

## CHAPTER TWO

Saturday 23rd July 2005

They were an odd couple, and it wasn't just the age difference. Plenty of men went out with women thirty-some years their junior and made brave efforts to bridge the generation gap, but in this case something had gone wrong. She was dressed in a clingy silk dress with a brief mohair jacket across her shoulders as a token protection against the evening chill; he was wearing a chain-store blue suit, with appropriate shirt and tie. She wore sling-back sandals with heels like bayonets, he, highly polished brogues. She was all Harvey Nichols and Jean Paul Gaultier, he Marks and Spencer and Debenhams.

But his happiness was clear to see. He placed a hand in the middle of her back, steering her through the throng as they exited the cinema complex and she instinctively moved closer to him. Her perfume

14 STUART PAWSON

tantalised his senses. Then there was the feel of her body, curved and alive, like a snake slipping through his fingers, and the silkiness of that dress, all conspiring against him.

‘That was wonderful,’ he said. ‘I really enjoyed it.’

‘Judi Dench always plays a good part,’ she replied.

‘Even if I did think the foyer was a good representation of what hell must look like.’ He’d shrunk in horror as they’d entered the complex, the purple neon, strobe lights and noise battering his sensibilities. Fortunately, once inside Theatre 1, it was not too far removed from his memories of what a cinema should be.

Strolling back to the car they held hands, her fingers gently caressing his. He opened the door of his Rover Connoisseur for her and she thanked him as she sank into the seat. He walked round, slipped into the driver’s seat and checked that she’d fastened her safety belt.

‘Coffee at my place?’ he suggested as he started the engine and pulled the gear lever into D for drive. This was their sixth date, and after the last two they’d gone back to his place. They hadn’t made love, not quite, but if the progression continued, tonight could be the night.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ she replied. ‘Not tonight, if you don’t mind. I’m feeling rather tired.’

GRIEF ENCOUNTERS 15

‘That’s all right,’ he said, a touch of relief tempering his disappointment. ‘I’ll take you home.’ It had been a long time since his last sexual activity, and even then it had been all rather low key, more duty than passion, and he was the wrong side of sixty. As they left the complex he glanced across and saw the sign advertising the film they’d watched: *Shakespeare In Love*.

They drove in silence until they were clear of the town centre, her hand resting on his on the centre console, their fingers restlessly intertwining. Street lighting ended and the traffic thinned out. This was the more affluent side of town, where anything less than a Series 3 BMW belonged to the nanny. He indicated a right turn which would have taken them towards her home, but she said: ‘No, Edward. Go straight on.’

He cancelled the signal. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry. We should have gone for that coffee. Can we just go somewhere quiet and have a talk, please? I don’t think I want to go home, yet.’

‘Will he be there?’

‘He may be. It’s a possibility. He sometimes comes to collect things, then gets drunk and falls asleep on the settee.’

‘Will you be all right?’

‘I think so.’

‘He hasn’t been violent again?’

‘No, just that one time. I think he got the message.’

16 STUART PAWSON

‘Well if he ever is, I want you to promise to call the police. Or me. Domestic violence is completely unacceptable.’

She glanced across at him, squeezing his fingers and smiling. ‘I promise, Edward,’ she said, then, ‘Turn in here. This should be nice and quiet.’

It was a pay-and-display car park at the entrance to the Sculpture Park. Through the day visitors came from far and wide to see the Henry Moores and Barbara Hepworths in a rural setting, but parking was free after six o’clock and the clientele at eleven-thirty were students of a more natural style of anatomy. Edward was surprised to see that there was a scattering of cars dotted about the park, lights off, windows steamed, gently rocking.

‘Gosh!’ his girlfriend exclaimed. ‘It’s busy. I thought we’d have the place to ourselves. Stop over there, under the trees.’

He did as he was told and parked in the shadows, well away from all the other cars. He killed the lights and engine and pulled the brake on.

They sat in silence for a while until she said, ‘I like being with you, Edward. You’re so comfortable. Undemanding. I can relax with you. You’re my rock.’

He reached behind her and rested his arm across her shoulders, pulling her closer. The mohair jacket fell off and he cupped her shoulder in his hand, stroking it until the strap of her dress slipped down

GRIEF ENCOUNTERS 17

her arm. He was confused and inexperienced, and not sure if he wanted to be regarded as comfortable. 'I...' he began, then stopped.

'You what?' she asked, gently.

'I...I like being with you, too, Teri.' It was only the second time he'd used her name all evening. It wasn't a name he felt at ease with, and far more exotic than that of anyone else he knew. 'You've given me a new life,' he went on. 'I never realised I could be this happy. If you told me that you didn't want to see me again, I'd still always be grateful to you. You'd always have a fond place in my memories.'

'Don't say things like that,' she admonished, resting her head against his shoulder. 'I won't leave you. Not unless you want me to.'

He pressed his face into her hair, saying: 'I never want you to leave me, but...'

'No buts.' She turned her face to kiss him, then said: 'Oh! This is in the way,' and banged her fist on the big car's centre console that jutted between them like a sea defence.

Edward laughed. 'We could always get in the back,' he suggested, rather daringly.

'Like young lovers,' she giggled. 'What a good idea.'

'Slide your seat forward, first,' he told her, 'to make more room.'

'How do I do that?'

18 STUART PAWSON

‘There’s a button down the side.’

Teri felt for it and the seat moved forward, generating another giggle and a squeal of pleasure. The interior light came on as they opened the doors, and faded again as they made themselves comfortable in the back, laughing like teenagers as they sank into the deep seats. Teri put her arms around him and pressed her face against his chest. After a few seconds she said: ‘Take your jacket off, Edward. It’s like snogging with a tailor’s dummy.’

Edward, eager to please, gladly pulled the garment off and moved closer to her.

‘So,’ Teri began, ‘how much holiday do you have?’

‘It’s not a holiday,’ he replied. ‘It’s a recess. It’s a time to concentrate on work in one’s constituency. And we still have to keep in touch. And if anything drastic happens we can always be called back and parliament reconvened.’

‘How drastic?’

‘Oh, a war,’ he replied airily. ‘Or a big tsunami wiping out the east coast. Something like that.’

‘It sounds like a holiday to me. When do you have to go back?’

‘You mean when do we reconvene?’

‘Do I? So when?’

‘The tenth of October.’

‘Tenth of October!’ she gasped. ‘That’s three

GRIEF ENCOUNTERS 19

months away. Who's running the country until then?'

'Oh, it's in safe hands.'

'Is it? So...does this mean I'll be able to see more of you, Edward? Will I be in safe hands?' She took hold of his tie to loosen it, and undid the top two buttons of his shirt.

'I hope so, Teri,' he told her, his voice so gruff it was barely audible as he fought against his own personal tsunami, sweeping up his legs and engulfing his loins. 'I really do hope so.'

He was nibbling her neck, thinking of Henry Kissinger, when the camera flashed for the first time. Kissinger said that power was an aphrodisiac, to explain his success with women. Edward couldn't think of any other reason for this beautiful girl to be with an old fogey like him. The flash cut through the thought like a scalpel. He didn't know what it was. The interior of the car was there for a fraction of a second, brightly illuminated, Teri's face white as marble, her eyes closed. Then all was even blacker than before. He half turned, blinking, puzzled but not alarmed by what he thought was a natural phenomenon. Summer lightning, perhaps. The second flash told him it was a camera, pressed against the window of the car. He twisted in his seat to confront the photographer when the camera flashed for the third time. Teri had covered her face with her hands and pulled her legs up in a

20 STUART PAWSON

protective gesture, which had the side effect of exposing her stocking tops and thighs. Edward was turning away from her, his jaw hanging loose and his clothing disarrayed.

That was the shot they used.

