haven't! My stepDad won't let me go *anywhere* with *anyone*!'

Alastair considered what she had just said and grinned.

'Okay, that's fine too. We'd better not tell him then!' He grabbed for her hand and pulled her up. 'Grab your book and let's go for a ride.' He got on his bike and patted the saddle for Suze to climb on board. She hesitated and he noted it and took her hand again. 'Come on, it'll be fine. I'm a good rider, I promise I won't let you fall off!'

She threw her leg across the cross bar and set herself on the saddle placing the book between Alastair's back and her stomach, wrapping her arms around his middle. He set off, gaining speed as they careered along the paths, he laughing and whooping, until he stopped at the edge of a small copse. She looked at him, wondering what he was going to do next, but he just smiled, and she conceded that she didn't feel threatened in any way and she was used to feeling threatened and recognised the signs. He gallantly helped her off the bike, lowering it so that she could get off without losing her dignity in front of him. He rested his bike against a tree as he took her by the hand again and led her to a big and beautiful weeping willow. Spreading the fronds of the tree apart, he stood aside to let Suze go through and she found herself under the large overarching and spreading branches of the tree. It was lovely, like a huge tent but with light streaming through it and casting shadows on the ground, it felt a little mystical and magical, and she had to admit, more than just a little romantic.

Alastair threw himself on the ground and patted the space next to him for Suze to sit down. She wasn't sure she should but decided that if he made any wrong moves she was a fast runner and he would probably choose to stay with his bike rather than run after her. She sat down next to him and he threw his arm around her shoulder, attempting to pull her closer to his side. She resisted and whilst Alastair stopped in his efforts to pull her nearer he didn't remove his arm; she tried not to feel the physical tension within her swallow her whole.

'Sorry, didn't mean to be forward or anything,' he apologised, but still didn't remove his arm and actually gave her a bit of a squeeze, resting his arm around her where it clearly felt comfortable to him.

'I guess I'm a bit too friendly sometimes and I suppose I could put people off. I don't want to put you off though, I like you and I think you might like me back if you got to know me better. Why don't we just sit and talk, I want to know the sort of things you like and what you think about things. I'll go first shall I?'

Suze nodded and then listened for the next few minutes as Alastair explained how he was the youngest boy in quite a large family, a happy family with great parents, indulgent grandparents and dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins. His mother was a school cook and his father was a builder. He liked his music loud and strong and wanted to follow his Dad into the construction trade. He was supposed to go back to school in September after doing a year of GCSE resits but he was trying to persuade his parents that it would be a waste of time for him to do 'A' levels and he was ready to start working right now. He wasn't stupid but he wasn't the academic sort, preferring instead to concentrate on sports, which he was good at, all of them by the sound of it. He told Suze how he had trials for a premier division football club but didn't think he was good enough to be a professional player. To Suze he was coming across as a nice, happy, carefree and considerate boy who didn't take life too seriously but did know what he wanted.

'It's your turn now, I've told you about me, so what about you? What sort of family do you have?'

Suze didn't know where to begin. Did she start at the beginning and explain how her father had rejected her pretty much from birth? His father, her grandfather, had questioned her paternity and thus had begun the first seeds of rejection, the suggestion somehow becoming a truth, although she knew for a certainty that she was her father's daughter, her mother had never been the unfaithful type. She hadn't seen her father since she was a toddler and as far as she could see for herself he had determined that she no longer existed. She wondered should she tell him about how her mother had remarried and her stepfather Steve was an alcoholic and a workshy bully who made her life hell? Her mother had put up with his abuse for some obscure reason that Suze never understood but she could never accept why she also put up with him abusing her daughter. Surely parents were supposed to protect their kids and not turn a blind eye to seeing them being beaten at every opportunity.

Steve was clever though, he almost always made sure that he didn't leave bruises where they could be seen. There were exceptions though, and she had spent a couple of nights in casualty

having her wounds stitched up, the scars on her arms and legs being visible to anyone who cared to look carefully enough, although Suze herself kept herself well covered, having no wish to have to explain to anyone what she had to live with. On the occasions when she was sporting such wounds her mother had advised that it was best not to tell anyone and Suze had complied. Was it because of fear that she kept quiet? Not for herself it wasn't, although she was realistic and knew that fighting back would only get her a bigger beating, but more for the fact that he had threatened to seriously hurt her mother if she told anyone about what he had done.

Perhaps she should start telling Alastair about the time she ran away. It was two years ago now and she had planned it after the last time he had seriously hurt her, and she had ended up with a dozen stitches in a leg wound. Her escape had been carefully planned, she had bided her time and then over the period of a week she had taken things from her room a few at a time and loaded them into an old pram in the shed, carefully concealing the contents. When she had everything she needed, which was very little, her school uniform, her one good dress, her radio, her few books and a few sentimental items, she had left for school and on the way went to her grandmother's where she announced she had left home and could she please come and stay. Her grandmother had been shocked but had agreed to let her move in. Suze never told her the whole truth about why she had left, citing just that she wasn't getting on with Steve. She was never sure if her grandmother suspected what was going on.

She had been happy with her Gran and had stayed there for a year before being encouraged to return back home, largely as a result of the fact that her grandmother couldn't afford to look after her on the small pension she lived off. There had been no financial contribution from her mother. Her mother had eventually been able to persuade Suze that things had changed at home, things were more settled. Suze had believed her, although she couldn't push from her mind the fact that it had taken her six months to make her first visit and she had only seen Suze twice more before she persuaded her to return home after a year away. When she returned things did seem to have changed for a while but after a few weeks they reverted back to the previous state of play and the

situations were becoming more frequent and more violent. As she contemplated telling her life story to date she tried to think of what she could tell Alastair that wouldn't make her sound like a self-pitying whinger or a total loser.

'I live with my Mum and stepfather Steve. I don't get on with Steve and it makes my relationship with my Mum difficult. I have a stepsister, Lisette who is 21 and left home when she went to university at 18. We're not close, she was 16 when my Mum married her Dad so she never really had any time for me and was never around for long enough for us to get to know one another. She rarely visits and Steve doesn't bother to make contact.'

Alastair listened to her and made sympathetic noises without passing any judgement.

'That's tough. I can't imagine life without my brothers and sisters. We fight now and then, but we get on great mostly and if there are times when one of us needs help there are 5 of us to offer it. Never mind, you can always talk to me and if you need any help then you only have to ask.'

Suze felt touched. He hadn't condemned her or questioned her further. He seemed to understand that there were things she didn't want to say and perhaps he even guessed how things were and there were things she couldn't say because it was too painful to reveal the whole truth. She decided she liked Alastair but she wasn't yet sure whether she could fully trust him.

'So, will you come to the cinema with me? We could go on Saturday afternoon, we could meet here, under this tree, and then get a bus on the other side of the park. Think you can get away for long enough?'

Suze thought about it and decided that Saturday afternoon would be the same as every other afternoon. If she timed it right Steve would be sleeping off another boozy lunchtime session, having spent much of the housekeeping money on fuelling his addiction. She thought it should be possible to be out of the house for the 3 hours that it would take to get to and from the cinema and enjoy a film. She made what for her was a momentous decision.

'Okay, that would be good. What will we see?' she asked, feeling a little nervous at the prospect.

'Well, seeing as you like romance so much, judging by your book anyway, why don't we go and see that weepy love story that everyone's talking about, unless you've already seen it? It's on at all the cinemas so there wouldn't be a problem about getting in during the afternoon.'

Suze grinned wryly. She couldn't remember the last time she had been to the cinema.

'No, I haven't seen it and I would love to go. I'll meet you here at 3pm? I'd have to be back around 6pm?'

'No problem, I can do that. Let's meet under this tree then,' he said smiling broadly.

Suze agreed, smiling shyly back and Alastair with his arm still round her shoulder gave her another little squeeze.

'From now I declare this tree officially ours, we can meet under here any time we want, it will be dry when it's raining and shady when the sun's out. It's perfect.'

Suze laughed but agreed it was more than fit for purpose. All she had to do now was stick to the plan that was running through her head. After a long time chatting, and checking her watch, a gift from her grandmother, she realised it was time to make her way home, Alastair walked her to the gates of the park and left her there to walk across the field by herself, at her own insistence. It was perfectly safe but she didn't want any of her neighbours out walking their dogs to see her with a boy, it could get back to Steve and inevitably he'd cause a scene.

Chapter 4

On the Saturday that she had arranged to meet Alastair again she found herself feeling incredibly nervous. She was worried on a number of counts, firstly because she couldn't be certain that Steve would follow his normal drinking pattern; secondly because she didn't have anything half decent to wear and she fretted that she would look a fright in her one and only pair of jeans and tee shirt, and thirdly, she worried that he may not turn up at all. She considered that his invitation might have been part of an elaborate joke. It wouldn't be the first time that she had been subjected to such treatment, she was a walking joke after all. Spiteful girls made fun of the fact that she didn't have the latest clothes, or make up, and she had never had a boyfriend to speak of, although she knew there were one or two that definitely liked her but wouldn't ask her out because of their own fear of being bullied for doing so. She was at the age where boys of her own age tended to join in the fun and they would make jokes about her being an untouchable, she would learn in later years that this was probably just out of embarrassment, but at this moment she was incredibly hurt by such treatment.

Thankfully Steve did come home and went straight to bed as expected, but not before making his usual nasty comments about the state of the ironing that she had just completed. Apparently the creases in the sleeves were not to his liking. There was nothing wrong with them she knew, it was just his way of reminding her should she forget that he was the one who was control. She dragged out the ironing board, making a pretence that she was going to rectify the situation, although as soon as he had disappeared she quietly put it down again. Giving herself ten minutes and listening out for his heavy snoring that told her the path was clear, she set off for her date. She had washed her hair and brushed it carefully. It didn't have a particular style, but was a nice blonde colour that tended to wave nicely and it hung to just past her shoulders. She sported a heavy fringe that framed her small oval face, highlighting the softness of her brown eyes. She had used a little makeup from her mother's make-up bag which she kept in the bathroom, not much, just a rose pink lipstick and a

little mascara. She was pleased with the effect, the lipstick added colour to her pale features and the mascara opened up her eyes, making them look wider and just a little more grown up.

She crept silently out of the house, softly pulling the door closed behind her, and slowly made her way through the gate at the front of the house, she then picked up her pace until she was first jogging and then running to the park. She got there just five minutes before 3pm but couldn't see Alastair and feeling decidedly disappointed she determined that he wasn't going to turn up, much as she had anticipated. She parted the hanging willow reeds and went to the tree anyway and sat down on the hard ground beneath it, thinking that she would give it ten minutes, just in case, and then never come here again. Just as she sat down she heard a rustling from above. As she looked up, there was Alastair, perched in the branches high above her head, grinning wickedly.

'Where have you been?' he asked, his face a mask of seriousness, 'I've been here since we last met.'

For a moment she wondered why on earth he hadn't gone home until she realised that of course he was joking with her. She wasn't much used to joking, there was little humour in her life. She thought she could be funny if she was allowed to be. She and her Mum could have a laugh when Steve was out, but as soon as he returned no-one was allowed to speak unless he asked them to and he didn't seem to possess an ounce of humour himself. She often felt she was less than half the person that she was meant to be because of the environment in which she was forced to live.

Coming back to the present she looked up at Alastair and smiled, a little nervously.

'I thought you might not come,' she admitted.

'What, and miss out on seeing you again? Are you mad, the best looking girl around for miles and you think I'd not want to take you out?' he asked, with a note of incredulity in his voice. 'You look lovely by the way. Your hair smells really nice too, he added, taking a strand of it and sniffing appreciatively.

Suze was flattered but more than a little dazed, had he really paid her such lovely compliments she was asking herself.

'Thank you,' she said simply, 'I've just washed it, stole my mother's shampoo,' she giggled.

'Steal it again,' he urged, 'it matches the way you look, fresh, ... unspoiled and delicate,' he added, after considering his choice of words.

'Don't be daft, it's just shampoo,' she blushed.

Alastair looked at her for a moment, wondering about her. She was the only girl he'd ever met who wasn't full of vanity and didn't seem to know that she was very, very pretty.

'Let's go, we don't want to be late,' he said, and grabbed her hand. Her first reaction was to pull it back, no-one had ever held her hand before and she didn't know what she was supposed to do. His hand did feel nice though, it was soft and warm, not that much bigger than her own but it felt strong and, well, it was just very nice. She decided to just go with the flow and she allowed him to lead her across the park to the bus stop which would take them to the cinema.

He bought tickets and they clambered up the stairs to sit at the front of the bus. It was strange feeling his body next to hers as they sat, side by side, on the narrow double seat. He still held her hand, gently squeezing her fingers and pressing his hand to hers. On the back seat she could hear a couple of girls giggling, one whom she knew was from her school. She felt certain that they were talking about her but couldn't hear what they were saying, she imagined what it was likely to be about though.

At the end of the journey Alastair rose to get up off the bus, still holding her hand and pulling her up alongside him. The two girls on the back seat were walking down the aisle at the same time and Alastair evidently knew them both.

'Hi Al, doing your charity work, are you, rescuing down and outs?' said the girl that Suze knew, a brunette who, at fifteen had the figure and face of a twenty year old and was popular amongst all the best-looking boys at school.

'Hello Sophie, see you've been playing with the face paints again,' he responded coolly, much to Suze's delight, although she stifled the giggle that threatened to spill from her tight closed lips.

Sophie just huffed and Suze heard her saying to her friend that Al really thought he was something didn't he. Her friend replied, in a loud and sarcastic whisper that she thought Al was gorgeous, shame that Sophie had never managed to get him to go out with her.

As they got off the bus Alastair made quite a show of putting his arm around Suze's waist and kissing her on the cheek before separating and grabbing her hand once again, walking away from a clearly disgruntled Sophie who had quite had the wind taken out of her sails. Suze had liked Alastair putting his arm around her but she had been a bit perturbed by the kiss, worrying that he might try to kiss her properly later. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, she had never been kissed before.

A little later, armed with a bucket of popcorn and two large cups of Cola they settled into their cinema seats. Suze had tried to pay for her own ticket but Alastair was having none of it and he had also insisted on paying for the refreshments.

'You can buy us both ice-creams at the park tomorrow,' he stated, without a hint of a suggestion that she would not be meeting him again.

The film was lovely, romantic, funny and sad in equal measure. At some point during the film she had felt Alastair's arm around her shoulder and later felt herself being drawn closer towards him. His body felt warm, firm and comfortable and she found she was enjoying the feeling. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had actually hugged her so she was relishing this first sign of affection, was it affection, she wondered? She chose to think it was, even though her underlying suspicion was that at some point he was going to tell her that it had all been a joke, ha ha. Towards the end of the film there was a very moving scene that brought tears to her eyes and a lump to her throat. She felt a little embarrassed when she had to dab at her eyes with a tissue, until that is, she realised that Alastair was also crying. He was crying openly, letting the tears fall freely without a hint of shame. It was then that Suze knew that she would like Alastair to be her boyfriend, for all of it to be real, for him to have meant everything he had said to her.

After the film finished they reversed their earlier journey and headed back to the park. With about half an hour to spare, Alastair suggested they could sit under their tree for a while before she had to go. More comfortable with him now than when they had met earlier, she sat on the ground and Alastair once again casually threw his arm around her and this time she let herself snuggle up to his side, her legs tucked beneath her.

‘I really like you Suze, you’re not like any of the other girls I know, and you don’t worry about whether your hair is slightly out of place or if your make-up is smudged. I like that in you. I also like the fact that you like my jokes and laugh at them. Not everyone gets my humour,’ he laughed.

Suze wondered why anyone would not get his humour, he was very funny, at least she thought so, and once she had attuned herself to him, and noted his expressions, she now understood when he was making a joke and when he was teasing her.

‘I like you too Alastair, I wasn’t at all sure whether we would get on today but it’s been lovely. Thank you for taking me to the cinema, and for paying for everything. I owe you a lot of ice-creams to make up for it,’ she smiled.

‘You owe me nothing. I’m lucky that I almost always have money, although I have to earn it. I’m guessing that you don’t get the opportunity if you have to help look after the house a lot?’

‘It’s true, I don’t have much money of my own, and opportunities to earn extra largely comes from doing a bit of babysitting now and then for the neighbours. I sometimes get extra from my grandmother when she can spare it, and Mum gives me spending money when she can, but it’s not a given and it must be a month since I last had anything from her.’

‘In that case then you don’t pay for anything, keep your money, I can afford to treat us both and if I can’t we’ll just go for walks and I’ll get my Mum to make us jam butties and fill up a bottle of squash.’ He laughed at Suze’s protestations but he dismissed them and Suze had to consider what she could do in return.

‘Okay then, well if we do that, I can always bake us something. I cook a lot at home and it wouldn’t be difficult to bake a couple of extra cakes or biscuits and put them away for us both. I make very good carrot cake, when Mum can afford the ingredients,’ she boasted proudly.

‘Baking tomorrow?’ he asked cheekily.

She thought for a moment, recalling what was in the pantry. ‘Ginger biscuits sound good?’

‘Vintage bottle of Ribena to wash them down with?’

They both laughed. She checked her watch. ‘I’ll have to go in a minute or two.’

‘Okay, can you meet me here tomorrow? About the same time?’ Suze thought for a moment.

‘Yes, I think so. Sunday is usually a reliable day, Mum will be around as well, so hopefully, as long as I do what’s needed during the morning, I won’t be needed during the afternoon so I can say I’m going for a walk around the shops or something.’

‘Sounds like a plan then!’ replied an enthusiastic Alastair.

Suze got up from the ground, dusting the dead leaves from her jeans and Alastair rose at the same time, standing in front of her.

‘See you tomorrow then,’ said Suze, not quite sure how to finish the conversation.

‘Yeah, see you tomorrow.’

She was just about to walk away when Alastair caught her by the wrist and pulled her back towards him.

‘Isn’t there something you’re forgetting?’ he asked, a serious look on his face. Suze hesitated, looked around her, unsure of what he meant. Alastair acted upon her momentary distraction and pulled her into him, lifting her arms up around his neck.

‘It’s customary to kiss your boyfriend goodbye at the end of a date,’ he instructed, looking at her expectantly.

Suze could feel a rising panic inside her. She’d never kissed a boy before. She thought she would like to kiss Alastair but hadn’t a clue what to do, what if she didn’t like it, or worse, what if she did it wrong and he didn’t like being kissed by her? Luckily for her Alastair had no such worries and simply

pulled her closer and moved in for the kiss. Unsure what to do, Suze could only follow his lead and found that it wasn't as difficult as she had thought it might be. All she had to do was part her lips and move them around a bit, matching what Alastair did. When she felt his tongue in her mouth it threw her off key a bit but again she just did what he did. She liked what was happening, his lips were soft and tasted sweet, probably the Cola she thought. His breath was sweet too and she liked the way his arms held her as his mouth and hers moved in synchrony. After what seemed like an eternity, Alastair pulled away and, holding her at arms length, looked her directly in the eye.

'That was quite something, where did you learn to kiss like that?' he asked questioningly, his face in a wide grin.

Suze blushed furiously, she didn't want to admit that it was her first time but she didn't want him to think that she fooled around either.

'I don't know, I didn't think I could kiss like that but it was kind of easy with you. It was nice, I like the way you kissed me.'

Alastair's face broke into a beaming smile, his eyes twinkled and the corners of his mouth revealed dimples at either side. At that precise moment Suze thought he was the most handsome boy on the planet.

'You're special, do you know that? You're really special. I'll let you go for now but I'm expecting a lot more kisses like that tomorrow, and the day after and the day after that.'

Suze smiled shyly. 'I can deal with that, I think....providing you keep kissing me the same way,' she joked, giving him a little dig in his middle.

'Till tomorrow then,' he grinned. 'And don't forget the ginger biscuits,' he teased.

Suze left him to make the short run across the field back to the canal towpath that led to home. She turned halfway and saw him standing at the tree watching to make sure she was safe. He waved and she waved back. For the rest of the journey home her feet didn't touch the ground as she floated on a carpet of hopes and dreams.

Her mother was home when she returned, and in answer to questions as to where she had been, she said that she had taken one of the neighbour's young children to the park. It was obviously a lie but not one her mother was likely to discover as she rarely had anything to do with the neighbours. She was seldom at home during daylight hours, Sundays excepted, and she discouraged neighbourly chats as she felt they usually asked too many questions.

Chapter 5

The following day Suze was excited at the thought of seeing Alastair again. It was her job to prepare Sunday lunch whilst her mother took her one and only opportunity to catch up with much needed sleep. Often Sundays were quiet and she was hoping this one would be no exception. She had been up for about an hour, and had prepared vegetables, batter for the Yorkshire puddings, and had a batch of biscuits already cooling with another batch in the oven. She had put a plate of 6 in the pantry hoping no-one would see them before they had cooled and she could then wrap them in paper ready for the afternoon. A few minutes later and she had managed to do just that.

She was just in time because seconds later the rumpus from above started. The first voice she heard was Steve's.

'I'm your husband and you'll do what I say, and if I say you stay in bed with me, then you stay in bed with me,' he bellowed.

'I don't want to stay in bed any longer, I need to get up and get things done,' fussed her mother, Penny. 'You stay in bed and have a nice rest, I'll bring you up a mug of coffee and some toast.' She offered, trying to deliver her offering in a conciliatory tone.

'I don't want bloody coffee, I want you and I want you right here and now. I have rights,' he yelled, his voice demanding and earnest.

Suze understood what was going on upstairs. It was a familiar experience. Steve wanted sex, her mother didn't; it wouldn't matter to Steve that she wasn't willing, he would take what he wanted anyway. She took a deep breath and put on the kettle for a pot of tea. The noise of the kettle would drown the noise of what was happening upstairs. It usually took about ten minutes before her mother was allowed to get away. She would come downstairs looking the worse for wear and possibly sporting a bruise or two and in dire need of a comforting cup of tea. Suze didn't know whether all men were like this, or whether it was just Steve, but she thought it unlikely that every man could be as vile as him. She couldn't imagine Alastair being like him, but then she didn't know

for sure, Steve had been quite nice at first but it had stopped a few weeks after he got his feet under the table. She had no idea why her mother put up with him. The one good thing about such mornings was that Steve was generally in a good mood for a good few hours. She hoped therefore that he would get up after getting his coffee and toast in bed and there would be a quiet hour with him reading the Sunday papers, which no-one was allowed to read before him, before he went off to the Working Men's Club. Sometimes her Mum would go with him and they would return about 2pm, eat lunch and go to bed for the afternoon, often with a repeat performance of the morning's activities.

She was correct in all respects. At 2.45pm she was able to let herself out of the house again, biscuits tucked safely in a bag slung across her shoulder. Once again she stole a slick of her mother's lipstick and resolved to try and buy herself a tube of her own next time she had some money. Her sixteenth birthday was just a few weeks away and she thought she was likely to get some money then. She didn't get gifts, it was usually along the lines of being told that they didn't know what to buy her so here's a tenner, get yourself something nice. If she was very lucky and Steve had won on the horses, another little indulgence of his, she might get a little extra. She was feeling a little guilty, a feeling she dismissed quickly as she recalled how lately she had discovered that it was worth checking his pockets before doing the laundry. On occasion she had found the odd fifty pence or pound coin, even a two pound coin once. She had started to put these odd coins away in a shoebox in her room and had managed to stash away over £10 to date. She thought she might be able to use some of it to buy something new for herself. New being something from the charity shop that would be new to her but wouldn't arouse suspicion with Steve asking how she got the money to buy new clothes. She would claim that a neighbour had given her some hand-me-downs, it wasn't a frequent occurrence but it wouldn't be questionable.

A few minutes later and she arrived at the tree in the park. Alastair was waiting for her when she arrived and he had a basket tucked under his arm.

'I'll show you what's in my basket if you show me what's in your bag' he challenged.

‘I’ve brought exactly what I said I would bring, home-made ginger biscuits,’ she laughed, ‘want one?’

‘Deffo,’ chuckled Alastair, ‘in return you can have some of my ham sandwiches, a piece of my mother’s fruit cake, a packet of crisps, a cup of coffee out of my flask, or if mademoiselle prefers, a plastic cup of Tizer.’

Suze laughed out loud. ‘Seems like you’ve been busy, did you make the sandwiches and coffee yourself?’ she asked, a look of suspicion evident on her face.

‘Well actually no, not that I couldn’t do it myself, but because I had to fix Mum’s washing machine this morning, there was a wire from her bra stuck in the pipe.... I asked her if she would make me up a packed lunch for two. It did mean I got a real grilling over who I was going to be sharing with of course. I told her all about you, about how lovely you were, how I really liked you and how you were my girlfriend,’ he smiled confidently. ‘The upshot is that you now have to come round for tea, she wants to meet you. It’s not that she doesn’t believe me, but she wants to make sure that you’re not the sort of girl that would take advantage of an innocent lad like me and corrupt me.’

Suze chuckled at the likelihood of corruption happening but was not sure about the invitation for tea.

‘It’s really nice of your Mum to invite me round, really nice, and I do appreciate the thought, but, well I’m not sure. I’m not that good with people and I wouldn’t want to let you down by coming across badly.’

‘Don’t be daft, my Mum will see you exactly the same way as I do. My Dad will see you differently though.’ He said, his face taking on a look of worry.

Suze froze a little. Was Alastair’s Dad like Steve? ‘Why would that be then?’ she ventured.

‘Oh he still thinks he’s God’s gift, he’ll try and flirt with you and see if he can make Mum jealous by doing so.’

Suze looked at him, not quite sure if he was serious or teasing. She decided he meant what he said.

‘How does your Mum handle him doing such things?’

‘She usually hits him. He doesn’t seem to mind too much though, although he does like to roll around a bit claiming she’s broken various bones or has dislodged his liver, or his heart or his lungs or whatever is close to where he’s been hit. As my Mum’s a bit of a seven stone weakling the effect of hitting him is like a Russian weightlifter being patted on the arm. It’s an entertaining event!’ he laughed.

Suze realised she was being teased and tried to imagine the same scenario happening in her home. A reverse situation in the life she led would result in at least a bruise or two, possibly a broken bone and often blood being spilled, and not Steve’s. She often wondered what went on behind closed doors and had thought that there must be lots of girls like her that lived in the sorts of circumstances that she did. She was beginning to revise her view on this. Did Alastair’s parents really fool around like this without getting upset with each other?

‘I’ve said you’d come next week, next Saturday in fact. Mum said she’d do tea earlier so that you could be home for 6pm.’ He delivered the news without considering that Suze would say no.

‘Well, it sounds like you’ve made plans and I’d not want to spoil them so I’ll do my best. What if your Mum and Dad don’t like me though?’ she asked anxiously. She had experience of the odd friend who had advised their daughters not to associate with Suze when she was younger, largely because she was poorly clothed and they didn’t want their children going around with a ragamuffin.

‘Why are you always so worried? My Mum and Dad are great, they’ll like you as much as I do. If I tell them I like someone that’s enough for them, but in your case they’d like you even if I didn’t like you myself. You don’t think much of yourself do you?’

Suze could only nod in agreement, years of physical and mental abuse had meant that she didn’t have a great deal of confidence, most of it had been knocked out of her. There had been so many

times when she had been told she was useless, a waste of space and an unnecessary appendage by Steve, that she had believed it must be true. Even her mother had called her a jinx.

‘I’m not the most popular girl at school,’ she offered. ‘You saw Sophie’s response to me on the bus, that’s a fairly typical reaction from girls in her group of friends. I don’t fit in, I know I’m different and I know I’ll never become part of their groups.’

‘So what? Why would you want to be friends with girls that are that shallow anyway? Yes, you are different and I can see why you might not fit in but that’s because not only are you a really nice person but they can see how pretty you are now and how beautiful that you’re going to be very soon.’

Suze laughed, dismissing what he had said out of hand.

Alastair scorned her protestations.

‘You have no idea have you? You’re beautiful, you really are, and I bet in a few more months I’ll be fighting other lads to keep them away from you. By that time I will of course be even more handsome than I am today and you will be fighting off other girls too. I will of course resist and will sacrifice myself entirely to you,’ he spelled this out for emphasis, buffing his nails on his shirt as he did so.

‘Oh you will, will you? So you expect me to hang around with you for the next couple of years?’

‘Of course, that’s just for starters. You’ll still be around in 5 years because you find me irresistible, charming and totally magnetic.’

‘I do?’

‘Yes you do, almost as much as I find you totally irresistible, charming and magnetic!’ He pulled her to him and started to kiss her, holding her tightly, placing one arm across her back and the other around her waist. In response Suze coiled her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through his hair, which was soft to the touch. She enjoyed the feeling of his lips on hers once more and wanted to be able to savour every second.

They kissed for a long time, enjoying the taste of each other until each was satisfied, for the moment at least. Alastair suggested that they have their picnic first and then they'd go for a walk around the park. If she was very lucky he might let her go on the swings later, he joked.

She was very lucky, and later they spent around half an hour in the children's playground, the swings fortunately not being occupied, the threat of rain in the air keeping parents and children away. Alastair frightened the life out of her by pushing her so high she thought she might do a triple loop over the top of the swing frame. She got her own back by whizzing him round on the roundabout until he was on the verge of turning green.

All in all it was a lovely afternoon and Suze was still pinching herself that someone like Alastair, in fact if she was honest, anyone, could possibly be as interested in her as he said he was and seemed to be. She was beginning to think that he was telling the truth. As before, he walked her back to the field and watched her as she walked to the towpath. They agreed to meet again on the following Tuesday night. Suze was going to claim that she had a babysitting job to do for a couple of hours. She thought her excuse would let her meet with Alastair, spend an hour or so with him and still meet the 10pm curfew that Steve imposed upon her. He was never home at that time anyway, rarely getting home before 11pm of an evening.

Their next date went exactly as was planned but there were no more opportunities to meet until the following Saturday, except for a brief half an hour at the library on the Thursday. They had managed to sneak a couple of quick kisses between the shelves of books before being disturbed by an elderly gentleman tutting at them. Alastair apologised profusely and the gentleman revised his opinion of them, respecting Alastair's good manners and told them that he could actually remember being young himself, so never mind him, he was just an old fogey who had temporarily forgotten what it was like to be young and in love.

Their next date was scheduled to be tea at Alastair's house, and as before, they arranged to meet at the park. Alastair had insisted that his mother was really looking forward to meeting her and Suze tried to convince herself that perhaps his mother might like her after all. In reality she thought she

was probably kidding herself and she and Alastair would be no more after Saturday. In the event, she planned to wear a pretty dress that she had managed to pick up very cheaply at the local Oxfam shop. It had been reduced by 50%, the assumption being that no-one else had wanted it. However, she had seen that with a few minor adjustments, which involved shortening the sleeves, tightening up the seams around the bust and adding a row of buttons for decoration, the dress could be made to look stylish and pretty. She was right, it had taken her just an hour or so to fix and she was extremely pleased with how the finished article looked. During this period and up until the Saturday morning everything was progressing much as usual. There were the usual digs and jibes from Steve, a number of arguments between him and her Mum, none of them coming to blows fortunately, not severe ones anyway, and the usual long list of chores that she had to complete to the required standard.

Saturday morning started off much as usual, Steve lying in bed whilst her mother went off to work at one of her jobs. He got up at 11am, expecting to find the house spotless, his shirt ready for the pub and a meal being prepared. He sometimes expected to have a late cooked breakfast on Saturday and Suze was the one required to cook it for him. This usually involved frying eggs, bacon, sausage, tomatoes and fried bread. On this occasion Suze managed to break one of the eggs whilst she was frying it. With Steve sitting at the table demanding she hurry up, there was no time to cook another egg and so with trepidation she served him the meal.

‘What’s this?’ he roared. ‘What do you call this? Can’t you even fry an egg properly, you useless article!’ He swept the plate onto the floor, and there was a clattering as it smashed into pieces, scattering food everywhere. Clean it up and make me another one, after you’ve first made me a sandwich to keep me going.’

‘But that’s the last of the bacon, I’ll have to go and buy some more. Can you give me some money to get some?’ stammered Suze, anticipating what was to come.

‘Money, money? Do you think money grows on trees? You’ve ruined the meal so you can replace it, take it out of your babysitting money that you must have earned the other night. Do me a

sandwich and then go and buy bacon, and not that rubbish stuff that your mother buys. I can see why you're so useless, you're two of a kind the pair of you.'

'I didn't get paid for the babysitting, I did it as a favour,' lied Suze, desperately trying to come up with a plausible reason as to why she would do so.

'Don't give me that, nobody does a job for someone else without getting paid. Give me your purse, let's see what you're holding back,' he demanded.

Suze began to panic. She had money in her bag, not much, she had hidden the bulk of it still, but she had wanted to buy Alastair's mother a small gift for inviting her round this afternoon, just a small bunch of flowers or a little box of chocolates.

'I didn't get paid Steve, I babysat for the Taylors in return for Tony helping me with my maths homework.' As soon as she had said it she knew she had said the wrong thing. Tony was only 22 and a young father with an even younger wife. She often babysat for them, many times being paid in kind, a bar of chocolate, a rented DVD or something similar, as they were really short of money. Like many young marrieds they just needed the occasional break, which was usually a drink at a local pub or a pizza at a two for one venue.

'Tony? I bet you give him freebies, you little slapper. No wonder you're always round there. He must think it's his birthday having two tarts hanging around him all the time. That wife of his is a right tease, always giving me the come on. Right little slut she was until he made an honest woman of her.'

Suze knew he was lying, Steve's wife, Jenny, was a sweet and modest girl who adored her husband and had never looked at anyone else since she was at primary school.

'Give me your bag,' he demanded.

'It's empty Steve, I've just told you, I've no money.'

He grabbed her bag from the back of the door and tipped out the contents on the floor. Spotting the new lipstick she had treated herself to, finding it in the discontinued basket at the local chemist, he picked it up and removed the top.

‘Slapper paint!’ he barked. ‘I’ve told you not to put on slapper paint. Do you put this on when you go round to Tony’s? Don’t answer, of course you do, that’s why you go round there. Lurching towards her he pulled off the top and scrawled it all over her face, breaking off the end in doing so and then treading it into the carpet, creating a huge pink stain.

‘What else do we have in here? Condoms, where are they? Surprise, surprise there aren’t any, not surprising at all really, why would a slapper want to use protection, slows down the whole process and spoils the fun.’

Despite her best intentions Suze started to cry and seeing her thus weakened she was rewarded with a hefty shove which made her body bang against the wall of the lounge. She felt something crack but wasn’t entirely whether it was her or the wall, but the pain was something else, she could already feel it rising from the base of her spine up to her neck.

Steve continued investigating what was in her bag. He found a tampon and tossed it on the floor.

‘So you’re not pregnant yet then. If you ever do get yourself knocked up then don’t ever think that you can bring up any brat of yours in my house. You can piss off and not come back. It’s bad enough having to have you around, never mind some spotty Herbert’s spawn.’

Suze stayed quiet. She knew from experience that protesting her innocence was a waste of time and would only incite him more.

‘Ah, ha, no money hey? What’s this then? He pulled out 3 single pound coins. I’d say that should just cover a pack of bacon, get out of here you dirty little tramp and fix that sandwich and then get your backside down to the shops.’

Suze looked at him with hatred in her eyes, if she could only pluck up the courage to hit him and believe she could escape without retaliation that wouldn’t leave her half dead she would have stuck a knife into him. She wanted to see him squealing like a skewered pig. Steve, unfortunately for her, noted the look.

‘Don’t you look at me like that you filthy trollop. Who do you think you are, giving me the evils? You’re lucky you’ve been allowed to stay in my house this long, you dirty little bitch.’ He reached

over for her and grabbing her by the hair banged her head against the wall, several times, until she thought she would pass out with pain. Just when she thought she could no longer stand he aimed a single but full bodied punch to her ribs and she crashed down onto the floor.

Realising he'd gone too far this time he stepped back for a moment, surveying the damage lying on the floor in front of him. He had a handful of her hair in his hand, which he tossed to one side. With one hand he grabbed her by her shoulder and she winced in pain, but he continued to haul her to her feet.

'Just do as you're told and we'll say no more about it,' he offered by way of a sick apology. 'Leave the sandwich, just get the bacon and do me another meal. Be quick about it and we won't have to tell your mother about your little accident. He threw the coins back at her and pulled a five pound note out of his pocket.

'You can keep your money, this time, but don't let it happen again,' he snarled.

Suze staggered into the kitchen, trying to get through the pain and to see through the hazy mist that surrounded her. Pull yourself together, she told herself, he's hurt you worse than this before, just brace yourself, you can get past this, just hold up. She made it to the kitchen drawer and found a box of paracetamol and pulled out 4, swallowing them without water, flinching at the bitter, sour taste. That's it, she thought, in a few minutes, the pain will be better, no need to panic, it will go away soon.

She stepped out of the back door, almost falling down the step, the pain in her back being jolted by that one single, simple movement. It took her 15 minutes to do the 5 minute walk to the shop. Painfully she had bought what was needed, careful to keep the receipt with the change and walked back home just as painfully, the tablets not yet doing the job for which they were intended. She managed to prepare the meal and served it to a silent and sullen Steve who just grunted at her when she returned his change and the receipt. It was only the thought of seeing Alastair again that was keeping her upright, but she was wondering if she could hold out long enough to make their date

this afternoon. She had about 3 hours before then and was wondering if the pain would get any worse.

Luckily for her Steve decided to go out as soon as he had finished eating, leaving the plate on the table for her to clear away and the lipstick stain on the floor for her to deal with. She did her best with the lipstick, using a floor cloth and washing up liquid and had managed to do a reasonable job, but knew it would require cleaning the whole rug and she had neither the time nor the energy. With Steve out of the way she decided to run a bath in the hope that it might help both soothe the pain and also help her to calm down. She couldn't meet Alastair's mother in this state. A few minutes later and she was in the bath, which was helping, that and the pain killers she had taken earlier were beginning to have some effect. When she dried herself she was feeling a little less pained. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and saw bruising on her shoulder, her upper arms, her wrist, and when she turned to try and see her back there was a livid dark bruise that was the shape of the African continent and almost the same size. She found some pain relieving gel and wrapping a clean flannel around a back brush she squeezed the gel onto this and did her best to apply it to the affected area. She also noted that the glass in her watch was broken and upon closer inspection she realised that the hands had snapped too. This upset her more than the physical injury as the watch had been a gift from her grandmother and she knew her grandmother had struggled to save the money to buy it for her.

Fifteen minutes later and she was still in pain, but as good as she was going to feel after this latest attack. She popped another couple of paracetamol pills into her bag, thinking she might need to take more whilst she was at Alastair's. She had washed her hair, noting that a handful came away in her hands as she did so and she was left in a quandary as to whether the chunk of missing hair was as noticeable as she thought it was. She brushed her hair and decided that she would play safe and brush it into a pony tail. She had retrieved what was left of her lipstick and rubbed a little into her lips, defying Steve's instructions to her. She would in future keep such things out of his reach and hide them somewhere else, the kitchen pantry maybe. She lay on her bed for the next hour,

hoping the pain would subside enough so that she could get through the afternoon without anyone guessing what had happened.

An hour later, with her new second hand dress on, a cardigan on top unfortunately being necessary. It didn't look out of place but it was not the effect that she had wanted to create but she had to cover up, she took a quick look in the mirror and felt she didn't look as bad as she felt and she was ready to take the walk to the park. She had allowed herself extra time, thinking that she wouldn't make it in time because she was going to have to go slowly, and as she still had the £3 she wanted to pick up some flowers on the way. The walk was painful, very painful, and she stopped to get her breath a couple of times. She was grateful when she saw Alastair at the tree, grinning like a Cheshire cat, when he spotted her approaching.

'You look lovely' he said as she came up face to face with him. 'You've done your hair differently too, it's really pretty,' he added, reaching out to touch the twist of hair closest to her scalp, not noticing that she winced as he did so. However, when he pulled her into his arms she squealed in pain, embarrassed that she had not been able to stop herself.

'What's the matter Suze? I didn't mean to hurt you, did I catch you or something? I'm so sorry, I never meant to hurt you.' he stressed, getting upset over the fact that he thought he had caused her damage.

'It's not your fault Alastair, I, er, I had an accident, fell down the stairs, bruised myself up a bit. I'd hoped the pain would pass a bit, but if anything it feels worse. I've got some painkillers in my bag, perhaps when we get to your house I can take them and it will kick in and take away the pain.'

Alastair looked at her anxiously, concern etched into his handsome face.

'If you don't feel well enough to come back with me I can take you home, or maybe take you to A&E, you might have broken something.'

'No,' said Suze, rather too sharply. 'No, it's fine, it's just bruising, I'm clumsy, it's not the first time it's happened. I'm a quick healer, it'll be gone in a few days, I just need to get through the day that's all.' She knew she was babbling.

Alastair looked unconvinced.

‘Thanks for caring about me, but it’s okay, I’ll be fine. Let’s not keep your Mum waiting, hey?’

Alastair took her gently by the hand, taking the bunch of tulips intended for his mother from her, and without holding her as he usually did, he kissed her tenderly on her lips.

‘Tell me if you feel any worse, I’ll get Dad to drive us to A&E and get you checked out. In the meantime, Mum has these magic pills that seem to cure anything and everything, I’ll get her to give you some.’

Suze nodded her agreement, and seemingly placated, Alastair walked her to his home, slowly. When they arrived at the front of his house she was very pleasantly surprised. It was neat and tidy with a freshly mown lawn, a neat hedge and pretty flowers in borders around the square shaped lawn. He took her round to the back of the house and stepped back to open the back door which led directly into the kitchen, where his mother stood at the cooker, stirring some delicious smelling pan of something sweet but which was as yet unidentifiable to Suze.

Alastair’s mother took the flowers that Suze offered, telling her she was silly to spend her money and not to do it again. She said it kindly though, and Suze knew she appreciated the gesture.

Alastair formerly introduced them and then explained the situation as he understood it.

‘Suze is not herself today as she’s had a bit of a tumble down the stairs and is suffering from some bruising. Do we have anything we can give her to make her feel better?’

‘Of course we do, oh you poor thing, let’s get you into the lounge and sit you down on a comfortable chair, you do look rather shook up. Aren’t you pretty?’ she smiled, ‘Alastair said you were and I can see that he was right. What a pretty dress as well.’

Suze smiled, already liking this lady who was being kindness itself.

‘I’m Diane by the way, you’ll meet John, that’s Alastair’s Dad, very soon, he’s just gone to fill up the car with petrol so he’ll be back any minute. We’ve both been looking forward to meeting you, Alastair has never brought a girlfriend home before.’

'Mum!' said Alastair, going pink. Suze laughed as she rarely saw him get embarrassed and it was a lovely moment to think that he had chosen her, and only her, to meet his Mum and Dad. He must like her a lot she decided. Diane sat her in a comfortable armchair and, despite Suze's protestations, carefully placed cushions behind her back, also offering her a footstool which Suze declined.

'I've got some herbal painkillers, they're almost magical and I'll get you some right now. Alastair, get Suze a drink so she can take them straight away. She reached into a drawer in the sideboard behind the chair and came back with two tablets and waited for Alastair to bring in a drink.

'I promise that unless you've broken any bones these will take away any pain.' She looked at Suze curiously. 'How did you manage to fall down the stairs?' she asked.

'Oh, I guess I'm just clumsy,' she answered, unable to look Diane directly in the eye. 'It's not the first time I've managed to injure myself, I'm always banging into doors, falling down steps and generally walking into things.' She smiled, hoping her explanation would suffice and also giving herself a back-up plan should future injuries be visible, something highly likely.

Alastair handed Suze a glass of water and she swallowed down the tablets Diane had given her. Diane asked Alastair to go and check the oven for her and waited until she was sure he was out of earshot.

'Suze, it's none of my business, so don't take what I'm about to say personally. I know your stepfather, or rather Alastair's Dad knows him. He's a nasty piece of work. Did he have anything to do with the fact that you're now covered in bruises?' She looked down at Suze's legs where a fresh bruise was now showing, but she also glanced at her exposed wrist which clearly showed bruising that were strongly reminiscent of finger marks. Diane also gazed pointedly at her neckline and Suze realised that the bruising on her shoulder must be partially visible too.

Suze could not lie, but she couldn't tell the truth either, so she just shrugged.

'Don't you worry, I know how it must be. We'll look after you whilst you are here and we'd like you to come here as often as you'd like. Alastair says you're a nice girl and I can see that for myself, but in any case, I'd take his word on what he thinks about you. He doesn't lie and he's proved

himself to be a good judge of character. For now, you just take it easy for a few minutes and let me know if those pain killers don't start working.' She smiled and gave Suze a kiss on the cheek, noting the tears that were threatening to form in Suze's eyes.

'Thank you Diane, thank you very much, I appreciate what you've said.'

Twenty minutes later and Suze was able to report that the pain had eased considerably. Diane gave her a handful of tablets to put in her bag, advising her to take more when she went to bed that night and to take a further two the following morning. Alastair had been told he could give her more tomorrow if she needed them. Suze again expressed her thanks for all her kindness. The afternoon was lovely, the tea was lovely, John was lovely and Alastair was his usual gorgeous self.

After tea the family watched a newly released DVD of a film that Suze had wanted to see but had not had anyone she could invite to go with her. It was a comedy, and she laughed as much as everyone else at the antics of the heroine, a dizzy blonde who was getting into all kinds of situational scrapes. She had been invited to sit on the sofa, next to Alastair, who had no qualms whatsoever about putting his arm around her and holding her hand, occasionally whispering to her and asking if she felt okay. Apart from the pain, which had receded considerably but could still be felt, Suze could only smile and acknowledge that she was feeling absolutely fine. In fact she had rarely felt better. Alastair's Mum and Dad were, in her mind at least, role-models of what parents should be.

She was given a tour of the house by Alastair, he being instructed to do so by Diane whilst she cleared away the dishes, having refused any help from Suze in doing so. Suze promised that on this occasion only she wouldn't insist but that next time, when she was feeling less sore, she would not accept Diane's refusal of help. Consequently she was guided around the kitchen, which was dated but well laid out and practical and functional. It was a bright and happy place, full of Diane's kitchen paraphernalia and the smells of her newly baked food and fresh coffee. She saw an enormous fridge that stood by the back door, which was open every few minutes with either John or Alastair rooting inside for some delectable something or other, the both of them being threatened by Diane

whilst doing so; the threats being very half-hearted and good natured and largely ignored by the two miscreants.

The dining room was again a warm friendly place with a large dining table, beautifully polished, covering up years of tiny dents and the odd scratch caused by the large family that Diane had given birth to. A cabinet in the corner was full of family mementoes and photographs, including one of Alastair as a baby, cute as a button with a single curl brushed up on the top of his head, his enormous blue eyes sparkling whilst he grinned mischievously. The lounge was comfortable and well furnished with a suite, two armchairs, a large sideboard that seemed to contain a Tardis of things that miraculously went in and out of a space that looked insufficient for even half the quantity that she saw. Photographs were all around the room and Suze could see the family resemblance between the brothers and sisters. An older brother especially had a very strong resemblance to Alastair and Suze could see in him the man that Alastair would eventually become.

She particularly liked the conservatory which looked out onto a pretty garden which still had the climbing frames and swing that Alastair told her he had played on as a young child. Upstairs and the bedrooms were all comfortable and nicely furnished, Diane's room having a boudoir effect in one corner of the room only. She had a traditional bedroom apart from a very glamorous dressing table that was complete with theatre lights, silk roses and a glass top. It didn't match anything else in the room but it was clearly Diane's little bit of heaven. There was a spare room, prettily furnished in tones of pink with a white wooden painted bed and a prettily flowered duvet cover with matching curtains that were complemented by a rug and lamp in tonal shades.

It was explained that most of the visitors to the house were female, either the friends of Alastair's sisters or prior to that the girlfriends of his older brothers. Alastair's room was a typical teenage boys room. A stack of sports equipment stood in a corner, a box of cds in another, but his bed was made, presumably by himself as it was a bit untidy looking. She noted that the curtains were not properly pulled back and there were clothes spilling out of his chest of drawers. Other

than that it was actually quite neat and tidy and was a room she would choose herself if she was furnishing it for him.

Alastair took the opportunity to grab a few kisses whilst they were upstairs and Suze was happy to receive them, welcoming the comfort the kisses gave her, he offered words of encouragement at the same time.

'Mum and Dad really like you, in fact they are threatening to throw me out and move you in,' he laughed.

Suze burst out laughing herself, 'As if, they obviously adore you, spoil you rotten no doubt and you're clearly the apple of their eyes. I envy you Alastair, I'd give anything to have parents like yours,' she said sadly.

'I know, they're great, I'm very lucky to have them, but you know what, I don't mind sharing them. I'll let them adopt you, unofficially, and then you can learn to make fun of them like the rest of us do. They're great, both of them, but when my brothers and sisters are here we do give them a hard time, just because we can and because they know we're teasing them and they like us ganging up on them because it's all good fun.'

The end of the afternoon came far too soon for Suze. As she was preparing to leave she was given hugs by John and Diane, gently, both understanding what had happened, even though Suze had not vocalised it.

'You take care of yourself, don't forget to take those pills I gave you, I'll give Alastair some more to give you when he sees you tomorrow. Hopefully you won't need them, a couple more doses tonight and tomorrow morning should be enough, and after that paracetamol will do the trick on its own. If it gets worse you let us know, John will take you to get checked out,' said a concerned Diane.

Suze nodded her understanding and said that she would take it easy and do what Suze had suggested. She was going to go home and get an early night tonight. Diane made her promise that she would try to get a good night's sleep and then invited her to come back tomorrow afternoon as well.

'I know you two want to spend all your time together but I'd rather have you both here until I know you're okay Suze. I'll get John to pick you up close to home and bring you here. You can have the conservatory to yourselves for the afternoon. We've been intending to move the spare TV into there so I'll get John to do that this evening. You, young lady, are welcome here any time, so think of it as your second home, we hope to see a lot more of you and we want to see a lot more smiles from you next time. You're a good girl, anyone can see that, we're glad that Alastair chose you to be his girlfriend.'

She gave Suze another comforting hug and kissed her on the cheek, Suze responded in the same vein. John also kissed her and promised that if she ever needed any help with dealing with anything at home, he didn't specify what he meant but Suze understood, all she had to do was pick up the telephone and call.

John had insisted on taking her at least part of the way home; he understood that she wouldn't want him going to the house without her having to explain why. Alastair identified a particular spot where Suze could be dropped off so that she didn't have far to walk.

Even though she was still in pain it was with a happier heart that she returned back home, knowing that she had found not only a great boyfriend, but also people who cared about her.

And so a pattern was set, which over the next few weeks meant that Suze would spend Sunday afternoons and a couple of evenings a week with Alastair at his parents' home. On Sundays she often helped Diane in the kitchen where she learned how to cook a number of different dishes but she was also able to share some of her own baking skills as well. In the evenings she and Alastair often had the house to themselves and John always drove her home afterwards, or nearly all the way home, she and Alastair holding hands on the back seat of his red Volvo, being subjected to merciless teasing by his father, and vice versa. Suze arranged her dates with Alastair to coincide with evenings when both her mother and Steve would be out of the house, having a back-up explanation if she was caught out of getting a phone call from her study group to contribute to a joint project at one of their homes. She had no recourse to this back-up plan for a number of weeks.

Chapter 6

Alastair and Suze had been seeing each other for several months when the next incident occurred. She had been at Alastair's home on the Sunday afternoon and they had both nipped out to the nearby shop to pick up some item of grocery that Diane needed and had forgotten to purchase. It was there that they bumped into one of Steve's drinking friends. He was an unpleasant individual, and had been to the house once or twice, and had taken on the same persona as Steve towards Suze, that is, he had expected her to act as unpaid waitress and had even had the audacity to ask her to open up his cans of beer and pour them into glasses for him. Suze had tried to avoid being seen by him, and thought she had got away with it, but he was still standing outside talking to someone when she and Alastair left the store. He didn't speak, didn't seem to acknowledge her at all, but by the time she got home later Steve knew all about it and was waiting.

She had barely stepped through the door when she was grabbed by the hair and dragged across the room, the obscenities flowing from a wild eyed Steve who was out of control with rage.

'What did I tell you? What did I tell you, hey? You don't mess around with boys, you don't go anywhere without asking permission, and you definitely don't go anywhere near the Dexter family.' He screamed his words at her, his mouth close to her ear, so close in fact that she was feeling pain in her eardrum from the volume of his voice. She tried pathetically to excuse herself, beginning to feel more fear than she had ever done before.

'I help his Mum, she's been showing me how to cook different meals. Alastair's just a friend Steve, he's just a friend.'

'I don't care what he is to you! I won't have you defying me and I'll make sure you never defy me again!' He flung his arm across her face and Suze began to see stars, such was the intensity of it. She stumbled and fell to the floor, where she then received a vicious kick to the ribs. She tried to curl up her body protectively but he grabbed her by her hair and dragged her to her feet. This time he slammed her against the wall and swung his arm across her face once again. She felt blood

trickling from her nose and prayed to God that it wasn't broken. Another kick to her legs and a final shove to the floor and she all but passed out.

His temper abating for a moment or two Steve stalked off to go get a cigarette. He came back and decided to go for the mental attack this time.

'So what do you get up to then, with this Alastair? Don't tell me he's just a friend, my mate followed you back to his house, holding hands like Jack and Jill you were, giggling like the mindless morons you both are. No wonder you've been smiling to yourself such a lot lately. Taken you to bed yet, has he? Course he has, those Dexter's are like rabbits, breed like rabbits too. How long is it before you're going to come and announce you're carrying one of their sprogs. Filthy bitch you are, filthy, you disgust me. Get up to your room and don't come down until I tell you to. I'll be seeing the Dexters myself, and mark my words they won't be welcoming you in their house again when I'm finished with them. Pity you didn't get to say goodbye to your pretty boy, next time you see him he won't be so pretty. You've always been ugly and a few more adjustments to your face will put paid to anything he might have seen in you, although God knows what that might have been. He could only want you for what's between your legs.' For good measure he kicked her in her side as she continued to lie on the floor and grabbed her hair again to bang her head against the wall again. Seemingly momentarily satisfied with the damage he'd inflicted he went off to get a beer out of the fridge. As Suze lay broken and damaged on the floor, Suze knew there were two possibilities, either he'd come back and finish her off completely, or he'd decided he'd done enough to show he was in charge and leave her be. She decided there was only one way to find out and she hoped it was the latter option. She knew she needed to get herself out of harms' way, even if that only meant getting to her bedroom. She could wedge the door shut with a chair if she could get up there.

Suze painfully rose up from the floor and using the wall for support managed to get herself into the hallway. Looking at the flight of stairs in front of her she wasn't sure she could make it. She took a deep breath and found her courage and painfully got to the top, going to the bathroom first to assess the damage. She blanched when she saw her reflection, her face was already swollen and her

right cheek was double its normal size. Her nose was bloodied and swollen, but she thought she had escaped it being broken. Her legs were once again showing signs of developing the sort of bruises that would take weeks to heal, but it was her rib that was causing her so much pain, she could hardly breathe and could barely turn around without screaming. This time he had gone too far, she thought, he must have broken at least one of her ribs and she worried that she would need medical attention. She was also petrified over his threat towards Alastair and his family.

She had to get to a phone but she didn't know how long she would have to wait and see whether Steve was intending to continue the beating. She was hoping he would leave her alone and just leave the house. If she was lucky he could be gone in less than an hour. She took a drink of water from the bottle she kept by her bed and staggered to her bed where she almost cried with pain as she lowered herself to it where she could only sit and wait. It seemed like an eternity but eventually she heard the front door slam and knew she would have to try and get downstairs without passing out. It took her almost 20 minutes, but she managed to do it, although her body was screaming with pain. She went to the phone, but it wasn't there. Steve had unplugged it and taken it with him. For the first time since the assault Suze cried, really cried, releasing the anger and sheer frustration of it all. She gave great gut-wrenching sobs until she felt she had no more to give.

It was then that a sudden jolt of resolve shot through her. She realised that she could do something, something she should have done before, she didn't have to be a victim any longer. It was time she thought about herself instead of trying to protect her mother by always giving in to Steve's threats and beatings so that he would leave her mother alone, which he never did anyway. He always did exactly what he wanted to do and at heart she knew he was a coward, he wouldn't go to Alastair's family as they would take him on without reservation and beat him at his own game. She thought that if she could just get to a neighbour's phone then she could ring Alastair and his Dad, they would know what to do and Diane would help her. She had never involved the neighbours before but she couldn't take any more, one more attack and he might kill her. She still didn't know the extent of the damage that he had done to her at this moment.

15 minutes later and she had managed to get to the Taylor's house, just a few houses further down the street. Tony answered the door and she almost fell into him, so exhausted was she by her short walk to safety.

'Good God Suze, what on earth's happened, you look like you've just gone ten rounds with a heavyweight boxer.' Suze couldn't suppress the laugh, even though it pained her to do so. Steve was over 6 feet tall and around 14 stones, she guessed that could put him in the near heavyweight category.

'Please can I use your phone, I need to call my boyfriend and his Dad and I need to go to the hospital,' she spluttered, barely able to talk or to stand.

'Of course, let's get you inside and I'll get the phone for you. I'll get Jenny to come and help you and get you cleaned up.'

It was then that Suze realised that she had blood on her hands and on her clothes, her nose beginning to pour blood again.

It took 15 minutes for John to arrive, Alastair wasn't in the house but a message was out for him to come to A&E, which was where John was intending to take Suze right now.

'I'm taking you straight to A&E and you'll be staying with us afterwards. I'm also calling the police, despite anything you say to stop me, I'll see him behind bars for this.'

Suze didn't protest. John asked if there was a way to be able to get back into her house and collect clothes, clearly Suze couldn't but Jenny could and she said she would go and grab whatever was needed. John and Tony would watch out to make sure that Steve didn't come back whilst she was doing so. Suze told her where everything was and what she needed, there was very little she insisted, but she particularly pointed out the shoe box in her wardrobe where she had hidden her money, which was now, to Suze anyway, a sizable £40. It took Jenny just a few minutes and she was back with a couple of bin liners full of the clothes and personal effects that Suze had asked her to get.

Tony gently lifted Suze and carried her out to his car where John helped her into the passenger seat. He covered her with a blanket and with thanks to Tony and Jenny and making an agreement to phone them later with an update, he sped off as fast as was legal to get her to A&E. Alastair had arrived at about the same time and his face was etched with worry and shock, when he saw the state of her.

'I'll kill him Suze, I promise you that I'll kill him,' he swore. Suze told him that didn't want him going anywhere near, although she understood how he felt, she had wanted to kill himself, for a long time in fact, but she was hoping that the police would be able to take some action now.

It was several hours later and it was confirmed that Suze had a broken rib. Fortunately it had not pierced her lung, which was a relief as Suze's breathing problems were a signal that this might have been the case. It was felt that it was the extreme anxiety that was causing the breathing difficulty. Once she was in safe hands and had been given pain relief she was feeling considerably better, although she still looked a complete mess. She was advised to stay in overnight for observation, it was also the best place for the police to come and interview her and take a statement. All in all it was nearly midnight before she was left alone to try and sleep. The police had advised that they would be picking up Steve and with the evidence they had they would be pressing charges.

The next day Alastair and John came to pick her up to take her back to their home. Diane had prepared the spare room ready for her and she had insisted that Suze was to be staying with them for as long as she wanted to, certainly for the next few weeks whilst her rib healed, which was expected to take several weeks at least. Suze cried when they told her of their plans and Alastair held her gently in his arms, reassuring her that all would be fine, they would take care of her now. The police had told them that they would be coming to see Suze again later in the day and would update her on what was happening. They had left a message for her mother with Tony but she hadn't called. Suze was not surprised.

Alastair was so attentive and gentle towards her as they drove home and he helped his father to carry her upstairs. Diane was equally welcoming and concerned and asked the men to leave her

alone with Suze whilst she got her comfortable. She handed her a lovely nightgown and told her to put it on as she would want to feel as pretty as she could whilst she was having visitors, of which she should expect to see many. Alastair's brothers and sisters all wanted to meet her, and whilst they wouldn't bombard her, they all wanted Suze to know they cared about her, if Mum, Dad and Alastair cared for her, then so did they. Suze took the nightdress and realised that it was brand new. She started to remonstrate with Diane who immediately reassured her that it was just a small gift but if she didn't like it she could take it back. Suze humbly and gratefully took it, telling her it was just perfect and that she had never had a pretty nightdress like it before. She usually just wore baggy tee shirts to bed. Diane told her that she had hung up her clothes, and added that she had brought her some new underwear as what she had was looking a bit tired. She hoped she wouldn't be offended by that and Suze could only laugh. Tired she thought, there was an exaggeration. She was lucky to ever get new underwear unless she used her birthday money to buy it herself. If her Mum did buy her some it was likely to be a multipack of cotton pants from a supermarket that she'd rooted out of a bargain bin. As for her bras, well she had learned long ago that the darker the colour the longer it would be passably wearable. She had two and had to wash the one she was wearing every night and make sure it would be dry to wear again in 24 hours. She couldn't express enough gratitude to Diane, who dismissed her thanks and fussed around her like a mother hen. She gently and carefully combed out Suze's hair, telling her how pretty it was as she did so but discreetly ridding the comb of the handfuls of hair that came away with each combing.

Eventually Suze was made to look quite pretty, notwithstanding the bruises and the swellings, which had fortunately decreased quite considerably but were still evident. Diane did a decent job at disguising the bruising by dabbing on concealer and adding a little blusher. She gave her a mirror and offered her a nice lipstick and at the end of it Suze thought she would no longer terrify anyone, although she still had a long way to go before she would be happy to look in a mirror.

Alastair was the first visitor and he ran up the stairs as soon as Diane indicated that Suze was ready to see him. He told Suze she looked beautiful, and sounded genuine as he said it, making Suze

smile. He was clutching a couple of women's magazines, a bag of Suze's favourite sweets and a pretty clip that he had bought for her hair. He helped Suze put it in place and showed her the mirror to see if she liked it.

'I love it. I love everything you've bought me but I'm feeling incredibly guilty about putting everyone to so much trouble. I have said thanks but if you could reiterate that to everyone I'd be very grateful.'

Alastair just laughed. 'My Mum's in her element, she's rekindled her mothering instinct and is loving every moment. Just relax Suze, and be looked after for once. When you're on the mend I'm sure you can do something to help around the house if you want, although you'll struggle to find anything that Mum would let you do, she's very territorial!' Suze smiled, having already suspected what he had just said. 'And as for Dad, well he's enjoyed playing the hero, this will be a story to tell the rest of the family for decades to come,' he chuckled.

'Can you cope with a kiss?' he asked playfully, taking her hands in his.

'I could manage a little one,' she replied, a little coquettishly.

Several gentle kisses later and Alastair sat on her bed next to her, an arm thrown around her and his legs stretched out in front of him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box which he had tied a ribbon around.

'Go on, open it, he urged.'

Suze was excited to see what was inside and was thrilled beyond belief to open the box and see that was inside was a watch that was very like the one that Steve had destroyed.

'I tried to get you an exact match but I couldn't find one locally, although the jeweller told me that if you didn't like this one I could take it back and you could go and choose another one out of his catalogue and he'd order it for you. Do you like it?'

'Oh Alastair, you shouldn't have, it's gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous and I love it. Help me put it on?' she asked. Alastair did what she asked and she flicked her wrist to the left and right, admiring how it looked.

'Do I get an extra kiss for my gift?' grinned Alastair.

He didn't have to ask twice and Suze found herself unable to stop smiling.

'You know I'd thought that when the time came to be in your bedroom, and on your bed, with you lying beside me, that the circumstances might have been somewhat different,' he joked.

Suze looked a little embarrassed but had to admit to herself that it had crossed her mind once or twice, but not in anything other than wondering what would happen when that time came.

Alastair stayed with her until lunch time when he was called down to eat his meal but he returned just minutes later with Suze's lunch on a tray. It was one of the best meals she had ever tasted. She did a lot of cooking at home and was a decent cook with the resources she had at hand. She couldn't dispute though that the quality of the food she was provided with wasn't always great, largely because the budget for housekeeping was often limited according to whether Steve had made money on the horses or not. Diane was a marvellous cook and she knew she was going to appreciate eating at her table.

'If I stay here for more than a week I'll be the size of a house,' she joked.

'No you won't but you could do with putting on a few pounds, you're a little too skinny and it will suit you to put on a few more curves, not that I don't like the ones that you already have,' said Alastair, cheekily.

'Who are you calling skinny?' joked Suze, 'I've seen more fat on a chip than what's on you,' she teased.

'Ah, but that's because I'm all muscle,' he said, flexing his arms to show off his developing biceps. 'And of course because I'm still a growing boy. This time next year I'll have a body like Arnold Schwarzenegger.'

'I really hope not,' said Suze pulling a face. 'I rather like you the way you are, but I agree that I'd still like you if you had a bit more muscle.'

'Well I'm glad to hear it, because I'd hate to think that when I'm lying in my bed at night, thinking about you in the next room, that you'd not be thinking about me in the same way.'

‘What way would that be then?’ teased Suze.

‘Oh, the sort of way that makes a man’s pulse race, imagining the sorts of things that aren’t decent to talk about in polite company,’ he joked.

‘If I wasn’t feeling so tender and sore I’d slap you for that. What would your mother think if she heard you?’ she asked, pretending to be shocked.

‘Actually you’d be surprised, she’s very liberal and broad minded, so is my Dad. They wouldn’t turn a hair. Mum would just tell me to be sure that I loved you first, which of course I already do.’

Suze smiled at that.

‘Dad would just tell me where to find his condoms and not to take the last one!’

Suze spluttered at that and Alastair laughed uproariously.

The conversation, fortunately Suze thought, ended at that point when one of Alastair’s two sisters popped her head around the door.

‘Hi Suze, I’m Julie, thought I’d come and say hello and see how you are. I’ve brought you some smellies and stuff, thought you might like something to take away the smell of Alastair from the room,’ she joked.

Alastair gave her a playful tap on her bottom and she pretended to be outraged as she feigned a swing at his head.

‘Clear off Alastair, I want to have a girly chat with Suze. Go and talk to the others downstairs, nearly everyone’s here at the moment and they all want to come up and meet Suze.’

Checking that Suze was okay to be left with his ‘vile’ sister, Alastair raced down the stairs to catch up with the family gossip. Julie immediately started a conversation with Suze.

‘So, you’re the girl who’s stolen Alastair’s heart?’ she giggled. ‘I can see why.’

Suze blushed.

‘He’s a deep one is our Alastair, he’s always had lots of attention from girls, he’s pretty cute even if I say so myself, but he’s rarely been interested, with the exception of my best friend, the story of that I’ll leave for him to tell you himself someday,’ she added, somewhat enigmatically. ‘It’s not that

he wasn't interested in girls, but rather that he was interested only in a particular kind of girl, which he said he couldn't find. It looks like in you he has found what he wanted. He talks about you all the time you know, bores us all to tears!' she giggled.

Suze could only giggle back in response. 'I think I've got the measure of Alastair now, although I honestly thought he might have been playing a joke on me when he asked me out, but he's proved that he's not like that all. I know how much he likes me, and he knows how much I like him. I can't imagine being with anyone else, and so far he seems to feel the same.'

'Take it from one who knows, he's smitten all right. I know he's still very young, Lord he's only seventeen, but when our Alastair commits to something there's no moving him. If you ever decide he's not for you he won't be easy to shake off!'

'I'm the same though, once I make up my mind about something I'm unshakeable too. He won't find it easy to get rid of me either!'

They both laughed easily together. Suze already liked Julie and she also felt that the liking was reciprocated.

'You remind me of my Mum actually. I think she sees it too. Did you know that she was only 16 when she married Dad?' Suze shook her head, saying that she didn't know that.

'She'd only just turned 16 as well, Dad was barely 18 himself. Gran and Grandpa were livid when she told them she wanted to get married and they refused to give her permission. She told them she was pregnant, even though she wasn't, and they had no choice. Nobody, themselves excluded, thought it would last. You've seen them though, they're still in love even now, we've all caught them in embarrassing moments. Embarrassing for us that is, not for them!'

Suze laughed and said that Alastair had said his parents were very liberal.

'You can say that again, get Alastair to tell you about the time he walked in on them in the bathroom one day, it was his first introduction to physical relationships!' Suze laughed, she couldn't imagine the scene but she could imagine Alastair's face.

‘Anyway, I’ll leave you for now, although I warn you there’ll be no peace for the rest of the afternoon, as soon as I’ve gone there’ll be someone else up here immediately afterwards. Hopefully though, the next time we all come over, you’ll be well enough to be downstairs with us, you can join in all the fun then, it’s a mad house when we’re all together. ‘

Julie was absolutely correct, one after another of the family came up and Suze met his second sister Jo, his brothers Pete, Mark and Luke, their respective wives and husbands and half a dozen nieces and nephews. By teatime she was feeling quite physically exhausted, but at the same time mentally exhilarated, a heady combination. Alastair brought up her tea and settled himself down with her for the rest of the evening. They had an hour together before the police arrived.

‘Hello Suze,’ said the young officer and his female colleague, removing their hats as they entered her bedroom. ‘We just wanted to give you an update on the situation. We’ve arrested your stepfather and he’s currently in police custody. Because of the circumstances and the fact that a number of neighbours have come forward to testify that they have heard the goings on in the house, and they also saw you go into the house unharmed and come out badly hurt he has a case to answer. It helps that you are technically still a child, although I understand you are sixteen in a week or two?’

Suze nodded yes, Alastair’s ears perked up at that piece of information too.

‘We’ll be keeping him in custody for a while, although it’s likely that he’ll ask for bail. Given that he has a criminal record, we hope to keep him in custody. The case will probably have to go to court and with a bit of luck we’re looking at a custodial sentence, although the way some judges are lately it may not be the length of term we’d want. We’ll let you know if there are any changes and at some point we may need a further statement from you.’

Suze thanked them for their help and agreed that she would give them whatever help they needed. She asked if they had spoken to her mother. They said they had but she had been uncooperative, although they were intending to see her again. Suze was upset that her mother had not tried to contact her.

The officers left and Alastair took up his position on Suze's bed once again, and they both took every opportunity to kiss and cuddle as much as they wanted, Alastair doing his best not to catch the bruised and tender parts of her body.

Thus Suze's life settled into a new pattern over the next few days. Gradually Suze was able to get up and down the stairs by herself, and although she struggled to get around it was getting slightly easier each day. She got Diane to give her things to do, sewing mostly, as it meant she didn't have to move around too much but could sit comfortably and use her needle skills. Diane said that Suze could teach her a thing or two about sewing. Alastair spent much of the daytime helping his father with the construction work at the site of the current project he was working on. In the evenings he was by her side constantly, despite Suze insisting that he spend some time with his friends away from her. He always refused, with the exception of football training once per week, which had taken less persuasion.

It was a few days later when the police came to say that bail had been granted but that the conditions were that Steve was not to make contact with her, or Alastair's family at any time. The case would probably take a couple of months or more to come to court but in the meantime if there were any concerns she should contact the police immediately. Suze was a little disappointed that he wasn't put on remand, but not surprised, the justice system wasn't always a fair one, even the police acknowledged that.

A week later and Suze was feeling considerably better, although she couldn't do anything too active still, and going further than outside to the garden wasn't yet possible, although she could push a Hoover around the floor if she took it slowly and she could dust furniture and insisted on doing both. It was her birthday today, and whilst she felt a little sad that no-one would know, and especially sad that her mother hadn't seen fit to make contact, she wasn't unduly concerned. She was very happy with her living arrangements, although she did feel guilty as clearly she was costing the family money to look after and they had to accommodate her needs too, without her being able to contribute much back.

It felt good to be 16 although, she would feel better when she was 18 as then there would be no restrictions on her at all. She was due to go back to school in just another week, although the school had been alerted to the situation and she would study at home, her new home she thought smiling, until she was physically recovered. She was bright and was scheduled to take her 'A' levels which she wanted to follow up by then applying for nurse training. She was also considering that perhaps another option might be to find work for the next couple of years and do her 'A' levels at evening class. That way she might be able to stay here and contribute financially, which would ease her guilt considerably, although nothing Diane and John had said to her had made her feel this way, she had offered them the £40 she had saved but they had resolutely refused to take it. They had constantly reminded her that they wanted her to stay as long as she wanted to. She just didn't want to wear out her welcome.

Mulling over these thoughts, she made her way downstairs to have breakfast. As she walked into the kitchen it was to a loud chorus of 'Happy birthday!'. She beamed and thought she might cry.

'Happy birthday sweetheart,' offered John, 'Happy birthday Suze my love', was Diane's greeting and as for Alastair, well he just pulled her into his arms and kissed her a happy birthday greeting but also whispered that she was now legal! She pulled away from him and gave him a stern look, but seeing the grin on his face she couldn't keep it up and had to smile, although she had flushed pink.

There were stacks of gifts on the table, more than she had received in her entire lifetime to date, and she felt suddenly overwhelmed, and this time she couldn't halt the tears.

'Oh sit down luvvy, have a cup of tea and I'll get your breakfast for you. We're having a full English today in honour of your special day. You've also got to put up with the company of Alastair all day as well as he's reported in sick to his Dad, claims he's got a headache.' She looked at Alastair with feigned contempt.

'It's true, my head is hurting, mostly from the clip round the ear I got from you when I told you I was too ill go to work today,' he grinned.

John entered the conversation and agreed that Alastair, for once and once only, could have the day off to spend with Suze, but he'd expect him to work twice as hard for the next few days to make up for it. Alastair just nodded his agreement and it was taken for granted that he would.

After a delicious breakfast Suze was encouraged to open her gifts. It seemed as if the whole family had brought her presents, which both surprised and touched her. There were lovely girly things from Alastair's sisters, pretty underwear and tights and make up kits, a lovely silky dressing gown from Diane and John. Perfume came from his eldest brother Pete, gift tokens from Mark and a lovely bag from Luke. There was also a gift from Tony and Jenny, cinema tickets for two which she said she'd share with a delighted Diane, much to Alastair's disgust until he realised he was being teased by both Suze and his Mum. She also had received a card from her grandmother, having written to her to explain the situation, and it had contained a £20 note, a whole £20 to spend on herself, together with the gift vouchers that she had received and the money she had saved meant that she could really indulge herself for the first time ever. She was thinking new coat and shoes, ready for when the weather would change in a few weeks. Alastair had held his present back until last and insisted that she couldn't see it until later, after his nosey Mum and Dad were out of the way. They just laughed.

It was a lovely day and Alastair thought they should go in the garden. He made them both drinks and carried them outside and put them on the garden table and then went back to help Suze. She was so much better but was still feeling some pain with certain movements, like stepping down steep steps from the house to the garden. Once she was settled on the pretty little garden bench he got her to open up her gift from him. If she had to describe the style of wrapping she would probably have said it wasinteresting. Pretty paper, lots of ribbon and about ten metres of sellotape made the package almost impenetrable. Alastair reached over to help her out, realising his error, but laughing at the result anyway. Eventually the layers of paper were peeled off to reveal a tiny box.

'I hope what's inside will not come as a surprise, I've been thinking about this for a while and, well, just open it. I hope you'll like it,' he ventured nervously.

Suze looked at him hesitantly, wondering what it could be, but was taken completely by surprise when she lifted the lid to find a beautiful sparkly ring inside. She looked to Alastair for an explanation.

'Do you like it?' he stammered, looking for him, unusually uncomfortable.

'I love it, it's absolutely beautiful...' she wanted to ask him what it meant but she couldn't bring herself to ask the question. His next action answered the question for her. He took the ring from the box and lifted her left hand.

'I love you Suze and I want to always be here for you. I've thought about this very carefully and I know how I feel and I think you feel the same. I want you to marry me. Not yet of course, but in time when we can save up some money and I can support us both. Will you marry me Suze?'

Suze was completely overawed.

'You really want to marry me, are you sure? What will your Mum and Dad think, won't they think we're too young to be taking such a big step?'

'They know how much I really want to marry you Suze. I've talked to Mum and Dad about this and they have no objections whatsoever, in fact they're all for it. They want you for their daughter in law. Are you going to keep me waiting any longer for an answer Suze, I'm getting nervous now!' he half-joked.

Suze didn't have to say anything, she thrust her hand at him and he placed the ring on the third finger of her left hand.

'Of course I'll marry you. I love you more than anyone in the whole world.'

She wasn't aware that Diane and John were peeking at them from the kitchen window and at the sight of Alastair and Suze kissing they broke into broad smiles. Diane wanted to run out and congratulate them immediately but was held back by John.

'Let them have their moment, they'll make their announcement to us in due course,' he chided. Diane just smiled up at him, remembering their own engagement and their marriage just weeks later, an event she and John had never once regretted. It took twenty minutes before Alastair and Suze were ready to share the news with their parents, who as expected were delighted for them both. They started making plans to have a big family party at the weekend to celebrate.

Chapter 7

It was another month before Suze was fully fit again. In that time she and Alastair had discussed their future and it had been agreed that Alastair had no inclination to continue his studies. Instead he was to be taken on as an apprentice with his Dad and warned that this was now a proper job with no preferential treatment and he would be expected to work hard, learn well, and then he might be able to call himself a skilled man. Alastair had been adamant that he was up for whatever was thrown at him. Suze's guilt at living at the family's expense was completely assuaged when they dismissed out of hand her voiced concerns over the situation. After considerable discussion it was agreed that, as she wanted a nursing career and she could get the qualifications by studying at home or at evening classes, then perhaps getting a job wasn't a bad idea, but she was to keep her money to herself and use it to fund her future. She insisted that she would be putting most of her money away but that she would pay board to Diane. Eventually Diane agreed, charging her a lesser amount than Alastair, whom she claimed ate like a horse and should therefore pay double.

Suze got a job in a residential nursing home. It didn't require a great deal of skill at first and there was no nursing involved but she did assist at the bedside on a number of occasions and learned how to develop her own style of dealing with patients. She was encouraged to spend time chatting with the residents who seemed to like talking with her, claiming she had a calming and soothing effect and had a cheerful manner about her. Thus it was that Suze gradually came to the idea that she might like to work in the field of psychiatric nursing, she liked the counselling approach that it offered. She kept these thoughts to herself though as she wanted to be sure before she started making applications, and of course she needed to get good 'A' level results. She worked hard and things between her and Alastair were going great, really great.

It had been about 6 weeks after their engagement that they physically consummated their relationship. It had been building up for some time and Suze had on a number of occasions been half-heartedly fighting off Alastair's advances. It happened over a weekend when Diane and John

were off on a trip to visit their daughter Joanna who had been taken unwell and needed a bit of help with the children. For the first time they had found themselves entirely alone in the house for two whole nights and things had quickly moved on to a whole new level. Alastair hadn't had to persuade her too much, she had wanted him as much as he had wanted her, but unlike Alastair she was in less of a hurry.

They had watched a film together, a romantic film that got them both in the right mood. Lots of kisses and hugs later and both were feeling the moment was right. Alastair had led her upstairs and they had lain down on her bed. It was a little awkward at first, Suze not really knowing what to expect at all and Alastair admitting that he had done this only the once before, being just 14 at the time and having been seduced by Julie's best friend. The way he described it had not sounded particularly memorable, although he did say he had fully learned the mechanics and had every confidence that this time it would be memorable, and for all the right reasons.

It had been nice, that first time, it wasn't earth shattering, the ground hadn't moved but it hadn't been scary and Alastair had done everything to make it as special as he knew how. There had been some fumbling around until they got themselves into the right position for them both and things had happened rather quickly after that, a little too quickly to be accurate. They had tried again a few minutes later and the mechanics were replaced by an intensity of feelings that made the whole process much more of what they had both wanted. The third occasion was just perfect and every occasion since then had been perfect. They had made the most of the 48 hours together and found that at the end of the weekend they were both expert, they knew each other's bodies in detail, understood what did and did not please the other and were eager to experiment. Always though, the priority for them both was simply to show how much they loved each other.

It was about this time that they discovered that Steve's case would be going to court, although there was a suggestion that he would plead guilty, on the grounds that this would give him a more lenient sentence as advised by his solicitor, and thus Suze may not have to give evidence. In the event he did plead guilty, and was sent down for a period of 12 months, which with good behaviour

meant he would be out in less than 6 months. Everyone was bitterly disappointed, Suze especially, but there was no option but to try and put it behind them and move forward. Suze was embracing her new life, and her new family, and she had never been so happy. She and Alastair had no plans to get married soon but they were saving regularly and had already built up a sizeable little sum. They were hurtling towards Christmas and everyone was looking forward to having a good one.

Christmas was everything they could have hoped for, and more. Suze had a card from her mother, but no gift, and when she went round to the house to try and see her she got no reply. She had twice left notes asking her to make contact but she never did. Her grandmother was delighted to meet her fiancé and felt that Suze had made an excellent choice. Her grandmother was becoming quite frail recently and there were some concerns in Suze's mind about her state of health. Suze resolved to visit more often and Alastair would go with her where he was happy to carry out some odd jobs that needed doing. Thus they set up a pattern of going over every Sunday morning. They did this for a number of weeks until the day when they arrived to find that her grandmother didn't answer the door. Suze let herself in, having been given her own key, and called out to her gran who didn't reply. It was then that they found her in her bedroom, her eyes closed and her body cold. Alastair called a doctor immediately but it was clear to both of them that there was nothing a doctor could do. It was only when the doctor arrived that Suze learned that her grandmother had been seriously ill for some time, but had refused treatment for her terminal condition.

Within days, Suze was made aware by her grandmother's solicitor that she had left Suze her house and contents, and a sizeable sum of money by way of an insurance policy which would be payable imminently. It was a huge shock and difficult to take in. Only a few months before, her amassed fortune was £10 worth of coins hidden in a shoe box. Now, she had enough money to secure her financial future for some time, and the bonus of her own home to boot. There was a lot for her and Alastair to think about. She refused to consider her options until after her gran's funeral, which she arranged, her mother expressing no interest in providing input and giving no indication of whether she would attend, not responding to Suze's attempts to make contact. In the event she

didn't turn up on the day, despite Suze writing to her and putting the letter through the letterbox herself. Diane helped Suze to organise things and between them they carefully chose the hymns, the site where she would be buried, and dealt with all the legal documents, such as the death certificate which had to be sent here, there and everywhere.

It was a little while after the funeral that Suze and Alastair finally sat down to discuss their future, knowing that they now had a firm financial footing to start their lives with. It was Suze's suggestion that they get married sooner rather than later. Alastair said he would have married her within a week of meeting her and he couldn't wait to make her Mrs Susannah Dexter. Suze's reasons were absolutely motivated by the love that she and Alastair shared and both of them had often said that whilst Diane and John were incredibly liberal, they themselves were a little more conservative and preferred their privacy. As much as their love for each other dictated the marriage, it was the privacy element that determined for them that having their own home would give them the opportunity to spend their nights together without having to sneak across the landing each time they wanted alone time. Both knew that the other was the most important person in their lives and they wanted to be together in their own space.

'Just think Alastair, we can stay in bed all day on a Saturday if we choose, walk around naked if we like, even swing from a chandelier!' she joked.

'I had no idea you could be so imaginative,' said Alastair, in his most seductive voice.

'Shall we talk to your parents first and see what they would advise?' offered Suze cautiously. 'If they think it's a mad idea then we'll drop it for a year or two and rethink it then. I just want you to know that I can't ever imagine my life without you, and I know we're both very young but I've always known what I've wanted and I want you Alastair.'

'And I want you, so yes, whilst we can talk to my Mum and Dad, I'm certain what I want to do. Let's go and find them and we'll tell them we're getting married.'

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