

Ship to Shore

Robin Dee

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INTRODUCTION

During the swinging sixties, an event took place which was to shake up the radio business in the United Kingdom, and was instrumental in bringing legal commercial radio as we know it today into our homes.

A young Irishman, Ronan O'Rahilly, frustrated by the fact that he couldn't get any airplay for his own artists on UK radio as it was dominated by the BBC's monopoly, decided to start his own radio station. As commercial radio was not permitted in Britain and the BBC had a stranglehold on the airwaves, he purchased a ship, fitted it out in Ireland as a fully self-contained radio station and sailed it to the south east of England. He anchored it in international waters just outside the four mile territorial limit free from UK jurisdiction, and on Easter weekend 1964, turned on the transmitter, and Radio Caroline was born.

Over the next few years, many more offshore stations were established around the British coast, both on ships and abandoned former WW2 forts in the Thames Estuary, giving the listeners what they wanted – non-stop pop music, not available on the BBC. The stations were synonymous with the 'swinging sixties' and became affectionately known as 'pirate stations', staffed by real radio and music enthusiasts who brought their unbounded passion for what they were doing into the living rooms of thousands. It was also a means for new and unknown artists to reach the public's ears, and many would agree that if it hadn't been for the 'pirates', the Liverpool sound would never have taken off, and certainly the American Motown and Soul genres would never have been successful in Britain.

However, all good things always seem to come to an end, and after three short years the British government passed a bill in Parliament to outlaw the stations, moving the territorial limit to twelve miles and making it illegal to advertise on the stations, work on them, and, bizarrely, even *listen* to them! By August 1967, all of them had closed down. All, that is, except for Radio Caroline. It continued in defiance of the law for over twenty years, struggling to survive in many forms.

In the early seventies, a similar phenomenon took place off the coasts of Holland and Belgium when many offshore stations sprung up, following in the footsteps of the hugely successful and much loved Dutch pirate, Radio Veronica. By 1974, the Dutch government had introduced their own legislation, closing the offshore stations – except for Caroline which continued.

By the eighties and nineties, some intrepid entrepreneurs still believed it worthwhile to start up an offshore station even though legal commercial radio was, by then, well established on land in most European countries. It was a way of getting on-air immediately without jumping through all of the legislative hoops involving bidding for licences, battling for limited frequencies and adhering to various imposed broadcasting restraints, either relating to programme content, maximum transmitted power, or both. Many ingenious tricks were employed to get around the offshore broadcasting laws, including commercials being placed through US advertising agencies, tenders servicing the ships secretly from unknown sources, and staff who, in true pirate tradition, were willing to risk their freedom by defying all the rules just to play music on what was, in all

honesty, some of the best radio ever heard on the European airwaves.

While we now have legal commercial radio in the UK with hundreds of stations broadcasting around the country, the sad fact is that most of them are just dull, soulless clones of each other. That is, until you find a little gem of a station tucked away in the back of beyond. There are a few, especially in Aberdeenshire, which are staffed by real passionate enthusiasts possessed with that special 'something' which made the offshore stations so unique. There is also a multitude of modern-day 'cyber pirates' to be heard on the internet, many of them emulating the former offshore stations, proving that the spirit of free radio lives on.

CHAPTER 1

>PLAY>

“♪ You’re only one step away from that hole you want to dig, with an excavator from Benson’s ♪ . . . Now, Benson’s Plant Hire can offer you the very latest in Komatsu excavators – the mighty SR 22 Super Reach. With its amazing 22 metre reach, it just eats up any job it tackles. River beds? – No problem! Culverts? – Piece of cake! It will even dredge a dock – from the shore! The SR 22 is just the latest addition to the fine fleet of machines at Benson’s. Mini diggers, cement mixers, dumper trucks, JCBs, tracked excavators, and the full range of small plant and tools – we have them all at Benson’s Plant Hire, Mains of Clarty, Strathdee. Call now on Strathdee 450700.”

Dave Buckingham wished he had a tenner for every time he’d played that commercial. Any normal DJ on any normal radio station would be wondering why they were airing a commercial for heavy plant hire at midnight, but Dave was no normal DJ, and Strathdee FM was no normal radio station. Benson’s Plant Hire was advertised at midnight, midday, morning, afternoon, in fact, any time of the day or night because Frank Benson wanted it, and Frank Benson *always* got what he wanted. He owned the radio station. Dave felt like he owned him too, as he sat there in the swivel chair on that hot summer’s night in front of the control console, an ice-cold can of Coke straight from the fridge in his hand, ready to start a ninety-minute show. He often felt like that lately, as Frank seemed to be taking a never ending stream of liberties with him resulting in an undeniable feeling of being dumped upon from a great height. *Marvellous*, he thought, *it’s twenty-two degrees on a hot August night, my shirt’s sticking to me, sweat’s dripping off my nose, there’s no air conditioning, my overdraft’s the biggest it’s ever been, I live in a caravan with one wheel, and I’m forty-one next week. Can it get any worse? Oh, and I’ve got to sound cheerful for the next hour and a half on the radio. Give me a break! Oops! – the commercial’s finished, better do the station ID.*

“Broadcasting to you in the North-East on 104 Megahertz, this is Strathdee FM, where the correct time is now twelve midnight.” Then he fired the ‘play’ button on the Spotmaster cartridge player and played a jingle featuring the golden voice of Mrs Benson doing a station ID. *There’s just no getting away from her*, he thought. At least Frank had never modernised the studio, which pleased Dave. While other stations were now all PC-based with all the music on hard drive and jingles on a computer screen, Strathdee FM had two turntables for playing vinyl, a bank of Spotmasters for jingles, three cassette decks for commercials and a giant Ampex reel-to-reel tape deck on castors for trails, promos and commercials – and it was used a lot. The only ‘modern’ items that had been added, several years ago now, were three CD players, as the DJs had complained to Frank that they could no longer get any new music on vinyl! But Dave liked it this way. This was a ‘proper’ radio studio – the kind he had cut his teeth on.

Jingle finished, he fired the first track on the show, which was on CD. The opening lyrics were spoken, and said something about offering your throat to a wolf with red roses. Or something like that – he wasn't really listening, even though it was one of his favourite Meat Loaf tracks, and Meat Loaf was one of his favourite artists. He was already thinking that perhaps Frank Benson had been the wolf with the red roses and he had been the helpless victim. He was seriously thinking of jacking all this in and going back down to his home in Essex where he might get some work hosting some sixties revival shows, or at worst, driving a van. He was well and truly in a rut, but it was a comfortable rut in its own strange way.

He looked down at himself, and patted his stomach. At least things weren't too bad. He hadn't acquired a beer belly – he couldn't afford to! His Beatles 'mop-top' hair style had gone, though. It was already out of date when he had it twenty years ago. The fresh, boyish face now had its share of lines – laughter lines, he liked to call them. He was quite small, about five foot seven, although his mother used to say, 'quality is better than quantity'. If he had been born twenty years earlier, he could have passed for Davy Jones of The Monkees.

And he still missed Katharina like hell.

<<REWIND<<

Dave had met Frank in 1987 in Holland, when he had heard about a new offshore radio station that Frank Bentley, as he was then called, was starting up. Dave had graduated from the London School of Economics the year before, with no job prospects, and no plans to find any as he'd had a belly full of statistics, balance sheets and figures. He decided to bum around Europe for a while and take in the scenery, both geographical and female. *Never sell yourself short*, he thought, and he headed for St Moritz in Switzerland where he walked right into a job as a host in a glitzy top nightclub (after telling them he was a DJ in a top London club and he would get references sent on to them!) His first impression of the club had been that he had never seen so many Porsches all together all at the same time as there were in the club car park. After three months, the owners got somewhat agitated that no references were forthcoming, and Dave got the distinct impression that it was time to move on.

One of the kitchen staff, a beautiful blonde girl called Katharina, was from Vienna, and she was missing home so badly that she wanted to go back. Dave got chatting to her during her break and he felt something click straight away. She had come to St Moritz with her best friend to work in the nightclub, and now her friend had gone off to London with a man she met in the club, who had promised her a top job as a hostess in a casino. Dave went out with Katharina on one of their few nights off. They walked about the town, had a couple of drinks in a bar, and then walked down by the lake in the warm moonlight. Just for a moment, Dave turned to read a poster about a forthcoming rock concert, then he heard her shout, "Bet you can't catch Katharina!"

He turned round, and there she was, running into the lake, her shoes discarded on the bank!

“You’ll get us locked up!” he shouted back. “Come out of there now!”

“No, no, no!” she shouted back. “You come get Katharina!” *This was one crazy girl*, he thought.

“OK,” he shouted. After kicking his shoes and socks off, he ran in after her. As he was just about to catch her, she squealed, reached down and splashed handfuls of water up in his face.

“You little . . .” Before he could finish the sentence, they were in each other’s arms. His lips found hers, and nothing else mattered. He liked this feeling. He liked this girl. He liked her a lot. People were starting to stare, so they came out of the water, put their shoes back on and walked back to her apartment locked together arm-in-arm, Dave suggested that they both go back to Vienna as soon as possible – things were getting too hot for him to stick around St Moritz. Katharina’s father had always worked in the hotel industry, and knew someone who owned one of the top tourist hotels there. She was sure he would be able to get them both work.

Dave stayed at Katharina’s apartment that night. They packed their few belongings, and in the morning they made an early exit. It took two days of travelling on trains, buses and on foot, and after receiving a warm welcome from Katharina’s father, he suggested a small cheap back-street hotel he knew where Dave could stay until they made their plans. His own flat had only two bedrooms, and Dave didn’t want to appear too forward.

As it turned out next day, the work they were offered was kitchen maid for Katharina, and bingo caller for Dave, with the additional duty of hosting afternoon tea dances for the elderly coach parties. The only redeeming factor in this situation was that Katharina was eternally grateful for his help in getting her home from Switzerland as she couldn’t have done it herself, and she showed her gratitude in a way that Dave liked.

“Come to your Katharina and she will make you feel good,” she always said. “She is always yours – your very own Katharina.”

Katharina or no Katharina, the bingo and tea dances had to go, and after three months, he was making plans to head north. He wanted to go to Hamburg, and Katharina pleaded with him to take her along. He had to remind her of how homesick she felt in St Moritz, but she said she would never feel like that when she was with him.

“Katharina – she love you very, very much, my darling. She want to be together with you always.” The way she said these words in her broken English with her “little girl” voice was almost too much for him. As if the voice wasn’t enough, she only had to look at him with her eyes half closed, and that beautifully sculptured face topped by gorgeous silky blonde hair blowing in the wind, and he melted into a heap of emotional jelly. She was a masterpiece, and was he going to turn this down? That didn’t make sense!

This was going to be difficult – very difficult. He had heard through the grapevine about a new radio station that was starting up, based on board a ship anchored off the Dutch coast broadcasting to the Benelux countries and, more importantly, the UK. A man called Frank Bentley was in Hamburg to see a suitable ship that was for sale, and he was looking for DJs to run it. Dave wanted to be a part of this. He had always been excited by the offshore radio scene, and he was going to move mountains to make his dream come true. He also wanted Katharina, and she very clearly wanted him.

“OK”, he said as they sat at a pavement café the next day, sipping lattes and

watching the world go by. "I've decided I want to go to Hamburg to see the guy who's starting the radio station face to face. It's better than phoning. I've also decided I'd like you to come with me. What do you think?"

"Yes, yes! Katharina will go with you! YES!" She almost knocked the coffee cups over in her excitement.

"It won't be easy," he continued. "If I get the job on the station, I'll be working at sea for weeks at a time, and you will be left on your own. You do realise that?" He was trying to put her off, hoping all the time that she would ignore him.

"Katharina will go with you, darling. She will be with you when you at sea. She will listen to you on radio with your voice close to her cheek. She love you so much."

This was very unnerving - he wasn't just taking a big gamble with his own future, but involving someone else as well. Someone as nice as this very, very special lady. They both sat in silence for a while, with only the noise of the traffic in the adjoining street, and someone riding a scooter across the pavement to avoid the cars.

"OK, let's do it," he said. "This is Friday, we'll leave on Monday morning."

They spent their last weekend in Vienna pretending they were tourists and walked everywhere, arms around each other, window shopping, people watching in pavement cafes, walking and stopping every now and again for a kiss in a shady part of a park. They didn't even have to talk - looks said it all. Katharina's English was good enough to understand, and Dave thought it was so very cute how she always referred to herself in the third person. It was just so . . . Katharina! He loved that girl.

Monday had come round all too soon, and Dave was beginning to have doubts about his plans. It was a pure gamble, and to involve someone else in his hair-brained schemes just seemed too risky. But when did you ever get anything you really wanted without taking a risk? And who said doing anything worthwhile would be easy? After giving himself a good talking to, he went to meet Katharina. It was a lovely calm, sunny morning as he walked down her street. The birds were singing and he could smell fresh baking coming from some of the little pavement cafes, where the owners were sweeping around the front doors and arranging their tables and chairs for the day's customers. From an open upstairs window there was a loud crash and the sound of breaking crockery. Then a child started crying and a dog barked in sympathy. A scooter roared along the pavement narrowly missing him, the smell of the two-stroke exhaust hanging in the still air. A typical Viennese morning! But it wasn't for Dave and Katharina. She was already out on the sidewalk at six-thirty am with her suitcase, waiting for him. When he arrived, her father Leon came to the door and gave her big hugs and kisses. Then he took Dave's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Now, you will look after my precious girl, won't you," he said, with a look that Dave translated as "if you don't, I will track you down, rip out your heart, and turn your innards into mincemeat!"

"Don't worry," he said, trembling, "I'll look after her. I'll make sure she writes to you."

As they walked off down the street, Katharina kept turning round and shouting, "Bye, goodbye Papa, goodbye," until he was out of sight.

Leon went back into the house and straight into Katharina's room. He pretended it was to check if she had forgotten anything, but it was really to just look at her things. He picked up her pillow and held it to his face, inhaling deeply. He knew that smell so well.

It was a cross between the fresh air smell of washing just taken in from the line, and an ever so slight hint of fresh flowers. Katharina never wore any perfume, but she just seemed to carry this aura of fresh flowers about with her. Leon was convinced it was all down to her mother looking down on her and making sure her daughter always smelt sweet and pure. There was no other explanation for it. He was going to be on his own again, as his wife Anna had died in childbirth when Katharina was only five. The baby brother she was so looking forward to having, died too. She was all he had left now, and she meant the world to him. He slowly put the pillow back on the bed, and turned towards the shelf unit beside the bed. On the top shelf was a collection of cuddly animals consisting of four teddy bears, two cute puppy dogs, a big floppy-eared furry rabbit and half a dozen small furry creatures, exact species unknown. Leon could almost recall to the day and the exact time when each of these toys was acquired. Most of them came from the fairground. Katharina loved funfairs, and always pleaded with her Papa to take her. Before taking her there, Leon would always buy a furry toy from a little novelty stall on his way home from work. He would hide it in his pocket on the way there, and if Katharina was unsuccessful with any of the games on the stalls, he would kneel down in front of her and produce this toy, saying, "Look, my darling, you won after all! Here is a new little friend for you to take home." The look on her little face with her big eyes all lit up just made him so happy. He knew he was probably spoiling her, but as the years past she proved that he hadn't, by being a perfect daughter.

The next shelf down was dominated in the middle by a large leather photo frame. The picture in the frame was the demonstration picture supplied with it. It showed a very handsome man in a sharp business suit, holding a telephone to his ear and smiling at the camera, with perfect glistening teeth and immaculately groomed hair. Katharina had bought it because she liked the man in the picture, but later she told her Papa that she would put a photo of him in it.

"Oh no," he protested, "I could never look as good as that!" He never did get put in the frame.

Next to the photo frame was a fabric-covered glasses case with little pink butterflies on it. He picked it up and opened it. There, inside, were her first glasses she had got when she was nine. He took them out and inspected them. They had a pink and brown mottled frame, and he recalled how cute she looked when she first got them. She had other thoughts, though. He smiled when he remembered how she refused to wear them, but then had to, as her schoolteacher reported to him about her poor school work. This was, of course, because she couldn't see the blackboard. The teacher was instructed to make sure she wore them – or else! However, after she was fourteen and noticed boys noticing her, the glasses were abandoned and never worn again, except when she wanted to watch television or read her favourite magazines. Then she had to wear them. Leon chuckled when he thought that this was obviously why she failed every exam at school and ended up as a kitchen maid in clubs and hotels, instead of a doctor or a lawyer. But she would be the best kitchen maid there ever was, he told himself, and she was the best daughter a father could ever wish for, so what did it matter? Now, however, the poor eyesight which she had inherited from her mother had progressively become worse over the years, and she had to wear her glasses full-time to be able to see anything at all.

On the other side of the photo frame sat a twenty pack of Marlboro cigarettes, and on top of it, a solid silver lighter with the initials K.A.B. engraved on it; both birthday

presents from her best friend Johanna. Katharina Anna Bloch didn't smoke, but all her friends did, and on her eighteenth birthday it was expected that she would too – a sort of 'right of passage'. Everyone in Vienna did. Leon opened the pack, and he already knew there were three cigarettes missing. She had tried them on her birthday night out with her friends, and decided there and then that smoking wasn't for her. Rather than offend Johanna, she told her that she would just have the occasional one. Leon was secretly glad, as it would have made his little girl even more grown up than she already was. She didn't even drink much, her favourite tippie being either an illegal glass of cold beer, or a white wine, but more often than not, a Coke.

The next two shelves held various books such as, 'The Bedtime Book of Short Stories for Girls'; 'Dinosaurs of the World'; 'The Official Rolling Stones Fan Club Handbook'; 'Monsters of the Deep'; and a strange one for a girl – 'Giant Excavators and Monster Trucks'. There were also three die cast models of excavators still in their cellophane-fronted boxes on this shelf. She was fascinated by diggers and excavators and always pleaded with her Papa to take her to watch any that were working in the town. She saw them as big, fuzzy, yellow dinosaurs in her blurred world. She knew all the drivers by name, and was in her element when they sometimes asked her to come up and sit in the cab on their knees and pull one of the levers.

The bottom two shelves were full of single records – the majority of them by the Rolling Stones. Katharina was mad about the Stones, and loved Mick Jagger. It was a 'rebel thing'. There were also some Beatles, Moody Blues and Fleetwood Mac records, but they were all too tame compared to her beloved Stones. In the corner of the room, sitting on a small table, was her little Grundig record player with a red fabric-covered case, and cream plastic knobs.

Leon wondered when he would ever see her again, and he couldn't stop the tears welling up in his eyes. He coughed, cleared his throat, then went through to his armchair and settled down with his newspaper.

Dave and Katharina took a tram to the railway station, purchased their tickets, then, as they had plenty of time to spare, went to the station buffet and had breakfast. The journey was uneventful and took all day. They spent most of it reading magazines they had bought, sleeping in each other's arms or just gazing in each other's eyes. This was all new territory to Dave – not just geographical but emotional. He felt like he was on an unstoppable roller coaster.

When they arrived in Hamburg, they went to a small bistro and ate. They had the address of a back-street hotel which Katharina's father knew, and he had phoned his friend there to arrange accommodation for them. They made their way there, got settled in, and were so shattered that as soon as their heads touched the pillows, they were sound asleep right through till morning. Well, at least till four-thirty as far as Dave was concerned, as there were trees right outside the window and the birds had decided to start their choir practice. He got out of bed and looked down at Katharina. She had such a contented look on her face, with her tousled hair spread out over the pillow. He crept about so as not to wake her, and decided to go for a walk – he needed to get his thoughts together. It was unusual of him to be so thoughtful, but he wrote her a little note saying 'gone for a walk – back soon', and placed it on her bedside table, just in case she thought he had done a runner!

He went out into the early morning sunshine and started walking in no particular direction. This was serious stuff. He asked himself: *Do you really know what you're doing? Are you ready for this? Do you love this girl? Is this right?* The answer was yes to all of the questions. *Right, that's sorted then*, he replied to himself, *let's move on now to the next stage*. When faced with a problem or tough decision to make, he always held this sort of 'board meeting' with himself and thrashed out the pros and cons. It had always worked before, so he stuck with it.

He walked for two hours, stopping for a coffee at a small café, and then returned to the hotel. Katharina was up and dressed, and welcomed him with a big kiss. He could get used to this! They had arranged two nights accommodation, as Dave thought it might take a whole day to track down this man, Frank Bentley. He had the name and address of the shipping brokers who were selling the radio ship, so he thought that was as good a place as any to start. Let's face it; it was the only place he could start. They set off to Horst Grunwald Maritime, Shipping Brokers, Hamburg Docks.

The docks area was enormous, and there were so many checkpoints where they had to bluff their way through. It was good that he had Katharina with him as he could speak no German, and without her it would have been a difficult, if not impossible task. After following directions for three or four times, they came across a big brown sandstone building bearing the legend in big blue metal letters:

Horst Grunwald Maritime
Shipping Brokers

It would appear that whoever had erected the sign had under-estimated the strength of the fixings required for the heavier capital letters, as most of them had fallen off. *Very strange*, Dave thought, as he knew of the legendary high quality of German engineering. He had to justify this, so he told himself that this must have been erected by immigrant labour!

They entered a heavy oak swing door with a frosted glass panel in it, bearing the company name again, but permanently this time, etched in the glass, with no risk of letters falling off. The office had beautiful wood-panelled walls. A rather severe-looking lady of indeterminate age confronted them at a huge oversize desk, surrounded by an aura of furniture polish. She had an overbearing appearance, and her jet black hair looked as if it had been moulded from plastic and glued onto her head. She peered at them over the top of her glasses, and asked in German if she could help. Katharina took the lead and asked her, "Können wir mit jemandem über das Kaufen eines Schiffs bitte sprechen?"

"Kann ich Sie das Thema von Ihrer Erkundigung fragen?" the receptionist asked. By now, Dave was completely lost!

"Wir interessieren uns für Kaufen des Radioschiffs," Katharina continued.

"Bitte setzen Sie sich für einen Moment hin."

She lifted the telephone, dialled a number, and spoke to someone at the other end in a hushed voice.

After replacing the receiver, she looked over to them and said, "Unser internationaler Umsatzdirektor wird mit Ihnen in ein paar Momenten sein. Bitte bleiben

Sie dort.”

“What was all that about?” Dave asked Katharina.

“Katharina tell her that we interested in buying the radio ship and she tell us to wait here on seat and international sales director will come see us soon.”

They did as ordered, and after about five minutes, a man in a grey suit appeared through a side door. “Bitte kommen Sie zu meinem Büro durch,” he said, adding in English, “Please come through to my office.”

They followed him through, and sat down as directed. He was a friendly-looking man with neat, short white hair, a white beard and sparkling eyes, and probably about sixty, Dave guessed.

“Now, how can I be of assistance?” the man asked, punctuating the question with a big smile. *I'll bet he sells lots of ships with a manner like that*, Dave thought.

Dave took the lead now, and decided to be perfectly honest. “We’re not actually interested in buying a ship at all.” The sales director’s brows furrowed and a frown started to spread across his face. Dave continued, “We are very interested in trying to contact a man called Frank Bentley, who is interested in the radio ship you are selling, and we hope you can tell us where he is staying in Hamburg.”

The sales director’s expression relaxed. “I’m so sorry. I think you have had a wasted journey. Herr Bentley is no longer here, and he is no longer interested in the radio ship. He told me he has had a better offer in Holland, and he returned there yesterday.”

Dave’s heart sank.

Sensing his disappointment, the sales director said, “I can, however, tell you how you may contact him, if you so wish.”

Dave perked up. “Yes please, if you would be so kind.”

“The gentleman in question owns a night club in Scheveningen. I believe it is called the Mermaid Club, and he spends a lot of time there as I have always had success in telephoning him there. I will write down the number for you if you like.”

“That would be just fine. Thank you very much,” Dave said, feeling relieved.

This was both good news and bad news. Good because he now had a definite contact number for Frank Bentley and bad because it would take at least another day to reach him, and they only had enough money between them for a week’s hotel bills, not counting the train fares.

They made their way back to the hotel, walking all the way to save money. It took an hour and a half, including a stop to eat some fresh fruit purchased from a roadside stall. *Well, that’s today’s main meal taken care of cheaply*, thought Dave.

Back at the hotel, Dave decided to try phoning Frank Bentley as soon as possible, and suggested to Katharina that she sit in the residents’ lounge and relax on one of the well-worn chairs in front of the TV. He went to the phone booth out in the hallway and dialled the number. The phone was answered by a girl in Dutch, and all he could understand was ‘Mermaid Club’.

“Hello, do you speak English?” Dave asked.

“Oh, ya, ya, can I help you, please?” the girl replied. She sounded nice.

“Can I speak to a Mr Frank Bentley, please?”

“Who is calling?” the girl asked.

“My name is Dave Buckingham.”

“Please, what is it in connection with?” This was a tough cookie to get past!

“It’s about the radio station project.”

“Ah . . . ya, ya, I think he expects you. I put you through.” An extension rang.
Expects me? Expects me? Dave was confused.

The phone was answered by an Englishman – *very* English. In fact, His accent sounded like it was straight out of a 1950s Ealing black and white movie.

“Hello, Rob you old scoundrel. Talk about keeping a fellow in suspense. You’ve kept me hanging on for a week. Do you want this bloody job or don’t you? The ship’s sitting out there waiting for you.”

After a few seconds, Dave nervously replied, “Um . . . Mr Bentley . . . er, I think you are confusing me with someone else . . .”

“Good Lord!” Frank exclaimed, cutting in over him, “Who on earth is this?”

“My name’s Dave, Mr Bentley, and I am phoning you about a DJ job on the radio ship.”

“Heavens above! That’s what I call great timing! Well, I’ve just been let down by someone who guaranteed me they’d take the job, and then they disappeared! Have you any experience, Dave?”

“Yes,” Dave replied. This was going better than he expected.

“OK, I like the sound of your voice on the phone, young man, so I’m going to do something which is very uncustomary for me. I’m in a spot, and I need someone right away, so I’m going to take a gamble and offer you the job on a six months trial. It’s yours if you want it. What do you say?”

Dave couldn’t say anything right then – he was coughing, spluttering and very nearly choked with excitement! Then he managed, “Yes, Mr Bentley. Yes, I’ll take it. Thank you very much.”

“Good! Superb! Wonderful! OK, where are you? I will want to see you tomorrow night.”

“I’m in Hamburg just now, looking for you!”

“Hell’s fire and damnation! I need you in Scheveningen tomorrow night. Think you can make it?”

“Yes. Of course,” Dave answered, “I’ll be there.”

“Good. Top man. That’s the spirit. Come to the Mermaid Club any time after seven pm. The taxi driver will take you straight here – they all know where it is. Charge the taxi fare to the Mermaid account. See you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mr Bentley, I’ll be there. Goodbye.”

Frank had the last word with, “And for God’s sake, don’t ask for Mr Bentley, ask to see Frank when you arrive and the girls will treat you nicer.”

Dave thought he would have a little bit of fun – he felt so good. He walked slowly through to the lounge with his tail between his legs, and with a glum, melancholy look on his face, he sat down next to Katharina. She took one look at him and her face fell. She said, “Aw, bad news my darling? Never mind, we find this Bentley man tomorrow. Katharina make you happy again.”

‘Mr Ed’ was on the TV. Dave said, “That’s all I need now – a talking horse, *and* it

even speaks German!” He moved close to her ear and whispered, “Mr Ed goes into a bar for a drink, and the barman says, ‘Why the long face?’”

She didn’t laugh. “How can you joke when it is bad news?” she said, almost crying.

With his lips right against her ear, he whispered, “I got the job!”

All hell broke loose! She let out a piercing squeal and shot out of her seat, a loose spring going “boing” and following her! The squeal was followed by another one, then uncontrollable laughter. At the same time, she started battering him over the head with the newspaper she had been reading, shouting, “Katharina hate you, hate you, HATE YOU! No, no, no, love you, love you, LOVE YOU! You pig! Pig! Lovely pig!”

Then she threw the newspaper up into the air and it floated down, page by page, while she leapt onto Dave’s lap and kissed him repeatedly.

The old couple sitting in the corner were aghast and couldn’t move. The hotel dog, which was in the room sleeping peacefully on the hearthrug, jumped up and ran for cover under the table, whimpering like a whipped puppy. A young couple who had been trying to pacify their troublesome child couldn’t believe it when their child froze to the spot, mouth wide open, then ran to his mother for a hug. To Dave and Katharina, nobody else was in the room. They kissed endlessly until Dave said, “I think we better go to our room.”

Up in the room, he told her all about the telephone conversation, and then said, “Right, young lady, bed-time now and no argument! We’ve got to go to Holland tomorrow. Hope you can speak Dutch.”

“No – no Dutch,” she replied, “only German and little English.”

After setting the alarm for five am, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The journey to Holland was fairly uneventful and they slept most of the way, waking up only when they had to change trains for The Hague. After arriving at The Hague Central Station, they went for a pizza and a coffee. Taxis were in abundance, and they picked a white top-of-the-range Mercedes to take them to the club. *Nothing like arriving in style*, Dave thought.

It was about ten pm when the taxi pulled up at the door of the Mermaid Club. The entrance was very impressive with cleverly concealed lighting making it look as if it was suspended in the water. In the full-length window beside the door, a beautiful girl with long waist-length blonde hair sat on a three-legged stool, her tail resting on one of the stool’s crossbars. This girl was a mermaid! She was blowing kisses to everyone who passed, beckoning them in. As Dave and Katharina opened the door, they were immediately met by another two girls dressed in fish-scale bikinis. They welcomed them in English, and asked what they could do for them.

“We’re here to see Frank – he’s expecting us,” Dave said, as instructed.

“OK, Please follow me,” the first girl said, and she actually took Dave’s hand. Katharina followed behind, and for the first time she felt a little threatened by this fishy

creature.

Dave was just gobsmacked by the whole place. In the middle of the floor was a circular bar, and in the centre of the bar was a giant circular aquarium with an assortment of exotic tropical fish swimming round and round, and a beautiful blonde girl who was dancing around a pole in the middle. Dave wondered how she could hold her breath for so long underwater, then he realised that the tank was like an elongated doughnut, and the girl wasn't actually in the water. She wore just two small seashells instead of a bra, just covering her and no more, and for panties, just a clump of seaweed which looked in danger of falling off. The sound system was the best he had ever heard, and it was pumping out 'Let's Dance' by David Bowie. The club was almost half full, and they cut through the dancers to a plain blue door on the back wall. The girl pressed a button, a CCTV camera up on the wall swivelled round to inspect them, then the door opened. They went up two steps, and the girl ushered them into a large room.

Frank Bentley was sitting behind a large oak desk, and he welcomed them with open arms. He was wearing a cream suit and an expensive-looking shirt. The neck was open well down, displaying a gold medallion. *Solid gold*, Dave thought, and that chest hair – was it real? And the shoes? – Definitely crocodile skin. Dave guessed he would be in his late thirties. After introductions were made, he guided them over to two large sumptuous cream leather sofas, with a smoked glass coffee table in front of them. Dave looked at the pictures on the walls. They were all of old sailing ships and galleons in full sail, some of them battling horrendous seas.

Frank spoke to the girl, "Tanya, love, pot of coffee for three, and some executive biscuits please." She nodded and went out the door.

Frank started the conversation. "Well, welcome aboard. Did you have a good trip?"

"Good, but hectic," Dave replied.

"OK," Frank continued after the introductions were made, "now let's get down to it. I'll give you a quick outline of what we're doing and what you'll be doing, and the rest we make up as we go along. Remember, there's a *lot* of give and take in this business, and I warn you now, it very often ends up more give than take. I tell you this now so that there are no illusions about the job. You will get stressed, fed up, tired, and sometimes so tired that you will want to chuck it in there and then. You will feel like killing me sometimes. Right, that's the bad bit over with. You already know the good bits or you wouldn't be here. Do you know why we are going to broadcast a radio station from a ship anchored in international waters?"

"Yes. I was brought up in Frinton-on-Sea, and my parents live in Walton-on-the-Naze. I missed all the sixties pirate radio scene, but I've kept up with the seventies offshore stations, Radio Northsea International, which was my favourite, Atlantis, Caroline and Laser 558."

The door buzzer sounded, and Frank pressed a button on the desk. "Come in, Tanya," he said as the door opened. He had been watching her on the monitor approaching with the coffee tray.

"Thank you, love, just put it down here. Why not take a break? Go down and have a drink and put it on the slate."

"Thank you, Frank, see you later." Tanya went out.

"Now, where were we?" Frank asked as he started to pour the coffee. This man

was completely in control and at home in his environment “Ah yes. Right, well, it’s almost impossible to establish a land-based commercial radio station legally in Europe right now, so we’ve bought a redundant oil rig supply ship, the Red Conqueror. When I say ‘we’, I mean the Mermaid Club. The ship is being re-named ‘Mermaid’, and the station will be called ‘Mermaid Radio’. This is going to be the mother of all offshore radio stations, because it is being done properly. To show you we mean business, I’ll give you some details.

“We bought the ship from the liquidators representing two Belgian brothers called Werner. They had converted it and fully fitted it out as a self-contained radio station, but they put the cart before the horse. They had no backers or advertising lined up. They thought the money would just flow in when they switched on the transmitter. Big mistake. Lucky for us there are still some naive people like that around in the world, and we managed to come along and take it off their hands for a bargain basement price. We have four clients who have each put up twenty per cent of the total cost in return for a year’s free advertising. They are: Super-Waffles – I’m sure you’ve eaten a few; Friday Girl – the chain of boutiques in Holland and Belgium; Poparama – the monthly charts magazine, who, incidentally, are giving us big publicity as part of the deal; and Media-Ads International in New York, the agency representing the clients, and they want to advertise in their own right. They’ve developed a package which blows holes in any legislation against advertising on offshore stations. Oh, and the Mermaid Club has put up the last twenty per cent, but we can advertise any time we want anyway. We also have our first outside client knocking at the door to come aboard, and that’s Music Maniac, the adult music magazine.”

Dave’s eyebrows kept rising higher and higher. He was impressed. Katharina just sat and listened, trying to take it all in. She felt completely out of her depth, but put her trust in Dave.

Frank continued, “You will be joining an organisation which is a success even before it’s begun. It can only go onwards and upwards. The ship is a beauty. You will have a clean, warm, modern cabin to yourself, excellent mess room with giant TV, stereo, and the station output on top-quality monitors as well.”

Dave dived in quick, “What about . . .”

Before he could finish, Frank came back with, “Pay? I know we haven’t mentioned it, so here goes. You will initially work three weeks on, and one week ashore. During the week ashore, you will be required to host at the Mermaid Club on two or three nights. You will be paid £100 per week.”

Dave frowned. He wanted this chance, but for £100 a week?

“Don’t forget,” Frank said, “all your meals will be provided both on the ship and ashore. You will have free supplies of beer and cigarettes on the ship, so you’ll have nothing to spend your money on.”

“We would need to find an apartment in Scheveningen for when I’m ashore, and also for Katharina.”

“Hmmm . . . let me think . . .” Frank looked very thoughtful, and was drumming his fingers on the coffee table while he was looking at Katharina intensely. “What are you intending to do, my dear?” he asked her directly.

She spoke for the first time, her voice quite husky with nerves, “Look for job in hotel, maybe, or club.”

There was total silence for two or three minutes. They all took a sip of coffee. Frank was staring at Katharina, and said, “Your features . . . beautiful! The cheekbones . . . the dimples when you smile . . . perfect! What do you do? What is your profession?”

“Kitchen maid.”

“Can you cook?”

“Yes, Katharina love cooking. Very good, very good cook.”

“I’m going to take a gamble here. How would you like to be the kitchen maid on board the ship, but do all the cooking as well, looking after your Dave and all the crew and the other DJs? Do you think you could do that?”

All she could manage was a little squeal, and nodded her head at the same time.

“Now,” Frank continued, “I’m totally knocked out by your looks – your man Dave here certainly has excellent taste. I’m going to take another wild gamble here. Would you mind taking off your glasses for just a second please?” Katharina obliged, and everything became an instant blur.” Hmmm . . . I would love to make you the public face of Mermaid Radio. You would need to do a publicity photo shoot in a mermaid’s costume, and your picture would appear in all of our literature, press releases, T-shirts, car stickers, coffee mugs, and so on and so forth.”

Katharina was shaking and uttering little squeals, and then she turned to Dave looking for his approval. He nodded his head, and she turned back to face Frank, giving him her best smile . . . and oh, those dimples!

“You see,” said Frank, “all our mermaids in the club have long blonde hair – fairly typical. You will be slightly different, with your cheeky tousled look, a sort of rebel. And that’s the image we want for the station – a new slant on a known brand – something fresh – nay, rebellious! How about it? You will need to help out in the club too on your weeks ashore, but I’ll also pay you £100 per week. And one more thing, I am willing to cut you both in for one per cent each – a sort of profit-sharing scheme, so you will be part owners of the station. It also means you can’t run off and leave me in the lurch! What do you think?”

Dave spoke for both of them. “I think you can safely say that the answer is ‘yes’, from both of us.”

Frank grinned from ear to ear, “Excellent. Let’s seal this deal right now with something a bit stronger and we’ll get the important stuff signed tomorrow,” and he lifted the telephone and pushed a button. “Tanya, love, can you bring up three glasses of Champagne please?” He replaced the receiver and turned to them both. “It’s late now, so please stay here tonight, we have an excellent guest suite you will like. Spend some time down in the club and get to know the girls. Help yourselves to anything from the menu, drinks included – it’s all covered. We’ll talk in the morning and start the ball rolling.”

CHAPTER 2

>>FAST FORWARD>>

Dave was brought abruptly back to the real world when the record ended. He had been daydreaming. *How can you daydream at quarter past midnight?* he thought. He had played two records in a row now as he just couldn't be bothered speaking.

The second track on the show was one of his all-time favourites – one of his 'desert island discs' as he called it. It was a track by Suzanne Vega called 'Men in a War' from the rather strange album 'Days of Open Hand'. He never forgot these lyrics about when men in a war lost a limb and could still feel that limb like it was still there. It was referring to losing love like losing a piece of your body, and still feeling it. He had heard that people who have had a foot amputated still get an itchy foot! He always compared this to Katharina. *She's my lost foot*, he thought. He never, ever, stopped thinking about her, day and night, even in his sleep. Tonight, his thoughts were stronger than ever. He ached inside for her. Every bone in his body wanted her. He told himself, *I'm going to have to do something about this. I'll leave next week, go to Vienna and find her. I've got to. There, that's that sorted.* It didn't take away the ache, though.

He was so overcome by his feelings, and the Suzanne Vega track, that he couldn't speak, so he had just gone straight into the next track. He didn't do crying, but he really had to wipe away some serious water from his eyes before he could see the controls on the desk. *Must be this damned heat*, he told himself.

The next track was a real rocker from a band called Reef. This would knock him back into shape, he thought. The singer roared out the first line of the song about placing your hands on his and running your fingers through his soul. He instantly remembered how Katharina would come up behind him and place her lovely hands on his neck, and then move them down from there to his shoulders, giving him a very sensual massage. Then she would rub her cheek against his from behind, slowly turning round to face him while rubbing her body against his like a friendly cat, the whole manoeuvre culminating in a passionate kiss.

"Oh man, I can't take this any longer!" he shouted out loud.

WHOOSH! PLOP! Flap, flap . . .

Something just flew in the wide open window. Instinctively, he tried swatting it with the running order, and it fluttered down the back of the desk while a stack of CDs crashed to the floor and the half empty can of Coke rolled along the desk leaving its trade mark as it went. Was it a bird? Was it a plane? Dave actually thought it was a cross between a bird and a moth. *Entirely possible*, he thought, knowing the track record of some of this village's residents' sexual exploits!

At that point the record ended. *Good job the microphone wasn't open*, he thought. *Better speak this time.*

"Hello . . . anyone out there? Welcome along to ninety minutes of superb tracks on a hot summer's night. We're in the studio here in Strathdee where it's just turned

midnight and we've got the window wide open. We had the lights on as well, which wasn't a good idea because something came in. I don't know what it was, but it flew past me at amazing speed, had about a six inch wingspan, I tried a swipe at it and it's disappeared down the back of the desk. Now, I can hear fluttering of wings, - I really don't want to think about it at all, so I'm just going to play some more music."

He fired a jingle which started with a powerful drum role, and then the singers came in with, "*The most music – Strathdee FM.*" David Bowie immediately came thundering in with one of the best intros to a pop record ever – 'Rebel Rebel'.

<<REWIND<<

Frank Bentley had wanted Katharina to be a 'rebel' mermaid. Dave loved the idea of that. It suited her so much, and she was so enthusiastic, even suggesting she did the photo shoots topless, but it was made quite clear to her that she would wear a 'fish scale' bikini top. "After all, this *is* a family station," Frank would say.

Dave thought back to the first three months on the station – it was heaven, and hard work, both at the same time. He put in a lot of hours, covering for other DJs most of the time as they were still short of presenters. He even persuaded Katharina to do a show in both German and English, and with her total inexperience and natural exuberance, the show was a revelation, and quickly gathered a cult following. Needless to say, a lot of Rolling Stones tracks were played. For over two months she would do the midnight to three slot, and she called it 'Pillow Talk with Kat'. She was so natural that people forgot she was on the radio, and almost believed she was in their bedroom talking to only them – the sign of a true communicator. Dave would do the nine to midnight slot, then hand over to 'Kat', as she became known on the station. He would then stick around to help her, coming in on the show from time to time teasing her and having a laugh, all in the best possible taste, but sometimes being a little bit naughty. She sometimes even did the show topless. Well, you could get away with that on a radio ship in the North Sea, and the listeners' imagination did the rest! At this time in the morning, Frank didn't bother. In fact, he encouraged it. When her show ended, a three-hour recording of the Mermaid Club would be played until six, when the first Dutch DJ would open up the Breakfast Show on the daytime Dutch service. Dave and Katharina would then go into the galley, fix some bacon rolls and coffee, and weather permitting, take them out onto the aft deck and lounge back on deck chairs, watching the sun rise over the North Sea – the most magical experience they had ever witnessed in their lives. By five o' clock, they were falling asleep and would go to their cabin. Katharina had to be up by eleven to get lunch ready for the DJs and crew, and Dave had to be up by twelve to prepare the 'Drivetime Show' which he presented from three to six. He often got up earlier, though, just so he could listen to the Dutch DJs doing their stuff. They were absolute masters of their craft, riding the discs like a true jockey, creating wall-to-wall sound, talking up intros to a nanosecond before the lyrics started, and even playing certain jingles over the record intros so precisely that a computer couldn't even do it better. Dave would sit in the studio mesmerised by all this. Sometimes he would stick a tape in a cassette deck and record

their shows from a feed on the desk so he could keep them for posterity.

It was on one of these magical mornings on the aft deck, watching the sun rise at four that the phone call came. Captain Visser came out onto the deck looking for them and said, "I have telephone call for Katharina Bloch from Scheveningen Radio, the maritime coastal radio station. The ship to shore call is booked for 04:10 and will be placed then. Can you please come up to the bridge?"

Katharina's heart leapt and she felt all of the colour draining from her cheeks. She never got phone calls, especially at four in the morning. *Something was wrong*, she thought, *something must be terribly wrong*. She started shivering and shaking. Dave put his arm around her, and they went up the steel stairway.

They went onto the bridge, and closed the door. It was warm and cosy in there. There was a comforting whine coming from various pieces of equipment. Captain Visser was drinking coffee, and he put his mug down beside a detective novel he had been reading which was lying face down on the desk.

The captain welcomed them in, and said awkwardly, "Nice morning, isn't it? Nice. Very nice. Good sea. Nice sunrise. Nice calm sea."

At that moment, the radio crackled into life: "Mermaid, Mermaid, Mermaid. This is Scheveningen Radio, Scheveningen Radio. Mermaid, Mermaid, Mermaid, do you read Scheveningen Radio? Over."

The captain picked up the microphone and pressed the 'speak' button.

"Scheveningen Radio, Scheveningen Radio, Scheveningen Radio, this is the MV Mermaid receiving you, go ahead. Over."

"Mermaid, Mermaid, Mermaid, Scheveningen Radio. I have a call from Vienna for a Katharina Bloch. Is the party ready to receive the call? Over."

The captain replied, "Scheveningen Radio, Scheveningen Radio, this is the Mermaid. Affirmative, go ahead. Over."

There was a fifteen second pause, then a couple of clicks and the station operator was heard to say, "Please go ahead, caller."

The captain handed the microphone to Katharina, and told her to say 'over' when she was finished speaking. A background whine appeared on the radio, and a nervous-sounding voice came over the whine.

"Katharina, Sind Sie dort?" She instantly recognised the voice.

"Uncle Josef, what is wrong? Please speak English, my boyfriend is here. There is something wrong, isn't there?" She was shaking like a leaf, and so nervous that she forgot to say 'over'. She pressed the 'speak' button again and said "over."

"Katharina, my darling child, I am afraid I have some bad news for you. Very bad news. Are you ready? Over."

"It's Papa, Uncle Josef, it's Papa isn't it? Over." She already felt the unstoppable surge of tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, my darling, your Papa passed away this morning. He was in the hospital for a routine operation, and he never came out of the anaesthetic. I am so sorry, Katharina. Over."

She couldn't reply. She couldn't speak. She couldn't stand. With an expression of sheer agony on her beautiful face, she let out a long, mournful yell as she collapsed, and

the captain caught hold of her before she hit the floor, the microphone crashing onto the desk.

Dave picked it up, hesitated, and then pressed the 'speak' button.

"Josef, this is Dave, Katharina's boyfriend. She is in shock. Please hold on a moment. Over."

"Dave, this is Josef, how is she? Is she OK? Over."

"Joseph, she is sitting down and the captain is giving her a brandy and holding her head. She's totally shocked, Josef, totally shocked. So am I, Josef. I will have to go and help her. Over."

"Dave, will you please take this information. The funeral will be next Friday. I have left a whole week to help Katharina get back here. Do you think that will be OK? She must come to her Papa's apartment, I will be staying there. Over."

"Josef, we will do everything for her to make sure she can be there. This must have been very difficult for you. I will let you go now and I will see to Katharina. She needs me right now. Goodbye. Over."

"OK, Dave. I go now. Please give my darling girl all my love and tell her I am thinking of her all the time, and I will see her next week. Over."

"I will, Josef, I will. Goodbye." Dave handed the microphone to the captain, who pressed the 'speak' button and said, "Scheveningen Radio, this is Mermaid. Call ended. Over."

"Call ended at 04:19, timed at nine minutes. Thank you, Mermaid. Over and standing by."

Then there was total silence, except for the whine of the electronic equipment and the continuous deep purring of the enormous diesel generator on the aft deck, providing the vital power for the transmitter to send ten kilowatts of energy up the antenna carrying the programmes of Mermaid Radio, as if nothing had happened. The radio burst into life again with a routine 'all ships' message from Scheveningen Radio. The captain turned the volume right down – they weren't going anywhere.

Katharina sat slumped at the desk, sobbing uncontrollably, her shoulders leaping involuntarily with each cry of anguish. Dave stood over her with his arm around her, cuddling her and kissing her forehead. He looked up at the captain, a big gruff ex-ocean-going tugboat man, who looked completely helpless. Captain Visser was out of his depth here. He was more used to dealing with rough and ready crewmen, and this was all new to him. He leaned over to Katharina, and topped up her glass from the brandy bottle. Then he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his top shirt pocket, removed one and lit it. He handed the lit cigarette to her, and without thinking, she took it. The brandy was beginning to kick in, and she was starting to calm down as she felt a warm and pleasant feeling spread through her body. She took a drag on the cigarette, and the taste immediately took her back to her eighteenth birthday night out. She took another one, and inhaled deeply. She felt a calming sensation sweep through her, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and she started to feel better. Then she spoke.

"Look at Katharina, this is very bad of her. She is so sorry to upset you."

Dave replied, "No, no, love. You've had a terrible shock, but you are doing fine. I will look after you. Finish your brandy and cigarette and I'll take you down to the cabin. You must try to get some sleep."

She didn't get much sleep, and neither did Dave. He went back up to the bridge at nine, and asked the captain to book a call to Frank at the Mermaid Club. The ship to shore service was very busy at that time, but he got a call booked for ten.

Frank sounded very upset at the news, and said he would arrange everything for Katharina to attend the funeral. The supply tender didn't come to the ship until Tuesday, so he arranged for her to be lifted by helicopter later in the day. He had a client of the Mermaid Club who ran a helicopter charter company, and luckily he owed Frank a favour. Also, as luck would have it, the helicopter was doing some survey work along the coast, and would divert out to the ship after the work was finished to pick her up. The Mermaid had a large helipad built over the bow of the ship, and Frank thought it would always be good to have for emergencies. He was right.

The helicopter arrived at the ship right on time. From there, it would take her to Schiphol Airport, where Frank had booked a flight to Vienna. On arrival at Vienna, she would take a taxi to the apartment.

Katharina had never been in a helicopter before, and the excitement of it distracted her just a little bit from the real reason for the journey. At Schiphol Airport, she asked a friendly girl at the check-in desk for full information about where to board the plane, as she certainly wasn't a seasoned traveller.

For the whole journey, it was as if she was on automatic pilot. She went through the motions like a robot, still feeling numb from the shock of it all. When she arrived at the apartment it was early evening, and as she walked up the steep narrow staircase with a heavy feeling in her stomach, her Uncle Josef was there to greet her at the door as he had been watching out for her. They both embraced, and hugged each other for a long time. Their silence said it all – she had lost her father and her only surviving parent – he had lost his only brother.

“Come and sit down, my sweet, you must be very tired,” he said, eventually. “I have prepared a simple meal. It is just a ham salad, I hope that is OK.”

“That is just fine, Uncle Josef,” she said, and pulled up a chair at the set table.

“I have to leave in one hour,” Josef continued. “I have a colleague covering for me at the hotel, but he cannot work past eight, so I have to do my night porter shift. Will you be OK on your own? I will come and see you tomorrow evening before work, after I have had some sleep. I still have arrangements to make for the funeral, and people to phone, so I will be busy for a few days. It's good I am on the night shift just now as I can do these things during the day.”

“That's all right, Uncle Josef, I will probably do a lot of sleeping, then go round the shops in town to try to take my mind off things.”

“Good. Good, my precious.” Josef loved her like a daughter. “I have written the number of the hotel down on the pad just in case you need me.”

“Thank you. I should be OK after some sleep.”

They sat and ate their meal, and Josef gave Katharina the funeral details. A car was to pick her up at eleven thirty on Friday morning. Then they talked about what she had been doing over the last few months. After an hour, Josef got up to leave, and said, “Oh, I nearly forgot, the hospital gave me your Papa's belongings. They are on the

sideboard in a plastic bag.” He kissed her, and she saw him out.

Katharina returned to the table and poured herself another cup of coffee. She sat there, contemplating, just trying to take it all in. After twenty minutes, she started to clear the table. She took the dishes through to the kitchen and washed them, placing them on the drying board. She dreaded going back into the room, but she did, and stopped in front of the sideboard. The polythene bag was directly in front of her, staring her in the face. Her hand was shaking as she reached out and picked it up. In it were four items: her Papa’s wallet, his keys, glasses, and a sealed envelope. She took out the wallet and opened it. There was a little money, a credit card, a plastic public transport season ticket, and a little clear plastic holder containing two photographs, back to back. The first one was of her at her eighteenth birthday celebration. She saw a young, happy, smiling girl, holding a glass of white wine in one hand up to the camera, and waving with her other hand. Her two best friends were jostling to get into the picture at either side of her. On the reverse side was a picture of her Mama, taken on the banks of the Danube on a hot summer’s day. *She’s much more beautiful than me, Katharina thought, even with her thick glasses. I have inherited her poor eyesight, but not her good looks.* She was always hard on herself.

Then she took out the sealed envelope. It had her name on it. She hesitated, holding it for a minute, and then she put it down on the sideboard. Shaking, she picked it up again and carefully opened it. She read:

My darling Katharina,

If you are reading this right now, then something terrible has happened, and I am so, so sorry for putting you through this, my precious. I am writing this in hospital, waiting for an operation as I have been in pain for a week now, but I didn’t want to worry you. It is a routine operation, but you never know what could go wrong, and I hope I will be able to tear this letter up. If I recovered, I was going to come to see you and your young man in Holland. I would love to have seen all the sights with you both. Please take care of each other for me.

I will always think of you wherever I am, and please don’t forget me, my darling.

Love, kisses and hugs from your ever loving Papa.

XXXXXX

She had to hold the letter close to her nose to focus on it as his writing was very spidery. Also it didn’t help that her eyes kept flooding with tears, and she had to stop twice to dry them. She carefully folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. She would cherish it forever. She then took the glasses out of the bag and held them to her heart, still sobbing. She put them up against her cheek and held them close, then she sniffed them, and was sure she could smell her Papa. She could barely remember her Mama, but she always felt like she was there looking down on her, guiding her through life, so much so that she would sometimes talk to her. Now she felt a very strong presence, and wondered if her Papa was doing the same. She would always know he was close to her. A thought suddenly struck her: Papa would now be with her Mama, together again, and they would both be happy. She would be happy for both of them, and this made her feel a whole lot better. She was on her own now, an orphan. But she did have Dave, and she was missing him so much.

On the sideboard was a bottle of her Papa's favourite Napoleon brandy. She was already feeling very close to him, and she thought a glass of his brandy would make them closer, so she poured a stiff measure. She remembered the brandy on the ship, and she had found it comforting. She then went through to her room to get the big floppy rabbit – one of the first toys he had bought her, and picked it up. Going back into the living room, she sat down in her Papa's favourite chair with brandy and floppy rabbit. The brandy went down nicely while she cuddled the rabbit, giving her that warm, comforting glow. She turned on the TV and started to watch a film, not paying much attention to the plot. Her head was spinning too much with everything that had gone on, and the brandy was contributing to the spinning in its own way. She was going to get through all this with the help of her Mama and Papa. Her Uncle Josef and Aunt Petra were good to her too.

The film was rubbish, and it was half way through, but she watched it until the end, comforted by the company, rather than sitting on her own in silence. At ten-thirty, she turned the TV off and poured herself another brandy. *For medicinal purposes*, she told herself. She looked around the room, wondering what would happen to all of her Papa's stuff; wondering what would happen to the apartment. The lease was in her Papa's name. Would she have to sort it all out? It was too late to think about at this time of night.

She cleaned her teeth, then went through to her room and changed into her nightie. Her Papa had given it to her last Christmas. Funny how everything she touched now would have a connection to him, she thought. She climbed into bed with her floppy rabbit and her little Walkman radio/cassette, and tuned it to Mermaid Radio's frequency. She couldn't believe it when she heard the weak, distorted signal, almost being swamped by a strong German station on an adjacent wavelength. 'Dedicated to the One I Love' by the Mamas and Papas was playing, and when it finished, she could just make out Dave's unmistakable voice struggling across the airwaves saying, "And I dedicate that one to my darling Katharina if you're listening. I love you, sweetheart."

"And I dedicate that one to my Mama and Papa," she said out loud, pushing back the tears.

She took her glasses off, folded their legs, and put them carefully down on the bedside cabinet where she could easily locate them when she woke up. She fell asleep cuddling her rabbit, and listening to the rest of Dave's show as it faded in and out.

She slept right through to midday, then, yawning, looked at the alarm clock on the bedside cabinet. "Ten past twelve!" she shrieked. She quickly got up, went to the bathroom and had a shower. She came out of the shower, and on her way back to her room, she paused to look at herself in the hall mirror, and she liked what she saw. I may not be beautiful, she thought, but at least I'm the right shape! She was always running her looks down, but all things considered, she thought she was passable. *Now, what to wear today?*

She decided to go into the city centre to buy something suitable to wear for the funeral, as all of the clothes she owned were casual. She put on a well-worn pair of stone washed jeans, and decided to put on her new Mermaid Radio T-shirt, with her picture printed on the front in the mermaid costume. After slipping into a pair of comfy trainers, she slung a denim jacket over her shoulder, headed for the door – and stopped dead. Turning back, she lifted her corduroy peaked cap from the coat rack, put it on as a finishing touch, and checked herself in the mirror. Satisfied with the result, she went out.

She hesitated in the apartment building entrance hall, which was really just a dim

passageway leading to the stairs, with electricity junction boxes and pipes adorning the flaking paintwork on the faded walls. Then, slowly emerging into the brightness of the street, she nervously blinked and looked around. For the first time, she faced a world without her Papa. She thought it strange that everything was going on as normal as if nothing had happened. People driving cars, buses, trucks and motor bikes. People shopping, laughing and joking over coffee in pavement cafes, oblivious to what's going on in her life. Didn't people know? Didn't they care? Of course not! This was going to take a bit of getting used to. She glanced at herself in the shop windows as she passed, and realised she was just going to have to get on with it.

Her first port of call, she decided, was to be a little ladies' wear boutique up a side lane off one of the main streets, called Pastiche. She had shopped there before, mainly for casual tops and jeans, but she knew that they also stocked more formal wear. She knew the owner, which helped, although it had been a few years since she had been there. As she went in, the little brass bell on the door tinkled. There was no sign of anyone, and she looked around for about a minute before the owner came through a beaded curtain from the back shop.

"Yes, madam, how may I help you?" she said.

Katharina saw she was looking at her with a slightly puzzled expression, and then the owner spoke again.

"Wait a minute . . . it's . . . it's . . ." she stammered.

"Hello, Maria. It's Katharina Bloch. You remember me?"

"Yes, yes. I didn't recognise you at first; you look so . . . grown up!"

She told Maria why she was there, and Maria gave her sympathies, and said she had heard about her father. She selected a very formal two-piece suit for Katharina to try on, and a plain white blouse to go with it. She went into the fitting room, and came out a few minutes later totally transformed. She looked like some top executive's PA, and she had aged about ten years.

Maria gave her a professional appraisal from top to bottom, straightened the skirt a little, pulled the collars of the jacket in a bit closer, and stood back. She was like an artist admiring her finished painting.

"Very nice, very nice, Katharina. You will do your father proud in this outfit. However, you do need suitable shoes. I always keep shoes in stock to go with my formal outfits. I remember your size, now try these on."

The result was perfection personified.

"I'm glad I came here, Maria, I knew you would help me out. You know I am only a jeans and T-shirt girl!"

"It's a pleasure, Katharina; I just wish it had been in happier circumstances."

She paid for the goods, and after exchanging goodbyes, she left.

She walked back to the main street and headed for the city centre for lunch. She was spoilt for choice with all the cafés and restaurants this wonderful city had to offer. She loved this place, and wondered why she had ever left it. Switzerland had sounded good at the time, but after her best friend left for London, it was miserable. Until Dave

came along, that is. Now she thought it was a good thing that she had gone to St Moritz.

She remembered this café. Happy memories of being here as a child, and later as a teenager with her friends came flooding back. It was very busy, but she found an outside table in the sun, and studied the menu. After five minutes, the waitress came over for her order. She ordered a hot dog with fries on the side, and a white wine. She remembered the hot dogs here were out of this world. While she was waiting for her order, she noticed a group of two men and a girl two tables away looking at her. She thought that maybe one of the men fancied her, and he was trying to pluck up courage to approach her. She felt slightly flattered. The waitress brought her order, and she started to eat. This was getting a little bit unnerving. Every time she glanced up, she made eye contact with the man in the group who was watching her, and then he would nervously turn away. *There is definitely something going on here*, she thought. She finished her hot dog and fries, and slowly sipped her wine. Right at that point, the man who was watching her got up from his seat, and came over to her. Her heart leapt with surprise when he said, "It is you, isn't it? It's Kat, the Mermaid Radio girl."

She felt relieved – she wasn't going to have to ward off unwelcome advances. She let out a little squeal as she always did when she was caught on the hop, and nodded her head, laughing, her beautiful blonde hair dancing about. At that exact moment, the other man jumped over from his seat, knocking another seat over, produced a professional camera from nowhere and started shooting . . . click . . . click . . . click.

"Great! Great! Fantastic!" he shouted. "What a terrific shot. You look terrific, Kat. We've got a winner here! This will be on the front cover of Poparama next week. Now, give us the low down on what you're doing here."

It transpired that they were in Vienna covering a rock concert that weekend, and were killing time before their flight back to Holland, and couldn't believe their luck when they saw her.

"Oh, I can't say anything," she protested, "You will have to check it out with Frank Bentley."

"No need," the cameraman said, "you're public property as far as Poparama is concerned. We have carte blanche to publish anything we want about Mermaid Radio. It's in the contract, and this is hot. You are hot, love."

She thought she would put them right. "I am here for my father's funeral. He died last week, so please show some respect."

"We're very sorry," the cameraman said. "We will publish the picture on the cover, and do a little tasteful piece inside, so if you can just tell us what you have been doing today, we will keep it nice and simple."

She told them she had been buying an outfit for the funeral, and at the girl's request, she took it out to show them. Click . . . click . . . click, went the camera. By this time, a small crowd had gathered, including some German and British tourists. The Germans barged up to her table and asked for autographs on menus, newspapers, napkins and anything else to hand. She was in deep here, and felt she only had two choices. Either get up and run, or sign the autographs. She hadn't paid for her meal, so she thought if she got up and ran, it would make even bigger news, probably in the papers too, and she would have the police after her! She started to sign the autographs while the camera went click . . . click . . . click.

After the crowd had subsided, she paid her bill and told them she had to leave

now as she still had some shopping to do. Click . . . click . . . click . . . the cameraman stole some parting shots as she walked away, turning round to wave to them.

Phew, she sighed to herself, if that's the result of being the Mermaid Radio girl, imagine what it must be like being Mick Jagger!

As she walked, she felt a strange mixture of elation and apprehension. This was all new to her, this public admiration. She decided to stroll around the city centre a bit more, and if anyone else recognised her - so what! She was going to have to get used to this new celebrity status sooner or later. She was beginning to enjoy this new-found feeling of confident independence, and wished now that she had done more on her own long ago, instead of always relying on other people and being dependant on them. If there was an easy option, she would always take it. If someone else wanted to organise something for her, she would always let them. In the end, this attitude resulted in people 'controlling' her, rather than helping her. She was independent now, and she was going to take control.

She lost track of time walking about the town, and by seven o'clock she thought she'd better go back to the apartment. When she went in, there was a message left from her Uncle Josef who had been there earlier, to phone Johanna, her best friend, at her parents' number. Katharina let out a squeal, "She's back!" she shouted, like an excited little school girl. She immediately dialled the number. Johanna answered, and for the next hour, the two of them never stopped talking. Johanna had come back for the funeral, but she was not going back to her top casino job in London.

"Do you know what they wanted me to do?" she said. "Clean the place all day, and then work as a croupier and hostess all night. Mind you, we did have more than a few celebrities coming in every night. You are never going to believe who I met last week! You would have fainted in his arms!"

Katharina was intrigued. "Tell me more!" she said, impatiently.

"I will, I will, but let's go out tomorrow night and hit Domingo's." This was a little club where they used to go which had live music and dancing.

Katharina spent the next morning in bed, then, still in her nightie, slouched around the apartment for the afternoon, drinking coffee and having one or two brandies. "OK, it's only two," she told herself, after a pang of guilt. She also watched some TV - a programme about skiing in The Alps, then Lassie, which took her back to her childhood. When she eventually had a shower, she felt slightly tipsy. She put the Mermaid Radio T-shirt back on and her favourite pair of stone washed jeans, then set out for Domingo's to meet her friend.

When Katharina went into the club and caught sight of Johanna, they let out a squeal, rushed up to each other and hugged, kissed, hugged then hugged again.

"I'm so sorry about Papa," Johanna eventually said. She knew him so well that she almost thought of him as her own family. Tears were streaming from Katharina's eyes by now, and she said, "Thank you. Thank you, Jo. Thanks so much for coming."

Not renowned for her tact, Johanna replied, "Oh, I was coming home for good anyway, so it's lucky I was here."

Katharina knew her friend too well to be offended. She would have thought it very odd if Johanna hadn't come out with some kind of reverse logic.

Johanna continued, "How are you, anyway?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose. It's strange knowing that I'll never see my Papa again. I still have lots of photographs and memories, *and* I have Uncle Josef and Aunt Petra I even feel that Papa is up there somewhere, watching over me."

"Oh, that's stupid, Kat," Johanna snapped. "When people are gone, they are gone. End of story! You can't believe in fairy stories like that – you'll never get back to normal!"

Katharina was beginning to wish she hadn't come, now. Then Johanna said, "Now, what about this big radio star, then?"

Katharina opened her mouth to speak, but Johanna just kept on.

"I've heard it. The station – *and* your show. It's really clear in London. You're great, I loved it. And what about your guy Dave? I listen to him on my nights off. He sounds really cute. And the two of you on your show – God, Kat, it sounds like you were made for each other. Tell me about Dave. Is he cute? Do you have a picture you can show me? How does he kiss? Go on . . . tell me!" They were just like schoolgirls again.

"That's personal. I'm not telling you anything," Katharina replied.

Johanna screeched, "Oh, go on. What's he like? Tell me. Go on."

"He's a very nice guy, very kind, very caring, and very good to me. And I hope to see him again very soon – and that's all you're getting!"

As the night went on, they were hoarse with talking, and having to shout above the loud music. They were also a little bit drunk.

"Oh Kat, I almost forgot. I got this on my way here for you. This is what you want if you're missing your guy," and Johanna pulled out a big box of the best Belgian chocolates from a carrier bag. "It's a bit of a swizzle – only one tier, *and* at that price, too!"

Katharina smiled and said, "Oh Jo, you really are impossible! Are you trying to fatten me up for Christmas?"

They talked incessantly, got up and danced with each other a few times, fended off a few approaches from predatory males (unusual for them, but they weren't really interested that night), and when it was time to go, Katharina pulled Joanna close to her outside the club, and said softly in her ear, "Jo, will you do me a great big favour?"

"Anything. Anything for you, Kat. You're my bestest friend in the whole world and I love you to bits. What do you want me to do?"

"On Friday, will you come to the apartment at ten, an hour before the funeral car's due, then come with me in the car and hold onto me for the whole day? Aunt Petra is so strict and always tries to take control. She likes to pretend she is my mother, so she would give me even more grief than I need on such a day."

"OK, Kat. I promise I will be there at ten. Don't worry; I'll look after you for the whole day. People will expect you to be grieving, and will expect your friend to be supporting you – it's perfectly natural."

"Oh, thank you, Jo. You don't know how much it means to have a good friend like you."

"I do – you are such a good friend to me that I do know, as it means the same to me."

At that point, they cried and hugged, then set off home.

CHAPTER 3

>>FAST FORWARD>>

It seemed to be getting hotter by the minute in the Strathdee FM studio. Dave had stripped off to the waist, and rivulets of sweat were running down his brow, joining the ones running down his cheeks like tributaries of a river, then all converging on his chest at the estuary, where they abruptly stopped, being soaked up by his trousers which were wet through right around his waist. *There ought to be a law against working in conditions like this*, he thought. Then he justified his former thought: *But when was anything worthwhile ever easy?* But this was only really worthwhile to Mrs Benson now. Frank was away in Spain on business. Dave was her puppet and she held the strings. Do this, do that, and while you're doing it, do the other! He was supposed to be a radio presenter, but usually ended up also being a plant delivery driver, transmitter engineer and general gopher and dogsbody. She had already been on the phone to him only ten minutes into the show.

"Dave, my darling," the thick Russian accent usually ended up charming him round to her beck and call. In a way, it made him think of Katharina. "Dave, Archie took the JCB up to Camus Fearn tonight for a job in the morning, and he forgot to take the small ditching bucket. I'd like you to run up there with it after your show. I got him to put it in the back of your pick-up – he's had to run off to an urgent appointment. Oh and there's also a twenty-five litre barrel of hydraulic oil in the truck. Please leave that beside the digger. It's got a leak on the back ram. In fact, could you top up its oil reservoir while you're up there so it's ready for the morning? I've left a funnel beside the oil."

"Yes, Mrs Benson!" *Of course, Mrs Benson. Three bags full, Mrs Benson*, he added silently, making a rude gesture! *Urgent appointment indeed! My ass! An urgent appointment with the barmaid in the Station Hotel, more like!* Frank Benson also owned the Station Hotel, so any extra business from Archie Murdoch would be welcomed by him – *and* he could shift some beer!

The David Bowie track was coming to an end, so not bothering to speak again, Dave went straight into the next track which was already cued up. This was one of his all-time favourites. He loved the intro. He loved the anticipation of what was going to blast from the monitor speakers – the anticipation of what was going to blast from all the radios in deepest Aberdeenshire that were tuned in to him. He loved to play a track with a 'bad' word in the lyrics every night on the show, just to see if he could get away with it! After all, no one from the Radio Authority would be listening to this station at this time in the morning, would they?

He pressed the 'play' button on CD player number two, and Patti Smith's rebellious voice came in with the rather risky lyrics. He loved the Patti Smith Group, and this track, '25th Floor', personified the lady in his eyes. He sat back and put his feet up on the desk for a few minutes of self indulgence. That lady sure was a rebel – his kind of lady. He couldn't help it, but this started him thinking of his 'rebel mermaid'. Where was

she now? He wished like hell that she was here right now with him. He imagined her sitting here on his lap, his arm round her waist and his other hand running through her beautiful blonde hair. Just for a fleeting moment, he swore he could even *smell* her!

<<REWIND<<

Friday morning came round all too soon, and Katharina was up at the crack of dawn. She took a shower, and then put on her new white blouse and black two-piece suit. Along with the new black shoes, she looked every bit the mourning daughter, or the high-flying PA. Today, she would be the mourning daughter. She made herself some toast and coffee, took it through to the living room, and just flopped back into the armchair. She immediately felt more relaxed, and fought off the urge to have a brandy too. *Later*, she told herself. She finished her coffee and the doorbell rang. It was Johanna, dressed very respectfully. They gave each other big hugs.

“You’re early,” Katharina said, “it’s quarter to ten.”

“Better early than late. Anyway, I wanted to make sure you were all organised. You seem to be.”

“I am. I am. Remember, I don’t want Aunt Petra to start on at me. She can be very bossy. You will have to stay with me all the way today, so please don’t let go of me.”

Johanna assured her, “Don’t worry, my honey, you’re bestest friend in the world will look after you all day. Just make sure you keep hold of my arm all the time. Now, do we have time for a cup of coffee?”

They sat and chatted for the next hour, and at ten to eleven the doorbell rang. It was a smartly dressed chauffeur who escorted them down to a black Mercedes Benz with tinted windows.

For Katharina, the day passed as if she was on automatic pilot. Apart from trying to prevent Aunt Petra from commandeering her, she became quite emotional and started crying a lot. Johanna held her close and whispered reassurances in her ear. She overheard her Aunt Petra say, “Look at the poor girl. She can hardly stand on her own. Poor girl. How terrible for her.” Then Aunt Petra came over to her and hugged her.

“You poor pet. My darling, remember we are always here for you.” She started crying as she spoke. This started Katharina off crying even more. Then Johanna joined in, and the three of them all hugged and cried.

After the funeral, they went to Aunt Petra and Uncle Josef’s house for a drink and sandwiches. Katharina felt numb, and somewhat detached from reality. As the day progressed, she went through the motions, and before she knew it, they were in a taxi heading home. At seven-thirty outside the apartment, she turned to Johanna in the car and said, “Stay with me, Jo, please. Just for tonight. Don’t leave me alone tonight.”

“Of course, my precious Kat, I am always here for you, you know that.”

They went up to the apartment, and Katharina changed out of her suit into her nightclothes while Johanna made some supper in the kitchen. They ate, and then Katharina poured them both a brandy. The TV was on in the corner, but neither of them was watching it closely as they were too busy chatting and reminiscing over happier

times. At ten o'clock, Katharina poured them both another brandy, and Johanna lit a cigarette. Then she said, "After this, I just want to go to bed. It's been a long and hard day."

"Where will I sleep, Kat?" Jo asked.

"Oh, I haven't sorted Papa's bed – it needs changing. But then it wouldn't be right to sleep in it tonight, would it?"

"No. You're right. We must respect him. He would only want you to be happy. What do you want to do, Kat?"

"Will you sleep with me tonight, Jo? We can squeeze together in my bed."

"OK, Kat, It'll be just like old times when we used to do sleep-overs."

Katharina turned the TV off, cleaned her teeth, then went through to her room and climbed into bed.

"I've put out a clean nightdress for you on the chair, Jo."

"Oh, I don't need it, Kat, I sleep in the nude," Johanna said, and climbed into bed. Katharina gulped, made a face at the ceiling, and climbed in beside her. They lay there chatting until the wee small hours like two schoolchildren.

Out on the North Sea, Dave Buckingham wasn't having such a comforting, safe, secure or happy time on Mermaid Radio. He had taken over the desk just over an hour ago from the Canadian DJ Tom Hammond. During Tom's show, they became aware of a large ocean-going tugboat which had appeared on their starboard side, with its powerful halogen spotlights trained on the Mermaid, totally flooding the ship with light. Tom had mentioned this fact on his show, and put out an urgent request on air for someone in the Mermaid Club to contact them immediately on their dedicated ship-to-shore frequency. His show was becoming quite dramatic as he gave out a detailed description of this tugboat in between the records.

By now, Captain Visser had trained the Mermaid's halogen spotlights on the tugboat, and could see it was called the Smit Samson, and was registered in Nassau in the Bahamas. He came down from the bridge to the studio, and said to Dave, "I have Mr Bentley on the VHF radio-telephone. Something is being very wrong. Very wrong. He wants speak with you. You come."

Dave faded the record that was playing, then opened the microphone fader and said, "We now have more information for you about what is going on out here. We have, at present, a large ship drifting on our starboard side. It is a large ocean-going tugboat called the Smit Samson. We don't know why it is here, and it is not answering any calls our captain is putting out to it on the VHF radio. It is training its spotlights on us, and the situation is becoming slightly menacing. We have our managing director Frank Bentley on the radio-telephone right now, and he wants to speak to me. I am going up to the bridge to take the call, and in the meantime we shall play you some continuous music. Please stand by for more news as it happens."

He pressed the 'play' button on the tape deck which they used to play continuous pre-recorded music when it was too stormy to play records, then he went upstairs to the bridge.

Captain Visser handed Dave the microphone, and he pressed the ‘speak’ button.

“Frank, it’s Dave, over.”

“Dave, this is Frank. You will see you have a large ship alongside you. I am listening to your show and you have described the Smit Samson, which is an ocean-going tug belonging to the Smit Salvage Company. Over.”

“Frank, what the hell is going on? Over.”

“Dave, this isn’t going to be easy. To put it bluntly, we are in the shit. Waist-deep at the moment, but by morning – up to our necks. Over.”

“Frank, you’re making me very mad, now what the hell is happening? Over.”

“Dave, you’ve got to get out of there. The ship is going to be seized and towed away. Over.”

“Are you going to tell me why, Frank? Over.”

“Right, very quickly, when we purchased the Mermaid from the liquidators, they had no legal title to sell it. We were stitched up. There was a writ served on the vessel by Smit Salvage for huge outstanding transportation costs from Bermuda, incurred by the Werner brothers. The writ had been removed when we looked at the vessel. The liquidators and the Werner brothers have all disappeared, and it looks like we’re left holding the baby – and they want their baby back! But they don’t just want the ship, Dave; they say they’re going to sue us for half a million to cover the recovery costs and everything else. It would cost us about half a million to fight this lot, so I think we should cut and run. Over.”

“Shit, Frank, this is a mess! Can’t you do something? Get the police or the coastguard, or something? Over.”

“The police and the coastguard are coming out in the morning, Dave. But they’re supporting the Smit Samson while it cuts our anchor chain and tows us in. *And* these guys have guns! Over.”

“What are you doing about it? Are we in danger? Over.”

“Dave, listen carefully. I suggest that you leave the ship as soon as you can. The others can go with the ship to port. It may be getting towed to Belgium. You are a one percent owner of the station; therefore you are named on the recovery order. Your good lady Katharina is also a one percent owner, and I will be contacting her. Are you with me so far? Over.”

“What will happen to Katharina? Over.”

“Nothing, I hope, if she keeps a low profile. You must take the rigid inflatable boat before dawn and head for England. There are full tanks of fuel on board – make sure you take plenty. Take food and drink, and Dave, wear a life jacket. Over.”

“For Christ’s sake, Frank, how can you spring something like this on us just like that? Over.”

“It’s been sprung on me, Dave. I’ve got a private plane chartered for midnight. After I speak to you, I’m off to a private airfield and taking off for Spain. I’m going to lay low for a while at a mate’s villa. You head for your parents’ house and I’ll contact you there. Oh, I nearly forgot, we’ll also have Super-Waffles, Friday Girl, Poparama and Media-Ads International chasing our asses to get their money back. Over.”

“Looks like I’ve got no choice. So this is it then. It’s been nice knowing you, Frank. Best of luck, and see you sometime. Over.”

“Best of luck to you, my boy. And you *will* see me soon – I promise. I will make this up to you – you can count on it. Over and out.”

For a moment, Dave thought this was a promise he could well do without. When Frank Bentley goes belly-up, he does it more spectacularly than anyone.

Dave turned to the captain and said, “Did you follow what that was all about?”

“Yes. Is bad. Is very bad.”

“Right, I want you to speak to all the Dutch DJs and crew. I’ll speak to Tom. You lot can do what you want, I’m leaving in the RIB and Tom can come with me if he wants.” Looking at a chart on the desk, Dave asked the captain, “Where are we on this?”

With a huge index finger, Captain Visser pointed to a mark pencilled in on the chart with a circle drawn around it. “Here. We are here.”

It was about twenty miles off the Dutch coast, opposite the Dutch/Belgian border, and he reckoned about a hundred and twenty to a hundred and forty miles from Frinton-on-Sea, if he headed in a west-south-westerly direction.

“How fast does the RIB go?” he asked the captain.

“Oh, about forty knots maximum, but for best fuel economy, twenty knots is good.”

Dave was calculating in his head, and speaking out loud to himself, “Let’s see, if we kept at twenty knots, it would take about six or seven hours to hit land. If we put on a few spurts of speed, we might get it down to four or five. Then we’d have to find Frinton. OK, Captain, thank you. I will go down now and speak to Tom.”

When he entered the studio, Tom was already there. It was ten to eleven, and the non-stop music tape was still playing. He gave Tom a quick résumé of the situation, and said, “What do you think, mate?”

“I think the whole damned world’s gone crazy,” he drawled, “but I think *we’d* be crazy to stick around. Let’s run the Mermaid Club tape at eleven instead of the usual time, then get the hell out of here!”

At three minutes to eleven, Dave faded the music and opened the mike.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is Dave Buckingham on board the MV Mermaid, the home of Mermaid Radio. As you are probably aware, we have a developing situation out here on the North Sea, which will result in changes to our scheduled programming. At present, we have a large ocean-going tug, the Smit Samson, standing by on our starboard side. The tug’s intentions are to cut our anchor chain, and tow this vessel into port by morning. This would normally be a gross act of piracy on the high seas, but in this case they have legal documents endorsing their proposed actions. Without going into too much detail, we feel we owe it to our thousands of loyal listeners to give an explanation of what is going to happen in the next six to eight hours.

“We, at Mermaid Radio, have only one aim in mind, and that is to provide you, our loyal listeners, with the very best in entertainment at absolutely no cost to yourselves. We are not here to defraud anyone, and we are certainly not here to fight or endorse violence of any kind whatsoever. However, it has just come to my attention that the Mermaid organisation has itself been defrauded in relation to the purchase of this vessel, and we do not appear to have legal title to it. The people on the large tug intend to seize this ship as compensation towards huge transportation costs incurred by the previous

owners, who, just to make matters worse, have disappeared. These people mean business, and by morning, the police and coastguard will arrive and assist them in the recovery of the vessel. They will be armed, and it is the intention of the tugboat crew to cut our anchor chain with an oxy-acetylene burner and tow this ship into port, probably in Belgium. We are not intending to resist or fight. We are not out to become heroes. We have no interest in causing any injuries or deaths; we are only here to provide you the listener with your favourite music. At eleven pm, we will run our overnight recording of the Mermaid Club, and then at some point throughout the early morning, transmissions will cease from this station.

“Well, that’s about it from me, Dave Buckingham, it’s been a real pleasure making you all part of my life. I hope I have enriched yours, even in a small way. And Katharina, if by any chance you are listening, I love you darling and I will be in touch with you as soon as I can. Good night darling, and sweet dreams. Tom, have you anything to add?”

Tom Hammond leaned over to the mike. “Thanks Dave. No, I don’t think so; you did it all so well. By the way, can I say you’re looking very fetching tonight in that cream polo top?” You could always rely on Tom to defuse a situation by camping it up a bit! “Seriously though, Dave, it’s been a real pleasure to have been part of this big happy family for the past few months, and I’ve just loved all our listeners. Haven’t they been great? It looks like it’s a big goodbye from all of us meantime, but if I know our boss-man as well as I think I know him, this won’t be the end of Mermaid Radio. I could more or less stake my wallet on it that he’ll be back in some shape or form with another station for you all. And considering all my worldly wealth is in my wallet, that’s some gamble!”

“Thanks Tom, I’ll second that, and I’ll say a huge thank you to our managing director, Frank Bentley, and all the staff at the Mermaid Club for treating us so well, and providing us with such a wonderful radio station for you, the wonderful listeners. Without you all, we wouldn’t be here. From Dave Buckingham, it’s a very tearful goodbye, and take care. Bye bye, now.”

“And from me, Tom Hammond, au revoir. See you guys around somewhere.”

Dave finished off with, “This is Mermaid Radio serving the UK and the Benelux countries. It’s eleven pm, and for the final time, we invite you to the Mermaid Club in Scheveningen.” He pressed the ‘play’ button on the tape deck, then leaned back and let out a big sigh.

“Right, that’s it,” he said firmly, “let’s get packed and get out of here.”

They went to their cabins, gathered their things together, and put them in rucksacks. Then they went to the galley and raided the larder. They filled a large holdall with bread, tins of corned beef, Spam, fruit, bars of chocolate, cans of juice and beer, (*get the priorities right*, thought Dave!), and bottled water. The RIB was already equipped with a first aid kit, self-igniting flares, powerful searchlight and a VHF ship-to-shore radio. Dave also took his small transistor so they could monitor what was happening back on the ship.

The rigid inflatable boat was quite a craft in its own right. It was orange and black, about eighteen feet long with a central binnacle which contained the steering wheel, instrument panel including speedometer, fuel gauge, compass and two-way radio.

Behind the controls was a captain's chair, complete with armrests and a full safety harness. There were seats for six passengers, all with safety harnesses. The storage locker was under the decked-in bow, and as this part of the boat usually remained out of the water as it surged along, everything in there kept quite dry. Propulsion was by a seventy-five horse power outboard motor, with a twenty-five horse power outboard motor on stand-by for emergencies.

Down on the aft deck, Dave lowered the RIB from the derrick where it was kept, to just above sea level. They loaded their bags, checked the fuel tanks, and lowered it the final three feet into the North Sea. They were on the port side of the ship, so they hoped no one aboard the tugboat saw what was happening. If they did, they didn't seem to bother. Dave released the winch hook, and once Tom was aboard, he started the engine which fired up first time. He turned the wheel and moved away slowly from the Mermaid so as not to cause any noise or wash, which would attract attention. It was very strange looking back at the ship becoming smaller and smaller as they headed west. Dave increased the throttle until they were doing twenty knots, and he set his bearing at west-south-west as best as he could. All they could do now was sit back and enjoy the ride. They had left at midnight on the dot, so Dave reckoned they should see land by six am, and hopefully reach Frinton by eight am.

The sea was very calm with just a slight swell, which was lucky, and there was a full moon which also helped. There wasn't much to see, but after an hour they could make out a flare stack in the distance, lighting up the sky and the sea with an eerie orange glow.

"No oil rigs in this area," shouted Dave to Tom, "must be a North Sea gas rig."

"Wonder if they've got any jobs going," was Tom's reply. "Hey, Dave, wouldn't it be a laugh if we turned up there on the boat and shouted up to them, 'any jobs?'"

"One thing's for sure, Tom, these guys are earning more than we ever could."

By now, the Mermaid had completely disappeared from view. From time to time, they saw little boats and some ships passing in the distance, their lights twinkling.

"Hey Dave." Tom shouted over the noise from the engine, "If we weren't in such a desperate situation, this would be quite a pleasant trip. All we need is a fishing line over the side."

"Thanks for the confidence booster, Tom. I was beginning to think our situation had improved!"

"Dave, give her some gas and let's see what she can do."

Dave eased the throttle lever slowly up to full. The bow raised itself up higher, the stern sat squatter in the water, the wake behind them began to look like distressed cream soda and the boat threw out wide plumes of water at either side like huge butterfly wings.

"WOW! We're really shifting!" Tom shouted, like an excited schoolboy.

Dave joined in, "FANTASTIC! We're up to forty-five knots now, and that's her flat out."

They had to really shout now. Tom yelled, "Keep her at that for an hour and we'll make up some time."

They slowed down after about forty-five minutes to twenty knots, and Dave got out his little radio. He tuned to Mermaid's frequency and looked at his watch - four o'clock. They had been going for four hours. He cut the throttle right back to a slow idle and the boat almost stopped. Now he could hear the radio, and the Mermaid Club

programme was still going out on air. “Well, the ship’s still there, Tom.”

“Oh yeah? Well, do you wanna go back?”

Dave held his fist up in the air triumphantly and shouted, “Frinton here we come!”

Tom suggested, “We’ll check the radio again at five, ‘cos that’s when the club recording will finish. Remember, we started it an hour early.”

“OK.” Dave said, then in his best ‘tour guide’ voice, he continued, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you care to look behind you, you will see the best damned sunrise to be seen anywhere. If you look to your right, you will see water, and if you look to your left, you will also see . . . wait a minute . . . I do believe it’s water! And if you look straight ahead, you will see . . . Tom . . . TOM . . . LOOK – IT’S LIGHTS! Tom, there are lights ahead. LOOK! Loads of them twinkling. It’s Mother England!”

“That sure is a beautiful sight,” Tom said. “This is the best darned boat trip I’ve ever been on. Pity the bar’s closed and I forgot my camera!”

“The bar’s open, mate. Remember we’ve got beer.” Dave went to the front locker and brought out two bottles. “Time to celebrate. Here’s to Mother England, and may we set foot on her soon! Only trouble is, mate, that could be any one of nine towns between Lowestoft and Southend. We’ll wait until we’re a lot nearer, then cruise along the coast until I recognise anything. Our best bet is to look out for Walton Pier or Clacton Pier. Walton is the northernmost one and that’s where my folks live, and if we find that, we’re home and dry.”

They put the speed back up to thirty knots and settled back to enjoy the rest of the trip, but keeping an eye out for landmarks.

After another hour, it was broad daylight and they could even see cars going along the coast.

Dave had a brainwave. “Tom, there’s a tower in Walton called the Naze Tower. You can’t miss it. It’s been guiding sailors for almost three hundred years, so we’ll use it too. We’ll spot that before we see any piers because the coast’s so damned flat. My folks live in Naze Park Road which is near the tower. We have to go north of the tower, hug the coast past the cliffs, then with a bit of luck depending on the tide, we can come right round the back of Walton where it’s all little narrow inlets and islands, find somewhere to tie up the boat, then walk up to the house.”

“Sounds good, Dave, do you reckon your folks will have break fast on?”

“They damned well better had!”

They were getting so close to land now that they could make out individual houses and vehicles.

Dave shouted, “What’s the most important thing we don’t have, Tom?”

“A can opener.”

“Well, that too. I meant binoculars.”

“The Spam and corned beef have got their own keys, but they always break with me!”

“Don’t worry about food, Tom; we’ll have a full English break fast at my folks. What day is it?”

Tom thought for a minute. “Sunday. No, wait a minute, Friday. No . . . we left on Friday night, so that makes it Saturday. What year is it?”

“1987, Tom. 1987.”

“Look,” Dave shouted after a few minutes, “I’m sure that’s Frinton. I was out here once sailing with a friend of my dad’s, and I recognise it. I’m going to swing round and head north. Watch out for the tower thing.”

Twenty minutes later, they saw it.

“Naze Tower,” shouted Dave, leaping up from his seat. “We’ve made it. Now all we’ve got to do is go round the headland and slip into the backwaters.” When they entered the sheltered water, they cruised along at ten knots past lots of moored boats.

“Look, Tom, my parents’ house is just on the other side of that green area. There’s an old rickety jetty here somewhere. We’ll tie the boat up and walk up to the house. It should take us about twenty minutes. I can smell the bacon and eggs already!”

They found the jetty, secured the boat and unloaded their bags.

“Look – no customs!” said Dave. “We could be anyone from anywhere smuggling anything!”

Tom said, “But it’s only us from the Mermaid with some contraband Spam! Hey, wait a minute – we forgot to check the station again. Get the radio out.”

Dave switched it on – nothing. No station, not even a carrier wave. Just an empty spot on the dial where Mermaid Radio used to be.

“Well, seems like it’s curtains for the old girl,” he said. “Let’s get some grub.”

They had to walk through a marshy area to start with, and got their feet a bit wet, but soon they were on solid ground, and then they were on Naze Park Road. Dave felt very strange as they walked up his garden path and rang the doorbell.

His mother answered the door, and let out a scream. His father came running to the door to see what was wrong, and they both shouted “David! It’s you!”

After the initial shock had subsided, they went in and Dave introduced his folks to Tom. Then Dave said, “Dad, you’ve always wanted a boat, haven’t you? Here’s a present for you,” and he threw the keys over to him. “It’s moored at the old jetty down the backwater. Now, any chance of some breakfast?”

“Of course, son, I think we can do you a good breakfast in exchange for a boat! Now, sit down and tell us what’s been going on.”

They shovelled the full English breakfast down in record time, and then sat talking for an hour. Then Dave realised they hadn’t slept for ages.

“Any chance we can get some sleep for the rest of the day? We’re shattered!”

“Of course, dear,” his mother said, “both the beds are made up in your room.”

They went to bed and immediately fell asleep. Dave’s dad went down to the jetty with a neighbour to inspect the boat. His neighbour had a private mooring which was empty, so they took the boat for a little spin round the backwater, and then moored it safely on the private mooring.

At precisely the same time, Frank Bentley was arriving at his friend’s Spanish villa. The chartered Piper aircraft had picked him up on schedule at the private airfield. Right on time, it touched down on a quiet Spanish desert airstrip. Waiting for him there, was a helicopter. At the controls was Ronnie Marsh, Frank’s friend.

Ronnie would describe himself as an international business man, entrepreneur and gentleman. Frank would describe him as a crook. Frank knew Ronnie as a customer of the Mermaid Club. Ronnie knew Frank as someone who knew just a little bit too much

about him. There was quite a lot of mutual respect going on, and each man treated the other with a certain amount of suspicion. It was a good friendship, and had also proved to be very handy in tricky situations such as this one.

Frank didn't know the exact details of how Ronnie came by his millions – he didn't want to know – but he was aware that it was something to do with a huge corporate misdemeanour. Ronnie had engineered the perfect crime. It had been committed by a computer while Ronnie had the perfect alibi – he was with friends on the veranda of his Spanish villa, and there was nothing on the computer to link back to him. The police had their suspicions, but they had no evidence, and they couldn't put a computer on trial!

Ronnie was working as an IT consultant to a large City merchant banker. Computers were still in their infancy, and what he did would probably not be possible today. He wrote a programme which would instruct the computer to transfer a revoltingly large sum of money to a Swiss numbered bank account, exactly one month after he had arrived at his villa. Five minutes later, an international bank transfer moved the entire contents of the Swiss account into a Jamaican account in the name of Diamond Drilling, a company previously set up by Ronnie with the express purpose of moving money around the world. The clever bit was that five minutes after that, a simple little sub-programme he had written deleted all records of the transaction, and then deleted itself, including the main programme. Not a trace!

After a smooth half-hour flight, Frank saw them approach a huge sprawling villa in the middle of nowhere. He could clearly make out a large swimming pool with a terrace. A courtyard came into view with three cars parked there. Frank raised his eyebrows when he saw a Ferrari, a Porsche and a Jaguar, all neatly parked in a row. A large stable block adjoined the courtyard, and he could see some horses looking over the stable doors, getting somewhat agitated at the noise from the chopper.

The villa and the cars were the proceeds from a previous job Ronnie had done as a trial run. He had been called in to a company which had suspected an employee of ripping them off, but couldn't prove it. It had got so bad that they were heading towards liquidation at a rate of knots. Ronnie found the scam, and as the company seemed doomed anyway, he thought it a shame that all of the perpetrator's hard work would go to waste. He cleverly turned the scam around, and liquidated the company's remaining assets into his own account. The original suspect was held and interrogated for days, then charged and jailed on a small piece of evidence linking him directly to the crime.

This time, though, Ronnie didn't want to appear too ostentatious, so he limited his purchases to just one item – the helicopter. The remaining millions were sloshing around in the Jamaican bank account, and he was looking for a way to get them back into circulation.

After landing, Ronnie shut down the helicopter's engine and they climbed out. Walking over to the villa's main entrance, which was very palatial with two crescents of pillars leading to a very flamboyant front door, Ronnie said, "Welcome to my humble abode!"

"Here, this is a bit of all right!" Frank was impressed.

"Come in, come in, Frank. You must be tired and hungry. There's some food left over from last night which you can have now, then I suggest you go for a siesta to

recharge your batteries. The other guests will still be asleep for a while. I'll introduce you to them later."

"Other guests?" Frank queried, suspiciously. "You didn't say anything about other guests. I thought it was just you and me." Although Ronnie was a good friend, you had to watch this man!

"Calm down, calm down. Watch your blood pressure! We have a Mr Neil Morrison here from Scotland, and a Mr Raymond Gillies, also from Scotland. Raymond's been here before. He's the head man in the local council in Aberdeenshire. I met him when I was contracted to them for a little job. Nice chap – really helpful. Neil is a good friend of his, and he owns a plant hire business in Strathdee, Aberdeenshire. Well, when I say 'owns', he doesn't own it all. Half of it belongs to his wife – his estranged wife. They're going through a very messy divorce, and the business is now the main stumbling block. Neil has just let it go to the dogs, poor lad; his heart just isn't in it any more. It's going to be sold off and the proceeds split fifty-fifty with his wife, but soon there won't be anything to sell as it's now struggling to survive. It's so bad that he's only got about two weeks to do something with it or there'll be nothing left – just a few rusty machines. All the business is gone and the staff have left and it's not looking too good for him. Raymond is over here on a 'transport initiative study' for the council, and the good people of Aberdeenshire are paying for it. He asked if he could bring Neil with him to cheer him up, but I think Neil is planning to stay here for good, so I can help him in that respect."

They sat down in the large lounge and finished off the buffet supper from the night before, while Frank gave Ronnie an account of the last twenty-four hours. Ronnie poured them a couple of brandies, and then opened an ornate wooden box, offering it to Frank.

"Finest Cuban," he said, nodding towards the cigars in the box. "And hand rolled between the thighs of dusky maidens. Very important, that!"

Frank took one and sniffed it.

"Very nice."

Ronnie continued, "Now, I know you want some sleep, but I'm going to give you something to sleep on. First of all, I can help you to release your assets from the Mermaid Club, and I think it is essential that you do this without delay. Give me all the club's bank details and any passwords. I will then take the helicopter to Madrid right away, and arrange for all of the funds to be paid into my Jamaican account. I don't think you have any choice in this matter if you want to come out of this with your head above water."

"Agreed," nodded Frank. "Everything's here in this briefcase," and he handed the contents over to Ronnie.

"Now, what's your security question?"

Frank hesitated. "Mother's maiden name."

"OK, what is it?" prompted Ronnie.

Silence.

"Come on, man, you're either in this or your not!"

Frank looked him straight in the eye and said, "Foster."

"That's F-O-S-T-E-R?" Ronnie spelled out.

"Yes."

"Good. Now that's the first step. You go to bed now, and I'll take off. I'll be back

tonight.”

He showed him to his room, and before he left, he said, “Oh, there’s one more thing, Frank. There are two conditions attached to this deal. The first involves me setting you up in business in Scotland, and the second involves a very pleasurable experience with a beautiful young lady. I hope you will be up for both of them. Sleep on it, and sweet dreams!”

Frank was too tired to start asking about any details, and as he prepared himself for bed he heard the helicopter take off.

He fell asleep quickly, but kept waking up in a panic. He wasn’t in control anymore, and he didn’t like not being in control. But what choice did he have? He decided to go along with the plans, but keep a careful eye on Ronnie – he knew his track record.

By three o’clock, he couldn’t sleep any more, so he got up, showered, shaved and dressed. Boy, he needed some fresh clothes!

He went out into the hot sun and headed for the pool. Two men were sitting at a table under a parasol sipping long drinks. He guessed that would be Neil and Raymond. The girls were more interesting – four beauties in bikinis. Two of them were swimming, one was standing behind one of the men, giving him a massage on his shoulders, and the fourth girl was just sitting on the edge of the pool, dangling her legs in the water in time to the music playing on a pop radio station from a portable radio on one of the tables.

Frank strolled over to the table and introduced himself.

“Hello, I’m Frank Bentley, a friend of Ronnie.”

The man who was receiving the massage held out his hand.

“Raymond Gillies. And this is Neil Morrison.”

They both shook hands with Frank. Neil Morrison looked like he had been on a bender for a week, and then pulled through a hedge backwards, several times.

“Let me introduce the girls,” continued Raymond. “This lovely Spanish beauty, who attends to my every whim, is Elena. In the pool, we have Ria on your right, and Carla on your left. They can be on your lap if you just say the word! Aren’t they beautiful?”

Frank was more interested in the older girl sitting on the edge of the pool. Following his gaze, Raymond said, “Oh, I see you have already made your choice! That is Tamara. She’s Russian, and very, very . . . Russian!”

Ria and Carla climbed out of the pool and came over to Frank. Raymond introduced them, and Ria said she would fix him a cool drink, while Carla started to gently massage his shoulders. *I could get used to this*, thought Frank. He looked over to the pool again, and Tamara was still sitting there, quite indifferent to what was going on. When Ria came back with his drink, the three men sat talking about everything in general and nothing in particular. Frank couldn’t believe it when Ria sat down on his lap with her own drink, while Carla continued with the massage. He was enjoying this. Just when things were getting interesting, they heard the distant sound of the helicopter. It circled over the villa, and then landed. After a few minutes, Ronnie appeared carrying a briefcase.

“Ah, Frank, you’re up. I see you’ve met everyone,” he said. *Well, not quite everyone*, Frank thought, glancing over at the pool. Tamara seemed quite disinterested.

Ronnie turned to Ria and said, “Ria, honey, can you please fix us some coffee and

sandwiches, and bring them into the lounge? Frank, can you come inside with me?”

They went inside where it was cooler in the air conditioned lounge.

“Take a seat, Frank, and have a cigar. Now then, everything went like clockwork, but of course, I have good people in the city looking after me. We’re very lucky. I have transferred half a million, give or take a pound or two, from the Mermaid Club’s account to the Diamond Drilling account in Jamaica. Normally they would require your signature first, but my people are very accommodating, and they are very much in my debt which is extremely handy. I have some documents here for you to sign, but it’s just a formality – the deal is done and there’s no going back. Oh, I almost forgot, I did have to grease an awkward palm with a thousand, but I think it was worth it. I hope you’ll agree. Are you OK, Frank?”

Frank had turned quite pale. “Yes, I’m just not used to doing things quite so fast. Anyway, thanks a lot, you’re a friend in need, Ronnie. Are you going to keep me in suspense much longer about these conditions?”

“No, Frank, no. We’ll do it now. I’ll come straight to the point. You already know about poor Neil Morrison and his problems. Well, I want to relieve him of all his worries, with your help, of course. I’ve sounded him out, and we can get his business for a hundred grand. That means he’ll pocket fifty grand, but here’s the clincher. I’ve told him if he signs tomorrow, he’ll get a little ten grand sweetener. I want us to be partners in the business, but I’m not a greedy man – I’ll take forty-nine percent, with you having the controlling interest of fifty-one percent. I don’t want anything to do with the running of a plant hire business – it’s too much like work! But I do want somewhere legitimate where I can invest, and release some of my capital, so you might find money flowing in and out again from time to time. ‘Laundering’ I think they call it. I prefer to call it ‘business’. Oh, by the way, the ten grand sweetener will come out of your funds. I think you’ll agree it’s a bargain.

“I’ve seen pictures of the place. It’s based on an old farm. The farm house is habitable, but a bit neglected. The barns and outbuildings are used as workshops and storage areas, and there are several vehicles, three useable caravans, diggers, tractors and quite a lot of small plant such as cement mixers, pneumatic drills, air compressors, temporary traffic light sets and generators.”

Frank was feeling a bit overawed at all this. What had he let himself in for?

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Ronnie, “there’s a radio station based on the premises too, in a portacabin. It’s some kind of local commercial station, run mainly by volunteers, but it’s thrown in with the deal. I’m not interested in it – you can have it. That’s your forte, isn’t it?”

Frank’s ears had pricked up. This was now sounding interesting.

“OK, I’m with you all the way so far, Ronnie. Now, what’s this second condition?”

Ronnie lowered his voice to a hush, “Ah, this is a bit more delicate, my dear fellow. Have you met Tamara?”

“No, not really. She stayed over at the pool.”

“Ah well, you see, she’s a bit shy, but a very, very nice lady. Now, I’m not just saying that, Frank, as soon as you meet her you’ll see what I mean. You just need to look at her, and you can see that she is one of those very rare individuals who just radiate a warm, genuine feeling of well-being. She’s so nice, Frank, that I’m almost ashamed that

she's having anything to do with me! But you know me, Frank. A deal's a deal, and I have a deal with Tamara."

"What's the deal, Ronnie?"

"I want you to marry her, Frank!"

"WHAT! Are you completely bonkers? I haven't even met the lady. Anyway, I'm not in the market for marrying anybody!"

"I don't see how you have a choice, Frank. It's one of the conditions. Do you want to cancel everything and go back to Holland?"

Deflated and defeated, Frank said, "What do you want me to do?"

"That's better," said Ronnie, grinning, "I'll introduce you now." He shouted on Ria to call Tamara into the house. "Tamara is Russian. She has found her way, illegally, to Spain. Don't ask me how. She wants to go to the UK and settle there, but the only way she can do that is to marry a British citizen – you, Frank. I think you'll agree she is a very special lady. She's a very clever lady too – she has a university degree in economics and business management, so she is not just a pretty face."

While they were waiting, Frank felt a funny feeling in his stomach. *My God, it's butterflies*, he thought. *I don't do butterflies!* Then, in walked the most heavenly being he had ever seen. This lady exuded confidence – she was in complete control of the situation. Frank guessed she must have been in her late twenties, maybe even thirty. She glided over to them, now wearing a silk robe, and the two men stood up as she approached. She was tall – almost as tall as Frank, who was six feet. Ronnie introduced them, and Frank held out his hand. She took it in both of her hands and shook it, at the same time kissing him on both cheeks.

"Tamara," said Ronnie, "meet Frank, your future husband."

She had a genuine sparkle in her eyes, and Ronnie was right – she was one gorgeous lady in every respect.

She stood back a little, looked Frank up and down, and said, "Very nice. I like. I like very much."

Frank, who could normally charm the birds out of the trees, was completely lost for words. All he could manage was a simpering silly chuckle, like a little schoolgirl.

"Come and sit down," Ronnie said.

She sat down next to Frank, and he could smell a freshness coming from her. They talked for some time, and her English was very good. Frank loved the Russian accent. It was doing funny things to him, and he was out of control again.

Ronnie had picked up a new passport and a full set of papers for Tamara from a contact in Madrid and he said he would arrange for a local wedding in about two weeks, and then transport arrangements would be made to get them both to the UK. After that, they could go their separate ways if they wanted.

"Thank you, Tamara, I'll let you get back to the pool now. Thank you." After she had left the room he continued, "Well, you've certainly made a hit there, Frank. You're going to get married!"

"Thanks, Cupid! She's a bit of all right though, isn't she? I've never felt like that about anyone before, and you know me, Ronnie, I've been around lots of women."

"Don't get any hopes up," Ronnie warned, "She could easily up-sticks and go once you're in Blighty."

"We'll see," said Frank.

“Come outside and I’ll show you round the place,” said Ronnie, and he led Frank outside.

They walked out past the pool where all the girls were now swimming. All, that is, except Elena. She was sitting on Raymond Gillies’ lap with her arms around his neck. They were whispering things in each other’s ears, and she was giggling at whatever he was saying to her. Neil Morrison was sitting sprawled out over the table, with his head buried in his arms, and several empty glasses in front of him.

Ronnie took Frank round the side of the house and through an archway into a formal garden where there were seats built round some of the trees. He gestured to Frank to sit down.

“I have one little last job for you,” he said.

“You drive a hard bargain, Ronnie. Go on, then. What is it?”

“Did you notice that pair over there beside the pool?”

“I couldn’t help it. Raymond’s enjoying himself, anyway.”

“Raymond’s been enjoying himself every day since he arrived. It starts with a bit of fun and frolic beside the pool with Elena, and then they make their way up to his room. An hour later, he comes down grinning like the cat that got the cream. It is our duty not to miss a golden opportunity like this.”

At that point, Ronnie reached into his pocket and pulled out a small camera, which he handed to Frank.

“We’ll go back to the pool now, and here’s what I want you to do. Start taking photos of me beside the pool, then the girls swimming. Then swing round and get a close-up shot of Raymond with Elena on his lap, preferably with her arms round his neck. Pace yourself until the moment’s right. Take two or three. Make fun of it – we’re all having a laugh together!”

“That sounds easy enough,” said Frank.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Ronnie said, “they will most likely go up to Raymond’s room very soon. I want you to give them fifteen minutes, then go up to the bedrooms. Raymond’s room is the one to the right of yours. I want you to go into Raymond’s room holding the camera. Before they suss what’s happening, I want you to take a picture of them in bed together. You may have to hold the camera at about chest level so it looks accidental, and you can apologise for going into the wrong room. They will probably sit up after this intrusion, and that’s when I want you to take another picture – with them both watching the birdie!”

“You devious old . . .”

“Now, now, Frank. Just remember one thing. Information is power. Photographic information is the ultimate power. Raymond has a lovely wife and two beautiful children at home – he’s shown me pictures of them. He’s also got the top job in the local council. Frank, Raymond doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to give us our first major contract – and continuous business from then on!”

Welcome to the Ronnie Marsh School of Business Studies, thought Frank!

After doing the dastardly deed, which was a success, Frank had one important task to do – phone Katharina. Ronnie took him into his office where he could have privacy. He dialled the number of her father’s apartment. It rang, then, “Hello?”

“Hello, Katharina? This is Frank Bentley.”

“Oh, Frank, hello. Are you well?”

“Yes, Katharina, how was your father’s funeral?”

“Oh, it was very . . . oh, not sure how to say . . . Katharina is glad it is over. Is she coming back to ship now? Oh, want to tell you Frank, you look at new Poparama magazine, you see Katharina on front cover and big story inside. Reporters were in Vienna for rock concert and made many photos of Katharina for magazine. You will like very much.”

“Oh no! No! You mean you’re in the magazine? Tell me you’re not.”

“Yes! Yes! It’s so exciting, yes? Katharina big star now on front page!”

Frank felt sick. “This is very bad, Katharina. I have bad news. The station has closed and the ship has been towed away. You cannot come back. I’m so sorry, but it’s over. Dave and Tom have fled to England, and I am . . . well, I am out of the country. You will just have to move on with your life. I expect Dave will contact you.”

There was silence from the other end, and then he could hear her sobbing.

“Thank you for phoning, Frank. Goodbye,” and she hung up.

Her heart sank, and she didn’t know what to do. She had no contact address for Dave, so she could only hope that he would contact her.

CHAPTER 4

>>FAST FORWARD>>

The Patti Smith Group track was coming to an end – rapidly, and Dave had forgotten that it ended so suddenly on this CD and it went straight into the next track if you weren't careful. His inattention was really down to the fact that he was night-day dreaming too much. *Oops! – time to speak!*

“And, that's what you get for selecting one track from that CD, because they all run into each other you see, and when you select one track it just chops you off without any warning – ooh! – painful! Right. That's the Patti Smith Group there from a great album of theirs, and I love the Patti Smith Group. I better give you some titles here of what we've been playing – let's see – prior to that, what did we have? Well, since we started, we've had Reef, Place Your Hands, and we've had . . . what else have we had? Oh yeah, a great one from Suzanne Vega and Men in a War, and in the three that started the programme off we began with Meat Loaf, of course, and You Took The Words Right Out Of My Mouth (Hot Summer Night), just like tonight, and went into . . . umm . . . a whole lot of other stuff. I don't know – I just can't remember. It is too hot, it's too hot, man, and I'm just trying to figure out what flew in here. I don't know what it was, but I caught sight of it under the desk. It's a sort of brownish-yellow colour with red markings, and it moved, but it won't come out. I don't know . . . I'm going to have to do something about this, because I don't know if I can continue on the programme with some wildlife roaming around in the studio. We'll have another think about that. If you want to call us – let us know what you're doing right now, or would just like a dedication for the lovely lady or guy in your life, the number as always is 01339 450450”

Dave played another Strathdee FM jingle featuring the dulcet tones of Mrs Benson. *She actually sounds damned good on these jingles*, he thought. Then he went into the next track, and talked up the intro.

“This is a great one from Don Henley, from the album ‘Building the Perfect Beast’, and a track called ‘Down at the Sunset Grill’. Somewhere I wouldn't mind being right now with a nice, long, ice-cold drink.” This was another of his favourite tracks – full of atmosphere. Tonight, it reminded him of Tammy's Truck Stop, and his first encounter with the lovely Tammy, ‘The Pride of Strathdee’!

<<REWIND<<

Dave had been hanging around Walton-on-the-Naze for three or four weeks, taking stock, and wondering what to do next. Tom had gone after a couple of nights, saying he was going to try to get back to Canada. Dave's main concern was for Katharina but he didn't have her phone number, and he hadn't kept a note of her address. He was going to have to go back to Vienna and physically track her down, but he had no money. Dave's father was a chartered accountant and he worked from home in a large conservatory built onto the rear of their house. He offered Dave some routine work to help him out, doing tax and VAT returns for some regular clients. Dave was glad of the diversion and the money, and at night they would take the boat out on the backwater for a bit of fishing. That's the time when his mind would wander. He couldn't concentrate on the fishing – all he could think about was Katharina. He had told his parents all about her, so much so that they felt they knew her as much as he did. He could have kicked himself for not taking her father's address and phone number with him when he jumped ship. She didn't have his parents' address or phone number either. It was a mess! He decided, once he had saved enough money, he would go back to Vienna and track her down. It should be easy.

It was a sunny Saturday, Dave and his father had been doing some fishing from the boat in the backwater, and then they decided to go out into the open sea and give it a bit of a blast down to Frinton then back home for tea. When they got back, they moored the boat and walked up to the house, laughing and joking. Dave's dad, Arthur, was in his element – he loved days like this. Back at the house, Arthur cracked open a couple of beers from the fridge, and they sat out in the garden to drink them. His mum, Marge, came out from the kitchen and said, "Shall we dine al fresco, boys, it's so nice tonight? It's just a ham salad with a fresh fruit salad for dessert. Then you two can go down to the pub for an hour or two."

"Sounds good to me, Marge," said Arthur. He loved these times with his boy, but Dave had said he didn't really want to stick around in Walton, so they made the most of the present.

They were half way through their meal when the phone rang in the house. Marge went in to answer it, then came out and said, "David, it's for you."

Dave leapt off his seat and shouted, "Katharina. Is it Katharina, Mum?"

"No, dear. It's a man. I think he said his name was Frank. That's your radio chappie, isn't it?"

Dave's heart pounded. *They've found us*, he thought, *they want an arm and a leg. We're doomed!*

He went into the house and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Frank?"

"Hi Dave. Boy, it's good to hear you, my lad. So you made it home safely?"

"Yes, Frank. No bother. The boat was great, do you want it back?"

"Hell, no, you keep it. It's the least I can do."

"Where are you, Frank, are you OK?"

"I'm fine, Dave. I got married a few weeks ago, and I'm in Scotland now."

Dave almost dropped the phone. "MARRIED? SCOTLAND? Hell, Frank, you never fail to amaze me! What are you doing?"

"Before I tell you that, let me ask you what *you're* doing."

"Not a lot in general, and nothing much in particular," said Dave, shrugging his

shoulders even though he was on the phone.

“Good. Good,” said Frank, “I’ve got a proposition for you.”

Alarm bells started ringing in Dave’s head. Frank’s propositions usually came with loads of strings attached, and dripping with potential problems, like people wanting to skin you alive, or worse!

“Oh, I don’t know, Frank. Do you have Katharina’s phone number? Have you spoken to her?”

“Never mind that just now, my lad, this is a cracker. You’ll love this one!”

“I don’t know, Frank, you’re too dangerous to have around! I value my life – *and* my sanity!”

“I’ve got a radio station and I want you as my top man.”

“What?” spluttered Dave, incredulously.

“That’s right. A proper, legal, legit radio station called Strathdee FM, in the darkest depths of bonnie Scotland. I’ve also got a majority share in a plant contracting business too, but the station’s all mine. It’s a terrific little place, Dave; it’s like being on holiday all the time! I need you, Dave. The station needs you.”

“I’ll need to think about it, Frank. I don’t want to end up like the last time.” Dave had learned a lot of lessons lately at the University of Life!

“I need an answer tonight Dave. I’ll give you a company vehicle – all expenses paid.”

“Do you have Katharina’s phone number, Frank?”

“I’ll get to that in a minute. Give me your answer first, and make it a ‘yes’.”

Still not convinced, Dave said, “I’m really not sure, Frank. I’d need to find somewhere to stay.”

Frank was like a dog with a slipper! “Dave, Dave lad. You drive a hard bargain. OK, I’ll also give you detached company accommodation in a lovely location, no charge and all expenses paid except your food. *And* I’ll pay you twice what you got on the Mermaid. Now what do you say?”

Dave lost the battle. “OK, Frank, you win.”

“Good man! Good man! You won’t regret this, I promise you. I did say I’d make things up to you, so I’m sticking to my word. Spit on the phone – I’ve just done it! That’s our deal sealed!” *How is it I always get an uneasy feeling when people say ‘you won’t regret this’?* Dave thought.

“Now, can you give me Katharina’s number please, Frank?”

Frank hesitated. “Dave . . . I had it . . . I phoned her from Spain. I . . . er . . . lost it in Spain.”

“Aw Frank, how could you? Well that’s it. I’ll never get her back now. Thanks a lot, mate!”

“Sorry lad. Something will turn up. You mark my words. Now, I want you to get up here ASAP. How about tomorrow? Get a pen and some paper. Got one? Good! Now write this down. Head for Aberdeen, then up the A93 through Aboyne, then take the road for Strathdee. Two miles out of Strathdee, take a farm track to Mains of Clarty. I’ll see you when you get here. Better make it Monday; it’s a long journey for one day. Bye. Oh, one more thing, I’m Francis Benson now. Frank Bentley doesn’t exist anymore.”

“OK Frank, I look forward to it,” said Dave, his tongue very firmly in his cheek!

He went back out to the garden, and sat down to finish his meal.

“Well, I’ve just got a job, folks!” he announced.

“Oh lovely,” Marge said. “What is it, dear?”

“My old boss has got himself a radio station and he wants me to run it – up in Aberdeenshire.”

“That’s nice, dear,” Marge said in her usual ‘mumsy’ way. “When do you start?”

“He wants me there Monday, so I’d better get going. Oh, by the way, you’ve to keep the boat.”

His mother looked at him and said, “Look, darling, I’ve been telling your Dad that we need a little break, so why don’t we drive you up there tomorrow in the Jaguar. We’ll break the journey half way somewhere in a hotel, and then we’ll have plenty of time to find the place on Monday. We can find a hotel or a bed and breakfast in the area for a few days. What do you think, Arthur?”

“Super idea, Marge,” Arthur said. “Dave’s been such a great help that I’m well ahead with my work. Let’s do it.”

That night, Dave packed his things, only this time his mother made sure he took a lot more than he did when he went to Switzerland. They spent the next two days travelling, stopping overnight in a lovely hotel in the Scottish Borders.

They eventually found Strathdee, and they all agreed it was the quaintest, most picturesque little village they had ever seen. They had to ask a man with a tweed cap and a sheepdog for directions to Mains of Clarty. In fact, they had to ask him three times because they just couldn’t understand the strong local dialect – it was like a foreign language. Eventually, they got him to draw a little map on a piece of paper, and they set off.

They found a badly rusted signpost saying, ‘Mains of Cla’. The sign was so weather-beaten that the letters just faded away into nothing. The Jaguar bumped and jolted up the deeply potholed farm track, with the high grass ridge in the middle of the track brushing against the underside of the car.

“Well, at least my engine sump will be nice and clean,” joked Arthur.

The track gradually got worse and worse and they were beginning to think it was going nowhere, when around a bend it opened up into a farmyard. Well, it used to be a farmyard. Now it was a clutter of broken, rusting lorries, cars, diggers, cement mixers and various other bits of flotsam and jetsam associated with the plant hire profession. A black and white collie dog was facing up to their car, barking like mad and trying to herd the car into a corner. Dave spotted a prefabricated building over in the far corner of the yard, with a microwave dish mounted on the roof, pointing up to the hill behind them. Mounted on the door of the building, made out of a yellow car number plate, was a notice bearing the legend, ‘STRATHDEE FM’.

They got out of the car, and the dog held them at bay with a mixed show of emotions, growling and wagging its tail at the same time. The farmhouse front door opened and Raymond Gillies appeared, being ushered out by Frank. They shook hands, and Raymond looked very solemn as he got into his black Lexus and drove off. Catching sight of the Jaguar, Frank came over to them with his arms open.

“Dave, my boy, fantastic to see you. Thanks a million for coming. I see you’ve met Shona. She’s quite harmless really. She came with the farm, so it looks like we’re

stuck with her.”

Dave introduced his parents, and while they were chatting a woman appeared at the farmhouse door. Frank called over to her, “Tamara, darling, come over and meet a very good friend of mine.”

She walked over, and Frank introduced her to them. He told them about how he had married her in Spain so she could get into the UK, then on their way to Britain he detected a spark between them. As he put it, the spark ignited a flame, and the fire was so intense that they decided to stay together and make a go of it, with Tamara taking on the role of business administrator with the company.

“You’ve got a sappy old streak in you after all,” Dave laughed as he tousled Frank’s hair.

Slightly embarrassed, Frank said, “All right, enough of that. Let’s get down to business. I’ll show you the studio.”

“We’ll just get away, dear,” Marge said. “We’ll look for a hotel for a few nights, and we’ll come back to see you before we leave for home.”

“There’s the Station Hotel down in the village if you like,” said Frank. “It’s nothing fancy, but you will get very good home cooking.”

“OK, thank you, we’ll try that. Bye bye now, darling.” Marge kissed Dave, Arthur shook his hand and after unloading Dave’s case, they left.

Frank took Dave over to the studio building and they went in. It was deceptively spacious inside, with a reception area, the main studio where a local DJ was presenting the afternoon show, and a production studio for making commercials and trails, which also doubled as a newsroom for local news. The national news was taken on a feed from the Independent Radio News service. Behind the two studios were a little office, a kitchen and a toilet. It didn’t look much from the outside, but Dave was quite impressed. They stepped outside and Frank pointed out the dish on the roof.

“That’s the microwave link which sends the station output up to the transmitter which is behind us up on the hill. You can’t see it from here because of the trees, but there is a track going right up to it and you can get up in a Land Rover. I’ll show you it later. Right, my boy, have you eaten?”

“Not since lunch,” replied Dave. “I was going to have something with my folks after we’d found the place.”

“Well, they’re off to the hotel now, and they’ll get a good meal there, but we’ve got other plans.” Frank ushered him over to his Range Rover. “I’m going to take you to the best little eating house outside of Texas, so to speak! Tammy’s Truck Stop – an experience not to be missed!”

As they drove off, Dave wanted to ask about his company vehicle and company accommodation, but Frank continued the conversation with a history lesson.

“Tammy’s old man was a trawler man with his own boat, and her old lady was a fishwife in Aberdeen, gutting and packing the fish in the market. Now, he got quite a sizeable sum from the government for de-commissioning his boat, and he bought the truck stop for his daughter. She had no qualifications from school or anywhere, and he didn’t want her ending up gutting fish like her mother. Then he popped his clogs. Her mother’s still alive, though. Comes out here for her holidays.

“At first, the café was a great success, but the poor girl’s a bit challenged in the business management department. To put it bluntly, she’s just about to go tits-up, if you

pardon the expression. Her husband won't help her – no, wait – I'll rephrase that. Her common-law husband won't help her – they never got legally married. He buggered off to work on an oil rig in the North Sea, and on his leave time he goes to a bird he's got stashed away in Norway. In fact, I don't think he's been home here for years, and Tammy's got three kids. Work that one out! But she's a tough cookie with a heart of gold, *and* she's quite good looking in her own way. She sees the kids as a steady income with the allowances she gets. She's one of life's survivors, but this time I think she's had it."

"Well, at least we can buy a meal from her," said Dave, feeling sorry for her already.

"Oh, we're going to do a lot better than that, my boy. We're going to buy the business from her – at a knock-down price. She'll still run it, and she'll still get to live in the mobile home behind the place. There you go, a little background on the lovely Tammy."

They had reached the end of the farm track, and were now heading for the village. Frank continued, "I know this track's a bit rough, but we're going to widen it and tar it. It'll be like the M1 motorway when we're done with it! Well, almost!"

"What about my company vehicle and accommodation?" Dave finally managed to ask.

"Yes, I've not forgotten. The vehicle's sitting in the yard – it's a classy piece of kit – very fitting for the area. Now, your pad is something else. It's exclusive, and it's in the most idyllic location you could ever imagine. You're going to love it. You'll feel like you're permanently on holiday. I'll take you up after we've had our meal."

Dave thought this sounded too good to be true. Frank was certainly coming up trumps. All his Christmases had come at once - at last!

As they drove through the village, Dave saw his folks' Jaguar parked outside the Station Hotel. *They must have got fixed up*, he thought.

Frank drove on out of the village. He had Strathdee FM playing on the radio, and the DJ was doing a 'lost pets' feature, reading out details of a dog, two cats and a rabbit that were missing. Dave couldn't help thinking that the dog probably had the cats for dinner, and was saving the rabbit for supper!

Two miles out of the village, Frank slowed down as they approached a building on their right, set back off the road and surrounded by a pine forest on three sides, with a large muddy parking area in front of it. A pink neon sign above the door declared: 'MMY'S TRUCK OP'. Some of the letters weren't working, and the word 'truck' was flickering out and in – unintentionally. Parked in front of the building, and taking up about half of the car park, was a huge Scania articulated truck with a low-loader trailer. It had an impressive row of six huge halogen spot lamps mounted along the roof, and another row of four mounted on the front bull bar. The lettering on the truck read 'Neil Morrison – Plant Contractor – Mains of Clarty - Strathdee'.

"Oh good," said Frank as he parked beside it, "Archie's here. That'll give you a chance to meet him. He's been dropping off a JCB up at Lord Strathdee's Estate. We're doing a bit of drainage work for him. Archie Murdoch is our main man. What he doesn't know about trucks and diggers isn't worth knowing. He's been driving them and working on them since he was five! We're going to have to get these vehicles re-lettered, though. That's the next job."

They walked into the café, and immediately Dave felt a homely feeling. He liked this place. There was a scrumptious smell of home cooking, and a country and western track was playing on the juke box. A little girl of about three was sitting at one of the tables scribbling in a colouring book. At a window table, taking up the space of two people, sat an enormous bear of a man with thick greasy shoulder-length hair and a full Rob Roy beard. He had on a pair of dark blue oil-impregnated overalls, and a pair of mud-encrusted rigger boots, with the zips open and their tongues hanging out like two starved abandoned animals. This was Archie Murdoch. He was also tucking into a huge shepherd's pie, and drinking a pint of milk along with it, straight from the carton.

Frank introduced Dave to him, and his first comment to Dave was: "You must have a screw loose to come and work in this God-forsaken place!"

Taken aback, Dave replied, "From what I've seen so far, I think it's a beautiful place. It's like somewhere you would come to on holiday"

Quick as a flash, Archie came back with, "Wait till you've been here a few months – that'll all change. And wait till the winter . . . I'm not saying any more. Just wait till the winter!"

"Are you taking the truck home tonight?" Frank asked Archie.

"If you think I'm battling up that bloody farm track again at this time of night with that monster, then *you've* got a screw loose. You want to get that road sorted. We're going to lose a load over the edge there sometime soon, you mark my words. I can feel it in my water. *And* it won't be my fault – it'll be yours for not doing anything about it. You've got to get it sorted." He took another shovelful of shepherd's pie and washed it down with a big slurp of milk.

Frank wondered sometimes who was the boss, but you couldn't win with Archie – he always got the upper hand.

"Nobody serving around here?" Frank shouted out.

"The lassie's through the back giving one of the bairns a bath," said Archie.

At that point, a plump, smiling woman appeared, carrying a dripping child wrapped in a towel.

"What's all the flippin' noise about?" she asked.

"You've got customers," Archie growled.

Frank introduced Dave to Tammy, and her eyes lit up.

"Ooh, are you a proper DJ? Not like the amateurs around here?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I have been on the radio before down south, so if that makes me a 'proper DJ', then I am."

She came right up close to him and said in his ear, "Have you got a big ego?"

"Tammy, leave the lad alone," Frank shouted, "he's only just got here and you've already got him undressed! Now, what's on the menu?"

"You can have anything you want, as long as it's shepherd's pie – I've got loads of it. I've got my speciality apple crumble to follow, and I know you like that, Frank."

"Shepherd's pie, Dave?"

Dave nodded.

"Ok, we'll have two shepherd's pies and two apple crumbles. I'll have a coffee, what about you, Dave?"

“Coke please.”

“Now get off to the kitchen, woman!” Frank ordered.

“I’d get on a lot quicker if you came through and gave me a hand,” Tammy flashed her eyes at Frank.

“I know what you’re after, and I’m a happily married man, so forget it! Now get on with it!”

While they were waiting for their meals, Frank said to Archie, “Well, good news today. That’s all the council contracts in the bag. We are unofficially the preferred contractors for the whole county. Obviously all the jobs have to go out to tender, but we’ll get them all – it’s guaranteed.”

It was unusual for Archie to show any emotion over anything, but he raised one eyebrow and said, “How did you manage that, then?”

“Oh, just a bit of clever dealing over a cup of coffee with Raymond Gillies while I showed him my photograph album.”

What Frank omitted to say was what was in the photographs, and also that Raymond was going to get one percent of the income from any contracts they handled, straight into his pocket.

Frank continued, “What we’ve had promised to us, Archie, is enough to keep us going for the next year. Everything else is the icing on the cake. We’ve got the new culvert for the river diversion at Banchory; we’ve got the road re-alignment at Crathes; we’ve got the new playing fields and landscaping at six schools. Life is good, Archie, life is good!”

Unperturbed, Archie finished off his shepherd’s pie, gravy dripping from his jowels at every shovelful. At that point, Tammy appeared with two huge platefuls of shepherd’s pie.

“There’s lots more in the kitchen if you want seconds, boys,” she said.

Archie handed his plate up to her. “I’ll have some more, lass.”

Before she returned to the kitchen, she turned to Dave and said, “When are you going to be on the air so I can listen to you?”

Dave turned to Frank for the answer. “Probably from three till six in the afternoon, and then back at midnight for ninety minutes – pretty much the same as he did on his last station, starting tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it,” Tammy whispered in his ear as she went for Archie’s seconds.

“She seems very nice and friendly,” Dave said, after she was gone.

“She’s being more than friendly, believe me,” Frank quickly replied. “Just keep your wits about you, lad!”

After they had finished their meals, Frank and Dave drove back up to the farm.

“Right, we’d better get you settled into your new abode,” Frank said, as they drove into the farmyard.

“What about my company car?” Dave asked again. He was determined to hold Frank to his word.

“Yes, yes, have patience, my boy. Right, come over here with me.”

They walked over to the far corner of the yard, then round the gable end of the

house. Parked there was a very beat-up Land Rover long wheelbase pick-up in a nondescript pale blue colour.

“Where are we going?” Dave asked.

“Here! Right here! This is it. This is your company car, my son.”

“WHAT! THIS? It’s a load of old junk! Look at it.” Dave was exasperated.

Every panel on the Land Rover was dented, the paint had peeled off in lots of places leaving the bare aluminium, the tyres were flat and the grass was growing up through the floor!

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” said Frank calmly, “these are hardy vehicles – *and* very classy. You know, our next door neighbour runs a few of them, and you know who she is, don’t you?”

“No I don’t.” Dave was getting very irritated.

“Her Majesty the Queen! The Balmoral Estate is just up the road from us. Look, don’t worry about the tyres, I’ll get Archie to blow them up tomorrow and check it over. I think it needs a new battery too – it was flat when I tried to start it today.”

This just gets better and better, thought Dave, sarcastically.

“Now for your new home. Jump in and I’ll drive you up.”

They climbed back into Frank’s Range Rover, and drove up a narrow grassy track leading up behind the farmhouse. The scenery was breathtaking. There was steep pine forest on their left, and on the right, you could see right over the valley in between the bushes. After quarter of a mile, the track ended and opened out into a flat circular area with just enough space to turn. Dave spotted a quaint little cottage on the left, nestling in the trees.

“Wow! This is fantastic, Frank. What a location. Hey . . . wait a minute . . . there are no windows in this house! And look at the roof – half the slates are missing! I can’t live here, Frank. You must be joking.”

“Steady on, old chap, this isn’t your new home. Don’t be silly! This is the old woodman’s cottage. It’s needing a bit of renovation, which I’ll get round to one day. No, yours is over here. Come on.”

They walked round to the right of the cottage, and there, in all its glory, was a caravan. This particular caravan had moss growing all over the roof, and only one wheel. Where the wheel should have been was a pile of bricks, supporting it.

“Aw Frank, you really must be kidding. This is a dump!” Dave was almost in tears.

“No, don’t be like that, my lad, think positively! Look at all the good points. Look at the location – you couldn’t get better. You’ve got privacy. It’ll clean up nice. Lots of folk would give their right arm for a home like this. Come on in, I got Tamara to light the gas fire earlier and leave it on ‘low’ to get rid of the musty smell. And there’s a lavender air freshener spray there if you need it. Brand new. I just bought it today.”

When they went in, it was warm and cosy – and quite spacious. The view from the big lounge window was nothing short of spectacular, looking right across the valley to the hills on the other side. The furnishings were in very good condition, and the bedclothes were all new.

“It’s not so bad when you’re inside, Frank. I think I’ll like it here.”

“That’s the spirit, my boy. I knew you’d love it!”

CHAPTER 5

>>FAST FORWARD>>

It was getting hotter by the minute in the studio. This just wasn't possible – this was Aberdeenshire. You could walk along Aberdeen beach in July and see people in anoraks – with scarves, gloves and the hoods up! The Sunset Grill sounded very appealing. Tammy's Truck Stop sounded appealing too. He was sorely tempted to go there after the show and get a full Scottish breakfast and an ice cold glass of Coke, especially as Tammy had been on the phone trying to tempt him. Too bad, he had told her, he had to take this damned JCB bucket and a barrel of oil up to some God forsaken hillside where he would most likely get savaged by a wolf!

When the Don Henley track was finishing, he decided to go straight into the next one. He really wanted to sit back with his feet up and listen to this one. This rated as one of his all-time top ten tracks, and he had come across it by pure accident. He didn't buy CDs very often, but when he heard 'Oh Romeo' by Mindy McCready, he just had to go out and buy it. The second track on the CD single, which would have been the 'B' side on a 45 in the olden days, completely blew him away. It was called 'Cross Against the Moon', and was the most heartfelt atmospheric thing he had heard in a long time. Now he was going to play it, and he was going to enjoy it in its entirety. He mixed the beginning of it over the end of the previous track.

The haunting piano intro started with an eerie wind whistling behind it, then Mindy's magic voice. Why the hell did this track remind him of Katharina? Was it because it was about an innocent, naïve little girl of seventeen who was giving up the safety of her bedroom in Nebraska to run away to Hollywood? That didn't make any sense, but it made him think of her anyway. He thought of her in her bedroom in Vienna, planning to go out into the big wide world. He wondered where she was right now, this very minute. What was she doing? Who was she with? Did she ever think of him? Did she ache as much as he did? Closing his eyes during the track, he could see her beautiful face right in front of him. He reached out, and touched . . . the microphone!

Time for the next track. He played a jingle, still didn't speak, and went straight into 'Cha Cha Loco' by Joe Jackson from the album 'Body and Soul', with its rousing Latin beat.

Things were pretty obscure, music-wise, on the show this morning, but that's the way he liked it in the wee small hours, and that's the way the listeners liked it too, going by the feedback he got. He just wished Katharina could be here doing the show with him just like they used to do on the Mermaid, but he didn't think the Radio Authority would let him off with some of the antics that they used to get up to on-air! It was a nice thought, anyway.

This was a nice lively track, and it brought him back to reality. He realised he was actually playing records for people listening out there, not just for his own amusement, so when the track ended, he thought he'd better speak this time.

“That’s Joe Jackson there, and ‘Cha Cha Loco’ from the album ‘Body and Soul’, and prior to that, just an ideal track for a hot summer’s night – Mindy McCready and ‘Cross Against the Moon’, and you’re hearing it on a hot summer’s night on Strathdee FM coming to you from the depths of the forest at Mains of Clarty in beautiful Royal Deeside. We are here in the dark now. We’ve turned the lights out and we’ve just got the desk lights on - the panel lights – with just enough light for me to see what I’m doing. We had the lights on and we’ve got the window wide open in the studio because, would you believe, it’s about twenty-three degrees in here just now. How can it be twenty-three degrees when it’s dark and the sun’s not shining? That’s what I want to know! But we’ve attracted one item of wildlife already into the studio. It’s hiding under the desk, and I must try and get it out, and there are some more noises outside - I don’t know what it is. Our studio window looks out onto a farm, and I know that there are no farm animals out there – I know that, but there’s something out there because I just heard it about three minutes ago. Umm . . . I’m going to investigate and let you know. In the meantime, more music.”

Dave played two lively jingles back to back, and then decided to liven things up a bit with Republica and ‘Ready to Go’.

Hell – those lyrics . . . about being too far away . . . it’s Katharina again! *Shit, man, pull yourself together*, he told himself, *you’re never going to see her again unless you go looking for her. Decide today if that’s what you’re going to do.*

<<REWIND<<

Over the next four weeks after the funeral, Katharina did nothing much at all – just hung about the apartment, went to coffee shops and walked about town. Johanna stayed over every few nights, and they discussed the idea of her moving in permanently. They both thought it would be good fun, and get Johanna away from the constraints of her parents. Then the first bombshell dropped.

A notice came in the post, informing Katharina that the landlord wanted repossession of the apartment for his own use, and she was given notice to quit. She wasn’t too bothered as she had discovered that she had inherited £10,000 in her Papa’s will – money he had saved for her wedding should she find the right man. She had already found the right man. The only man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with – and promptly lost him again. She should have married him when she had the chance, she thought. All he needed was a little push. *Well, I’ve still got Johanna*, she thought, and that meant a lot to her.

One morning, two weeks later, they got up at nine o’clock. Johanna had stayed over again, as she did every few days. They had got into the habit of sleeping together. Katharina liked the arrangement as she felt safe and secure. Johanna liked the arrangement as it kept her away from her parents. The only down side to this was Johanna’s snoring. It could be compared to a leaky steam engine! Katharina filled the kettle and switched it on. Johanna came through in a bath robe and lit a cigarette.

“You look pale,” she said to Katharina. “Are you OK?”

“I was thinking about us getting an apartment together.”

Johanna’s eyes lit up. Katharina continued, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. In fact, I don’t think we should do any more sleep-overs. I’m not getting a good night’s sleep when you’re here. You snore!”

Hurt, Johanna replied, “Oh well, if that’s the way you want it. I thought we had something special between us, but obviously I’m wrong.”

“We have, Jo, we have. But not so special that I can put up with that! I can’t take it, Jo. I need my sleep. I just want to be on my own today. Do you mind?”

Johanna left, under an awkward atmosphere. Katharina had other reasons for wanting to be alone today. She thought she was pregnant. She was sure she was pregnant – well, almost sure. She wanted to go out and buy a testing kit to make sure. She was already three weeks late, and she was *never* late.

She went out to a pharmacy several blocks away where she wasn’t known, and chose the most expensive kit on offer – she wanted this to be accurate. She returned immediately to the apartment – a girl on a mission. After reading the instructions, she proceeded to carry out the test. When she looked at the result, she couldn’t believe it. Well, she could, because in her heart of hearts she already knew, but seeing it there in front of her eyes, shouting at her . . . POSITIVE!

She felt all sorts of emotions flooding over her all at once. Excitement; fear; regret; fulfilment; motherhood. *Hang on to these last two*, she told herself. She walked slowly through to the living room, staring at the test result still in her hand. She poured herself a brandy to calm her jangling nerves. *Well, all this drinking will have to stop*, she told herself. She was going to have a baby. Her baby. Dave’s baby. Her Papa’s grandchild. Her dear Mama’s grandchild. She wished they were both here.

Then the practicalities started to kick in. How did this happen? She was on the pill. Then it struck her. That night on the ship when she received the terrible phone call, all she wanted afterwards was some loving comfort from Dave. Like the perfect gentleman he was, he naturally obliged. In her emotionally disturbed state, she forgot to take her pill. Now her mind was racing as she started to justify the situation: *This was meant to be. This is Dave’s gift to me – the finest gift a girl could ever have – the gift of life. If I can’t have Dave, I can have his child. Mama and Papa can have the grandchild they would always have wanted. They are watching over me. They will know about this. They will make everything all right, I know they will.*

She spent the rest of the day lounging about the apartment, trying to formulate a plan for her future. She had responsibilities now – the responsibility of another person’s life. She was going to do this right – she had to. Her first mission would be to find a place to live. She could buy an apartment, using the money she inherited as a deposit, but she knew she wouldn’t get a mortgage without a job. She would have to get a job. *Looks like it’s a kitchen maid again for me*, she thought. Next step would be to go to the doctor for a proper examination. Or should she do that first? She hadn’t a clue! She climbed into bed and had an early night.

Things looked clearer in the morning. Her whole life had changed within twenty-four hours. She decided to go out and try to find a job, but first she would phone Johanna. She dialled the number, and her friend answered.

“Hello, Jo,” she said, tentatively.

“Oh, you’re speaking to me now?”

“Jo, I’m so sorry about yesterday – please don’t be cross with me. You will soon understand why I was a bit short with you. I had something big on my mind. Can I meet you today to tell you?”

“What is it? What is it – tell me.”

“No, Jo, I’ll tell you when I see you. Meet me at the Café Mozart at five o’clock. I have a lot to do today and I should be finished by then.”

“OK, Kat, I’ll see you then. I can’t wait!”

Katharina put on her Mermaid Radio T-shirt which she had washed the previous day, and a pair of her best jeans. Then she set out to get herself a job. At first, she went to all of the big hotels in the city centre, and out of twelve hotels, all she was offered was a temporary chambermaid’s job for three months. She said she would get back to them, and then she went to a small café for lunch. In the afternoon, she tried another six hotels, this time concentrating on the privately owned ones in the quieter areas of town. After having no luck, she was just about to give up when she saw a hotel sign at the end of a side street. When she saw what the hotel was called, she just had to go into this one. She walked along and went into the Hotel Mermaid. There was an immediate homely atmosphere, and the smell of fresh home baking pervaded the reception area. A grandfather clock ticked reassuringly and a friendly woman welcomed her. She was the owner and was about sixty, with white hair swept back into a bun, rather like an old fashioned schoolteacher. She told Katharina she was originally from Copenhagen, and had come here to introduce a little bit of Denmark into Austria. She was very interested when Katharina gave her an account of her experience. She was so impressed by her spell in St Moritz, and even more so by her Mermaid Radio experience, that she offered her a job there and then. Her job would be kitchen maid, with additional duties as waitress, chambermaid, receptionist and even barmaid when required. This was a lot to ask from anyone, but when the owner told her what her salary would be, and that she would have her own en suite room, she decided it was too good to turn down. However, Katharina didn’t mention the fact she was pregnant – that would do for later. After all, she still hadn’t had it confirmed by a medical practitioner. She arranged to start in two weeks, and then left for the Café Mozart to meet Johanna. She would be early, but that wouldn’t matter.

When she reached the café, she took one of the outside tables under the canopy to watch for her friend arriving. Cars were parked nose-in to the opposite kerb outside the café in a little parking area, and in one of these cars, a black Mercedes with tinted glass, sat two men in dark suits. A third man in a white T-shirt and jeans was standing beside the open rear door of the car, smoking. He spotted Katharina, turned round and said something to the occupants of the car, and the man in the back seat handed him something. It was a copy of Poparama magazine, with Katharina on the front cover. He walked over to Katharina’s table, and very politely said, “Excuse me; I hope you don’t mind me approaching you like this, but are you Katharina Bloch?”

Taken aback, Katharina hesitantly replied, “Yes, I am.”

“Katharina Bloch, the Mermaid Radio girl – the one in Poparama magazine?” and he held the magazine up in front of her.

Getting rather excited now, she squealed, “Yes! Yes, that’s me!”

The man then said, ‘I wonder if you would be so kind as to do me the greatest of favours? My friends and I are big, big fans of yours. Would you be so good as to autograph my copy of the magazine for me?’

‘Of course I will,’ she said, and he handed her the magazine and a pen. She signed it with a ‘good luck’ message across the top of her front cover picture.

‘That’s wonderful,’ said the man, ‘now, would you be so kind as to autograph my friend’s copy. He’s just in the car over here and he is slightly disabled and can’t come out. It would make his day if he could meet you.’

‘Of course I will, of course I will, no problem,’ she said, and as she got up from the table the man escorted her over to the car. She leaned in the back door of the car and the man inside held out his hand to greet her. As she took it, he pulled her sharply into the car while the man outside pushed her in and followed on behind, closing the door.

The jeans man said to her, ‘Now Katharina, we have a little job for you. It is very easy and safe. You will come to no harm, that is, if you fully co-operate with us.’

Then the suit man sitting on her other side took over. ‘Katharina, it is an absolute pleasure to meet you. I do honestly want your autograph, but first let me explain our rather unconventional behaviour.’

A cold chill travelled right up her spine, and at this point the driver started the engine, reversed the car out from the parking space, and joined the busy traffic. Katharina was starting to get very alarmed. This definitely was not right. How could she have been so stupid? The suit man continued, ‘Katharina, we are authorised debt recovery agents, otherwise known as professional bounty hunters, and as professionals, we very rarely ever fail in our assignments. We will use any means we can to succeed in our missions – it is that important to us. We have some very high-profile clients and we are in great demand, Katharina, and that is because we are the BEST! We are second to none! Do you understand me, Katharina?’

She was getting very frightened now, and all she could manage was a little nod as her eyes started to fill with tears.

The man continued in a very refined, well-mannered voice, ‘Now, Katharina, you have a boss called Frank Bentley who has defrauded several big companies who we represent, and it is our job to get our clients’ money back from him – all of it. The only trouble is, Katharina, we don’t know where your boss is, and this is where you come in.’

The car was now well away from the city centre, and Katharina could see they were driving into an industrial area. They drove on through some quiet, deserted streets between empty warehouses and yards with trucks parked in them. They turned a corner at the very bottom of the industrial estate, onto a totally deserted street with high walls on each side. The driver stopped the car and switched off the engine.

Katharina was shaking like a leaf, and the tears were uncontrollably running down her cheeks. The man continued, quite softly, ‘Now, Katharina, let’s get straight down to business. The sooner this is finished, the better. Where is your boss?’

‘I . . . I . . . I don’t know,’ she sobbed.

Quick as a flash, the man turned with the rolled up magazine in his hand and smashed it brutally across her face shouting, ‘WE ARE NOT HERE TO PLAY GAMES, KATHARINA, AND YOU BETTER REALISE THAT!’ The blow was so severe, it knocked her glasses off and they fell onto the floor of the car somewhere. She was in a terrible state by now, sobbing loudly, and screaming in between gulps of breath, ‘No!

No! I . . . don't know . . . where he is. I want to . . . I want to find him too. I lost my boyfriend . . . Frank will know . . . he will know . . . where Dave, my boyfriend is. I must find him. I will help you, but I really don't know where he is."

Just as she began to almost regain her composure, the suit man reached out with a big hand, took hold of her whole face in his hand and squeezed. He squeezed so hard that he almost broke her cheekbones and her jaw. She yelped in absolute terror and pain. He said to her quite calmly, while still holding her in a bizarrely contorted position, "I hope, Katharina, for your sake, that you are telling me the truth, because if you are not, we will track you down forever, and you will regret lying to me for the rest of your life, short as it may be."

She would never forget the strong smell of aniseed coming from the man's hand right up against her nostrils.

While this was going on, the jeans man bent down and picked her glasses up from the floor. The suit man released his grip on her and took them from the jeans man. Katharina was too terrified to cry now. She was starting to go into spasms of shock, and couldn't stop herself from shaking. Her face was in agony, and she reached up to touch it but she couldn't control her shaking arm, and she ended up hitting her face and making it worse.

The suit man said, "I'm so sorry, I seem to have knocked your glasses off. Do you really need them?"

She could barely speak now. She thought she was going to pass out. "Y . . . y yes." She was now a complete wreck. "I . . . I . . ."

"YES?" he shouted, right in her face.

She forced an answer, "I . . . can't. I . . . c-c-can't see a thing . . . without . . . them."

She tried to reach out for her glasses, and he held them up, out of her reach, shouting, "KATHARINA, DO YOU KNOW WHERE FRANK BENTLEY IS?"

"No," she sobbed. "No, no, no," and she let out a long wail. The suit man then took the glasses in both hands, and right in front of her face, snapped them in two.

"First them - next YOU! NOW TELL ME THE TRUTH," he yelled at her.

At that point, a car came round the corner, and as it got nearer, the jeans man shouted, "Police!"

The suit man shouted to the driver, "GO! GO! GO!" and as he was starting the engine, Katharina, suddenly finding some super-human strength, whacked the jeans man in the groin with one hand while opening the door with the other. As the car was speeding off, she was launching herself through the open door, tumbling over and over three or four times before her head smashed into a lamp post. She just lay there, stunned. There was a stony silence – nothing. The Mercedes had gone and the police car had gone. She was alone. She felt liquid running down her cheeks, and when it reached her mouth, she could taste it. Blood! She rolled over painfully and just lay there totally destroyed, and she started to pass out. She really thought this was the end.

After what seemed like an eternity, she came round, and tried to sit up. She was sore all over and thought she had broken some ribs. Her face hurt like hell, and she thought it was twisted permanently after what she had been through. The bleeding had

stopped by now, but she felt the congealed blood down her face and started to cry again. After another ten minutes, she tried to stand up, and yelled out with pain as her chest felt like a knife was piercing through it. She managed to get onto her feet, and tried to work out where she was. She could see she was in some kind of industrial area with warehouses and offices, but she couldn't read any of the company signs or the street name. She struggled up to the inside edge of the pavement and painfully stood up against the wall. At this close range, she could make out it was a concrete wall, and she could clearly make out the rough detail of the concrete. She thought she would follow this wall, touching it all the way, and hoped that it might lead her to somewhere.

The wall turned a corner into another street, and she held onto it as she stumbled along slowly. It was starting to get dark now, and the street lights had come on. She looked up at them, and they looked like big fluffy balls of light. In different circumstances they could have appeared to be quite beautiful, but these were dangerous circumstances, and she was only now beginning to realise how much danger she actually was in. She was totally helpless. There was no way she was going to be able to make her own way home. If she could find a phone booth she could at least phone for help, but how was she ever going to find one here in a deserted industrial estate miles from anywhere? In total despair, she slumped down again onto the pavement. It would be so easy to just lie here, she thought, go to sleep and never wake up again. She felt so light-headed with losing so much blood, that she seriously thought it was all over for her. She felt she was past the point of no return.

After lying there for what seemed like another eternity, somehow she got enough strength together to struggle back onto her feet and follow the wall for a bit more. The wall stopped, and she felt a steel mesh gate. She followed the gate, and then it became a brick wall. She was sure this wall had windows in it as she looked up and saw dark blurry squares above her. Just then, she stumbled into a steel handrail at right angles to the wall. On the other side of the handrail were steps, and as she crawled up them, she was faced by a glass door. She bang, bang, banged on the door, crying out, "Help! Help me!" and realising that the building was all in darkness, slumped down again into a crumpled heap and started to cry.

Inside the building, two English guys John Ford and Colin Burrows were sitting in one of the offices with their feet up on a desk. Their company, which was based back in Tyneside, had won the contract for installing the network cables for a new computer system in the offices. John was from Newcastle and Colin was from Sunderland, and they never ever let each other forget it. If it wasn't continual bantering about the merits of Newcastle United over Sunderland Football Club, or vice versa, then it was a contest between the Newcastle women and the Sunderland women. When every computation of rivalry had been exhausted, the insults were reduced to the plain fact that Sunderland had never produced a decent cable layer in its history, or in Colin's view, all Newcastle cable layers were rubbish!

"Well, what do we do now, bonnie lad?" John asked Colin. "We've finished the final run, and if we stay back and buzz it out tonight we can get off on a flyer tomorrow and get back in time for the match on Saturday."

Colin wasn't so sure. "I'm knackered, John. We've been at this since eight this

morning. I'm so tired we could make a mistake, then that's the whole job gone tits-up! Let's come back in the morning, early – about seven, knock it on the head, then go straight home. We'll still make it to the match OK."

John succumbed. "You're right. We'll call it a day. But it doesn't mean that's a point for Sunderland, mind!"

"You do the alarm and I'll get the car out of the yard," Colin suggested.

They put the office lights out and went into the hallway. "Wait," John shouted, "Did you hear that?"

They both froze. "What?"

"A sort of knocking sound at the main door," said John. "There it is again."

Colin was dismissive. "It'll be kids, or an animal." He wanted back to the hotel and a well earned beer.

John shrugged his shoulders, and they went out a side door to their car. Colin opened the big steel gates, started the car and drove out into the street to wait while John closed and locked the gates. He was just about to climb into the car when he stopped in his tracks.

"Whoa there, bonnie lad! Do you see what I see?" he shouted to Colin.

Colin followed his gaze to the front door. "There's someone over there – on the steps. It'll be a drunk. Come on, let's go."

John wasn't so sure. "You only get drunks in doorways in Sunderland, man. This is Vienna."

"You cheeky sod. Newcastle's full of drunks in doorways. It's all that Brown Ale!"

"Wait a minute," John hushed his voice, "I'm going over to take a look."

He walked to the main door, and as he approached Katharina, she said weakly, "Help. Please help."

He shouted back to Colin, "It's a girl, Colin. A young girl – and she's hurt pretty bad. Come here."

Colin got out of the car and went over.

"Oh my God! She's in a mess, poor lass. You stay with her and I'll open up the building again. I'll come down and open this door. No, wait; we don't have a key for this door. Let's take her in the side door."

John put his arm around her and said, "What's your name, pet?"

"K . . . K . . . Katharina."

"Katharina, we're going to help you, don't be scared. We will take you into the building and get you cleaned up. We can phone for the police and ambulance from in there."

She struggled against him, and with a burst of energy she squealed, "No, no. No police, no ambulance!"

"OK, pet. OK. But you must let us help you. Come on, hold on to me and we'll get you inside."

Colin opened the steel gates again, and they went in the side door. He entered the alarm code, and they slowly went up to the hallway and into the kitchen. They carefully sat Katharina down at the table and took a good look at her. There was a gash on her brow and her face was covered with the congealed blood that had run down from it. Her face was badly bruised, and her left cheek seemed to be very swollen. She was also

holding her chest where her T-shirt was ripped. Colin filled the kettle and switched it on. Then he got a bowl from a cupboard, and took the first aid box down from the wall. When the kettle boiled, he made her a cup of coffee and put four spoonfuls of sugar in it. She took it and started to sip it, painfully. He poured the rest of the water into the bowl, and with cotton wool and disinfectant from the first aid box, he started to clean her face, very gently.

“Now, what happened to you, pet,” he asked her.

The sweet coffee was making her feel better, and she said, “Bad men in car. They grab Katharina in town and bring her here. They hit her. She jump from car and they run off from police.”

“We must phone the police,” John said, “they could still catch them.”

“No, no. No police, NO!” she shouted. “The men, they want information from Katharina, but she not have it. They gone now – they not bother her again.”

John noticed her looking at him very closely, squinting with half-shut eyes.

“Maybe you have concussion. Are you having trouble seeing me?”

“Bad men take Katharina’s glasses and break them in pieces. She not see well without them. Very bad eyes. You help her get home, please?”

“I think we should take you to hospital,” John said. “You could be badly injured.”

“No, no. No hospital. Hospital will tell police. Police want to know what happened. No, no, please.”

Colin had finished cleaning her face, and he put a dressing on the wound. Luckily, she still had her canvas bag which she always carried right over her shoulder as you could never be too careful, even in Vienna. The bag was now scuffed and dirty, and the strap had broken. Colin asked if he could check inside her bag, and she said yes. He took out her purse and checked it was still intact. Thankfully her keys were still there.

“Now, how do we get you home, pet? Where do you live?” asked John.

She told him the address, but he was none the wiser. She told him that if they could go into the city centre to the Café Mozart, she would give them directions from there by memory, as she wouldn’t be able to see where they were anyway.

They locked up the building again, and helped her out to the car. She felt safe with these two lovely guys, *and* she felt very lucky. They reached the centre of town in fifteen minutes, and then she directed them to her apartment. They took her right up to her door, and took her right inside, making sure that she was safe.

John said, “Now, do you have a good friend, or maybe relations that you can phone to come over and help you?”

“Yes. A friend will come. Thank you.”

“OK, if you’re sure you will be all right, we’ll go now. You are very lucky we were in that building tonight. You could have been lying there all night as no one comes round there at night.”

“Katharina, she is very, very grateful to you both. You are both lovely guys. Thank you so very, very much,” and she gave them both a kiss on the cheek. They said their goodbyes, and she closed and locked her door, went through to her bedroom, flopped down on the bed and fell fast asleep.

“You’ll never get a woman as nice as that in Sunderland,” John fired quickly at Colin as they drove off.

“Or in Newcastle,” Colin quickly replied, “they’re *all* dogs there!”

The following morning brought with it its own problems for Katharina: an aching forehead; a severely bruised and aching face; unbearable pain in her chest when she breathed; an almost paralysed right hand from when she hit the man in his nether regions, and on top of all that, everything blurred resulting in a pounding headache. *This is not good*, she thought, *not good at all, but at least I am still alive*. She hoped it was too early to have caused any harm to her baby.

She very slowly eased herself off the bed onto all-fours on the floor and crawled slowly over to her shelf unit. Gingerly, pulling herself up on it and letting out a little yelp, she fumbled for her 'little girly' glasses case and grabbed it. She couldn't use her right hand, but carefully with her left hand she opened it and took out the glasses. Very, very carefully, she put them on. There was no immediate noticeable difference, and then she realised that things were slightly clearer. *They'll do for now*, she thought.

She had to phone Johanna, and she crawled slowly through to the living room, feeling her way towards the telephone. She saw a blurred red light blinking on and off, then realised it was the tiny red light on the answering machine telling her that she had messages. She found the 'play' button, and then pressed it. There were three messages from an increasingly irate Johanna, imploring her to call her back as soon as she got them. She dialled the number and her friend answered.

"Jo, it's Kat."

"Oh, so you're speaking to me! You stood me up, you little beast. Who was he? Obviously better company than me. So what do you want now?"

Katharina could hardly form the words when she spoke.

"Jo, something terrible has happened. I've been badly hurt and I'm in a bit of a mess. Can you come round please? Now?"

"Oh Kat, you sound awful. Stay right there. I'll be round in ten minutes."

When Johanna arrived she was absolutely appalled. She started to cry while she cradled Katharina in her arms and cuddled and kissed her.

"Ouch . . . that hurt!" Katharina yelped as Johanna pulled her towards her.

They sat down holding hands, and Katharina gave her the full story.

"You poor, poor thing," Johanna said, "I'm so sorry for being angry with you on the phone. We must get you checked out as soon as possible. I will phone for a taxi and we'll go straight to the hospital right now. We can just tell them you had a bad fall if you don't want them to know the truth. Now, I will make you something soft to eat, and sweet coffee, but first you need a shower. I will gently wash you down. And look – you have broken a front tooth also. Oh, my poor, poor Kat." Then she started to cry again.

Johanna washed Katharina in the shower, and she was horrified at the bruises on her body. Then she dried her gently and carefully dressed her. They sat down at the table and Katharina carefully ate a boiled egg and some bread and butter.

Johanna phoned for a taxi, and then she said, "I'm phoning your Aunt Petra and Uncle Josef. They really have to know about this. You don't need to tell them the truth. Do they know you're pregnant yet?"

"No."

"Well, we can do it all at once. The one thing will detract from the other!"
Johanna's logic prevailed!

When the taxi arrived, they set off for the General Hospital. Josef said on the phone that they would also make their way there.

Katharina was taken immediately to casualty, and Johanna waited in the foyer. Petra and Josef arrived soon afterwards and sat down beside her. Johanna told them that Katharina had been out walking in a hilly area and had fallen down a rocky ridge. She said she had smashed her glasses too, and now she couldn't see with her old ones.

"Oh, the silly, silly girl," Petra said angrily. "Why did she do that? Why does she have to go walking in dangerous areas on her own?"

Thinking fast on her feet, Johanna continued. "She's had a lot on her mind lately what with her Papa and the baby."

"WHAT!" Aunt Petra exploded!

"Oh! You didn't know, did you? Katharina's pregnant. It's Dave's – her boyfriend from the radio ship." Johanna could never keep a secret.

Aunt Petra stood up, and was pacing back and forward like a caged lion.

"And where is this Dave now? Has he been told?" she demanded, while walking around.

"Nobody knows where he is. He had to flee the ship and the country when the station got into financial trouble. Kat is hoping he will contact her."

"This just gets better and better," Petra said sarcastically. "She's not safe to be let out on her own. I will control her from now on!"

Taken aback, Johanna said, "Petra, she's a twenty-year-old woman!"

"No," Petra stormed in reply, stamping her foot, "more like a ten-year-old girl in a twenty-year-old's body."

They sat for another hour, drinking coffee from the vending machine while Petra punctuated each mouthful with words such as, 'disgrace'; 'stupid'; 'careless'; 'silly'. Johanna went outside two or three times for a cigarette. Then a door opened and a nurse guided Katharina over to them. Her right hand was strapped up and her arm was in a sling. They both sat down. Johanna was the first to speak.

"Oh Kat, how are you? Is it serious?"

The nurse turned to Johanna and said, "Katharina has told me it's OK to tell you that she is definitely pregnant – and there is no problem."

Johanna turned to give Katharina a hug.

"Ouch," she yelped, "careful, Jo."

The nurse continued. "She has severe bruising to her face and a laceration on her forehead. She has severely bruised ribs, and I suspect one or two of them may be cracked, but they will heal in their own time. She had dislocated a bone in her right hand and sprained her wrist. We have re-located the bone and the hand must remain strapped up for two weeks. She may be able to remove the sling in one week. Now, with regard to her vision, we have had our eye specialist check her out and she has high myopia, in her case an inherited condition. That means she is extremely short-sighted. She says she lost her glasses in the fall, and our doctor suggests that she sees an optician right away to be fitted with new spectacles. She is in danger of falling again if she doesn't, and someone will have to stay beside her at all times until this is done. I have given her some pain killers to take as required."

Petra spoke up. "I am her aunt, and this is her uncle. We will take her now to the family optician and get this sorted out."

Katharina thanked the nurse, and they said their goodbyes and left. Katharina said she would phone Johanna later on, and she gave her a little kiss and said goodbye.

Petra took Katharina by the arm and led her out to the car park. “You and I are going to have a little talk, my girl,” Petra snapped. “You obviously need looking after. Honestly! Pregnant! Half killed! Half blind! You are a danger to yourself! You are going completely off the rails, girl!” Of course, Aunt Petra was perfect, and frowned upon anyone else who wasn’t. *Poor Uncle Josef*, Katharina thought!

They drove off, and arrived at Mr Bauer, the optician, ten minutes later. He had been the family optician since her mother and father had got married. He was now approaching retirement age but still kept working, and was training his son Rupert to take over the business. Rupert was almost twenty-one, and was studying for his optical qualifications while working part time in the shop. As they entered the shop, a young receptionist greeted them.

“Hello, how may I help you?” she said, very pleasantly, with a friendly smile.

Petra took control. “My niece here urgently needs an eye test. Is Mr Bauer available?”

Before she could answer, Mr Bauer emerged from an alcove behind her.

“Petra, my sweet, how nice to see you. And Josef too. How are you both?”

“Oh we are fine, very well thank you. It’s not us that we are here to see you about. It’s Katharina. She is in desperate need of new glasses. Can you see her now?”

Mr Bauer stood back and looked Katharina up and down.

“Well, well, well! Katharina! How long is it since I saw you? It must be all of ten years. My goodness, you are a young woman now. But what on earth have you been up to.”

“I had a bad fall, and I broke my glasses,” she said.

Mr Bauer looked at her with a pleasant smile. “I think you had better come through to the consulting room and let me take a good look at you. Petra and Josef please take a seat and Natalie will make you some coffee.”

Through in the consulting room, he sat Katharina down and went into a filing cabinet. He pulled out a file and opened it.

“Aha! Here we are. I still have your file here from all those years ago. Hmm . . . you had a very high degree of myopia and I was worried in case you had inherited your mother’s progressive myopia, you know, short-sightedness. We shall see, we shall see.”

He studied the file closely, and after he had done the routine inspections, he sat her in front of the chart.

“Now, Katharina, let’s start at the very beginning. Tell me please, the furthest you can read down the chart.”

“I can’t even see the first line.”

“You mean the large ‘E’ on its own?”

“Yes. The whole chart is just a sort of big white fuzzy oval thing, with some dark areas on it.”

Mr Bauer turned to Katharina and said, “My dear, I think we are in for a long journey!”

After they had completed the test, he sat down beside her and looked at her with a

serious expression. She was actually starting to get quite worried when he didn't speak. Eventually he spoke.

"Now, we have some bad news and some good news. We shall get the bad news over with first. Katharina, I can most definitely say that you have inherited the same condition that your dear mother suffered from, and that is progressive myopia. It means that you have deteriorated a lot since I last saw you, and you will get progressively worse and will need regular increases in your prescription. It may stabilise in your late twenties - I hope so.

"The good news is that I am going to prescribe you spectacles much stronger than your last ones, so you will notice a big difference even to them. Now, if you go back through to the shop, Natalie will help you choose frames. I can have them ready later today, and if you prefer, I can have my son Rupert bring them to your house and fit them, as you would not be able to come to the shop without assistance. I will also want to see you again in six months."

Katharina went through to the shop, and looked at the selection of frames on display, but she could barely see what she was looking at. She chose a modern, trendy style, and she settled on them. Arrangements were made for Rupert to come to the apartment with them on his way home at about five o'clock.

Petra and Josef took Katharina back to the apartment, and Petra escorted her up to the door to make sure she didn't fall down the stairs or bump into anything.

"Now, I can stay with you if you like," she said.

"No, no, Aunt Petra, I will be fine until Rupert arrives. Thank you."

After Petra left, Katharina fumbled about the kitchen and made herself a cheese sandwich and some coffee. She took her lunch through to the living room and switched the radio on. She tuned it to her favourite ORF station which played traditional popular music. When she finished her lunch, she sat back to enjoy the music, and fell asleep.

At five to five, the doorbell rang, waking her with a start. Sitting up in that half state of consciousness, not really knowing where she was, it suddenly dawned on her – Rupert Bauer. She opened the door on the safety chain, and there stood a fresh-faced young man with slightly tousled hair, in a dark suit with an immaculate white shirt and dark blue tie. He was carrying a brief case. Her heart leapt. She was starting to think about the immaculate dressed man in the Mercedes the day before.

"Miss Bloch? Miss Katharina Bloch?" he enquired.

"Who is it?" she asked. She couldn't make out his features.

"I am Rupert Bauer, from my father's optician shop. You are expecting me?"

"Oh, yes." She unlocked the chain. "Come in, come in. Sorry about that, you can't be too careful." He seemed a bit flustered as she beckoned him in.

"Now, Mr Bauer, would you like a coffee?" she asked.

"Would you like me to fit the spectacles first, then you can try them out while making coffee? And please call me Rupert."

"Oh, right, shall I just sit down here?" she asked awkwardly.

"Yes, that's fine," he said, opening his briefcase and taking out a glasses case. He opened it, took out her new glasses, and very carefully slid them onto her face. He slipped his fingers under some hair that was trapped beneath one of the legs and gently

eased it out. She caught a whiff of very pleasant aftershave as he came close to her. *I don't think he's even started shaving yet*, she thought as she could clearly see his reddish pink complexion.

"Now, how do they feel? Look around and tell me what you see," he said softly.

"Wow! Everything is so clear – even better than with my old ones. But the room seems strange when I look around – the walls are curved – it's weird!"

He smiled. "As I think my father told you, they are a much stronger prescription. Only look through the centre of the lenses, and turn your head if you want to look around. You will soon get used to that. Now, let me check the fitting."

He came up very close to her, and felt around her ears, lifting the glasses up and down. She felt a little stirring inside her; a little excitement – she hadn't felt this since she was with Dave. This boy was really very nice. *Behave yourself girl*, she scolded herself. *This is a professional visit. And you still have a boyfriend – somewhere!*

"I just want to make a little adjustment," Rupert said, as he carefully took the glasses off her, plunging her into a blur. She could just about see what he was doing and he removed a piece of equipment from his case. It was a little hot air gun a bit like a hair dryer which he plugged into the wall socket. He switched it on, and applied hot air to the legs of the glasses, bending them a little, giving them more heat than bending them again.

He made sure they were cool, then said, "Right, that should do it," as he carefully slipped them back onto her, his hands lingering just a little bit longer on her ears than was necessary. *Was this a signal?* she thought. *Whoa there girl, control yourself. What on earth are you thinking of. This is just a nice young professional man doing his job.* She fought back the urges she was feeling.

"How are they now," he asked.

"Fine. Very good. Now, can I make you that coffee and we shall see if they work OK?"

She went through to the kitchen, and when she returned with the tray he was sitting on the sofa. She poured his coffee, and wondered what to say.

"So you are studying to take over the business?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, that's right. I have three more years to do before I get my qualification. It is very hard work, but I enjoy it, and it is especially worthwhile when you know you are helping people."

He then went into all the technicalities of his courses, and described in intricate detail much of the medical aspect of the job. It was too complicated for Katharina, and she felt her mind drifting off as he droned on and on.

Suddenly, she said, "What do you do for fun, Rupert?"

"Oh, I have many interests. Firstly, I collect manhole covers. Well, not actually the covers themselves – that would be silly – and dangerous as it would leave a hole in the pavement!" He laughed, and she giggled along with him. "No, what I do is photograph them. I also do rubbings of them – but not ones on roads – that would be dangerous. I would get run over!" He laughed again. *This is bizarre*, she thought.

"That is a very unusual hobby," she said, smiling.

"Oh, that's not all," he continued. "I also collect sand. I have dozens of little plastic tubes with sand from beaches all over the world. I have Waikiki Beach sand, Bondi Beach sand, Durban Beach sand and much more. People bring me sand back from their holidays, and I get my own sand when we go to the sea. The last sand I got was

from Scheveningen beach in Holland. I am thinking of expanding the collection to include stones now. Not just beach stones, but also stones from mountains, or perhaps from a castle rock, or from a river bed. I already have my first stone from the Danube.”

Katharina didn't know if she was supposed to be impressed, amused, sympathetic or what. She was certainly mesmerised by this young man.

“Do you have any other interests,” she asked, fascinated.

“Well, there's my car. I love my car. It's a Volkswagen Golf GTI, not very new, but five years old. It's in very good condition though, and I clean and polish it every weekend, then take it for a run in the mountains.”

“With your girlfriend?” Katharina was getting curious now.

“No, just myself. I don't have a girlfriend.”

“Do you go to the cinema, or dancing?” she probed.

“Oh yes. The last film I saw was at a lecture all about intra-ocular lens replacement in the eye – very interesting. And dancing, yes. I do dance.”

This was more interesting to Katharina now. “Where do you go dancing, Rupert? Clubs? What kind of music do you like? Disco? Soul? R & B?”

“Mostly hotels, you know, for the tourists. I'm a member of a traditional Tyrolean dance group, you know, lederhosen, accordions and all that stuff. It's great fun and it earns me a bit of cash. You should come to watch sometime.”

“Are you asking me out on a date?” Katharina got straight to the point.

A very flustered Rupert replied hastily, “Oh dear, no. I'm sorry if I appear too forward. Please forgive me. Oh, this is terrible, I'm so embarrassed. This is very unprofessional of me. Please accept my apology, that is not how I intended it to sound,” and he turned a deep shade of beetroot.

“Don't worry about it, I'm very flattered. Let's start again. Now, Rupert, will you ask me out on a date? Please?”

He stuttered, “Emm, umm, I'm not sure, err, I'm not good at this sort of thing. I . . . umm . . . wouldn't know what to do. You wouldn't want to go out with me, I'm sure. I wouldn't know how to ask anyone that.”

Katharina was beginning to enjoy this. She liked being the temptress.

“OK, what you do first of all is ask me to go out with you. Then I say 'yes', and we discuss where we're going to go. It's really quite easy.”

Still bright red, Rupert tentatively asked, “Let's just say if I was to ask you out, would you actually say 'yes'?”

Katharina gave him her best smile. “Try it!” she said.

Rupert's voice was going all rough now with nerves. He cleared his throat and said, “Miss Bloch, I . . . umm . . . oh, I mean Katharina . . . would you like to go out with me?”

“Yes,” she replied. “There, that wasn't difficult, was it?”

“No, no, no. I mean yes. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. I don't know what I would have done if you had said 'no'. Probably ran straight out the door!”

“Well I didn't. Now we need to discuss where we are going to go.”

He thought for a minute. “I don't know anywhere to go. Wait a minute, it is my twenty-first birthday next Saturday, and my parents are taking me out for a meal. Would you like to come?”

“Yes. I'd love to.”

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You mean that? You're not just saying it to be kind?"

"Of course not. I'd really like to come."

"Really? Oh dear, here we go again! I didn't mean that."

"Rupert, the answer is yes, yes, YES!"

"Oh, thank goodness for that," he said with a huge sigh of relief, "that's settled then. I'll pick you up here at seven o'clock if that's OK, and if you change your mind I'll understand perfectly. Now, getting back to business, it is essential that you get a spare pair of glasses and carry them with you at all times. Come into the shop on Monday and choose the frames - the second pair is usually free. If I don't see you then, I'll see you on Saturday."

Katharina showed him to the door, and he shook her hand. She reached up, pulled him towards her by the lapel and gave him a little kiss on the cheek. Totally flustered, he turned and walked right into the edge of the open door without seeing it. He turned back, rubbing his nose, eye and cheek. Katharina couldn't resist saying, "I think you should make an appointment for an eye test!"

He laughed, spluttered, bumbled about and left. Two minutes later, the doorbell rang. It was Rupert. "Silly old me, I forgot my briefcase," he said, nervously.

Katharina lifted it and handed it to him. They said goodbye again, and she closed the door. After five minutes, the doorbell rang again. It was Rupert. "I'm very stupid, now I've forgotten my hot air gun!"

"I think you just can't wait until Saturday to see me again," Katharina teased.

This completely flustered him and he couldn't get out of the door quick enough, trapping his tie in it in his haste. She had to open it again to release him.

Katharina sat down in the living room and looked around. She laughed out loud. She was very pleased with the evening's results in more ways than one. Picking up the phone, she dialled Johanna for a long chat.

CHAPTER 6

>>FAST FORWARD>>

The Republica track was nearing its end, and Dave was still worried about the intruder. When he was five years old he had been savaged by a moth. It had affected him for life, and now he had a healthy suspicion of everything that flew. Moths; butterflies; daddy-long-legs; even birds, although they weren't too bad as long as they kept to their rightful place in the sky. The other lot couldn't be trusted, and more often than not, would delight in dive-bombing you or try like mad to get inside your ear!

He had also taken a couple of phone calls during the last track, with two dedications to read out. Normally the phone was much busier on the show, so the heat must be affecting people's ability to lift the handset and dial. Anyway, the track was fading out, time to speak.

"That's Republica there, and 'Ready to Go', and that's one of these tracks that's just too good – you know what I mean? Anyway, welcome along to the show if you've just joined us, we're just over half way through and we're well into the wee small hours on a long, hot summer's night. We've been trying to get rid of a beast, for want of a better word, which is somewhere in the studio and it can't be found now. It has gone into hiding and we don't even know what it is, but it came in the window when we had the lights on, and sort of dive-bombed me, and then I took a swipe at it and it disappeared somewhere under the desk, never to be seen again. I hope it blooming well stays there, I really do."

He started the next track and did a talk-up over the intro, "This one goes out to Fiona in Banchory, and Alison in Hazlehead, Aberdeen – good to see we're reaching the city tonight. It's REM and 'Green Grow the Rushes' – I wish the beast would get back into the darned rushes!"

This is good, Dave thought, I'm playing tracks now that don't remind me of Katharina . . . THEN WHY THE HELL AM I STILL THINKING ABOUT HER? Think of something else – someone else – ANYONE ELSE, you cretin!

He thought of Tammy. He thought of one particular night with Tammy – one very special night with Tammy.

<<REWIND<<

He had been in Strathdee for four weeks when it happened. He always did the midnight to one-thirty slot on-air, and he knew Tammy would be listening – she was his biggest fan. She would have closed the Truck Stop for the night at about eleven, and she would be cleaning up and baking for the following day while listening to the show. Just

after one o'clock, she got into the habit of phoning Dave at the studio and inviting him to the café for bacon rolls and coffee. Then he would maybe help her with anything that needed doing, like changing a light bulb or clearing a blocked sink. Afterwards, they would just sit back and talk about everything and anything, while the kids slept in the mobile home behind the café.

On this one particular night, he got the call as usual, told her to have the bacon rolls ready at quarter to two, and played her a song on the show. When he had ended the show, he handed over the studio to Clive Johnson, an insomniac who did the one thirty to six o'clock slot every morning. Clive would then go home and work on his farm. He never seemed to sleep!

Dave climbed into the Land Rover, started it up, and headed down to the village and Tammy's Truck Stop. It took fifteen minutes to get there, and as he pulled onto the forecourt he always thought it was like a fairy-tale location. The building had a sort of Swiss chalet style to it, and it nestled right on the edge of a pine forest with the closest trees towering above it and framing it in a beautiful setting. The lights shining through the windows always had a welcoming look, and when he opened the door, the smell of bacon was even more welcoming. But even more welcoming than that was Tammy. She always came up to him and gave him a big welcoming kiss and a hug, and then they would sit at a table and enjoy the bacon rolls and coffee.

She was difficult to put an age on. Dave thought about thirty-two, give or take a year or two. She was a big girl, not obese, but certainly plump – pleasantly plump, and would be described in the local Doric dialect as a 'sauncy quine'. One thing she certainly liked doing was showing off her cleavage, and tonight was no exception. She sat opposite Dave at the table, and her very low neckline showed a deep ravine leading to . . . *phew!* Dave quickly turned his eyes away, But Tammy just sat there, cradling her coffee mug in her hands and leaning towards him as she spoke, her voluptuous body speaking much more than her mouth. Just as he was almost re-gaining control, she leaned over even closer, until her fringe was brushing against his brow. He could smell a mixture of baking and body odour coming from her. It wasn't an unpleasant smell. It was highly attractive in an animal sort of way. He felt his guard slipping again. Tammy suddenly said, softly, "How long have we been friends now Dave? Four weeks?"

"Yes, that's about it," Dave replied.

Tammy continued, "Well, I think we're really good friends and I value that, and I really, really like you a lot. Now, I'm going to ask you a big, big favour, and I will totally understand if the answer is no, but I feel I know you well enough to ask you anyway, and I hope you feel you know me well enough to say yes."

Dave was getting curious. "OK, what is it?"

Then Tammy dropped the bombshell. She leaned even closer and whispered, "I don't mess about when I know what I want. Will you stay tonight?"

Confused and flustered, Dave said, "What? You mean . . . stay? As in not go home? You mean . . . sleep here . . . with you?"

After a minute's silence, Tammy spoke again, softly in his ear, "Dave, I want you tonight. I've wanted you since I met you."

Dave started to get alarmed. "Do you know what you're saying? I'm sorry. I can't get bogged down with anything like that just now. No, no, no – you're crazy – NO!"

Tammy wasn't to be put off, "Dave, I'm not asking you to get involved or take

any responsibilities. It's just a bit of fun – and company. I already have three kids. Look at little Sarah, she's Archie's daughter, and the twins were kindly supplied by the vending machine repair man. We still joke about his engineering abilities – the machine still sometimes gives out two cans instead of one! Neither of them give me any support for the kids – I get my child support benefit for them, although Archie secretly does like to put little Sarah on his knee and tell her stories about the animals in the forest. Dave, I have three of the most beautiful kids anyone could be blessed with and I love them more than anything. Kids are an investment, Dave. They give you endless pleasure when they are growing up, and when they are older, they bring in the money and look after you if you're lucky."

By now she had walked round to his chair and was standing behind him, fondling his hair. She leaned down and put her lips close to his ear, whispering, "What do you say?"

That smell was so overpowering – it was pure animal magnetism. Her lips were right beside him. Her warm, inviting body was right beside him. She was oozing attraction from every pore, and he just couldn't resist any more. She had laid her cards on the table. She wanted his services, and he was too much of a gentleman to refuse. He turned to her and they looked each other in the eyes. Very slowly, their lips touched, ever so gently two or three times. They looked at each other and smiled. She really was a very beautiful woman in her own way. She also had a rare inner beauty which shone through. They kissed again, this time passionately, and held each other close – very close. Dave felt himself sink into her ample breasts as his fingers explored the softness of her waist, then her hips and thighs. He had never been with a woman like this before, and he found it erotically exhilarating. He was hooked.

Tammy switched the café lights off, took his hand and led him through to a back storeroom where she had some cushions on the floor. She stood there, slowly unbuttoning her blouse and letting it fall to the floor. Dave was mesmerized as she stood facing him in her bra, her breasts just bursting to get out of it. She was a big girl. She reached out to him and pulled his polo shirt up over his head. Then she turned her back for him to unfasten her bra. He undid the clip, and let it slide from her shoulders onto the floor, at the same time cuddling her from behind, his bare chest against her bare back and his hands gently cupping her ample, beautiful breasts. He could feel her nipples standing erect as he kissed her on the neck. She turned around, her face lit up like a sunrise, and a deep, passionate kiss followed. *God, she really is beautiful*, he thought, *and all woman!* She led him over to the cushions and she lay down on her back, beckoning him towards her.

As he lay down beside her, she spoke. "Come here, Dave. Closer. Closer. There – isn't that just beautiful? I'm yours now, Dave. You can do what you want." He did. Dave was in seventh heaven.

Twenty minutes later, as he lay there, he started to realise just how bizarre this whole situation really was. He could hear the buzz of a freezer in the background and the intermittent squawk of some form of unidentifiable wildlife outside. *As long as it stays outside*, he thought, *we've got enough wildlife of our own in here!*

Tammy got up, put her blouse on without buttoning it, and went through to the kitchen. Dave could hear her filling the kettle. "I think a nice cup of tea would go down well," she shouted through.

“Have you got any scones?” he shouted back. He just thought that tea and scones would complete the surrealism of the whole episode.

“Yes, freshly baked. Would you like jam on them?”

“Ooh, not half,” he replied, enthusiastically.

After a few minutes, she brought a tray through to the storeroom with the tea and scones, put it on the floor, and sat down next to him on the cushions.

“Well, big boy, I think that session was a great success,” she said, quite matter-of-factly.

Alarmed, he said, “For God’s sake, don’t be so mercenary!”

She laughed, throwing her head back, “I’m only joking, lover, it’s been a long time and you were just in the right place at the right time, so to speak!”

“You make me sound like a stud bull or something,” Dave snorted.

“If the cap fits,” she responded.

They sat close together eating their scones and drinking their tea. Every little while, Tammy ran her fingers through Dave’s hair as they spoke, and he couldn’t help wondering if this was going to be the start of something regular. *The worrying thing is*, he thought, *I wouldn’t mind if it was!*

Testing the water, he ventured, “Do you still, umm . . . you know . . . get together with Archie?”

“Oh, goodness me, no,” she replied indignantly. “He’s served his purpose, *and* he knows it! Don’t get me wrong though, he’s a very good friend and he loves his little girl, but he’s never loved me – really loved me.”

“What about his wife?” Dave ventured further. “Does she know?”

“Och, yes, she’s not daft. He’s a great dad to his own kids and he has a heart of gold, but he’s got this weakness you see – women! She knows what he gets up to. You can’t hide anything in this place, try as you might. She just accepts it as she knows he would never leave her. She just says, ‘well, at least he’s not an alcoholic or a junkie!’, and then she just gets on with it. Right now he’s getting it on with the new barmaid at the Station Hotel. I don’t know what they see in him. It’s just pure animal lust! To look at him, you’d think he never washes, but he does – and he looks just the same afterwards! He’s been taking Sheena, the new barmaid, in the truck with him when he’s been delivering machines to some of the really remote spots, and he’s got a bed all fitted in the cab. It’s quite a little home from home.”

“What about the vending machine repair man?” asked Dave.

“Oh, that was just a one-off. He’s moved away now to somewhere down south. He was OK, but a bit of a ‘Jack the lad’. He’s probably got bairns scattered all over the country! But his twins are lovely lads. Jamie and Robert. They’ll be seven next month.”

Dave had to know about the ‘husband’. “Do you ever see your husband now?”

“No,” Tammy frowned, “I’ve given up on him now. He’s not my real husband anyway. He used to call himself my common law husband, but he forfeited that right long ago. If he’s not working on the oil rig, he’s shacking up with his Norwegian piece in Stavanger, and good luck to him. She must be even stupider than me!”

Right, Dave thought, *you’re being stupid yourself, mate, but here goes*. “Do you think, err . . . that we, umm . . . might do this again sometime?”

Tammy came over all emotional. “Oh, Dave, you mean you would really like to? Don’t get me wrong, you’re a lovely lad and I must be ten years older than you, and there

is no way that I'd ever consider getting married or anything like that, but just say that we did, umm . . . 'see' each other again like this, maybe even regularly, it would definitely need to be on a 'no strings attached' basis. You know, just a bit of fun. A girl does get lonely sometimes. Could you handle that?"

"I'd certainly give it a good try," he said, his heart pounding. "You know, Tammy, I think you really are a beautiful woman, *and* you have a wonderful personality. I mean, you're just a joy to be with. *And* a guy gets lonely too sometimes."

She started to get all coy now. "Och, get away with you. I'm not beautiful. I'm fat, frumpy, and I can be a right bitch!"

"Now, let's just get this sorted," Dave continued, "you're not fat. You *are* a big girl, but you're well proportioned, *and* you've got a lot of assets. And as for the frumpy bit, maybe you are in a cardigan, or an overall, but I've seen the real you in the flesh, and frumpy doesn't come into it. *And* I haven't seen any sign of a bitch yet."

"Oh Dave, you just say the most wonderful things. You don't know how good it feels to know someone thinks like that about me," and she put her arms around him and kissed him. He returned the kiss, and they stayed there, locked in each other's arms, until he made a move to get up.

"I think I should really get going now," he said.

She put on a 'hurt little girl' look and said, "Aw, that's a shame. Do you really 'want' to go, or do you just 'have' to?"

"Well, I suppose I can do what I want. I'm not on-air again until the afternoon. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying come with me through to my mobile home. I have a lovely double bed in there with complete privacy, and we can just see how it goes."

Dave didn't take much persuading. "OK, I suppose it beats my one-wheeled caravan!"

Tammy gripped his arm, and said, "There's just one more thing. Go and put your Land Rover round the back beside the trailer. There's no point in just feeding the folks round here gossip on a plate – they'll find out for themselves soon enough."

Brrrrrring . . . the alarm clock was enough to waken the dead.

"What time is it?" groaned Dave.

"Nine o'clock," answered Tammy. "Come on, time to get up and go. I've got to open this place at ten. It's a good job it's a Sunday, or we'd have been up at five."

They got up and she made him some toast and coffee. They sat together at a table, neither of them quite believing that the previous night had in fact happened.

"You know Frank wants to buy this place, don't you?" asked Tammy.

"Yes. He did say something about it."

"Well, he's definitely going to buy it and I'm OK with that. I've made a mess of it business-wise. I'm a great cook and a good hostess, but when it comes to figures, the only figure I can look after is my own, and that's getting harder by the minute! He's going to keep me on to run it, which is good, and I can still stay in the mobile home, but I won't have the responsibilities of doing the books and paying the taxes. I should end up quite well-off and maybe I might even be able to buy a wee house. That would be great."

Dave genuinely was happy for her. "If you're pleased with that, then I'm pleased

for you,” he said.

Tammy continued. “You know, Frank wants to change the place around a bit. He’s going to refurbish it all and style it on a 1960s American burger joint. He’s going to tar the forecourt and mark out parking bays, get new neon signs and put in a super duper sound system playing all fifties and sixties stuff. He’s even talking about getting some local bands to play live, and even maybe getting some big stars to make an appearance in conjunction with the radio station. You know we get quite a few American oil men driving out here from the city at night for one of my special home made Aberdeen Angus burgers, well, he wants to cash in on that and get more of them to come – make them feel like they’re back home.”

“I think that’s a great idea, Tammy, and knowing Frank as I do, he’ll make it happen.”

“Yeah, so do I,” she said. “Right, my loon, time you got up that road to your one-legged caravan! I’ll phone you on the show tonight to see if you’ve forgotten about your Tammy.”

He got the Land Rover out from its hiding place, and set off through the village, then up the narrow road to Mains of Clarty. As he approached the farmyard, he could see Frank standing talking to someone outside the studio door. He waved over to Dave to stop, and walked over to him. Dave opened his window, and Frank spoke.

“Well, how did it go in the lovely Tammy’s boudoir last night? You lucky lad!”

Flabbergasted, Dave spluttered out, “How did you know where I was?”

“Oh, the night has a thousand eyes, lad, the night has a thousand eyes!”

What a place, he thought; you couldn’t hide anything from anybody here!

“You’ll be needing a bit more sleep after last night, then? You better get up to your caravan before you’re back on-air.”

CHAPTER 7

>>FAST FORWARD>>

This time Dave really was going to have to do something about the intruder, sabre-toothed moth or not, he was bigger than it was, and it wasn't going to get the better of him. *Oops! Record finished – time to speak.*

“Wow! – Just pardon me a minute while I pick the cones up from the monitors off the floor, and pop them back in the speakers! Nine minutes forty-eight seconds there of The Who, and a live version of ‘Won’t Get Fooled Again’, and the reason I wanted to play that one was that it would give me ten minutes to do some big game hunting here and try to track down this beast. Well, things have happened and events have moved on. I think the noise we heard outside earlier was actually Mebo the studio cat, because he’s just popped in through the window, yes, Mebo the moggie has just popped in through the window and he took one look at our visitor, launched a full-scale attack at it, and it disappeared out of the window at roughly two hundred miles an hour. So, thanks to the studio cat there, he’s definitely earning his keep. We’ll play the next track for him. And don’t forget that number if you want to give me a call for a dedication to your loved one, or your dog, or cat, or even your budgie – we’ll take them all – it’s 01339 450450.”

Dave fired a jingle that name-checked the station over the thundering roar of a jumbo jet taking off. He loved to segue the jet’s engines over the intro to the next track, and he did it this time to a track from Heart, called ‘Nobody Home’, one of his and Katharina’s favourites. While the intro was playing with the jumbo thundering over it, he talked it up, “And we can relax now, with this great track from Heart.” Then Ann Wilson’s golden voice came over the monitors.

And relax he did, with his feet up on the desk, just letting the beautiful track flow through his mind. Just to complete the moment, the cat leapt up onto his lap, stretched its front paws right up his chest, put them round his neck and rubbed its cheeks against his, purring like mad. Dave loved this cat – they were soul mates.

The phone rang again and he answered it. “Hello, Strathdee FM, Dave Buckingham here. Speak to me.”

Silence at the other end, and then he thought he heard a faint voice, then . . . nothing.

Folk fooling about, he thought, have they got nothing better to do?

After a few minutes, it rang again and he answered it. Still no one there. Of course, they would try to phone when he was listening to one of his favourite tracks – that was Sod’s law for you! Now the track was coming to an end, so he decided to go straight into the next one which was Donna Lewis and ‘Without Love’. In a flash of inspiration, he suddenly said over the intro, “This one’s dedicated this morning to a lovely lady called Katharina. I know you won’t hear this, but let’s hope the spirits are working.” Donna’s soft, sexy voice came in with the lyrics which spoke about thinking of each other and giving a sign that you care. *Hell, that’s me thinking of her again, he thought. Right, that’s*

it, I'm definitely taking a week off and going to try to find her. I can't stand this any longer.

<<REWIND<<

Her Saturday date was approaching fast, and Katharina had forgotten that she also had to vacate the apartment by Saturday. It was now Friday and she was panicking. She resorted to her usual plan when she was in a jam – phone Johanna. She asked Johanna if she had any suitcases she could bring round to help her pack up all her stuff. Johanna said she could bring round two really big ones on wheels, so with the two that Katharina had, she thought she would be able to move all her worldly possessions, but to where? That was the next problem. It was a week until she was to start her new job, so she had to find somewhere to stay for a week.

Johanna arrived, and typically, put on the kettle for coffee before starting anything.

“It’s obvious,” she said, “You’ve got to stay with me. Your only other option is Aunt Petra, the wicked witch, and do you really want that?”

“I could always book into a hotel,” Katharina suggested.

“Why? Don’t be daft. You’re staying with me and that’s final.”

They had their coffee, then started packing things up. Half way through the operation, the doorbell rang. It was the wicked witch and her husband. Katharina asked Petra and Josef in.

“You’re lucky,” she said, “You’ve just caught us. We’ve almost finished packing.”

Petra said, “That’s partly what we have come to see you about. You are coming to stay with us for the week, aren’t you?”

“Well . . . actually . . .” Katharina stuttered, “No. I’m going to stay with Jo.”

Petra looked at her indignantly. “Well, I’m disappointed. You would be properly looked after with us, and we would make sure you were ready for your new job. But there’s another reason why we are here. Josef has something to say to you, haven’t you, Josef?”

“Yes, my dear, I have.” He didn’t get to speak very often when she was there. “Can I ask you, Katharina, do these people who you are going to work for know you are pregnant?”

“No, I didn’t have it confirmed when I was offered the job.”

“Well, do you not think that they might decline their offer when they find out? I think they will.”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” she said, sheepishly.

“Well, I have,” Josef continued, “and luckily I have a very good offer for you. Listen to this. I have a very good friend who manages the big hotel next to the conference centre, and he has a very interesting vacancy. He hosts a lot of foreign visitors for conferences, seminars and meetings, and he is responsible for their well-being during their stay. Now, he is an old-fashioned man, and he doesn’t like to advertise vacancies if

he can avoid it. What he does first, is he contacts all his friends and acquaintances to ask if they know of any suitable applicants within their families or friends. That way, he can get a lot of background information and history about the person that he wouldn't get with a complete stranger. Also, if he engages someone from these connections, they feel more obliged not to let him down, and the end result is usually always a success."

Josef stopped for a sip of coffee which Katharina had made for them, and then he continued.

"My friend is looking for a hostess. In actual fact, the full title of the position is Group Coordinator. Ideally, what this gentleman wants is someone who can look after the delegates who are attending the conference centre, from the time they arrive at the hotel until the time they leave. This will include meeting them at the airport or train station, making sure they get checked into the hotel with the minimum of delay, showing them the hotel's facilities, explaining meal times, and then giving them a conducted walking tour of the city centre.

"On their first day, you will escort them to the conference centre, introduce them to the staff, meet them for lunch and answer any questions they may have. You will be required to assist them if needed with any purchases they require, such as postcards, souvenirs and even medication and toiletries. You will arrange any visits they may require to the doctor or dentist. At the end of the day, you will meet them at the centre, escort them back to the hotel for dinner, then over coffee, discuss the evening entertainment available to them, whether it be cinema, theatre, or just maybe a walk and a drink in a bar. What do you think so far?"

"It's a lot to take on," Katharina said. "What about my baby? And my English is not so good."

"I'm coming to that," Josef continued. "At the end of their stay, you will make sure that they have their return transport arrangements made, and you will escort them back to the airport or train station. They must want for nothing. You will be their 'mama'. Now, regarding your English, I have provisionally booked you on a three month 'Conversational English' course. It's a very good course and will teach you all you really need to know. Most of the delegates tend to be British or American, but there are also some Japanese or other Europeans, and most of these speak very good English. Remember, we are dealing with educated professional people here. Regarding your baby, the hotel has an excellent crèche, and also a kindergarten for older children, and as you will be required to live in, there shouldn't be any problem. You will have lots of free time to be with your baby as there are gaps in between the seminars that are held at the centre."

Katharina was slightly overwhelmed.

Josef concluded, "This is a very prestigious position, and the salary reflects this. You will be required to dress immaculately, with well-groomed hair and nails. You will be an ambassadress for Austria, and the guests must leave with only the best memories.

"OK, that's all I really have to say, except that the appointment begins in three weeks. The English course begins in two weeks. You would attend the course, and when possible, you would shadow my friend the hotel manager to learn the job, as he is doing everything at the moment. After three months you would take over completely. You will be given maternity leave when your baby is born. There you are, everything has been thought out and taken care of. Now, Petra has something to say."

That was the longest Katharina had ever seen Petra remain silent.

“Now then, Katharina, I believe you have to be out of here by tomorrow and you have nowhere to stay. It is a condition of you accepting this job that you stay with us for three weeks until you officially move into your work accommodation. That way, we can make sure you don’t get up to anything silly and therefore jeopardise this wonderful opportunity. Do you have any questions?”

Katharina thought for a few seconds. “Yes. As you know, I already have a job which starts in a week as a kitchen maid and general worker in the Hotel Mermaid. The owner will be expecting me.”

Petra put on her patronising look. “Katharina, my dear, as Josef has already said, did you tell this hotel owner that you were pregnant before you accepted the position?”

Katharina replied, “No, Aunt Petra, but I didn’t have it confirmed at that time, so I couldn’t have said for sure.”

“And do you think this person would have still offered you the job if they had known you were going to have a baby, with all the complications that would bring?”

Katharina was defeated. “Maybe not, Aunt Petra. Maybe not.”

“Then I think the right thing for you to do is to phone this Hotel Mermaid and tell them the truth. We must go now, Josef, we have lots of shopping to do. You will phone us first thing in the morning, Katharina, and let us know what you are going to do. I must urge you to seriously consider this offer – it is too good to miss, *and* Josef’s friend at the hotel is holding it open for you before he considers anyone else, so he must know by tomorrow at noon. Come now Josef, stop dilly-dallying, we must go.”

“Yes, dear.”

Katharina saw them out, then came back through to the living room where Johanna was sitting. “Well, what did you make of all that, Jo?” she asked.

“I wish someone would come along and offer me a job just like that. You would be mad not to take it.”

Katharina had an idea. “Jo, do you really mean that? Do you really want a job?”

“Do I want a job? You bet! I’ve got to get something soon – I’m rapidly running out of cash, and my folks won’t give me any more.”

“Then why don’t you take the Hotel Mermaid job? We can go round there today and see the lady – she’s really nice. I think she’d appreciate me telling the truth.”

Johanna agreed. “OK, you’re on. Let’s do it.”

All of Katharina’s father’s things had already been cleared out, so it took her and Johanna just an hour to pack all her own stuff into the four suitcases. Josef was going to pick them up later in the car, and she was keeping an overnight bag in the apartment with just the essentials in it. The two girls then decided to go out for lunch.

“I’m not going to the Café Mozart,” Katharina said forcibly. “Let’s go somewhere small where we can sit indoors.”

She was beginning to feel quite uneasy in town on her own.

After lunch, they made their way to the Hotel Mermaid. The owner was surprised to see Katharina, and genuinely concerned about the bruising that was still visible on her face. She had, by now, discarded the arm sling. The owner was very impressed by Katharina’s honesty, and equally as impressed by Johanna’s experience in the hospitality

industry. So much so that she accepted Katharina's suggestion, and offered Johanna the job there and then, starting in a week.

As they left the hotel and walked down the pavement, Johanna shouted out to the world, "I've got a job!"

Katharina joined in with, "So have I!"

They went round some shops and Katharina chose a new dress for her date. 'Something subtly sexy', as Johanna described it.

"I don't know if he'll even notice, as I'm not a manhole cover or a stone!" Katharina mocked. She also chose what she hoped would be a suitable present for Rupert's birthday.

When they got back to the apartment, Josef was there loading up the cases.

"Tell your friend that I will take the job," she said to him. "Johanna is taking the other job, so it has worked out fine. Thank you so much, Uncle Josef, you are just wonderful," and she took him in her arms and gave him a big kiss.

When Josef left, Johanna asked if she could stay the night. Katharina was dubious.

"Oh, it's our last chance for one more night," she implored. "Please, please, my little pet Kitty-Kat!" and she ruffled Katharina's hair, which she hated.

"Cut that out! You really are impossible!" she scolded Johanna. "OK, if you behave yourself."

Saturday morning dawned, and Katharina looked around the apartment. This was the last day she would ever spend here – her family home. The flat was empty now, except for the large items of furniture which were to be left as the landlord had purchased them.

The girls lounged about all morning, drinking coffee and chatting. Then they went out for lunch.

They returned to the apartment about three o'clock, and got down to the serious business of making Katharina beautiful for her date. Johanna did her hair for her, and helped her to put on some subtle make-up. After she had put the new dress on, she stood back and Johanna looked her up and down, clapped her hands and said, "Perfect! I could fall for you myself!" Then she added one of her famous 'put-down' tailpieces, "Pity about the thick glasses, though. Could you not leave them in your bag and just take them out if you need them?"

Katharina was appalled. "You're joking! I wouldn't even be able to find the bag if I did that. You really know how to make a girl feel good, Jo!"

At seven o'clock the doorbell rang and Katharina answered it. There stood a very awkward and embarrassed Rupert, with a small bunch of flowers in his hand.

Katharina was the first to speak. "Oh Rupert, come in. Happy birthday!" She gave him a little kiss on his cheek. "This is my best friend, Johanna."

She frowned at Johanna as a warning sign to behave. Johanna flashed her big brown eyes at Rupert, wished him a happy birthday, and kissed him on the cheek. Rupert said something unintelligible and turned red. One girl he could barely cope with, two and he was a bumbling wreck.

Johanna then came out with the worst line ever. "Well, Rupert, I hear you and

Katharina have at least one thing in common – she likes The Stones too!”

Rupert looked completely perplexed and shuffled about on his feet. He was wishing right now that he had stayed at home. He quickly handed the flowers to Johanna by mistake, and she said, “Oh Rupert, I didn’t know you cared! Only joking – I think these are for you, Kat.”

“Can you take them home, Jo? There’s nothing here to put them in, and I’ll get them tomorrow. You’re just leaving now, aren’t you?”

She gave Johanna a little shove and a knowing look, then turned to Rupert. “Thank you so much, Rupert, they’re lovely. What a lovely thought.”

Katharina showed Johanna out, and Johanna whispered to her at the door, “He’s dishy. I’d love to get my hands on him for a night!”

“Good night, Jo. See you tomorrow.”

“I’ll want a blow-by-blow account tomorrow!”

After Johanna was gone, Katharina went through to where Rupert was standing and said, “I’ve got a little birthday present for you.” She lifted a little gift-wrapped box off the table and handed it to him. “Happy birthday, Rupert.”

“Oh, thank you,” Rupert said, surprised, “you shouldn’t have, really. Thank you.”

“Open it,” said Katharina, “I hope you like it . . . I mean, them.”

He tore the wrapping paper off, and opened the little hinged box. There, inside, was a beautiful pair of polished pebble cufflinks. His face lit up like a little boy.

“They’re just beautiful. That’s a beautiful gift – thank you very much.”

Katharina stood right in front of him and pointed to her cheek with her index finger. Rupert looked flustered, cleared his throat, went up close to her cheek, drew back again, and finally gave her a very quick peck on the cheek like a timid bird eating a breadcrumb from your hand.

“Put your cufflinks on now.”

“That’s a good idea,” he said, as he took them out of their box. “Then I think we had better go. The table is booked for seven thirty.”

They went down to the street where his car was parked, and he opened the passenger door to let Katharina in. Immediately, her feet got caught on some stones lying on the floor. Flustered, Rupert said, “Oh, I’m very sorry, I forgot they were there. I’ll put them in the boot. I was gathering them from the Danube this morning and I haven’t sorted them out yet.”

He took the stones and put them in the boot, got back in the car and drove off. They were silent for a few minutes, and then he spoke.

“I am going to do a collection of stones from the Danube, from source to sea. These were the easiest ones to get today. Do you know the river originates in the Black Forest in Germany as two smaller rivers - the Breg and the Brigach - which join together at a place called Donaueschingen, and it is from this point that it is known as the Danube? It roughly flows eastwards for a distance of about 2850 km, and passes through several Central and Eastern European capitals, before entering the Black Sea at the Danube Delta in Romania. Not a lot of people know that. Do you know what I would love to do? I would love to drive to the source of the two rivers and get some stones from there, then get stones from Donaueschingen where the actual Danube starts, and then get more

stones from each of the capitals it passes through. I've already got Vienna's ones. The real highlight would be to get some stones from the Danube Delta, and even more exciting than that would be to get some sand or silt from there."

This is going to be a fun evening, Katharina thought.

They arrived at the restaurant, one of Vienna's classiest, moments after Mr and Mrs Bauer. Rupert introduced them.

"You already know my father, Felix." They shook hands and he gave Katharina a little kiss on her cheek.

"And this is my mother, Miranda." She had a lovely warm smile, and she hugged Katharina, kissing her on both cheeks.

"Rupert has told us all about you," she said. "In fact, he has spoken about nothing else for the last week, apart from stones from the Danube." During the last part of the sentence, her eyes looked skywards and she made a funny little face at Katharina, and then winked. Katharina thought she was going to like this lady. She already liked Felix.

They talked all the way through the excellent meal, with Miranda taking the lead most of the time. Katharina told them all about her forthcoming position, but she didn't say anything about the forthcoming baby. *All in good time,* she thought. *Anyway, I might never see them again.*

At the end of the meal, over liqueurs, Felix pulled a cigar from his inside pocket and politely asked if anyone minded if he smoked. Nobody objected, so he lit up. The evening had been very pleasant and ended all too soon. Felix settled the bill and they made their way to the door.

"Now Rupert, you will see young Katharina home and make sure she is safe and sound in her apartment. We shall see you later," he said.

"Would you like a walk down by the river first?" Rupert asked Katharina. "It's such a beautiful night."

"Yes, I'd love that," she replied.

They said goodbye to the parents, Katharina thanking them for their generosity, and set off in Rupert's Golf GTI for the river. They parked the car and started walking. Katharina put her arm around Rupert. He didn't reciprocate, so she grabbed his arm and put it round her. He started to get all flustered.

"Oh . . . umm . . . I'm so sorry. I'm no good at this sort of thing. You must forgive me, I'm not really sure of what to do," he blurted out.

"Don't worry, I'll keep you right! Let's just enjoy the walk."

They stopped now and again, and watched the lights twinkling on the water without saying anything. Katharina felt safe and warm with this lovely boy's arm round her, but even though he was older than her, she still felt like he was just a boy. He needed some maturing now he was twenty-one. She turned to look at him and he smiled at her. She reached up to him and he bent down slightly, then she grabbed his collar, pulled his face towards hers, and they kissed very gently. She liked the feeling very much, and she thought that he liked it too, as he was smiling at her with his eyes lit up.

"Did you like that?" she asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Y-y-yes. Very much," he said, quite confidently now. "Would you believe, that's the first time I have kissed a girl properly, and it couldn't have been a nicer one."

Katharina believed it. “Well,” she said, “how would you like to make it a second time?”

Without saying another word, their lips came together and a long, passionate kiss followed, with Katharina taking the lead and making all the right moves to hide Rupert’s inexperience and avoid any embarrassment to him.

To make him feel good, she praised him. “For someone who hasn’t done this before, you are very, very good at it!”

“You’re just being kind – I’m hopeless!”

“I’m not complaining. Let’s go back to the car and you can take me home.”

They drove back to the apartment, and as he parked outside, Katharina asked if he would like to come up for a coffee.

“Well, I suppose I could. It’s only ten-thirty,” he replied.

They went up to the flat, and Katharina apologised for the bareness. “Everything has gone, Rupert. Tomorrow I move in with my aunt and uncle for a week, and then I move into the hotel where my new job is.”

“Can I help you with the coffee?” Rupert asked.

“In a minute,” Katharina replied, “take your jacket off and just wait there – I have another birthday present for you,” and she went through to the bedroom. She took off her coat, and walked back through to the living room. Rupert glanced at her, and then nervously looked away again. She stood there and beckoned him over to her. When he was right up close to her, she put her hands up and cupped his face in them, guiding his lips towards hers. She gave him a very sensual, lingering kiss, and she could feel him responding. He put his arms around her without any prompting, and returned the kiss, quite gently at first, then with feeling. She could see he was perspiring down his brow. Then he spoke.

“Katharina, you are . . . you are so . . . gorgeous! Oh . . . I’m sorry . . . what have I said! I’m sorry.”

She put her fingers up to his lips, touching them, and whispered, “Shhh. Don’t speak.”

Katharina was thinking: *This is one of those nights that stay with you for the rest of your life – one of those nights that you never ever forget.*

Rupert was thinking: *Mother and Father will be wondering where I’ve got to. I’ll need to go.*

Suddenly, Rupert said, “I’ll have to go.”

“Stay here tonight,” Katharina said.

“Oh no, I can’t,” he protested. “Mother and Father will be expecting me home.”

“Phone them and say you’ve had a couple of glasses of wine and you shouldn’t drive. Go on!”

“But I don’t drink – they won’t believe me.”

“Rupert, you’re a twenty-one-year-old man. You’ve just kissed a real woman. Just do it! The telephone is still connected – phone them now.”

He got up, went to the phone and dialled his home number. Katharina went to make the coffee. She could hear his side of the conversation, and it wasn’t going well.

“They didn’t believe me,” he said when the call was finished. “They think you might be leading me astray.”

Katharina put on a coy, innocent look, and said, “As if I would do such a thing!”

They sat down with their coffee and gazed at each other in silence. Then Katharina said, "Now, there's a quarter bottle of brandy in the sideboard. I think we should have one after our coffee, and then you will have sampled two of life's little pleasures in one night – your twenty-first birthday night."

He felt pleasantly dizzy after the brandy, and then he just turned all giggly and lost all of his inhibitions. He initiated another kissing session, and by one o'clock he had fallen asleep in her arms. She carefully got up from the sofa, draped her coat over him and gave him a little kiss on the cheek. Then she went through to her bed.

They slept right through until mid morning, and Rupert was appalled when he saw the time.

"Mother and Father will wonder where I am."

"They know where you are, darling," Katharina said softly, running her fingers through his hair. She kissed him, then said, "You go and make some coffee, I'll take a shower."

After the shower, she sat down at the table beside him.

"I have something very important to tell you, Rupert," she said solemnly. "I'm pregnant."

He leapt up from the table, knocking the cups of coffee over, with one of them smashing onto the floor. He put his hands to his head and shouted out, "Oh my God, my dear God! Oh . . ." All of the colour drained from his face and he looked physically sick. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Oh what am I going to do? This is terrible . . . awful. I'm too young to be a father! Oh, what will Mother and Father say? They'll disown me – that's what they'll do, disown me!"

Katharina tried to butt in to explain, but to no avail.

He continued. "Don't you take pills or something to prevent this happening? No, no, it's all my fault. That's right; I should have done something. I shouldn't have kissed you. You shouldn't have let me. Oh, what are we going to do? I'll stand by you, of course. Yes, I'll pay for everything. I'll . . . marry you!"

"Stop. STOP! Now listen." She finally got him calmed down. "It's not your baby. It couldn't possibly be your baby just from kissing! It's my previous boyfriend's. I've known for a few weeks now, but I didn't tell you in case it spoiled our date. Have your mother and father never explained to you how these things work?"

"No, not really. They left a book once in my room, but it wasn't very interesting so I never read it. I realise now that I probably should have."

"You *definitely* should have," Katharina said, giving him a little cuddle. "Now, let's get organised and you can give me a lift to my Uncle Josef's on your way home. We will need to take everything that's left here with us, and then say 'goodbye' to the apartment forever."

CHAPTER 8

>>FAST FORWARD>>

The record now playing was ‘Took the Last Train’ by David Gates, another of Dave’s all-time favourites – he certainly had a lot of them. It was now almost unbearably hot in the studio and he couldn’t wait until he was finished to get outside and breathe some fresh air – it just had to be cooler out there. He had heard Clive Johnson’s Isuzu Trooper pull up outside during the last track, and now Clive popped his head round the studio door.

“Hi Dave, how’s it going? I hear you’re overheating. I was listening to the show on the way over. Great music tonight. I’ve brought one of your fans with me,” and he produced a big old metal desk fan of industrial proportions!

“Hello, Clive, you’ll need that. I think that’s the only fan I’ve got tonight – the phones have been dead, except for one call that keeps trying, but there’s no one there when I answer it.”

Clive had brought his own selection of CDs and albums, all ready in the order he was going to play them, and now he started to prepare his show at a table opposite Dave.

The phone rang again and Dave answered it. “Hello, Strathdee FM, Dave Buckingham here. Speak to me.”

A faint female voice at the other end said, “Dave . . . hello . . .” and then there were some crackling noises, and again, “Dave, can you here me?” Then complete silence.

“Shit – that’s Katharina’s voice – I’m bloody sure of it – IT’S KATHARINA’S VOICE!” he shouted out.

Clive looked up, startled. “Who’s Katharina?”

“It’s my girlfriend, I mean was my girlfriend, I lost her in Europe years ago, but that’s her, THAT’S HER!”

“That was a bit careless of you wasn’t it?”

“It’s a long story, Clive, a long story.”

“Dave, try 1471.”

“Good idea, Clive,” and he dialled the number.

“You were called today at 01:12 AM. We do not have the caller’s number.”

“No joy, Clive. Maybe she’ll call back. She’s got to call back.”

<<REWIND<<

The years had passed, and true to the old adage that time passes quicker the older you get, Katharina just couldn’t believe how quickly her beautiful daughter Anna had grown up. She was now a nineteen-year-old young woman, and Katharina could see so

much of herself in her. She could also see lots of Dave in her. Her brilliant personality, her big brown eyes and her rich brown hair which she loved to wear in a pony tail. She had been a success at school too; so much so that she had been accepted for university, and one of the ones she had been offered was The University of Aberdeen. Her chosen subject was Forestry. She had always loved the great outdoors, trees and anything to do with them, and Aberdeen had one of the best Forestry departments in Europe, with world-class forests close at hand for field visits. Now Katharina had two weeks holiday due her, so the two of them planned to come over to Aberdeen and check it out.

Rupert had been a great influencing factor in Anna's life – almost like a father, but known to her as Uncle Rupert. From the moment she was born, he played an active part in her life, even being present at the birth. The hospital staff mistook him for the father, and neither he nor Katharina enlightened them. He quite liked it that way, and he was extremely proud of Katharina and the way she handled the whole situation. They had become very good friends, not lovers, although when the occasion suited, they had no hesitation in providing some comfort to each other. It was a strange partnership, but one which suited both of them very well.

Rupert's father had now retired and Rupert ran the business. Katharina thought she was very lucky to have her own personal optician – not just for her, but also for her daughter, as it was very likely that she would have inherited her mother's problem. As it happened, she had, and by the time she was five she was already prescribed glasses. Katharina had noticed her squinting a lot when she was trying to look at her, and when the television was on she would stand very close to the screen, trying hard to see it, but only making matters worse. Rupert took them to the shop and very carefully did a test on her, making it fun as he went along. She was diagnosed with the same problem as her mother, with every likelihood that it would get worse as she got older. Now, at nineteen, she had progressed through various stages to a prescription as high as her mother. Like mother – like daughter. She took this all in her stride. She was a very matter-of-fact girl, and she saw how her mother had coped over the years, and it didn't frighten her. It was just her – and that's the way it was.

Katharina's job as Group Co-ordinator with the hotel had been a great success. Her English had improved by leaps and bounds after the course, and after baby Anna was born, Aunt Petra became like a grandmother to her. She loved to take her any time she could, and often it was a friendly fight between her and the crèche for Anna.

Katharina was a natural for the job of looking after the conference centre delegates – very professional, yet very personal and friendly. She always got positive comments from everyone when they were leaving, and very often gifts too, ranging from bouquets of flowers to small items of jewellery, or toys for Anna. On numerous occasions, a delegate would ask her out to dinner, and although this was not recommended practice in her work detail, she was free to accept if she wanted.

On the week prior to the trip to Aberdeen, she had some delegates from Aberdeen Council attending a Budget Management seminar in the conference centre. The head of Budgeting and Finance, a certain Roy McNair, asked Katharina out to dinner on their last night there. She normally wouldn't have accepted, but as this gentleman was from Aberdeen, she thought she would be able to get some useful information for their trip the

following week.

They headed to one of the best restaurants in town where they had a table booked. After some small talk, they got round to talking about Aberdeen and some of the places they should visit while there. Roy explained how the airport was some distance away from the city centre at Dyce, but the public transport was good. He also explained that no matter how passable Katharina thought her English was, it was highly probable that she wouldn't be able to understand a word from any of the locals. They spoke a strange dialect called 'Doric', where boys were called 'loons', girls were 'quines', the word 'what' was pronounced 'fit' and the word 'how' was pronounced 'foo'. Katharina was fascinated, and couldn't wait. Then the conversation got onto a more personal level when Roy asked, "Now then, Katharina, tell me all about yourself and how you got into this business."

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Oh, let me see, how about at the beginning?" he smiled.

She gave him a condensed résumé of her life, concentrating on her spell on Mermaid Radio, which was the most influential and enjoyable time of her life.

She became very thoughtful as she said, "I had this wonderful boyfriend there. We did shows together, watched the sun rise together on the deck of the ship, had great laughs together and we just loved each other so much. When the station got into difficulties financially, he jumped ship. I was already ashore in Austria for my father's funeral, and I waited for him to contact me, but he didn't. I know he would have wanted to, but we just lost touch completely. I still love him so much that it hurts sometimes, even after all these years, but now I have to accept that I'll never see him again. The worst part of it all is that he'll never see his beautiful daughter. He is Anna's father."

Roy asked, "What is this marvellous boy's name?"

"Dave Buckingham."

They sat in silence for about a minute. Roy looked at Katharina, and she looked so sad. Then he dropped the bombshell.

"Dave Buckingham eh? Dave Buckingham." He played with the name, repeating it slowly as he fiddled with his teaspoon. "This may be something or nothing, but I think I know where this guy is."

"WHAT!" Katharina suddenly sat bolt upright. "You know where Dave Buckingham is?"

"Well, first I thought it might be someone else, but the more I think about it, it must be him."

Katharina was on the edge of her seat, almost having kittens by now. "Where? WHERE IS HE?"

"Now, just calm down a minute and I'll tell you. In Aberdeenshire we have a local radio station called Strathdee FM. It's about thirty miles or so out of town, near Aboyne in Royal Deeside. You can pick it up in the city and I listen to it quite a lot. It's got a homely sound which I like – makes a change to the slick city stations. There's a guy on it called Dave Buckingham who I listen to at midnight until one-thirty. I like his choice of music and he has a nice laid-back style. He's English, with a sort of London or Essex accent."

"Could it not be someone else with the same name?" Katharina butted in.

"Yes, that's possible, but I don't think so."

“How not?”

“Every time I’ve heard him, at some point in the programme he always plays a record and says ‘this one’s for Katharina’. He never says who this Katharina is, and it’s always a mystery. It’s not a mystery any longer – I’m looking at her right now. That’s your man, I’m positive of it.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or kiss him, so she did all three. She leaned over and kissed him while she was laughing, then sat down with tears streaming down her face. She had found Dave! *But wait a minute*, she thought, *he might be married, he might have kids, he might not want to see me. But he must want to see me. Why else would he play records for me every night? He’s got to want to see me.*

Finally she spoke. “I don’t know what to say, Roy, it must be fate that you asked me out tonight. I’m so sorry that we can’t take the night further, but you see, I have this boyfriend in Aberdeenshire waiting for me! And I’m going to see him next week! My daughter is going to meet her father for the first time! This is going to take a bit of organising.”

“Do you have a personal radio?” asked Roy.

“Yes. I have a Walkman with a radio on it.”

“Take it with you and take your mobile phone.” Roy wrote something down on a piece of paper he tore out of his diary. “This is a note of the frequency they broadcast on – 104 Megahertz. You will be able to pick it up in the city OK. Now, I suggest you tune in at midnight to Dave’s show. He will read out the station’s phone number several times during the show, and all you’ve got to do is call him. Here is my mobile number and my office number. I’d love to hear how you get on, but also if you have any problems or need any help, please don’t hesitate to phone me at any time, day or night.”

“You are so kind,” Katharina said, and kissed him again. She was on cloud nine for the rest of the evening as they finished their meals.

When she got back to the hotel and the staff quarters which she and Anna shared, she thought she would keep silent about this just in case it amounted to nothing and disappointed Anna. Katharina had always been upfront with her about her father, and Anna had often asked about him and made it quite clear how wonderful it would be to meet him one day. Anna was out at a concert, so Katharina sat back to relax with a magazine and her old favourite – a brandy. She only got about twenty minutes of calm before Anna swept through the door like a mini tornado. She was always so full of the joys of life, and her presence filled a room.

“Hi Mama,” she shouted cheerily as she breezed across the room. “How was your date?”

“It wasn’t a date, darling, I was getting information for our trip next week,” Katharina said patiently.

Anna sat down, reached over to Katharina’s brandy bottle, and poured herself one.

“Hey – buy your own,” Katharina scolded her.

“I don’t get wages or tips like you do, Mama Moneybags!” Katharina loved her little girl, and she loved the way she kept her so young. If the information she received was correct, then all this girl’s Christmases were going to come at once. *Good job*

Johanna isn't here tonight, she thought, the secret would be well and truly out!

“How was your concert, dear?” she asked her daughter.

“Oh, wicked, Mama, just wicked! You know, they released a hundred white doves into the arena and they were pooing on everyone! I put my programme over my head!”

They had a clear weekend, so they spent Saturday shopping for stuff they didn't really need, but would be nice to have on holiday. They dived in and out of cafés and shops like bees round a flower bed, and then they went for a meal before heading back to the hotel around eight o'clock. Katharina loved these days out with her daughter. She wasn't just a daughter, but her best friend too. Sunday started off with a lie-in, then a lazy day just lounging about their staff apartment. Around late afternoon they both took a walk in the park, feeling guilty about being so lazy. *Well, we're conserving our energy for the week ahead*, Katharina thought.

Monday morning found them jostling through the crowds at Vienna International Airport for their flight to London Heathrow, where they would pick up a connecting flight to Aberdeen. It was mainly businessmen at this time on a Monday, searching through their brief cases for documents they had forgotten, speaking on mobile phones to their offices or frantically tapping on laptops trying to finish presentations they were going to need in an hour or two.

Katharina and Anna should have boarded the plane half an hour ago, but they were still sitting waiting for the announcement. Other passengers were getting very agitated and Katharina went up to the check-in desk to ask what was going on.

“Oh, I'm sorry, there has been a slight technical fault,” the girl behind the desk said to her in her best customer relations voice. “There will be an announcement made very soon.”

Within ten minutes, an announcement came over the PA system to say that the plane was experiencing technical difficulties due to a bird strike on landing, and they were waiting for technicians to arrive to assess the damage. A further announcement would follow shortly.

“This is all we need,” said Katharina in disgust. “We've got a two hour interval at Heathrow before our connecting flight, so they better get a move on.”

Two hours passed with no information announced. Everyone was now getting irate, and the poor check-in girl had to bring in reinforcements to help her with the onslaught. Eventually, they managed to drag the information from her that the plane had suffered fatal turbine blade damage to an engine by the bird strike, and would not be flying. A replacement plane was due to arrive in under an hour.

“What about our connecting flight at Heathrow?” Katharina screamed at the girl. “We've missed it altogether now. What are you going to do about that?”

The girl quite calmly said, “There are other flights going to Aberdeen from Heathrow. If at all possible, you will be allocated seats on one of them. If this is not possible, buses will be provided.”

Katharina completely lost it now. “Buses? BUSES? We're not sitting on a bus from London to Aberdeen, you better believe it! You will give us hotel accommodation

at no cost until there is a flight, *and* we will be expecting compensation! Have you got that?"

She almost felt sorry for the poor girl when she replied, "Yes, madam, I'm sorry; I will see what I can do."

This was almost more than Katharina could bear. She was so near to Dave, yet so far away. This was fate at its worst. Eventually, the replacement plane arrived, and they were herded up along with the other irate passengers. They boarded the plane, and just flopped down into their seats with sheer relief. The flight was uneventful, which pleased Katharina as she couldn't take much more drama. On arrival at Heathrow, they were informed that seats were available for them on a flight to Aberdeen leaving in four hours. It would arrive in Aberdeen at midnight – not the best of times to be arriving when you haven't got any accommodation booked. The original plan was to arrive late afternoon and book into a hotel near the airport, but all that had now changed.

They spent the four hours wandering about the terminal at Heathrow, looking in the shops, drinking coffee, people watching. By the time the Aberdeen flight was announced, they knew almost every brick in the walls, every light bulb that wasn't working, and felt they knew the girl making the announcements so well that they could ask her out for a night on the town!

"Right, here we go – it's the final stretch," Katharina said with a big sigh as she made herself comfy on the plane. "Isn't it exciting?"

"Well, it certainly is exciting that we don't even have anywhere to stay tonight," said Anna, bringing her back down to earth.

"Let's get some sleep now, then we can stay awake all night and just wander around Aberdeen and get booked in somewhere in the morning."

Anna thought this defied all logic, and she knew her mother's quirky ways, but she thought something didn't quite fit here.

"Is there something you're not telling me, Mama?" she asked. "Have you already made some other arrangements?"

"No, my darling, it's just that I maybe have to phone someone when we arrive. It's information that I received from that visitor who I met for dinner the other night. Just wait and see – it'll be alright, I promise."

They landed just after midnight, and Aberdeen airport was deadly quiet at this time of night. Their plane was the only arrival, apart from a helicopter which had just arrived from an oil rig. The workers from it were milling about the terminal, and they looked exhausted, like they had just finished a shift. They still managed to laugh and joke with each other, although they were badly in need of a good shower, and probably a good meal followed by a cosy night with their loved ones. The other passengers on the plane had either people meeting them with cars, or they had their own cars parked in the car park. They trickled out gradually until they were all gone. The oil workers boarded a waiting coach which quickly left, and the only people remaining were Katharina, Anna, a man in a fluorescent yellow hi-viz coat who was standing near the door speaking on his mobile phone, and a young man in a yellow reflective vest guiding a big floor polishing machine back and forward along the concourse, it's yellow flashing light reflecting off anything it could find – the drinks dispenser; the chrome frames of the seats; the stainless

steel panels in front of the check-in desks, and the windows themselves. Anna went over to a coffee machine, but realised it only took British coins. They had changed their money before they left, but had no coins – only notes. The man in the yellow coat finished his call and was about to leave when he noticed them. He turned round and walked over to them, saying, “Hey, can I help you two gals?”

Anna smiled at him and asked, “Could you give me some change for the coffee machine, please?”

He replied, returning the smile, “I’ll do better than that. I’ll buy you coffee. I sure could do with one myself – it’s pretty darned hot here.”

And then, as if he had noticed the yellow coat for the first time, he looked down at it and immediately wrenched it off, laughing, “Hey, this isn’t helping, is it? Well, it is a bit colder out on the rig.”

They both smiled at him, and he went up to the machine and got three coffees. He also got three Mars bars from the dispenser next to it and brought them over to the seat where Katharina was sitting. Anna followed him with two of the coffees.

“I’m just going outside for a minute,” Katharina said to Anna. “You stay here just now.”

As soon as she was outside, she took her little Walkman out of her bag, put the headphones on and tuned the radio to 104 Megahertz. Nothing. Just the continuous FM mush, with the hint of some faint music in the background. Her heart sank. She walked around, trying to get a better signal, but to no avail. She put it away and went back into the terminal where Anna was chatting to the man.

“Mama, this is Ritchie Allman. He’s a genuine Texas oilman and he’s in charge of one of the North Sea oil rigs. He says we can’t stay here all night, so he’s suggested we go with him in his car to the city centre where we might get a hotel even at this time of night. He’s got to go to the harbour first, to see the captain on one of the supply ships about stuff he’s taking out to the rig.”

Katharina held out her hand to him. “Hi Ritchie. I’m Katharina, Anna’s mother. Yes, thank you, we will come with you, and thank you for the coffee and chocolate bar. You’re very kind.”

They climbed into Ritchie’s top-of-the-range BMW in the car park, and drove off. Katharina immediately felt scared sitting on the wrong side of the car, and driving on the wrong side of the road. Ritchie could see this, and said, “It’s OK. It just takes a bit of getting used to. When I go back home now, I feel weird for a few days driving on the right.”

After leaving the airport, they drove through the outskirts of the city until they came to a BP petrol station on the left. The sign at the entrance said ‘Propeller Service Station’. Ritchie said, “Gotta get some gas,” and drove into it. As he was filling up, Anna popped into the shop for some sandwiches, Coke and sweets. After she was out of the car, Katharina switched the car radio on. The display on the radio said N’SOUND1, and the DJ announced the station as Northsound One. Then he played the latest chart buster by the Scissor Sisters. Katharina pressed the ‘scan up’ button, and held it until the display read 104 Megahertz. Coming through the speakers loud and clear was David Bowie and ‘Rebel Rebel’, and the RDS signal on the digital display suddenly changed to ‘S’THDEE’. Her heart leapt, her stomach was full of butterflies and she quickly switched it off as Ritchie and Anna walked back to the car.

“I’ll take you down to the harbour with me,” Ritchie said after starting the engine. “It’s safer than leaving you in the middle of town at this time in the morning, and you can wait in the car until I’ve finished my business with the captain of the supply boat. Then we shall see about finding you some accommodation. I just can’t dump you in town – it wouldn’t be right.”

They could see they were getting nearer the city centre, and Katharina said, “This town looks very nice – very clean and solid buildings.”

“That’s because the whole place is built of granite. It’s called ‘the granite city’, and they don’t come any more solid than that,” Ritchie explained.

They left the central area, and Ritchie drove down some side streets. Katharina caught sight of some ships at the quayside. They were all oil rig supply vessels, all brightly illuminated by their halogen spot lamps shining down on their decks.

“The one I want is berthed at the Pocra Quay which is almost at the harbour mouth,” Ritchie explained as he slowed down. “If you didn’t know where you were going, then it’s a hell of a place to find.”

The road opened out a bit where there were some huge tanks on the quayside, and there, fiercely illuminated by its own lights, was the Star Venturer, a huge supply vessel painted a bright orange.

Ritchie parked the car adjacent to the water’s edge, and said, “Look, you guys, I’ve got to see the captain about some last minute details for the rig. You can wait in the car or stretch your legs a bit, but don’t go too far away.”

They elected to stretch their legs a bit, and they walked slowly along the quayside towards the harbour mouth. They stopped in front of a curious tall tower like a Dutch barn. It had windows right round its top storey and a circular balcony half way up. Behind it was a much bigger ultra-modern tower which was obviously the main control centre for the harbour’s operation. Katharina liked the atmosphere about this place – and it was very warm, unusual for this time of night, and definitely unusual for Aberdeen.

They walked back over to where the ship was berthed, and Anna went to the car and took out the packs of sandwiches and cans of Coke she had bought at the garage. They sat down on a bollard and started to eat. Katharina took out her Walkman, put the earphones on and switched it on. She tuned it to 104 Megahertz, and there, before her very ears, was Dave. She almost dropped her sandwich when she heard him, and let out a squeal which alarmed Anna.

“What is it? What is it, Mama?”

“Oh, nothing, darling, I . . . I, umm, I had the volume turned up too far when I switched it on and it gave me a fright. Now quiet for a minute, please.” She was mesmerised as she listened to Dave’s unmistakeable voice:

“Nine minutes forty-eight seconds there of The Who, and a live version of ‘Won’t Get Fooled Again’, and the reason I wanted to play that one was that it would give me ten minutes to do some big game hunting here and try to track down this beast. Well, things have happened and events have moved on. I think the noise we heard outside earlier on was actually Mebo the studio cat, because he’s just popped in through the window, yes, Mebo the moggie has just popped in through the window and he took one look at our visitor, launched a full-scale attack at it, and it disappeared out of the window at roughly two hundred miles an hour. So, thanks to the studio cat there, he’s definitely earning his keep. We’ll play the next track for him. And don’t forget that number if you

want to give me a call for a dedication to your loved one, or your dog, or cat, or even your budgie – we'll take them all – it's 01339 450450.”

Katharina scrambled for a pen in her bag, found one, and then wrote the number down in her diary. Now he was playing one of her favourite tracks by Heart – it was as if he already knew she was here listening. She pulled her mobile phone from her bag and keyed in the number, not certain whether to put in the country code or not. She heard something connecting – then nothing. She looked at her display – the ‘battery low’ symbol was on! *This is just typical, she thought, it's fate at its worst!* A few minutes later, she tried it again. This time she thought she got through as she heard it ringing and someone answered, but then – nothing.

“Who are you phoning, Mama?” asked Anna.

“It's just a number I have for accommodation that I thought I'd try, but my battery is low.”

“You are up to something, aren't you, Mama? I can tell.” Anna was suspicious. “What are you up to? Come on. Tell me!”

“It's nothing, darling, honest. I wish you had brought your phone with you.”

She took some peppermints from her bag and offered one to Anna. Then she just sat there listening to her favourite Heart track. When it faded out, Dave immediately went straight into the next track, but she wasn't expecting what followed next. He spoke over the intro, and said, *“This one's dedicated this morning to a lovely lady called Katharina. I know you won't hear this, but let's hope the spirits are working.”* And then Donna Lewis came in singing ‘Without Love’. Katharina almost went wild, jumping up and shouting, “Oh my God!”

Anna really was getting suspicious by now. “Mama, what is it? What are you listening to?”

“It's just one of my favourite records. I haven't heard it for years – I got such a surprise!”

At this point, Ritchie came down the gangway from the ship, and walked over to the girls. “Look, girls, I'm really sorry but this is going to take me longer than I thought. We have a few problems to sort out on board. Now, I don't intend to abandon you here at the harbour, so the captain has suggested you both come on board and the chef will make you a lovely cooked breakfast and fresh coffee. Then we can see what happens. How about it?”

“Yes,” Katharina replied, “that sounds great.”

They followed Ritchie up the gangway, and immediately Katharina felt like she was back on the Mermaid. Ritchie took them onto the bridge to meet the captain, and Katharina heard the same electronic whine coming from all of the equipment that she heard all those years ago when she was on the Mermaid's bridge taking that awful call about her Papa. Even the smell here was the same - a hot, plasticky, electronic smell if such a thing existed. She wondered if all ships smelled the same. The chef popped his head through the door and invited them to come down to the galley for their meal. A wonderful smell of bacon and eggs was wafting up the stairwell, beckoning them down.

As they sat wolfing their breakfasts down, Katharina got up and moved to the other side of the dining room. She tried the station's number again. This time it rang, and Dave answered it.

“Hello, Strathdee FM, Dave Buckingham here. Speak to me.”

Katharina quickly said, “Dave . . . hello . . .” and then there were some crackling noises, and again, “Dave, can you here me?” Then complete silence. She looked at her phone and the display was completely blank. The battery was dead and it had turned itself off.

“Oh shit!” she exclaimed, “My battery’s run out! Oops! Sorry, please excuse me!”

The chef heard her comments and called her through to the galley. “Here,” he said cheerfully, “use my phone,” and he took his mobile from his jacket pocket and handed it to Katharina.

“Can I stay in here to make the call?” she asked. “I don’t want my daughter to hear – it’s a surprise.”

“Yes, no trouble.”

She got her diary out, checked the number, keyed it into the phone and pressed ‘call’. Her heart was pounding as she heard it ring.

“Hello, Strathdee FM. Dave Buckingham here. Speak to me.”

“Hello Dave, can you hear me?”

“Yes, yes. Is that Katharina . . . hello . . . is that you, Katharina?”

She was laughing now with joy. “Yes, YES, Dave, it is really me.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on a ship. It’s an oil rig supply boat. I’m having a meal right now.” She didn’t know what to say.

“Where are you? In the middle of the North Sea?”

“No, I’m in Aberdeen Harbour. The ship is berthed.”

“Katharina, this is fantastic! I must see you – I really need to see you. Give me the ship’s name and the quay you are at and I will come right now as soon as the show ends at one-thirty.”

Katharina asked the chef for the ship’s name and the quay.

“Star Venturer and we’re berthed at Pocra Quay.”

“Dave, it’s the Star Venturer and it’s orange. It’s berthed at the Pocra Quay. Near the harbour control tower. And Dave, I really have to see you too. I’m listening to the show right now on my Walkman. I also have someone with me who I want you to meet.”

“Who is it?” asked Dave.

“Wait and see!” Katharina teased. *Just like her old self*, Dave thought.

“Right, here’s what to do. Stay put – don’t move. I’ll be there in about forty-five minutes to an hour. Watch out for a yellow Toyota Hi Lux pick-up truck with an excavator bucket and a big oil drum in the back – that’ll be me. I’ll watch out for you too, and I’ll even switch on the rotating orange beacon on the roof so you can’t miss me. See you soon. I love you darling.” Dave had forgotten how good it felt to say these words to Katharina.

“I love you too.” Katharina had forgotten how good it felt to say these words to Dave.

Katharina handed the chef’s phone back to him and walked back through to the dining room to continue her meal. She felt like she was walking on air, and in addition to that, she now had a whole flock of butterflies in her stomach. The butterflies had just had kittens, and the kittens were chasing the butterflies round and round! She was still smiling and laughing, and Anna was now getting really suspicious. “You really are up to something, Mama, aren’t you?”

“OK, I admit it. I have a little surprise for you darling, but you’ll have to wait about an hour. Please be patient.”

After their meal, they went out on the deck which overlooked the quay, and just soaked up the warm, balmy night while watching the various activities going on around them. The harbour never sleeps. Katharina was watching for something else – a yellow pick-up with an orange flashing light.

CHAPTER 9

Dave was running about the studio like a chicken with its head cut off! He was absolutely delirious, and Clive was getting a bit worried.

“Are you all right, mate?” Clive asked.

“Yes. Fantastic. This is unbelievable. My girlfriend is in Aberdeen and I’m going to see her in an hour for the first time in nineteen years! Quick – quick Clive, help me find a CD. The Best of The Mamas and Papas – ah – here it is. Got to be quick, David Gates is about to finish. Into the deck it goes . . . track number . . . and . . . press ‘pause’. That’s it cued.”

The David Gates track ended and Dave opened the microphone fader.

“Well, there you go, that’s got to be one of my ‘Desert Island Discs’ if you know what I mean. David Gates there, and ‘Took the Last Train’. Now I just took a very special phone call a few minutes ago – a phone call that has just literally knocked me for six, and living proof that thought transmission really does work. Those of you who listen to the programme regularly will know I always dedicate a track at some point in the show to a lovely lady called Katharina, and I never say who she is. Well, she’s a long lost girlfriend who I haven’t seen for nineteen years, but the flame still burns, and would you believe she’s in Aberdeen and I’ll be seeing her in an hour. This is the best thing ever that could have happened tonight, and I’ll never forget this night. I hope you can share in my excitement when I tell you that this is one very special lady, and I’m going to dedicate the next track especially to her. Katharina, my love, this one is for you and you only. It’s the Mamas and the Papas – ‘Dedicated to the One I Love’.”

Katharina listened on her Walkman on the ship, and started to cry.

“What’s wrong Mama?” Anna asked, putting her arm around her.

“Oh, nothing, darling. They’re just playing a silly sentimental record on the station I’m listening to.”

Dave was really champing at the bit to get out of there now, but he was a professional and was determined to end the show properly. After the Mamas and Papas track, he went straight into ‘Sara’ by Fleetwood Mac. While it was playing, he hunted out a nice long track to end with so he could nip away early. Picking a CD by Rick Wakeman called ‘The Six Wives of Henry the 8th’, he cued up track number six, ‘Catherine Parr’ which was seven minutes six seconds long. *That’ll take us to the end*, he thought.

When the Fleetwood Mac track ended, he opened the mike. “Fleetwood Mac there, and Sara. Well, that’s about it for another show. It’s certainly been one to remember, what with the heat, the wildlife, and the reappearance of someone very, very special. To end with, I’ve picked a track by Rick Wakeman from his superb album ‘The Six Wives of Henry the 8th’, and it’s called ‘Catherine Parr’. Clive’s standing by to take you through to six, and I’m off to meet a lovely lady. Bye now.”

Oh shit, he thought, *Tammy will be listening. And she hasn’t phoned tonight. I’ll*

have a lot of explaining to do.

He remembered the last time he felt as excited as this. Tammy had phoned him towards the end of the programme.

<<REWIND<<

“Hello, Strathdee FM, Dave Buckingham here. Speak to me.”

“Hell, Dave, shut up and listen . . . it’s coming, it’s bloody well coming . . . the baby . . . Dave, get your arse over here quick.”

“Have you phoned the midwife?”

“No, yes, oh I don’t know. Mum’s supposed to be doing all that. All I can do is yell every few minutes. Come on man, get yourself over here now – this is all your fault anyway!”

“WHAT! It takes two you know! OK, I’m on my way.” You couldn’t argue with a woman in labour!

In a completely helpless flap, he just panicked, then panicked more, left the control console and told Clive he would have to take over for the rest of the show, shouting to him, “I’m having a baby!”

He climbed into the Land Rover, and just flew down the farm track with all four wheels barely touching the ground at any one time. Once he got to the Truck Stop, the midwife’s car was parked outside. He went round the back to the trailer, knocked and went in. The midwife stopped him in his tracks, saying: “No room in here for men. Go into the café and make a big pot of tea. We’ll call you when anything happens. Everything’s fine just now – Tammy’s a real expert at this!”

Dave went into the café where the other kids were watching television. He started making the tea, and when he was finished, the door opened and the midwife shouted to him to come through to the trailer. The kids ran after him as they went in.

“You’ve got a lovely big bouncing baby boy,” the midwife said to him with a big grin. “Well done!”

“Say hello to Duncan,” Tammy said to Dave.

He went over to Tammy and kissed her. “Well done, love.” Then he looked at his beautiful son and gave him a tender little kiss on his soft forehead. “Well done, son. You’ve done us proud. Come on kids, come and see Duncan, your new brother.”

The kids were just over the moon, and the whole scene was just a lovely happy family situation – just a normal day in the life of Tammy, ‘The Pride of Strathdee’!

As the years progressed, Dave played a very active part in the upbringing and well-being of his son Duncan. He played with him whenever he could, took him for rambles in the forest, taught him how to fish, helped him with his school work, and all in all, was the perfect dad. Tammy didn’t ask for any of this, he just wanted to do it. He also provided financially in no small way.

He still went to the café after his show for bacon rolls and coffee, and

occasionally, if the moment was right, the conversation would lead to other things. It was an arrangement that suited both of them, and it continued over the years.

The Truck Stop had been fully refurbished by Frank, and was now busier than ever. The evening clientele were different to the daytime ones. At night, as predicted by Frank, a lot of the American oilmen came out from the city with their families to have some real home cooked Aberdeen-Angus burgers, and listen to live Country and Western bands. Frank managed to get some pretty hot bands to appear, and he would record the performance and play it on the station. When the audience in the city heard this, they just had to come out to see it for themselves, and the place went from strength to strength. Frank took on extra staff to cope, and when she was old enough, Tammy's daughter Sarah worked in the café full-time. The twins, Robert and Jamie, started work with Benson's Plant Hire when they left school, and soon they were driving trucks and were experts on any kind of machine. They were real enthusiasts. The trailer was eventually too small for all of them, so Frank bought another one and sited it alongside the first one. This way, everyone could get a bit of space and privacy. There was even room for her mum to stay in comfort whenever she liked – or was needed. Tammy thought the family would soon leave home, but they had other ideas – her home cooking was just too good to give up! *And* they had a good life.

>>FAST FORWARD>>

At last, Dave was free from the studio. He opened the door and walked out into the warm morning. It was one-thirty, and he was a man on a mission. He had almost an hour's drive ahead of him. He looked at the JCB bucket and the oil drum in the back of the pick-up, and cursed Mrs Benson. He cursed Archie too. *His head's too full of barmaids just now*, he thought. *Well, I'll just have to go up to the site with the stuff after I've met Katharina. I'm not wasting time just now.*

He climbed into his 'new' company vehicle which was a seven-year-old yellow Toyota Hi Lux pick-up, which replaced the Land Rover after it eventually died. Always one for a bargain, Frank bought this vehicle at auction from the Water Board. Luckily, it still had its rotating flashing beacon fitted to the roof, very handy for their line of business. Dave drove on down the A93, leaving Aboyne behind, heading for Banchory on his way to Aberdeen, and Katharina. He just thought this was the happiest he had felt in a long time when, suddenly up ahead, he saw a blue flashing light. The policeman directed him over into a lay-by. He wound down his window, and the officer said, "Good morning, sir. Just a routine check. Would you mind telling me where you have been and where you are going?"

Dave obliged. "Mains of Clarty, and going to Aberdeen Harbour."

The officer continued, "Would you mind telling me the purpose of your visit to the harbour?"

"I'm meeting my girlfriend off a ship."

"Really, sir? Can you tell me why you have a digger bucket and a drum of oil in the back?"

“Yes, officer. After I meet my girlfriend, I’m taking these things up to Camus Fearn where my boss needs them for the morning.” Dave was getting exasperated by now.

“Is that so, sir? Do you have any means of identification on you?”

“No, officer, I don’t. I’m Dave Buckingham, you know, the DJ on Strathdee FM.”

The officer smiled. “And I’m Maggie Thatcher, sir!”

Dave couldn’t believe this – he just didn’t need this right now.

“Look officer, I’ve just remembered I’ve got a credit card with my name on it in my wallet,” and he produced it. “I live in the caravan at the woodman’s cottage, Mains of Clarty.”

The officer took it, inspected it with his torch, flexed it, and then, incredulously, sniffed it! He took it over to his colleague who was sitting in the police car and he wrote something out. The officer came back over to Dave and handed him his card, and a piece of paper.

“This is notification to produce your licence and vehicle documents at any police station tomorrow. Sorry to have bothered you sir. Have a safe journey.”

I’d have a safer journey and more peace of mind if you’d stop harassing me, Dave thought.

On he drove, through what he felt was a magical, mystical night. It was like he was in a dream. *Perhaps I am,* he thought, *and this isn’t really happening.* To make sure, he switched on the radio and listened to Clive’s show in the background. He reached the town of Banchory which seemed to be totally asleep. The only other vehicles he passed were two taxis, otherwise the road was deserted. Onwards through Crathes, then Peterculter, and when he got to Bieldside and Cults, where the moneyed people lived, he had reached the outskirts of the city.

He was starting to have butterflies now, and he felt his hands and feet shaking – not very handy when you are driving. He pulled into the side of the road and got out to calm down. Everything was deadly quiet, like time had stopped and that was it. He could smell the night. Like the world was standing still.

Oh no it’s not, he told himself. *I’ve got a very important lady to meet,* and he climbed back into the truck, much calmer now, and set off again.

As he reached the city centre, it was sound asleep. Turning off at the end of Union Street, he headed for the Beach Boulevard. This was the only way he knew to the harbour, so he stuck to it. Turn right now, onto the Esplanade. With the sea on his left, and the Funfair on his right, he cruised along slowly, past all the empty, silent cafés, and then to the little unobtrusive street on the left, lined with houses and parked cars, which would take him right down to the harbour and Pocra Quay.

His hand really was shaking now as he fumbled for the switch to put on the flashing beacon. The whole area was immediately floodlit with one-second pulses of orange light, even right across to the Bon Accord soft drinks depot on the other side of the water. As he slowly drove round the quay, the big BP oil tanks out on the jetty alternated between white and orange as the truck’s beacon rotated. Further round still, and there she was – the Star Venturer, alternating between orange, and even brighter orange. *This is it,* he thought, *this is the most important moment of my life.*

He got out and looked up at the huge ship. He could see two girls leaning on the rail, looking over to him. One of them waved. He waved back. Then she started to hurry

towards the gangway, with the other girl trying to keep up behind her. Anna just didn't know what was going on, and she was watching to see what her crazy Mama would do next. Katharina reached the gangway and started running down it, almost stumbling as she ran. Her heart was racing; the butterflies in her stomach were having a boxing match with the kittens, and there, in front of her, was the whole reason for her living. It was as simple as that to her. Nothing else mattered, except, of course, her precious daughter. Dave's precious daughter. She reached the quay, then slowed down and stopped. She could see Dave silhouetted against the pulsing orange light coming from the truck's beacon, and he could see her, her face illuminated in orange at one second intervals. The radio in the truck was playing 'I'll Be There for You' by The Rembrandts, and the light was flashing in time to the music, like a surreal disco.

After about thirty seconds, she walked slowly over to Dave, and he saw the other girl stay where she was. Dave could see Katharina was crying, and as she got nearer, he held his arms open wide. She ran the last few yards and just threw herself into his arms, the tears now streaming down her cheeks. Dave expected bells and whistles with fireworks or even a trumpet fanfare when this moment arrived, but there was silence. They just stood there locked together as Anna looked on. The beacon flashed, the deep purr of the Star Venturer's generator filled the air, and somewhere along the quay a warning bleeper was sounding, either from a fork lift or a truck manoeuvring.

Dave was the first to speak. "It's all right. I'm here now. It's all right, love."

She still hadn't spoken as they kissed passionately.

"You don't know how good it is to see you and hold you," Dave said.

Eventually, Katharina managed to speak. "I do, I do. I've waited nineteen years for this. Now look at me – what a mess! Tears everywhere!"

"You're starting me off as well," Dave spluttered, as they both hugged really closely again.

Then, Katharina remembered Anna watching from a distance, and she said, "Dave, it is so, so good to see you. But I am forgetting – there is someone here I want you to meet," and she waved Anna over. Anna looked puzzled as she walked over to them. Dave saw a beautiful young woman with long dark brown hair tied back in a pony tail.

"Dave," Katharina said slowly, "Dave . . . this is Anna. Dave, Anna is your daughter. Anna, darling, meet your Papa at last."

Dave was completely paralysed, his jaw almost hitting the ground. He just stood there and Anna stood in front of him. They looked at each other for what seemed like an eternity, and Dave could see that Anna was crying now. This was all too much for him. Eventually, Anna opened her arms and said, "Hello Papa." Dave took two steps up to her and they hugged, carefully at first, then a full no nonsense hug, cheek to cheek.

Dave said, "Hello Anna," his voice hoarse with emotion. Anna kissed him on the cheek and he returned the kiss on hers. *I'm holding my own flesh and blood*, he thought, *and it feels wonderful!*

When all the hugging, kissing and crying had subsided, Dave came back down to earth. "How long are you here for?" he asked tentatively, not sure if he really wanted to hear the answer if it wasn't going to be 'forever'.

"I'm not sure," Katharina answered. "It depends on a lot of things. Anna has been offered a place at Aberdeen University and we are here to check it out. It depends also on

how long you would want me to stay for. It's been a long time and lots of things have happened to us both. I have to know what you think – I already know what I think.”

Dave didn't like this uncertainty – he had to sort this out now. “Do you want to know what I think? I'll tell you what I think. Do you know what the word ‘forever’ means?”

“Of course,” she said, and started to get excited. “Yes? What do you mean?”

“I mean forever. I want you to stay forever. Until the end of time. Until the tide stops rushing in, until the rivers stop flowing and all that stuff! No, wait, longer than that – forever and a day!”

Katharina really was excited now. “That's what I really wanted to hear. That's how I feel too – that's all I want!”

Anna joined in, “Oh Mama, this is wonderful, and Papa. I'm so happy for you both. This is the best night of my life.” Then they all hugged together.

Dave pulled himself together and took control of the situation. “Now, do you have anywhere to stay?”

“No,” Katharina said, “we had planned to book into a hotel when we arrived, but the plane was delayed and we were too late. This very kind oilman gave us a lift from the airport to here, and the ship's chef cooked us a meal. The oilman was going to try to find us accommodation.”

“Well, you'll come and stay with me, won't you?”

“I was really hoping you would say that. I will go anywhere with you Dave. I never, ever want to lose you again, and I will make sure of that.”

“That's what I wanted to hear,” he said. “I'm never going to let you go. And Anna, this is wonderful, I just can't believe it. How old are you?”

“Nineteen,” Anna replied.

Katharina whispered in Dave's ear, “It was that night on the Mermaid, when I got the phone call about my Papa. I forgot to take my sweet!”

“And you have had my lovely daughter all these years and I never even knew. Looks like we've got a lot of catching up to do.”

They said thanks and goodbye to Ritchie and the captain who had been watching, and walked over to the pick-up. Dave said, “Right, we should be able to squeeze three in here, but your bags will have to go in the back,” and they climbed in. “We've got about an hour's drive to get to where I live.” He switched off the beacon, started the engine and they drove off.

As they drove back through the city, then out onto the A93, he told them all about what happened on the Mermaid and how he and Tom Hammond had jumped ship in the RIB. He continued with how he ended up in Aberdeenshire, and how Frank had changed his name and bought the plant hire business and the radio station, and married Tamara, the Russian lady in Spain. He left out the bit about his son, Duncan. She would find out soon enough, and he didn't want anything to jeopardise this moment.

Katharina then told Dave all about her experiences over the last nineteen years. She told him about her ordeal with the debt recovery agents and how she nearly died. She told him all about Rupert, and how she was in a successful job in Vienna. She commented on his hair now being so different, to which he replied, “Well, Beatles mop-

tops do eventually go out of fashion, and we all get older!”

They drove through the night and into the morning. Dave felt like he was in a movie. This sort of thing just didn't happen in real life, did it? To make sure, he looked over at his two lovely ladies. Katharina was sitting beside him in the middle seat, and she mouthed a kiss to him while she put her hand on his thigh.

Slightly flustered, Dave cleared his throat, and said, “We can't go back just now. I've got to deliver this digger bucket and the oil to Camus Fearn. It's right up a forestry track at the back of beyond. Frank has a machine up there ready to start work in the morning, but Archie the driver forgot the bucket.”

The radio still played in the background on Strathdee FM as they drove, and Clive was doing them proud. He was playing ‘My Girl’ by The Temptations, and he back-announced it, dedicating it to Dave and his girl. Then he played ‘Waiting for a Girl like You’ by Foreigner, and dedicated it to Dave and Katharina also. Everything just fitted perfectly – what a morning, what an atmosphere – perfect!

They reached the turn off for Camus Fearn. It started as a single-track road, and then petered out into a dirt track with grass growing in the middle. A closed gate loomed up ahead, and Anna obliged by getting out and opening it, then closing it behind them. They had to go through two more gates, climbing all the time through the forest, and then they reached a clearing down in a little dip. The dip was full of water, and a little loch had formed, blocking the track there and then. At the edge of the water was the JCB.

Dave stopped the Toyota and got out to survey the situation. The two girls also got out. It was so quiet and still, the silence was deafening. Katharina looked knowingly at Anna who smiled back at her – all girls together! Katharina said, “We won't be a minute, darling!”

Without saying a word, Anna wandered into the forest out of sight. Katharina took Dave's hand and led him in the opposite direction.

“Turn your back,” she said to him softly. She came up behind him like she used to do and caressed his neck, then kissed his neck, slowly turning round to give him a long, passionate kiss.

The strong smell of the pine trees was lingering everywhere on this hot, still morning. Even stronger, was the smell of the sphagnum moss and the heather beneath them as they kissed and kissed. It was like a wonderfully scented padded quilt – almost like standing in a giant bowl of pot pourri. Dave thought for a second, *if you could bottle this, you would make a fortune.*

“This is just so right,” Dave whispered, “this is how it should always be, and will be forever. I love you so much, Katharina.”

“I love you too, darling. I want you forever. Never, never ever leave me, will you? Always stay with me and I will always be yours.” Then she slipped into her old accent, saying, “Katharina, she want to make you happy for ever and ever. She is yours always.”

Dave just laughed, “I love you, darling.”

They both wished this moment would never end, but then Dave said, “Well, I hate to break up the party, but we've got a digger bucket to unload, and our daughter is on her own in the forest.”

Katharina laughed, “You party pooper!”

They made their way back over to the truck where Anna was leaning against the open passenger door listening to the radio and drinking a Coke. She gave her mother a

knowing smile as if to say, 'I know what you two have been up to!'

"Right," said Dave, "let's get this bucket dumped. It's too heavy to handle, so I'll have to use some ingenuity."

He started the truck and repositioned it. Taking a heavy rope from the back, he tied one end through the fixing eye of the bucket, and then walked over to a tree behind the truck. He tied the other end round the tree and climbed into the truck. He drove slowly forward until the rope tightened, then kept going as the bucket was gradually pulled to the edge of the tailgate. A bit more power and the bucket thumped down onto the ground. He turned the truck so that its headlights were pointing to the digger, then filled the oil can from the drum, climbed up onto the digger and topped up the hydraulic oil reservoir. He left the oil drum beside the JCB then said, "OK girls, homeward bound!"

They went through the same rigmarole in reverse with the gates, and eventually reached the main road.

"This is the village," Dave pointed out, as they drove through Strathdee. It was now after four thirty and getting light. As they passed the baker's shop, Dave saw Ian Forbes the baker busily getting his day's offerings ready. The milk truck was out delivering milk, and there was even someone out walking a dog along the main street.

Once out of the village, they turned into the farm road up to Mains of Clarty. Frank had widened and resurfaced the road since the first time Dave had gone up there in his parents' Jaguar. It was now quite a good road, until it entered the farmyard and then things kind of let it down. It was a physical impossibility to keep a plant hire yard tidy, and the place was cluttered with diggers, lorries, bulldozers, dumper trucks . . . the list was endless. Katharina was completely gobsmacked. She used to love diggers and excavators when she was a little girl, and here was a yard full of them! Barely visible behind a huge tracked excavator was the studio. "That's Strathdee FM," Dave said to her, pointing over to it. "We have to go up another narrow forest track to get to my country residence."

He drove up the track towards the caravan, the pick-up's wheels spinning on the gravel. Anna was overawed by the sheer beauty of the area. She was surrounded by her beloved trees. When they reached the clearing, Dave parked the truck and they got out. The sweet smell of pine was everywhere as he took them round to the caravan.

"Well, here we are. Welcome to 'Buckingham Towers'!" He opened the door and welcomed them in. They all flopped down on the comfortable sofa in the lounge.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Katharina was the first to speak. "It's . . . it's . . . just magic! It is. It really is a magical place. It's lovely inside – very nice and comfy. Are you going to show us round?"

"OK, follow me. This is the lounge, as you have already seen. Through here we have the kitchen – quite spacious for a caravan, and at this end we have two double bedrooms. I use the bigger one, which I hope you will share with me, and Anna, you have a good sized room there for yourself. Next to the bedrooms is the toilet and shower room. It is all connected to the mains water supply and drains, so there is no hassle. We use bottled gas for cooking and heating, but the lighting and power is on a cable from the farmhouse where Frank and Tamara stay down at the farmyard."

He put on a posh accent and said, "What does madam think? Does madam wish to stay?"

Katharina answered, “Madam is very pleased. She likes what she sees very much. She will stay. She will stay forever and a day!”

“And what about my precious daughter? Do you like it, Anna?”

“I love it . . .” and she hesitated, “. . . Papa. I love being right in the forest. It is just magical.” Dave felt so proud – she called him ‘Papa’.

“That’s good,” he said. “Now, this is what I suggest. I think we all need about eight hours sleep, so I will get the other bed set up for you, Anna, and we can all sleep until noon then make our plans in the afternoon. Frank is coming back from Spain sometime today, so you will see him soon.”

Anna and Katharina went back outside while Dave got some clean bedding from the storage lockers and made up the spare bed. They wandered over to the old woodman’s cottage and had a look around it. They loved this place, and couldn’t wait to see it in broad daylight.

Once back in the caravan, everyone settled in for the rest of the morning, Anna in her new room, and Dave and Katharina snuggled together in his room.

CHAPTER 10

Dave awoke with a start. He looked at the alarm clock – eleven o'clock. He heard noises coming from the next bedroom. *Intruders*, he thought, *or an animal's got in*. Then he turned over and saw Katharina lying sleeping beside him, and everything fell into place. He was so used to staying on his own and never hearing anything except the birds outside. Now he realised that his daughter was in the room next to him, and his beautiful girl was in the bed alongside him. He just lay there, gazing at her. Her blonde hair used to be straight and sort of wild, but now it was wavy. Her face was a bit thinner than before, with the signs of ageing by way of lines at the sides of her mouth. Some people might have called them laughter lines, but to Dave they looked more like sadness lines. Lying there sleeping, she had no control over her expression, and to Dave she looked like she had really been through the mill. *Well, she is thirty-nine*, he told himself, *and I'm no spring chicken either – I'm forty-one next week*. But he still thought she looked sad. It made him love her even more. Her glasses were carefully folded and placed on the bedside cabinet right beside her, where she could just reach over and feel for them. Dave felt really sorry for her and all she had been through, and vowed that he would love her and care for her as best as he could for the rest of his life. But this wasn't a pity thing – it was a real love thing.

He reached out and stroked her beautiful hair, then gave her a little kiss on her forehead. She moved a little, smiled, and then snuggled in further under the duvet. He lay for a bit longer just listening to the birds outside, then he got up and dressed. Going through to the kitchen, he could see that Anna had made herself some cereal and coffee, but there was no sign of her. He made himself a coffee and took it out into the morning sunshine. She was sitting on a fallen tree at the other side of the clearing, with her cup of coffee. He walked over to her, thinking that this would be a good chance to get to know her a bit better.

"Can I join you?" he asked.

"Yes, please do," she said. "It's such a beautiful morning I thought I would take a cup of coffee outside. I just couldn't wait to see this place in the daylight – it's just wonderful! I didn't want to disturb you or Mama. I think she was so tired. She has done so much for me over the years. She has been a wonderful mother to me – the best mother in the world."

"She is certainly a very special lady," he agreed.

She put on a serious look as she said, "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, Papa . . . it feels strange calling you Papa . . . but I really, really hope that you won't hurt her in any way. I hope you really mean what you say, and you won't desert her or make her feel sad. You know she has been through a lot of bad times, but good times too, and Rupert has been very good to her and to me also, but I know she doesn't love him. I know she has thought about you every single day, even without her saying it, I can see it in her eyes. You know she nearly died because of that damned radio station? She was kidnapped, and then managed to escape in an industrial park, and almost bled to death after injuring herself. If it wasn't for two English workmen who heard her, she would have died. She has always said they saved her life, and she would love to meet them

again some day and thank them properly. She has this wonderful job as a Coordinator for the conference centre delegates, and she loves it, but I know she would give it up tomorrow if she thought she had a future with you. Does she?”

The question caught him by surprise. “Anna, everything you have just told me about your mother equally applies to me. I have thought about her every day since I lost her. I have played a record for her every single night on the programme. Lately, it has been eating me up so much that I couldn’t stand not seeing her any longer. I have two weeks holiday due me and I was going to come over to Vienna and try to find her. Anna, I want to spend the rest of my life with her. And you . . . well, you are such a wonderful unexpected bonus that I feel like I’m the luckiest man in the world. I would ask her to marry me today if I thought she would say ‘yes’. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, Papa, it does,” and she gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “And do ask her, please, I know you won’t be disappointed.”

“Thank you, Anna; I’m really glad I’ve had this little chat with you.”

“There’s one more thing I have to ask,” she said, putting the serious look on again. “You know about Rupert, and Mama has been very close to him over the years, but is there another lady in your life, or has there been?”

This is going to be awkward, he thought, but I’d better get it out in the open. It could ruin everything.

“Anna, you are a very intelligent, sensible lady, and I respect you for that very much. I know you appreciate that nineteen years is a long time to have lost someone for. You’ve told me about Rupert, and the way I feel about that is happiness that your mother was lucky enough to find someone to care about her so much. I also feel so grateful and lucky that she never forgot me. I would never grudge anyone happiness in an unusual situation like this, but in the end, real love wins through.

“Yes, there has been another lady in my life who I care about very much. It is very similar to your mother and Rupert, with one major difference, which I will come to in a minute.”

You’re flying by the seat of your pants here, boy, he thought. You’ve got to tell her about Duncan – she’s a levelheaded girl and you’ve got to trust her and be honest with her. Go for it!

Anna finished the dregs from her coffee cup, and then tilted her head slightly, giving him her full attention.

“This is very difficult, but I’m going to be totally honest with you, and I hope you will guide me with regard to telling your mother this. I have a son to this lady. Anna, you have a half-brother.” He stopped there to judge the reaction.

She just sat in silence, looking at the ground.

“Do you love this woman?”

“Anna, I am going to tell you the honest truth. I know it sounds incredible, but it is the truth, and I respect you far too much to try to fool you over something as important as this. Do you believe me?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “I’ve only known you for less than a day, but I feel I’ve known you for a lot longer, and I know you are a good man because my Mama says so. Tell me about her, and I will believe you.”

“She is a lady called Tammy and she runs the Truck Stop. She used to own it when I first met her, but she had problems and Frank bought it from her. When I first met

her, she had three children to two different fathers. Oh hell, this is difficult – you’ve got to believe this. I used to go to her café at one thirty every morning for bacon rolls after the show, and I was missing your mother so much. I honestly thought I had no chance of ever seeing her again, and we were just two lonely people. It just sort of happened. These things do.

“You know, a guy gets lonely, and here was some recreation offered to me on a plate as it were, and I was missing your mother like hell. The baby was born nine months later – a beautiful little boy called Duncan. Well, Anna, I just couldn’t ignore him – I maybe didn’t love his mother, but I certainly cared for her very much. However, I loved him, and I still do. I have seen him every day since he was born, I’ve played with him, read him bedtime stories, gone fishing with him, helped him with his homework, and done everything a dad should do and loved it. I’ve also paid a lot of money towards his keep – so much so that I’m pretty well broke just now. But I think it was worth it. Duncan is a fine, big, strapping lad, and I really am so proud of him. You’ll have to meet him. He’s eighteen and he recently started work with the Forestry Commission. He’s on a training programme where he starts at the bottom doing all the dirty, heavy work, and studies for his forestry exams to become a Forest Officer. Hey – wait a minute – that’s what you’re going to do at university, isn’t it? Well, that’s a coincidence!

“Anyway, back to Tammy. I see her almost every night and we’re very good friends. Sometimes, when the time is right, we . . . well . . . you know! It’s the only recreation around here! Well, Anna, that’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Does that make me guilty of being a bad person?”

Anna got up, strolled across the clearing a bit and looked out over the wonderful view. “It’s so beautiful here,” she said. Then she turned around and walked back to behind where Dave was sitting on the tree trunk, out of his sight. Next thing he felt was her hands on his shoulders, then her lips on his cheek. She whispered in his ear, “I think it makes you guilty of being the best Papa anyone could possibly ask for, and I am so proud that you’re mine!”

He turned to face her and looked up into her beautiful eyes. “Stop it – you’re going to make me cry now!”

At that moment, they heard Katharina’s voice as she walked over to them. “Hey, you two, what are you getting up to?”

“Oh, just getting to know each other,” Dave said, “and I’ve found that we have a wonderful, wonderful daughter.”

“But I already know that,” she said.

Then Anna chipped in, “But Mama, I now know for sure that you have a wonderful, wonderful guy here – after all, he *is* my Papa, so he’s *got* to be great!”

All three of them hugged together, then Dave turned to Anna and said, “Sweetheart, how about making your Mama and I some coffee while I have a little chat with her?” and he winked at her. Anna smiled knowingly and headed for the caravan.

Dave sat down again and patted the tree trunk beside him for Katharina to sit down.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he said.

“Oh, you’re putting on ‘Mr Serious’ face. Do I really want to hear this?” she asked, mocking him and putting on a serious face in return.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to have to tell you anyway, then you can decide. I

have a son.”

She looked shocked, then surprised, then curious. After almost a minute’s silence, she spoke. “How old is this son, and where is he?”

“His name is Duncan, and he’s eighteen. He lives just out of the village with his mother at the Truck Stop.”

Quite calmly, Katharina said, “Tell me all about it, please.”

Dave went through the whole story, and said how Tammy didn’t want him to have any responsibility, but how he actually did help to bring up the boy and contribute financially, and how Duncan was now a fine young man working for the Forestry Commission. He also said she could meet him that night if she wanted to.

She sat for a long time in silence, playing with a twig in her hands, then she turned to him with a slight smile, and said, “You have told me all this, and I trust you. Without trust, you can’t have love. I know you didn’t do that to cheat on me – you had lost me and we both thought we would never see each other again. I had Rupert and you had . . . what is her name . . . Tammy. But there was no love, not real love, but that doesn’t stop you caring very much for somebody. That doesn’t stop you being with somebody when you feel alone. I have been there; you have been there. I want to tell you this: Dave, I love you even more for you telling me this and being so honest with me, but I do warn you,” and at this point she put on her mock serious face, “as long as I’m around, there will be no more fun and games with this Tammy woman. Is that clear?”

Dave gave her an erect salute, saying, “Yes sir!” Then, while he was on a roll, he threw in, “Katharina, will you marry me?”

Quick as a flash, she saluted him and said, “Yes sir! Yes, yes, of course I will. If you had taken any longer to ask me, I was going to ask you! Oh, I’m all excited now, look at me, I’m shaking!” Then they kissed.

At that point, Anna appeared with two mugs of coffee, saw what was going on and hesitated. Katharina saw her and waved her over, saying, “Darling, how would you like to be my bridesmaid?”

She almost dropped the coffee, and putting the mugs down on the ground, she ran over to her mother, shouting, “Oh Mama, Mama, this is wonderful! This is fantastic!” She hugged and kissed her, then hugged and kissed Dave.

Time was marching on, and Dave had to go down to the studio and prepare his afternoon show. He told Katharina and Anna to make themselves completely at home. They could relax and watch TV, go for a walk further up the hill into the forest to where the transmitter is located or walk down to the village and explore the shops.

“Make sure you’re back at the caravan by six,” he said, “because that’s when my show finishes, and I’m going to take you both to Tammy’s Truck Stop for the best burgers you have ever tasted, home made from finest pure-bred Aberdeen Angus steak. I’m back on-air at midnight till one thirty, and tonight, Katharina, I would love you to take part in the show – just like old times. Anna, I hope you will come too and see how good your mother is on the radio. Then tomorrow, I’ll take you to the university for the open day. OK, girls? See you later.”

Dave walked down to the studio, and Tamara was there when he went in. She told him that Frank was on his way back from Spain and she was off to meet him at the

airport. Dave very quickly told her all about the previous night, and asked her to update Frank when she saw him.

“Oh Dave, that’s marvellous. It’s like a fairy story – a dream-come-true,” she said, genuinely pleased for him.

“It certainly is a dream come true for me, Tamara; you’ve no idea how good it feels. And you should see my wonderful daughter!”

“I’d love to, Dave, so why don’t you all come to the farmhouse tomorrow evening for dinner? I am going to cook a Russian speciality for Frank, so please come.”

“That’s great, Tamara, We’ll be there.”

Tamara left in her Volvo V70 Estate, and Dave got down to business getting the show ready. Once it was under way, he thought it was his best show ever – he was walking on air, on-air!

The afternoon show was three hours long, and when he was finished, he just couldn’t wait to see his two precious girls again. Back at the caravan, he found them lounging on the sofa where they had been listening to the last hour of his show and drinking coffee.

“Great show, Dave,” said Katharina, “I could feel that you were having a good time – it came over in your voice – I wonder why!”

“I had a super time, Kat, hey – I haven’t called you that for a long time. What else did you do this afternoon?”

“Well, Anna wanted to go up into the forest, so we climbed the track up behind the caravan, and it’s just beautiful up there. We saw the transmitter mast and it’s a beast! We couldn’t get very near to it, but we saw it has a lot of aerals attached to it. Why is that?”

Dave tried to explain, “Well, most of these Yagi arrays that you saw all point to Aberdeen because that’s where most of the potential listeners are – right down the Dee valley. Frank kept adding elements onto the mast, and every time he did, we found that we could get into another part of the city that we couldn’t before. There are another three Yagi pointing north, south and west for the local area. The signal does reach Braemar in the west, but struggles to get over the hills to the north and south. You would see some other antennae on the mast, and some microwave dishes too – this is all income for Frank. We lease out space on the mast to the utility companies, taxi firms and mobile phone companies, and we’ve just signed up another courier company who want their radio antenna up there. It’s just as well you didn’t get too near to it as there’s a lot of nasty stuff flying about in the air up there!”

“It was really lovely up there and the view was terrific – like being on top of the world. We also passed a very deep gorge with a waterfall and I wanted to go over to see it, but Anna said it looked too dangerous and she pulled me back. Do you know where I mean?” Katharina asked.

“Yes I do,” Dave said, rather concerned, “It’s called ‘Lover’s Leap’, and rumour has it that long ago, if a boy wanted to marry one of the clan chief’s daughters, he had to prove himself first by jumping across the gorge at its highest point between two rocky promontories, and if he failed, he would be torn to shreds as he fell down and down into the turmoil below, hitting the jagged rocks on both sides as he fell. By the time he reached the bottom, he would be in pieces and his dismembered body would be washed away in the raging torrent, never to be seen again. The clan chief would just accept that

this boy was not of suitable material for his daughter, and the amazing thing is that the daughter would accept this too. Fortunately, it's not used for this purpose any more."

Katharina and Anna were mesmerised, and Katharina asked Dave, "Would you leap this gorge for me, darling?"

"NO!"

"Oh well, I will let you off this time!"

"Right, the only place we're going to leap just now is into the truck and down to Tammy's – I hope you are hungry."

"We are – all that fresh mountain air did it."

They set off, down the farm track, onto the main road, through the village then out the two miles to the Truck Stop. As they pulled onto the forecourt, Anna said excitedly, "Just look at this place – it's surrounded by a forest. It's like something out of a story book."

There were four cars and two trucks already parked there, and Dave knew it would get busier later as there was a new Country and Western band from Aberdeen playing live from eight until ten. They went up to the door, and Anna said, "You both go on in; I want to have a look around first and take in the scenery, so I will come in later. Just order me a burger and a Coke please."

She just stood there, absorbing the atmosphere. This was her idea of heaven, and she thought how lucky people were who lived and worked here. She could hear a chainsaw working somewhere round the back, and she wandered round to investigate. She saw this very good looking chunky guy in torn jeans and a chequered lumberjack shirt sawing up logs on a saw horse. Smoke was drifting upwards in a straight line from a fire beside him, then spreading outwards and just lingering amongst the trees, stationary, like some low cirrus cloud. She moved closer and just stood there watching him. By now, he was aware that he was being watched, and he made a special effort to brandish the chainsaw in the most professional manner that he could muster. When he was finished the log he was working on, he stopped, let the saw's engine idle, and looked over to Anna. He saw this beautiful girl with a thick mop of gorgeous brown hair pulled tightly back into a pony tail. She had on a flimsy cool white top and a light blue short peasant skirt, with a generous helping of bare tanned midriff in between the two, and very stylish glasses. Never one for being backward, she shouted over to him, "I can do that!"

"Oh you can, can you? Let me see you, then," he said, beckoning her over.

"Yes I can, I'm going to work in forestry. I'm going to Aberdeen University to study it."

"Oh you are, are you? Well, they'll teach you how to count trees there, but you'll need some practical tuition to work this. Anyway, come on, let's see you do a log," and he heaved another tree onto the saw horse. He took off his protective goggles, slipped them over her head, had a bit of bother getting the strap over her thick pony tail, and carefully positioned them over her glasses.

Anna went to pick up the chainsaw and found that it was just a bit too heavy for her. Rather than humiliate her any more, the boy said, "Look, I'll show you," and he picked up the chainsaw. "Now, you hold it here while I put my arms around you and get a hold on the other side."

He was behind her with his thighs pressing into her bottom, his arms tightly around her, and a firm grip on the saw while she also held it on top of his hands. He positioned it on the tree and revved it up. The vibration from it went right through both of their arms and from his body into hers, and the saw tore through the tree like it was butter.

“There, easy isn’t it,” he said, smiling. “How did you like that?”

“It’s a bit more difficult than I thought,” she said while he was still holding her. Her face was very close to his and she could smell a mixture of perspiration from him, and resin from the freshly sawn wood, mixed in with the two-stroke exhaust fumes from the saw. It was nice. For a fleeting moment, she thought he was going to make a move on her and kiss her, not that she would have minded, but suddenly he relaxed his grip on her and carefully brought the chainsaw safely down to the ground.

“Right, if you don’t mind, I’ve got a lot to do,” he suddenly said, and turned towards the job in hand.

“OK,” said Anna, “I better go inside. My parents will have ordered my meal. Thank you.” He gave her a friendly wave and she smiled at him as she turned to go round to the front entrance.

Inside, Dave had already introduced Katharina to Tammy, who seemed to take it all in her stride. She had told him that she really was genuinely happy for him, and he really deserved some good luck like this, and she wished them both all the very best for the future.

“Now, I want to meet this daughter of yours,” she said to Dave.

“She’s outside just now,” Dave said. “She should be in any minute.”

“And I want to meet this son of yours, Dave,” said Katharina.

“He’s out the back sawing up logs, “Tammy chipped in. “I’ll give him a shout in a minute.”

At that moment, Anna came in and joined them at their table, looking very pleased with herself. “What have you been up to, darling, you look very happy?” her mother asked.

“It’s just this place, Mama. It feels so right. And I have just met the most gorgeous guy. He was sawing logs round the back and he held me while I tried a shot of the chainsaw. I thought he was going to kiss me, Mama. Now I wish he had.”

“Shall I tell her or will you?” Dave asked Katharina.

Katharina spoke softly. “Anna, darling, you can’t kiss that boy, or even think of him like that. That was Duncan, your half brother.”

Anna turned scarlet, feeling very foolish, and said, “Oh Mama, I knew there was something special between us. I could feel it as soon as I saw him. I want to meet him properly now.”

“You will, darling, he is coming in soon.”

When Duncan eventually appeared and was introduced to them, he seemed quite shy and almost ignored Anna. Tammy served up a meal for him at another table and Anna, feeling bad about her behaviour, asked him if she could sit at his table and chat to him. He pointed to the seat and she sat opposite him. After a few awkward moments, they became more at ease as they talked about trees and forests, and eventually they were laughing and joking.

The evening had been a great success, and as they left, Tammy made sure they all

knew they were welcome any time, and said she hoped she would see them regularly. As they drove back to Mains of Clarty with the truck radio playing, they were singing along to the records, changing the words of the songs to anything they liked. Dave was singing 'I'm getting married to the most wonderful girl in the world' over and over again to any record that was playing, while Anna was singing 'I've got the best Papa in the world' to anything she could fit it to.

"You're all mad!" shouted Katharina over the din.

"We're all mad, mad about each other," sung Dave along to the next record. Katharina gave him a friendly thump and looked up to the sky, shaking her head.

Back at the caravan, they all just lounged around for the rest of the evening, chatting, watching TV and relaxing with a bottle of wine. At eleven o'clock, Dave said he had better go down to the studio to get ready for the programme, and he asked if they still wanted to come.

"You bet!" squealed Katharina. "I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

Dave gave her a concerned look. "Don't get any naughty ideas – we've got to behave ourselves on this station. This is a legally licensed radio station, and if we did any of the stuff that we did on the ship, well, we would be shut down!"

"I will behave myself," Katharina said, putting on a 'little girl hurt' look.

"I'd love to come too," said Anna. "I've never been in a radio studio before and I'm really interested."

They walked down to the studio in the still night air. It was pitch dark and totally quiet except for an owl hooting somewhere up in the forest. They all got a fright when they heard a twig break and some scuffling sounds in the undergrowth beside the track.

"Just an animal hunting its supper," Dave said, although he never could get used to the wildlife around here.

They reached the farmyard, and Dave used his key to let them all into the studio. Fiona Campbell, a local girl, was on-air right now. She did the nine to midnight slot, and she was one of the many volunteer presenters who worked on the station. During the day, she was a dental receptionist in the village, and at night she presented a very popular show aimed at teens and early twenties. She did this every week night, and she loved it.

As Dave walked into the studio, she gave him her usual greeting: "Hi there, my great big gorgeous hunk of masculinity!" Then she pulled him down towards her and gave him a big kiss before he could stop her.

A very flustered Dave spluttered out, "Fiona, Fiona, behave yourself!" He looked up at Katharina and said, "It's OK – she's like this with everyone. Fiona, I'd like you to meet my fiancée, Katharina, and my daughter, Anna."

"Well, Dave, you certainly *are* a dark horse! Where have you been hiding them? Oh well, I suppose it's better that she meets 'the other woman' sooner rather than later! I'm only joking – honest!" and she reached up and shook their hands.

The record that was playing came to an end, and it was time for her to speak on-air. "Right then, that's a good oldie for you there from Roxy Music. I'll bet Dave Buckingham remembers when that one was in the charts! Dave has just walked into the studio, and he's not alone tonight. He's got two lovely ladies with him, so I'm not going to hang around and play gooseberry, I'm out of here in twenty minutes. Here's the latest

one from the Scissor Sisters for you now, and I hope you feel like dancing, because they don't."

She started the track, and slipped the headphones down around her neck, smiling up at the visitors.

"You're very good," Katharina complemented her.

"Oh no, I'm awful. I can't do any of that slick DJ stuff. I just try to be myself and make the show sound like it's just me and a few friends round, playing our favourite records and having a bit of fun. I've had a few friends here tonight already."

"That's why you're very good," Katharina said. "You are creating a very atmospheric show without really trying, and it works."

"Well, thanks for the compliments. I don't get too heavy about it, and I don't try to analyse it. Heck, I'm only here to have a bit of fun – I don't even get paid for it. At least it keeps me off the street corners!"

Another couple of records, and it was time for Dave to take over. After Fiona said her goodbyes and started her last track, she vacated the swivel chair and handed the headphones over to Dave. Before he sat down, Dave got another set of headphones down from a hook on the wall and handed them to Katharina. He pulled another chair up beside him for her, and took her hand as she sat down. "Just like old times, eh?" he said, "but remember, behave!" Anna sat on a sofa on the opposite wall and could hear the programme through the studio monitors.

They didn't take the news feed at midnight, so when Fiona's last track ended, Dave played a station jingle then went straight into three tracks in a row to get everyone settled into the show. He started with three rockers: 'Just Like Paradise' by David Lee Roth, then 'China Grove' by the Doobie Brothers, and finally, 'The Only Thing That Looks Good on Me Is You' by Bryan Adams. By the time the last track was fading out, Katharina was actually on him, literally, sitting on his lap with her arm around his neck. He opened the microphone fader with great difficulty and spoke. "Hi folks, it's Dave Buckingham here welcoming you along to the Midnight Show from now until one thirty when Clive Johnson comes along to take you through to breakfast time at six. I have two very special guests in the studio this morning – two lovely ladies, one of whom is sitting on my lap right now, doing everything she can to put me off and distract me from the job in hand, and she's not going to succeed. This is Katharina, who used to be the 'Mermaid Radio Girl', on another radio station on the North Sea many years ago, and now she's going to be my wife. Say hello, Kat."

Katharina spoke, "Yes . . . um . . . it's a long time since I have done this, but hello everyone. As you may guess from my accent I am not a local lady, but from Austria where we have some very nice scenery just like you have here. That is one of the reasons I want to stay here, but the main reason is this wonderful guy who has asked me to be his wife. I hope you will all be happy for him as he really deserves it – my lovely Dave!"

"Thanks Kat – you really know how to embarrass me in one sentence! But thanks a million for saying 'yes' to the big question. I'm playing the next one for you - it's your favourites, the Rolling Stones, and 'Start Me Up'."

He started the track, closed the microphone and said, "Right, we're not on the Mermaid now, so I really think you better sit on the chair – please?"

Anna shouted over, "Mama – behave yourself!"

The show continued without too many mishaps or embarrassments until the end.

When Clive arrived, Dave introduced him to Katharina and Anna, saying, “This is what all the fuss was about last night – picking up these two lovely ladies. Don’t you think I’m a lucky guy?”

“Well, Aberdeen Harbour seems to be the ‘in’ place now. Think I’ll try it myself!” Clive replied.

At this time, Dave would normally be heading off to Tammy’s Truck Stop for bacon rolls and anything else that was on the menu, but not tonight. Tammy hadn’t even made her nightly call to the studio as she would probably have been listening to all the hilarity. Dave felt a little sad, and hoped that she would still be a good friend to them all. He would make sure of that. After all, she was the mother of his son.

Now they would have a pleasant stroll up the track to the caravan in the fresh morning air, then coffee and bed. It was already tomorrow, and there was a lot to be done.

CHAPTER 11

It was like being in a different time zone. Katharina found it hard to believe that places like this could exist in the same dimension as Vienna. The more she got to know the place and its people, the more she felt like she was living in one of her childhood story books. This was everyone's dream come true. The scenery; the flora and fauna; the smells; and of course, the wonderful people. She had only met a few so far, but was looking forward to meeting everyone in the village if she could – she was like that. Even after all she had been through, she still had this childish, naïve attitude to life, only seeing the best in people, and never, ever expecting to be hurt. Anna had inherited her mother's outgoing personality, and was always the extrovert. They both had such a zest for life that everywhere they went, people just smiled because they were there. It was as if this aura of goodness followed them around.

Katharina felt so content that this was going to be her new home. She felt safe and secure here. She was going to have to do a lot of tying up of loose ends back in Vienna, and would have to go back there to collect the rest of her belongings. She decided she would discuss this with Dave later. She just hoped now that Anna would be impressed enough with Aberdeen University to accept her position, and then they could see about getting her accommodation in the city. Strathdee was close enough for her to travel to at weekends, so it would be a perfect arrangement.

She was lying, turning all this over in her mind, when Dave sprang up out of the bed saying, "Right – it's seven o'clock. Come on, up you get, we've got a lot to do today. We've got to be in town by nine."

It was a mad scramble for the shower, then after breakfast, they left for the city.

When they arrived at the university, they registered and picked up their Welcome Pack at the registration desks in the King's College Conference Centre. Of course, Katharina being the professional coordinator took command and surveyed the information and timetable. They were advised to attend a welcome address which was scheduled for several times throughout the morning. The timetable began at nine, and listed all the talks and discussions they could attend right up to two-fifteen in the afternoon. Katharina helped Anna to plan which ones would be relevant to her, also managing to schedule a hot lunch into their day. Dave couldn't stay right to the end as he was on-air at three, so he gave them directions to the bus station where they would get a direct service to Strathdee. They were to phone him from the village and he would come down to meet them.

Everything went as planned. Both Katharina and Anna were very impressed with the university and all the facilities. The course was exactly what Anna was wanting, and she decided to accept the placement. They gave Dave the good news on the drive back up to the caravan, and they sat making their plans before it was time to go down to the farmhouse for dinner with Frank and Tamara.

“I will need to go back to Vienna to sort everything out,” Katharina announced. “I have to resign properly from my job, say goodbye to Aunt Petra and Uncle Josef, and collect all my things.”

“Well, you’re not going there on your own,” said Dave. “I’m going with you. There is no way I’m letting you out of my sight again – I don’t want to be hunting for you for another nineteen years! I’ve got two weeks holiday due, so we’ll go after your two weeks here end.”

“Can I stay here, Mama?” Anna asked. “I could stay in the caravan, and I could look out for a flat or a bed-sit in the city while you’re away. Please?”

“Well, OK, if it’s all right with Dave.”

“It’s fine with me,” Dave said.

At seven o’clock, they headed down to the farmhouse. Tamara greeted them at the door, and took them inside. The interior of the farmhouse looked like it hadn’t changed in a hundred years. There were bare sanded wooden floors with rugs scattered here and there, an antique grandfather clock ticking away almost in slow motion in the hall, and a dark brown leather three piece suite in the lounge, with the stuffing trying to burst free from it in several places. The rest of the furniture was old – not antique, and never would be as it had suffered from just too much wear and tear. Frank and Tamara didn’t bother, as the house was also used as an office, with drivers and plant operators tramping in and out it every day in muddy boots and oily overalls.

Frank was preparing the wine, and he stopped what he was doing, stood back, and said, “Well, well, well! Just look at this! Not just one beautiful lady, but two! And Katharina – you just look gorgeous. And you must be Anna. Well, Dave, she must have got her good looks from her mother because it certainly wasn’t from you, you old dog!”

He pulled Dave aside while Tamara started speaking to the girls.

“Dave, lad, I’ve just spent a week with Ronnie Marsh at his Spanish villa, and it’s looking good – very good. We’ve just secured a massive amount of EU money for projects that are scheduled in this area, and we are the appointed contractors. Don’t ask me how he did it, Dave, but the man’s a genius. There were also quite a few girls involved, oh, and Ronnie’s trusty camera. He’s even got stuff on video now complete with sound that turns politicians into putty in his hands. He certainly sails close to the wind, but always comes up trumps. Anyway, the bottom line is that we’re more than secure for the next three years. And the Truck Stop is going from strength to strength. I think I underestimated what a little goldmine that place would turn out to be. My next project is to do something with the Station Hotel. It’s looking a bit tired and down at heel, and it’s a bit of an embarrassment when strangers specially make the effort to come to it for Maisie’s superb cooking.”

“Well, at least they don’t wreck the joint like Mad Mike Murray did that night,” Dave chipped in.

“Oh yes, do you remember that? It was our little effort to encourage the younger local element with the new pool table. Mad Mike lost his first game and he went out to his truck, brought his chainsaw in and sawed the legs off the table! Then he smashed the optics and the mirrors behind the bar with one of the legs! You just couldn’t make that up, Dave, could you?”

“Do you remember what he did at Christmas, Frank?”

By now, the ladies had joined in the conversation.

“Oh, yes. Listen to this, everyone. This guy, Mad Mike, is drinking in the hotel bar on Christmas Eve. He’d had about five pints, and this local layabout that was in the bar starts insulting him – calling him a fat pudding, casting doubts on his parentage, and seriously undermining his abilities as a woodcutter. Well, instead of just thumping the guy as any normal person would do, he dives out of the bar, grabs his chainsaw from the back of his truck, fires it up and fells the village Christmas tree – lights and all! He even cut right through the mains supply and fused half the street! Then he drove home! The guy’s a complete maniac!

“Anyway, I want to bring the hotel a bit upmarket, encourage families and people out for the day at the weekends. I want to try karaoke nights, and quiz nights, and maybe even run a talent contest, but the whole place needs a makeover first.”

When she could get a word in edgeways, Tamara invited them to all sit at the table.

“I have cooked a very traditional Russian meal for us tonight, I hope you will enjoy it,” she said. “I have, for the first course, the most well-known Russian soup called ‘borscht’, a tangy dish that gets its sweetness from beets and its tartness from sour cream. I have made this borscht with beef. You can have a vegetable one, but I think the beefy one has more body. Next, for our main course, we have Kotlety Pozharskie, which is ground chicken cutlets prepared with lots of butter and cooked in breadcrumbs. There is a full choice of vegetables, and my own recipe mushroom sauce. For dessert, I have made ‘Vareniki’, which are dumplings filled with fruit. Now, please, I hope you will all enjoy.”

When Tamara went into the kitchen, Frank said, “She’s a wonderful cook, you know. She’s a wonderful business administrator too, in fact, she’s wonderful at everything. She’s the best thing ever to happen to me. Now, tell me about yourselves. What are your plans?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Dave said, nonchalantly, “Anna’s got a place at Aberdeen University, and, um . . . oh yes, we’re getting married!”

“WHAT!” Frank nearly choked on his wine! “Well, congratulations! You really are suited to each other, but it’s taken you a long time to do anything about it.”

“Well, we kind of lost each other for nineteen years which didn’t help, and I’ve lost all of Anna’s childhood which is a big regret, but things are going to be great now.”

Tamara started to serve the soup, and Frank waited until she had put the two plates she was carrying down before he said, “They’re getting married.”

“Oh marvellous! What good news!” she said, pretending that she didn’t already know, and went over to kiss them both. “Congratulations – I know you will both be very happy – I can tell, you see, it’s Russian instinct. You are both such lovely people, and Anna too. Now, this makes tonight so much more very special. I’m so happy for you.”

When Tamara had finished serving and had sat down, Frank said, “Dave, it’s your birthday next week, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but don’t remind me. It’s another year older that I could do without!”

“Well, maybe so,” Frank continued, “but I wanted to get you a little present.”

“A present!” Dave scoffed. “Since when did you ever get me a birthday present, you old codger?”

“I know, I know, I’m not really a ‘birthday person’. But I want to do something

for you this time. I missed out on your big four-o, so I'm combining it with your forty-first. We've known each other a long time Dave, nineteen years, and that's a long time. You've been like a son to me and Tamara, and I feel proud of everything you do. We've been through a lot together, and we've always come up smiling. At the risk of bursting into tears, I can truthfully say you are the best work colleague, and friend that anyone could ask for." He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Now, before I start blubbering, here's my present to you."

He reached into his jacket inside pocket, took out an envelope and handed it to Dave. Dave opened it, unfolded the piece of A4 paper and stared at it. His mouth opened, his jaw dropped, then dropped further.

"What is it, darling," asked Katharina impatiently.

Dave was flabbergasted. "It's . . . it's . . . I can't believe it. Is this a wind-up? This is a document offering me a fifty per cent share in the radio station. You've got to be joking! It's got an acceptance clause on it for me to sign."

He looked up at Frank, who was already handing a pen over to him.

"I can't take this, Frank. You're mad – this is much too much. How about cufflinks instead? Come on, you've definitely flipped this time."

"No, Dave, I'm deadly serious. You've put a lot of effort into the station – more than I've ever done. You've got the majority of advertisers, you handle all the staff, *and* you work all the hours God sends when you need to. You deserve it, Dave."

Almost speechless, Dave managed to say, "I don't know what to say, Frank."

"Just sign the bloody document, and then we can all get on with our meals!"

They all laughed, Dave took the pen and signed, and there was a round of applause. Frank lifted his glass and proposed a toast: "To a new chapter in the life of Strathdee FM, *and* to Dave, Katharina and Anna."

The radio station was playing in the background on the music system, and Fiona was on her programme.

"She's so good, isn't she?" commented Katharina.

Frank looked up from his now empty soup plate, and lifted his glass of wine.

"Yes, she is. She's a natural, but we don't tell her that – she might want to get paid for it! But look at it this way. How often do you get kids actually wanting to stay in, or sit in their cars in the village car park specifically to listen to a radio show nowadays? That is the real indication of a good presenter. I honestly think if she did get paid for it, she wouldn't enjoy it so much and the show would suffer."

Tamara started to bring the next course in, and joined in the conversation.

"Whenever money is involved, Frank will always take the cheaper option. You know, he actually gets paid by the government for employing young David White on the morning show. He's on some kind of work placement training scheme for six months."

Katharina started her main course. "This is delicious, Tamara, you must give me the recipe, but I don't know if I could cook it in a caravan."

"It's really very simple, darling. It's just chicken cutlets, shredded and mixed with bread crumbs and a lot of butter. You have to shred it and re-shred it about three or four times, mixing the butter in at the right moment – that is the secret. There are a few other things added as well, and then you shape it into little dumplings and cook them in more breadcrumbs to get the crisp exterior. But as for the mushroom sauce, that was my mother's recipe, and I would never give that to anyone."

When they had finished the main course, Frank helped Tamara to clear the table, and he was away for about five minutes. They could hear him chatting to Tamara in the kitchen, and when they both came back through, they sat down, looking like they had something on their minds. Frank was the first to speak.

“Now Dave, Katharina, and Anna – you are included in this as well. Tamara and I are overjoyed at your good news. Have you set a date for the wedding yet?”

“No,” said Dave, “but we’d like it to be as soon as possible. We thought Christmas would be magical.”

“What a good idea,” Frank agreed. “As you know, it is magical here at Christmas, with the tree and the lights in the village, and if we get the added bonus of snow, well, it’s like a Christmas card scene. Anyway, I digress. Tamara and I want to give you both a special wedding present.”

Dave thought for a minute – *he’s going to give us the caravan.*

“Now, you’ve been living in that caravan for how long, eighteen years?”

Here we go, I knew it!

“That’s a long time to live in a caravan,” Frank continued. “Too long. Dave and Katharina, we want to give you the woodman’s cottage.”

Dave nearly choked. He took a quick sip of wine, and dribbled it all down his chin. Wiping his face with his napkin, he recovered enough to say, “Well, that’s a really nice thought, Frank, but the place is a mess. We’d be cheaper buying a little cottage in the village.”

“No, no!” Frank protested. “Hear me out. I will get it all restored and modernised for you – it won’t cost you a penny. Ronnie Marsh in Spain said I could have it for myself as we were thinking about letting it out for self-catering holidays, but we don’t really need the money, and it’s a lot of extra hassle we don’t need either. The property is basically very sound – the walls are solid stone two feet thick! I’ll get a quote for the complete job from two or three firms, and you could be in it by the New Year.”

Dave was speechless. Katharina spoke instead. “Frank, we don’t know what to say, this is very generous of you.”

“My dear, just say ‘thank you Frank – we’ll take it!’”

“We will! WE WILL!” Katharina was squealing now, and she got up and gave Frank a great big hug and kiss. Then she hugged and kissed Tamara, saying, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Dave got up and hugged them too, shaking their hands and thanking them.

“Wow! What a night,” he said excitedly. “This is all unbelievable!”

“Now, time for dessert,” said Tamara, and she went through to the kitchen for the Vareniki.

The little fruit-filled dumplings were delicious, and everybody scoffed the lot, taking second helpings when offered.

“Let’s have coffee over on the comfy seats,” Frank suggested, “and would you like something a little stronger after it? I have a seventeen-year-old Isle of Jura single malt whisky. Can I persuade you, Dave? And what about the girls?”

“I would like a brandy if you have it,” asked Katharina.

“Same for me,” Anna added.

“This really calls for a celebration tonight,” said Frank, going over to the large sideboard and opening a drawer. He took out a box of Havana cigars and offered one to

Dave, taking one himself. “Ronnie gave me these last week. Nothing but the very best!”

Tamara poured herself a vodka, then said, “Now then ladies, I have some finest black Sobranie Russian cigarettes – please help yourself,” and she offered them to Katharina and Anna who hesitated as they looked at each other, then each of them took one. Tamara then took one herself and lit them all. They settled back into the old leather suite, and then Dave said, “We’d better go after this – I’m on-air at midnight.”

“No you’re not – not tonight,” Frank replied. “I asked Fiona if she would do your show tonight and she said she’d love to. What a girl! So, what are the rest of your immediate plans?”

“Well, Katharina and Anna are basically on two weeks holiday,” said Dave. “Anna has decided to accept the offer of a place at Aberdeen University, and Katharina will have to go back to Vienna at the end of next week to tie up all the loose ends. Anna wants to stay here in the caravan, and I want to go with Katharina as I’m never letting her out of my sight again. I’ve got two weeks holiday due, so I’d like to take them then, if that’s all right?”

“Well,” said Frank, “it’s all right with me as long as you get someone to cover your shows for you. But I’m only a partner – you’ll need to ask the other partner also if it’s OK.”

“Very funny,” laughed Dave.

“How are you getting over there?” asked Frank.

“By plane, probably, but we’ll have a lot of stuff to bring back. Maybe it might be better if we hire a car.”

“Right,” said Frank, “don’t go by plane, and don’t hire a car. Take my Range Rover and have a really good holiday out of it. Then you’ve got plenty of room for anything you want to bring back.”

Dave saw a problem. “Thanks a lot, Frank, that’s very generous, but I just couldn’t afford to keep that thing going in petrol. The V8’s just a gas guzzler!”

“Oh, it’s not so bad, really, if you keep the speed down and keep a light foot on the throttle. Anyway, take the fuel card and just put all the fuel on the company account. As far as the taxman’s concerned, you’re off to Austria to look at some excavators!”

“You don’t know how true that is, Frank.” Frank looked puzzled at Dave’s remark, but, of course, Dave was thinking of Katharina’s model excavators that she still had, and probably would bring back.

The evening continued with good malt whisky, excellent brandy, very potent vodka not available in the shops, and fine cigars and cigarettes. They were all enjoying themselves and the conversation was stimulating.

Back down in the village, the Station Hotel wasn’t exactly doing great business. It was built around the end of the nineteenth century to cater for passengers on the Deeside Railway. The Deeside Railway was opened on 8th September 1853. Eventually the line was extended to Aboyne and Strathdee in 1857 and then Ballater on 17 October 1866. The hotel had been very busy in its heyday, but by the time the railway was closed down in 1966 by the infamous transport minister, Dr Beeching, it had gone downhill. The owners at that time had just got too old to bother any more with it, and a young couple from Glasgow, Maisie and Tommy Mullen, bought it with some money they had

inherited. This was going to be their dream-come-true. Twenty odd years later, despite every effort, and lots of blood, sweat and tears, their dream was still a million miles away as they had slipped into serious debt, while the hotel was slipping into serious disrepair. The only things that kept them going were the local bar trade and Maisie's wonderful home cooking.

When Frank came along, he saved the day. He had been going there for the odd drink and meal, got chatting to them, and became friendly enough for them to unleash all their problems on him. Always on the lookout for an opportunity, he put together a buyout package which included retaining them as managers with a wage. Then he upgraded the bar and lounge, putting in a pool table, juke box and large screen TV with all the satellite sports channels. He promoted the 'home cooking' theme, and advertised the whole lot for six weeks on Strathdee FM. The transformation was amazing, and now it was doing really well, but the building itself needed a facelift inside and out.

Parked outside in the hotel car park that night was Archie's Land Rover, and beside it a black Mercedes with Dutch number plates. Parked at the bar inside was a very inebriated Archie, and beside him the two owners of the Mercedes. One of them was a heavily built gentleman in his late fifties with a shaved head and an immaculate suit. His name was Kees Manser. The other guy was dressed less formally, but still with expensive jeans and a designer T-shirt. He was called Joop Van Dam. They looked like they might be tourists to the other occupants of the bar. They weren't. They were freelance debt recovery agents – bounty hunters. They were the same freelance debt recovery agents that Katharina had the misfortune of meeting all those years ago. True to their word, they had never given up.

The Mermaid had finally been sold for scrap, and the proceeds divided equally amongst the creditors – small change compared to what they were actually owed. After three years, it became apparent that this debt may be more difficult to recover than they thought, as everyone connected with it had disappeared, except for poor Katharina, who had been of no help to them whatsoever. Never ones to give up, Kees and Joop had purchased the debt, and they put it on the back burner for a future attempt. With accrued interest over the years, the debt had grown arms and legs and now stood at two million pounds, give or take the odd pound. They had no way of tracking down Frank Bentley or Dave Buckingham at that time, until, later on, the internet was invented.

Three months previously, Dave had organised a computer expert friend of his to design and produce a website for the radio station. It was a good website, with pictures of the studio, the DJs and the surrounding area. There was a facility to e-mail the studio with requests, and currently they were working on adding a live audio stream so that the station could be heard anywhere in the world.

Kees Manser had been looking at the old Mermaid file one day, and just typed 'Dave Buckingham' into a search engine on his PC. He couldn't believe it when he saw the name appear on a link to a radio station in Scotland – Strathdee FM. He clicked on the link, and spent the next half-hour examining the website. Dave Buckingham was listed as one of the presenters, and in his profile, it said 'formerly of offshore radio station Mermaid Radio'. Eureka! Even better still, it listed as the station owner, a Mr Francis Benson. Not Frank Bentley, but close enough to probably be the very same. Kees was convinced that this was their man. He and Joop decided to go for it. This was the big one. This was the one that was going to finance their retirement. They got the ferry across the

channel and drove up to Aberdeenshire. They were going to get this money by fair means or foul – more likely foul! They were going to be millionaires.

The bar wasn't exactly busy that night. Archie was perched on a stool at one end – the end where the till was. His logic was that it saved Sheena the barmaid from walking too far when she served him. It also really meant he could see more of her as she kept returning to the till. Sheena and Archie had been having a 'thing' going for longer than most people's marriages lasted. They liked the pleasure and excitement with no responsibility, and now they were just in a comfortable rut.

Sitting over beside the open log fire nursing a pint, was a retired shepherd. Alasdair McLennan had retired the previous year at aged eighty, and his dog Quiney had retired too, although it took the dog a while to get used to it. It would try to round up the customers as they came into the bar, but now it just slept in front of the fire. The fact that the two Dutchmen were the only other customers in the bar made them a bit conspicuous.

Archie turned towards them and struck up a conversation.

"Are you on holiday, then?" he asked.

Kees replied, "Yes, we are having a little break. Recharge the batteries, you know."

"Why did you choose to come here, of all places? We don't get many foreigners here."

"Oh, we heard it was a very nice place, and we think an old friend of ours lives here. We thought we would visit him if we could find him."

"I might be able to help you there," Archie offered, waving his empty glass in the air to punctuate his statement.

"Would you like another drink?" Kees asked him.

"That's very good of you," said Archie. "I'll have a pint of Belhaven."

Kees caught Sheena's eye. "Three pints of Belhaven please, and whatever you are having yourself."

"Thank you, I'll have a gin and tonic," she said, smiling. After she served the drinks, she joined in the conversation.

"What's your friend's name?" she asked.

"Buckingham. Dave Buckingham," replied Kees. "We used to know him in Holland, but we lost touch."

"Well, we can help you there, can't we Sheena?" said Archie. "He's on the local radio station – that's it playing on the radio. He would normally be on at midnight, but the lassie's just said she's sitting in for him tonight. Dave has just found his old girlfriend, and they're having dinner at the boss's house to celebrate."

Kees and Joop looked at each other with a wry smile.

"Would that be Katharina?" Kees asked.

"The very same," said Archie. "Cheers!" he added, as he lifted the fresh pint to his mouth.

"Where does he live," Kees enquired, "because we would like to call on him tomorrow?"

"OK. Just go through the village, watch for the sign for Mains of Clarty and the big 'Benson's Plant Hire' sign beside it. Turn up that road for about half a mile and you'll come into a farmyard. That's the plant hire business that Frank Benson owns. The radio station's there too. Then take a wee forest track on the left, up through the trees for a

quarter of a mile, and then you'll see a big caravan. That's where Dave lives. Katharina and her daughter Anna are staying there too just now. She's Dave's daughter too, you know."

Finally, Kees asked, "This girl Anna, what does she look like?"

"I've only seen her once," said Archie. "Tall, long thick brown hair tied back into a bushy pony tail, and she wears glasses. Very nice, actually." Sheena scowled at him.

"Thank you, I think we might just find our friend tomorrow."

Kees turned to Joop and said to him quietly in Dutch, "All the little birdies are in the nest together, my friend. I think we must snatch the baby bird, and see how badly the other birds want her back."

Joop nodded, and an evil smile spread across his face. "Let's go for a walk in the country," he said.

Dave, Katharina and Anna were walking back home to the caravan up the forest track after a wonderful night. They were laughing and joking, saying how perfect everything had turned out and how generous Frank had been. Dave's world had completely turned around in just a few days, and now he had no intention of packing up and going south. This was his home, and he had his lovely family around him. Life didn't get any better!

They reached the caravan and Dave and Katharina went in. Dave shouted, "Coffee everyone?"

Anna shouted back, "Yes please. I will be there in five minutes – I am just going to breath in this beautiful air first."

It was just after one o'clock and pitch dark, except for a little bit of moonlight just managing to squeeze between the trees. Anna walked over towards the woodman's cottage in the still night air and stood looking at it. *This will make a wonderful home*, she thought. She turned around and sat down on her favourite fallen tree, taking a deep breath.

Just then, there was a rustling sound in the undergrowth behind her and she heard a twig snap. She felt a little tingle of fear run up her spine, but then she thought:

It's just animals . . . they never sleep at night . . .

CHAPTER 12

Anna never felt the hand go over her mouth until it was too late. Instinctively, she tried to pull away, but a strong arm was already round her waist and she couldn't move. She couldn't scream even though she tried. All that came out was a little muffled squeak. One thing she was very aware of, apart from the sheer fright and terror, was a strong smell of aniseed coming from the hand. Before she could take in what was happening, she was being dragged away from the log she had been sitting on, her heels scraping along the ground, over to where the dirt track led up the hill to the transmitter. Then she realised there were two of them as she heard her attacker's voice say something in Dutch. His accomplice replied in the affirmative, and they both proceeded to manhandle her up the stony track out of sight of the caravan while she struggled in vain to free herself.

After what seemed like an eternity, they stopped and stood quite still, listening. All that could be heard in the pitch darkness was the hooting of an owl, and some unidentifiable noises coming from animals in the forest. It was a warm, balmy night, but Anna was shivering through fear and shock. Kees released his grip on Anna's mouth, still holding her tightly by the arm, while Joop shone a torch directly into her face. Then Kees spoke for the first time.

"You are Anna, yes?"

"Yes," she replied, shaking. "Who are you? How did you know my name? What do you want?"

Kees continued. "I will ignore your first two questions as you do not need to know the answers. In reply to your third question, I will not beat about the bush, as they say. We want two million pounds which a certain Frank Benson owes us. You are going to help us to persuade him to hand it over. If you cooperate, you will not get hurt – maybe only a little bit wet and dirty, it is up to you. Now tell me please, what is up this track?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Anna replied defiantly.

Quick as a flash, Kees grabbed her whole face in his huge hand, and squeezed it in his famous grip, knocking off her glasses in the process, and then he said, "Now let's get this quite clear, my dear. You do not have a choice in any of what we intend to do. Your only choice is whether you remain unhurt, or get seriously damaged. Do you understand?" He punctuated this last bit with an extra hard squeeze of her face, to which they both heard the crack of a jawbone protesting against the severe force.

Anna was terrified now, and she stuttered, "O . . . O . . . OK. I will help you. Please don't hurt me," and she put her hand up to her cheek, feeling the pain as she touched it.

"Where are my glasses? I need my glasses, please," she cried.

Joop bent down and found them lying on the gravel track.

He put them into his top jacket pocket, saying, "I will keep hold of them for you until we get this sorted out. My insurance. We wouldn't want them to get broken, would we? Now, will you tell us what is up this hill?"

Anna decided to cooperate. "The transmitter mast for the radio station is up there, and there is a concrete building beside it."

"Good girl, good girl," said Kees, "now you are seeing sense. Right, we are going

to take you up to this building, break into it if we can, tie you up inside it, phone your father's boss and tell him he can have you back in one piece when he pays his debts. It is all very easy really, as long as everyone cooperates nothing can go wrong and nobody will get hurt. Do you understand?"

"Y . . . y . . . yes," Anna replied, tears running down her face.

They climbed up the track for another thirty minutes, and then stopped. Joop shone the torch around, but all they could see were trees, with the track winding its way up the hill through the forest and disappearing into the trees.

"How much further is this building?" Kees asked Anna.

"I have only been up here once and it took us an hour, but we kept stopping. I think another fifteen minutes maybe," she said. Just at that moment, she was sure she could hear her Mama and Dave shouting her name in the distance, and the echo bouncing off the hill opposite.

"OK, let's keep on going," said Kees, puffing and panting. He wasn't used to hills like this in Holland.

Without any warning, they turned a corner, and there it was towering above them. The transmitter mast was festooned with red lights at regular intervals all the way up it. This was a safeguard for the local gliding club which was nearby. A square, dark shape appeared beside it, and as they got closer, a powerful halogen spotlight burst into life, triggered by an infra-red detector, lighting up the transmitter building and the yard. The yard containing the building and the mast was surrounded by a high chain link fence, with double gates half way along one side. They approached the gates and read the notice attached to one of them. It said:

STRATHDEE FM TRANSMITTING SITE
IN EMERGENCY, TELEPHONE: 01339 450450
DANGER – KEEP OUT.
ACCESS TO AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY.

WARNING
STRONG RADIO FREQUENCY FIELDS EXIST IN
CERTAIN AREAS OF THIS TRANSMITTING SITE.
IF YOU HAVE A CARDIAC PACEMAKER OR
BONES REPAIRED BY METAL / PLASTIC BONE
IMPLANT, YOU MUST REPORT THIS FACT TO
STATION RECEPTION ON YOUR ARRIVAL.

They all read the sign, and Kees programmed the telephone number into his mobile phone. Then a big grin spread across his face as he inspected the gate closely. The latch for locking the gate was pulled shut, but the lugs where the padlock should have been were empty. Someone had been careless when they were locking up. There, beside the gate, hooked onto one of the links of the fence, was the big brass padlock.

"This is our lucky night," said Kees, as he unlatched the gate, pushed it open and ushered everyone through. As they walked up the gravel path to the transmitter building, they were aware of a deep humming sound all around them. This was coming from a large electrical transformer in a cage, located to the side of the building, obviously for

powering the equipment in the building.

When they reached the grey door of the transmitter building, Kees couldn't believe his luck. The hasp for the padlock was swinging open, and the padlock was hanging on a hook beside the door. However, the door was locked, but only on a Yale-type lock. Kees turned to Joop, and said, "Joop, please do your speciality!"

Joop stood back, and then took a run at the door, smashing his size ten boot into it just below the lock. There was an almighty bang and the whole door, including the frame, shook, but the door remained firmly in place. Joop walked backwards a few paces, and then did a repeat of the operation. This time, the door burst open, the latch ripping itself out of the wood and splinters of the door frame flying everywhere.

Kees said, "I see you have not lost your touch, my friend," as Joop stood back rubbing his hands together while admiring his handiwork.

They all entered the building, and Joop switched on a light switch he found while shining the torch around, and he blinked as two fluorescent lights flashed once, twice, three times, then burst into life. He then pulled the door shut as best as he could, considering the damage he had caused. The first thing they all noticed inside was the heat. There were racks and racks of equipment, which all seemed to be running as various lights of many different colours were either flashing out and in, or staying on constantly. Lots of meters with their own backlights were visible on the front of the racked equipment, and the needles were indicating various results from the performance of the equipment – much too technical for any of them to understand. There was also a pungent smell of a mixture of hot metal and plastic, and an intrusive whine of discordant notes filled the room, coming from all the pieces of live equipment. They all got a fright when a large cooling fan the size of a car tyre suddenly started up behind the racking, sucking out the generated heat, and expelling it up a big shiny flexible pipe which disappeared through the wall. The noise from the fan was too loud for anyone to speak, so Kees beckoned them to follow him into the room between the racks of equipment. Joop was now gripping Anna tightly by the arm, and jerked her sharply as they followed Kees. He casually strolled along as if he was at an art gallery looking at the exhibits.

The first large cabinet had a plastic etched notice stuck to it bearing the legend:

STRATHDEE FM TRANSMITTER
104 MHz FM

Behind a window in a locked panel, there were lots of knobs, switches and flashing lights, with illuminated dials indicating 'STATION INPUT' and 'STATION OUTPUT'. Opposite the transmitter on the other side of the alleyway was a whole wall of racked equipment, all of it running. The notices on the modules read, 'DEE TAXIS'; 'BENSON'S PLANT HIRE'; 'FORMULA ONE COURIERS'; and 'DEESIDE RECOVERY'. All of these companies rented space on the mast for their aerials, except, of course, for Benson's, as Frank owned the whole facility.

"Very interesting!" said Kees after inspecting it all. "Now, we must formulate our plan without wasting any time."

They walked back between the racks of equipment to where a door led into a small room. Kees switched the light on and they could see it was some kind of small office-cum-kitchen. There was a sink unit and worktop with a kettle and a microwave oven. Two tubular chairs sat at either side of a cheap wood-effect desk. On the desk was

an open blueprint diagram of some kind of electronic equipment, and beside it, a laptop computer with the obligatory coffee cup beside it, containing the dregs of someone's last drink. Also on the desk was a cable reel half full of coaxial cable, and a small plastic wallet with some electrician's tools in it.

Kees surveyed the situation. He noticed two water pipes running up the wall which then turned off at ninety degrees to feed the sink. He then went over to the table, unwound a long length of cable from the reel, and cut it with a pair of wire cutters from the toolkit. "Bring the girl over to the pipes," he shouted to Joop.

Joop obeyed, and then he tied Anna's wrists together and finally lashed her tethered wrists to the water pipes. When she let out a little yelp, he loosened the knot and pulled the flex further away from her skin. She pushed against the flex as he did this, and the final result was a very sloppily tied knot. She began to wonder if this was intentional on his part.

"I hope this is not hurting you, my dear?" he enquired.

Terrified, all she could manage was a little squeak, and a shake of her head.

"Now, I must make an important phone call," he said, pulling his mobile from his pocket.

Back down at the caravan, Katharina and Dave were mystified as to where Anna could have gone. They walked all around, shouting her name in the still night air. All they could hear was their echoes coming back to them.

"Maybe she's gone back down to the farmhouse for something she forgot," suggested Dave.

"No, no, she would tell me first," Katharina said. "She is a very thoughtful girl, and she would never do anything like this."

"Anyway, I think I'll go back down to the house and check. I'll also check the studio. She can only be either there, or up the hill at the transmitter, and she wouldn't be going up there for a walk at this time of night, would she?"

"OK darling," Katharina said, "I will stay here in case she turns up. Dave – I'm really, really worried. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Don't worry, my love, we'll find her. After all, this is Strathdee!"

Dave arrived back down at the farmyard to find all kinds of mayhem. Clive had abandoned his programme when he had taken the call on the studio phone. He had to run over to the farmhouse and bang on the door to get Frank out of his bed on the strict instructions of the caller, who said he would phone back again in fifteen minutes to speak to him.

Both Frank and Tamara were running over to the studio in their dressing gowns when Dave arrived.

"What's going on, Frank?" he shouted. "Have you seen Anna? She's disappeared."

"No, I haven't, Dave, but something's not right. Someone is phoning here in a few minutes and it doesn't sound good. I hope the two are not connected – you know – Anna and this phone call."

“Oh God, Frank, are you thinking what I’m thinking? Could it be our past catching up with us?”

“Don’t say that, Dave, please don’t say that.”

At that precise moment, the phone rang. Frank pounced on it and lifted the handset.

“Hello”.

“Hello, is that Mr Benson? Mr Frank Benson, formerly Mr Frank Bentley?”

Frank’s heart sank. “Who is this?”

“I think you know who this is, Mr Benson. I think you know very well who this is. I think your friend Katharina will have told you all about us, Mr Benson. Oh, by the way, are you missing anybody by any chance?”

“Anna,” Frank shouted down the phone. “Anna. Where is Anna? What have you done with her?”

“You don’t need to know where she is. She is with us, Mr Benson, or can I call you Frank? She is such a lovely girl, Frank, so helpful. She is going to help us with our task. So are you, Frank, and if you don’t, well . . . she just might meet with an unfortunate accident. Now, we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

“What do you want?” Frank growled.

“I think you know what we want, Frank. You still owe some people a rather large debt. We have taken over the debt, and it’s amazing, Frank, how that debt has grown. It has matured very nicely over the years, and now stands at a very healthy two million pounds. Now, Frank, you will pay us that debt within the next twelve hours in order to get your lovely Anna back safe and sound. Do you understand me?”

“I can’t do that!” Frank gasped. “Where can I get that kind of money in that time?”

“Oh, I think you can, my dear Frank. I happen to know that you have access to that kind of money. Now, do you have a pen and paper? I want you to write down a number I am going to give you. It is an account number with a bank in Zurich, and you will make sure the money is deposited in it by close of business today. Now, do you understand me?”

All of the colour drained from Frank’s face. He was beaten. “OK, go ahead,” he said quietly. He wrote down the number and the bank that Kees read out to him.

Then Kees said, “Fine. Now we are getting somewhere, Frank. I will call you again at, say, 10 am to make sure you have made the transfer. Goodnight, and sleep tight! Oh, and one more thing – NO POLICE. If you are so stupid as to contact them, we will know, and the girl will pay for it.”

Frank replaced the receiver, trembling, and said to Dave, “Come over to the house. And Clive – you carry on with your show as if nothing has happened. OK?”

“OK, boss.”

Back at the farmhouse, Dave phoned Katharina on her mobile and told her everything. She was absolutely distraught, and it brought back all the memories of her ordeal with these men.

“I shall be back up very soon, darling, please try to stay calm,” he said, trying to reassure her.

“Dave, I don’t have that kind of money,” said Frank, panicking. “All I can do is phone Ronnie in Spain and put myself at his mercy. He has millions stashed away.”

He lifted the phone and dialled the Spanish villa. It rang for ages, and then a sleepy voice said, “Hello. Who is this at this ungodly hour?”

“Ronnie, it’s Frank.”

“This better be good, Frank, you woke me up!”

“Oh it’s good, Ronnie, it’s so good that it’s the biggest load of shit you’ve seen in a long time. Ronnie, I need two million quid by four o’ clock today.”

“WHAT? Is this some kind of joke? Frank, are you drunk?”

“Ronnie, I’m deadly serious. The debt collectors from years ago have caught up with us. They have kidnapped Katharina’s daughter and given me twelve hours to pay the money into a Swiss numbered bank account.”

There was silence at the other end. Frank was the first to speak. “Ronnie, are you there? Did you get all that?”

Finally, Ronnie spoke. “Frank, oh Frank, what have you done, old boy? I can’t get you two million. I’m having problems of my own just now. I’ve just had to sell one of the helicopters. I have only one suggestion for you.”

Frank was almost in tears by now. “Ronnie, you’re my last hope, mate. Can you not help us?”

“Frank, the only thing I can do is this. Now listen closely. If you can stall these people for another twenty-four hours, I can get you a hit man who will take them out for you with a high velocity precision rifle. You will have to pay him, though, and it will cost you thirty grand. That’s the best I can do, mate. Sorry.”

“Ronnie, I’m sorry to lay this on you. Thanks. Thank you, mate. I think we *will* have to take you up on your offer. We’ll talk about it and get back to you.”

“Do I go back to bed, then?” asked Ronnie.

“No, mate, go and make yourself a cup of coffee. I think we will be phoning you back very soon. Maybe in an hour or two.”

This was well out of Frank’s league, and certainly way beyond real life for Dave. This was stuff right out of a crime novel or a movie. He had read books like this and had thrown them down half way through; saying that they were too far fetched as nothing like that would ever happen in reality. Now he was living it.

After Frank finished the call, he turned to Dave and said, “You go back up to Katharina and tell her what’s happening. Let’s take an hour or so to get our heads around all this. Maybe she won’t want guns involved where Anna’s concerned. Personally, lad, I don’t see that we have any choice. I’ll go back over to the studio in case there’s another phone call, and I’ll give you a call on your mobile in about an hour and a half. OK?”

“OK, Frank. This is terrible, Frank, it’s like your worst nightmare. What about the police, Frank?”

“He warned me about that.” Frank tried to be tactful with his words. “He said it would affect Anna’s safety if we contacted them.”

“Oh God, what are we going to do?” cried Dave, his eyes filling up with tears.

Frank put his arm around him, and said, “Let’s take some time out – have a breathing space. At the moment, everyone is safe. We just need to work out what to do. Go on – go back up to Katharina just now.”

Dave left the farmhouse and sprinted back up the track to the caravan. When he

got there, Katharina was beside herself with grief, shaking, sobbing and speaking incoherently. Dave tried to comfort her, and then put the kettle on for a calming cup of tea.

Back up at the top of the hill, the three of them were standing in silence in the little office. Then Kees beckoned Joop out into the main transmitter room, and spoke.

“Joop, my friend, we are winning so far. We have such a good plan that nothing can go wrong. However, we do need to give ourselves some extra insurance just in case. I suggest that we work out how we can put the girl in some potentially serious danger and terrify her, so that if Mr Benson starts to mess us about, we can tighten the screws, as it were, and get her to plead directly with him over the phone. It usually always works. We need to find somewhere dangerous, and I immediately thought of tying her to the transmitter mast, but it would be dangerous to us also with the risk of radiation burns. We need to find a lake, a river or a cliff edge - somewhere where we can tie her up, so that one slash of a knife to the rope, and . . . goodbye Anna!

“This is quite a rocky area, so I will go outside with the torch to look about for a suitable spot. We have plenty of time, and as long as we have her in a suitable spot by nine o’ clock, we should have all of this wrapped up by ten. As previously arranged, the bank will telephone me at ten as soon as the transfer has been made. Then we rush down to the car and make haste back to Holland.”

“What if the bank doesn’t phone?” asked Joop.

“We have to hope that they will phone, but if they don’t, we put the girl in such terrible danger, and then get her to speak directly to Frank Benson on the mobile phone. A damsel in genuine distress has very persuasive powers in getting results. You do remember when we re-possessed the Rolls Royce, don’t you?”

Taken aback, Joop replied, “But that girl died, didn’t she?”

Quite calmly, Kees replied, “Yes, my friend, she did. But we did get the car, didn’t we? Just remember and never forget: two million is one hell of a kill! Now, you go back in and guard our guest, while I do a little reconnoitring.”

Kees went out the door with the torch, and Joop went back into the office.

“Let’s see if we can get a cup of coffee going here,” he said.

Anna was surprised to hear him being almost human. “What are you going to do with me?” she asked.

Joop ignored her and hunted in a wall cupboard, found a jar of instant coffee and a tin of sugar, and then proceeded to wash out two dirty cups that were lying abandoned on the draining board. He filled the kettle and switched it on. With great precision, he carefully measured out two rounded teaspoonfuls of coffee and emptied them into the cups.

“Do you take sugar and milk?” he asked Anna.

“Yes, one sugar please. Now, please, can you tell me what you are going to do – I’m scared.”

Joop made the coffee, put the cups down on the desk and sat down on one of the chairs. He started drinking his; quite oblivious to the fact that Anna was tied up and couldn’t even reach her cup. After taking a sip from his cup, he scratched his chin thoughtfully, and then said, “My friend has plans to tie you up somewhere very

dangerous by morning, then use your terror as a lever in getting the money out of this Frank Benson – but only if the bank does not contact him by ten to say it has been transferred. I have reservations about this plan, as the last time we tried something similar, the girl died. I do not wish to retire with another death on my conscience, so you better be very, very careful.”

“Can I have a drink of coffee, please?” Anna asked.

“I’m sorry, please forgive me,” Joop said, and he raised the cup up to her mouth, letting her take a few sips. Anna thought he had completely changed now that he was on his own. She thought she would push her luck a little further.

“Can I have my glasses back now, please?” she asked, giving him a pleading look.

“Oh, yes, I suppose so. I forgot all about them. Here you are.” He took them out of his jacket pocket and carefully slipped them onto her face.

Outside, Kees had scrambled round to the rear of the building where the ground was much rockier. He had to clamber over some large rocks while shining the torch all around him, and he was getting quite breathless with the effort. This was looking promising. He was looking for a cliff edge, and without warning, he suddenly found one, almost tumbling over the edge. He stopped dead in his tracks, his heart pounding with the unaccustomed exercise and the sudden fright, and grabbed hold of a small silver birch tree which was growing between the rocks on the cliff edge. He shone his torch downwards, over the edge, but couldn’t see the bottom – it was a long way down. He could hear some fast-flowing water down there, rushing through the gorge in a frenzy, its sound distorted by the rocky walls and making it sound like he was listening to it through a drainpipe. Kees didn’t know it, but he was staring down into the depths of Lover’s Leap.

A wry smile spread across his face. He had found his dangerous spot. This would fit the bill perfectly. He turned to make his way back to the transmitter building, and the pain suddenly hit him like a sledge hammer. It gripped his chest like a massive steel claw, and then his arm. His wry smile quickly changed to a contorted grimace, as he let out a yell. He lost his footing, and as he began to slip over the edge, he grabbed hold of the silver birch, and was left dangling there with no hope of being able to pull himself back up. The pain was unbearable, and as he began to feel himself slipping into unconsciousness, he kept on yelling for help.

Joop was beginning to like this girl. Against his better judgement, he sat chatting to her, and even learned about her plans for Aberdeen University. He had untied one of her hands so that she could drink her coffee herself, and he was actually beginning to feel sorry for her. Half an hour had passed since Kees had gone outside, so to prevent himself from getting any closer to the girl, he told her he was going outside for a minute to see if he could see his friend. He had to remain objective, and not let any personal feelings get in the way.

Once he was outside, he stood still in the calm night air. The sky was beginning to get light in the east as dawn approached. Then he heard it: a strangled cry coming from

behind the building. There it was again. It sounded like Kees, but different somehow. Joop quickly made his way to where the noise was coming from, and when he was right beside the spot, he still couldn't see anyone. Then reality struck him hard when he looked down and saw his friend. There he was, dangling over a sheer drop with his hand tightly clamped around a birch tree which was growing between the rocks, right on the edge.

"Kees, Kees," he shouted, "hold on, hold on tight. I will get you back up."

Joop edged himself closer to his friend, still shouting for him to hold on. As he got nearer to him, some rocks broke away from the edge and rattled their way down into the abyss. His heart was pounding like a pile driver now as he wrapped his right arm around the silver birch tree, and then with his left arm, he reached down and grabbed hold of Kees's arm.

"I've got you, Kees, I've got you. Pull hard on the tree while I pull you up. We'll have you up in no time, my friend. Then we'll get a doctor."

Silver birches are hardy trees. They will grow where no other tree would ever consider growing. Peat bogs, marshes, rocky outcrops with little or no soil – it's all in a day's work for the silver birch. They do not, however, take too kindly to supporting the weight of two well-built Dutchmen. This particular tree had now met a challenge far worse than the severe inclement weather and barren terrain that it would normally take in its stride. With a tearing of root tissue and a cracking of loose rock, it finally gave up.

Kees, Joop, the tree, and a pile of rocks cascaded down into the murky depths of Lover's Leap. It wasn't a straight forward journey, as they smashed into rocky protrusions jutting out from the walls of the gorge on their way down. There was no chance for any of them. This was the end. A gruesome, messy, final end.

Anna sipped at her coffee, her jaw aching every time she took a mouthful. Twenty minutes had passed since Joop had gone outside, and she was beginning to wonder, even hope, that something had gone wrong. She still had one hand free – her left one – but her right hand was tied very firmly to the pipe with a multiple knot that would take more than one hand to undo. At least, she could now see what she was doing, and she could see around the room clearly for the first time. There were the usual Health and Safety notices on the wall above the desk, describing what to do in case of electric shock, and showing the correct way to lift heavy weights. As her gaze panned around the room, she saw a large pictorial calendar with Scottish scenes. Then, beside the calendar on the wall, was a cream plastic box which looked a bit like a baby alarm. It was connected to a cable which ran down the wall to a black power supply plugged into a socket. The switch on the socket was off. She screwed her eyes up, trying hard to focus on the plastic box, and could see that it had two buttons right in the middle, with the word 'CALL' etched into one of them, and 'ANSWER' on the other one. Someone had attached an adhesive label, made from one of these instant label machines, above the 'CALL' button. It said 'STUDIO'. She figured out that this must be an intercom between the transmitter building and the studio down in the farmyard.

She was already hatching a plan, but she was terrified that Joop would suddenly come in through the door, and if he caught her trying to attract attention, well, it didn't bear thinking about. She sat there for another fifteen minutes with no sign of him. All she had for company was the continual whine of all the equipment. She was also sure she could hear very faint music, with someone talking in between the tracks, and she realised it was coming from a pair of headphones which she could just see through the open office

door, hanging on a hook and plugged into a patch board beside the transmitter. This was Clive's programme on Strathdee FM.

Joop had now been gone for over half an hour, and Anna was sure something had happened to him. Perhaps he had got lost looking for Kees. Perhaps Kees was lost too. She decided to try out her plan, which was to switch on the intercom and press the 'CALL' button. The only trouble was that she couldn't reach the switch, or the call button. Then she noticed a stack of aluminium rods lying propped against the wall beside the sink. They were used for repairing damaged elements on the aerials. She selected the longest one, and found that she could reach the power socket no bother at all. She positioned the rod carefully on the bottom of the rocker switch, and pushed.

'Beep'. The intercom bleeped into life and a red light came on above the 'CALL' button. Next, she positioned the rod directly on the 'CALL' button and pushed. A green light came on beside the red light, and two seconds later she could hear a repeated tone coming through the little speaker, just like the 'engaged' tone on a telephone, only slower.

Back down in the studio, Frank was pacing up and down like a caged tiger. He felt totally helpless, and hated being out of control. He had only told Clive that some people had kidnapped Anna, and were holding her to ransom for a large amount of cash. He didn't enlighten him as to the reason.

Frank had been going over all of the options, which were rather limited. If he went with the captors' wishes, he could probably only raise half a million. The rest would have to come from loans and sale of equipment, all of which would take days, if not weeks. The only other option – the hit man – sounded nice and final, but he didn't even know where they were holding Anna. He would never know anyway, as the money transfer was to be made directly to the bank and not to them in person. They had him over a barrel, whatever way you looked at it.

He was just about to go back to the farmhouse to phone Ronnie and try to squeeze half a million from him, in the hope that it would appease the captors. Failing that, he was going to request the hit man in the hope that he could find out where they were holding Anna. He had his hand on the door handle, ready to leave, when the little intercom on the wall burst into life. This one was never switched off, and it ran constantly on stand-by. Both Clive and Frank got a fright and they looked at each other, puzzled. Then, Frank started putting two and two together, lunged at the intercom and pressed the 'ANSWER' button.

"Hello, who's there?" he shouted.

A faint female voice came through the tiny speaker, saying, "Hello. Hello, can you hear me?" She sounded like she was a good distance from the intercom.

Frank's heart was beating hard and fast. This was Anna – he was absolutely sure. Without wasting any time, he replied, "Anna, is that you? This is Frank."

"Oh Frank, thank God. Thank God! I am tied up in the transmitter building and can't move. The two men who took me here have disappeared. They have been gone for almost an hour now, and I think something has happened to them. Please hurry – come up and get me, but be very careful – these men are very dangerous."

"Don't worry, Anna, I'll get Dave and Clive to come with me. And I'll bring my

shotgun.”

He told Clive to simulate a breakdown in the programme and announce that they were closing down for essential maintenance and would be back on air soon. He then dived over to the farmhouse and opened the gun cabinet. Tamara looked on inquisitively.

“We’ve found Anna,” he said to her, while removing the gun. “She’s tied up in the transmitter building. I’m going up there with Dave and Clive. You come with me and stay with Katharina.”

Tamara panicked. “Oh darling, please be careful. I don’t like this!”

“It’ll be OK,” he reassured her, “the men have disappeared. Anna thinks something has happened to them.”

Frank opened the Range Rover and they climbed in. After turning it, he stopped to pick up Clive, and they roared up the track to Dave’s caravan. Dave was already outside waiting as he had seen the lights coming up the track. Frank quickly briefed him as Tamara went inside to tell Katharina what was happening. Dave climbed aboard, and they slowly bounced their way up the rough track to the transmitter. When they reached the top, Frank parked the car, and they could all see light seeping from the door of the building. There wasn’t a sound to be heard, except for the deep hum of the transformer sitting in its cage like a captured wild animal.

“I’m going in,” whispered Dave, and he turned to Frank, saying, “keep me covered.”

He went up the gravel path to the broken door, the adrenaline pumping through his body. Frank followed him with the gun, and Clive kept a lookout all around them. Dave pushed the door open very, very slowly, then stopped and listened. Nothing. He ventured inside while Frank followed behind him, gun cocked ready to fire. The place was deserted. Then he saw the office light was on, and the door was ajar. He carefully approached the door, and then got a fright as he heard a squeal from inside the office. Anna saw him and thought it was Joop before she recognised him. Dave put his finger up to his lips to quieten her, and immediately set about untying her. Frank kept guard in the main building, and Clive kept guard outside.

Anna wanted to start talking, but Dave silenced her again by putting his finger up to his lips as they moved swiftly towards the car. Once Anna and Dave were safely in the car, Frank told them to lock the doors while he and Clive took a look around. Anna had told Frank that the men were going to look for somewhere dangerous to tie her up, and then they never came back. Clive, who knew this area inside out, said the only dangerous place here was Lover’s Leap, so he and Frank headed over to it.

It was getting quite light by now, and as they approached the edge of the ravine, Clive held his hand up to stop Frank from getting any nearer.

“I’m going to look over the edge on my tummy,” he whispered to Frank. “You keep a tight hold of my legs.”

When he peered over the edge, his suspicions were confirmed. He didn’t waste any time staying in that dangerous position, and sidled back carefully to safety. Standing up, he faced Frank and spoke.

“There’s a tree been freshly uprooted from the edge of the rock. Some of the rocks have also recently given way – you can see the fresh break and the churned up earth. More to the point, there are two men’s shoes stuck on one of the rocks that jut out, and there are various other bits of what looks like torn clothing caught on the jagged

rocks and tree stumps all the way down as far as I can see. The shoes are both different – one is a black leather shoe and the other one is a trainer – quite new by the look of it. Two people went over there, Frank. The water at the bottom is raging as usual, and I think that if anyone went right down there, they would have been torn to shreds and knocked senseless all the way down. If that didn't finish them, then they would have drowned, been dismembered in the torrent, and washed away. I think we can say your problems are over, Frank."

"Phew, Clive, you don't know how good that feels. Let's get back."

Back at the car, they told Dave and Anna what they had found, and Frank asked Anna, "What sort of shoes were the guys wearing?"

She thought for a minute, and then said, "The older man had black shoes, and the other one had white ones – possibly trainers. I remember as I couldn't see them clearly, but at least I could see their colour."

Frank turned to her and gave her a big hug. "The bad men have gone for good. Let's get back home."

Before driving off, Frank switched off the lights in the building and secured the broken door as best as he could with the padlock. He also padlocked the gate and they left.

Back at the caravan, Katharina and Tamara were outside to greet them. As soon as she saw her precious Anna, Katharina broke down in tears and hugged her for a full five minutes. They all went inside and calmly told the gruesome tale of what they had seen.

"I suppose we should really report this to the police," Dave suggested.

Frank replied, "Oh, I don't know, do you think that's necessary? All's well that ends well! I think we should leave well alone. It'll stir up all kinds of unsavoury things, and I think the girls have been through enough. Anyway, who's to say that the police won't think that we pushed the guys over the edge? They like to have things neatly tied up. They won't let this sit as it is. They like answers. It's not just us who would be affected; Clive's involved in this too, and it wouldn't be fair to him." Frank turned to Clive when he had finished speaking.

Clive quickly replied, "Clive wasn't even here tonight. It was just a figment of your imagination!"

"Good man! Good man!" Frank said, as he put his arm around Clive's shoulder. "Now, I think we should leave these good people to get some rest. Dave, I want you to take the rest of the time off until you set off for Austria. The three of you take the Range Rover and just go somewhere for a complete break. You're better out of here until this blows over. I'll cover your shows for you – it's about time I got back into the driving seat on the station again. Where would you really like to go?"

"That's fantastic, Frank. We'll do that. I would really like to go to the Isle of Skye."

"Right. That's settled then. You're off there tomorrow," and with that parting comment, Frank, Tamara and Clive left.

Dave, Katharina and Anna were so shattered that they spent the rest of the day in

bed, after finally getting to sleep at about five o' clock. Anna had to take pain killers several times for her jaw, but luckily nothing seemed to be broken.

The following morning, they packed some bags and loaded up the Range Rover. They set off along the A93, turning up the Cockbridge to Tomintoul road which would take them up to Inverness and then on to the west coast and Skye.

They settled down to enjoy the scenery in comfort, with the car radio playing in the background. That evening, as they crossed the Skye Bridge, the news came on the radio, and the first item made Dave pull up sharply on the verge to listen closely:

“Two Dutch tourists have met with a fatal accident in the Strathdee area. Their car, a black Mercedes with Dutch number plates was reported abandoned at the foot of a forestry track, near to Mains of Clarty, Strathdee. A search of the area revealed men's torn clothing and footwear strewn down the sides of the infamous Lover's Leap gorge. The Mountain Rescue team were called in, and they descended the gorge to find traces of dismembered body parts lodged in rocky crevices deep down in the ravine. Further downstream, two male bodies were found in a severely mutilated condition.

“From identification found on the bodies, and from their car's registration plate, Dutch police today confirmed that they were Kees Manser and Joop Van Dam, both from Gouda in Holland. Their next of kin have been informed. Locals in the Station Hotel, Strathdee, said they had spoken to the men who were over here for a short holiday. It would appear that they had gone for a spot of hill walking and fallen down the notorious Lover's Leap gorge. The gorge became famous in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a test for proposed suitors for the clan chiefs' daughters. They could not have their hands in marriage until they proved themselves by jumping over the gorge. Many young men met a gruesome end as they failed to clear the chasm.

“Local community councillor, Scott McPhee, said he had been campaigning for years to have safety barriers erected at the historic beauty spot, and he asked how many more lives were to be lost before some action was taken.

“Next in the news today, a local fly fisherman has landed a record fish on the River Dee in Royal Deeside. Archie Murdoch, a truck driver from Strathdee netted the whopper today at . . .”

Dave switched the radio off. “Well, at least we've managed to upstage Archie – not an easy task! Come on – let's get on with the rest of our lives!”

