



Chapter 1

Ronald Arthur Stilton, nicknamed 'Cheesy' by his old classmates, for obvious reasons, walked quickly along the street, pulling his muffler up around his nose and mouth in an effort to keep warm. The December day was cold and it looked as though the country was in for a hard winter.

'Cheesy', or Ronnie, as he preferred, wasn't sure exactly where he was going but would probably end up at the Salvation Army's soup kitchen where he could be sure of a decent meal.

Life had never been kind to him. Born with an unusual bone formation in his face Ronald was rejected by his unmarried mother who signed him over to Social Services for adoption. It never took place, of course, as prospective parents didn't warm to the idea of a child who appeared quite so ugly. Doubtless there were kind people who could see past the outer shell to a baby who deserved a chance in life and a loving home but unfortunately for Ronnie, they never came his way.

He had a miserable time for years in the Children's Home he was brought up in. The other boys ostracised him and he was never allowed to join in their games. The Staff practically ignored him except to provide him with food, clothing and a small room on the top floor.

It wasn't much better at school except for a teacher named Mrs. Brown who tried to help him and to insist that in her class he was treated as everyone else.

He never had a real friend of his own but at least he had a tolerable time whilst he was at Clicton Infant School. One teacher Mrs Brown had shown him the only

kindness he ever remembered. She tolerated no nonsense in class and every child was treated the same. She always behaved as though Ronnie was just like the other small pupils in her class. If anyone dared to throw something Ron's way then they were made to stand in the corner for a while and then made to apologise.

When it was time to move to Cliction Junior School things were not so good. No one there took much of an interest in him, the teachers didn't seem to know how to treat him and the other pupils behaved as children often do. They either ignored him or laughed at him behind his back. He wasn't stupid and he saw them laughing at him on numerous occasions.

A strong resentment began to build up in 'Cheesy' who vowed that one day they would be sorry. "Who are they to act this way," he frequently mumbled to himself. "It isn't right. I have done nothing to upset them. Why do they have to behave so badly?"

Life at Comprehensive School was worse as some of the boys would follow him when he left school making loud monkey noises and knocked off his cap.

One of them called Denzil Orpington had punched him to the ground on a few occasions and he had bruised badly. Denzil's girlfriend Beth Sleighthouse always stood around laughing and egging on her boyfriend whom she affectionately called 'Bruiser'. Ronnie hated them both and was determined that somehow he would make them and the rest of the gang regret their actions. If he had to spend most of his life planning his revenge, make no mistake, it was going to happen.

When he was fifteen he was sent by the doctor, who visited the home, to see a consultant at the University Hospital. He was offered surgery and was advised to take the opportunity to have some reconstruction work performed on his face. After much persuasion he agreed to it. He would accept anything that would keep him away from school for a lengthy period and at least here he was shown some understanding and kindness. Who could tell? Maybe he would end up looking normal which was all he had ever wanted.

Sadly surgery failed to make him look any better. In fact his once sunken nose now seemed the most prominent facial feature. In Cheesy's opinion he looked worse than before and he refused to entertain the idea of having further surgery.

At last on this cold December evening, he shuffled into the warm hall where Salvation Army Officers served up a decent hot meal. He took his plate and sat at one of the long tables and gratefully ate everything quickly.

He had been one of the lucky ones and was early enough to secure a bed for the night at a nearby hostel. After he had checked in there, he lay on his bed plotting his revenge on some of those who had hurt him in the past. 'Bruiser' and his gang would regret the day they ever met him.

He was twenty two years old now and it was time to plan for his future. "Which way would his life go?" he asked himself. "Could he ever be a success in life or would it be downhill even from this low point. Was there anything he could do to improve his lot in life?"

Chapter 2

Denzil Orpington had progressed well once he knuckled down to work at school. He was from, what he described, as a middle class home and had parents who believed that they had supported him well. It was true that they had encouraged him to follow his dream of becoming an accountant but that's as far as things went. His mother was out a great deal eating, drinking and making merry with her fine friends

while his father never had much time for his son whom he regarded as lazy. A frequent clip round the ear was his way of encouraging his son to work harder.

Perhaps Denzil's eventual choice of profession would seem strange to some of his old classmates but he had always enjoyed maths and had done well in his 'O' and 'A' level examinations which stood him in good stead to go to University to study accountancy.

Once he had qualified he found it relatively easy to land a job with a large firm of accountants in his home town of Clicton. When he had been with the firm for a year he thought that he could now manage to put down a deposit on a house and then look around for a girl with whom to share his life. Beth Sleighthouse had ditched him for some bookworm of a fool called 'Henry'. Well she had never known a good thing when she saw it so as far as he was concerned he was well off without her. He needed a partner who was at least as intelligent as himself. The Blicktons had the gall to live around the corner from him but perhaps he should have checked who lived in the neighbourhood before he bought his house. Well never mind, perhaps she would regret her choice when she saw how well he was doing and what a corker his prospective wife would be.

Denzil's parents still considered that they had been good to him but as far as Nigel was concerned they could have done a great deal more for him and he began to find it oppressive to have his every move scrutinised even though he was now an adult. Feeling that he now needed a place of his own, he had recently arranged a mortgage on a detached house close to the office. He moved and was settling in to a reasonably happy routine when three months later, unknown to him things were about to change.

He left work a little later than usual on Monday evening and as he hurried across the city centre he didn't pay much attention to the figure huddled outside a shop doorway shaking an old baked beans tin in an attempt to beg a few coins from passers by.

Denzil had lost weight and no longer resembled the fat slob who had tormented him in school but as Ronnie glanced up he would have recognised that supercilious fool anywhere.

He got up quickly and followed at a safe distance to see if he could find out where he lived. It didn't take all that long until he saw his quarry enter a smart detached house in Elmer Road. It had the kind of name that suited him well, 'Mon repose'. What an idiot Denzil was Ronnie thought. He still hated him and would make him pay. He was in no rush and intended to think carefully how best to get his revenge. If he could blackmail him he would. If he refused or started to use his old method of punching then he knew what he would do, kill him. He fingered the knife in his pocket and made his way back to the centre to try to beg a few more coins which would ensure him a meal and a bed for the night. Unlike the Salvation Army Hostel, the other in the city charged a small fee. Shivering in the cold he told himself that before long he would be well off. He intended to find a way of getting into that house in Elmer Road and helping himself to a few items before carrying out his plan of blackmail.

Chapter 3

Beth had been surprised the first time she saw Denzil in the vicinity of the city centre and had been going to stop and speak to him but he had given a brief nod and

curt "Hullo" and had passed on quickly. It surprised her but didn't unduly worry her for she had found him too clinging and possessive when she was at school and she felt she had become wiser in her choice of boyfriends after she left school. However, it did disappoint and annoy her a little that she had been more or less ignored by Denzil. Beth did not like to be ignored!

Her husband Henry had been a fellow student on an English course at university and they had been attracted to each other from Freshers' Week. They had enjoyed their time at Bristol University and both succeeded in gaining a degree. They then studied for a B.Ed degree as well and had finally secured teaching jobs in Clifton.

They bought a house near the city centre which was in the next road to Denzil Orpington. Denzil was going to have very little effect on Beth's life unlike her old classmate she knew as 'Cheesy'. Unfortunately for Beth she never thought of the boy she had helped to bully and was completely oblivious of any danger he might pose.

Beth rarely walked anywhere and had never noticed him in his favourite spot for begging, outside Boots the Chemist, just a few streets away from where she lived.

One evening Beth decided she was eating too much and not exercising enough. She took a pride in her appearance so thought as it was a mild evening she would take a short walk. She knew she should change her ways and become more active if she didn't want to become too much overweight. She set off to walk around the neighbourhood and passing Denzil's house she wondered if she should knock the door and attempt to smooth his obviously ruffled feathers. He was probably still annoyed that she had rejected him.

She decided against it at least for this evening. After all tomorrow was another day and she could always change her mind then.

Walking on she hadn't noticed the figure in the hooded duffle coat watching her from across the road. As she continued her circuitous route around the streets she was followed and observed entering her house by none other than 'Cheesy' Stilton. However one day soon she would be made very much aware of his whereabouts

Chapter 4

Bryn Blakely who had been another of the gang had never been academically gifted. When he left school he spent three months looking for a job. He liked money and knew it wouldn't fall into his lap. He needed to work and was delighted when he was offered a place in a large firm of building contractors who had a scheme for training carpenters within the firm.

His chance came when he answered an advertisement at the Job Centre which he diligently visited every day. He had applied and was offered an interview and a week later had been accepted for training. He had been on the minimum wage while serving his apprenticeship but now he was on a reasonable salary for a man of his age.

He still lived in his home town of Clifton and had met his old mate 'Bruiser' when the firm had been asked to make fitted cupboards for the new house in Elmer Road. Good old 'Bruiser' now insisted on being called Denzil. He seemed not too keen on renewing his friendship but that was O.K. by Bryn. He knew his old mate had always been a bit 'stuck up'. He imagined, for some unknown reason, that he was better than the rest of humanity, silly fool. As long as he paid on time Bryn was happy enough. He had plenty of friends both around the area he lived in and at work. He suspected 'Bruiser' was still a loner without any real friends of his own.

The firm had a policy whereby all customers were visited six months after work had been completed to check that they were satisfied and any problems rectified. It

was important for the good name of the business to have happy customers who would then be likely to recommend them to others.

Bryn had been asked to accompany one of the more senior people in the firm to check on the work at 'Bruiser's house early one evening. They were relieved to find the visit short and sweet as Mr. Orpington had been satisfied with the work carried out and had already recommended them to one of the men at the office.

Glad to get away quickly the men went their separate ways. After all there was more to life than work and both men had made plans to enjoy themselves having an evening meal at the pub with friends.

Bryn had no idea that another old classmate of his was watching from the end of the road. He was oblivious too that he was followed all the way home on the twenty minute walk to the housing estate in the older part of Clifton where the residences were considered to be less desirable than those in Elmer Road. Here in Duke Street the houses were older and had been built at the beginning of the last century. Bryn had a flat in his parents house but was currently saving hard to buy his own place probably in the same area. He had been happy living where he did but now he needed his freedom and to get away from the constant watchful eye of his mother. Much as he loved his parents, he felt he needed to live his life without any interference. He had no current girlfriend but was quite taken with a girl who frequented the same pub as he did on a Friday night. It was his intention to ask her out to see a film one evening. If his friendship was to grow he didn't want his parents observing his every move! As he thought of this he turned the key in the lock and went into his flat without seeing 'Cheesy' pass on the other side of the street.

Chapter 5

Ronnie had started keeping a record in a small notebook which he had stolen from a local stationer's. He knew it was a stupid thing to do. If he had been caught they would have called the police and he didn't want that kind of trouble in his life. He had to be certain that there was no police record if he wanted to achieve his dream of exacting revenge for his unhappy childhood. Someone had to pay and he'd make damn sure they did. The honest truth was that he couldn't afford the sixty five pence to buy the book. He wanted to keep a record of names and addresses of his future victims. He needed to know their routine and note down the times they left the house, where they went, how long they stayed and when they arrived home for the night. Planning was everything he decided.

The weeks went by and he had kept a record of the times his ex-classmates left and returned home. He had plenty of pages left for the other two tormentors if he was ever lucky enough to find them. They had not been so unkind to him but they did play their part in egging on the others. He wasn't too worried if he didn't find them but he intended to keep looking. He read what he had written so far and wished he could be neater but that had never been a strong point with him. At least he could read it and that was all that mattered. It read:-

Denzil

Leaves 8.30 a.m. - work

Returns 5.20 p.m.

Leaves 7.30 p.m. - Pub Returns

8.30 p.m. -

Bed 11.0 p.m.

Beth

Leaves 8.20 a.m. - work

Returns 4.30 p.m.

Leaves 8.15 p.m. - Walking

Bed 10.30 p.m.

Beth's Husband

Leaves with Beth at 8.20 a.m. - work

Returns at 5.0 p.m.

Leaves 8.0 p.m. - some kind of keep fit class

Returns 9.15 p.m.

Bryn

Leaves 8.0 a.m. - work

Returns 5.0 p.m.

Leaves 7.30 p.m. - Pub

Returns 9.0 p.m.

Bed - unknown

He decided to observe them for several months before making a move. As far as he had been able to tell the above times were their usual routine on weekdays. The weekends were different and he decided to keep clear as there were too many people about

during the day. Neighbours tended to pop into friends nearby and he didn't want to be noticed by anyone. He would have liked to know Bryn's bedtime as he was planning to visit just before that time to catch him by surprise but as he appeared to have an apartment at the back of the house it wasn't possible to see when lights went on and off.

His next aim was to try and procure a sharp knife but he was never going to have enough money for one. He didn't want to be caught stealing so would have to look around town to see what possibilities arose.

On the following two Saturdays he spent time visiting shops in the centre and on one street leading off the main shopping street, he found a place selling Swiss Army Knives. He spent some time looking in the window and noticed how busy it always became around 10.30 a.m.

He decided that on the next Saturday he would go in. He would wear the only other jacket he possessed as his duffle coat with hood would probably get him noticed in this up market shop. On the day in question he wore a trilby hat which he had stolen from one of the old men in the hostel one night and he looked fairly presentable with his jacket and tie. He entered the shop as soon as there were other customers keeping the owner busy and he browsed around. Besides their main knives they also carried a stock of antique daggers and one caught his eye. It was within easy reach and he decided to grab it when no one was looking. Waiting for his chance he snatched it while the owner was counting out change at the till and other customers were busy examining knives. He quickly secreted it in his inside pocket and quietly made his way to the door. Once outside he hurried as fast as possible to the nearby park where he had hidden his bundle of possessions behind some bushes. Changing back into his old duffle coat he sat on one of the benches grateful to have avoided detection. Fate was obviously on his side.

Chapter 6

Henry Blickton had fancied Beth the moment he saw her at university. He had been a very happy man when she returned his smile. Their romance had flourished quickly and looking back he blessed the day he had the good fortune to apply to the same university as Beth. He thought it strange how relationships happened almost by chance. What if he had been accepted at his second choice university? Would he have met someone else and now be married to her? As things were he thought himself a very lucky man. It seemed they shared everything and his wife had even told him how she had been involved with Denzil Orpinton who seemed a very unsavoury sort at least when he was at school. It seemed he had changed as he grew older and had managed to train for a good career. Well good for him! He admired a man who worked hard to better himself. He hoped Denzil would find happiness with someone else.

He had been surprised and sorry though to learn from Beth that Denzil had been such a bully at school and that Beth had gone along with it for fear of upsetting him. He knew it wasn't really her. She was a kind person at heart. Well children are sometimes drawn into things in an effort to be one of the crowd. They had both changed for the better as often happens with youngsters like that. They grow up and learn about life and how to respect others.

Henry longed for a son of his own but agreed with Beth that they needed to accrue some savings before they even thought of her giving up work for a while to concentrate on motherhood. They were both happy with the way things were at the moment. He knew that some people thought him a bit weird and bookish but he was as aware of the world as anyone else. Heaven help anyone who messed with him, after all he had gained a brown belt in martial arts the previous year. Discipline was the main thing it taught him, not that he really needed teaching that particular skill. He had always believed in behaving as one should. Respect for others and oneself. He was hoping to eventually teach martial arts. If he succeeded in obtaining his black belt early next year he would apply. These days it was good for a man to be prepared. There were some peculiar people walking the streets in every town or city. It was comforting to know that he would be able to protect himself, his wife and any family they had.

One thing Henry was oblivious of because Beth had never actually mentioned it to him, probably being unaware of it herself, was that she had an enemy. If only he had known he would have attempted to diffuse the situation and talk some sense into this would be killer but Henry didn't know. He was a very well rounded character but was completely unaware that he was followed daily and his whereabouts recorded by Ronald Arthur Stilton.

On the other side of town another old classmate of Beth's was about to be revealed to Beth, Denzil, Bryn and 'Cheesy'. Danny Lexington had been in their gang at school and had played his part in supporting 'Bruiser' mostly out of fear. He didn't enjoy hurting people but was too afraid of the class bully to be ostracised by the group. When he left school, he had breathed a sigh of relief, and had no desire to see any of the gang again. By nature he was a gentle soul and had since trained as a hairdresser for male and female clients only. He had trained in a large Salon in Bristol but had recently returned to Clifton where his parents and brother still lived. He had gone into partnership with his uncle Maurice who had spent his life trimming the hair of the local residents. He now hoped to expand their customer base with the skills he knew his nephew possessed. Danny was never going to marry, but

he hoped that somewhere there existed another gentle male who would love him for himself and become his long term partner. Danny had an aptitude for hairdressing. He could cut well, shape and style, perm, colour, in fact he had acquired all the skills a good hairdresser should have. He had recently entered a regional competition and much to his surprise had won. There would soon be a national event and he intended to enter that too. Very luckily for Danny he was about to make peace with an old classmate of his.

Having treated himself to the cinema on Wednesday evening he walked through the centre of town and noticed a figure sitting huddled begging outside of Boots the Chemist. He searched for a £1 coin and put it in the old tin on the pavement. He looked at the figure sitting there and then said, " Good God, Cheesy is that you? Man what's happened to you?" He crouched down and said, "What are you doing here? You're not homeless are you?"

After Ronnie had give a mumbled "Yes," Danny said. "That's hard mate. I hope things get better for you soon. Look I owe you an apology, I'm really sorry about what happened at school. I'm ashamed that I stood by without doing anything when that shit 'Bruiser' laid into you. I was just scared of him. If I can make it up to you in anyway I will. I'm a hairdresser now and work across town but if you want your hair cut at any time come on over and I'll do it free for you."

Ronnie was surprised. He hadn't given much thought to Danny and thought this was one man who had guts unlike the other members of the gang. He had been big enough to apologise and know he had been wrong.

"That's O.K. Danny. You are forgiven. I was scared stiff of 'Bruiser' too. I hope to God I never meet him again. I'd still run a mile to get out of his way. Thanks for the offer too. I may well take you up on it."

"Yes please do Ronnie. It would make me feel a bit better too to try and make amends. Here have one of my cards. It has my address on it. Come on over one day. It's always quiet on a Thursday morning for some reason," and with that he shook hands and hurried home.

'Cheesy' felt a bit unsettled. He had hoped none of his classmates would ever learn his whereabouts but he thought he had covered himself well when he had told Danny that he would run a mile if he saw 'Bruiser' again. Far from it! When he was ready he intended to confront him, corner him and kill him.

Chapter 7

Ronnie lay on his bed at the hostel that night and thought over the events of the day. Even for those down on their luck, as he was, some days could be very surprising. Who would have thought that one of the old gang would turn out to be an 'O.K. kind of guy' like Danny. Never in a million years would he ever have thought someone would apologise for him. It was a first! He might as well take him up on his offer too. No harm in getting a free hair cut so he'd wait a few days and then wander over there to see what the place was like.

The next few days passed as usual for him as he sat in his place in the town centre begging for a few coins to ensure a roof over his head for that night. The days were beginning to get colder and once or twice he had been moved on from his wet weather pitch inside one of the doorways. They said he was blocking the entrance which wasn't really true but he didn't want any trouble with the police so on wet days he made for the park where he found shelter from the weather in an old disused hut.

The roof leaked but at least he could dodge the worst of it by resting in the corner. He passed the time by reading his notebook and jotting down more entries.

On the afternoon of the following Thursday he decided that as he'd already made enough money to pay for his bed at the hostel, he'd walk over to Danny's place and get his hair cut. The day was sunny and a brisk walk would do him good, he thought. Reaching the other side of town he eventually found his way to the smart looking hairdressing shop. He stood outside looking in. There were four chairs facing large mirrors and he could see Danny and someone he guessed was Danny's uncle, busy with customers. There were two other people there waiting their turn. They all seemed to be laughing at something the uncle had said. He wasn't sure what to do. Should he go in now or wait until the customers left. He thought that was best so walked on a little way down the street and then crossed over to the other side where he could spot anyone going in or out of the hairdressing salon. Eventually three of them left so he strolled slowly back and peered in at the window. The uncle was still cutting the hair of the remaining customer and Danny was sweeping up. He suddenly looked up at the window and then waved. He came out, brush in hand, and said, "Ronnie! Glad you made it here mate. Come on in and look around the place."

He ushered Ronnie in and asked him to take a seat while he just finished brushing up and then they'd show him around, cut his hair if he wanted it cut and then all have a chat and a cup of tea. It was almost closing time anyway and they were not likely to get any more customers that day. It had been very busy all day and they'd be glad of an early finish. As soon as the last customer left Danny introduced his old classmate to his Uncle Maurice who shook him warmly by the hand and said, "Good to see you Ron, Danny said you might call by. Now shall I cut your hair while Dan gets us all a cup of tea?"

Not sure what to expect Ronnie took off his duffle coat and left it on the hook provided. Then sitting in one of the chairs, put himself in the hands of Danny's uncle. "Any idea which cut you'd like or do you want to leave it to me to shape it a bit?" asked Maurice who these days pronounced his name 'Maureece' in the French way, believing it gave a more 'classy' feel to the name of the salon.

"I've no idea how to have it cut to be honest. I've never bothered with it much as you can see," replied Ronnie.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, if it's O.K. with you. I'll trim it first of all and get some sort of shape to it and then we'll give it a quick shampoo and you'll be a transformed man!" That O.K. with you mate?"

"Sure, thanks, go ahead I'm all for a bit of improvement," said Ronnie

A half an hour later his look was completely transformed. He'd never be a handsome young man but at least he was now a tidy and presentable one. He thanked the uncle and Danny for this rare treat and then sat down with them to enjoy a cup of tea and the chocolate biscuits provided.

He thought he'd better get back to book in at the hostel and as he was leaving Maurice said, "Look Ron, why don't you come over one evening and we'll all have a meal together. I'm quite a good cook as Danny can vouch. Look at him he's putting on weight. He used to be such a puny kid but at last there is a bit of beef on him!"

"Yes do come over Ronnie, Uncle Maurice is fantastic at rustling up a tasty meal," added Danny.

"Oh thanks! I'd like that," replied Ronnie, hardly able to believe his good luck.

"O.K. make it next Thursday as it seems to be our quietest day and we usually finish work a bit earlier."

"Right I will and thanks so much for the haircut," replied Ronnie as he turned and left the salon.

Chapter 8

The following couple of weeks passed slowly for 'Cheesy' as he continued to monitor the comings and goings of Beth and her husband, Denzil and Bryn. He still intended to carry out his plan to take his revenge on all of them but he had decided that he would not harm Danny in any way. He and his uncle couldn't have been kinder and it looked as though he had his first real friend in Dan. He had firmly believed he would never have a friend of his own and it felt really good to know that someone actually cared about him.

When Thursday arrived at last he made his way over to 'Salon Maurice' at the appointed time. Danny opened the door and appeared to be bursting with news.

"Come in Ronnie, have I got some news to share with you!! You are never going to believe it but I am in the final round of the hairdressing competition!! Uncle Maurice is over the moon with excitement. Even if I don't win he says it will be good for the business as the local newspapers are sure to get hold of it."

"Crumbs Danny that's wonderful, well done, it looks as though you will become famous before long."

"Come on Ron, let's get upstairs and celebrate, uncle decided on roast chicken with all the trimmings for dinner and he bought a couple of bottles of bubbly to celebrate."

"I can't wait, it all sounds delicious," said a hungry 'Cheesy'.

They went up to the living quarters where Maurice was fussing about putting the finishing touches to the table settings.

"Hi Ronnie, have you heard the good news? Come on in, take his coat Danny, and you come and sit here Ron," Maurice said indicating one of the chairs.

"Gosh Mr. Lexington, it all looks wonderful, thanks so much for inviting me. I can't wait to sample it all," replied Ronnie.

"Enough of the 'Mr. Lexington' young man. I think you should call me 'Uncle Maurice' the same as Danny does."

Ronnie smiled and said he'd try to remember. It gave him a good feeling to be accepted as a friend by both of them. His luck had obviously changed.

Within minutes they all tucked into an excellent meal and a few glasses of Champagne after which Danny and Ronnie cleared the table and loaded up the dishwasher.

"Thanks so much Maurice," said Ronnie when they were all comfortably seated later.

"Our pleasure Ron and while you are here there is something we want to discuss with you. Danny is going to be busy now preparing for his trip to London for the finals of the competition and we were wondering whether you would consider helping out here. If it suited you we have a spare room on the floor above and you could have it rent free if you helped a little in the salon by keeping the place tidy and answering the 'phone. We may be able to manage a few quid at the end of the week too especially if the business increases as much as we are hoping. Oh by the way I don't know whether you realise it but there is a separate entrance to the living quarters. It's the front door next to the salon. If you decided to take us up on our offer you can have your own front door key."

"Oh my God! I can't believe you would do that for me," replied an astonished Ronnie.

"The way we see it is that we shall be doing each other a favour if you accept the offer."

"I may not be the most handsome fellow on the block Maurice but I'm not a stupid one and there is no way I can refuse such a generous offer! A million thanks and what's more I don't need to think about it. My answer is 'Yes please'."

"Excellent! Drink up then and Danny can show you the room and you can move in whenever you like."

Danny took his new friend upstairs and Ronnie was surprised at what a pleasant room it was. It was already furnished as a guest room and had a window overlooking the main road. He somehow felt he would be happy here and going downstairs again he explained that he had booked in the hostel for that night but he would love to move in on the following day.

Everyone agreed it would be the best thing to do and now Ron was going to have a permanent address he would be eligible to claim some money from the Government as his income would still be far below the national minimum wage.

Hugging his new friends he thanked them again and said he'd see them the following day and making his way back to the hostel he found it hard to believe that this might well be his last night seeking help from the Salvation Army.

Chapter 9

The following morning after breakfast at the hostel, Ronnie packed his few belongings into a plastic carrier bag he had removed from a rubbish bin at the park and left the hostel for what he hoped was the last time. He was grateful to them for without these places he would probably have died of cold last winter.

It was a fine sunny morning but there was a crisp feel of approaching winter in the air. It was just the weather for walking and as he walked through the park on his way to 'Salon Maurice', he thought he would have to suspend his long term ambition of making his old school tormentors pay. There was no hurry, they could all wait while he settled in his new home and helped out in the salon.

When he arrived at his new accommodation, he spotted Maurice and Danny at work as he passed the window of the salon, then he put proudly the key in the lock, hardly daring to believe he would now have a permanent home and no longer have to wander the streets. He went up the stairs two by two and opened the door to his room. Sitting on his bed he looked around trying to decide where to put his few things. He took his jacket from the plastic carrier bag and placed it on a coat hanger in the wardrobe where he saw a short white jacket and a pair of black trousers on their respective hangers. Danny probably forgot they were there so he'd remind him later. He was concerned that the oriental dagger would be a bit of a problem and decided that he would secrete it under the mattress for the time being. It was still in the original wrapping as he wanted to make sure his finger prints were never found on the weapon.

He noticed a note on a side table and went over to see what it was. It was a note from Maurice who had written, "Welcome to your new home Ron, if you are here before midday as planned, would you go to the kitchen and rustle us up some

corned beef sandwiches and a pot of tea for us all. You'll find the bread in the kitchen cupboard and I've washed some tomatoes and lettuce which are in a bowl in the 'fridge. We can then have a quick lunch before we get back to work. By the way did you see the jacket and trousers in the wardrobe? They are your uniform if you are going to help out in the salon. You seemed a standard medium size so let's hope they fit."

"Ronnie was excited as he took the jacket and trousers from the wardrobe and tried them on. They were almost a perfect fit and with his new hairdo he felt he was at least passable as a normal human being. He changed back into his own clothes, replaced his new uniform and went to the bathroom to freshen up a bit. That done he made his way to the kitchen where he found the things for lunch and had made the sandwiches just before Maurice and Danny arrived for lunch.

They seemed genuinely pleased that he was here and appeared to have settled in.

"Well done Ron these sandwiches are great," said Danny wolfing down the first one swiftly followed by a few mouthfuls of hot sweet tea.

"That's given me an idea," said Maurice. "We ought to diversify and offer our customers a range of sandwiches. Most of them are busy people who call in on their way to or from work. Others take an early lunch hour. They may all be happy to buy a few sandwiches."

"A good idea Uncle Maurice but if Ronnie is to help in the salon, when are we going to have time to make sandwiches. We start work early in the morning now and I don't think we could cope with any less sleep!" replied Danny

"The three of us could join forces and work as a team. We'd make them the night before and store them in the 'fridge until the following morning."

"It seems like a great idea to me," said Ronnie.

"Well we could give it a try for a few weeks, although I think we should wait until after my London trip." suggested Danny.

"Well we can leave it for a week or so until you are back and while Ron settles into the routine of work. When we finish this evening we'll show you what you would need to do each day Ron, but perhaps for this afternoon you could peel the vegetables for dinner? We have some chicken breasts and we can make a large chicken stew with dumplings. How does that sound?"

"Like I've died and gone to Heaven," joked Ronnie. "Only too pleased to help out Uncle Maurice," he chortled.

During the afternoon Ronnie peeled the vegetables as requested then went for a short walk in the park. He sat down on one of the benches and watched as a few people passed by. Nobody paid him any attention which really pleased him. All his life, until he had met Danny and Maurice, people looked back with curiosity if they caught sight of his face. Now with his transformed hairstyle he didn't need his hood to half cover his face. He felt he could look the world in the eye without blinking.

He wished he had had some cookery lessons at school but in those days it was girls only who graced the kitchens of Clicton School. If only he knew how, he'd have attempted to cook the stew for dinner so that it would save Maurice further work. He'd ask him to show him what to do so that he could make it in future.

Arriving back he found that the salon was just closing and he went upstairs to wait for the workers to arrive.

When he explained to Maurice he'd love to learn how to make the stew, Maurice was only too delighted to pass on his knowledge to Ronnie. It was good that

the lad wanted to learn. It would help them all in the future if he spent a little extra time now explaining what to do.

"It's simple really Ron, all you do is chop up all the vegetables finely, fry a chopped onion, and add it all plus the cut up chicken to a large saucepan, add a stock cube and pint and a half of water and bring it all to the boil quickly. Once boiling turn down the heat and simmer until everything is cooked. About thirty to forty minutes should do the trick. Meanwhile we need to make the doughboys with flour, margarine and a pinch of salt and pepper, form them into balls and drop them into the stew for the last twenty minutes," Maurice explained.

"You make it sound simple but I shall write it down after we've eaten and I'll give it a try next time it's on the menu," replied Ronnie.

"Good we'll look forward to it," said Maurice. "Let's have a sit down and a glass of wine while we wait for it to finish cooking. After we've eaten Dan can take you down to the salon and just run through what we'd like you to help with."

After they had eaten a very tasty first course, followed by an apple pie and custard which had been purchased from a small shop further down the street, Danny showed Ron how to sweep up after he and his uncle had cut the hair of each customer. "In this job Ron, we need to smile and be pleasant to the customers whether we take to them or not. They are our bread and butter so we want them to keep coming back. After each one has gone give the washbasins a quick rub over with the wet wipes provided, and take two clean towels from the pile over there and place them the rail at each side of the basin. Another job you could do is to make sure these shampoo bottles are filled from the larger containers over there on the shelf. Always take the bottles over to the sink in the small room over there. Never try to do it at the sinks here in the salon. It doesn't look right and there is quite a skill in filling them without having it overflow and run everywhere. Don't worry about things mate. It isn't rocket science and you'll soon get the hang of it."

Ronnie said he was looking forward to being useful to someone and couldn't wait to get started the following morning. After his brief introduction to the work in the salon, the two friends went back upstairs to relax with Maurice and to watch one of Danny's favourite T.V. programmes.

Chapter 10

Ron was up early the following morning. He had a wash, then donned his new uniform. Going down to the kitchen he found Maurice and Danny already there eating a breakfast of cereal, toast and marmalade.

"Good Morning Ron, are you ready for business?" asked Maurice.

"Sure thing boss, I'm ready, willing and able as you see," replied Ronnie cheerfully.

"Our first customer, Mr. Parsons, is sure to be waiting as he's always outside at 8.0 o'clock on a Friday. He likes to have a trim, every two weeks, on his way to work. Once you get to know the regulars you can open the door and welcome them in. Just watch how it's done when I open the door this morning."

"You'll be fine Ron," said Danny. "They are all quite a decent lot really and will be interested to see you as it's only been uncle and me here until now. Don't be afraid to chat them up a bit if they speak to you. Some of them seem to enjoy the banter."

They cleared up quickly and made their way down to the salon where sure enough Mr. Parsons was waiting. Ronnie watched as Maurice opened the door and said,

"Good morning Mr. Parsons, welcome! Quite a bright day I see, and you have just made it that bit brighter. Come on in and take your usual chair,"

Mr. Parsons smiled and said, "You are always a flatterer Maurice. On with the trim and give me a quick shave today please, I need to look my best as we have visitors at the office this morning. They could be good for business so I want to make a good impression."

"No problem at all, we'll have you looking as great as one of the royal princes," joked Maurice.

"Ah, the one thing even you can't do Maurice is to make me as tall as them! If only....!", he said laughingly.

He spotted Ron, standing in a corner, brush in hand, "Oh do you have a new assistant?"

"Yes this is a friend of ours Ronnie, and it's his first day here."

"Oh good luck Ronnie! You could do much worse than work here. These are good guys and quite talented too. Our Danny is off to London soon I believe?"

"Only for a couple of weeks Mr. Parsons," said Danny. "I wouldn't move there for any amount of money. I love it here."

"Good, well said young man! You see Ronnie that's the kind of loyalty we like about this place. Anyway you settle in and you'll be fine."

"Thanks Mr. Parsons, I will," said Ronnie shyly.

Soon a number of customers came in and took their place in the chairs provided. As Maurice and Danny finished cutting the hair of each one, Ronnie swept up, cleaned the washbasins that had been used, changed the used towels for clean ones and did his best to answer pleasantly when addressed by various customers.

The time seem to pass very quickly and before long Maurice said, "O.K. well done both of you. Turn the sign on the door to 'closed' Ron. It's time to go up for a spot of lunch. Friday afternoon can be quite busy so we need be get down here by 2.0 p.m. sharp.

After enjoying a Pizza Marguerite with salad they returned for the afternoon shift. It went much the same as the morning and Ronnie felt more relaxed and enjoyed the feeling of being useful.

That evening Maurice said he was really pleased with the way things had gone. He was a little concerned at how they would manage while Danny was in London but hoped his customers would not mind waiting a little longer than usual. Now Ronnie was helping out they would probably manage and hopefully not lose any custom.

That next few weeks passed quickly and it was soon time for Danny to make the trip to London. He was given many instructions by Maurice and taking it all in good part he hugged his uncle and asked him to keep his fingers crossed that he would at least do well and come somewhere near the top. If he could achieve that then his name would become known in all the right places.

The three of them went to the station together and eventually the train came in and Danny found a window seat and as the train drew out of the station he waved happily at the two standing on the platform waving frantically and giving a thumbs up sign.

Danny wondered what the future held and prayed he'd do well and make Uncle Maurice proud of him.

Chapter 11

Danny was too tense to relax as his journey started. He was nervous but very excited at the thought of being in the final. His parents would have been so proud of him. He missed them greatly since the car accident which had taken them from him when he was ten years old. What a godsend Uncle Maurice, his father's brother, had been taking him in and loving him like the son he had always wanted. It had taken him some years to get over the shock of losing his parents and he felt it was one reason that he had been persuaded to join Bruiser's gang at school. People are so peculiar at times he thought. Who would have thought poor old Ron would turn out to be a decent fellow. He hoped the others had grown up a bit too and that as adults they were ashamed of their behaviour at school. At least he had been given the opportunity of making it up to Ron.

He ran through in his mind the stages of the competition. First cut and style the fairly long hair of a male model, followed by a female. Then create a unique style for a volunteer for the last stage.

All equipment would be provided at the leading London establishment which was to host the competition. The T.V. cameras would be there and all the finalists were to wear a short sleeved white top and black trousers. Well no change there then. At least that was what he was used to. He had several of his own styles which he could use for the third stage but it would all depend on the shape of his model's face as to which he would use. It was going to be a tense situation and he just prayed he was up to it. Almost before he knew it the train arrived at Paddington Station and he collected his overnight bag and made his way to the exit where he queued for a taxi to take him to the West End of the city where he had been booked into a hotel near the salon.

When he arrived he went to check in and was asked to go to the small lounge just to the left of reception where the other contestants were gathering and where they would be met by two of the organisers. He did as instructed and found that he was the last to arrive. One of the older men approached him and said, "You must be Danny Lexington then?"

"Yes that's right," replied Danny.

"Welcome and good luck for the competition. As you see the other five contestants have arrived so first of all we are all going to have coffee and cakes so that we can chat and get to know each other. Our aim is to get you all as relaxed as possible so that hopefully you will all have a happy stay in London whatever the outcome."

"Thank you, that sounds wonderful," replied Danny.

The coffee cups and cakes had been placed on a table at the side of the room and everyone was asked to help themselves. The six contestants needed no second invitation. They quickly made their way to the refreshments and began talking to each other as they stood around.

One young man was from the Devon, one from Scotland, one from Wales, a young lady from Northern Ireland, another from London and Danny from Clifton. They all seemed friendly and each was thrilled to be here. Each was ready to show their skills to the world.

After a twenty minute break they were all asked to take a seat while the organisers explained how the following day would be organised. In the morning after breakfast they were to assemble in the foyer of the hotel where they would be escorted around the corner to the salon so that they could get a feel of the place. They

would have a short welcome speech from the owners of perhaps the most famous salon in London. After approximately an hour they would be free until lunch time. At 1.30 p.m. they would be taken back to the salon for the first stage of the competition which would be held at 2.0 p.m. when marks would be given but kept secret until the evening. It would all be filmed by the T.V. crew to be shown later that evening just before the final stage.

The contestants enjoyed the day enormously and chatted amicably as they returned to the hotel. After that events went as planned and it seemed that competition day arrived more quickly than anticipated. They soon found themselves standing behind the first of the volunteer models who were already seated in the salon. They were told which model they had been allocated and told to wait for instructions to start.

Soon a voice said, "Are you all ready? Three, two, one, off you go!"

The six finalists started cutting and shaping the head of hair in front of them. Danny had the presence of mind to ask the model if he had any preference regarding style and he said he would like the same cut as the one currently seen on the footballer Beckham. Danny smiled and said he'd do his best. Secretly he was overjoyed that over the last few weeks he had studied the hairstyles of the rich and famous, the football legend being one of them.

Everyone snipped away with care and finally, job done, stood back to admire their handiwork. A spontaneous clapping sounded as those present, including the T.V. crew, showed their approval at the results.

Then the second models took their place in the chairs and the same procedure as before took place. After the countdown Danny asked his model whether there was any style she preferred and she opted for the same as the one she had seen last week on Amanda Holden, singer and T.V. star whom she greatly admired. Again Danny has been blessed by someone above, he thought. This was another style he had studied feeling there was a good chance it may be requested.

The contestants and models were thanked and everyone invited to refreshments. They were reminded that the marks would be made public at that evening.

Chapter 12

The rest of the afternoon seemed to pass very slowly for the contestants as they nervously waited for 6.30 p.m. to arrive. Some of the top names in hairdressing had been invited to the live show and for the winner and runner up of the competition it would be a life changing experience. They would become household names for the chic and beautiful of Britain.

At last it was time! For the last time the small group of six was escorted to the salon, were quickly prepared, by the make up staff, for the cameras and all too soon it seemed they found themselves standing waiting for their models to arrive.

Danny noticed the group of important looking guests seated in a group behind them. They would be watching their every move and would doubtless play a recording of the programme over and over to examine their work from every angle. At last the countdown began from ten to zero. Then they heard, "We are live."

A fanfare of music was heard and the six beautiful young women arrived, as only models do. Slender, chic and confident, they took their places in the chairs provided and it was time to show what the contestants could do.

Danny welcomed his model, speaking quietly to avoid being heard on T. V. then confidently snipped away and shaped her long blonde hair into the style he had been perfecting in his mind for the last few weeks. He called it 'London Bridge,' and it consisted of a bouffant style at the crown, and ringlets falling behind and secured on either side by a plaited strand which held the hair tidily at the back. He secured it with a small jewelled slide that had belonged to Maurice's elderly aunt. Most of the others he noticed had gone for short style and he hoped he hadn't just ruled himself out of the competition.

Soon the allotted time was up and they were told to stop. All had finished and were relieved it was over. Standing back they admired their handiwork and each felt they were in with a chance. It was going to be a nerve wracking few moments now while the judges made their choice.

Finally the owner of the salon was asked to announce the names of the top three contestants in reverse order.

He said, "First of all we all wish to congratulate our six contestants, each of whom should go far in their chosen profession. Well done to all of you for getting this far. Taking this afternoon's marks into consideration and going on your performance this evening these are the people the judges have chosen as our winners. I will announce them in reverse order.

Place number three goes to Anna Chomley of our Mayfair salon. Anna would you please come forward to receive your certificate and cheque for two thousand pounds. Anna pleased to be in the top three but sad it wasn't first place, walked forward with a smile, shook hands with the famous hairdresser and accepted her cheque gracefully. She returned to her place as the audience clapped enthusiastically.

"Awarded second place is Nigel Smith, Nigel would you come forward please to receive your certificate and cheque for five thousand pounds." Nigel stepped forward to warm applause. He had never for a moment thought he would be given second place. He had been sure that he would win and he was not a happy man. Nevertheless he had to smile, act the part, pretend this was the most wonderful result. He accepted his prize and certificate, waving them in the air and smiling.

Finally the winner would be announced and the rest of the candidates dared not believe it could be them. It seemed an eternity for each of them until they heard the announcer say, "Ladies and gentlemen and to all of you at home watching, finally we have our winner of this prestigious competition. First place goes to.....," a fanfare of trumpets sounded and then, "Mr. Danny Lexington from Salon Maurice in Clifton. Danny would you please step forward to receive your certificate and cheque for ten thousand pounds."

Danny's heart turned somersaults and he felt he was about to faint but he took a deep breath and stepped forward to applause. "Danny you look shocked but the judges have all agreed that your choice of style is unusual and each is anxious to try it out for themselves in their own salons. Many congratulations from all of us. Would you care to say a few words to everyone watching."

An astonished Danny thought quickly and said, "I am truly humbled by this experience, delighted of course by this tremendous honour. I'd like to thank the other contestants for being such wonderful folk, each one has made me welcome and we have supported each other through the last few days. I would like to thank the organisers for such a fantastic opportunity for young hairdressers and to the judges for selecting me as the winner. It is going to take some days to sink in. To the audience watching I would like to say if a young chap from Clifton can get this far then whatever your dream, go for it and good luck to each of you."

He stepped back to further applause and the announcer made his final comments to the T.V. audience and then it was all over!

They had all been invited to a five course dinner at a nearby restaurant at which the Press would certainly all be clamouring to get photographs and possibly try to interview Danny.

Soon after they arrived at the hotel he received a 'phone text message from Maurice which read, 'we are both thrilled for you. Many congratulations, Can we start to book in people for the 'London Bridge' style next week? Danny returned the text, 'Thanks. I'm a happy man. Yes book 'em in Uncle.'

The evening was enjoyable and memorable. The meal was top quality and Danny had been photographed from about every angle possible. He was asked by several journalists for an interview but the Press were asked to leave and contact Danny on the following day.

Finally the evening drew to a close and they returned to the hotel for the final night's stay.

Chapter 13

After breakfast the following morning, Danny walked through the lounge to find four journalists approaching him. They were keen to get his comments on the competition and to learn more about him. He learned that two were from a national newspapers, another from a local London paper and the fourth was from Clicton. He said, "You are welcome to ask questions but there is little I can add to last night. It has been a wonderful experience and I am really thrilled to have come first. I never imagined for one moment that someone from my home town could win a national contest."

"Yes, well done Danny," said the Clicton reporter. "Do you really intend to stay in Clicton?"

"That is certainly my intention for the foreseeable future, my uncle whose salon I work in has been extremely good to me and I need to be there to help out. I'm not ruling out what I may do in future. If the opportunity arises and the time is right, I would love to work in one of the well known London salons."

They continued to ask questions about his childhood, teenage years, his training as a hairdresser and the inevitable question about his love life. He told them that he had been far too busy to even think of a love life. There was work to be done and he and his uncle were workaholics. Maybe when the time was right he would think about looking for someone with whom to share his life.

He then pointed out that he would have to leave to catch the train back to Clicton and eventually they reluctantly let him go.

On the way back Danny was too excited at the thought of seeing his uncle and Ronnie to catch up on his sleep so he just watched the scenery fly past until at midday he arrived at Clicton.

He knew that there would be no one to meet him as it had to be business as usual at the salon so he walked quickly home and went up to his room, changed into his uniform and went down to the salon. As he entered he was greeted with cheers and applause by five customers, Ronnie and his uncle. He saw that the salon was decorated with balloons, trimmings and a large notice that said, 'Welcome home Danny - London Winner'.

All trying to talk at once they asked him what it had been like and whether he had enjoyed it. He did his best to satisfy their curiosity and as each left they shook hands with him and said that he'd be in great demand now.

After they had left, Maurice suggested that it would be good to have an extended lunch time and that they would reopen at 1.30 p.m. The two of them were keen to hear more about the whole London experience.

Eating their chicken salad lunch, they listened enthralled as Danny filled them in on everything that had happened since he left a few days before. It seemed more like a lifetime, so much had happened. Maurice told him that Ronnie had been really helpful and he had decided, if Dan agreed, to start training Ronnie as a hairdresser. "The lad doesn't want to spend his entire just sweeping up and tidying after us and with your new found fame Dan we are going to need more hands on deck. We can teach him all he needs to know and then he can sit his examinations. I'd like him to enrol for evening classes in hairdressing as well. There is one held on Thursday at the local college."

"It sounds like an excellent idea!" exclaimed Danny. "What do you think about it Ron?"

"Well I'd love the opportunity and can't believe my luck! It's so kind of you both and I just love the idea of having a career to follow instead of just bumming around the streets, I shall never be able to repay you or thank you enough."

"Nonsense Ron, you'll be an asset to us. We can teach you the basics, shampooing and setting hair first of all and then after a few months when you have covered it at evening classes, you will be able to trim hair. It'll help us considerably and free us to do the more complicated styling."

That decided, the happy trio returned to work. It was a happy afternoon with more congratulations from their customers and after completing his tidying up duties, Ronnie eventually joined the others upstairs where Maurice announced that he had booked them all in at the local restaurant for their evening meal. It was a treat to celebrate Danny's victory.

When they arrived at the restaurant they were shown to a table and as they sat down, Ronnie noticed a familiar couple seated a little way from them. It was none other than Beth and Henry Blickton.

Ronnie nudged Danny, "Look over there Dan, do you recognise her"!

"Oh yes! I have seen her around town once or twice but I didn't stop. She didn't seem to notice me anyway."

"Well she is not my most favourite person," Ronnie said.

"Don't let her spoil your dinner Ron, I think she was scared of 'Bruiser' too and is probably as ashamed as I am at our failure to stand up to him in those days. Tell you what mate, let's change seats so that you don't have to look at them. "

"Thanks for the offer but no thanks Dan, if she looks this way I'll just stare her out. I have nothing to fear from her now. I've grown up these days."

"That you have and well said," Maurice said. "Anyway any nonsense from her and you'll find you have two protectors in Dan and myself."

Despite his reassurances to his friends, Ronnie was not pleased to see Beth Sleighouse or Blickton as she was now, in such close proximity. He knew if he was to succeed as a hairdresser, he was going to have to shelve his long term plan and after spending so many years plotting his revenge, it was a difficult thing to do. At one moment he felt it would be worth it and at another time he felt he would burst if he didn't act and punish her and the others for their cruelty.

He pulled himself together and chatted to the others as though he didn't have a care in the world. After all this was supposed to be a celebration for Danny and he wasn't about to spoil the evening.

Chapter 14

Early on the following Monday morning, Danny said he needed to go to the bank to pay in the cheque he had received as his first prize. He promised he'd be back as soon as possible as they were always quite busy on the first working day of the week. On the way back he saw a newspaper notice board outside of the newsagent which had as its headline, 'Clicton man clips to success'. He nipped quickly into the shop and bought three copies of the 'Clicton News'. The newsagent, who had known him since he moved first moved in with his uncle, said, "Good Morning Danny, how does it feel to be famous?"

"Good Morning Mr. Thomas, it feels really good. I must get going though as we are always busy on a Monday morning. I'll fill you in on what happened later."

He made his way back to the salon and arrived at a quarter to ten to discover that Ronnie had been very busy answering 'phone calls and taking bookings.

There were now eight new women clients booked in for the 'London Bridge' style. As soon it quietened a little Danny showed the newspaper to Maurice and Ronnie who read it and said that the photograph had come out really well.

"Heavens Dan, you are going to have all the women flocking in, you are not a bad looking fellow you know."

"When that happens, look up in the sky Uncle and you'll see little pink pigs flying past," laughed Danny.

"It's a smashing article Dan. It should bring in customers alright," said Ronnie.

"Guess what Dan? One of the new clients who has booked to come in on Friday afternoon for the 'London Bridge' style, is none other than our old friend Sarah Blickton. You'll be interested to learn that I kept my cool and was polite to her. Of course she had no idea that she was talking to none other than 'Cheesy Stilton'.

"Ha, ha," laughed Ron, "I guess she's in for a big surprise then Ron. I can't wait to see her face when she spots you. You can open the door and welcome her in and we shall be watching with interest. One rude sign from her and she's out the door without the new 'London Bridge.' style. We have never turned away a customer but she could be the first."

The following evening Maurice went out to a meeting of the local group belonging to the Chamber of Trade. He was surprised and delighted to be welcomed with applause from the other members, most of whom had business within walking distance of 'Salon Maurice'. The chairman approached Maurice and said that they would like to put on a special party for his nephew and to invite his friends, neighbours and family to the event. It would be advertised in the newspaper and also each member would put a notice in their shop window. It would be quite an event with the Mayor and Mayoress in attendance.

Maurice was so glad he lived in Clicton. They were a great bunch of people and he told them how grateful he was to have such support from valued colleagues and friends. Not normally an emotional man, he was close to tears as he sat down to more applause. The suggested date was for a month's time. The event would be held at the Mayor's official residence and would commence at 7.30 p.m.

When Maurice arrived back at just after 9.45 p.m., he found the others watching an episode of 'New Tricks', the popular T.V. series when retired police officers solve cold crime cases. He didn't want to disturb them until it was over so made a cup of drinking chocolate for everyone, rustled up a few egg and tomato sandwiches and took it in just in time to see the last few minutes of the programme.

As soon as it was over he told them the news and they both whooped with delight!

"This salon is really going places Uncle," said Danny.

"Many congratulations!" said Ron. "I'm so proud to be a part of this salon."

"Thank you both. I'm all for partying anywhere at any time." laughed Danny. "Should I write to thank someone?" he asked Maurice.

"They are going to send you a letter and invitation so you can reply to that when it arrives," Maurice informed him.

"Wow, what a roller coaster these last couple of weeks have been," Danny said.

They all settled back to eat and to watch the T.V. News before turning in for an early night. Tomorrow would, more than likely, be another very busy day.

Chapter 15

Nigel Smith had been disappointed at not winning first place in the competition and felt that the judges had been biased. His disappointment festered like a sore in his mind. It grew as the weeks passed until he felt he'd go completely mad unless there was some kind of restitution.

He had attended several interviews as a result of his second place achievement but no job offer had come his way. To add to his anger the Devon papers, as well as the Nationals had photographs and reports of how Danny Lexington had succeeded and what an asset he was to the profession. His dislike of Danny grew as the weeks passed and when he read about a forthcoming party for friends, family and colleagues, he decided he would apply for a ticket, go to the said party, and attempt to extract some kind of revenge.

Completely unaware of the machinations of Nigel Smith's mind, Maurice and his team went happily about their daily business. Danny received his letter with an invitation to the party at the Mayor's Parlour, signed by the current Mayor and the local Chairman of the Chamber of Trade. It was, by Maurice's instruction, pinned to the wall of the Salon with an accompanying notice informing people that friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues past and present could apply for a ticket. When some of Maurice's long established clients came in for their usual appointment he made sure they knew about the party and he asked them to apply for a ticket. They seemed delighted at the idea of attending the party, though whether it was to honour Danny or to be introduced to the Mayor and Mayoress would remain unknown. They did feel a loyalty to Maurice as he had served them well over the years and it was good to be able to show their appreciation.

Friday dawned and Ronnie nervously awaited the arrival of Sarah Blickton. The morning seemed to pass very quickly and at lunch Ronnie could hardly get his sandwich down as his throat was dry. He nervously swallowed his mug of tea and helped clear things away. There was no way of avoiding the inevitable, he'd just have

to pull himself together and remember he was a man now and not a small, frightened school boy. As they descended the stairs he still wished that part of his life had never happened but things had turned out just fine for him so he wouldn't let this woman spoil his life a minute longer. He had every intention of standing his ground and doing the job he was paid for.

At five minutes to two Sarah Blickton arrived and Ronnie went to the door to let her in. "Good afternoon Mrs. Blickton, please come in and sit anywhere. Danny will see to you straight away."

Sarah nodded her thanks and mumbled "Thanks." She didn't seem to recognise Ronnie and made her way to the furthest seat. Danny approached her and started chatting amicably about the new hairstyle and asked if it was for a special occasion and she said that it was. Her husband had recently been appointed as Deputy Headmaster at Cliction High School and they were hosting a small celebratory dinner for some of the staff, friends and family. She looked at him in the mirror and said, "Good Lord! Are you the Danny Lexington I knew at school?"

"Yes, I wondered if you'd recognise me Sarah," replied Danny smiling. "There is someone else working here that I think you will remember," he said waving to Ron to come forward.

Ronnie approached again and Danny said, "Now Sarah, do you remember Ronnie Stilton?"

"Oh my God! 'Cheesy Stilton'! I honestly didn't recognise you! You have changed quite a bit. How did you come to be working here?"

"It's a very long story," replied Ronnie. "I'd better not get started on that or your hair will never get styled."

Ronnie then asked which shampoo she would like and choosing the requested one, he carried out the shampooing as he had been taught. He then towel dried it and Danny took over to weave his magic with Sarah's beautiful hair.

After an hour in the chair, Sarah was delighted with the result and thanked Danny. "Danny you've done a splendid job and I'd like to become a regular customer if that's alright with you."

"Of course, we'd be delighted to have you," came the reply.

She suddenly turned and went up to Ron who was back in his corner waiting for the next client to arrive. "Ron, I need to say something. I feel dreadful about what happened at school. Quite honestly I was terrified of 'Bruiser' and went along with him as I didn't have the courage to walk away or report him. I truly believed he'd severely injure or even kill me if I did. I don't expect you will find it easy to forgive me but I hope you can realise the awful position I was in. I was so glad when eventually I found the courage to make the break when I went to university. I met my husband there and he's a martial arts fanatic so I don't fear meeting 'Bruiser' as long as Henry is with me."

An astonished Ronnie didn't quite know what to say but mumbled, "It was an unhappy time for me but things have changed now and I really love my job and am training to become a qualified hairdresser and hope to continue working here."

"Good for you Ronnie. I'll look forward to coming back." She smiled quite sweetly and squeezed his arm as she turned to leave. As she did she dropped a large tip into the tin kept for clients to show their appreciation.

"That went well didn't it Ron?" asked Maurice.

"Couldn't have been better," replied Ronnie feeling that another burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Now that he had received two apologies from members of their teenage gang.

Chapter 16

Bryn Blakely had read the news about Danny in the local newspaper when he went for one of his coffee breaks at work. The management paid for a couple of tabloids and it was a case of first come first served. He was surprised to see that Lexington had done so well. He hadn't thought any of the old gang would have gone into hairdressing. It seemed a bit too effeminate. There was no way on earth he'd go in for something like that! Still each to his own and who knows it may pay him to visit 'Salon Maurice' and try it out for himself. His present girlfriend was always complaining that his hair looked like a hay stack so he'd pop round there after work one Friday as they always finished work a little earlier. He was taking Mandy out in the evening so it would hopefully be a surprise for her. He'd ring and ask how much they were charging first of all. A little bit of fame and people usually put up their prices by a whole lot. If that was the case he wouldn't bother. At lunch time he 'phoned the salon and was told that a haircut would be £5 and styling from £20 as it took longer and was more complicated. He thought it was reasonable and less than some other places so he booked an appointment for the following Friday.

On his way to the pub that evening he spotted Sarah Blickton on what he assumed was her exercise for the day. He had spotted her once or twice before power walking, and thought that if you taught kids all day then a good long walk was probably what you needed to do to get that awful stuffy classroom smell out of your nostrils. Bryn thought she looked particularly smart and decided to cross the road and have a word with her. "Good evening Sarah, out for a walk?" he asked.

"Bryn! Fancy seeing you here on this side of town. Where are you off to?"

"Ladies first," he said.

"Yes I always try to get a walk in as soon after school as I can. Just to blow away the cobwebs and to keep the weight down. Actually I can't stop long Bryn as Henry and I are going out to a meal in about half an hour and I don't want to keep him waiting. By the way did you hear about Danny Lexington?"

"Yes I read about it in the local rag! Who would have thought he'd have gone into hairdressing. He didn't seem the type."

"No but did you know his uncle who brought him up has been a hairdresser all his life? It was he who encouraged Danny to go in for it and fair play he's done really well." She pulled back her loose hood to reveal her new hair style. "He styled my hair into the style he won the competition with. Not bad eh?"

"Very fetching Sarah, Henry is a lucky man. I have actually booked an appointment with him as my new girlfriend is always complaining about my hair."

"Good luck then. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Oh I almost forgot to mention it but do you remember 'Cheesy' Stilton? He's working there too."

"Never! Blimey I would have thought he'd put off any customers they have," he said pulling a face.

"He's changed Bryn, I hardly recognised him. He helps out in the salon and Maurice is going to train him so that he can qualify as a hairdresser in a few years time. Be nice to him when you go. Just remember we all gave him a hell of a time in school," she said giving a wave and hurrying on her way.

"Bryn stared after her for a while and then made for the pub where he met a couple of his mates for a pleasant evening's drinking.

Later at home he gave more thought to what Sarah Blickton had said and for the first time really thought about what they had put 'Cheesy' through. They hadn't been kind but then how could they really know what he had been thinking. He had been hard to like in those days. Still never one to shun a difficult situation he didn't intend to let it put him off getting his hair styled for Mandy.

The following Friday he arrived at 'Salon Maurice' and was greeted by no other than Ronnie Stilton who greeted him pleasantly enough and showed him to a chair.

"Good evening Bryn, Danny will be with you in a minute or two."

"I heard you were working here Ron. Good on you. I didn't have you down for a hairdresser though, nor Danny come to that," Bryn said.

"Maurice has been particularly good to me and I took to this job the minute I started. We were pleased for Danny too. Coming first in the competition was a real boost for him."

With that Danny took over to discuss styles with Bryn and then Ronnie shampooed and towel dried his hair.

Almost an hour later Bryn looked at himself in the mirror and was delighted with the result. Mandy would probably walk right past him not recognising the handsome chap who was looking at him in the mirror.

He told Danny he was delighted and as he went to pay Maurice pointed out the notice on the wall and asked him to come to the party that was to be held for Danny. Ring up for a ticket Bryn. The Blicktons are coming and a few old friends will be there. "Bring your girlfriend if you like too," he added.

"Thanks I'd love to. I'm all for celebrating anything at any time," he joked.

He went up to Ronnie and said, "Thanks Ron, sorry about the school thing. It was all down to 'Bruiser' really. We all felt we had to do as he said. I've since learned that he had a rotten time at home himself and in a way it was lashing out at someone else that kept him sane. I know it's no excuse but I am sorry about it. See you at the party mate," and with that he went out to have a quick snack before going to meet Mandy.

Ron thought, "Incredible! Three apologies! A couple more and he may be forced to ditch the dagger which he still kept secreted under the mattress. He'd hold on to it though as he could never imagine 'Bruiser' apologising and someone should pay for what he went through.

Chapter 17

Henry thought that Sarah's hair looked beautiful and as they enjoyed a meal out together she told him of her meeting with her old classmates.

"I apologised to 'Cheesy' and he seemed to take it all in good part. He's changed a lot since those days. He is much more confident and although he is hardly chatty and outgoing, he does at least hold a normal conversation with everyone. I had a strong feeling that he was pleased that I had apologised and I think and hope he has forgiven me," she said.

"Well done love, I'm proud of you. Let's hope that at last they see the true Sarah, the girl I married and love," Henry replied

"I'm wondering if I dare go round to Denzil's house and suggest he apologises too. After all it was mostly his fault that things were made so bad for Ron."

"I'm not sure love, but if you think it would lay this matter to rest once and for all then do it by all means but not alone. I'll go with you in case he lashes out in some way."

"Oh come on Henry, he's hardly likely to punch me or pinch my bum is he? He's appears to be a respectable business man now and he'd hardly want to spoil his reputation by molesting a local schoolteacher would he?"

"No I suppose not but I'm coming just the same young lady!"

Sarah said she would think about it and decide the following day and they then they finished their meal and made for home to relax for the rest of the evening.

The following day she announced that she would definitely have it out with Denzil and she'd go round there on Sunday so on the following Sunday afternoon, accompanied by her husband, Sarah rang the bell of Denzil's house.

He came immediately to the door which he opened with a surprised look on his face. "Hullo Denzil," said Sarah. "This is my husband Henry and we wondered if we could come in and have a word with you?"

"What about?" asked Denzil looking at them suspiciously.

"Nothing to worry about but we wanted to put something to you and depending on your answer we may ask you to accompany us to a party next Friday."

"You'd better come in then," replied Denzil begrudgingly.

He took them into the lounge which was pleasantly furnished with settee and two armchairs all in a plum colour which matched the long velvet curtains at the window.

"You have a comfortable home Denzil," said Sarah.

"Yes, it's what I'm working my socks off for," he replied.

"Well, what's it all about then?" he enquired.

"I'm sure you remember well how disgracefully we all behaved at school. The gang made Ron Stilton's life a misery and it's time to do something about it," Sarah said. "He is doing quite well now thanks to Danny and his uncle Maurice. I'm sure you must have read the local newspaper with its report on how Danny won a prestigious hairdressing competition?"

He nodded and said, "Yes I was surprised to say the least. I thought Danny had too many male hormones to go in for hairdressing," he retorted.

"It's a fine profession with someone who has an eye for style and fashion and Danny was always at his happiest designing things if you remember."

"Well I'll give you that, yes he was always wanting to draw things which got on my nerves quite honestly."

"Many things seemed to get on your nerves in those days Denzil, do you have any regrets at all?" Sarah asked.

"Of course I do! Do you think for one moment I enjoyed my school days? You all thought I came from a loving middle class home where I was spoiled and loved. How wrong you were! Mother was never around as she was 'doing her own thing' with her posh friends and Dad was a bully. He constantly clipped me around the ears and told me I'd never amount to anything. I regret to say that bullying can create bullies sometimes and I was one of them. I admit I didn't want to be like that but at least it helped me even if it did upset some people. Unfortunately it's left me without family or friends, all I have is my work."

"Yes we heard you had followed your dream of becoming an accountant and I'm happy for you," said Sarah. "You could easily change things Denzil. It's not too late. If you apologise to those people you hurt I think you'll be surprised how they will

react. Both Danny and I have spoken to 'Cheesy' and Henry and I now count them among our friends."

Henry said, "I have a suggestion to make if you don't mind. Denzil why don't you start by apologising to Sarah? She never wanted to be in that gang of yours and did it out of fear not loyalty. You made her life miserable."

Denzil looked down and mumbled his apologies to Sarah. "I'm sorry Sarah, I was very unhappy too. I thought it the only way to have people around me and I know it's no excuse but if things had been different at home....."

"I'll forgive you willingly Denzil if you promise me you'll apologise to Ronnie. After all he was the one who we all shunned and made fun of."

"Why don't you come with us to the party they are holding for Danny and you can apologise to him there, then perhaps we can all be friends. If you decide to do it then call round for us at 7.0 p.m. and Henry can drive the three of us."

Denzil thought he may as well try and bury this thing once and for all so agreed he'd apply for a ticket the following day and do as they had suggested. He thanked them for coming and said he would think about it. He could see it was time to move on from those unhappy schooldays.

On the way home, Henry hugged Sarah close to him and said, "I'm so proud of you darling, I think you were right to have it out with Denzil. You know he seems a really unhappy, miserable soul and I think this could help him. You know you really should have gone in for Social Work and not teaching," he joked kissing the top of her head.

Chapter 18

There was a feeling of excitement and anticipation in the hearts of many people in and around Clicton and in at least one further afield in Devon, as the day of the party arrived.

It was proving to be one of their busiest days ever at 'Salon Maurice' but Maurice had decided to close at 5.0 p.m. in order to give them plenty of time to get ready. The three of them had worked hard to make sure no one was disappointed and everyone had seemed pleased with their new haircut or styling.

Around the corner Sarah and her husband had an hour to relax before they needed to get ready and they were both wondering whether Denzil would show up or withdraw into his shell and cut off all contact with them.

Bryn and Mandy were looking forward to an evening out together and wondered who else would be there. They decided to have a light tea of a sandwich and a small cake to go with their favourite brew. Both had good appetites and enjoyed their food.

"You never know what you'll be offered on these occasions," warned Bryn.

"If many turn up we'll be lucky to get more than a sandwich or two."

"You are not just going for the food Bryn and anyway look at that spare tire," Mandy said squeezing his tummy and making him squeal.

"O come on 'Mand', you know what I mean and yes I'm looking forward to seeing Danny again. It should be a happy evening and the talk of Clicton."

The members of the organising committee were all relaxed and looking forward to the event, confident that their minions would serve up a decent meal and clean up after the party.

There was one heart that was not so happy and as Nigel sat in the Clicton bound train he kept going over and over in his mind his plan for the evening.

He was going to surprise them all!

At 7.0 p.m. precisely Denzil rang the door of the Blicktons' house and was greeted warmly by Sarah and Henry.

"So glad you decided to come Denzil, come on let's get in the car, we don't want to be the last there or we won't get a decent seat," Henry said.

Arriving at the Mayor's official residence they parked nearby and Sarah said, "Why don't I go in first and find Ronnie. I think we should explain why Denzil is here otherwise it is sure to be a shock if he should turn round and suddenly spot the three of us together."

"Good idea love," Henry replied. "I think that's best. O.K. with you Denzil?"

"Sure, whatever you say, I don't want to upset anyone's evening."

Sarah went to the door and handed her ticket to the young man stationed at the door. He indicated where the main hall was situated and she made her way in. Spotting the three guests from 'Salon Maurice', she went up to them, greeted them and said, "Ronnie can I have a word over here for a second?" Ronnie left the group and they walked a little way away.

"Henry and I have a surprise for you and hope you will not be too shocked," she said. "The thing is we have brought another old classmate with us who very badly wants to apologise for his behaviour towards you. Before we bring him in I want you to know that Henry and I feel he is genuinely sorry and although he feels you will never forgive him, please at least hear him out. He had a rotten childhood himself and the way he behaved was a kind of defence mechanism."

"Who is it?" Ron asked.

"None other than Denzil the 'Bruiser'," Sarah explained.

"Oh God! I'm not sure I'm ready for this," gasped Ronnie. "If you believe he is genuine then bring him in and I'll listen to what he has to say."

"We will stay with you Ron and if there is any problem with Denzil, Henry will take care of it, and make sure he leaves!"

She hurried off to fetch the other two who were waiting by the entrance. She waved and they handed their tickets to the doorman and followed Sarah to where Ronnie was standing waiting.

"Well this is a surprise," Ron said.

"Ronnie, I'm so glad you agreed to see me and thank you for that. I really am ashamed and very sorry for the way I behaved at school. I know it isn't any excuse at all but everyone at school thought I was from the perfect family. The truth is that I wasn't. My father was a bully and my life was not very happy. The only way I seemed to survive was to act the strong man myself. If you can ever find it in your heart to forgive me then please do. I know it'll be difficult and I promise to keep out of your way and not spoil your evening."

"It takes a strong man to do what you have just done Denzil, give me time and I'm sure I will be able to forget all about the past. I have some great friends now here in Clifton and a promising career. Maurice is training me up and I intend to become a fully trained hairdresser like Danny."

"Thanks so much Ron. One day perhaps we can become friends."

"I hope so but let's all enjoy the evening for now. Let's make sure Danny has a great evening."

They helped themselves to a drink from those on the table and talked a while longer until at 7.25 p.m. an announcement was made by the Mayor who informed everyone that a formal dinner would be served. Each guest had been allocated a place at one of the tables and they were asked to look at the lists which had been pinned to boards around the hall indicating where guests were to sit.

He then handed the microphone over to the local Chamber of Trade Chairman who said how delighted he was to welcome everyone to what he hoped would be a memorable evening. Once again, to Danny's discomfort, he praised him on his achievement and for helping to promote Clifton and asked Danny to go forward to accept his membership of the local group of the Chamber of Trade

Danny went forward to loud applause and many of the guests patted him on his back and said, "Well done Danny!"

He gave a few words of thanks and said how grateful he was to the organisers of the event and to all the guests for attending.

The Mayor then asked everyone to take their place at the appropriate table as dinner was about to be served.

Chapter 19

Taking their places at the table Danny, Maurice and Ronnie found they were seated at the nearest table to the organisers, always considered an honour. Next to them, on one side, were the Blicktons, next came Denzil and on the other side Bryn and Mandy with two other local shopkeepers and their wives. It seems considerable thought had been put into the seating arrangements. Ronnie thought that probably that input had come from Maurice at one of the meetings he regularly attended.

Furthest away from the main table, Nigel sat silently seething. This was another insult! He was a better stylist than Lexington yet look how differently they had been treated.

He would wait his moment but he hadn't finished with the 'winner' yet. They would all know exactly who deserved to be seated at that top table.

The meal of roast turkey plus all the trimmings was served and all the guests ate hungrily, having waited for this moment all day. Afterwards they had a choice of dessert, fruit and ice cream or tarte au citron with cream. This was followed by a choice of coffee or tea and pleasantly full, chattering happily the guests relaxed. Maurice stood up and called out, "Silence please everyone."

The hubbub died down and he continued, "On behalf of all the guests, I'd like to thank the Mayor and the Chairman for their considerable honour to my nephew and also for the very splendid meal we have all enjoyed. It has been the most enjoyable occasion and we are all really grateful to everyone concerned."

There was plenty of applause as Maurice sat down again.

The Mayor replied, "It has been our pleasure and we are delighted that you were all able to come and it is particularly pleasing that you all seem to have enjoyed the evening. Please take care on your way home. There is a reporter and photographer here from the local newspaper and they have asked that we have photographs taken so if you would like a memento of the evening you can order a copy. If you wouldn't mind remaining seated he'll come around and photograph you in groups."

More applause followed and everyone sat waiting to be photographed. The Mayor and guests were photographed first, followed by Maurice and the group at his table. When the photographer had finished the Mayor rose again and said, "Once again, thank you for coming and please take care on your way home."

The organisers rose to leave and as they filed out they were applauded by the guests. Then everyone stood and made their way to where their coats had been placed. Suddenly Nigel Smith made his way to the small group around Danny and Maurice. He approached Danny who had his back turned. Taking out his knife he strode towards the group, raised his arm and was about to stab him when Ronnie stepped

forward and punched him on the jaw. He was rewarded with a sharp stab in the fleshy part of his arm and felt a sharp pain and something hot running down. In a flash he noticed blood beginning to pool on the floor. Henry Blickton seized Nigel's wrist and bent it backwards to disable him he continued pressing hard until Nigel squealed and dropped the knife. Henry then held him and threw him to the floor standing over him. "Don't touch the knife anyone! Leave it for the police. Could someone call them quickly please and ask for an ambulance at the same time."

Denzil knelt down by Ronnie and pressed his jacket over the wound in his arm.

"Best to press hard on this and with luck it will stop the bleeding," he said.

"Thanks Denz," replied Ronnie.

"Don't worry, the paramedics will be here soon. After all this is the Mayor's official residence. It wouldn't look good if they took all night getting here would it?"

"Clear the way everyone, no need for an ambulance said the Mayor who had returned when he had heard a disturbance. My chauffeur will drive us to the hospital. The rest of you stay here to be interviewed by the police."

No one had noticed that the photographer had turned just in time to get shots of Nigel as he raised his arm. It would make the 'Clicton News' tomorrow and with luck most of the London papers too.

The police arrived in less than 10 minutes and taking stock of the situation, arrested Nigel Smith who was taken out to a waiting police car. The guests who were still there were interviewed and finally allowed to go.

Sarah, Henry and Denzil went back to the car and decided they should go to the hospital to see how Ronnie was doing. Maurice and Danny had already gone and twenty minutes later they all met in the Emergency Room at the local hospital.

Accompanied by the Mayor and his entourage, Ronnie had been swiftly treated, receiving ten stitches in his arm and was told he had been extremely lucky that the knife had missed the main artery. He was informed that the wound should heal quickly and was given analgesics and a course of antibiotics to help prevent any infection.

Finally they all left the hospital and the group thanked the Mayor for his quick thinking and kindness in getting Ronnie to hospital without delay..

Chapter 20

The following day the local newspaper and most of the 'dailies' carried the story with headlines which amused most people. 'Mayhem at Mayor's Parlour', 'Punch up at Party', 'Niggling Nigel Not Amused', 'Local heroes lash out', all accompanied by photographs sent in by the local newspaper photographer, with its report by his colleague the Clicton News reporter.

Sitting around the breakfast table it was being discussed all over town.

Ronnie nursing his sore arm was being waited on by Maurice who was fussing around him like a mother hen and ordered Ron to stay upstairs and rest for the day. They would manage without him for once.

"Come on eat up Ron, you need to feed yourself up now. These things can really take it out of a man."

"Thanks Maurice, gee I can't get over what happened last night. Fancy old Denzil stepping in and helping like that. Henry is full of surprises too. I knew he went

to keep fit but had no idea until last night that he was so good at martial arts. Sarah told me in the hospital that

he will take his final exam soon and if he passes he will receive his black belt."

"Wow, we'll all have to watch our 'P's' and 'Q's' whenever we are with them then," laughed Danny.

Over at the Blicktons' house Sarah was saying, "I'm so proud of you Henry! Especially as you are going to be a father in about 8 months time!"

"What! Not really? Are you sure? When did you know?" said a delighted Henry hardly daring to believe it was true.

"I did a pregnancy test yesterday afternoon and intended to tell you after the party but events made me decide to keep it until today. We had had just too much excitement for one day."

"Have you seen the doctor yet? Are you going to give up work?"

"Wahoo! Enough! No fussing love. I'm a strong and determined woman and we have quite a few months to plan all those things and with that she kissed the top of Henry's head and started to clear the breakfast table.

On the other side of town Bryn explained to Mandy that he had intended to ask her to marry him after the party but in view of what had happened to poor old Ron, the time didn't seem right so he decided to wait until the following day. Always the romantic he went down on one knee and said, "Mandy darling, will you do me the honour of marrying me? I love you and know we can be very happy together."

"Yes, yes, yes!" replied a delighted Mandy. She had secretly hoped for this for some time and after last night's incident she realised that life was often short and she didn't want to waste a moment of it.

Denzil sat in his breakfast room finishing his tea and toast as he read the account of the Clicton party. He saw that he was mentioned by name and wondered what would be the reaction when he had to face his colleagues on Monday morning. Whatever happened he was pleased he had acted swiftly and managed to prevent too much blood loss. It was a really nasty gash and he decided to pop over later to see how Ron was doing.

The Mayoress read the paper and was busy trying to console her husband. "It really doesn't matter what these London newspapers have to say. The local people know what you did to help ease the situation and that pleases them I can assure you. I'm sure you will receive lots of praise at the next council meeting.

"I learned something last night. We will ask advice from close relatives in future regarding which friends we should invite. Who could have guessed that someone who had come second in a national competition could be so warped as to actually try to kill the winner."

"The world has its fair share of damaged people so I suppose it is inevitable that we come across one or two of them now and again. Hopefully that was the one and only who will set foot across the Mayor's Parlour. Thank God it wasn't any worse love. What if the boy had died? It doesn't bear thinking about."

Pacified by his wife's soothing comments he decided that he'd pay the injured boy a visit that morning to see how he was feeling.

The local reporter and photographer had arrived at work to a round of applause from the other staff. "Well done you two! Had any job offers from London yet?" the joked.

It wouldn't be too long before that actually happened. One of the main daily newspapers was looking for a new junior crime reporter and they thought the Clicton man would suit them very well.

At the local police station Nigel sat in a police cell waiting to be taken before the Magistrates' Court and knew from what the Detective Inspector had said that he would probably be referred to the Crown Court for trial. In front of a large crowd he had attempted to seriously injure or even kill another human being. That apparently was not allowed in a civilized society. As far as he was concerned it wasn't a civilized society where the wrong people get all the praise and rewards! It was explained to him that he would almost certainly serve a prison sentence of some considerable time. Nigel was not a happy man!

Later that morning Denzil arrived at 'Salon Maurice' with a small present for Ronnie. He could see that Maurice and Danny were busy at work and hesitated not certain whether he should go in or not but Danny happened to catch sight of him and beckoned to him to come in. He went in and asked how Ronnie was doing.

"He's doing really well. A bit shaken up but he'll be fine before long thanks to you acting so quickly Denz. Just go up the stairs and straight on and you'll find him in the lounge."

Denzil went up and knocked on the door he assumed was the lounge. "Come in!" shouted Ron, thinking that it was Danny or Maurice acting the fool. He was very surprised to see Denzil come in and was unsure what to say at first.

"I just wanted to see how you are doing Ron, that was such a dreadful thing to happen last night. Danny might have been killed if you and Henry hadn't stepped in like that! I hope you like chocolates as I brought these for you."

"Thanks Denz. I love chocolates but will keep them until tonight when the lads finish work and we can all relax together. Maurice has bought a DVD of one of our favourite Bond films. Hey why don't you come over and watch it with us? We'd all love to have you join us especially after your help last night."

"Well thank you! I'd like that. I'm always at a loose end at the weekends. Never had any real friends to be honest and work has been all I've been interested in but after last night I can see there is more to life than just work."

"Too right mate! We need to make the most of what we have."

There was another tap at the door and again Ron called out "Come in!"

He and Denzil were astonished to see the Mayor come in.

"Good morning. How is the arm today Ronnie?" asked the Mayor.

"It's not too bad at all thanks Sir," replied Ron.

Denzil stood up and said, "If you'll excuse me I'll leave you to talk in private."

"No, sit down please young man. I'm glad to have caught you too. I want to thank you for helping to prevent a disaster last night. I believe you are an accountant is that right?"

"Yes Sir," replied Denzil.

"In that case I would like you or your firm to take over the accounts for my business. It's getting too much for my wife as orders for our machinery are coming in quite quickly despite the recession."

"I'd be delighted as will the rest of the staff. Thank you very much Sir."

"Make me an appointment for next week sometime and ring my office to let them know," replied the Mayor handing Denzil his business card.

Soon after he had been assured that all was well, the Mayor left them to return to his official residence.

"The day is young and full of surprises!" laughed Ronnie as Denzil stood up to leave.

"It certainly is! O.K. then I'm off to do some chores at home but look forward to seeing you this evening."

On his way out Denzil told Maurice that Ron had invited him over for the evening and was delighted when Maurice smiled and said, "The more the merrier Denzil. Be here by 7.0p.m. and you can eat with us before we see the film."

Chapter 21

Five Years Later

Twelve good friends sat around the dining room table at the Blicktons' house. They were celebrating a five year friendship. Much had happened to all of them. Sarah and Henry now had a son of almost five and a small daughter of 2 years. Sarah had resumed working part time and an unemployed friend acted as babysitter on the three weekdays that she worked at Cliction High School.

Bryn and Mandy had moved to their own small semi-detached house and now had a baby daughter of six months who was being looked after by her doting grandparents that evening. Bryn had branched out on his own as a carpenter and was doing well. He now employed two other men and Mandy helped by doing the books at home. Once a year Denzil checked their accounts to make sure they were accurate for tax purposes and always charged them a very reasonable rate for his services.

Danny had found a life partner in Billy and they both worked at the same London salon. They had an apartment nearby and were extremely happy at work and at home. They were both among the best hairstylists in the capital and among their clientele they had several young up and coming stars of television, film and stage. They paid frequent visits back to Cliction to keep in close touch with family and friends.

On of the group's greatest surprises had been when Denzil had announced his forthcoming marriage to Abigail the daughter of the Mayoress who had given up her council work when her husband passed away. They had met when Denzil had gone over to check the accounts of the business and had been attracted to each other almost immediately. It had been a slow courtship but just four months ago they had married and all those present today had enjoyed the ceremony and the reception held at a local restaurant.

Sadly three years before the Mayor had died from a heart attack and eventually six months ago, after a year's courtship, Maurice had married the Mayor's widow. They were blissfully happy and Maurice had moved in with Mary leaving the apartment above the salon to Ronnie and his wife Linda. Linda had come into Ron's life when he had been persuaded by Henry to join him in martial arts classes. She was a keen participant and she and Ron had fancied each other as soon as they met. Ronnie was astonished to find she actually wanted him as a husband and he thought what a miracle it was that his life had turned out so well. He had now qualified as a hairdresser and still worked in 'Salon Maurice' with his good friend and mentor Maurice. A few weeks ago he had visited the shop which still sold Swiss Army Knives and antique weapons and surreptitiously dropped the knife behind a couple of others lying on a shelf. This time he felt he should buy something so chose a book entitled, 'The Ancient Weapons of China', and paying for it at the till he left happy in the knowledge that he could now live a peaceful life without the need for weapons. The book would serve as a reminder of what his life might have turned out like had he ever used the knife to actually kill someone. He was much better prepared for life now surrounded by friends and could rest easy knowing that his weekly visits to classes

with Henry had armed him with a good defence if ever he should need it. If ever he and Linda were blessed with nippers of their own, he intended to lavish love on them and ensure that they had the love and security of a loving family which he had sadly lacked.

As the twelve friends chatted happily together Ron thought how that the first small act of kindness by Danny had mushroomed and changed his life completely. He was now a really happy man with no grudges. He had a lovely wife to keep him warm at night and not the hate which used to fire him with anger as he lay plotting his revenge in a hostel bed. "Thank God for friends," he thought. "A little kindness goes a long way."

About the Author

Jean Marian Lewis



Jean Lewis , a retired Registered Nurse lives in South Wales, U.K. Married, she has two sons and four grandsons. Her interests are languages, growing orchids, the Internet, designing websites and writing poetry and fiction. Jean also has a degree in the History of Art. She has other published books ‘A Cry from the Heart’, ‘Aerantes Writes Poetry’ and ‘A Brief Book of Poetry Forms’, Accolade’ and several eBooks. She is also co-compiler, with Sarah Zang of ‘A Bouquet of Poetry’ . She has won several poetry competitions. She had started writing fiction and this is her fifth fiction eBook. To read more of her work visit her website:

<http://www.jeanmarian.co.uk/ebooks.htm>