



LIKE TWIGS IN A STORM

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

The faded yellow sign still warned traffic that there was a school ahead, but Steve Garnet knew better. After all, this was his latest acquisition. His tender for the Upper Forks Road School buildings and ten acres of land had been accepted and he was now the proud owner of this strip of countryside, a two-hour drive from the city. The last forty-five minutes of his journey, however, was along a narrow gravel road, which zigzagged up a hillside, down the other side and into an amazingly fertile valley of rolling farmland.

After his Jeep Wrangler turned into the slightly widened pull off area, Steve climbed out and walked up the concrete drive. There it was, the two-classroom school, wooden, seventy years old but still solid and in a good state of repair. The grass around was short and, by the droppings dotted everywhere, had been kept that way by grazing sheep. To his left was a collection of three wooden outbuildings: a toilet block, play shed and woodshed still half filled with firewood.

He walked to the door, reached for the bunch of keys the land agent had given him and inserted the largest one in the lock. It turned with ease and the door swung open without a sound. Oiled floors and slightly musty smell of a closed interior hit his nostrils but the long corridor with pegs along the interior side looked clean and fresh. There was even a child's raincoat dangling on a peg next to the yellow classroom door. Under the outside windows a row of white porcelain sinks sat ready for use.

The place seemed lonely and empty but in others ways, felt ready to receive children to come running in. It was like a school on Sunday afternoon waiting for the youthful crowds to arrive on Monday morning. Yet Steve knew the children had gone now; the school had been closed for at least five years and had been sold as redundant government property.

The cheeky tender he had put in, sight unseen had been accepted so all of this was now his.

He smiled to himself, walked into the closest classroom and gave a grunt of satisfaction. The afternoon sun bathed the room in light. This was typical of these old schools, all built the wrong way so they were shady in the morning and hot in the afternoon. A group of children's wooden desks were still there and even faded artwork and notices were pinned to the wall. An old square chip heater sat in a corner with its steel chimney towering up to the roof. Steve could imagine the children gathered around it on a frosty morning with red hands and faces getting warm. Back in his own school days at a small school, not too different from the one he was now in, they used to toast their sandwiches on the heater at lunchtime. The smell of burning wood and scorched bread still tickled his memory as a warm fuzzy feeling of security and peace.

Bye Old School. Merry Xmas, the yellow and red chalk writing on the blackboard could still be read. With this was a conglomeration of children's names sprawled across the board and half a dozen children's sketches, some smudged out but others still quite clear.

Steve walked out and along the corridor to the second classroom. This one looked dusty and deserted with only a few pieces of debris lying around. It seemed that before its closure only one room of the school was in use. Another door at the end led into a tiny staff room, still equipped with a sink, small stove, zip water heater, small table and a wooden couch with a mattress on it. Once again, the room appeared clean and tidy. He turned on a tap and after initial discoloring, clean water ran out.

A polite cough made him glance up. A woman with short dark hair stood in the corridor. She had a faint, almost shy, smile on her face. His first impression was that she was attractive, of

average height, well built without being chubby, and appeared to be in her early thirties. She was wearing casual jeans and a light blue jersey.

"So you're the one who outbid us in the tender for our school," she said in a pleasant educated voice and gave a wee laugh. "It serves us right. We thought nobody would bother to tender so put in a price way too low."

"Yes, actually I am," Steve replied and introduced himself.

"Lavina Ryland, " the woman said. "We farm the adjacent property and those are our sheep grazing the school football field. I'll move them out for you."

"No, leave them," Steve said. "I have no animals to keep the grass down so, if you don't mind, they can stay there."

"I see." Lavina glanced at him with hazel eyes. "Can I be rude enough to ask why you bothered to buy the property?"

"Sure," Steve said. "I'm a computer consultant in the city but like the outdoors." He shrugged. "I guess I bought it on impulse with a vague idea of converting it into a hideaway-cum-dormitory. There are numerous bush walks around and this could become a place to stay for my friends or myself."

"So you aren't just interested in moving the building out," Lavina said. "That's what happened to the school house. One day a truck moved in and it was gone in a matter of hours."

"No, my first thoughts are to keep it as it is. I only took it over this week."

"I'm glad," Lavina said with a whimsical, almost sad expression. "I guess this is the last link to what was once quite a thriving little community." She smiled again. "I taught here, married Grant, a local farmer, and fourteen years later I'm still here."

She walked into the first classroom and waited while Steve followed. "I came back and taught the last term before the school closed. It was down to twelve children. There were forty when I first came."

"So all this was done by you?" Steve smiled and nodded at the blackboard.

"Yes," Lavina said grinning. "I guess I should have cleaned it off years ago. I've been the defacto caretaker as we leased the land from the government. I've kept the building clean. The locals used it for an occasional meeting but there aren't even many of those now. Everyone drives down to the hall on Lower Forks Road. I think this was last used as a polling booth for the election a few months back. We must have had one of the smallest number of voters in the country. I was polling officer." She stopped and bit on her lower lip. "Oh here I go reminiscing again. Please forgive me."

"Sure, that's fine. I thought I was completely alone. It's good to meet a local."

"One of the few," Lavina said. "There are only half a dozen families left in the valley now. Even the farms have amalgamated. The dairy factory shut down before my time and the local shop closed when I first started teaching at the school. We even had a hall once but it burned down ten years back." She gazed around the room and sighed. "The school was the last thing to go. They don't even run a school bus up here any more. My daughter was on correspondence."

"And now?" Steve asked.

"Cathy goes to boarding school." Lavina once again sounded sad. "She's only twelve but we thought it was the best thing for her."

She chatted away for a few more moments before saying she must be off and excused herself. Steve escorted her to the gate and watched as the pleasant young woman climbed in an ancient Land Rover.

"I live just around the corner," she called out the window. "Feel free to visit any time you're here. The kettle is always warm."

"Thanks," Steve replied. "I might just do that."

He watched as the old farm vehicle drove away, then turned and went back to lock up. The early spring shadows were already crossing the playground and a chill was in the air, a reflection of the higher altitude of the area.

Steve returned to his jeep and sat deep in thought for a few moments before he started up and headed back to town. He was glad he'd bought the old school. It had distinct possibilities. In his mind's eye he pictured a dormitory in the second room, the main classroom as a living area and somehow the vision of his visitor came back to complement the picture.

Steve's home at 23 Ashley Grove was a large modern light brown, two-storied stucco house with a double garage, and immaculate lawn. Inside there seemed to be two of everything, including two spacious living areas with balconies overlooking the hillside below and the city beyond.

It was not a happy home though. In fact Steve tended to live in only half the building since his wife, Trish, had left.

With the shift to his apartment and busy work commitments, Steve didn't return to Upper Forks Road School for three weeks. The spring was now moving into early summer and it was a hot cloudless day when he drove in with a trailer load of supplies behind his Wrangler. The garage at his house had been emptied and there was no room at the apartment, so he had decided to bring his builder's workshop out to the school. Most of the gear that he had inherited from his father, a builder, had been barely used and he thought the power saw and other items would be useful at the school.

"So this is the great holiday camp," Noel Capra, one of Steve's employees and a personal friend from High School days commented. "It looks in pretty good condition."

"Yes, I was pleasantly surprised," Steve said. "Everything's there. We'll need bathroom facilities and perhaps a bigger kitchen." He showed his friend around and the two men lifted the equipment from the trailer into the second classroom.

"Come on, let's look around the property," Steve said. "I haven't even been down the back yet."

After a walk around the boundary and admiring the bush covered hillside across a steep valley the pair ended up at the old swimming pool; a fifteen-meter rectangle surrounded by a high wire netting fence and padlocked gate.

"This would be great if you got it filled and filtered." Noel grinned. "Do the filters go?"

"I have no idea," Steve said. He found the padlock key from his selection and opened the gate. Apart from the inevitable grass and weeds growing through cracks in the concrete, the pool

looked in good order. There were even faded paintings of fish beneath the few centimeters of slime and mud that covered the bottom of the pool.

"The filter looks okay," Noel called out from the wooden shed at the end of the enclosure. He stuck his head out and grinned at Steve. "If you like, I'll have a play around here for a while. If we can find where the water supply comes from..."

Steve knew Noel was a real handyman and could get anything working. "Sure," he said. "I want to go and check out the school."

"Yeah, I'll give you a hand there, too," Noel replied, but he was already absorbed in checking out the filters.

Steve smiled and strolled back across the small crumbled weed strewn tennis court to the classroom and let himself in. With the power now on, he found everything worked well. For an hour or more he worked at cleaning the rooms and had just sat down at one of the desks and started drawing a floor plan of the building in his laptop when, once again, a polite cough interrupted his thoughts.

Lavina, dressed in shorts and white tank top, caught his eye. He immediately thought how attractive she was with tanned limbs, curved figure and short but not severe hairstyle.

"Hello again, Steve." She smiled. "Got a worker slogging it out over at the pool, while you're playing computer games I see."

"Hi, Lavina," Steve replied and flushed at his innermost thoughts. "That's Noel. He's the handyman. I'm full of ideas but when it comes to practical work, I'm all thumbs." He turned the computer screen in her direction. "I'm sketching my ideas for converting the corridor into a bathroom and kitchen unit."

"Can I have a peek?" Lavina stepped close to glance over his shoulder. He could smell her presence, the clean smell of hair shampoo and soap together with a faint whiff of perfume as she bent over to see his plan.

"You've got quite a talent, here, Steve." She turned so her eyes gazed into his. They were wide and smiling, almost like Trish's back in those earlier student days.

"Yes, well," Steve muttered. "You feed in the data and the computer can create different scenarios. I'll show you." He pressed a few keys and a three dimensional drawing of a kitchen unit appeared, showing a new wall, door and sink unit in what was now just the corridor.

Lavina stared at the screen. "That's great."

"It's one of the programs my firm has refined," Steve continued. He found it so easy to talk to this woman he'd only met once before. "There are several from the big firms overseas but they use huge amounts of RAM. I wanted one that could be used in a home computer..." He stopped and smiled. "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"No. Keep going. I'm interested."

Steve grinned and spent several moments showing her his ideas for converting the old school into a small lodge with sleeping for a dozen or so visitors.

"Steve," Lavina said quietly when he'd finished, "I think your idea is grand. This is what the valley needs." She stood up from where she'd been crouched beside him and grinned. "Actually, I came across to invite you up for afternoon tea. Your friend too, of course."

"That's kind of you. I'd love to come."

"Great!" she said. "Make it forty minutes. I think I told you last time, I'm at the white house just up around the corner to the right. You can't miss it. See you soon."

"Thanks." Steve's eyes followed her as she walked out and past the classroom windows. Just before she disappeared from sight she turned, smiled and gave a tiny wave. My God, she was a good looker!

Steve immediately reprimanded himself for being stupid, turned back to his laptop but found his concentration had gone. He switched the computer off and strolled out into the sunshine to find Noel.

CHAPTER TWO

Over the next two months Steve visited Upper Forks Road School every weekend. Sometimes with Noel and Geraldine, Noel's wife, but often by himself. Builders were employed and after a two-week stint all the interior building alterations were complete. The walls were in, new doors, sink unit and other fittings. A plumber had installed two showers, modernized the sinks and declared the school water supply and septic tank in good condition. Everything was still in a raw state as Steve planned to do the painting and other renovating himself.

Every time Lavina turned up, Steve's attraction towards her grew stronger. Though nothing was said, he was sure the feeling was mutual. She rarely talked about her own life but on the few occasions she mentioned her husband, her voice lost its sparkle and became listless--almost sad.

Steve thought about her one late Sunday evening on his way home. That was the trouble, he thought about this woman too much. Whenever his mind wandered during the day, she would appear in his mind, smiling and smelling so clean and feminine when she brushed close to him. This weekend had been different in that he had met Grant Ryland, her husband. The man had been a pleasant enough sun-baked farmer in wide hat and work clothes but appeared years older than Lavina, and older than Steve himself.

"I was young and impressionable," Lavina had commented one of the few times she'd mentioned her husband. "Just a second year teacher in my first permanent position. Then Cathy was on her way and we got married." She never elaborated but her eyes gazed sadly into the distant hills. "That was what good girls did in the country then. Attitudes are twenty years behind the city out here."

That was when Steve almost tucked his arms around her. "Stupid bugger," he swore to himself and changed gears of the Jeep on the top hairpin bend and headed down to the highway towards home.

Summer came with the school vacation and Steve found a new visitor to Old Forks Road Lodge,

as he had renamed the property. He was painting the second classroom and was high on a plank held up by two steel trestles when two girls in their early teens walked in.

"Hi," a slim girl with blonde hair tied back in a ponytail called up at him. "I'm Cathy Ryland and this is my friend, Donna." She nodded to her companion, a redheaded girl with shy smile and freckled face.

Steve glanced down and immediately saw the resemblance between Cathy and Lavina. "Hi girls. Want a job painting?"

"Well, if you pay enough," Cathy said and then hesitated before she spoke again. "Mum said you've got the old swimming pool in operation and wouldn't mind if we had a swim."

"Sure!" Steve said. "I was over there earlier. It's unlocked. Come any time. Tell your mum I'll give you a key."

"You can tell her yourself," Cathy said as the two youngsters laughed. "She's coming up the drive now."

Steve grinned as Lavina approached and apologized for her precocious daughter.

"No problem. I could tell she was your daughter by her good looks and pleasant nature."

Lavina's eyes met his for a second and Steve flushed at his forwardness. "I'm sorry," he muttered and glanced away. "I just meant Cathy is a nice young girl."

"No, I'm honored," Lavina replied, fixing him with a serious look. "Steve ..."

"Yes?"

This time she flushed and glanced away. "It doesn't matter," she whispered. "Thanks for letting the girls use the pool. I thought I might go in too. It's nice and warm out in the sun."

Steve grinned. "I got half a dozen keys for the pool cut. Take them and give them out to any locals who want to use the pool. I'd leave it unlocked but it could be an invitation for all sorts of riffraff."

"Thanks." Lavina smiled and walked out across the grounds.

Steve scratched his chin in wonder. It wasn't what was said, but rather what wasn't said that made him tingly inside. He dipped the brush in the paint bucket and began on the next wall, half-heartedly did one more section and stopped. He quickly cleaned up and tried to look casual as he wandered over to the pool.

Noel had done a marvelous job with the filter and the water in the swimming pool was crystal clear. The girls were screaming in delight and Steve noticed Lavina sitting on a towel in her togs. She glanced up as he walked through the gate.

"You should come in," she said in a quiet voice and bent forward to wipe her hair. "The water's perfect."

The tiny bikini left little to the imagination and Steve grinned. Lavina glanced up, flushed and wrapped the towel around her shoulders, almost as if she could read his mind. Her smile, though, was still warm and left him wondering about his feelings. Since Trish had left he'd dated a few women but had never taken anyone seriously. Sure, there was Gillian, who was keen on him and had enticed him into her bed once but he'd felt so self-conscious he had hardly

maintained an erection.

Lavina in front of him now, had done no more than become a friendly neighbor but Steve found himself in waters he didn't understand.

"The true academic, aren't you?" Lavina said in a mysterious voice and jolted him back to the present. "Deep in thought there."

"Sorry." Steve grinned and tried a white lie. "Cathy and her friend made me think back to my own school days. I went to a tiny country school like this and over the holidays we practically lived at the school swimming pool."

"We tried keeping the pool open after the school closed but couldn't afford to do it," Lavina said. The next season the filter broke and that was that." She shrugged. "Plenty of locals wanted to enjoy the amenities but couldn't be bothered contributing to the cost. I think you're the girls' most popular person at the moment." Their eyes met again. "Well, are you going in?"

"Yes," Steve replied, seeming strangely hushed. "I'll get my togs."

Steve had a week off work and had come up that morning prepared to stay for a couple of days. But now he'd decided on taking a cowardly retreat back to town. He had to admit he was attracted to this married woman who was not even separated. His quite conservative background fought with his feelings. When he arrived back at his apartment, he tried to do some computer work but couldn't concentrate.

"Oh Hell!" he snorted. Perhaps he should give Gillian a ring. No, that would be fair to nobody. In the end he made a compromise and went down to the pub for a drink.

"She's gotten to you hasn't she?" Noel sat down at the small table where Steve was sipping his beer.

"Who?" Steve replied with a self-conscious grin. Noel was the company he needed at the moment.

"Lavina Ryland. Who else? She's one good looking woman, Steve."

"Yeah." Steve stared into his drink. "A local farmer's wife."

"So?" Noel said. "From what I heard, her marriage is on the rocks as much as yours."

"But she's still living with the guy. Trish and I are separated."

"I know." Noel poured himself a drink out of Steve's jug. "I have a funny feeling that might change soon." He clapped Steve on the shoulders. "Just keep a low profile for a while, mate, but stay around. I think she has a lot on her mind and could do with a little help."

"And where did you sort that out from?" Steve grunted.

Noel grinned. "Geraldine's an expert on women and their moods," he laughed, "so drink up and relax. You're doing well."

Steve visited his school half a dozen times over the following three weeks and saw Cathy on every visit. The two girls accepted his offer of ten dollars an hour to help him paint. They did the undercoat in all the rooms and were remarkably conscientious and careful. With old clothes and sloshed paint everywhere over their clothes they really looked the part after each two-hour painting stint. Afterwards they'd change into togs and run out to the pool for a swim while Steve had another session of painting. In those weeks though, Lavina never came near. Steve thought he may have offended her but decided it wouldn't be prudent to visit her house. He thought about her often as he painted away; it was the type of job he could switch to automatic and let his mind wander.

It was a Sunday afternoon and the school's redecoration was almost complete. Donna had gone home a few days earlier feeling pleased with the money she'd earned and the twenty-dollar bonus Steve had promised if the girls didn't slop paint on the windows.

"Well Steve. That's about it," Cathy said grinning at the kitchen wall she'd just completed. She took off the old hat she'd been wearing and shook her ponytail out. "God, my arms are aching."

Steve climbed down from the trestle where he'd been doing the ceiling and ran an eye over the youngster's work. "It's good," he praised. "I couldn't have done better myself."

"Yeah. You go too fast," Cathy scolded and Steve realized how she sounded like her mother. She looked like her too, in the facial features and easy smile.

"I won't stay for a swim today," Cathy said. "It's a bit cold out there and with Donna gone home it's not as much fun swimming by myself."

Steve grinned. "Yes, I'd better head back to town. I'll get your pay." He strolled over to his jacket and peeled off some twenty dollar notes to the youngster.

"That's too much," she gasped. "Mum will go bonkers if she knows you gave me that much."

"I gave Donna a bonus when she left. You've done another four hours in the three days since then, spilt no paint on the windows or floor and did a marvelous job. You keep it."

Cathy's eyes lit up. "Thanks, Steve. Mum said I could go into town and buy myself some new label jeans when I had the money." She screwed her nose up, ran some hot water into a sink and began to scrub paint off her arms. "They cost over a hundred bucks."

"How is your mother?" Steve asked, forcing a casual voice.

"Oh, Mum's been pretty moody lately," Cathy replied and gazed out the window. "Poor old Mum."

"Why?"

"You men," Cathy replied, pouting.

"What do you mean?" Steve frowned. "What have I done?"

Cathy flushed and flung her head around so her eyes peered into his. "No, not you personally, Steve. You're okay. Men in general and Dad in particular."

Steve stirred his bucket of paint and tried not to appear too interested but Cathy just kept talking. "Mum and Dad had a big row last night. They thought I was asleep but I heard every word." She grinned. "Mind you I had to sneak downstairs to listen. "

"Perhaps you shouldn't have," Steve scolded.

Cathy shrugged. "It was the usual thing. Dad can do what he likes but as soon as Mum even talks to someone he goes bonkers. They think I don't know but I do."

"Know what?" Steve said quietly.

Cathy gazed at Steve and furrowed her brow. "It's well known in the valley that Dad was having a fling with Janice Ludlow. Probably still is. Her father booted her out and she moved to town. Dad and Mr. Ludlow had one hell of a fight a few months back and they just about called the cops in. Mum never said a word but just went all quiet." The twelve year old looked up. "Then you came along."

"Me!"

Cathy stopped and swallowed, "I'm sorry Steve, I've said too much."

Steve nodded and walked across to the bench where there were a couple of tins of coke. He tossed one to Cathy and sat down at the table. He wanted to ask more but felt it wouldn't be fair to Cathy to be too inquisitive.

"Promise you won't tell!" Cathy continued. She popped the top of the coke can and took a sip.

Steve nodded but couldn't look the youngster in the eyes.

"She's been so happy up until that day we were all swimming together. Dad and her had another terrible row that night and Mum was in tears. I think she's fallen for you, Steve. That's why she doesn't come over." Her eyes caught his. "There, I said it! I think I'll go for a swim after all."

Before he could reply Cathy jumped up, ran out of the room and across to the swimming pool. Steve watched her swimming in the distance for five minutes before he gritted his teeth and walked through to the old school telephone. It was disconnected but the telephone book from several years before was still there. He thumbed it through and found the number, "L & G Ryland, Upper Forks Road"

With the adrenalin flowing, he walked out to the Jeep, grabbed his cell phone and punched in the number. With his luck it was probably changed anyhow.

On the fourth ring the phone was answered. "Good afternoon, Lavina Ryland speaking."

Steve almost turned his phone off but swallowed. "Lavina, it's Steve."

"Hello Steve," she replied in a cautious voice. "Is Cathy being a nuisance?"

"No," Steve replied. "She told me something which I promised not to repeat."

"Go on."

"I don't know what to say," Steve stuttered.

"Since we're on the phone, Steve, wouldn't it be a good idea to tell me why you rang?" Her voice was completely neutral.

"Cathy said you've been having a hard time. I'll give you my town and work telephone numbers. If you'd like to visit for a chat any time you're most welcome. I mean..." his voice trailed off.

"I'll write them down," Lavina replied. The voice was now almost cold. "But I can't promise anything. Thank you for your concern."

Steve felt an utter fool but gave her the details and hung up. "Bloody stupid thing to do," he cursed and shrugged at himself. Well, he'd made his move. She'd probably be too embarrassed to come near him again.

Steve was at work in the office on the following Tuesday morning when his receptionist-assistant poked her head in the door.

"Personal phone call for you, Steve," she said, chuckling. "Sultry voice. Sounds a real honey."

"Thanks, Suzanne," he replied and reached for his phone.

"Steve, it's Lavina."

"Hi Lavina." His heart began to bounce in his rib cage. "It's good to hear your voice."

"Is it?" Her voice held that same neutral tone as the Sunday before. "I'm in town and would like to meet you for lunch if you can spare an hour or so."

"Sure, I'm sure the boss will let me off." He winked at Suzanne.

"I've taken the liberty and booked a twelve thirty table at the Royal Duchess Restaurant. Do you know it?"

"No, but I'll find it. See you there."

"The woman you've been mooning over for the last month?" Suzanne smiled after Steve hung up.

"Is it so obvious?"

"Not really. I thought you covered things up quite well, to tell the truth. Enjoy yourself but remember; you've got that three thirty appointment."

"Sure, Suzanne." His assistant was a chubby mothering type lady in her fifties who ran the office like it was her home. Nothing was too much trouble for her and it was often her care that kept the business humming along.

The Royal Duchess Restaurant was part of one of those international hotels, very up-market with crisp white table clothes and waiters hovering. A red cord was hooked across the entrance and Steve almost felt he should whip back to the apartment and put a suit on.

"You look just grand," a soft voice said behind him and he felt a soft arm link into his. Lavina gazed into his eyes and gave a nervous smile. She was dressed in a dark business suit with cream blouse. This was the first time he'd seen her out of casual clothes and, if anything, they made her look more desirable than ever.

The meal was expensive and elaborate with wine and complimentary chocolates but it suited the

situation. After the main course, Lavina dabbed her lips with her napkin and gazed across at Steve.

"Tell me about yourself, Steve," she said in a quiet voice. "I mean your family. You've told me a little but I'd like to hear more, if that's not being too personal."

Steve reached across and took her soft hand in his. "Trish and I are separated and just waiting for the statutory two years before we get a divorce." He filled her in on the details of the house and apartment. "We're definitely finished. I think she's found a different partner; the first only lasted a few months." He grimaced. "And yourself?"

"Oh Steve," Lavina said. "I'm so muddled up inside. I was only twenty-one when I married Grant. He's ten years older than me. I told you I was pregnant with Cathy but I never told you I'm his second wife." She stopped and wiped a tiny handkerchief in the corner of her eyes. "I remember Nancy as a tiny stooped shouldered mousy person with pursed lips who was about his age. They were still living together when he impregnated me, there was a rush divorce and I became his new wife. Stupidest thing I ever did."

"Why?" Steve asked in a kind voice.

"My husband is domineering and extremely jealous. He used to be quite violent in our earlier days but since I began standing up for myself a few years back, the violence stopped. He just goes off and has affairs with young women but if I as much as talk to a male he goes into a sulky fit for weeks." She shrugged. "That's better than the violence. I told him five years back if he laid another hand on me, I'd take Cathy and walk out".

"So why do you stay with him?"

"For Cathy's sake. She's all I have, Steve." She stopped and waited while a waitress removed their plates. "But she's getting older now. God, I've missed her this last year when she's been at boarding school. She's going back next week."

"Cathy told me about a Janice Ludlow." Steve decided to admit his knowledge of this information.

"Did she?" Lavina looked surprised. "I guess I can't hide anything from her any more. She'll be thirteen soon and knows as much about life that I knew at twenty. Janice Ludlow is his latest fling. She's only about the age I was when I met Grant. She moved back to the valley after spending a couple of years at the university but is back in town now."

"So what now, Lavina?"

The woman looked at him and blushed. "I think I have feelings for you, Steve and want to know what you want. Is that blunt enough for you?"

Steve felt an immediate physical reaction and was glad a table was between them. He took both her hands and gazed into her eyes. "Lavina, I want to help you in any way possible. I'm a free agent with only one commitment at the moment." He grinned. "How's that for a direct answer?"

Lavina frowned and pulled her hands away. "One commitment? And what's that?"

"You!" Steve replied. "Any time you want me, I'm available; just to talk to or--" He stopped. "Oh hell. You know what I mean?"

"I think I do", Lavina replied and reached across and kissed him gently. Her lips felt so soft, tasted of waxy lipstick and made his own tingle. Her eyes were moist with tears but she was

smiling. "Our coffee has arrived and we've been here almost two hours. Haven't you an appointment soon?"

"An hour yet," Steve smiled. "There's plenty of time."

CHAPTER THREE

It was Thursday evening about nine and, as usual, Steve was thumping away on his computer. When he heard a light tap on his apartment door, he opened it to find Lavina standing there with wide eyes and a serious expression.

"Can I come in?" she asked quietly.

"Sure." She was dressed in a white blouse, skirt and light jersey. On her feet were sneakers and ankle socks, which made her look so young and desirable.

She walked through his living room and turned around. "If you want me, I brought my nightie," she said in a hoarse voice. Suddenly her eyes brimmed with tears and she ran out of the room up the tiny corridor.

Steve followed and caught up with her by the bathroom door. He slipped his hands on her waist and turned her around. Tearful eyes from an upturned face found his.

"I've never ever been unfaithful before." She sniffed and took a handkerchief out.

Suddenly arms were flung around his neck, lips met and the soft kiss became frantic as mouths opened and tongues slashed. Steve reached down, slid a hand to her blouse, undid three tiny buttons and his fingers ran along the frilly bra inside.

The flesh was warm and soft but Lavina pulled back. While he watched, she stared straight into his eyes, smiled and slipped off her blouse. She unclipped her bra and let it drop to the floor so she was nude from the waist up. Her breasts were large, erect and heaving in nervous anticipation. Steve could see the line between the tanned skin of the bikini top and the soft white skin beneath with light brown nipples. Without a word she grabbed his two hands and placed them against her taut nipples.

"My God, Lavina!" Steve gasped and within seconds he was kissing them while she held on, sobbed and quietly stroked his hair.

Steve had never been stimulated like that before. The exhausted man lay back, bathed in perspiration while the woman he'd just loved kissed his lips as their orgasm slowly retreated. For several moments they just clung to each other until Lavina rose up on her elbows so her eyes could find his.

"You're what I call a real man." She giggled for what seemed like an eternity afterwards before she flushed and turned serious. "You must think I'm a real hussy."

"No, I think you're a beautiful woman that I love."

"Do you, Steve?" she whispered in a serious voice and kissed him. "Or is it just the lust?"

"Oh just lust," he teased.

Lavina smacked his shoulder and wriggled off the bed. "I'm meant to be at a friend's but she promised to cover for me." She took his hand. "You've made me feel wonderful, Steve," she confided, "but can we be discreet for a while until I work things out?"

"Sure, you know where I am."

"And I promise I'll visit you at school. I wanted to but..."

"I know," he said. "When I saw you in that bikini at the swimming pool ..."

"And tried so hard not to stare at my boobs," Lavina giggled.

"You knew!" he gasped.

She nodded. "That's why I stayed away. I thought you might just be a lonely man needing sexual gratification and you'd drift off if I didn't encourage you." Her eyes twinkled. "But it didn't work out that way, did it?"

"No. If it weren't for Cathy's comments though, I wouldn't have phoned you know. Even then, if I'd really thought about it I would have chickened out."

"But you did, Steve. If you hadn't I would have found some way to contact you, I'm sure."

She kissed him once more and stepped across to the lift that had opened behind her. Steve grinned and walked back inside his apartment. What a night. Never in his wildest dreams did he think it would turn out like this. Never had he been so aroused, even in his early days with Trish. It was like being alive all over again. He smiled and walked into the living room where the computer was playing a colorful spiral pattern. In his haste the evening before, he hadn't even remembered to turn it off.

After that day, the world seemed somehow brighter for Steve. Problems at work became minor and weekends at the lodge were an automatic activity. True to her word, Lavina always appeared and would just sit and chat, help do the gardening, or help with the new bunks Steve was making with his late father's gear. Every second weekend when Cathy was home from school she accompanied her mother--and would never stop talking.

Physical contact between the lovers was discreetly avoided except for every Thursday night when Lavina stayed with Steve. This was the evening she attended a night class at the local Polytech. Prior to their affair, she had stayed with Alison Watson, a close friend who wholeheartedly supported Lavina's clandestine affair. They more than made up for enforced abstinence during the week with desperate love making from almost the moment Lavina arrived about nine in the evening until she reluctantly left about twelve hours later.

"My husband approves of me extending my education," she said one Thursday evening, laughing. "Mainly because he has a cute little arrangement with Janice Ludlow to do the same thing we're doing."

"What about Cathy?" Steve asked.

Lavina smiled. "She knows about us but we both pretend she doesn't. Mind you, last Sunday after you left she came up to me and said, 'Don't let Steve get away, Mum, now will you?'"

"I like Cathy. Trish had a miscarriage a few years back. That's the closest I've come to being a father."

Lavina looked at him in a strange way. "There's still time, my love," she whispered almost to herself and then kissed him with a passion he was still getting used to. "Cathy's quite taken with you, too, you know. When your firm got the contract to set up those Internet connections at her school and you walked through the corridor she was thrilled."

"Yeah." Steve laughed. "Cathy, Donna and her friends zoomed in on me like bees around honey. I've never been mobbed by pre-teenage girls before."

Friday morning came again too soon and Steve watched as Lavina drove away. He smiled and drove to the office. Steve felt as though his life was like a rainbow in the sky with the sun shining before the thunderclouds roll in. Something beautiful but transitory.

Tuesday morning was a quiet time at the Metropolitan Art Gallery, not that the crusty old building ever really had a busy time. Arts in the city was reserved for the three percent of the population who expected, and received, money poured in from city coffers far in excess of their needs. However, because the academic elite decided this was good for society, the snobs usually had their own way.

Anyhow, that was how Laurie Ellis felt. So why should millions of dollars be tied up in a motley little painting a few hundred years old so half a dozen stupid old ladies could gaze at it each week? The interesting point, though, was that this painting by a guy called Rubens was wanted by an art gallery in Amsterdam--and they were prepared to pay big money for it.

That was what companion Petra Roberts had told him. Everything had been arranged by Petra's associate, whom she'd only referred to as The Boss. His part was to steal the painting and get it to an aircraft. The Boss had arranged for it to be taken south to a remote area and hidden where it couldn't possibly be found. Once the heat was off eight months down the line, Laurie had to collect it from the same airfield and bring it back to Petra who was going to fly to Singapore to meet up with the Amsterdam collector. For his effort he would get a cool ten thousand dollars. Not bad for two days work.

Petra had been the kingpin in the planned theft. She was the one who had obtained a position as assistant curator at the art gallery and, over the last month, methodically recorded everything about the art gallery's security. It was tight but had a few flaws.

Tuesday morning was one such time. Between eleven and noon on that day the small side bay where the Rubens was displayed along with a dozen or so completely worthless paintings, the infrared alarms and pressure pad behind the paintings were turned off so the cleaning staff could dust the frames and surrounding area. The whole operation took about five minutes, then the alarms were turned on again and the staff moved into the next section.

During that time, one security guard stood watch, communicating by radio with the hidden control room in the cellar. It was this one guard who specified when to turn the alarms off and on.

"Okay, switch Bay Six off, Alexis," Griff Turrell muttered into his hand held radio seconds

before a balaclava enshrouded man stood at the entrance to the bay waving a revolver and screaming.

Griff reached for his own automatic when there was an explosion of gunfire. Shrapnel ricocheted from a wooden beam behind him and a splinter sliced through his cheek.

"Get down!" screamed Laurie Ellis. "Everyone on the floor! On your stomachs, hands behind your heads!"

He cuffed Griff on the side of the head and the security guard collapsed, bleeding.

The cleaning lady turned white and dropped in a panic. Petra, who had the job of supporting the security guard, couldn't help smiling at the theatrics of it all as she also lowered herself onto the floor.

Within seconds, Laurie had the Rubens painting off the wall, replacing it with the bare frame he'd brought with him. He glared at Petra. The instructions were for the benefit of the cleaning lady who would be able to confirm that she was also a victim.

"Get the alarm on again," he snarled.

Petra played the part perfectly. Acting terrified, she nodded, took the radio from the unconscious guard and spoke into it. "Petra here. Griff's got the trots he reckoned and has gone off to the loo. You can turn Bay Six back on."

"Right Petra," came the bored reply.

Laurie walked over to the trembling cleaning lady. "If you move before five minutes is up Maureen, my girl, I'll tell your boss about the money you've been nicking from the weekend takings. Get it?"

"How did you know that?" Maureen stammered. Her crinkled face was a picture of misery as the man just glared back. "Okay, I don't move for five minutes. I've got that."

"You're coming with me!" screamed Laurie at Petra and the pair headed for the back door.

However, as they walked through the exit an alarm began to wail.

"Oh shit!" Petra retorted. "I didn't know about this. There must be a triggering device on the painting."

"Now you tell me, you stupid bitch," Ellis hissed.

He tore down the tiny alleyway to where their third accomplice was waiting in a white Toyota, stolen for the purpose.

"Quick!" Laurie snarled as he jumped in the passenger seat and slammed the door. "Plan B, Murray." He turned to Petra. "Give us time to get out of sight, then scream blue murder."

"I know," Petra said, scowling.

The car started moving just as another security guard reached the alleyway and Petra ran up to him. "They're in that car," she sobbed. "I thought they were going to make me go with them."

As soon as the Toyota turned into the busy through road, sirens sounded and a police car approached from behind.

"Shit that was quick!" gasped Murray.

"A bloody door alarm we didn't count on went off, " Laurie replied with his face set hard. "Don't lose your cool." He gave curt instructions on his cell phone. "You know the route."

The driver nodded and accelerated just as a second police car turned in from a side road with screaming tires. They were now squeezed between the two cars.

"And you said we didn't need this alternative plan," Murray hissed and glared at Laurie.

"Okay, I was wrong. If Petra had found out about that extra alarm..."

"Okay." Murray smiled grimly. "Hang on, we do our sharp turn in the next block."

"Right," Laurie muttered.

Murray ran a red light into the next block and was now almost overtaking the police car in front. However, at the last moment he cut across the inside lane, braked, turned at a right angle, bounced over a road hump and entered a multi-storied car park building.

"The cops are flowing us!" Laurie hissed.

Murray grunted and turned the first tight corner to Level Two and drove quickly to the next level.

"They're just coming up the other end, " Laurie reported.

"Good!" Murray snorted, turned the next bend and headed towards an opened door with the words *Private Park* painted in yellow letters across the top. He screeched to a stop inside and the door closed behind them just as the police car appeared.

At the other end of the floor another white Toyota, driven by two little old ladies employed by Petra, disappeared around the corner with the police car close behind.

"Quick!" snarled Laurie. "The place will be sealed within minutes."

The two jumped out and hauled the painting into a small red van. The garage door opened and they drove out sedately, found an exit and reached the street just as two more police cars screamed to a halt in front of the white Toyota.

"Shall I head to the airfield?" Murray asked in a calm voice.

"My bloody oath," Laurie replied, wiping his brow. "We just about stuffed it up." The two men turned and grinned at each other.

Twenty minutes later the red van pulled into Armsfield Airstrip, sixteen kilometers south of the city well away from the main commercial airport to the west.

"Drive up to the Aero Club hanger," Laurie ordered. "You'll see a high winged single engine Cessna with the registration ZK HTG there."

The van pulled to a halt and a man ambled towards them. "You're late," he muttered, holding his hand out. "Name's Grant Ryland. Have you got the package?"

Laurie shook his hand. "There was a minor hitch but we came through okay. Petra said you own a high country sheep station a few hundred kilometers south and will be looking after our package for us."

"Yeah," Grant grinned. "I've got a little wine cellar at home. It's perfectly dry and is never used. In fact, I don't even think Lavina, the wife, knows it exists."

"Good," said Laurie. "You know the whole plan, I take it?"

"Yes, I store it and fly it back up to this airport in about eight months after I receive a coded letter from Petra. For that I get my second half of the twenty thousand." He sniffed. "Talking about the money..."

"Okay," Laurie snorted and handed Ryland a small cardboard package. "Ten thousand is there. Count it if you wish."

"No need," Grant replied. "After all, I have the painting too, remember."

He took the package and watched as the painting, now covered in the brown paper, was placed in the back of the Cessna. He shook hands with the pair again climbed aboard and started the engine.

"I don't like him," Murray complained as the tiny plane lifted into the air. "He seemed a bit slick for me."

"He must be reliable or the boss wouldn't have hired him." Laurie said.

Murray frowned. This was the first time Laurie had mentioned somebody other than Petra. He stared at the other man but decided to ask no questions. As long as he got paid for his efforts it didn't really concern him.

"Okay," he said. "Now let's get you across to Auckland International Airport."

Laurie nodded. "I had my face covered and the cleaner lady was shit scared but Petra said I should fly south for a few weeks," he shrugged, "and who am I to argue?"

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