

S. C. LOADER

HELPING HANDS

*Sometimes love needs
a helping hand.*



Also by S.C. Loader

The Last Chapter

The Realm

Three Wishes

Helping Hands

Sometimes love needs a helping hand.

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*To Love,
no barrier can stand against it.*

Chapter 1

With only the birds breaking the early morning silence and lost in his thoughts Paul stood idly staring at the first of the forty-six steps that rose up before him.

‘THAT be a stairway!’ stated a voice suddenly and emphatically over his shoulder. ‘A stairway to ‘eaven that’s what they be, at least for some anyways.’

Still recovering from the missed heartbeat Paul turned to greet the local postmistress, ‘Good morning Nelly, so it’s not a broken escalator then?’

‘And a good morning to you Paul. Surely you ‘ad them in the city didn’t you?’

‘We did Nelly and in every shape and size you could imagine, but none like these.’

‘What’s wrong with them? Perfectly good steps they are! See us in our graves long before they’re worn out they will.’

Paul’s gaze followed the two-metre wide steps all the way to the top. ‘There’s nothing wrong with them Nelly, it’s where they’re asking me to go that makes me feel a little uneasy.’

Nelly’s gaze momentarily joined Paul’s at the top of the flight and the bright cheeriness in her voice suddenly faded. ‘You’ll not find much company up there, most in the village ‘avent got much reason to go up there nowadays.’ Her gaze returned to Paul and drew her curiosity, ‘I must say, you’re looking a little peaky, country life not up to your liking?’

‘It’s absolutely wonderful Nelly, the only drawback I’ve found so far is a postmistress who likes to sneak up and frighten the life out of me when she should be working.’

A smile of feigned innocence crossed her portly face, ‘My work’s done. I only pop in for the sorting office delivery then I’m off ‘ome till the post office opens proper at eight o’clock.’

‘Mentioning which, the sorting office van was late this morning, what happened? An accident?’

‘Na, not this time. The ex-pizza delivery driver that careers around in it upset a couple of cows up at Marsh Farm and they took umbrage at ‘is ‘orn tooting. Blocked the road good and proper they did,’ suddenly the implication of her answer dawned on Nelly and she looked urgently at her watch. ‘Oh my good Lord look at the time! Got to get my old man ‘is breakfast, ‘e’s a right miserable old bugger if ‘e don’t get ‘is eggs and bacon in the morning.’

‘Before you go, Nelly, please could you tell me how my advertisement was answered when it never even appeared in your window?’

With a departing, ‘You’ve got a lot to learn about village life you ‘ave,’ she rushed off.

Paul watched Nelly’s well-rounded figure vanish down an alleyway, then returned his attention to the silently beckoning stairway to heaven.

Paul’s climb came to an abrupt halt upon reaching the forty-fourth step, a small, stockily-built white dog sat barring his way, ‘Hello! Who are you then,’ he asked cheerily, ‘the guard dog?’

The pocket-sized sentry took to its feet and from behind an impressive display of incisors began to issue a low ominous growl.

Paul grinned, ‘That’s a fair imitation.’

When both attempts to circumvent the animal ended with his path being blocked Paul felt it was time to put an end to the impasse. Withdrawing a red ballpoint pen from his pocket he offered the dog a deliberate fleeting glimpse of its clear plastic casing.

‘Say,’ he asked with a hint of mischievousness in his voice, ‘would you like me to show you how a vet takes a dog’s temperature?’

The dog backed away a little and the growling grew distinctly louder.

‘I presume you already know!’

Having had his bluff called Paul was trying to work out his next strategy when a distant voice called out, ‘Cat!’

Suddenly the growling abated as the dog turned and trotted off in the direction of the voice, leaving Paul wondering why any owner should feel the need to warn their pet dog of an approaching cat.

With the puzzle over the dog unresolved and the last two flagstone steps overcome, Paul was finally able to cast an eye over the unassuming, although, picturesque reason for his expenditure of energy. This was not an unfamiliar sight; on the contrary, since moving into the village just over a month ago it was one he had seen countless times daily. His rented flat above the post office stood at the foot of the hill on which it was located and even his bedroom window framed a vista in which it was prominently positioned.

In his walks around the village or those out into the surrounding countryside, this local landmark remained a constant delight to the eye. Even from further afield, on any of the three possible roads into the village, this could be seen long before any part of the red-roofed village itself came into view. That village now nestled at the foot of the hill behind him and for the first time since taking up residence there, he had abandoned the distance, for across the tiny gravel courtyard from where he was standing stood this pretty, visually persistent landmark, the local parish church.

It had become his habit every morning to take a stroll around the village before it awoke, a chance to really appreciate the calming peacefulness of the countryside and the revitalising freshness of its crisp clean air, pleasures rarely found in the city where he had previously lived. As it frequently did, that morning's stroll took him past the first of the forty-six slightly forward sloping one-metre deep steps that led up to the church. On earlier occasions, despite this being his last remaining unexplored part of the village he had easily resisted the mild urge to placate his curiosity. This morning however it had not been curiosity that had brought him to the top of that long flight of steps, but an irrational and wholly irrepressible desire to go inside the church.

Across the courtyard, the copper-faced outer doors of the church stood wide open like a pair of friendly welcoming arms silently inviting him to come inside, but despite the feeling that had drawn him to them, this was still

an invitation Paul felt very uneasy about accepting. His hesitation derived not from a disbelief in God, but in the animosity, his own personal interpretation of God invariably drew from others. Such acrimonious confrontations held no appeal and one of the consequences of trying to avoid antagonising those with different values and beliefs other than his own was to swear he would never again set foot inside a church. This had not been an oath taken without some deep regret, but it had nevertheless, stood unbroken for well over eighteen years.

Voices from the lane below forced him out from under the modern substitute for a traditional lychgate, an unadorned, lacklustre, metre-wide concrete archway. He felt self-conscious enough about his dithering without others witnessing it as well, or even finding amusement in it. The open church doors were only six steps away, he took three towards them then abruptly turned to the right and stopped. Pretending to retie his shoelace not only gave an excuse for his presence should he be seen, but also allowed for a surreptitious glance back down through the archway. Much to his relief the owners of the voices passed by without even a casual look in his direction. While his conscience continued to fight itself over whether or not to enter the church, he cast an eye over this new panorama. To his right, the gravel courtyard was bounded by a narrow, but very neatly kept grass verge, which was in turn bounded by a metre high brick and stone wall. On the other side of the wall, there was a steep drop down into the crescent-shaped village which snuggled tightly up against and around the base of the hillside. To his left stood the uninspiring southern face of the church, excluding the porch which housed the two copper faced doors, there were only four small arch-shaped windows set high up in the wall to offset its blandness. The pale yellow paintwork and the white painted detailing required some touching up here and there, and some of the larger cracks running down the wall looked like they urgently warranted more professional attention.

To avoid the necessity of coming to an immediate decision about entering the church Paul took himself on a tour around the outside instead. At the end of the wall stood an impressively high copper-roofed spire, which again

showed the same desire for some professional attention to its masonry. The gravel courtyard opened out on the eastern end into a very large forecourt, this separated the church from a cemetery which occupied the whole of the long gentle downward slope on this side of the hill.

The courtyard narrowed quite considerably once he had passed the two modern additions of a vestry and an annexe at the start of the northern side. The bounding wall also reinstated itself again, having been absent for the length of the cemetery and the entrance to the church forecourt. Here it separated the church from the huge expanse of fields beyond. At the western end, there was a large pair of oak doors that were obviously meant to be the main entrance to the church, although bizarrely the wall separating the church from the fields stood barely one and a half metres away from them. A quick glance over the wall also revealed a two-metre drop on the opposite side, which in Paul's mind was suggestive of the fact that it was not only modern architects who were capable of making what an acquaintance frequently referred to as a planning cock-up.

The oak doors returned Paul's thoughts to the reason why he was there. Letting a pair of vacant eyes stare out over the fields basking in the early morning sunshine he questioned the rationality of maintaining an oath taken so many years ago. He was no longer the idealistic student that had made it and the world had become far more tolerant of differing religious beliefs and opinions since then. His own beliefs, if he ever chose to voice them again, would probably not even raise an eyebrow nowadays. So why bother? This thought stayed with him as he resumed his journey and by the time he had sauntered back to the copper faced doors he had come to realise that the only thing preventing him from entering the church was his own pride. The oath he had taken was nothing more than a promise to himself and it was a matter of self-pride that he had never broken a promise to anyone, including those made to himself.

As the bells finished sounding out the seventh-hour desire finally overcame pride and Paul slowly pushed open the groaning heavy inner door just enough to peer inside the church. In front of the door, there was a wide entrance aisle that spanned the full width of the church and to the left, there were some pews on either side of a centrally located aisle running towards the back. Unfortunately, this narrow angle provided only a very limited view and the door recess also blocked his view of the altar end of the church. Pushing the groaning door open a little further he leant forward, although this provided a better view towards the back of the church it still did not allow him to see the full width. To the accompaniment of some more loud groaning, the slowly opening door revealed the centrally placed aisle ran through the entrance aisle and continued on towards the altar. Thankfully, like all the others, those pews visible at the altar end were also empty. With bated breath he waited and listened, inside everything was perfectly still and quiet. There was nothing and far more importantly, there was no one to be heard. Another minute of absolute silence passed before he felt confident the church was empty. Desire had made a deal with pride; he would only enter the church if there was no one inside to witness the breaking of his promise. Tentatively stepping over the threshold he closed the door behind himself as quietly as it would allow. Moving forward out of the deep recess the door inhabited, he nervously checked to the left again, all the pews were empty right the way to the back of the church. There was also a large gallery at the far end that played host to the huge church organ, again all the seats were empty. Turning to the altar end he visibly started as his heart missed a beat. Sat in the front right-hand corner were a small group of five people, their bemused faces watching his every move.

Not knowing how to excuse himself Paul blustered out an, 'Oh! I'm sorry,' and turned to leave.

A voice from one of their number, soft and friendly in tone beckoned him back, 'Come on in lad, don't worry about us... we don't bite!'

'He can't!' said another. 'He hasn't a tooth in his head!'

Some tittering rose from within the group, instantly the sombre atmosphere within the church vanished.

‘Thank you, but I would only be disturbing you.’

A plump elderly lady stood and beckoned him back into the church, ‘Please... we’re only chin-wagging, please come in.’

‘Thank you again, but I’m not really sure I should. This isn’t my church,’ and with a little hesitation, he added apologetically, ‘nor is this my religion and I’m afraid I don’t have a belief in your God either.’

‘It matters not son, everyone’s welcome in this house,’ spoke one of the men in the group. Nodding heads accompanied the loud murmurs of unqualified agreement from the others.

Paul still felt unsure.

The plump old lady spoke again, ‘Everything you seek young man is here in this house. If you leave you may never find them again. Please come and join us. We promise not to bite, leastways four of us do, old Tom here can’t anyways!’

Their open-armed friendliness was enough to persuade Paul to abort his face-saving escape and with a little more cajoling from the group he was soon making his way down the aisle towards them.

In the first row of pews were an elderly man and an elderly woman, they sat askew so as to face the pew behind where another elderly man, an elderly woman and a younger woman all sat.

The man and the woman in the front pew stood as he approached both surprised him with their tallness and their casual, but very stylish dress sense.

The man gave his hand, ‘Hello, I’m Eddy.’

Paul took his hand and introduced himself, ‘I’m Paul, are you sure I’m not disturbing you?’

‘No no, not at all son. Let me introduce the others,’ stepping slightly to one side allowed the woman to step forward. ‘This is my darling wife, Liz. The gentleman without teeth is our neighbour Tom, this is Elsie another of our neighbours and this pretty young lady is Karen.’

Tom and Elsie stretched over the intervening pew to shake hands and after a little prompting from Elsie so did Karen, but she kept her eyes firmly fixed to the floor, an impoliteness that automatically drew Paul’s suspicion.

‘She’s a bit shy is our princess,’ advised Elsie by way of an explanation.

While they all returned to their seats, Paul looked over the group. He would have guessed Eddy to be in his late fifties, although his wife Liz actually looked much older and both Tom and Elsie were in their early to late sixties. Karen was probably somewhere between her late twenties and early thirties, although exactly where was somewhat difficult to tell. Her clothes were either borrowed or a very poor choice for someone with a trim figure, especially at this time of the year. The checked flannel shirt she wore on the outside of her loose-fitting jeans was evidently a man's shirt, given the position of the buttons and its large size. The thick grey jumper she wore was also more suited to a man and it was far too big for her, as a consequence only her fingertips emerged from the ends of its sleeves.

Paul sat down next to Eddy, 'Thank you for asking me to join you, but I feel I'm interrupting your meeting.'

Tom laughed heartily, 'This ain't no meeting lad! It's a tea break!'

'The kettle!' exclaimed Liz loudly as she suddenly stood up. 'I hope it hasn't boiled dry! Paul, would you care to join us in a cup?'

Eddy, an elegant looking man with a full head of smartly groomed grey hair, placed a hand on Paul's shoulder, 'Think very carefully before you answer son.' He paused for a deliberate overly theatrical check for potential eavesdroppers, then in a loud whisper added, 'This is the real thing son, it's not like that cheap stuff they serve in the café down the road. This'll put hairs on your chest!'

'I hope not!' declared Elsie indignantly.

Paul grinned, then acknowledged he would risk a cup and thanked Liz for the kind invitation.

In the few minutes of idle chat before Liz returned with a tray bearing six cups of hot freshly brewed tea, Paul had discovered Tom actually did have some teeth. In fact, he had a full set, although only ten of them resided in his mouth, the rest were kept in a plastic bag in his jacket pocket. 'Damned uncomfortable lad!' was Tom's explanation, but it was enough for Paul to appreciate such eccentricity.

The level shelf at the back of the pew, designed to hold prayer and hymnbooks, became Liz's temporary tabletop as she handed out the refreshments. The men received their tea in mugs, the women had theirs in bone china teacups with matching saucers. The mismatched milk jug and sugar bowl gave evidence to the limited availability of crockery.

Paul's quizzical look at his mug caught Liz's eye.

'Oh, I'm sorry Paul. Would you have preferred a teacup?' she asked.

'No, a mug's fine thank you. It's the decoration I find a little...'

'*Ey!*' interrupted Tom in a very loud indignant tone. 'You gave 'im the blond! That's mine, that is!'

Blushing slightly, Liz exchanged Tom and Paul's mugs, 'I'm sorry! He gets cranky unless he gets the blond, do you mind the brunette?'

'No, not at all,' and to try and alleviate some of Liz's obvious embarrassment added, 'I prefer brunettes, they're far prettier.' An opinion Paul suddenly wished he had kept that to himself as four old faces momentarily turned towards Karen. Unable to hide her dark brown hair from sight, she chose to hide her blushes behind her hands instead. No one gave an explanation for this strange behaviour, but Karen's wedding ring negated Paul's initial thought that they were matchmaking. Although if they were, then they obviously had a far different interpretation of prettiness than he had.

Some unheard, but presumably comforting words from Elsie slowly drew Karen's face back out from behind its veil. This was, apart from a fleeting glimpse before they shook hands, the first time Paul had seen her face properly since his arrival. Her repentant head had kept the majority of her facial features hidden from view, but now he caught sight of her beautifully shaped and appealingly dark eyes. Their dullness however and the dark shadows beneath them were anything but appealing, they gave the impression that she had not slept in weeks, although the state of her clothing testified to the contrary. To Paul's mind, given her drawn look, her long lank unbrushed brown hair, un-plucked eyebrows, badly bitten fingernails and the absence of any make-up, gave this young woman an air of someone who had either given up caring about her appearance or worse, about herself.

‘I love redheads,’ announced Eddy brightly, ‘that’s why I married one!’

Liz elegantly plumped up the base of her hair, ‘Even though there’s more grey than red nowadays?’

Eddy leant towards her and planted a kiss on her lips, ‘I would love you just as much, my dear, even if you were bald!’

Liz’s expression showed the horror at such an eventuality.

‘Na! Give me a blond any day!’ said Tom nudging the blond-haired Elsie with his elbow. ‘Especially if she’s got some meat on ’er! Can’t do with these skinny girls what one can do with...’

‘Tom!’ interrupted Elsie with a reprimand. ‘I don’t think these young people want to know!’

Tom placed his hand on Elsie’s knee and winked at her, ‘We could always give them a demonstration girl!’

Elsie lightly slapped the back of his bald head, ‘You’re a dirty old man, now behave yourself! And take your hand off my knee!’

Tom meekly complied, only to have his hand surreptitiously returned by Elsie when she thought no one was looking.

Paul added some sugar and milk to his brunette mug, once again his puzzled look caught Liz’s eye, ‘Is there something wrong?’ she asked.

‘If these mugs belong to the church, then why are they adorned with pictures of naked women?’

‘Beats the ’ell out of a crucifix don’t it lad?’ grinned Tom, a comment that earned him another pump hand across the back of his head.

‘What difference does it make?’ asked a bemused Liz.

‘Well it seems a little irreverent,’ replied Paul, ‘and should we really be sitting here like this?’

‘Like what?’ asked Eddy looking around to see if he had missed something of importance.

‘Well... drinking tea in a church, it doesn’t seem quite right somehow.’

‘I know exactly what you mean son,’ confided Eddy in a whisper, ‘unfortunately we couldn’t locate the key to the wine cupboard!’

Liz nudged him disapprovingly.

Elsie leant forward smiling broadly, 'Young man, this is a house and in every house, people drink coffee or tea...'

'Or something far stronger!' interrupted Liz, eyeing Eddy disapprovingly.

'Just because this is a house of God, doesn't mean we can't drink a cup of tea when we fancy one.' Then catching sight of Tom's mischievous grin she added, 'Although while we're here some dirty old men do have to go without what they fancy!'

'But what would the priest say if he walked in on us? I'm sure he wouldn't approve of us using his church like this.'

Four faces lost their joviality momentarily.

'Sadly, he's very unlikely to walk in us,' advised Liz.

'Why not?'

'He has a small problem that's causing him some difficulties.'

'What small problem?'

'He's begun to question his faith in God, son,' advised Eddy sombrely, then with a discreet nod towards Karen added, 'and he's not the only one.'

Tom slapped Paul heartily across the back of the shoulders, 'But not to worry about it lad! 'Elp is now on its way, that's why we've been asked to come 'ere, to keep the place up and running till it arrives!'

'That's right!' added Elsie cheerily. 'Can't have the old place going to rack and ruin just because he hasn't got the wherewithal to get himself another cleaner while the regular one is poorly, now can we?'

'We'll have this place sparkling like new pin by the time we're finished,' stated Liz, then as she lovingly kissed Eddy's cheek added, 'won't we, my dear?'

He returned the kiss, 'Too right we will! Once we're done they'll need a magnifying glass to find any dust in this place!'

Tom withdrew a paintbrush from under his jacket, 'Not only will it sparkle lad, but the paintwork will dazzle them!'

'What's that doing in there?' asked a shocked Elsie. 'Funny place to keep it if you ask me!'

'Like to keep all of me tools 'andy girl,' explained Tom. Then with a suggestive wink added, 'Never know when I might be needing one of them!'

A plump hand caught him across the back of the head once again, 'Well that's one tool you won't be needing!'

'I think you'll be needing something a little larger,' remarked Paul after glancing up into the heady heights of the church ceiling.

'Aint the size that matters lad, it's what you do with it that counts! Ask any woman, she'll tell you the same!'

Elsie's hand caught him across the back of the head again, 'The young man's referring to your paintbrush!'

'Ow! Keep that up girl and me 'ead'll fall off!'

Paul noted with inner amusement that despite Elsie's verbal and physical chastisement of Tom, his hand had not only been permitted to stay on her knee, but the plump hand of retribution also returned to discreetly caress it after its work had been done each time.

* *

Paul glanced at his watch.

'Do you have time to join us in another cup?' enquired Liz as she collected up the crockery. 'We always like to have a second, sets us up for the day.'

'I do and I would be pleased to join you in another cup if it's no trouble.'

'When do you start work then, son?' enquired Eddy.

Liz nudged him, 'Leave the young man alone!' Then looking towards Paul added, 'When I married him I was under the impression that men with big noses had big... well you know... tools!' Eddy's chest swelled with pride, 'but it's not true, they're just very nosey!'

Eddy's chest fell despondently, 'I'm not nosey! Not in the slightest!'

Grinning, Liz wandered off with the tray and once she was out of sight Eddy eagerly turned back to Paul.

'So what time do you start work then son?'

'I'm not working at the moment, although hopefully by the end of summer I'll have something sorted out, but it's going to take a great deal of preparation before that can happen.'

‘Interesting!’ he replied. Turning to Elsie he repeated part of Paul’s answer, ‘The end of summer.’

23Elsie smiled broadly, ‘Lucky young man!’

‘What’s with the time then lad?’ asked Tom. ‘I see you look at it often enough, got a girl waiting, have you? ’Ope it ain’t one of those skinny things, can’t abide them meself, can’t get a good grip on those!’

‘Tom!’ came another of Elsie’s reprimands.

‘No, there’s no girl, but there is a woman I’m due to meet at eight-thirty.’

‘Ope she’s got some meat on her lad, need something good and solid underneath when you’re...’

The plump hand of retribution abruptly curtailed his explanation.

‘Unfortunately, it’s not that type of woman Tom. I’m looking for someone to do my laundry and this woman has answered my advertisement.’

‘What’s wrong with the Missis then lad?’

‘I’m not married Tom.’

‘Then get your girl to do it! Get her trained up, lad! No point in ’aving a dog and barking yourself is there?’

‘I don’t have a girl either Tom, I live alone.’

Liz returned as Elsie continued their investigation, ‘What do you want to live alone for?’

‘I’d rather not, I just haven’t found the right girl that’s all.’ Then after a few moments of quiet reflection, he added resignedly, ‘Actually, that’s not entirely true. There were a couple, unfortunately, I just happened to choose two who considered their careers to be of greater importance than marriage, but that’s not uncommon in the city.’

Liz placed Paul’s mug on the makeshift tabletop, ‘Well you’re out in the country now young man, once they find out you’re single here, they’ll be queuing up at your door to marry you!’

‘Thank you, Liz, but I don’t think so. I’m forty-one and I think that makes me just a little too old to appeal to those seeking husbands, don’t you?’

Liz turned to Elsie, ‘Perfect age I would say, what do you think Elsie?’

Elsie smiled broadly, ‘I say he’s going to be a very lucky young man! That’s what I say!’

Liz returned the smile, 'I think so too!'

During a conversation that followed between the four elder members of the group and unhindered by their inquisitiveness, Paul took the opportunity to pass a furtive eye over Karen. Apart from a barely audible "please" when she was asked if she wanted another cup of tea and another barely audible "thank you" when she received it, she had remained silent the whole time. Until she had picked up her cup, her head had remained almost constantly bowed and her eyes fixed on two thumbs nervously wrestling one another in her lap, but now with a hot cup of tea held between her hands, her head once again regained an upright posture. In profile at least, her face held the prospect of prettiness, but whether the emotion or the illness that controlled her would ever allow it to show itself was another question.

Her membership of the group was also rather odd; her reticence in speaking was in total contrast to the others, as was her whole demeanour. She was also a lot younger and given her poor dress sense she obviously came from a different social background than the four smartly attired senior members of the group. Yet, Elsie's arm lay around her shoulders offering comfort and support and Liz, despite creating a large gap between herself and her husband, had made a point of sitting in front of Karen ensuring she felt included within the group. Not only that but like Elsie, she also frequently and reassuringly stroked the sides of Karen's face with the tips of her fingers and occasionally gently returned stray strands of hair back behind her ears. Even when Eddy had introduced her, his "this pretty young lady" carried a very distinct note of pride, but subsequently, there had been no hint or clues neither from him nor any of the others to explain their deep attachment to this shadow of a woman. Unexpectedly the church bells began to chime out the eighth hour and brought Paul's thoughts about Karen to a conclusion, as well as his participation in their extended tea break.

'I'm really sorry,' he said taking to his feet, 'I'll have to leave you now, I have an appointment.'

Walking around to Liz he shook her hand and thanked her for the tea, then he shook Eddy's hand, then Elsie's, Tom's and finally, despite some reluctance on her part, Karen's.

'Thank you for your hospitality, it was a real pleasure to have met you all.'

Eddy stood, 'You're welcome to come and join us anytime son, we'll be here every Monday and Friday morning if the fancy takes you!'

'If it's no trouble, it would be my pleasure to take you up on that offer.'

Tom stood, 'The brunettes yours whenever you want 'er lad!'

Karen obviously didn't understand Tom's comment and tried to hide herself behind the plump figure of a broadly grinning Elsie.

'Thank you, Tom, you can't beat a good brunette!'

'Oh yes, you can lad!'

Paul nodded a final farewell as he made his way to the church doors, as he reached them Elsie came hurriedly up behind him.

'Young man,' she said a little breathlessly, 'we cannot be here as often as we would like, but Karen is here early most days and I'm sure she would appreciate your company if you would care to join her.'

'I'm not so sure she would Elsie.'

'Even if she's a little shy of saying so, I'm sure she would.'

'Okay, I promise to see what I can do.'

'Thank you, it would mean a great deal to all of us if you could.'

Paul smiled and turned to leave.

'Paul!' called Elsie behind him.

'Yes.'

'Please be gentle with her, she is in a great deal of pain,' she laid a hand over his heart, 'and it's a pain that comes from here.'

'I'll bear that in mind.'

Chapter 2

Tuesday followed Monday as it usually did, but unusually Paul woke up not to the sound of a post office delivery van testing its brakes beneath his bedroom window, but to the distant chimes of the church bells. Despite having a deep appreciation of the comfort provided by his bed, the brightness of yet another glorious sunny summer day drew him out of it. The cool morning air had displaced the sultriness of the previous night and thankfully had also thinned out the overbearing odour of fresh paint. En route to the kitchen, he checked his previous afternoon's work, without exception it was all dry, although he would wait for it to fully harden before moving all the furniture back where it belonged. Fortified by a coffee and a slice of toast he proceeded to make himself presentable to the world. Shaved and showered he stood before his badly depleted wardrobe, a situation that he hoped would soon be rectified by his newly appointed laundrywoman. While he waited for inspiration he caught sight of himself in the full-length mirror of the wardrobe and Liz's comical prediction of the local girls queuing up at his door sprung to mind. He had seen the local young men, all were from solid, good old fashioned farming stock and if the need ever arose most of them were capable of carrying the tractors they drove about the village on their shoulders. They made his seventy-five kilo, one metre seventy-four frame look like an underfeed dwarf by comparison. Looking at himself in the mirror he could find no reason why he would warrant a second glance from any woman, let alone a pretty local one. The only two advantages he had over a lot of men his own age were a full head of hair and a stomach that did not block the view of his feet. Unfortunately, these were of little value against younger, stronger and taller competition that could not only see the shoes they wore, but who also still had a use for a comb as well.

His final choice of clothing, a brown checked flannel shirt, light brown jeans and a plain light brown jacket had little to do with inspiration, but to a desire for smartness versus availability. Still, as his mother so often advised him, ‘Always make the best of yourself, you never know when you might meet the girl of your dreams!’ As he pulled the door to the flat closed, he wondered if the girl of his dreams would even be out of her bed at five-thirty in the morning? He seriously doubted it.

During the half an hour stroll around the deserted streets and lanes of the village, he had in his head at least, rearranged all the furniture in the flat to make the best use of the limited space available. Prioritised the list of all the things he wanted to replace and had planned his vengeance upon the pizza delivery driver who delivered the mail to the post office every morning.

Rounding a corner he heard the six o’clock chimes of the church bells and shortly thereafter the forty-six steps up to the church came into view. His eyes followed them up to the top and came to rest upon the pale yellow façade. Thoughts of Karen and of the half promise he had made to Elsie sprung to mind.

He wondered at what time the church doors were unlocked, if he knew that then it might act as a guide as to when Karen might turn up, presuming of course that she was going to turn up that day. Unfortunately, the “Parish Information Board” at the bottom of the steps failed to inform and hopeful that the church would be a more lucrative source of information Paul started the long ascent.

With a few steps still to overcome the open outer doors of the church came into view, a sight he had not expected but then, he was far more used to the ways of the city.

When the outer doors, the notice board, nor the literature stand in the lobby revealed the information he sought, he tried the inner doors to see if they were still locked. Surprisingly, they were not.

The inside of the church was empty, save for one person sitting in the front right-hand corner, in the second row of pews, Karen.

Paul spent some considerable time in her company during which her total commitment to conversation, despite a few early attempts at inaugurating one, amounted to a single greeting of “hello”. Surrendering his desire for conversation and avoiding anything personal he settled for posing a few questions to try and break the ice. All were answered unenthusiastically with either a nod or a shake of the head, or more often than not, shrugged shoulders. This included even those questions that under normal circumstances would require more than a one-word answer.

Eventually, he gave up and just sat quietly with her, although not next to her. Earlier in the morning, she had clearly demonstrated her reluctance to be sat next to by backing away when he came too close. Which was probably just as well as far as he was concerned, as excepting the coat she had wrapped around her shoulders, she wore exactly the same clothes as she had the day before. Indicating that either her mother had failed to give her the same advice as his mother had given him, or that she had already found the man of her dreams. If her wedding ring was a clue, then the latter seemed more likely, but unless she did something about herself and very quickly, then the man of her dreams would very soon be the man of someone else’s dreams.

After two hours the need to go to the toilet became urgent and Paul used this as an excuse to leave. An excuse Karen did not question and a goodbye she did not fully reciprocate.

On Wednesday morning the pizza delivery driver attempted to break the world record for the longest skid marks, but at five-thirty in the morning Paul was unwilling to leave his bed just to verify whether or not he had been successful. Instead, he cast an admiring eye around his new, freshly decorated bedroom. For the first time since moving in, neither his bedroom nor the rest of the flat resembled a sale in a furniture shop. Every piece of furniture was back in its place and all the fittings had been returned to the walls. Of particular delight, the pastel pink paintwork and the red rose-patterned wallpaper that had adorned every single wall right throughout the entire flat were now just spine shuddering memories. To add to that feeling of contentedness, the previous afternoon his wardrobe had taken its first

delivery of freshly laundered clothes. Vera, the cheerful chatterbox who did his laundry was a master of her unsung craft, not only was she quick and efficient, but she could also press a crease sharp enough to cut paper with. She had also drawn his attention to something he had failed to notice about Liz, Eddy, Tom and Elsie. Like Vera, they all had a distinctive local accent, but unlike Vera and just about everybody else he met in the street, only Tom used the local dialect. Thinking about this oddity of the four heart-warming characters inevitably drew his gaze out through the bedroom window and up to the church basking in the early morning sunshine, where one far less heart-warming character was probably already sat inside. Should he waste his time again as he had the previous day, just to pacify a sense of obligation for a promise he had given, or do as he had planned?

The latter, a shopping trip for all those things he wanted for the flat had a far greater appeal. Although instead of going into the city, a mere ten kilometres away, he was going to support the local economy by spending his money in a town equally distant, but in the opposite direction. This was not intended to be just a shopping trip, but also an opportunity to gain valuable insight into the prices and the availability of local properties further afield. His flat was after all, despite the hard work, just a temporary stopover.

Obligation, not enthusiasm had drawn him to the church doors and it was the same combination that pushed them open and drew him inside a church devoid of all but one worshipper, Karen.

Unhappily the previous morning repeated itself, not only was she still wearing the same clothes, but it was also another morning devoid of both conversation and answers. The only distinction between the two mornings was that today she was without her coat, the shadows beneath her eyes were even darker and he had been permitted to sit a little closer to her, leaving only enough room for two people to sit between them instead of three. This was however not enough of an incentive to remain in her company and after two hours he left Karen as he had found her, sat alone in the second row of pews.

At six-thirty on Thursday morning Paul stood before the church doors once again, heavily regretting the promise he had made and cursing the very principles that obliged him to keep it. His patience was wearing thin with Karen; not because of the amount of time he spent with her, but because he was spending that time sitting like a tailor's dummy. His skills as a conversationalist would probably only rate as fair, but as a listener, he rated himself as good. Karen it seemed was neither interested in his skills, nor allowing her own their freedom, but without that freedom, he had no idea whether she welcomed his company or not, of the two he was beginning to believe the latter to be far nearer the truth than the former. Another victim of her imprisoned skills was his fast waning sympathy towards her, he wanted to help her, but had no way of knowing how or even if she wanted that help.

As he pushed the door open he had already begun to formulate an apology to Elsie for withdrawing from his promise. Karen was there as he had expected her to be, although not where he had become accustomed to seeing her.

She was knelt directly in front of the altar, but given his belief this was not a place he felt entirely comfortable about, so rather than joining her he headed for the closest pew to her. Halfway down the aisle, he abandoned his reticence, not only because she looked a pitiful heartrending sight sitting fully on her ankles with her head bowed, but also because her hesitant sobbing pulled heavily at his conscience. Nearing her, he could see she was shaking and both her trembling hands were pressed palm to palm and held under her tear-soaked chin. The two large wet patches on her jeans gave evidence of the length of time this particular emotion had been in control. Kneeling quietly down beside her he half expected her to move away as she had the previous days when he came too close, but she didn't. As she was without her coat, Paul surrendered his jacket and placed it over her back and shoulders to help ward off the cool morning air. This was to his mind a very poor substitute for the physical comfort she needed and for what he really wanted to do, take

her fully in his arms, but he felt the latter would be an unwelcome gesture and to ask beforehand would appear somewhat tactless in her present state.

After a few minutes, her head turned slightly towards him and a pair of tear-filled eyes rose up to meet his, pleading for something. What that something was she didn't say and he could only guess. Sidling up, he placed an arm around her and with his free hand drew her head against his shoulder. Leaving his hand on the side of her face he lowered his head until it rested gently against hers. This was a position of comfort and intimacy that Karen made no objection to, but one he feared if her husband found them in would probably see her end up in a divorce court and himself in hospital.

Karen's hands slowly lowered into her lap and as they fell apart both the palms of her hands bore the deep indentations from what had been sandwiched between them, her wedding ring.

Paul's thoughts immediately turned on the husband. What had he done to drive his wife into removing such a sacred piece of jewellery? Adultery? Drink? Cruelty?

And if the blame did not lie with him, then where was he? This was his wife and he had an absolute duty to love and care for her, no matter what the circumstances. Surely he could not be so blind as to overlook the fact that she was wasting away before his very eyes?

A violent shiver caused the ring to slip between Karen's hands, it rolled down her legs onto the floor and then in an arc ending up in front of Paul's knees. He picked it up and placed it back into the palm of her hand and as he curled her fingers over it he offered some obvious advice and a snippet of his grandmother's philosophy, 'Don't lose this! It's filled with enough love to last more than a lifetime!'

Her big brown eyes rose to meet his, stayed for a while and then returned to the hand holding the ring.

At eight-thirty Paul was back in his flat happily, if not joyfully, reflecting over the events of that morning.

Despite the lack of conversation, at least one of the more pressing questions from his rapidly growing tally had been answered. Karen did want his help, even if it was only in the form of a shoulder to cry on and although comforting another man's wife left him with a guilty conscience, he would readily do it again.

Soon after she had dropped her ring the appeal of kneeling on a cold floor lost favour. Having led her by the hand to the pews, not only did she willingly sit down beside him, but she also snuggled up against him as tightly as she could and before the bells had tolled out the seventh hour, she had honoured him by doing something no other woman had ever done before, she fell fast asleep in his arms. This simple endearing act was as unexpected as the resulting overwhelming sense of protectionism he now felt towards her. Sadly the eight o'clock chimes ended his pleasure and Karen's dreams. Unusually it was Karen who had to leave first and not only did he receive a "Goodbye" and a "Thank you," but also a kiss to the cheek and a few precious moments of lingering eye contact as well.

By mid-afternoon, all the purchases of the previous day hung where they belonged. The forty watt light bulbs hiding behind pastel pink coloured lampshades were now history, in the places where they had once lurked were various sets of modern spotlighting, each with more candle power than the floodlights that lit the church at night. Damaged or discoloured light switches and wall sockets had been replaced, as had the non-functioning doorbell. Three new pictures now adorned the walls, in the lounge a framed and fading print of two cats made way for two large unframed, highly colourful abstract prints and in the bedroom one framed original pen and ink portrait study. Unfortunately, the latter carried a rather high asking price that he was unable to bargain down, but because of the subject's resemblance to someone he knew, it was sold the moment he set eyes upon it. Halfway through a well-deserved cup of coffee, someone knocked at the door. It was an angel bearing gifts, or more precisely Vera with what appeared to be the rest of his outstanding laundry.

‘You take the ’angers young man, I’ll carry the rest, don’t want to get them all messed up do we now?’

Paul led the way up the stairs, followed by Vera happily humming away to herself.

In the bedroom, Paul started loading all the shirts back into the wardrobe while Vera separated the rest of his clothing into different piles on the bed.

‘Vera! You don’t have to iron socks and underpants!’

‘While the iron’s ’ot, might as well make use of it ’adn’t I?’

While he continued to refresh the wardrobe Vera looked admiringly around the bedroom, ‘Been ’ard at work I see!’

‘It needed it!’

‘Making yourself a nice little ’ome ere, just one thing missing now!’

‘Missing? What’s that then?’

Vera patted his bed, ‘It ain’t no good having a double bed without someone to share it with is there?’

Paul looked at the bed thoughtfully but didn’t reply.

‘You’ll not be young forever! Don’t wait too long to fill it.’

‘I’ll try not to.’ Then patting the bed and bearing a mischievous grin added, ‘Meanwhile, if you know somebody who fancies someone a little younger, just let me know.’

Vera blushed beetroot red.

He left Vera humming away to herself and admiring his new picture while he went to find his wallet.

Vera accepted payment blindly, the picture obviously had a greater appeal to her than money at that point in time, ‘Looks a bit like one of me girls that does!’

‘Does it? Why’s that?’

‘The ’air, me girl’s got long curly ’air like that! And the eyes, just like ’ers too.’

The comment about the eyes immediately drew his interest, for it was precisely these that had sold the picture to him.

Singing to herself, Vera jaunted along the hallway and down the stairs to the front door.

‘You seem in an especially cheerful mood today Vera, what’s up, won the lottery or something?’

‘As good as, although she ain't said nothing, I think me girl’s got a new man.’

‘What makes you think that, especially if she hasn’t said anything?’

Vera looked surprised at the question, ‘Mothers know these things!’ she said rather matter-of-factly. ‘They don’t ’ave to be told!’

She picked up the bag containing more of his laundry and made her way out of the door, as Paul was about to close it behind her something occurred to him.

‘Vera! Your daughter in the picture, may I ask her name?’

‘Carina. Why?’

‘Oh! Just interested that’s all.’

As he closed the door another thought crossed his mind, ‘Vera!’

‘I’ll not get this lot laundered like this young man!’

‘One last question, how old is Carina?’

‘Thirty-three! Why so many questions, are you ’er new man by chance?’

‘No, it’s not me and I’m sorry, just feeling inquisitive today, that’s all.’

‘Shame it ain't you! A nice young man like yourself would do her some good.’

* *

An overjoyed Elsie collided with Paul halfway down the aisle on Friday morning, the ensuing bear hug of an embrace signalled she was very pleased to see him. When she started to cover his cheeks in kisses he began to fear that Vera had spread the word he was looking for someone older to fill his bed. Elsie graciously allowed his rib cage to return to its normal shape, ‘I don’t know whether you’re an angel or a saint young man, but either way, you’re heaven sent!’

Shell shocked from such an exuberant welcome, he failed to notice Tom’s approach. Tom greeted him with such a resounding slap on the back that