

Special Delivery

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Extract

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Chapter One

Cheltenham, three years later . . .

Gavin tapped his fingers impatiently on the desktop and tried not to hum along to the tune in his ear. He wasn't accustomed to being put on hold; something he studiously avoided by getting his PA to make his phone calls for him. But not this one. He didn't want Karen knowing, in case she let slip something to Miranda and blew the whole thing. Unfortunately, the old adage was only too true: if you wanted something done properly, there really was no substitute for doing it yourself.

The electronic muzak pinged to an abrupt halt and a disembodied female voice returned to the other end of the line.

'I've spoken to Mr Sallis, sir, and he says wouldn't you prefer a marquee in the grounds? Most people—'

'Yes, but I'm not most people,' pointed out Gavin tartly. 'So please explain again to your Mr Sallis that I have to have that stately home for the entire weekend, or I'll be forced to take my business elsewhere.'

Up in the loft at 22, Brookfield Road, Ally peeled a skein of itchy cobweb off the end of her nose and sneezed. 'Remind me again, Zee, why exactly did I let you drag me up here?'

'Why?' Zebedee Goldman, who sounded a lot more exotic than he actually was, grinned at his best mate through the fretwork of dusty rafters. He looked more like one of Fagin's urchins than a thirty-five-year-old single dad. 'Because you're skint and you can't resist a treasure hunt. Same as me.'

'Treasure?' scoffed Ally. 'In *my* attic?'

‘Well . . . stuff that’s good enough to sell at the car boot sale, anyhow. That counts as treasure, doesn’t it?’

She evaluated the scene in one sceptical sweep of her rather pale, doll-blue eyes: eyes that had sometimes led people to underestimate her. Men mostly. ‘I hate to burst your bubble, love, but this is a 1950s’ ex-council house; and the last people who lived here kept chickens in the shed. I doubt anybody’s left any Picassos stashed away for a rainy day.’

Zee left off rummaging through a sagging and mildewed cardboard box which seemed to be filled with broken teapots and bits of old Lego. ‘Ah, but you’ll never know if you don’t look. Did you see that programme on Channel Six last week? The one about that woman who found that medieval parchment stuffed down the back of a second-hand bureau? Then there was the guy who found he’d had an icon hanging in his downstairs loo. That could be us, this time next year.’

Ally shook her head and smiled at his childlike enthusiasm. She loved Zee dearly, in a twin-sisterly, co-conspiratorial kind of way; the pair of them had hit it off the very first time they met, at their respective kids’ nursery school, and ever since then he had been trying to involve her in his never-ending schemes to make money out of junk. Still, you couldn’t help but respect a young widowed dad who’d jacked in a well-paid job as a book designer to make a living doing the odd freelance design job while selling rubbish on eBay, just so that he could spend more time bringing up his daughter.

Over the years, Zee had become a good friend to Luke, too; and it seemed almost comical now that Luke had ever had suspicions about the closeness of his friendship with Ally. Anyone even remotely observant could see that it just wasn’t *that* kind of relationship. Besides, as far as Ally was concerned Zee – bless him – was about as sexually alluring as a one-eared teddy bear.

She blew the thick layer of dust off a pile of bundled papers. ‘Ooh look, a six-month run of the *Cheltenham Courier*, 1953. And some half-empty tins of gloss paint. All different colours, naturally.’

‘No probs,’ Zee assured her. ‘We’ll pour the whole lot into one tin, give it a quick stir and flog it on the stall for 50p a go. Rainbow paint. Very postmodern.’

Ally laughed. She’d allowed herself to believe that this boot sale

was a great money-making idea, but it was hard to imagine anyone in their right mind forking out good money for this tat. ‘Very bullshit, more like. Still, Luke would approve. Recycling, and all that.’

‘What’s this?’ called out Zee, brandishing a flat, leather-covered box he’d found inside the old linen chest underneath the skylight. Before Ally answered he opened it up and gave an appreciative whistle. ‘Hey, these look a bit of all right. Whatever they are.’

‘Hang on a minute.’ She tottered gingerly along the joists towards him, trying not to recall the moment in her childhood when her dressing-gown-clad father had stepped on the wrong bit of their loft floor and her sleepover friends had been treated to the sight of two hairy legs dangling through the ceiling.

Zee was giving his finds a close inspection. ‘I reckon these are solid silver, you know. Bound to be worth something to somebody.’

Gently but firmly, Ally removed the box from Zee’s enthusiastic grasp, closed it and replaced it in the linen chest. ‘They are,’ she replied. ‘To my sister.’

‘Uh?’

‘They’re antique ivory-handled caviar spoons,’ Ally explained. ‘A wedding present from Miranda.’

‘Aaah. Right. So you didn’t actually go out and buy them yourself then?’

Ally smiled at the ridiculousness of the idea. ‘Are you kidding? She spotted them in an antique shop in Geneva of all places, and – get this – she thought they’d “come in really handy”. Honest to God, she really did.’

‘Caviar spoons?’

‘Caviar spoons.’

‘I wonder what she thought they’d come in handy for.’ Zee scratched at his dusty brown locks. ‘And doesn’t Luke have a thing about ivory anyway?’

‘He doesn’t like having the stuff in the house, which is why we hide them up here. And even if he didn’t have ethical objections to them, what use would our family ever have for anything that’s too small to eat baked beans with? I daren’t get rid of them though, so we keep them up here and bring them out whenever Miranda’s in the vicinity.’

Zee frowned. ‘She’d understand if you sold them though, wouldn’t

she? What with you having kids and needing the money?’

Ally brought down the lid of the oak linen chest with an emphatic clunk. ‘Call me a big fat coward,’ she replied, ‘but I’m not about to find out.’

Gavin’s plans were starting to take shape. By mid-morning he had charmed the owner of Nether Grantley Hall into letting him have it for the entire weekend, plus full use of the private grounds; and all for a third less than he’d been prepared to pay for the privilege.

They could have had a party at home, of course; but it would’ve had to be a pathetically small affair. The Hesketh eight-bedroom luxury barn conversion would have struggled to accommodate twenty overnight guests, let alone a massive jungle extravaganza for two hundred plus. Besides, it was Miranda’s fortieth; it ought to be marked by something a bit special. And if you had money and style, Gavin always argued, you really ought to flash them around once in a while.

All in all it was good that things had worked out so smoothly, since Gavin didn’t believe in having a Plan B. That wasn’t how he operated. What he did believe in was getting whatever you wanted first time round, because anything else was second best and that just wouldn’t do.

It was go-getting philosophies like that which had built up Gavin Hesketh’s property-development business from a single terraced house in Swindon to mega-money – all in five years. There were an awful lot of people out there who would have liked to be Gavin Hesketh, but he would never have dreamed of swapping places with any of them. He was having a blast just being himself.

The entertainment agency got back to him on his mobile as he was eating a light sushi lunch at his desk and going through the figures for the new conference centre he was thinking of building. Never do one thing when you could do two, was his motto; and if you could manage three, so much the better. If you didn’t leap up and grab the opportunities, some other bastard would.

‘Ah, Mr Bergstrom, hi,’ he said, tucking his phone under his chin. ‘Have you got me my orchestra?’

‘I can do you a very nice forties’ nostalgia combo, sir. “White Cliffs of Dover”, all the old favourites. Good musicians, very tasteful, and all the authentic gear.’

‘I said twenties.’

‘To be completely honest, Mr Hesketh, twenties’ acts are a bit out of fashion at the moment. There just aren’t the bookings for ’em, see. What about an Elvis tribute act? They always go down well.’

Gavin let out a small groan of exasperation. The world, it seemed, was as full of amateurs as ever. ‘Let’s not waste each other’s time, Mr Bergstrom. I want a full-size twenties-style orchestra for the Saturday night. Plus singers. And dancers. I am prepared to pay for it. For God’s sake, fly somebody in from Vegas if you have to.’

‘And if you can’t, find me somebody who can.’

It was a very different world at the offices of ChelShel, Cheltenham’s homelessness charity on Henrietta Street, and Luke’s middle-aged client was considerably less choosy than Gavin Hesketh. He’d have been happy with any solution that didn’t involve spending another night sleeping rough in a smelly shop doorway.

He looked up hopefully as Luke came back into the small office he shared with Chas, one of the other case workers; then his face fell. ‘You didn’t manage to find me a room for the night then?’

Luke’s apologetic expression said it all. ‘Sorry, Jake. There aren’t many hostels round here, and they’re all full.’

‘Great.’

‘There may be a vacancy for tomorrow night though. So call by in the morning and check again.’

‘Don’t I always?’ Slowly Jake started to gather together his grubby belongings as Luke looked on, aching with sympathy and frustration in equal measure.

‘I really am sorry Jake, but you and I both know how it is. You don’t fit the stupid rules the authorities make. You’re not under sixteen, you’re not pregnant or a single parent, or over sixty-five, or mentally ill . . . ’

‘So what you’re saying is, because I’m managing to scrape by without slitting my wrists, they can get out of doing anything for me.’

Luke tried not to wince, but it was true. He could have punched the wall in frustration. ‘Well . . . put it this way, you’re not a priority case.’

Jake got to his feet and hauled his rucksack onto his shoulder. 'People like me never are a priority, are we? More of a bad smell in the corner.' As he reached the door, he turned back with the ghost of a smile. 'If you ask me, my son should be working for the housing department. He seems to think the same bloody way they do, at any rate.'

A couple of seconds elapsed as the spring-loaded door glided silently shut, then Luke hissed 'fuck' under his breath and kicked the waste-paper bin across the office. It clattered against the back wall and scuttered to a halt, upside down.

'You know, you're not the world's headmaster,' commented a quiet voice behind him. 'Sometimes you can't force the world to behave like you think it should.'

'Oh really?'

'Take it from me – you know I'm right.'

The words came from a forty-something guy in jeans, steel-capped boots and an old Star Wars T-shirt, who was doing battle with the office's aged photocopier. ChelShel was not the best funded of housing charities. In fact there were whispers that the council liked it that way, if only to keep the spotlight off the town's small but growing homelessness problem. Luke could quite believe it. Anything to avoid frightening away the wealthy tourists who poured into Cheltenham to patronise its plethora of festivals. He had a nasty suspicion that the council spent more on hanging baskets than it did on the sixty or so people who slept rough on its streets every night.

He grunted and sat down. 'Give it a rest, Chas. I suppose you're going to go all holy on me now and tell me priests are always right about everything.'

He chuckled. 'Don't you believe it. They just teach us how to sound as if we are. That way, everybody else gets to feel nice and reassured, and we're the ones left wondering.'

'I wouldn't exactly describe Jake as reassured,' commented Luke. 'I mean, the poor guy's finally got a roof over his head, he's sharing a flat with his son; things are looking up. Then the son moves his new girlfriend in and the next minute it's: "I know you've got nowhere else to stay Dad, but we're having a baby so could you just pack your bags and sod off?" Charity begins at home, eh? Could've fooled me.' He rubbed his stubbly chin as a persistent idea bubbled up again at the back of his mind. 'Maybe I could . . .'

Chas silently slipped a mug of coffee in front of him.

‘Oh. Thanks.’ He looked sideways at Chas. ‘You know we do have the boxroom.’

The priest put up a hand to stop him. ‘Don’t even think about it, Luke. Even you can’t house the entire homeless population of Cheltenham in a four-bed semi in Whaddon. And I think the lovely Alison might have a word or two to say about it too.’

Luke pictured Ally’s probable reaction on discovering that her boxroom – which they had plans to turn into a study – was about to become an emergency hostel. Perhaps Chas had a point. ‘Well I’m not giving up on that guy,’ he declared, feeling in his desk drawer for his little black book of useful contacts. ‘There has to be somebody in here somewhere I can embarrass or coerce into doing something.’

Chas shrugged. ‘Good luck, go for it.’

At that moment, the office phone rang and Chas’s hand got to it first. ‘ChelShel? Yes, sure, I’ll pass you over. Luke, a lady called Miranda for you.’

Chas had yet to meet the divine Miranda or her entourage of beautiful people with huge, empty houses. Boy, did he have a treat in store.

Luke’s hand tensed involuntarily as he gripped the receiver. ‘Afternoon, Miranda. How’s things?’

‘Oh you know, busy, busy, busy. The new line of wallpaper is out on Monday and I just don’t seem to get a moment to myself, d’you know?’

‘Oh, absolutely.’ Luke felt an attack of sarcasm coming on. Trouble was, Miranda just brought out the bad side in him. ‘Matter of fact, business is a bit busy round here too. Fancy a few lodgers for that third garage you never use?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Well, the office is absolutely swarming with homeless asylum seekers. You know, I reckon we could fit half a dozen in your garage if I got in a carpenter to put up some MDF partitions . . . ’

There was a short pause, while Miranda worked out whether or not he was joking; then, having concluded that he must be because he wouldn’t be that mean, she giggled like a breathless sixteen-year-old. ‘Oh you are funny, Luke. It’s amazing how you keep that sense of humour of yours really, working in such a sad place. Listen, I’ve got some really exciting news for you. Something to cheer you up.’

You're moving to the Moon, thought Luke. 'Really?' he said out loud.

'Really! You see, Gavin's organising an absolutely *huge* party for my fortieth next month, only it's supposed to be a secret and I'm not meant to know. So I'm pretending I don't.'

'That's . . . er . . . nice,' murmured Luke, still scanning the pages of his book of contacts for somebody – anybody – who might owe him a favour. 'So what exactly can I do for you today?'

'Well, you can be sure to tell Alison that you and she and the children simply *have* to be free the *whole* weekend of my birthday, because I've heard a whisper that it's going to be a complete extravaganza, and I'm not going to let you miss any of it!'

'We'll do our best,' replied Luke, who had been hoping against hope for a quick family get-together and then home to watch the football highlights, 'but what with work, and the house, and ferrying the kids round to all their clubs and stuff . . . '

'You'll do more than your best, my darling. You'll be there.' Miranda was always at her best when a hint of dominatrix entered her voice. 'And you will do one other thing for me, won't you Luke?' she added in the sweetest of purrs.

'What's that?' he enquired, somewhat fearfully.

'You will wear something . . . *nice*, won't you? Just this once.'

'Palm trees,' repeated Gavin, craning his head furtively around the stable door to check that his wife wasn't outside. The coast was clear. 'I want palm trees and plenty of them . . . '

'Real ones or plastic ones?' enquired the voice on his mobile.

'Real, of course! What do you think I am, cheap? Native huts, lianas, oh, and some live birds of paradise and that kind of thing.'

'No problem with the trees or the huts,' the voice assured him. 'It just so happens we've got a lot of scenery left from last year's *Tarzan* musical at the Bristol Hippodrome. Might be some trouble with these exotic species of yours though; lot of rules and regulations these days.'

Gavin hummed and hawed, which he seldom did. This had to be right, but . . . 'Bloody bureaucracy. Well OK, whatever you can get. You've got the list. Oh, and a tiger cub.'

'A what?'

'You heard. Make sure you get a cute one. My wife adores tigers.'

‘Er . . . they’re a touch hard to come by these days, Gav. Endangered species and all that.’

‘I wasn’t actually suggesting you go out and capture one yourself. Borrow one or something. Doesn’t London Zoo hire them out by the day?’

‘I could get you one of Damien Hirst’s sharks.’

‘A tiger cub. Or you’re fired.’

No compromises, Gavin told himself firmly. Miranda’s birthday weekend must be perfect, entirely perfect; exactly as if had stepped straight into the pages of her favourite book. And it was going to be that way because he wouldn’t allow it to be anything less.

Miranda phoned just as Ally staggered back in through the front door from an afternoon’s supply teaching, with Kyle and Josie bickering in her wake and a thousand plastic carrier bags of shopping dangling from her straining arms.

She flung the whole lot onto the kitchen table, dislodging the cat from its usual sleeping place in what used to be the fruit bowl, and made a grab for the wall-mounted phone.

‘Hello? Yes?’

‘Is that you, Ally?’ enquired Miranda’s voice. ‘What am I saying? Of course it is, nobody has vowels like yours.’

‘What?’

‘Your vowels. They’re very distinctive. You know, very . . . Gloucestershire.’

‘What – common, you mean?’ Ally stuck her tongue out at her sister down the line. ‘Gee thanks. As I recall,’ she added, trying to shove maxi-packs of crisps into the kitchen wall cupboards, ‘yours were even broader than mine before you did that charity thing with Joanna Lumley.’

Miranda’s laughter tinkled like crystal waters down an Alpine mountainside. ‘Oh Ally, you’re so funny. A real scream.’ Right on cue, an ear-splitting shriek threatened to shatter her left eardrum. ‘What on earth are those children of yours doing? They’re awfully . . . loud.’

‘Kids are,’ replied Ally, with a glare at her wayward progeny. ‘Oh, just normal kid stuff. Fighting with sticks of celery actually.’

‘Oh. How creative. Now listen, it’s about my party next week.’

‘Your . . . *surprise* party?’ enquired Ally with a smile. ‘The one you’re not supposed to know about?’

Miranda waved this aside airily. ‘Oh, Gav knows I know, and we both want to make sure it’s absolutely perfect. Besides, I’m much better at organising functions than he is. So I wanted to let you know about the dress code.’

Ally’s jaw dropped. ‘What dress code? I thought this was a family birthday party.’

‘Well I think it’s a little more than that, darling. I’m not forty every year, thank God. In fact next year I think I’ll go back to thirty-nine and start counting backwards. Anyhow, it’s fancy dress for the Saturday do, but you’re not to worry because I’m having something run up specially for you and the kids.’

‘What!’

‘She’s a wonderful designer. You’ll love it when you see it, you really will.’

Ally sank slowly onto one of the kitchen chairs, blinking mechanically and craving chocolate. ‘Fancy dress?’ she repeated faintly. ‘But I was just going to pop down to the Matalan sale.’