

THE WORLD OF NICHOLAS MALLET.

Copyright 2002

When being driven by my sister, with my mother who loved an afternoon drive, near the New Forest, we came across a large mansion with a front pediment, down a long driveway, I thought the colour of the mansion garish. But it was set in a lovely dell and surrounded by old trees. I also imagined a small river behind the mansion. We were there just briefly only passing slowly. When my sister delivered us safely home I got fingers to laptop. As I was on holiday from Australia I must have got a little home sick! Well yes I could had thought of another name other than Nicholas but I didn't! By the way I have lovely siblings, so this story is based on imagination only! Or did someone whisper it in my ear, perhaps Alex!

Chapter One. Looking for a home.

Beneath the bower of two tulip trees, two figures lay peacefully side-by-side, their fingers entwined, both listening to the sound of the leaves brushing against one another in the summer breeze. A fourth honeymoon to celebrate, some real time together.

After a while they began their exertions once again. Eight months and fourteen days later a son was born, the fourth boy, fifth in line after the daughter who was three years older. They named him Nicholas, but were still bitterly disappointed. They had wanted another girl after all to take care of the hand me downs and to even up the children.

Shirley and Bill forked out the old baby clothes once again; the pram stroller was decrepit, but would at a pinch last for one more time. So the old clothes and fifth hand stroller would follow young Nick throughout his childhood, always the smallest and the easiest to cloth. Often dressed in an assortment of his sibling's old clothes. Nick would be easy to find with his cream coloured bubbly hair and high-pitched voice. Made louder as the elders constantly teased him unmercifully. After all, who would wear an old dress over a patched pair of shorts? Gary was the worst, just four years older, taller and slimmer and a bully to boot.

Tamara would side with Gary, whenever Nick complained, she took the side of the elder who ever that might be, and thus Nick was looked upon as an inveterate liar.

The Estate Agent drove quickly through the narrow lanes with barely a glance at the autumn colours.

"Soon be there Mr. Mallet" he eyed his client's golden head. The head merely nodded.

They seemed to have travelled an age through these country roads. Nick wasn't surprised that they seemed to slow down at every house or farm for sale. He supposed the agent was sizing up the opposition and how many properties were on their books. He smiled inwardly nothing so far seen had interested him.

"A bit run down, but you'd expect that after a few decades of absence. But the grounds are extensive with the Avon running near the boundary. And water rights as well." The Agent quickly glanced at him but no reaction. Strange one this he thought.

"Village about a mile away, down stream if you get my meaning, but it's a fair price, buy it myself if I had the loot!"

Nick nodded, uninhabited for decades, run down, extensive gardens probably over grown, priced to sell quickly, it seemed a snip at the price but that was the problem. Still worth a look, New Forest and all that. Far from the maddening crowd. Now who said that?

But he just nodded and as they reached a gravel road with sprouts of grass seeping up.

"Far is it now?"

"Just along here."

Just along here took another ten minutes and a bumpy rutted track. They slowed as two stone piers beside a two rusty metal gates came into view. The Agent got out and pushes the gates wide open then drove through.

"Not locked?"

"No need round here, nobody would come this way, they'd rupture their suspension."

"Locals?"

"None as far as I know one foresters house bit further over the bridge. But turn left at the start of the gravel leads you to the village. Well you said you wanted somewhere substantial and quite".

"I did indeed Mr. Denton, by the way I did not see your Agents sign here."

"Well we did have one, in fact we put five in all, but they keep getting blown away!"

Denton drove down a narrow curved tarmac road set between a wide avenue of huge beech trees. Soon a palladium style house came into view, Denton stopped the car by the imposing front steps.

"Think I'll sit over there on that garden seat whilst you peruse the house in your own time" Denton handed over the house keys and locking the car strolled over to a bench seat.

Nick clambered up the four stone steps and used the large door key to turn the lock, then pushed. The solid oak door didn't budge so he turned the key

back and pushed again, this time the door swung open. To his surprise an elderly man in black stood patiently waiting for him.

“What an idiot I am. It was already unlocked; you must be the agent’s man to show me around. I trust we haven’t kept you waiting.”

“Indeed not Sir, you have both arrived on time, and in good time.” He bowed and then ushered Nick into the house. “Feel free to wander about as you wish, I would suggest the attic rooms first and then down to each floor.” “How many are there?”

“Three floors, no basement as the water table is high and the house itself was built upon a plateau, thus the steps outside. If you would come this way, the servants staircase and is most useful to reach all floors.”

Nick traversed the various floors without incidence, one of the attic bedrooms had a small glass pane missing and shards of glass lay on the inside, a blackbird’s nest lay in the corner with five little beaks actively searching for food. A small pebble had caught under the door when he had first opened it and had scraped floor, he picked the pebble up and put it into his pocket. When he returned to the ground floor the caretaker had disappeared so he closed the front door and joined Denton on the bench.

“No furniture to speak of but I didn’t expect any not for the asking price, have you had many people interested in the property?”

“We’ve had a fair number look over it, but take a walk down by the river and just see what you get, admittedly the garden is unkempt but there’s 500 acres in the property as a whole, a worthwhile investment I’d say”

“Here are your keys to the house, didn’t need them really as the caretaker had unlocked the door already, seemed a nice sort of chap.”

Denton blanched but said nothing, so Nick strolled off along the path toward the river. He thought he smelt smoke as the pathway veered around the house rear and on down to the riverbank. There lay a decrepit boat ramp half submerged and a small wood fire burning brightly in a rock circle by a roughly made bivouac. Nick peeked inside and found two overcoats in the back. He heard voices coming toward him and two lads came along the riverbank. They were startled when they saw him and were ready to run.

“No just hold on there, I’m just a visitor here, do you guys live here?”

“We live over there, the white cottage but we come here to fish.”

“And get away from the family no doubt!” said Nick.

“No just fish, and cook as well, you see our fire.”

“Indeed and looks a pretty safe to me surrounded by river rocks and pebbles.” Nick dug into his pocket, “I’ve got this purple one to add to your fire surround.”

Before he could place one of the boys took it from him.

“My best one, Ash here nicked it last summer, didn’t you?” The boy turned to the younger one.

“I lost it Jack.” Replied the other sheepishly.

“I found a broken pane up in the attic there, the stone was in the room.”

“You won’t say anything will you to the gentleman in the house will you sir, he advised us we could build our shelter and fire here and we wouldn’t want to be asked to leave.”

“No I wont say anything. But tell me what you know about this place?”

“You thinking of buying it then?” Jack the elder put a small branch on the fire and placed a fish carefully on top.

“I guess it would be better to skewer the fish so you can rotate it.” Nick grabbed a piece of willow branch and cleaned off the leaves, then handed to Jack who lifted the fish from the fire and thrust the stick through the mouth and tail.

“Where did you learn that?”

“A long way south of here,” Nick smiled as the lads sat down to cook their fish.

“No rod.” Nick said more to himself but the boys pointed up stream where they had come from.

“The road bridge just up there, that’s how we get here from the cottage, if you want to know more ask Dad and Mum they’ve been here years, you can see our cottage through those birch trees.” Jack pointed across the river.

“Indeed I can, I have to go now, the Estate Agent is waiting, and I may pop in tomorrow if that’s convenient. Please ask your parents.”

“Best make the evening, Dad be home then.”

Nick nodded and returned up the pathway to rejoin Denton, who had moved into the car.

“Well any interest in the place”, he looked across at Nick when the passenger he was seated.

“Maybe, perhaps, but one more visit tomorrow. No don’t worry I have a hire car to bring me, just have a chat to the neighbours. Incidentally I’m surprised no one has taken a fancy to it, seems a great buy for the price.”

Denton stopped the car and got out to open the gates, he then got in again and drove through.

“I’ll close them,” said Nick and got out and swung the rusty iron gates closed.

“Probably because no one lives there any more, the atmosphere of the place if you get my meaning.” Denton looked squarely at Nick, “We don’t have a caretaker in the house nor any colleague of mine. You are the fifth one to tell me about an aged gentleman showing you around.”

“Well he didn’t actually, just pointed to the staff staircase and left me.”

“And how did the house feel on your perambulations through it?”

“Right, a bit of dust here and there, rooms seemed empty, save for a desk and chair in one plus a broken pane of glass up in the attic.”

“Right so how did the house feel about you?”

“That’s an odd question, but I’d say welcoming.”

“Really, most of those interested in viewing had found it the opposite. To be truthful I wouldn’t feel right about selling it without asking you that question. I myself have only been through the one time and to be frank once was enough!”

“You didn’t see the old gentleman then?”

“No but I got the distinct impression I was not wanted!”

“May I ask who will be the beneficiaries of the sale, are there family members left?”

“Of the Malling family, possibly not. In fact the estate was willed to the village as a whole, presumably for upkeep of the various facilities, such as the playing fields and memorial hall. You would need to ask around the village we are only interested getting it off our books quickly.”

“Thus the reduced price.”

Denton shrugged and drove them back through the forest now gloomy in the dusk.

XXX

Chapter Two. A home is found, complete with a resident family.

Nick found the road bridge and turned into the track that led to the white cottage. There was a Forestry Land rover parked on the small lawn so he drove in beside it. A short stout man came out the cottage and signalled him to come inside.

“Names Trent, Tom Trent and this here is my wife Florence. Jack told us you would come by, thinking of buying the old manor house he told us.”

Jack was sitting at the kitchen table and nodded. There was no sign of Ash and presumed as he was the younger he was in bed. He looked at his watch and it was past nine.

“I apologise for it being so late and this will only take a few minutes.”

“If it’s about the boys building a shelter on the bank over there, they were given permission by the old caretaker. Florence can’t understand why they couldn’t build in our yard but still that’s lads.”

“ I was just after some information on the property and the people who used to own it. The lads are welcome as I also saw the old gentleman and he seemed a pleasant sort of chap.”

“Well then,” Florence beckoned to the table, “have a sit now. Tom has been here thirty years now and he’s never been over the once. I went over when we married just to introduce myself and got short shift from them. Rang that huge bell and rattled that massive door, but never a peep. Felt quite eerie that place, spooked me up. I come from the village and heard all sorts of stories about the place, none of them pleasant.”

Nick nodded, Florence continued.

“Sometimes at night we see lights on in the upper floors, but we know nothing other than when its sold the village will gets its proceeds. What did you say your name was?”

“Nick Mallet.”

All this time Tom Trent had been nodding his agreement so Nick decided to leave them and he was ushered out into the night. He shook Tom’s hand and he whispered.

“Florrie’s not herself these days, we cope though.”

Just then they heard a high-pitched voice come from the barn.

“Be that you Uncle Tom?”

“Me and Mr. Mallet both, he’s come about the big house, now you get some sleep now young Ash and school tomorrow.” Tom turned to Nick,

“Sleeps in the barn, Florrie won’t have him in the house poor lad, not since he dropped her ruby glass, he be my dead sisters lad, now so we have him here. Company for our Jack you see.”

“Thank you Tom, I’ll pop over to the Manor another time but I am interested in it, goodnight.” Nick drove back over the bridge and was just about to turn

towards the Ringwood road when he spotted the old caretaker by the roadside. He stopped and opened the window.

“Do you want a lift Mr.?”

“Dunning Sir, just Dunning, and yes that be most welcome. Just turn here the right and you’ll see our entrance a little way along.”

They drove through the old iron gates and down the beech drive stopping in front of the steps.

“Be obliged if you could come in for a moment Mr. Mallet.” Nick followed Dunning up the steps into the house. The ground floor was ablaze with candles perched on three and two branched silver candlesticks on the floor.

“My apologies Master Nick we couldn’t place them any higher.”

“No furniture?”

Dunning nodded.

“Just along here to the kitchen, I’m sure Alice will have made a nice cup of tea.”

“Alice?”

“My wife”

They passed the main staircase and preceded along a side corridor, and then they came to a glass-panelled door and wonders of wonders a long refectory table with a dozen chairs and a large candle spluttering in a dish.

“Very medieval, and a Ray-burn to boot! Pleased to meet you Mrs. Dunning I do hope we have not put you to any trouble.” Mrs Dunning turned to a cream coloured teapot and poured a cup, which she then gently pushed toward him.

“Please do sit down Master Nick” Dunning indicated a chair. “Could you please advise me of your intentions to purchase the manor?”

“I can understand you wanting to ask me intentions but I can assure you both your jobs would be secure if I did buy the property.”

“That’s kind of you Sir, to consider us, however I’m asking on behalf of the Master and Mistress.”

“Of this house you mean?”

“Indeed.”

“I am seriously considering the property but cannot understand why it is so cheap, I wonder if I should engage surveyor, perhaps its roof or foundations are at fault. There’s an old saying in civil law about a buyer should be wary of a deal that seems too good.”

“Of course it’s a dam good deal my boy, and there absolutely nothing wrong with the house.” Nick spun round in his chair and there seated at the end of the table sat a middle aged man dressed in tweeds. The problem was that Nick could plainly see the chair back behind the man.

“ Ah, so the place is haunted that rather explains the cheap price and the strange goings on as reported by Mrs. Trent. Where do you keep the coffins then, do I run to fetch my gun, or stake, perhaps a silver bullet? ”

“Don’t talk absolute nonsense Mr Mallet, and never mention Florence Trent’s name in this house. Certainly I am not as I would seem, but I can assure I have no intention of harming you. Apologies for the shock, however we are getting rather fed up at the constant visitations and no sale.”

“May I ask who you are?”

“The names Malling, not too different from your own. We took a vote yesterday and have decided to offer the position, in short, part owner of the house.”

Nicks mouth dropped.

“Now drink your tea. Alice has made it very sweet which I understand is good for shock.” Malling then lifted his arm and swept it over the other chairs, two women and two young men suddenly appeared.

“Father, I wish you wouldn’t swish us in so fast it affects the balance of my ectoplasm whatever its called.”

“Ectoplasm” said the elder.

“Peter” he said nodding to Nick

“Alex” said the younger.

“My wife Lady Celia and my daughter in law Joan, Peter’s wife” Malling flourished his hands again and two ladies came into view, he wondered how many more spectres were to appear. But the younger lady kept flickering on and off.

“My wife is somewhat shy of strangers, but that’s the family” Peter smiled.

“You mind read as well.”

They all nodded.

“Presumably you gave everyone else the rattling chains and groans?” Nick looked at Lady Celia.

“I did no such thing young man, but I cannot vouch for the others.”

“There’s another thing Sir Horace.” Dunning raised his frame slowly from his seat.

“Indeed Dunning, but first things first, Mr. Mallet do you have enough cash or whatever to purchase the manor and its land and provide furniture to restore the house.’

”I do have sufficient funds to cover the sale and legal fees. Plus enough left over to rewire the house for electricity and maybe furnish a small flat.”

“Then that is decided, we welcome you into our home, you will be joint owner with myself. In future you can call me HE.”

“His Excellency? ”

“Don’t be frivolous Nick, my name is Sir Horace Edgar. We shall call you Nick. Everybody in agreement say Aye?” and there was a chorus of Ayes. Nick wondered what he had let himself in for but managed to say Aye to himself, at least Peter would have heard.

“Yes I did” came Peter’s far off disappearing voice. The Dunnings were still there.

“What was the other, Mr Dunning”?

“Well Master Nick, it concerns one of the boys over the river, but I think the master is more concerned with wrapping up the property, no doubt the other will come up soon enough.”

“You will excuse me if I ask if you were both employed by the Malling family?”

“Once Master Nick, we keep ourselves to ourselves here. We have a small cottage just behind the house in the shrubbery. We do have electricity installed both in both buildings obviously we keep the house switched off to save charges. The master before he passed over had made several provisions for our wages and maintenance. But we are getting older and would like to see the manor restored to its former glory. We have a spare room and you are most welcome to stay.”

“Thank you, but I’ll go back to the hotel and sign the contracts tomorrow, that way everybody will be happy, seems I have no option!”

“Forgive me for asking, but you seemed quite calm with tonight’s proceedings.”

“Well goodnight to you both, I have to admit the shock was tempered by Mrs Dunning thick sweet tea, I had felt a sort of kinship with this house and now I know why. No please don’t show me out, I can see Alex waiting for me at the doorway.”

Nick came out of the hall and followed Alex across the dark hall to the door. Nick’s hand brushed through that of Alex as he tried to shake hands.

“Try it again and let me concentrate,” Alex laughed.

This time the handshake was firm. Nick found his car had been turned to face up the driveway.

“You’ll have to watch Peter, always did love motor cars, I think yours is safe, it’s not too sporty!” Alex waved as Nick climbed in and drove off, the gates were open and then slowly closed behind him after he drove through. He shrugged his shoulders in disbelief and continued down the track.

xxx

Chapter Three. Settling in and a new friend.

Three weeks passed and Nick finally had the keys in his hands, a depleted bank balance and certified deeds in his solicitors hands. In the meantime he had purchased a car, trawled the various auction rooms and pending house sales, and purchased some linen and towels to see him over the foreseeable future. He had run down to a Southampton shipping agency to organise the delivery of his trunks to the manor.

It was a bright hot morning when loaded with his baggage and the keys he drove down the beech drive and parked. The house was quite as he bought up his cases and purchases, which he left in the hallway. The door had obviously been left unlocked for him. He came outside and walked down to the riverbank and found the two lads larking about on the broken boat ramp. "You guys should be a bit careful on that old ramp, the timbers seem pretty rotten to me" he yelled.

Startled both lads attempted to jump clear of the timber boards and in doing so the impetus caused one plank to splinter. Jack managed to scramble free but Ash slipped and fell between the planks his hands vainly flaying the neighbouring planks. Nick leapt forward and lying on his stomach managed to grasp Ash's arm then he squirmed forward and putting his arms under Ash's armpits hauled him out. Ash was drenched, Nick fell back into the flowing water, pulling Ash into his arms, and then carried him to the bank where Jack helped them both up the slope. Ash had gone pale and was shivering and sobbing.

"You are safe now Ash lets get these wet clothes off you before you get hypothermia."

Jack and Nick started to take Ash's faded jumper off but he resisted. After some wrestling they managed to turn Ash over on his front and pull the heavy cotton jumper over his head. Ash's whole back was covered in red welts. Nick was astonished and he looked at Jack accusingly. But Jack's own stare was enough.

"Well who then, your Dad?" Nick asked as he pulled down the sodden jeans to reveal more welts.

"Not Dad, he wouldn't hurt a fly, me and Ash always bring him stray injured animals and such. "

"Someone has been giving him a belting, stop struggling Ash and rest awhile in the sun over there by your shelter. Jack just place those wet clothes on the branches of the tree over there after I wring them out. I've got a bath towel in the hallway I'll get it now." Nick ran as quickly as he could and retrieved a large white towel, hurrying back he quickly wrapped it around a still shaking Ash.

“Aunt Florence will skin me alive I’ve wet me clothes and there’s a tear on my new jeans which Jack has just found.”

“I reckon a nail must have torn it Sir,” yelled Jack sitting astride the tree branch where he was laying out the clothes. “It’s the left leg that’s torn.”

“I’ll have to check your left leg Ash just in case” Nick lifted up the towel and found a long pink abrasion running over more deep welts. Something struck him as odd and he examined the right leg as well more closely.

“He has a scrape Jack its not deep I’ll need to put some antiseptic on it once Ash is dry now. By the way what do you guys wear to school, shorts or longs?”

“Shorts, why?” came the answer.

Nick didn’t reply but crouched down and lifted Ash into his arms.

Remembering the Dunnings had a cottage somewhere along the back of the house, he called Jack down from the branch to guide him. They walked some distance through dense undergrowth and eventually found the cottage. Jack knocked on the door and Alice Dunning appeared and seeing Ash in a state took immediate charge and laid the boy gently on the sofa.

“Alice do you any antiseptic cream please, you can see Ash has an abrasion on his thigh.”

“Aye I do indeed Master Nick but I can see a whole lot more on that upper leg.” She turned Ash on his side, he still making an occasional sob, so she gently lifted his trunk and stared.

“Jack Trent away with you this instant to Dr. Matheson, You hold him with the abrasion upwards Master Nick and I’ll get the cream. He’ll need an injection for tetanus that’s for sure but it’s the other that worries me. The Master will have to be told.”

“Already done Alice,” Lady Celia stepped inside and moving Nick and Alice aside checked the boy, and then gently laid her hand on his forehead. Ash’s sobs and sniffing stopped. Alice collected her tube of cream from her medical box and Lady Celia gently applied it on the abrasion.

“Alice you and Dunning will need to keep the boy here for the time being, let me know what the fool of a Doctor has to say. She brushed Ash’s spiky golden hair and turned to Nick.

“Take the lad up to the spare bedroom and settle him down Nick. A nice sweet cup of tea will help Alice. Nick stay with the boy until Jack Trent returns.” With that she vanished and Nick wondered if he would ever get used to the comings and goings of the Malling family.

“Course you will” said Alex following up the stairs to the cottage attic bedrooms.

“For heavens sake Alex you scared the living daylights out of me.”

“I expect you did the same shouting at the lads as they gallivanted on the old pier.”

“It’s a bloody death trap Alex should have been taken down years ago.”

“Peter and I used to paddle our canoes from there.”

“Don’t change the subject, now what are we going to do about young Ash?”

“Nothing, well for the moment at least.”

“Nothing?”

“I expect Father has it well in hand now Nick, I’ve been asked to take a trip to our local Social Dept. to gather some forms. Don’t ask me what or why. Mother said you were to wait for the doctor and if my ears do not deceive me I hear a car pulling up. Bye for now.”

“Who was that Mr. Nick, the voice I mean?” Ash was peering about as Nick laid him gently into the spare bed.

“Did you not see him?”

“No I just heard a voice that was not yours.”

“Well Ash he’s a good friend of mine and worried about you as we all are, but here comes the doctor to check you out.”

“Uncle says he’s useless.”

“Be that as it may you will need an injection in case you get a decease so try to be brave you are in safe hands now.”

“Will I have to go back, I heard your car and voice when you came to see Uncle last time?”

Before Nick could reply the Doctor bustled in and pushing Nick roughly aside said brusquely

“What the problem with this little pest?”

Nick had come down stairs to leave the doctor and Alice to examine Ash. Jack came through the door loaded with Ash’s clothes.

“They seem nearly dry Mr. Mallet, except for his sandals, I’ve left them to dry on the widow sill outside the stone sill is quite warm.” As Jack finished Alice and the doctor came down.

“Can I go and see Ash please Mrs. Dunning?”

“Of course Jack and take up his clothes please will you, I see you have collected them and I hope they are really dry. He has to go into town for his injection. Master Nick can you fetch your car here and take him please, the doctor will give you the prescription and pick up a jar of skin repair cream from the pharmacy.”

Nick went out to fetch his car and met Dunning coming down the cottage drive.

“The master wants to see the Doctor in his study Master Nick.”

When Nick drove round he saw a furious Dr Matheson climbing into his car. Nick went over to see what it was that obviously inflamed the doctor.

“That dimwit Dunning has asked me to call in to see his Master, I understood that you had bought the property, who and what is he talking about Mallet?”

“Well Doctor, I have bought the manor house but with the help of my Uncle Horace, and I presume he wants to ask about the lads wounds. I’m sure it would be best to pop in as he can get quite testy being a magistrate and all that.”

“Oh quite so, I will drive round then, perhaps a glass or two might be offered. I’ll have my surgery nurse send the bill tomorrow, and you’ll need to pay for the tetanus injection yourself, its not on the health.”

“Right” and so Nick went inside to collect Ash who was dressed and still looking pale.

“Can I come with you as well?” asked Jack.

“Jack, I believe Master Nicks uncle wants a word with you my lad so you best go up to the house and wait till the Doctor leaves, is that correct Master Nick?”

“If HE wants it that way, come on Ash lets get the puncturing over and done with.” As they got into the car, Ash turned nervously to Nick.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of an injection, why should I have to one?”

“It’s a precaution against lock jaw, a nasty thing to catch, its possible the nail could be contaminated, it’s for the best Ash and I’ll be with you if they’ll let me.”

So Ash had his injection an hour later and Nick had time to get the skin cream, a large half litre pot. As he left the pharmacy a whisper asked him to pick up a package from the Council social department, he got there just before they closed and collected the envelope, someone had scrawled his name across it. Mystified they returned to the Dunnings cottage where Alice was waiting for them.

“Sir Horace has said Ash is to stay here for a few days, he has sent Jack home with a message to ask Mr Trent to come here this evening, I’m to take the envelope to the Master. Could you put the cream on Ash Master Nick and here’s a towel to protect the sheet and mattress when its finished.”

Nick helped Ash up the stairs to the spare room and whilst Ash undressed, Nick opened the sheets up and spread the old towel onto the lower sheet. He then asked Ash to lie on his front and proceeded to gently rub the ointment into the deep welts.

“Let me know if I touch something that hurts Ash”

“No its OK I can take it but my upper leg is sore.”

“The one with the nail scrape?”

“No the other thigh.”

After having smoothed over Ash’s back and buttocks, Nick turned him slowly over and checked his right upper thigh. Here the welts were deeper and obviously newer. He ran his finger gently following one deep red marking and it led past the buttock up to the shoulder blade. Nick measured with his stretched hand over hand. It measured at least two and a half feet, over sixty millimetres. It looked likely to be an adult’s leather belt. The welt marks were deep but hadn’t cut the skin except a small piece near the shoulder bone which he did not cover in cream but left to dry naturally.

“I guess I’ll have to do this tomorrow if you don’t mind Ash. You will stay for a few days as my Uncle has asked Mrs Dunning to care for you. He is also to talk your uncle tonight so we will know what will happen to you. By the way I do apologise for frightening you when you and Jack were on the boat ramp pier,” He covered Ash up with a blanket and sat down beside the bed. Ash turned on his side so his head was close to Nicks.

“No, you shouted because we were in danger, and in fact the planks were rotten, so it’s not your fault Mr. Nick.”

“Just call me Nick, everybody does, how old are you anyway.”

“Twelve going on thirteen. Mr and Mrs Dunning call you Master Nick”

“Well they won’t change their ways but there you go, I’m only twice your age and a touch more.” Nick smiled.

“Can I ask you something Mr. Nick, I mean Nick. Have you bought this place and who are your family, they seemed to arrive earlier than you. Jack and I were expecting to see you weeks ago.”

“Well firstly I had some legal business to attend to, and as for the family I seem to be adopted by them, which I have to admit was totally unexpected but still rather nice.”

“I wish I was adopted, I mean Uncle Tom is great to me and Jack but I hated living in the barn and getting.” Ash stopped there.

“And?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, but I broke the favourite china figure, it was my fault I can be so ham fisted sometimes. Could you go and collect my bag and satchel from the barn please Nick.”

“Are you sure you are twelve you seem so much younger?” Nick had noted a thin body as he had rubbed the ointment in.

“It strikes me that Jack was always catching you fish, cooking it and you eating it. And Jack didn’t have any. Were you hungry?”

“I was never given dinner so Jack would sometimes nip out to the barn and bring food with him that he had taken from the pantry. On weekends we

fished and I ate. Like the day you came and showed us how to cook on the stick. In my bag are all my things and my birth certificate, it says where and when I was born.”

“When do you want them?”

“Now please, I want to show you things. Nick you won’t go far away after you get my things.”

“Are you hungry?”

Ash nodded.

“I’ll go and find Jack and get your things, he was told to wait in the hall as Uncle Horace wanted to see him, if I’m quick I’ll catch him. I’ll ask Alice to make you some, well some what?”

“Soup would do please.”

“Now Ash what would you really like?” Nick rose and brushed Ash’s yellow fringe from his forehead.

“Bacon and eggs then please. Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Why have you got dark brown hair with light streaks?”

“I guess since I was the last of five children, all the colour genes had nearly all been used up when they finally got to me Ash!”

“Was that this family.”

“No this is my new family, my other family I lost contact with when I migrated to Australia. Now no more questions young man I’ll order your meal, then I’m off to find Jack.”

“You will come back soon.”

Nick pulled the blanket high up to Ash’s chin then went down to see Alice. He found the doctors car gone and Jack just coming down the steps. He asked Jack if he could come with him and pick up Ash’s bags and Jack looked tired and troubled, but agreed.

“We will have to be quick as Dad will be home soon Mr. Nick, your uncles a fearsome man, I think my Dad is in hot water this time.”

“Because Ash has been beaten.”

“Ash has kept that really quite, I think he dead scared of my mother and she’s as nice as pie with me and Dad, so perhaps he felt he wouldn’t get too far complaining.”

“I’m just as staggered as the rest of you though your Aunt seemed a lovely lady and gave me a hug when I left.”

They crossed over the bridge and went into the barn where Jacks dad was waiting for them.

“Where is Ash.” He turned to Nick and grabbed his collar. “Where is my nephew, have you all gone mad?”

“Let me go Tom, we will explain.” Nick threw off Tom’s rough hands and pointed to the wall. Hanging there on a nail was a broken three-foot leather thong used for tethering horses.

“Yours I suppose,” Nick said coldly

“The Doc rang me on the mobile and told me things I could not believe. You don’t think I had anything to do with this Mr Mallet.”

“Alas Tom, I’ve been sent over to fetch Ash’s things and Jack has a message from my uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“Newly found but a magistrate to boot, I suggest your early compliance. If you want to know I don’t think you knew anything about this. Ash kept quite and that’s between your nephew and you.”

“OK I’ll come with you, you Jack better clean up for your supper, and your mother will be wondering where you are. If I’m not back by supper time you best tell Mother what its all about.”

Nick picked up Ash’s packs and climbed into the Forestry Range Rover. They drove to the Manor where Tom Trent was ushered by Nick into Sir Horace’s study.

“Can’t stop now Ash, back soon.” Nick dived past Alice who had bought up a steaming tray of egg, bacon and chips. And a glass of orange juice, which Nick quickly took a sip.

“Not for you Master Nick, yours will be ready when you return. The Master has suggested you stay here until we get some furniture in the house and Dunning has bought your bags and that.” Alice put the tray down and pointed to a wood box like apparatus. Nick could just make out some canvas leaves sticking through.

“It’s the Masters campaign bed, folds up you see.”

“Fine I better get onto a furniture search straight away tomorrow.”

“I think Ash is looking forward to some company, he’s a great one for questioning that one.”

“Oh Nick I forgot one more thing it’s a small box I hide under one of the straw bales, I’d be lost without it.” Ash said between mouthfuls.

“I’ll get a lift with your Uncle. So this is my first day in residence and I have not stopped.

OK Ash don’t worry, don’t wait up for me, but I promise I will back.” Nick dashed out and ran along the cottage road till he reached the manor. He opened the door and Dunning came out of the kitchen.

“Mr Trent is still with Sir Horace, but I heard a scraping of a chair so he may not be long. The study door opened and HE called out.

“Dunning show Tom out please. Did you want to see me Nick?”

“No HE just a lift from Tom to collect Ash’s cardboard box hidden in the hay somewhere.”

“You won’t regret Tom, I wish you well and please come and see me at any time.”

“Thanks Sir Horace, come along Nick we will see if we can find that box for young Ash.”

They hurried down the steps and found Toms Land Rover was already pulsating with life.

Nick spotted Peter behind the wheel.

“Get in the back you two, move it” yelled Peter and gunned the vehicle as soon as they climbed in.

“What the dickens!” gasped Tom somewhat aghast at Peters taking his vehicle.

“My cousin Peter, it must be urgent Tom” Nick yelled above the clash of gears and a vicious left turn outside of the gates.

“Wrong way Peter” yelled Nick

“No, he knows the local way alright, it might be a bridal way but its sure the quickest way to my cottage.” Yelled back Tom and they held on to the roof handles as Peter weaved this way and that to miss as many potholes as he could. Soon they onto the main road and tarmac, over the bridge with an almighty thump to the suspension, then a controlled skid into Tom’s yard.

“The house go.” yelled Peter, but his was not the only yelling and it was coming from the cottage. Tom jumped out and ran to the cottage and threw open the door with Nick not far behind. In the corner of the small dining room lay Jack sprawled beneath his mothers fierce gaze who held the leather strap above her head and as strange malevolent look which turned to abject misery as Tom struck her hand to release the strap. He turned and threw it into the fireplace, then strode out to the kitchen bringing with him a can of paraffin. All this is happening in a sort slow motion, thought Nick, and with the supper plates already filled upon the table. Tom poured the fluid into the hearth and struck a match from the box on the mantle. Florence had not moved but Jack had begun to sob and shake, his father picked him up and passed him to Nick.

“Let him calm down Mr. Mallet and perhaps you and he would like to finish the meal on the table.”

“And what about me Tom Trent, all that evil in that mansion poisoning our child's mind,

And that clumsy vicious scum of a half nephew of yours, from that sordid sister not even married.” Florence’s eyes were as fierce as Toms as she

glared at me as I lifted poor Jack into a chair.

“You take your hands off my boy you and your high flown family. What you be not much older my youngest brother, how can you afford to buy that pile over there if it wasn’t through ill gains.”

“Enough Florrie, you need to go to the special hospital, come get your coat.” Florence spat at Nick as she passed and grabbed her coat from the coat rack. She turned to Jack.

“I am so sorry Jack, its all your fathers fault for consorting with those over the river, he should have been home for tea.”

Tom pushed her through the door and soon they heard the Land Rover leave.

“What did you come for Mr. Nick?”

“Well Jack, Ash wanted me to pick up his private cardboard box in the barn.”

“Yes I know the one it contains baby stuff and photo’s of his Mum, he hid it from Mum and Dad. I think you can see why. I think mum must have whipped him for it, as when he first came he proudly showed it to her.”

“Do you want me to heat your dinner up?”

“No I couldn’t eat a thing now, think I’ll wait up for Dad, do you think he will be long?”

“I guess about an hour or two, he’ll make the excuse that he returns to you as quickly as possible.”

“What will happen to Mum?”

“The special hospital will determine what ails her and how to help her, and prescribe medicine. It may take some time and I expect its caused by a severe aberration in the brain. They do have the tools to help her. More importantly don’t feel to bad about her she loves you in her own way, after all she apologised to you.”

“You’ve got spittle on your jacket.”

“ Well lets go find that box of Ash’s if you can, then I’ll get away.”

They scoured the barn using Toms torch and eventually found the box buried deep into last years hay bales. With the box wedged under his arm Nick crossed over the bridge and clambered down to the boys short cut path. Eventually he found a sidetrack with the help of moonlight, which led to the Dunnings’.

Nick found only one light on as he opened the door and saw a note on Alice’s table.

‘Ash asleep upstairs, found your new linen, candle on table to find your way and piece of lamb pie in the oven, Alice’

Nick scoffed the proffered pie with a glass of water then lit the candle, turned the electric light off and picking both candle and box crept up the

staircase and into the spare bedroom. As quietly as he could he undressed and looked around for the campaign bed. It had been opened and moved besides Ash's bed. He found Alice had made his bed and slid in feeling the fresh starched sheets and luxury a soft down pillow.

"Did you bring it Nick" came a whisper to his right.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now young Ash, and by the way I put the folding bed over by the door so I wouldn't disturb you, why did Alice move it when she made it up."

"I shifted it when she went. Did you get my box please?"

"I did indeed, it's safe by your satchel at this precise minute in time."

"I need to go to the toilet Nick"

"Is it urgent, where is it anyway?"

"Outside, Jack and I used to use it occasionally, and both things."

"You want me to come with you?"

"Please."

"Well get your shoes on and I'll get dressed again."

"I don't have my sandals, Jack was drying them if you remember."

"Yes I do now, OK come on down the stairs and I give you a piggy back."

So they both crept down and Nick lifted up Ash onto his back. He was amazed how light Ash was, so he asked for directions and jogged to the outside toilet. Ash went in and Nick waited patiently in the moonlight.

"Bit late to be out Nick."

"Don't you ever get any sleep Alex? Anyhow I'm on toilet duty and I guess its only nine or so. By the way thank Peter will you, but tell him I'm not keen on him getting his hands on my new car."

"Second hand car, but I will tell him. Goodnight to you both."

Just then Ash called.

"There's no paper here."

"Must be Ash. Can you see properly with the door closed."

"No."

"Then open the door and let some moonlight in."

"You'd make a great Dad."

"Alex just be quite you'll frighten Ash, for goodness sake become visible at least".

"Who you talking to Nick?"

"Alex my cousin."

"Oh yes I can see him, but there is definitely no paper in here."

"OK Alex some suggestions please, its been a long day and I need my beauty sleep."

"How about London Plane leaves and a wash in the pool."

“What pool?”

“The one in the river, it’s a swimming hole we used to use.”

“I really must get some orientation of where and what everything is, but later. Ash come on out Alex has an idea. If you don’t mind I carry you in my arms. OK lead on Mac duff.”

Alex lead them a short distance to the river.

“There is the pool and beside it the tree.”

“Right give us a hand I say you get into the water and I’ll lower Ash into the pool.”

“Why me into the water?”

”So he doesn’t float away and anyway there is nothing of you to get wet!”

“Don’t you believe it sunshine.” But Alex stepped into the pool and Nick retrieved some leaves from a low branch. These he gave to Ash and said just wipe and lets hope nobody uses the river for drinking water.”

Nick crouched down and lowered Ash into the water and Alex held him by his shoulder whilst Ash did his ablutions. They then lifted him out and Nick carried him piggyback to he cottage.

“Thanks Alex” he called, but Alex had gone.

Once upstairs and dried with one of Alice’s rough towels, Nick plastered a new batch of skin cream and rolled him under the sheet. It was a warm night so he left the blanket rolled up at the beds end. He blew the candle out and undressing quietly slid into his own bed. What a day, his first here, after a long sigh he was soon fast asleep. Ash stayed awake for some time listening to Nick’s shallow breathing then he leaned over and stroked Nick's hair.

“Thanks Nick and Alex, I wish, oh I wish I could,” He sighed and fell deeply asleep.

XXX

Chapter four. Money matters and some purchases.

Nick woke to the chirping of woodland birds. He rose quietly so as not to

disturb young Ash and strode over to the low attic window. Drawing the curtains aside he looked outside, everything here so peaceful and fresh. He saw Alice hanging out washing and checked his watch. It said half past ten. Ash woke up and stretched his arms out, he peeped at Nick framed in the light of the window. Nick turned and sitting on the bed started to dress. Suddenly was hit behind by a soft pillow.

“Glad to see you awake young man, I reckon its bath time for you, How was the water in the pool last night.”

“Quite warm.”

“Right you and I are heading for that same pool now. Grab a towel and shorts. I’ve got soap and shampoo so stir yourself now” with that he put his shoes on and went downstairs. Spying Alice he saw his white towel neatly in a cane basket beside her.

“Your towel dried overnight Master Nick I was bringing it in to iron.”

“Please don’t bother I’m off for a bath in the pool, presumably there’s no bathroom in the manor, at least I didn’t see one.”

“Yes one on each floor but until the electric is put on the pressure pump can’t be run. Dunning is getting that sorted out today.”

Nick looked though the cottage window and saw Ash looking around the room inside then he spotted Ash’s sandals on the window ledge.

“There are out here on the ledge Ash” he turned and walked down the gravel till he reached the path leading to the pool. In daylight now he could see how it had been cleverly constructed within a curving bank protecting it from the normal river current and large stones set into the riverbed giving the pool an elongated bath like appearance. He stripped and quickly slid into the water. A bit cool but the bottom was sandy. Turning to the grassy bank and picking up his soap case when a violent wave sloshed over his back. Ash had arrived sandals and all.

“Thanks a lot you gremlin and those sandals were dry.” Nick reached down and undid the straps on Ash’s sandals. Depositing them onto the grass he threw the soap at a grinning child. He himself washed his head, ducked down to wash it out, turned a soapy Ash around and plastered the boy’s hair with the shampoo and rubbed it in.

“Its in my eyes!” yelled Ash.

Nick cupped his hands and poured water onto a bobbing head.

He then wrestled the soap from Ash who had decided it was a fun thing to turn and splash his legs swimming fashion.

“Ah Ash you can swim?”

“Nope, never learnt how.”

“But the leg motions?”

“Just pretend. Was dunked at the school pool and never learnt.”

“I guess that’s something I can teach you.”

“Nick why are you browner than us?”

“I guess it’s the sun, I worked for a time in Australia. I had an opal mine and when I wasn’t underground I was up in the harsh sunshine”

“Father wondered how you could afford to buy our house.” Alex had appeared with a two large grey dogs alongside him.

“Excuse me Ash and I were having a private conversation, and what are those?”

“Irish wolfhounds,” said Ash brightly.

“Spot on young man.” replied Alex who let Ash try to fondle their heads but his hand kept slipping through.

“Not so rough Ash, they are special dogs, the sort that are only visible half the time!” Alex took his hand and laid it gently on one of the dogs.

“That’s Bill and the other one is Ben, and Nicks Uncle wants to see young Ash soon, so boys bath time is over for now.”

“It’s just like staying at a boot camp no peace at all, So Alex, pass us over the towels please and I will get out.”

Alex threw the towel to Nick as he got out and disappeared up the pathway. Nick dried himself then held out the towel for Ash as he slipped out of the pool. Nick wrapped it around Ash’s waist and picking up the one Ash had bought down and dried the boy’s hair. Ash put his arms around Nick’s waist and held him tight.

“OK Ash what’s the trouble now?”

“Perhaps your Uncle wants to give me away Nick, I do so want to stay with you.” He buried his head into Nick’s chest.

“I want you to stay too, I lost my family years ago, and presumably you were an orphan when your Uncle Tom took you in?”

Ash nodded,

“Well then I will try my very best to convince everyone who counts that you belong here now. I can make no promises, why we’ll run away together if no one understands!”

“Promise?”

Nick looked down at the golden head gazing up at him, the eyes so blue and misted with tears. ‘I shouldn’t joke about this’ he thought to himself, it was just as much his fault that he migrated to Australia to get away from the constant pressures of his own family. This child had no one except an abusive Aunt.

“Jack and your Uncle, will you want to continue seeing them?”

“Of course, Jack is my best friend!”

“Dry your tears then, I've bought the Manor did you know that Ash?”
“I think Mrs Dunning told me when she bought the meal.”
“So if I say my home is your home does that make it better?” Nick gave Ash a squeeze and felt the welts again on the lads back. He took the towel from Ash's waist and laid him on his tummy in the sun. He then traced his finger along the welt from the shoulder to the boy's rump.
“Do you feel any pain as my finger moves?”
“Only on my bottom, but it itches on my back.”
“I think itching is a good sign Ash it means the skin is recovering. I think we will leave the cream off until tonight. Can you take the towels back to Alice to dry on the line once you've dressed? By the way do you have any spare clothes in your bags I bought over yesterday?”
“Mrs Dunning said she would look out some old clothes from a trunk in their box room as she had children but were grown now.”
“Lie in the sun for a few minutes both sides but not too long then, I see you later I have to see my Uncle. By the way how well acquainted are you and Jack with the property?”
“We only stayed close to our shelter and the bridge, we never explored.”
“Then I think we should, I'll ask Alex to give us a tour.”
“With the invisible dogs as well?”
“If they want to come along why not, do you want some unsettling news Ash?”
“What news?”
“You've got to put your wet sandals on again!” Nick strolled away laughing.
“Not if the hot sun has made them almost dry.” Ash shouted. As Nick passed the cottage door Alice came out.
“Where is the lad Master Nick?”
“Sunning himself.”
“I don't think that's such a good idea, not till his wounds are healed that is.”
“I suppose not, sorry Alice, I said he could for a few minutes but if its unwise can you pop down and fetch him back. I'm away to HE, back soon.”

But Nick did not come back soon, in fact it was late in the evening when he returned in a smart pin stripped suit. Again all was quite in the cottage and Alice had left him a cold supper in the cool room cupboard, he ate quickly, made himself some tea, and then gave himself a brisk wash, finally washing up the dishes. He climbed the stairs and found Ash up to the spare room. Ash had a small lamp on a table by his bed. The lamp cord reached out of the window.

“Hi Nick, you are late and look at the suit! Mr. Dunning set it up the lamp

for me this afternoon and bought some adventure stories for me to read as well.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Shepherds pie and rhubarb and custard” Ash rubbed his stomach.

“I guess that means you are full young man!”

“Why so smart Nick.”

“Let me get to bed, it’s been another hard adventurous day.” Nick took his suit off and found a hanger to place it on then hung it on the doorknob. Once he was undressed he slipped into his bed.

”Well do tell?”

“We discussed your future Ash and we all said you were welcome to stay. In fact Alex had obtained some papers, which transfers you guardianship from your Uncle and Aunt to myself.” Before he got any further Ash leapt from his bed and jumped onto Nick’s. Ash hurled his arms around Nick and held onto him tightly.

“Excuse me Ash but you are throttling me!”

“I’m so pleased Nick, I’ve been hoping against hope. As you hadn’t come back I had thought you might be having difficulty to convince the others. Oh thank you.” Ash gave him another hug and Nick laughed.

“Careful back to your own bed or this poor old campaign bed will be in strife and I will be for it!”

“Why have you been so long?”

“Ah my brothers keeper, do you want every detail? Has Alice done your back yet?”

“Yes and no, I said you wanted to leave it until tonight.”

“Right turn over and lets have a look. By the way Alice told me I was wrong to let you sun bathe.” Nick unscrewed the jar, he might have to get another one tomorrow. So under the lamp he checked the welts, some were healing into pink lines, but the one creasing right over the buttocks was still inflamed, so he gently rubbed the cream into the red crease. He continued with thinner amounts up to the shoulders. But overall there was a definite improvement. Dr Matheson might be an abrasive man but he knew his medication.

“How does it look?” asked Ash

“Beautiful to behold.”

“What Nick?”

“There is only one crease we have to be careful about Ash, the rest is healing fine.”

“Can you touch the crease, was it the one that hurt this morning.”

“You touch it and tell me.”

Ash carefully brought his hand and slid his finger along the red welt.

“Ouch” he said.

“At least there’s no nerve damage, the pain should go but I want you to check in the morning yourself, if the welt breaks and you feel fluid you are to ask Alice to get the nurse from the village, do you hear me Ash. Don’t be embarrassed the nurse has probably seen hundreds of bums in her time.”

“Aren’t you going to be here tomorrow?”

“My uncle and I have to go to London, some monetary affairs to deal with.”

“What took you so long today Nick?”

“Ah you missed me then.”

“No as I had Alice fusing around me and my adventure books to read. Then Jack came by and we gossiped about school mainly”

“I had to drive to Salisbury to open a bank account then transfer some more funds from my Australian bank. I did some shopping as you can see from the suit, shirt and tie, plus buying a package for my new friend.”

“Me?”

“You, it’s by the door.”

Ash leapt out of bed and rushed back clutching several large plastic carrier bags.

“May I open them Nick.”

“Be my guest.”

“I’m now a bit more, aren’t I?”

“From what.”

“From being just a guest.” And Ash delved into each package bringing out jeans and polo shirts and underwear and socks and two pairs of fine leather shoes, one brown and one black. Finally he pulled out a large cardboard box and found a pair of brown suede boots with thick rubber soles.”

“Oh Nick thanks a million trillion, how did you know my size?”

“I guessed, not difficult you know Ash you under size and under weight and I’ve kept the receipts in case they don’t fit. Right you can try everything on tomorrow. There should be two pairs of pyjamas somewhere.”

“I’ve never had pyjamas before, not that I can remember Nick, I’ve never worn them ever.”

“Um, so I’ve noticed but you can’t go around naked all your life. Carry on reading if you like but I have an early start tomorrow. “

“I wish I was going with you.”

“Not with that bruising on your rear end, you’ll need to stay quite for a day or two, unless you want the district nurse take a peek.”

Ash gave Nick a glare settling his many bags down by his bed he switched off the lamp.

“Thanks Nick.”

A false snore came from the campaign bed. Nick received a friendly thump from a soft down pillow.

xxx

Chapter Five. More money matters and old furniture returned.

The alarm vibrated on Nick’s wristwatch and he awoke to find Ash’s limp arm on his shoulder. Nick turned slowly on to his back and looked across at Ash who was close to the edge of his own bed. He picked up the boys limb wrist and instead of nudging it back to its owner, he turned the hand gently around and kissed the palm. Then he carefully moved it onto Nicks sleeping body. Why had he done that, perhaps there was something in this child that

both yearned for and gave out something special, something he had never found. He brushed the short golden hair, what a lovely child Ash was, special. With that beauty of a sleeping child caught in between childhood and their teens. Nick remembered his and grimaced, so he whispered his inner thoughts as he gazed at the sleepy head at peace.

“What did you say Nick?” Ash opened his big blue eyes.

“You weren’t supposed to hear you imp, I shall take it back!”

“No you can’t, once said it gets engraved somewhere special.”

“Ash I have to get away now I have to catch the 7:50 train, and I have to shave and wash, I’ll do that downstairs.” Nick dressed quickly as Ash sat up in bed. He had his new pyjamas on.

“Suits you, now remember to take it easy I don’t want any skin ruptures occurring from you know where. If you want to make yourself useful you can go over with Dunning to check out the electricity. Then it will be a proper bath and showers.”

“If they approve the wiring.”

“Yes, so Ash if there is extra work needed, give your approval, tell Dunning I’ve put you in charge. Bye now.”

“I love you too, be safe.”

As Nick shaved he thought about the word he had whispered and that Ash had also used.

He checked for his wallet of documents. and remembered they were in the car so he dashed up the gravel and started his car. HE appeared beside him, at least his voice did.

“Presumably Nick I won’t have to pay for a ticket.”

“Not unless you mysteriously appear in front of the ticket collector HE.”

“In that case you better buy two returns, my control these days is fast disappearing.”

They arrived in London in good time for their meeting at Royston and Squirm stockbrokers. Nick had a folder of documents under his arm.

“Now remember my boy you don’t speak you, you speak me.” HE was once again invisible having only briefly appeared when a lady had tried to sit on his train seat.

“You mean you will whisper instruction to me and in effect use me as your mouth piece.” They pushed through some glass swing doors and into a reception area.

“Mr Squirm if please, we are expected, I mean I am expected.” Concentrate Nick, came the whisper.

“Your name sir”

”Malling-Mallet” Nick thought it should have been the Mallet first but was shushed by a fierce ringing tone in his ear. He wondered how HE did that, but got a light kick on his shin.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Perdue will be here to collect you shortly.”

‘Perdue is Squirm’s little helper; he must be ninety if a day. Probably getting Celia’s share portfolio out and checking its all there, Remember what we discussed yesterday, they will be suspicious, there should be substantial assets according to Celia. You have not spoken to anyone Nick about Celia’s and my little plan.’

“Not a word to anyone HE.”

‘Now its important you follow what we discussed and rehearsed yesterday, I will only come in if you fluff your lines or forget. Now you did open a bank account yesterday didn’t you.’

“HE that little white haired man is looking at us rather strangely.”

‘That’s Perdue, get up and shake his hand and introduce yourself, a bit of praise for Perdue.’

“Mr. Perdue many years ago my great Aunt Celia wrote to Mother mentioning you were her font of financial wisdom.”

‘Don’t lay it on too thick my boy but he’s squirming with delight look at the old fraud.’

“Mr. Malling-Mallet you are too kind, indeed Lady Celia and I had a close liaison, financially of course. She always suspected Sir Horace of financial incompetence, he was apparently prone to wasting money in their earlier years at the Manor.”

‘Idiot Perdue how about bringing and educating two boys, putting in sewage, water and that expensive electricity.’

“Would you follow me, Mr. Squirm is ready to see you now.”

They walked to the lift and were whisked up too many floors for Nick to count, him being too busy to go over his lines. He was sure Perdue was an absolute knock over but his boss would be a different kettle of fish. They eventually found a large office, plate glass everywhere including the desk.

‘Squirms doing well on his commission.’

“Mr Malling Mallet, Mr. Squirms.”

“Do stay Perdue your advice is invaluable especially as you had a close affinity to Mr. Malling eh Mallet’s Aunt.”

“Great Aunt” said Nick.

“Indeed, please sit. We will require some proof of your relationship to The Malling family, you may have perchance a birth certificate or some such. Some family background information?”

“Yes indeed my background is such, briefly my Great Grandpa Ernest, the

youngest of Sir Horace's generation fell foul of his grandfather Sir Guy Mallings. The result was they never saw Ernest again at the Manor, and he hived off to London, Kensington to be precise. He in turn married and they had a son also by the name of Ernest. I believe Sir Horace and Lady Celia made some financial arrangement, I believe my own mother told me a Mr. Perdue was involved."

Perdue nodded his agreement. Nick continued, no tea had been offered yet but Squirm was studying the birth certificate with a canny eye. Perhaps tea if he succeeded?

"My Grandfather married, and the only issue was a single daughter named Myrtle. She married a Mr. Reginald Mallet and they also had one issue. The birth certificate you hold is my own. I have a copy of my bank account and a letter from my Bank Manager confirming my name. My Bank statement from the bank in Australia is named for Mallet only as that was the name when I lived there. You may or may not be aware that Australians have a propensity to laugh at double barrel names."

Both Squirm and Perdue duly acknowledged that it was likely.

"As you can see I had substantial funds in Australia somewhat diminished by the purchase of my families home."

"Why would you have to buy something that could be yours?" Squirm asked innocently.

"The property was to be sold for the benefit of the village, who had shown great loyalty to the family. This was after both my cousins had been killed in the Great War. Sir Horace I believe felt it right and proper to look after the village."

"Bloody fool if you ask me." Said Squirm, not realising how close he had come to a punch on the nose.

"Perdue, perhaps tea would be in order now."

We've got there thought Nick.

'Concentrate my boy, lest their tea charade lure us into agreeing something we don't want.'

'Uncle, HE, let me deal with this my own way, as if I'm Lady Celia's solicitor.'

'Agreed but I reserve the right to butt in.'

'Don't for heavens sake materialise.'

"Tea is served Mr. Mallings- Mallet, you seemed far away."

"Forgive me Mr. Squirm I was thinking how I could possibly furnish the Manor House."

"You mean you have no furniture at all."

"None, you see the estate was put up for sale the villagers plundered the

inside and took what was removable, they felt it belonged to them already as part of Sir Horace's will. Lady Celia died prior to Sir Horace perhaps her will might have been written differently."

"It's obviously to me young man that you indeed who you are and very conversant with the past of your family. You know things only I would know about the Mallings."

Perdue sat down this long speech had exhausted him.

'He's definitely going to get a kick.'

'Hold on they are both grinning, good news to follow I think.'

"Well my dear Mallings-Mallet we have excellent news for you. As you may know Lady Celia siphoned off many of the estate profits which she gave to Mr. Perdue to purchase shares through the stock brokering Company of which my own Grandfather was the main partner."

'So why does his name come second on your company name Squirm.'

Nick gave a great sneeze and a large Shush followed.

"I beg your pardon Mr. Mallings Mallet shall we continue?"

"Please do, temperature difference."

"Oh we understand," looking at the portfolio Squirm, said, "the value of assets is in the region of twenty four million. What Lady Celia and Mr. Perdue did was to choose companies where it was possible to reinvest the dividend thus accumulating the asset. We would be pleased to continue our relationship with the family though you of course. Had you thought about the title, perhaps it could be also realised if you changed by deed pole you name to Mallings alone?"

'Over my dead body.'

'Think about it, you are already knighted Uncle'

'Tis Peter's by rights.'

'He also, don't worry I'm not enamoured.'

'Tell him yes then it will clinch it, you'll see why.'

"An excellent idea Mr. Squirm, I'll have the Mallings family solicitors, Martin Bros and Son investigate the possibility with the College of Heralds. I think I would require an immediate deposit into my bank of say one million only, plus some of the dividend to be allocated as cash into the same account on a bi-yearly basis. The portfolio is to continue Mr. Perdue and Lady Celia's investment strategy. Naturally we will endorse the management fees to which your company is entitled. Further a transfer of a one hundred thousand pounds from my Mallet Australian account to be placed into a separate portfolio for management by your Company. That portfolio to have the single name of Mallet, are we agreed?"

'Indeed Mr. Mallings-Mallet, I return your folder and your details; I have noted you bank and account numbers and we will dispose of a select few

shares. Mr Perdue has written down a short list, ones he feels now could be sold on. Perhaps you would sign the disposal form“

Nick took out his pen and signed and returned the document together with a bank cheque from his own Australian money. It was most of what was left with the money he had in Australia, he still owned the mine and was renting it out in a partnership.

“Did you not want to check Mr. Perdue’s list?”

‘Perdue has a granddaughter working here’ came a whisper in his ear

“No Mr. Squirm, why would I doubt your integrity on such a matter, both you and Mr. Perdue have shown exemplary honesty, indeed great wisdom, I would suggest very few companies would have had such singular success at retaining and subscribing to long term shares and debentures. You have our full confidence. All I ask is a full account of your commission fees for our own internal auditors. You see we may become a private company in the future to protect both the Malling name and its estate. Perhaps Mr. Perdue’s granddaughter would take on our interests, keep it in the family. I understand she is currently in your employ? ”

Squirm squirmed, he was not comfortable with the suggestion, but gracefully acknowledged to himself at least he could wrest commissions if not the shares themselves. So Squirm clapped his hands in mock delight and looked at Perdue who was obviously delighted. Nick rose, bowed in appreciation and showed himself out.

HE was very fulsome in his praise for Nick and quite overcome about Lady Celia’s investment policy. They visited the Malling solicitors and settled some outstanding issues that HE had. Nick hired a taxi and HE gave him a brief tour of the sites before returning to Waterloo. They found their seats on the train; Nick put a copy of the Times where HE sat.

'You know Nick what you said about honesty to Squirm set him back on his heels a bit, his grandfather was known as a real fraudster, often selling shares for his clients who took his advice, then buying them for himself. You could see he was a self made man climbing on other peoples wealth.'

“Why didn’t he do the same to your portfolio, I was quite surprised about the size that had been amassed. Aunt Celia told me you had both only invested a hundred thousand at most?”

'Perdue. I believe he was most fond of Celia. A poor young clerk roughly treated by his employers. Finds such a one as my Celia who treated him with respect and helped his advancement by her investment. He adored her, didn’t much care for me, but he kept her money safe from the other fellows.'

Chapter Six. Affection and memories in a box.

When Nick and HE arrived back in high spirits, HE disappeared inside to tell Celia the good news. Nick went round the rear of the manor to the pump house. A man was inside pulling out the old china fuses and placing them in a bag. Nick left him to it, he checked his watch it was 5:30 pm so he branched off down to the old pier. He found a pile of rotten planks and some of the old piles on the bank together with a space and crowbar. Somebody had been busy; still it was sensible to get rid of the danger. He went back to the house and Dunning was in the kitchen with an agitated Alice and the electrician from the village.

“How did the electricity go, did we switch on?”

“No Mr. Mallet, the fuse box needs replacing but all the wiring has been checked. I’ve told Mr. Dunning we will bring out a refurbished one tomorrow. One of my lads is removing the old one as we speak most of the rooms will need rewiring, Mrs. Dunning tells me the ground floor was done twenty years back, it seems fine but sockets need replacing.” The electrician stood up but Nick waved him to sit.

“Fine go ahead and do the work as required, I’ll give you a cheque for the materials if you want, how long till you finish?”

“A full month at least if we start tomorrow, I suggest we need a wallpaper specialist to help us skim the paper aside as we have to install PVC piping into the walls. There is Dave Gorman in town who would help us do that. You’ll need to mark where you want switches and sockets in each room.”

“Perhaps Mr. Dunning could handle that,” Then turning to Dunning he asked, “Have you been busy on that old pier Dunning, you should have waited for me to give you a hand.”

Alice was still agitated so Nick took her aside.

“Master Ash and Jack Trent were at it and Master Ash had severe pain so Dunning drove him down for nurse to see him, I’ve sent him to bed. Nurse gave Dunning this sticky patch to replace the one I put on. Nurse said to replace it once the wound had been given fresh air.”

“OK Alice thanks I’ll take it with him now lets see what the little pest has been up now.”

Nick left the manor and walked down to the cottage. When he saw Ash spread eagled on the bed on his front he knew what had occurred and was not best pleased. He walked over and inspected the broken skin following the deep welt mark on his left cheek. There was a yellowy pus seeping out. Nick slapped the right cheek sharply.

“What’s that for?” Ash turned angrily to Nick who sat on the bed edge fuming.

“That is for doing something you were told not to. Did I not ask you to remain in the house and check on the electricity.”

“You did.”

“And”

“ I tripped over the electricians box and tipped all the tools out, so the electrician told me I was a stupid kid, I took offence and kicked one of his screwdrivers across the marble floor, so Mr. Dunning thought it best I return here out the way.”

“And”

“Jack came round and we decided to rip down the pier in case some other fool hurt himself.” Ash was getting quite belligerent now, working up quite a

steam.

“And the spade and fork?”

“Jack got them from the tool shed behind the outside loo.”

“And you forgot that you have an injury that will likely or not leave a permanent scar on that backside of yours. Well looks like its stopping seeping, how long did the nurse tell to dry it?”

“Until it had dried, to leave a crust, then protect with the pad you’ve got in your hand.”

“It’s called a scab, something you ought to be called, a scabby child.”

“I’m not a child Nick, I’m not any more, I’ll be thirteen in a few weeks, and you check in my box, it’s under the bed.”

“No Ash, not your personal box.”

“Please do, just bring it by my head so I can tell you things, go on Nick it won’t worry me and I always intended you to share it with me, but you being busy all the time and coming in late and tired.”

Nick reached under the bed and brought out Ash’s special box. He opened the lid and was surprised how little was inside. He picked up a photo of a young girl in plaits.

“My Mum when she was nine.”

Nick picked a larger one the girl was much older maybe eighteen with a rounded tummy.

“Me inside Mum, I was born soon after,”

Three conkers came next, one with a piece of sting through the centre.

“That one was a champion, unbeaten.” Ash pointed to the stringed one. “The other was a spare from the same tree in Kidderminster.”

A small penknife and a service medal followed.

“Mum said these belonged to my...her boyfriend.”

“Your Father?”

“Mum had lots of friends.”

Next came the pink birth certificate, Ashley Trent, Mother Sally Trent spinster, Father unknown. Date of birth and time: 10am. Nick counted back the years.

“Your birthday is in August, next month and you are a Leo. And horrors you will be a terrible teen!” Nick chortled as Ash poked his tongue out.

“Can I sit up now?”

“Just wait while I put your box away and apply this patch to your precious skin.” Nick stripped the backing off and seeing the pus had now dried, gently pushed the broken skin together and applied the sticky patch. Ash rolled over and looked directly into Nick’s face.

“Truly Nick I was trying to help, I didn’t mean to rip the wound, I was as

careful as I could be. It frightened me when you were so cross. Your face was so taugt and angry looking. I'm sorry."

Nick eyes met Ash's. Ash's eyes were a light violet and they misting up again, but he was bravely fighting the tears back.

"I was angry, because you ruptured the wound when we had been so eager for it to heal. I guess my affection for you covers the whole of you not just that golden noggin of yours." Nick leant forward and brushed Ash's shock of hair now all askew. They looked at one another for a minute then Ash bent forward and kissed him with a long gentle kiss.

"Steady Ash you'll get me embarrassed." Nick had turned a shade of pink, Ash laughed.

"Am I forgiven Nick, please say I am."

"You get under my skin and I've got no defence, you meant well but is that giving you much pain, Alice was worried."

"It did sting but the nurse gave me aspirin and Alice gave me a small bottle to take if need be. Are you going?"

"Just over to the house, I left without seeing my Aunt and Uncle.

"How did things go in London?"

"I missed you, but in spite of that fact, things went very well. Ash can you print me out a few A4 sheets with these words printed on them, for circulation in the village? You'll find some new sheets and felt pens in my briefcase. "

Nick handed over an old envelope he had in his back pocket, which Ash read out aloud.

"Furniture for the Manor house required, payment will be made if in good order."

"Perhaps, but its about paying for returning furniture on that envelope, that's the old furniture that was removed. So its important to be original."

Nick walked up the manor and found HE and Lady Celia in high spirits.

"Dear Nick a glass of Champagne to celebrate. Oh come now don't be so sour, the boy won't die. He tried to be helpful not a drain, and you are cross."

"How did you know that Aunt?"

"Peter and Joan were walking past the cottage and heard you!"

"Is nothing private in this blasted house?"

"Well they were concerned!"

"How nice, and whose idea was it to open the doors of the manor?"

"It was Joan's decision. When Horace died he allowed Peter's wife to remain here at Mallings, When Joan died, her will gave certain villagers the

right to take whatever they needed. ”

“Except the baths, Dunning tells me they are still here, one on each floor. I can’t find them!”

“They were built to be unobtrusive, in our day ablutions were not to be heralded. Come on Nick I’ll show where they are. I suggest we leave a chalk mark so you can find them again.”

Nick followed Lady Celia and found substantial bathrooms behind masked doors that matched the corridors. There were four in all including a small one up in the attic. Whilst

They were up there he popped into the bird room to measure the broken pane.

“You are not going to put a new pane in until the birds are fledged and flying.”

“Of course not, but I intend to get Ash to repair it as he damaged it.”

“Perhaps we are taking this guardianship a bit far?”

“I’m worried that’s all.”

“About his abrasions. Joan told me you were angry about the skin damage; so let me give you some advice. Where the old house used to be in the Middle wood there is an estate cottage, which used to be the entrance lodge before the beech drive was planted. I would ask Peter or Alex to show you where it is but tomorrow, alas they are away. Instead call for Bill and Ben and tell them Molly Clark. They’ll lead you to our local herbalist who may be able to help young Ash. Now Nick lets go to Horace’s study and open a bottle, just we three.”

Nick arrived back at the cottage and whilst he and Ash ate a supper Alice had prepared he told what Lady Alice had said.

“Well you cannot expect young Ash to walk that far particularly as you gave him a right dressing down this afternoon.”

Nick looked at Ash who looked innocent enough.

“Then it appears the whole wide world heard us?”

Alice nodded.

“There is a pushchair in the tool shed we used for our little ones so you are welcome to that, make sure you use a pillow for the poor lads behind.”

They both retired early and Nick examined the posters Ash had copied out. He certainly had an eye for layout. They were beautifully inscribed.

“These are great Ash I’ll put them in my briefcase and take them down to the village tomorrow after we go to Middle wood.”

“Nick why don’t you wear pyjamas?” Ash was sitting straight up in his bed.”

“Had no need to, in Australia though the outback got cold I used to live and sleep in a

Dugout underground except for the entrance door, cool during the day and warm at night. When I was your age living in Britain of course I had pyjamas a red pair if I remember.”

“Did you run away from home to go to Australia?”

“When I was eighteen I did. Couldn’t get a job in the city but an old codger advised me to go labouring in a place called Lightning Ridge and dig for opal, they are quite valuable. Anyhow I worked for another chap for board and lodging and ten percent of what we found. It’s a luck thing, after five months of hard graft we hit a beautiful seam. It was worth over three hundred thousand. When it petered out he gave me the option of buying him out with my ten percent share. He’d been there a long time and wanted to retire, so he took the lot and signed over the licence and equipment. “

“And were you lucky?”

“I found you didn’t I?”

“No Nick, It was I who found you. The day you came down and showed Jack and I how to cook using that piece of willow.”

“OK I give in. Anyhow I worked dam hard and tried to follow the old seam, that was a mistake we miners all expect once you find a certain level you follow it. Food was getting short and my tab at the store was long, so I was refused further supplies. I was fed up Ash; I had risked my ten percent and found nothing. I shined down the chain into the mine picked the pickaxe and in my anger I burst into tears and threw the dam thing across the small drive. So narrow was the drive that the axe drove into the wall leaving me to use a sledge hammer to knock it out.”

“And out poured opal, tons of it.”

“You’ve been reading my mind you young imp. Yes Ash, in my anger I had struck it rich. The quality was superb and such a quantity. I worked feverishly for a week. The first piece that came with the pick I sold and settled my bills. I told the opal buyer it had come out of old Bills finished seam so as not to allay any suspicions about a major strike. Otherwise other miners might come in the night and steal the seam. I had no way of sealing the shaft other than driving the truck over the shaft which we all did. The result was I contacted old Bill and offered him ten percent to put me in touch with an opal buyer who could take what I had. Bill came down with two nephews and we loaded everything up and Bill and I drove it up to Sydney to sell.”

“Were you a millionaire?”

“And some, still Bill and I bought out two licences adjoining ours and went

back into partnership with his two nephews. They broke through another seam so I left them and rented a flat, started painting, got bored and came back home to look for a peaceful place so I could improve my painting and maybe sell a few.”

“There are five partners in the mine and hopefully the prospects for further finds are good. So far Bills nephews have found more than enough to live on and upgrade the machinery. And whilst they dig, there’s always a chance of hitting another seam. It’s a bit like a drug Ash, once you start thinking it could be, the mind races ahead to it will be, such is life of the gold, emerald or opal miner.” Nick fell back into bed,

“That’s the end of the story of my life. Do you need a tablet for the cut?” Ash shook his head put the light out and lay down. After an hour or so his rear did start to throb and he put the light on, found a tablet and swallowed it down with a beaker of water.

“The blanket is putting pressure on the wound. Its hurting so I’ve taken a tablet.”

“OK, make a tent with your hand so the sheet and blanket are above the wound. When you feel the tablet take affect let it drop.” A minute later he heard the rhythmic sound of Ash's breath, asleep at last.

xxx

Chapter 7 A meeting with Molly.

Nick woke again to the general chorus of bird song, he felt Ash’s limp hand on his shoulder. Neither had moved during the night and Nick felt stiff in his joints, he gently moved Ash's arm away and Ash awoke and stretched. He gave a long sleepy sound and snuggled his head in against Nick’s back.

“Oh no my boy its off to work we go.” Checking his watch he moved away from the campaign bed and dressed.

“Come on Ash its ten past nine and we will be late for an appointment. How’s the rear?”

Ash smiled and shrugged then slipped out of his bed and dressed quickly.

“Where are we working today?”

“Well I am, you aren’t, you get a ride in a push chair or wheel barrow.”

Ash grimaced in mock alarm, but they went down to the kitchen and had strawberry jam, toast and coffee. Nick then collected the pushchair and told Ash to call for Bill and Ben.

By the time he returned both the large hounds were skipping around a bemused Ash to try to touch each one as they cantered past.

“Right in you go young fellow me lad, do you need a dummy and a toy?”

“Ha, very funny Nick, but you’re doing the pushing, do I need a cushion to sit on.”

“Of course,” Nick dashed into the cottage and bought Ash’s pillow out and pushed it into the chair. Ash carefully stepped in and wiggled in.

“Find Molly Clark boys, and stay close we don’t want to get lost.” The dogs skipped ahead and Nick followed them almost running now. Up the cottage road, sweeping around the front of the manor, through the gardens and down to the river bank where he saw an overgrown track.

“Not so fast Bill and Ben, heel, heel you two.” Nick stopped and the dogs returned. They carried on a more sedate pace. The pathway widened and turned into the woodland proper soon the saplings gave way to broad oak and ash trees their low limbs just brushing his head, in places he had to duck. Ultimately they came to a massive old oak tree its huge crown towered over the woodland. Here the dogs veered off a small leaf strewn path and galloped on ahead. Nick could hear their barking ahead and soon he pushed the chair into a square clearing with some old stonework crumbling at the edges. The dogs appeared and race around the pushchair when Nick had halted.

“Got a nice smell this place.” Said Ash looking around.

“Molly Clark please.” Yelled Nick but heard nothing. The dogs thought it was their command so they charged ahead and through a wide gap in the shrubbery. Nick thought it probably was the old carriage drive so he followed as quickly as he could. The old drive ran steeply upwards and Nick had to stop to take a breather, the dogs came back until he had rested and moved on. Then they forged ahead tails wagging furiously until Nick saw them barking in front a dilapidated cottage with the roof partially fallen in. Out of the door came a bent old white haired lady and berated the dogs for their antics, then she bent down and gave both a hug. Suddenly she looked up and spotted the pushchair and Nick.”

‘Who be you me fine lad, looking for Molly Clark be you.’ She didn’t actually speak but the words came thrusting sharply into Nick and Ash’s minds all the same.

“Lady Celia sent us with Bill and Ben.” Shouted Ash.

“I ain’t deaf young one, and will you be telling me who you be.” This time

she did speak and she came closer as she picked her way through the dancing dogs.

“Bill and Ben settle.” The dogs lay down and she came close up to Nick and studied him intently.

“You come afar,” then she turned to Ash, “That’s why me lady sent thee, get out now young one and lie over that fallen log and we’ll have a look see.”

Ash climbed gingerly out of the pushchair and took his shorts and underpants down then dutifully leaned over the log.

“I ought to be charging people for looking at my behind!” Ash said by way of a joke.

“Hush be quite child.” Molly stooped and in one swift movement tore the patch away.

Nick raised Ash’s shirt to show the full damage and Molly nodded.

“Some ignorant cow did this, what you been using, cream from Matheson the quack I expect.” Nick nodded.

“It’s helped the back a lot Molly you can see the marks are going.”

“Does it tickle young man, the back?”

Ash nodded.

“But the rear is split and I have a throbbing pain, I took aspirin for it, Alice gave me. My name is Ashley Mam.”

“Be it now and a fine looking lad you be with your ass all broken up and having to come wheeled in to see old Molly, still and all old Molly can do something for that wound but you mind you stay clear of Matheson and his modern science. It is the old ways that are best. Now stay as you are young Ashley and your brother will come with me and pick herbs” Molly beckoned Nick to follow her and they went up to the cottage and round the rear where there was a clearing and vegetable patch. Molly started to pick her herbs and some dock leaves.

“You bunch these here plants onto the rear end and cover with this dock leaf, Molly do the first one and you watch. No plasters just tight pants to cover and hold them, you follow me?”

Nick nodded.

“This talking bits uses my energy, I do not speak now.”

They walked back down to Ash still prostrate over the log, Molly clutched a piece of each herb and placed them into a dock leaf then applied the lot to Ash’s wound and pulled up his pants.

‘Now mind to don’t let them move about, keep still and let them do their magic, you hear young Ashley?’ Both Nick and Ash heard her once again as a trill in their minds.

“Thank you Molly, As soon as I can I will get this old lodge renovated, a

new thatch and a clean up.”

‘No you don’t young sir, so you be Nick, our Alex told Molly about the goings on, so you be the new owner of Mallings.’

“Not quite Molly the Mallings are the real owners of the manor, I’m just helping.”

Molly took Nick aside.

‘Now young master Nick, what be your problem, Ashley can’t hear.’

“You mean I worry to much about the lad?”

‘I mean no such thing, that be fine, the lad needs close comfort if you see my meaning, don’t fear your own feelings let nature take its course. What he been through he needs all the love and comfort you can give him, remember your youth.’ She touched his brow and they stood silently whilst his mind flicked through old memories.

‘Ah Nick you be the same and such trials. You be both welcome in my patch any time.’ She strode over to Ash who had squeezed back into the pushchair.

‘Now young Ash you be loving and give it out I see that, be warned there are those who would be jealous of your new found life. You be bullied no doubt because you are handsome as any child. My Alex was such a one, you and Nick will always find a friend in him. But you listen carefully, there will be trials at school ahead and you will find sanctuary here, or by calling them.

Use both when you need to.’ She pointed to the dogs and both rose and came either side of the chair. Turning to Nick she placed her hand on his chest.

‘Let the boy grow up in his own way, and allow him to give for he needs to.

Now be off you two and leave my cottage as it is, none of this talk of renovation, now watch my hand and you will understand.’ She swept her hand and it glided though the pushchairs hood and though Ash.

“That tickled Molly.” Ash cried out.

‘An don’t you forget my it fine lad, be off the two of you and have Molly’s blessing.’

She turned and disappeared.

“Home Bill and Ben, lets go.” Ash patted each one and they led the way back through the shafts of light that lit the woodland.

Nick said nothing but a huge relief had come over him, Molly had helped him as well as Ash, and as they came to the track by the river bank they saw two white swans searching for morsels in the river weed. The swans heard them and raised their long necks. And Nick stopped pushing and watched and turned to look at Ash and his violet blue eyes and his wide smile.

“Carry on driver please.” Said the golden haired one with the two grey wolfhounds trotting by his side. Nick bent down and kissed the yellow spiky hair.

“Ash your hair needs to be at least three inches longer then it won’t stick up so.”

“Uncle used to cut it short.”

“What with sheep shears?” And they both laughed and headed for the manor where the Electricians had finished their work. Nick by his watch it was mid afternoon, where had the time gone?

“Hungry?”

“A bit.”

“Lets go in and see if the kitchen can do us a sandwich?” Nick eased the pushchair up the steps in reverse and Dunning opened the door as they arrived under the portico.

“Sir Horace said you were coming so Alice has prepared an early tea in the kitchen, we have electricity now, a new fuse board Master Nick, but the hot water cylinders will be ready tomorrow.”

“After tea I think I will pop down to the pool and bathe there.”

After tea they went down to the pool and Nick had his soapy cool bath whilst Ash looked on and laughed as Bill and Ben joined Nick. Now fully visible, their dashing in and out and shaking their sodden coats soon smothered Nick and Ash, in the end Nick got out and dried them both and then they lay down in the sun.

“I wish I could get in there with the dogs.” Ash looked up at Nick who was busily pushing Bill wet coat away from him. Meanwhile Ben had lain down by Ash’s side and was enjoying a stroke to his great head.

“Well when my rear is in good order then.” He saw Nick shaking his head.

“Funny, you know Nick, how the boys have become solid, how their coats are wet.”

“I expect they dry very quickly when they disappear.” And just then they did, disappear.

“Alex must be home Ash,” Nick gathered Ash into his arms and held him tight.

“I love it here Nick.” Ash looked at the river, then lay down with his head on Nick’s chest.

“Why don’t you have hair on your chest, I thought most men have? Do you think Molly put those swans there when we saw them?”

“Ash I’m relaxing, questions and questions. What did you think of Molly?”

“Smelt roses and lavender.”

“I think she was a white witch, someone close to nature, and obviously fond of Alex.”

“Did I hear my name mentioned? You two in a clinch or just protecting one another?”

“When the dogs vanished I thought you might be home, and yes we are protecting one another from the outrageous fortune.”

‘Bit of the old Bard in Nick and how’s the young dragon slayer?’

“Fine thank you Alex, Molly seemed very fond of you.” Ash sat up and looked around. “Its called mind speak according to Molly but it’s a bit devious when you creep up like that and we can’t see you.”

“Well young Ash,” Alex appeared translucent, “it’s alright for you folk you are already solid, it takes a lot of energy and concentration for me. Have either of you seen Peter’s Joan, I think not but she’s about, mainly arm in arm with Peter so you see.”

“No we don’t see.” Nick glanced up at Alex.

“Correct you cannot see her as she can’t do the concentrating hard enough.”

“OK how about Bill and Ben then. I can always see them.” As Ash spoke the two hounds came around Alex and settling down close to Ash.

“Have you stolen by best friends young Ash?” cried an incredulous Alex.

“Ah you’ve gained two more in the meantime.” Ash settled close to Nick who had fallen asleep after all his exertions pushing the wheeled char, Ash placed one hand over his arm and the other over Ben’s huge neck.

“Then I’ll leave to your dreams young Ash, send Ben to me when you want, tell Nick Molly once saved my skin when he wakes up. I’ll tell you about it one day.” Alex’s voice trailed off as he and Bill went in search of rabbits to chase. All was peace with the world and Ash suddenly realised, as a breeze swept the leaves of an old tree shading them from the sun, that he had found his true home and wonders of wonders there was no pain in his rear end since they had met Molly Clark. Nick turned away over on his side; Ash nestled closer into him and also fell asleep. Ben sprawled out wedging Ash between them. And there they lay until Alice called from the cottage for their supper.

Nick went to the manor to check on the electricity and hot water situation, he met Dunning in the kitchen who seemed in some distress.

“We just had a telegram from our youngest who has had a motor accident in Dorset, Alice is keen to go down tonight and would you mind if we left you until tomorrow. By the way the telephone has been installed and there is a phone here, one in the hall and another in one of the bedrooms Lady Celia has picked out for you on the left wing, and the last in with HE’s study.”

“Of course you must go and stay as long as need be, Ash and I can always eat in the village, I have to go down there to put up our posters. I only came up to check the electricity and if there was hot water yet.”

“By tomorrow Master Nick, its only just warm. I ordered a fridge freezer

from the city which should be here tomorrow, I've told them to leave it in the kitchen here and could you leave a cheque for three hundred on the table here for their man to collect. Assuming you and Master Ash will not be around."

"That's fine Dunning, I'll walk back with you, do you need any cash for the journey?"

"No thanks, we have sufficient."

The Dunnings drove off in haste and Ash came into the kitchen.

"Nick, Jack came around when you went to the manor he bought two sets of news."

"What were they, hang on just let me finish these accounts, and I have to write a cheque for the fridge coming tomorrow." Nick finally finished and sat back.

"Well school has broken up for the summer holidays."

"Excellent, just in time to do some furniture buying and moving."

"And Uncle Tom has been retrenched by forestry."

"That's not so good, what will he do and how about his cottage?"

"It's rented, but Jack tells me it is to be demolished, Forestry own the land and a picnic site cum nature reserve is to be created. The plans are with the borough council"

"Wonder if he'd be interested in a general factotum job here? I'll pop over now, are you coming?"

"No thanks Nick, that barn gives me goose pimples, I'll stay here and read."

The evening was still bright for walking and found Tom Trent up. Nick asked him if he would work on the Mallings estate. Tom thought and then nodded, they agreed on an initial wage and an August start. Then they discussed the problem of the Forestry cottage. But Tom said it would be months, if not a year or two for planning permission, as the cottage was graded. He and Jack would be fine, and with that Nick bade him goodnight, then walked back to the manor where he knocked on HE's study door. He found a copy of 1925 Times fluttering in the air.

"Just popped in HE to say I've taken on Tom Trent as he's been retrenched and I think he would make a good handyman about the place."

"That's fine with me, I'll tell the others. Let me know what his wages will be so I can put them into the accounts. Don't look surprised Nick I have to do something here so I've decided to learn accounting and run our accounts. All bills to me in future my lad if you please."

"How are you going to sign the cheques?"

"That's easy you'll be doing that every Monday in here. Incidentally, your

posters are doing the trick. Better stay by the phone tomorrow, and get some ready cash from the bank, there's a lot of interest. Goodnight."

When Nick returned to the Dunnings cottage, Ash was in the outside toilet.

"Chuck away those old herbs and I'll put new ones on."

"Bit of a problem here Nick." Poor Ash had diarrhoea.

Nick ran up the stairs and retrieved both towels and the bag of herbs, and then he recalled that the skin had to be left dry. He spotted the Dunnings laundry room off the kitchen and saw they used two concrete tubs side by side. He tried the hot water and it was hot so he ran some hot and cold water into one tub. He ran outside and called Ash in. Laying one of the towels, his white one, onto the front edge of the tub, when Ash arrived he lifted him up to balance on the towel and tub edge. Nick picked up a small hand towel and wiped the excrement off careful to keep from touching the pink wound.

"Well lets get you off to bed and put some more weeds on you and sleep, we have a busy day ahead.'

"You aren't cross?"

"Of course not, we must be careful what you eat. I'll wash the towel under the tap and you pop upstairs. By the way I'll show how you can apply the herbs yourself, especially if you get caught short again."

Upstairs as Nick folded some of the herbs under the large dock leaf he turned Ash over and showed him how it was folded. There still remained some brittle scab tissue, but the wound was pink and dry. So he reapplied the herbs and dock leaf. The herb side on the wound and the dock on top and the pants pulled over and up to keep the whole lot in.

"Good news Ash."

"What good news?" whispered Ash his face buried in a pillow.

"Your Uncle Tom is going to work for us, and they don't have to move from their home for months yet, and the wound has closed and is healing beautifully."

"And." Came a muffled response in the pillow.

"And I love you to bits, as well as your poor belted bum. All being well, it's a proper bath for us both tomorrow at Mallings" Nick laughed as Ash hoisted himself up and threw himself into Nick's arms.

"Now about those birds and bees Ash."

"Learnt it at biology in school last term, so you needn't be embarrassed Nick!"

"OK then I'm off to the bank tomorrow and more shopping, you are on phone duty all day in the kitchen or Uncles study if you prefer. I expect that

will stop you running about and getting into everybody's way. If Jack comes by, he can help you. Oh didn't I tell you, Uncle Horace mentioned we have had lots of interest in your posters. Well done Ash." Nick plonked Ash back onto his own bed. "Sleep and no snoring."

"Not me Nick, pity you can't hear yourself." Ash managed to get the last bit in then a pillow hit him. He returned fire and five minutes of warfare found them laughing but exhausted.

XXX

Chapter Eight. A move at last and shifting furniture.

Ash was up early and when Nick came down to the cottage kitchen, a well-cooked breakfast awaited him. After washing the dishes Nick left a note for the Dunnings in case they returned, then Ash and he walked up to the manor.

They found Lady Celia sitting on the bottom of the main stairway writing out tickets.

"These are sticky, Joan and I are going to place them all on the various rooms in the house. We have a list here and spare labels, so when the furniture arrives you can check the room list and advise the men where to put them."

"Aunt, who will stick the labels on the furniture?" asked Nick.

"Why me of course, I'll know where everything needs to go of course."

"Excuse me Aunt Celia."

"Yes Ash?"

“You aren’t quite fulsome at present, won’t you scare the people who bring it.”

“Of course not I don’t scare you do I Ash. Anyhow they’ll come in ones or twos so I won’t stick the labels on until they leave. The hall is plenty big enough to store any amount ”

“I want to buy two beds today and hope they will get delivered this afternoon could you show Ash the bedrooms allocated to us please Aunt.”

“You will have the second floor on the left wing. Horace, boys, Joan and I will have the right wing as we have always been there. The first floor we used to keep as reception rooms and an occasional ballroom is the large lounge, I suggest we keep it the same Nick.”

‘Fine Aunt Celia, we are expecting a fridge freezer to arrive and I’m not sure where Alice wants it put in the kitchen. Also Ash is to take the calls on the telephone so where is the best place for him to go?’

“With Horace of course Nick, and when the fridge arrives I will tell Ash in mind talk where to put it. Now you both better go and see Horace who’s studying his accountancy book avidly.”

Ash knocked on the study door and they both entered, a tasselled bookmark floated from the desktop onto a large book.

‘Right you two, Nick I propose you take out from the Malling account five hundred, for those who don’t want cheques. Ash, just pop along to the kitchen and fetch a chair for you to sit on. I have drawn up a list for you to fill in when people telephone. Come by me and have a look.’ The top portion of HE appeared and Ash stood beside him.

“First at the time of ringing, their name, telephone number, the item in question, what money they want for it, Cash or Cheque, I suggest you abbreviate Cash is C and Cheque is Q, and any other details you are given. I will be here all the time so yell out if you need assistance.”

“Right Uncle Horace, do you have a spare biro?”

“Only a fountain pen old fruit.”

Nick passed over his own biro to Ash who scurried out to get the chair.

“He’ll be fine Nick my lad, now away you go.”

“Just one thing Uncle, alas inflation has increased substantially and a table costing twelve now a days will be ten times that.”

“For new maybe but this is our old stuff!”

“Yes even old prices have increased dramatically.”

“I suppose you are right so make it a thousand. And Nick something for the boys.”

“Like what?”

“Bike each, I expect young Jack Trent will be as eager as Ash to help move

things about.”

“It’s Ash’s birthday next month, so that might do nicely.”

Ash came back carrying an old high chair.

‘Just the thing young Ash, now you can sit taller than me, here at the end where that dam telephone is and here’s a book for you to read that I have in my drawer.’ HE was fast disappearing, but the drawer squeaked opened and two large books floated down before the boy.

“Why Uncle Horace it’s the history of the Mallings!” exclaimed Ash leafing through the first book. Nick looked at them, well one of them and a moving bookmark, he smiled to himself and left.

The fridge freezer arrived in the morning and Lady Celia called Ash to co-ordinate the installation. She spoke to him in mind speak and the men set the appliance into its designated slot. Fortunately some power outlets had been set into the kitchen wall at Alice’s instruction, when the electricians had come. New power points were also due to be placed in the scullery. And replaced in HE’s study plus the various floors above.

After they had set and levelled the large fridge, one of the men spotted the old electric range.

“Must be fifty years old at least, wonder if your boss would be willing to sell it?”

“Why?” asked Ash?

“Our boss he has a collection and as sure as hell he don’t yet have one of these old ones, can I give him a ring if you are interested?”

‘Yes’. Said Celia.

“Yes” said Ash.

So the fridge man rang on his mobile and named the range its model number stamped in the cast iron edge.

“He’ll give you a hundred for it”

‘We will need another range Ash to replace this one.’

“We would need another range do you mind if I ring my brother Nick?” Ash picked up the telephone and rang the number Nick had given him. He thought it might be the bank but Nick answered straight away.

“Its Ash Nick, the men with the fridge want to buy the old range, Aunt says yes but we need a new replacement.”

The fridge man was speaking on his mobile again.

“Look can I speak to your brother young fellow?” He took the phone from Ash.

“My boss collects old electrical appliances he’s offering hundred and fifty off a new range.”

“How much is a good quality electric range sufficient to handle the requirements of this house?” Nick asked.

“You’d need a double range top and double oven.” He hesitated, “ the boss says eight fifty and he’ll throw in a new washing machine and discount by the hundred and fifty.”

“That’s fine with me, can we have it delivered by lunchtime, I’ve electricians coming in the afternoon and they could fit it. I will go and pay your boss if you give me his address.”

The fridge man's boss agreed to deliver them himself after Nick had paid, and then await Nick’s electrician to un-install the old one. Meanwhile his men could return to load up the new range and washing machine and they would all return after lunch. Every thing was agreed so Ash showed the men out. Ash returned to the study where HE was taking a call and the pen poised over the paper. Ash picked the phone gently out of the air and listened said quietly.

“I’m so sorry my old uncle is somewhat deaf and I’ve only just come in, could you repeat what you said to him.” Ash looked down at the paper and checked what HE had written.

“Well it’s exactly what uncle wrote down but he left the price you want out, what was it you wanted?”

‘He’s a downright thief, Ash I know the family, it’s not an important chair it was my old one in my bedroom with wings on it, they were getting worn.’

“Five thousand! Mr. Trenchard, Oh I’m sorry Lord Trenchard”

‘Been made a Lord now, in my day they were just Squire Trenchard and well known for skulduggery. Tell him fifty or seventy five absolute limit. Better still Ash tell him Sir Horace was intending to send it to the parish hostel!”

“I’m so sorry we could only pay seventy five for it as Sir Horace in his will had left it for the parish hostel, so its not something the family would be keen to buy back, however the offer is there if.” The phone was slammed down at the other end.

‘That family has not changed one iota, mark my words young Ash. I must say for a twelve year old you handled that well.’

“Coming up to thirteen Uncle Horace.” A brief laugh came from over the accounting book. Ash looked down at the list they had collected between themselves, there were already eight entries and all for delivery tomorrow.

Jack came around after midday, and not finding Nick or Ash stood in hall.

“Anyone at home” Jack shouted.

‘Your young friend is here in the hall Ash, you look after the men and machinery and I’ll take care of the telephone.’

“Right Uncle, that’s eleven so far and only this morning.” Ash rushed out to meet Jack.

The bell from portico doorbell rang, a long booming chime.

“Erie isn’t it Ash, the bell I mean, echoing throughout the hall like that.”

“I expect it’s loud as Dunning needs to hear it in the kitchen.” Ash replied as he swung open the door. Two men with a bed and mattress stood outside.

“This Malling Manor mate, you the page?”

“Certainly not, what have you got there please.” Ash replied a bit miffed.

“Two single beds, mattresses, pillows and linen, blankets in the name of Mallet. That you?”

“Yes could you bring them in and perhaps bring them up to the room if that’s all right?”

‘Its on the second floor left wing, I’ve tagged the room names Ash.’

“Thank you Aunt.”

“Pardon?” said the man with the bed.

“Sorry just talking to myself, please come in.” Ash turned and called Jack, “I think the electricians are coming can you ask them to take the old range out please Jack.”

He then indicated to the bed men to follow him up the stairs.

“Big place for two young lads to own.” Said one of the men as they hauled up the first bed up the stairway.

“Belongs to my Uncle and Aunt.” Ash directed to the second floor and along the corridor to the room labelled Ash and continued on to the end where ‘Nick’ was displayed. He opened the door and found Nick's room was large and airy and had two windows, a large one to the front of the house and a smaller on the side overlooking the Dunnings cottage in the distance, then the river, and further on the road bridge.

“Fabulous.” He said.

“Where to with the bed mate.”

“Over by the back wall please, close to the window. Can you bring up the other bed and put it alongside please, I’ll help with the other stuff.” They followed Ash back along the empty corridor and down the two flights of stairs to fetch the other bed and bedding from the van. Ash helped them up with the bedding. A buzz entered his head.

‘Come down to the study and I will give you a tip for the men.’

“Right Uncle.”

“Not you’re uncle mate, but sign here for the items please.”

Ash signed as A. Mallet. As they returned down to the hall Ash asked them to wait and went into the study where HE handed him an old shilling.

“Uncle the moneys been changed now and a tip needs to be a bit higher.”

‘Pop down to the kitchen and in a little flowered pot in the scullery Dunning keeps change for such things.’

Ash dashed out and down to the kitchen found the pot and took out a decent tip for the men. He raced back to them and handed it over. Then showing them out spotted the appliance truck coming down the drive. Dashing back into the kitchen he alerted the electrician and Jack that the new range was coming.

“Over the next few days Jack, its going to be pretty busy here, can you come and help if its possible.”

“Course Ash and I’m sure Dad will come and help, the Forestry told him it would be his last day today.”

“Oh great, everything seems to be falling into place, and its bath night tonight!” Ash dashed back to the main door to welcome in the appliance people.

Nick arrived soon after, having dropped two large parcels strapped to his roof rack at Tom Trent’s barn with a quick note attached. As he came through the front door Ash was there to greet him.

“Nick have you noticed that the main door is in fact a double door and by unlocking these central bolts here top and bottom both doors open much wider.”

“That’s great because we need them now as there’s another lorry coming down the drive. Do you have your list with you it could be one of your telephone callers?”

Ash ran into the study and collected the top page as HE was using the clipboard for another entry.

“Yes a Mr and Mrs Durstan, from Pool Dorset, a large mahogany table and five leaves, five thousand due this afternoon. And its a Q, a cheque.”

‘That’s fine Nick I’ll help Ash you pop into the kitchen and check on all the installations.’

“Aunt you can’t just wave that pen around in mid air, you’ll frighten the visitors!”

Lady Celia burst into a very solid being.

“I’ve been practising very hard, now off you go and leave Ash with me, you’ll find Jack in the kitchen so please send him out to give us a hand, according to the list we have five deliveries.”

“Oh Aunt there are fourteen chairs to come with the table.”

“There was originally sixteen, I wonder where the other two might be? Right off you go.”

The lorry stopped and backed up to the lower step. Lady Celia went outside

to meet the Durstan's.

"Morning Mam, Durstan from Dorset, we were expected this afternoon with a table and chairs. Might you be the Lady of the house?"

"I am indeed Lady Malling and you are both most welcome, my sturdy lads here will help you unload, and here is Trent coming round the drive, lets get them unloaded."

The rear roller door was raised and with much huffing, lifting and pushing a large six-legged table was man handled up the steps. Lady Celia and Mrs Durstan staying well back as it was slid sideways on sacking the boys had found. Nick came back to see what all the noise was about. They all lifted the table right way up.

"Its to go up the first floor dining room cum ballroom my lads." Lady Celia fondly swept her hand over the polished surface. "You've looked after this well Mrs Durstan, it was my great aunts favourite table, such dining parties held on it."

"Aunt it's a bit heavy to get up those stairs, they might be wide enough but the bend on the landing might be difficult."

"Pop underneath Nick, and tell me what you both see at the top of the leg joints, they might unscrew."

"I understand we asked for five thousand for the chairs and table my lady."

"Indeed Mrs Durstan, that's what my husband has agreed, by the way how did you acquire my family's table?"

"I am the granddaughter of the Rector here and I believe he acquired it for the Rectory in the village."

"Acquired?"

"Well I think he purloined it my lady."

"Well we have agreed on a price and it's so nice to see it back, thank you.

Well Nick what do see?"

"Thumbscrews" Said Nick.

"Well done, so turn the table back on its side on these sacks and perhaps unscrew the legs. Nick you will need to arrange for a cheque for our visitors."

"Mam I listened to what my wife had said, I wonder if we could ask for five hundred in cash and reduce the amount we receive to a total of three thousand."

"That's most generous of you both but I think the way your wife has looked after the patina of the table and the chairs the boys have just bought up I would suggest a total of four. By the by there used to be sixteen chairs and I wondered where the other two might be?"

"Begging your pardon Mam, but we moved to a small flat from our large

house and had to put the table and chairs into storage last year. But we kept two chairs for our own use as a souvenir of a lovely piece.” Mr Durstan blushed in embarrassment.

“Then the price is agreed and you may keep those two chairs as a memory of Mallings, so Nick cash and a three thousand cheque if you please.” Lady Celia watched intently as the legs were unscrewed and the boys and Trent carried them up the stairs to the right wing. Nick fetched the cash and signed the cheque and ushered the Durstan’s down the steps.

“Lovely lady your Aunt, I expect she’s met the Queen?”

“I expect she has met many of them.” Nick said with a smile. “Could you leave the gates open please and thank you very much for coming.” He waved them off up the drive. He then went to his own car and collected a small black case and some boxes.

“Something for the accountant, come on Ash lets give Uncle Horace a surprise. Ash have you ever worked a computer?”

“Only at school, we have a computer lab and lessons, mainly use it for the Internet, searching history and stuff.”

“Great, you are the ideal person I’m looking for, I wouldn’t know how to use the blasted thing, no need when you are working underground.”

They knocked, and then went into the study. A page in the book on the desk stood stock-still.

“Well you two what have you got there?” HE’s head and shoulders gradually appeared.

“Uncle we would like to present you with a laptop computer and a simple accounting software pack to install.”

“That’s most kind of you Nick and what part does young Ash have to play in this comedy?”

“He’s going to teach you.”

“What is it, some sort of slide rule?”

“No, it’s a piece of very useful equipment, every family should have one, especially those who are into accounting. I’ll leave Ash with you as we are still expecting more furniture this afternoon and I’ll help Aunt Celia and Jack. By the way did you set a maximum hourly time for receipt of the furniture?”

“Indeed we did Nick, Uncle and I set between ten in the morning and eight at night in case people had to come far. No deliveries on Sunday.” Ash checked the clipboard as he climbed into the high chair beside HE.

“Now Uncle, this is the carrying bag for the computer which is called a laptop. Its powered by either electricity or a battery, we need to plug it into a

socket and switch on.” Ash picked up one of the software packs.

“Accountancy for shops, small business and farms.”

“Ideal” said HE, and Nick closed the door behind him and went to aid Lady Celia who was dealing with a man who had bought in a bureau, a small one.

“Alas my man this is not one of ours, cannot allow you anything for it.”

“But Mam the gentleman on the phone gave me an approximate price of two hundred, and said to bring it in, I don’t want to take it back again.”

‘Well Nick looks like Horace has given his word.’

“Well I suppose we could put it up in one of the box rooms for the time being.” Said Nick.

“Well we will accept on that condition, but it is not ours, let me inspect it carefully I don’t want rubbish in the house.” Lady Celia gave the man a distinctly hard look. “And if your friends have the same idea of dumping their non saleable brown furniture on the Mallings let them beware. I believe you to be a dealer, am I right?”

“Yes Mam, I thought it a good opportunity to be rid of it from the shop, houses these days can’t fit stuff like this, but it is in good nick.”

“Very well, Nick give the man two hundred as long as he helps take up the to the attic.” Lady Celia then went to the door as another delivery arrived.

And so it went on right up to the late afternoon until Ash said all deliveries for the day were in. The Dunnings arrived back bringing with them their son Jason who was to recuperate at the cottage. After settling Jason in the spare room, Alice went about making sandwiches for them all, at least for those who had a body. She took a plate into Ash who was deep in discussion with HE. Eventually Joan and Peter came down to say all the furniture received had been properly placed and Joan had dusted and polished them.

Nick went outside to enjoy the last evening light and Ash soon joined him, Jack and Tom Trent came out and Nick had a quite word with Tom about the packages he had left in the Barn.

“Bath night.” Said Ash expectantly.

“Right first one there with their towel in their hand gets first hot bath, the loser makes do with the warm remnants. Hang on Ash I did not say go!” But Ash was through the door like a flash and clattering up the broad staircase before Nick had even closed the main doors.

‘Nick, we will probably need that stair carpeted and along the corridors, I’ll ask Peter to peruse some stores for colour and prices.’

“That’s fine with me Aunt, perhaps we could lay them down ourselves, now that little urchin has beaten me to it so at least I can go and fill the bath for him, I doubt he knows how to find the bathroom let alone get in so, the race is still on.”

‘Afraid not Nick, I showed him this morning, he wanted to see it, he was so looking forward getting into a real tub, I don’t believe the lad has ever had a proper bath except when you both were at the river pool with Alex.’

Nick wished his adopted Aunt a good night went outside to pick up a plastic bag from the car, then returned and climbed the stairs to the second floor bathroom, the door was wide open with an excited Ash half naked jumping up and down.

“You see the bath is one of those old fashioned cast iron ones on legs, so you put a small amount of hot water to take the chill off the iron. Then you pour some of this in called a bubble bath liquid, then turn the taps on and it makes bubbles. Use your hand Ash to test the temperature; you can then wash in the bubbles. I’ve bought us soap, shampoo and conditioner so here is yours, which I’ll put on this marble table. Strange you know none of the bathroom furniture is missing!”

“Aunt Celia told me the villagers couldn’t find the door entry catch so they left these alone, that’s why Uncles desk and chairs are still in the study. Can I get in now?”

“Try the temperature and turn the taps off now.”

Ash dipped his hand in, “A little more hot I think.”

“Not too full, halfway it’s about right for you I think, can you swim?”

“No.”

“So we can’t have you drown, OK in you get and don’t splash.” Ash jumped in and a shower of fairly warm water hit Nick on the face.

“Thanks a lot Ash now I’ll have to find another bath before I freeze to death. There’s one downstairs under this one.”

“Sorry Nick,” said Ash luxuriating in the bubbles and poking his head up in alarm.

“Its just down stairs under this room.”

“No Nick don’t leave me in this strange room.”

‘That’s alright Nick, I’ll keep an eye on Ash, you are drenched and need to change.’ Joan appeared intermittently, but not fully developing.

“But I can’t see you properly Joan,” Ash whined and remained worried.

‘I’m still here Ash and I am really trying, now go Nick and have your bath.’

Nick went out and closed the door then went down to the first floor and filled his bath. He soaped and shampooed and felt like luxuriating as Ash had done, but he worried about the boy, got out, pulled the plug, dried and went back upstairs. When he opened the door Ash was still in the bath with a guilty expression. Joan was in full body and washing Ash hair.

“Well what happened to you two?”

“This little horror sank under the water and I was so afraid that I forced myself to become whole and drag him out quickly. He was fooling around so I’m giving his scalp a good rub and clean, then I will start on the tummy and groin.”

“Anything but that!” Ash yelled.

A knock on the door and Peter came through.

“Are there you are Joan, and my goodness you are fully there. Well done.”

Turning to Nick, “Joan has been trying desperately to learn to control the visibility.”

“Ash helped me.” Joan gave him a huge kiss on his forehead.

”Not to much of that Joan, don’t get carried away.” Ash said as Joan lifted him out of the bath and Nick wrapped the towel around his tummy.

“Well you too I’ve locked up and I’ve come to collect my beautiful wife away from the clutches of a young whipper-snapper who has managed to drench nearly every square centimetre of our bathroom.”

“Ours?” queried Ash.

‘I do wash sometimes Ash and this is the only one on this floor.’ Peter laughed as he and Joan slid through the closed door.

Nick rubbed Ash down and told him to turn around so he could check his back and buttocks.

“Good news and bad Ash.”

“What’s the good?”

“Your whole back is spotless just a little pink on the welt mark but no scab, the bath has cleaned you up pretty well.”

“The bad?”

“I’m off to bed you still got to pull the plug, clean the bath and mop up the floor. On the towel rack you’ll see I put a bathmat and you can use that to mop up.” Nick placed his own towel on the rack and went off to the bedroom.

When Ash followed a few minutes later Nick was in bed.

“Why did you move your bed into my room, you’ve got a good large one for your own, next door Ash. Right, you can read me a part of that adventure story it will send me to sleep.”

A pillow came flying across the room and hit him softly, he threw it back and settled down as Ash began to read aloud. Nick closed his eyes and just listened to Ash’s high clipped clear voice, staying awake listening and enjoying the timbre. Eventually Ash stopped reading and put out the light.

Chapter Nine. Time passes quickly and Ash grows up.

The days followed, full of lifting, carrying and storing. Lady Celia surveyed the rooms with missing furniture and she and Nick ventured out to furniture auctions and house sales to purchase what was needed.

Middle of August soon came and Ash came down for breakfast to find a large slim cardboard package inside the hall by the main door. On it was a small notice. 'A birthday gift to the truest little brother I've ever had, love Nick.' By it were other little packages from the Mallings. Ash waited till they all arrived and opened them up. Two cycle helmets, from HE and Lady Celia, Two pairs of real leather gloves from Alex, and two pairs of anoraks from the Peter and Joan. Lastly he opened Nick's parcel and found a scarlet mountain bike needing to be assembled.

"Oh thank you one and all, thank you, thank you. But why the spare stuff I really only need one set?" He looked inquiringly at HE.

"Well Ash. We thought you might like to reward your cousin Jack with something. For all the work he's done for us."

"So we both can ride this bike with our own gear, I'll save up the pocket

money Nick gives me and buy him a bike for Christmas.”

“Your wish is my command. Here he comes now I can hear the splash of gravel outside!”

As Nick opened the main door there sat Jack as proud as a peacock on his green mountain bike.

“Thanks Ash, the label said it was from you.”

“Come inside Jack there’s your helmet, gloves and coat as well. Its not from me its from my Uncle and Aunt and Nick and Alex and Peter, and dear Joan as well.”

And so for the next few weeks both boys cycled through all the paths they could find. Ash would take his drawing pad and pencil, then map the paths, significant things such as trees, fences, outbuildings and of course the river. Jack would carry a tree knife to cut away any offending branches. They would race over the bridge and down the forestry paths and explore the surrounding area. Nick had bought Ash a small cell phone so they could ring in an emergency.

It was on one of their excursions close to the Dunnings that they popped in to visit Jason who was recovering slowly. Jason told them when he was young he and his elder sister had found a row of desolate cottages behind the shrubbery close to the road leading to the bridge. It was heavily overgrown so would be impenetrable now. This sent the boys into high excitement and leaving their bikes at the Dunnings they went in search of the buildings that Jason had described. After walking up to the bridge then turning right along the road they tried to see into the thick woodland, without success. They decided to retrace their steps until, from where they were standing; they calculated they would be a direct line to the Dunnings. They plunged fearlessly in and fought their way through. Jack had thought to break a branch every few feet so they could find their way back. They struggled forward scratched by briar and blackberry until finally they reached a small group of cottages, three in a row, sadly neglected but the roof’s still on. Ash thought the high trees had protected the houses like a protective shroud. Elated they tried each door but a large padlock protected their entry. The windows were so grimy that the boys could not see anything inside. Deciding to carry on forward Ash was worried they could go off track and get lost so he yelled ‘BEN’ several times until suddenly a huge grey head protruded though the undergrowth.

“Good boy Ben, to the Dunnings now, take us to the Dunnings.” Ben wagged his tail as he circled both boys and led them at an angle though the bushes with Jack snapping branches as they went. Ultimately they came to very high laburnums. Ben, Ash and Jack forced their way through and there

was Mr and Mrs Dunnings vegetable patch right in from of them and the dear cottage a little further on. They dashed inside to tell Jason and he advised them to place a stake where they had exited. They did this then picked their bikes and stormed back to the manor to tell Nick of their find. He was greatly impressed with their navigation until they owned up that Ben had helped! Nick and Tom then returned that evening with the boys leading them to the cottages. Tom had a quick look around and said there was every opportunity to restore them. Nick then suggested cutting a drive through to them and then to look at restoring them next spring. Thus the boy's adventurous days ended as new school term beckoned.

Ash returned to school. Jack and his father decided that as Jack had turned sixteen in September, he would leave the school. HE offered him a similar position to his father's, so both the Trent's came to work at Mallings. They decided to clear a track into the three cottages much to Jack's delight as he felt these were his and Ash's new found domain!

The months passed into late autumn and Ash used the river path to walk to school with his satchel slung from his shoulder and a jaunty stride though the forest over the grass field until he reached the school playing fields, which actually belonged to the Malling estate but had been given a ninety nine year lease to the school at the time of Lady Celia's death. Ash would wonder when the lease would be up and what would Nick do with the land. The grass fields had been let by Nick to a local dairy farmer. Ash always had time to pat one or two cows on his way through. Sometimes he saw the swans swimming silently in the river. He missed Jack's company and occasionally would ride his mountain cycle as a quicker means of getting school when he was running late. The previous night he found he had a puncture so today would have to be walking day.

After school he crossed over the playing fields and passed over the stile but instead of taking his normal route straight across the fields, he cut down to the river path where there was a chance of seeing the river otters that often fished in the open water. He knew they lived further upstream in the forest shaded part, but there was a chance of a view of otters though they fished late evening. As he came down to the river he heard splashing and chortling but found to his horror two elder boys from his school throwing stones at a poor creature caught in weeds close the opposite bank.

"Hey you guys quit throwing stones at that vole." Ash raced down to stop them.

"It's a flaming rat and so are you, you alien." The larger of the lads lunged for Ash and he just managed to avoid the fist. But the other grabbed him

from the waist and the elder one punched him in the stomach. Ash fell in pain, his cell phone spilling from his pocket. Meanwhile the bully's foot smashed down upon Ash's hand as he tried to retrieve the phone.

"Not bad, look Harry one of them latest, takes video I bet. Kid doesn't need this, finders keepers." Whilst the bullies opened up the cell phone and played around with it Ash managed to scramble to his feet and ran along the river path toward the gate to the forest and Mallings. But the bullies had been alerted by Ash's groans and the pain in his stomach didn't allow much speed, the others were catching up and Ash pushed through the gate and stumbled on. The bullies also came bursting through and picked up fallen sticks which they then thrust at Ash catching in his legs forcing him fall heavily. Then they belayed into him using the thin branches as whips twice they hit him and then a dreadful cry came from Ash as he called for Ben. It was over quickly as the older bully raised his whipping branch his shirt erupted with blood as a giant grey head threw him to the ground. The younger bully suffered a similar fate as he tried to run back, Bill had sprung and held onto the lad's shoulder with his gnashing teeth. He tripped the lad and ripped his shirt clean off. Ash was as much shaken by the speed of the attack, but he gathered his senses and called the dogs off. Their teeth and their deep growls were held at bay by Ash's hands on their necks which was enough to encourage the bullies to run back to the fields with their tattered clothes clutched in their hands. Ash looked down, and carefully wrapped a leaf around each gently dropped to pick up the whipping sticks, he took them for evidence. He hobbled slowly back toward Mallings with both dogs on guard by his side. He felt sick in the stomach and rested for a while,

"Bill go fetch Nick or Alex, now boy go, Ben stay here." Ash gasped.

Bill sped off and soon Ben ever alert pricked up their ears and soon Alex appeared. Nick came running soon after with the pushchair.

"Ash what the hell happened, and why are you holding those sticks."

"Evidence Nick, the bullies used them."

"Where does it hurt?"

"All over the head and back but mostly my tummy, I got belted there."

"Molly, need to go to Molly now." Said Alex. So they lifted Ash gently into the chair and pushed him up to Molly's place. She appraised the stomach carefully, touching him as gently as possible.

'No internal damage, had you braced the punch your muscle would have been damaged and at least a hernia. But the stomach has been bruised so I will give you some herbs to boil with water and drink as an infusion.' Molly lifted his head, 'A back eye is what I forecast but not damage to the eye,

leave it as it is.' She turned to his back 'I expect Master Nick has a cure for that, some gentle treatment and consideration for the boy.'

"Of course Molly but we have to find the culprits." Nick said angrily and followed Molly to her herb patch.

'Indeed they will be presented to you shortly, now take the boy back and treat his wounds but leave him up, I suspect a visitor will be with you soon.' Alex Nick and the dogs wheeled Ash back; he still clung to his evidence sticks and only yielded them up by placing them in the hall.

"Don't touch these Nick, we learnt about DNA last year and that could point to the bullies. Oh I'm sure they stole my cell phone, what shall we do?"

"Absolutely nothing until I clean you up young man." Joan appeared, and taking Molly's infusion plants pushed Ash down to the kitchen. Nick sat heavily on the staircase with Alex beside him.

"If Bill and Ben had not got to him in time what could have happened Alex."

"I guess it can happen any time, generally it's my estimate that bullies have a cowardly disposition, hold it here comes father."

'What the devils going on I saw Ash though the study being pushed in a trolley and seemed to me to be in pain and bruised. Well come on you two?'

"He was attacked in the cow field by a couple of bullies. Hold on he's telling Joan and Peter what happened."

HE and Alex listened carefully; Nick could only hear a faint trembling voice coming from the kitchen corridor. Neither moved for several minutes.

'When Ash has had Molly's special tea he's to come in the study with me and settle down.'

"Molly's been in touch Father?"

"No, your Mother has just been to Molly, I wish you'd pay more attention to who is and who is not in the house Alex, but Mother and I will care for Ash, and Nick."

"Yes Uncle?"

'You will leave everything to Peter, I know you are angry and in shock, go down and have a sweet cup of tea that Alice is making. I suggest you listen and mind speak if you must Peter will hear you, in fact you can go down and practice with him. Alex you are staying with me, I don't want you belting the idiot who is about to come through the door!'

Nick went down to the kitchen, Ash's shirt and trousers were off and Joan was administering some sort of lotion on his back and legs, whilst Ash drank Molly's tea. Alice handed him a mug tea, and Nick faced Ash and checked his right eye where a welt mark could clearly be seen. Ash's tears started to well up onto Nick's hand, Nick kissed his forehead. Peter touched him on the arm.

“Best sit down and have your tea, now try your mind speak.”

“How?”

“Think of me Peter, imagine me listening, then use your mind and talk in your mind.”

‘Peter if you can here this you have the most beautiful wife in the world.’

“You are quite right Nick that’s why I surfaced here after the bomb blast I had to be around her all the time.”

“And I never knew” chipped in Joan looking lovingly at her husband.

“I heard every word too Nick” cried Ash as Alice dried his tears.

‘How come Peter everyone heard.’

“Because you had us all somewhere in your mind. Now young Ash if you heard Nick and I then you are a natural mind speaker, so you have a try.”

‘I love you all so much and my fine Nick, I will never find another like you.’

Alex poked his head around the kitchen door.

“Thanks Ash I thought the dogs and I came first in your heart of hearts.”

They all laughed, but more out of relief for Ash was becoming more himself.

Alex departed with Dunning as the doorbell boomed out. Peter followed and indicated for Nick to stay close by the kitchen door and listen.

Dunning opened the door and a police sergeant stood in the doorway.

“We’ve had a serious complaint about the manor, some dogs have viciously attacked two young lad’s going about their lawful business. May I see the owner of this house?”

“Well you can see one of them I’ll call Mr. Peter down now if you kindly sit over there. Sergeant?”

“Sergeant Ferguson, Hampshire Police. Kindly be quick about it my man I don’t have all day, if these here charges are proven the dogs will need to be destroyed.”

‘They already are you buffoon’ Alex thought.

‘Quite Alex this is no laughing matter.’ Said HE abruptly.

Dunning called up the stairs and Peter came down slowly, every bit a gentleman.

“Well Sergeant how can we help you.”

“Have you got two massive live dogs running free in the woods?”

“No.”

“Big ones, huge teeth, boys say they taking a walk in the woods and were attacked.”

“Sergeant when I was upstairs I heard you tell Dunning here that the boys were on their lawful business. Its not lawful to be loitering in my cousin Nick woods, would that not be so?”

“Nevertheless its illegal to attack trespassers regardless sir.”

“Oh really then it would be illegal for two boys to attack a smaller boy in these self same woods, would it not, and perhaps this small boy whom you shall presently see beat them off.”

“Knowing the lads I think that would be far fetched sir.”

“Yes sergeant you do know the lads, perhaps they be related to you, a Father or more likely an Uncle.”

‘You’re reading his mind.’

‘Shush Nick’

‘Don’t forget my stolen phone.’

‘Thank you, now be quite you two.’

“Right sir I do happen to be the lads Uncle, and that makes it much harder since I’m family involved.”

“And presumably Sergeant Ferguson, you know these lads to be caring and honest with their fellows?”

“I’m sure they be, but my brother is willing to settle out of court so as not to embarrass the manor.”

“That’s very considerate, but alas my cousin is prepared to sue for considerable damages, but we are talking at cross purposes what we have is a crime which still needs proving. Do you have any chance an officer of the law at the boys house?”

“I have one of my constables there now taking a full statement.”

‘Nick got your cell phone, come on out now.’

“Are here comes my cousin now, Nick just take the Sergeant down to the kitchen to see our young cousin.” Nick showed the Sergeant where Ash was. The Sergeant was obviously shaken to see Ash’s blood shot eye and welts on his back and hands where he had tried to parry the blows, Alice tuned Ash gently in his chair and pointed to his stomach. It was purple with bruising.

“What happened?”

“I was set upon by two older boys who throwing stones at a vole on the river bank, our bank. I asked them to stop and they said it was a rat and began to pummel me, they took my cell phone then chased me into the woods as I tried to escape. They caught me and beat me with sticks. I could not take any more and lost my temper and one fell over a root of a tree so I gave the other a walloping, he ran away, the other rose and I grabbed him with my fingers and scratched his back and tore his shirt, as you can see some of my nails are broken.”

“And of course you can this?”

“Of course Sergeant, the sticks in the hall are those used to beat young Ash and most certainly will have the DNA of the perpetrators, these are to

collected by my solicitors for laboratory testing as a basis for substantial damages from your brother.”

“These are evidence,”

“No the evidence is elsewhere, please telephone your constable and ask him to wait to listen?” Peter eyed the Sergeant.

“To what?”

“Pick up the phone and ring your policeman, Ash told you he had his cell phone stolen did he not?”

The sergeant rang through to his brother’s house.

“Put PC Pearson on Bert will you, no I haven’t yet, just put him on.” The sergeant sat on a chair and waited, “Pearson are my nephews with you, OK.” He nodded to Peter.

“Nick has an identical cell phone, show him Nick and the Ash’s telephone cell number, and now ring it. Can PC Pearson hear anything his end Sergeant?”

The sergeant asked the constable, and nodded.

“Ask the constable to take the cell phone from the boys with his gloves, but do not allow the boys to re-handle it, we want the fingerprints intact. Now Nick give the sergeant your phone and Sergeant you ask Pearson if he would take in the cell phone.” Both officers commenced to talk.

“I suggest Sergeant you prepare your paperwork, my Father, Ash’s Great Uncle is a magistrate and would be keen on some prosecution even though he cannot take the case.”

“I’ll remind sir that I am a police officer and I will do my duty to see the offenders are brought to the juvenile court if that is the complainants wish?” The Sergeant looked hopefully at Ash.

“I believe some punishment is necessary though I’m sure I gave as good as I got, but stoning animals and stealing and bullying on our land is beyond a joke. I believe if we left this matter in the hands of the Sergeant and his family might be best. A term of community work such as cleaning out the ditches in and around the village, and a ban ever to enter the Malling land might be sufficient.”

“Nicely spoken young man but you have the right to proceed in law and I would carry out your instruction.”

“The return of my mobile phone rather than having it kept in evidence would be appreciated.”

“Pearson leave my brother and those two cretins, and bring master Ash’s cell phone to the manor. Tell those bullies they are on work duty at the watch house toilets for the next three months. No pay. Since the little fellow here has already given them a thrashing being a tough magical little kid, tell Fred

no thrashing, they already had a good one.” The Sergeant shook Ash’s hands gently.

“I’m right sorry Master Ash, if ever I can be of service to you or your cousins let me know. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and I will tell Bert he could have a summons hanging over his boys heads if they continue their stupidly.” He patted Ash’s hands, bowed to those he could see in the room and walked out a chasten man. Ash was to find him a useful ally at a later time.

Nick took Ash up to the bathroom, ran a bath and lowered him in.

“What no bubbles this time?”

“Last time most of them were sloshed on the floor.” Nick poured the bubble bath liquid in and Ash worked his hands and feet to get more bubbles.

“And no Joan to wash me down either, Nick why aren’t you tall like Peter is?”

“I expect I was the last child in line and missed out on any height, I’m happy with my five foot five, it seems a nice round figure, but what about my little squirt?”

“That’s not nice after all I’ve been through, remember Molly’s advice?”

“I do indeed and I know what you are going to ask me and it’s a yes until you get better, now I’m off to bed and come when you are finished.” Nick went and fetched Ash’s towel and draped it over a chair.

When eventually Ash did come into the bedroom he put the light off and climbed into Nick’s bed where he laid his head on Nick’s chest.

“No height and no chest hairs”, as he moved his limp hand over Nick.

“OK you little imp, we do this for your security and no insults please. Now which side does it hurt the most, do you need me to make a tent over your right side.”

“No I’m comfortable.” Ash’s voice started to waver. “Nick I was so frightened they would kill me, I could hardly shout aloud when I called Ben, it was almost a hoarse stifled cry I made, I’m sure those louts did not hear me, yet Bill and Ben came charging in.”

“Perhaps the dogs had been following you and came to your rescue.”

“That cannot be, as I was first hit by the river bank in the fields, no somehow they heard me.”

“Ash do you remember when Peter and I were doing mind speak, you heard every word.”

“And when Peter told you to hush up.”

“So you are a natural at mind speak and tomorrow we’ll try it over ever increasing distances and see how we get on”

“So we won’t need mobile phones any more.”

“We most definitely will and you have it for my well being.”

“Ah I wondered whether you worried about me.”

“Ash, my boy I will always worry whether you safe or not, like about now.

By the way how’s your tummy”

“Still throbs but the stinging inside has gone. Why now?”

“ Because I’ll give your unmarked backside a whack, now go to your own bed.”

Ash snuggled right into Nick strong arms as he carried him back to his own bed. The boy slept fitfully still dreaming of the chase, but Nick found it difficult to sleep, worried about the bullies attack. But Alex came into his mind,

'Bill and Ben will stay close when he goes in the morning and comes back in the evening, so don't fret to much'.

XXX

Chapter Ten. Reconstruction and a lady arrives.

Spring arrived with the final destruction of the old pier when the boys finally got their wish and dragged the old piles out using Nick’s car trailer ball. Tom had them stack all the timbers to dry out ready for bonfire night. Since they were old oak and not ground treated they could be burnt. That is until Peter came down to see them and said the old piles would be better cut, dried and used in the manor fireplaces. The rotten planks could be used for a bonfire. They all agreed and proposed Peter to do the sawing up.

“No, what we need is a chainsaw, and Tom being a forester, therefore I propose Tom to go and buy a good one to be used on the estate.”

“We can also use clearing the drive to the three cottages. Tom the boys and I will go to a hardware place and buy all the necessary.” Nick said as he finished stacking up his four piles against one another.

On the drive to the city, Tom turned around to Nick who was driving.

“I can never really feel comfortable with Alex and Peter, there’s something cool around them. I was standing close to Peter when he came down and

rested his hand on the spade, his thumb seemed to glide through it.”

The boys behind laughed.

“Dad”, said Jack, “Mum was partly right about the weird folk in the manor, excusing Nick and the Dunnings.”

“You mean they aren’t all there?”

“No Tom, my adopted relatives are all there, well most of the time, they just live in a different zone. Think of it this way, pick up a piece of paper and look along the edge, that’s only one dimension, lay the paper flat out and you see two dimensions, go outside your cottage and you see three dimension. Peter Alex and the others live in the fourth dimension.”

“They are ghosts.”

‘Spirits if you please but very much alive still, that a problem Tom Trent?’

Tom swung around and saw the boys well apart in the back.

“Which one of you devils copied Peters voice?”

“No one did because the boys know who and why we are.” Peter appeared his arms around the boys’ shoulders.

“You best put your seat belt on then Peter!” Tom saw the boys smiling.

“Would you prefer not to see us at all Tom?”

“I would find it difficult talking to thin air though, I prefer to see you in the flesh.”

‘Only because you would worry what other people thought of you speaking to nobody they could see.’

Tom nodded, and turned to Ash,

“I’m glad Peter’s got a sense of humour, I just realised about the seat belt. I always reckoned there were wood sprites in the forest, so you are believable Peter, welcome to the real world.”

‘And to show you that I am in your real world I suggest we look at more equipment. I found a small tractor cum digger with grass cutting attachment in a magazine Jack had brought over to read yesterday. If we need one lets buy one, all those in favour please vote.’ Four hands leapt up.

“And presumably you discussed this with the accountant.” Nick put his hand down.

“Which accountant.” Peter suddenly appeared in the full.

“Your Father.”

“No, but we just took a vote and your hand was up dear cousin, however in the interest of family unity I will pop back and have a word with the old man. I shall say it was Ash’s idea then he’s bound to agree, I’ll be back soon, so Ash mind think so I can track you down.” Peter vanished and Ash gave a sigh, wonder how Uncle Horace would take it, anyhow it wasn’t his idea! Still, a tractor to ride about on around the estate!

‘He’s approved, I told you so.’

So a few days later the small tractor and all its implements, including a snow scraper and post hole digger arrived safely and was immediately commandeered by the boys until Tom Trent tossed them off, until they took proper lessons at driving it. Meanwhile Nick had been in touch with a local Public school and had found a place for Ash to attend as a boarder after the summer holidays.

“But why Nick do I need to go the this place Ashdown College, I’m perfectly happy here and at the village school.”

“Well for one thing you need a better education, for a second you were bullied at the village school, you’ve been there two years now and I can’t remember you ever bringing a friend home.”

“So?”

“Meaning, you really don’t seem to get along with the village kids. Give it a try Ash, that’s all I ask, if you don’t like it we’ll think of something else.”

“Like home study?”

“Well I guess even that would be possible, so you agree. Listen its HE's old college so if he survived the rigours of Ashdown so can you, its even named after you!”

Ultimately Ash agreed to give a try after the summer break, as Nick knew he would. Ash had adventure deep in his soul and was brave enough to try anything. Nick had counted on this and had not discussed his plans with anyone other than the Dean of Ashdown.

The working party split into two once the driveway to the cottages had been gravelled and the tractor had rumbled along pulling a massive rusty roller that Dunning had found hidden in creepers behind the manor. They then selected the cottage each pair would tackle, Nick and Ash the first one, Tom and Jack the second one and these were allocated for them to live in ultimately. The third cottage would be a joint effort. Nick had arranged for a surveyor to visit, so the locks were cut away and they all clambered into the first cottage. It was covered in cobwebs but empty of any furniture. They left the surveyor to do his work and they dashed into the second and then the third. All apparently seemed in reasonable order but they had to await the surveyors report.

Back at the manor they congregated in the kitchen to await the surveyor. When he did arrive he seemed amazed that the condition of the buildings were reasonable. The walls had been built on granite foundation blocks with the floors set well above the ground and with adequate ventilation. The

staircases to the attic rooms needed to be replaced, as did the thatch.

“You can work in the cottages at the same time you get them thatched with new reeds. I suggest after thatching the reeds be covered with mesh wire as they are very close to the woodland.” The surveyor promised to send along a local thatcher to give Nick a quotation.

The last week of summer saw both the completion of the thatching and the rebuilding of the internal staircases. It also saw the arrival of a young vibrant dark haired lady, who screeched to a standstill in front of the manor in her dark green MG. Running up the steps she collided with Nick who was on his way to the cottages.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you by chance Mr Malling Mallet.” She asked looking him up and down. Mostly up as he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Most people round here call me Nick, what can we do for you?”

“Some time ago you put a notice down in the village about procuring furniture for the house.”

“Indeed, I think you’d better come in and have a seat.”

“Oh I would much prefer to sit over there amongst the roses, as I do believe I spotted a garden seat.”

The seat the dark haired one pointed to was a fine oak and beech seat that Sir Horace had bought for Lady Celia. The rose garden was a gift from the other inhabitants of the manor.

“Oh gosh, I must introduce myself, I’m Cassandra Acton, Lord Acton’s daughter, I believe we have a chair of yours and my father has ask me to bring it over.”

Nick looked across to the MG, and indeed there was an old library chair with torn fabric sticking up in the rear seat.

“That’s very kind of you, and what sort money did you father want for the chair?”

“Nothing at all. He rang months ago and a rather rude man answered the phone and said father could keep it. Might have been your servant, not a nice person, though I’m sure you are fully cognisant with your staff.”

‘More likely Uncle I would have said’ thought Nick.

“Rather hot this summer, a drink wouldn’t go amiss Nick.” Her eyes sparkled as she looked directly at him.

“Of course I will unload the chair and we can go inside, I’m sure you came to look over the place as well as to bring the chair back.”

“Oh how did you guess, you are so clever, I’d love to see around it, people have said you’ve done marvels with the place.” She twittered, then leading

the way she marched up the stairs and pushed open the doors nearly knocking Ash over as he held two large brushes.

“Well little man help your master with the chair, put those things down, can’t you see him trying to lift it from the car. Mind you don’t scratch the car. Now quick be off with you.”

Ash thought the same but he was too well mannered to say, Alex who was behind him was not.

‘Pushy little lady, better drop the brushes on her brand new suede’s Ash and go and help Nick.’

Ash dashed down and between them they to prise the chair from the open roofed car, it took some time as some oaf had clamped it in tightly.

“Who’s the chair from Nick?” He was tempted to add who is the autocratic girl.

“Its from a Lord Acton apparently.”

“Oh, I don’t think Uncle Horace wanted this back.”

“Well it would be impolite Ash, to refuse after all she’s bought it a long way.”

When they carried it in and set it down on the floor, they saw Cassandra Acton had found herself a seat and a drink which Dunning was serving. Ash picked up his brooms and disappeared towards the cottages.

“I’m sorry we took so long, the chair was fairly well wedged in the back.”

“But of course Nick I asked my brother to do that so it wouldn’t fall out.”

“Now would you like to see the rest of the house, once you’ve finished your drink.”

“Oh no I must fly, may I come another day and lets do it together. I can see you spent a fortune, we had heard the house had been totally divested of all its furniture, word is you own an opal mine and I expect you have oodles. But lovely meeting you Nick, we’ll make a date for you to come and see ours, might help you in your setting out next time I come. Do you work in town?”

“No I’m here most of the time, I’m retired.”

“You are so young, and so fortunate. I love to travel. I must be away, how old are you if you are retired?”

“Twenty eight.” Nick was intrigued with this dark haired raven of a lady with her rapid questioning, but before he could say another word she was running down the steps into her car and gunning the car so half the drive showered over the steps. And Ash had taken the brooms so he shook his shoulders looked up the beech drive as the MG drove straight through the gates.

‘She’ll kill herself or someone else one of these days the way she drives,

come on lets give Ash a hand with the sweeping.’ Alex closed the door and pushed Nick gently down the steps now laden with grit.

‘A message from my Father, burn that dam chair Nick.’

“Why, it could be refurbished?” Nick disliked throwing perfectly good items out, in Australia they would have fought over a chair such as this.

‘He was sitting in that chair when he learnt of Peter’s death, and later of mine. He considered it a bad omen chair for our family, he was pleased when someone took it away.’

Nick nodded.

“Ash and I will dump it on the bonfire then.” They carried on until they joined Ash busily sweeping out the third cottage. Later in the evening they carried the old chair out of the manor and set light to it, it burned fiercely. As they watched it glow HE came and stood beside them.

“I told Ash we did not want that dam thing here, I’m not pleased Nick, its always bought us trouble.”

“That’s superstition Uncle, it’s only a bit of wood and cloth, and beautifully carved, I don’t see the purpose of destroying something that could be refurbished.”

“ Perhaps, but it brings unhappy memories and I thank you both for burning the darn thing. Letting it come into the house could have had repercussions to the family that I’m sure. You might as well put all those rotten planks on the fire as well.”

“We were hoping to save them for bonfire night Uncle.” Ash pleaded, but they did as they were told, and loaded the planks onto the glowing embers.

“By the way Nick I’ve arranged for the solicitors to have Ash’s surname changed by deed poll, from Trent which has unhappy memories to Malling. I need both your permission and signatures for the papers I have on my desk.”

After waiting for the fire to burn itself out they followed HE into the manor and there they both signed the deed pole papers which HE carefully placed inside a large official envelope.

“For posting in the village and ask for registered please Nick. We don't want it lost.”

Chapter Eleven. A window repaired and an estrangement.

Nick received an invitation to the Acton house so he drove away leaving Ash to mend the window in the attic, now that the birds had flown. He had left Dunning some putty and a piece of glass he had obtained from the glass merchant. Dunning had said he would show Ash how to replace the pane, but Ash had said he had broken it and it was his job to repair it.

Thus while Nick was away on a visit to the county gentry, Ash climbed up to the attic, and rubbing in a layer of putty then placing the glass in then again rubbing in the putty. He squared the putty off with the flat bladed knife Dunning had given him then closed the tin of putty and placed it on the floor outside. Now he was up here he might as well explore, so he visited all the rooms along the top corridor. He opened each door and quickly glanced inside. On the left hand side facing the back of the house were rooms for the staff in the olden days and each had a small opening window. The rooms overlooking the front of the house had only small fixed windows and were probably storage rooms. At either far end of the corridor were two small bathroom and toilets. The baths was tiny and he imagined the staff would have to buckle their knees to get in it. He came down to the centre of the corridor and wondered how they kept the staff apart as it was obvious to him that one bathroom would be for girls and the other for boys.

“That’s easy Ash to explain and now you almost a Malling I can show you.”

“Show me what Alex?” Ash bent down and gave both hounds a hug.

“The staff were segregated and if you turn here in the centre as if you were looking toward the house front, what can you see.”

“Nothing, at least not to the left until I see the box room door handle way up there, and the same for the right.” Ash traced his finger along the wall, and then he knocked with his knuckle and the wall sounded hollow.

“It’s a hidden room Alex. But that does not explain how they kept the staff apart.”

“Gracious Ash you are a questioning soul. Do you see the nail marks on both walls, there was a thin wood partition, plus the steward of the house lived here as well.”

“Steward, who was he?”

“He was above the butler and managed the house, did all the accounts and kept the house and staff shipshape. He is Mr. Dunning’s great grandfather. The Dunning’s have lived here almost as long as we have, and I expect Jason Dunning will follow in his father’s footsteps. If you walk along here, use your finger along the dado, you will find a knotty piece. Now don’t be frightened but I want you to meet him!”

“I’m not frightened Alex I have you and the dogs with me.”

“Have you found the knotty piece yet, it’s not easy to see in this poor light so its best to feel for it.”

Ash drew his finger along the dado then stopped and nodded.

“Now knock three times rapidly.”

Ash did as he was bid and, a very heavy door slid open, first a hand appeared then a youthful face and a voice like thunder.

“Who be you young one to annoy me from my rest, Oh tis you as well Mr Alex and I don’t like the dogs to be up here with the staff its no place for them up high.”

“Dunning please may we come in? This is Ash Malling my cousin and let me tell you HE is very fond of his young nephew. Besides there is no staff here except you, so the staff won’t spoil them.”

“Right then Mr Alex, and you master Ash come right in. But the dogs?”

They came in anyway even after old Mr. Dunning had slid the door shut!

“Now lets have a look see, you be live master Ash not like us, as I live and breath you be warm and, well I’ll be bowled over that Ben dog has put himself between us just as I touched your arm. Now you can see this my quarters are down those steps and the window over the outside portico is my window. Everything Mr Alex.”

“Yes Dunning, everything.”

“This be the strong room of the house up here, we keep all the family silver

and valuables in these cupboards against those walls. That's why the door is steel lined. Also I've kept the family pictures and photographs safe from marauding hands, especially after HE let those dam villagers pillage the house. They couldn't get in here, couldn't find the door. Three quick knocks will always find me but mark you only for the family, you hear young Master Ash."

"Mr. Dunning may I ask a question?" Dunning nodded his head, "Why are you so young looking I thought you might be really old and white haired, here you are no older than Uncle Tom."

"Oh you mean I look so much younger than my own dear great grand son who is the butler now, well we can choose our appearance when we go up another level, I sometimes think Mr Alex would be more suited to a young child, so child like is he and up top lots of trouble he was both as a lad and a man I can tell you!"

"We won't go into that Mr. Dunning, not today."

"Why didn't your own son and his son stay around here then." asked Ash.

"Well this has always been my place, but my son and grandson have found other things to interest them. Sometimes I might get a rare visit, but both in their turn cared for Malling Manor. I keep a close eye on our Jason as I hope he will follow in the family footsteps. Will that be all Mr Alex? You mark my words if you need a hidey hole this is the place to come Master Ash."

"Thank you Dunning I expect Ash has found a lot of safe places including the three cottages."

"Ah you found those already, we use to have a large staff at one time."

"Nick and I have been renovating them together with Uncle Tom and Jack."

"Well my boy they were good places to live in, I was born in one of them, Anyhow who is this Nick fellow?"

"He owns the house jointly with Father and is Ash's big brother would best describe him." They then slid open the door and left old Mr. Dunning in peace. Alex took Ash around the right wing of the house to show him where the rest of them lived, and then they went down the main staircase to meet Nick as he came prancing through the front door.

"I had a letter from Ashdown today Ash confirming your entry is accepted and would we acquire uniforms and such like by next Monday, That's the day you start, I spoke to Lord Acton briefly and he remembers his grandfather went to school with Uncle Horace, a small world isn't it. Oh hello Alex, you don't seem to pleased about Ash's education?"

"To be truthful you would have been better to discuss this matter with Father, he's the one who went there, Peter and I attended the Cathedral school and

we always felt that Ashdown was, well, Ash will tell us once he's there."

So the following Monday Nick drove a very quite Ash into Ashdown, introduced him to the Dean and left him in his misery to drive over for tennis at the Acton's.

Ash found a distinctly chilled atmosphere since he was at an older age attending the college. The other boys had already teamed up in the previous year and formed their cliques. Ash was treated as an outsider from the start, however he was expected to conform with the college rules normally laid down for the twelve year old new starters. He was allocated an elder boy, a prefect, to fag for, a boy called Trenchard. Ian Trenchard. Ash took his unhappy chores in a stoic manner. Already the Dean placed him in the grade below his age, and he felt most uncomfortable but decided to do the best he could. In a way he saw the lower grading as an extra year to his dismal prospects. He discovered the previous boy who had fagged for Trenchard had been sent home with an illness, but nobody would venture a guess. Just that one day the bags were packed and a parent picked him up.

One afternoon after Ash had cleaned and tidied Trenchard's room, the prefect himself came through the door, He appeared to be in a nasty frame of mind, and cuffed Ash about the head.

"I told you, you buffoon that I wanted my Geography essay finished and in my hands by this morning. Where the hell is it you young fool?"

"I've decided Trenchard that I shall not be doing your school work, the job of a fag is only to clean a prefect's room, nothing else ,and I will not be bullied by you."

"Will you not, you fair haired little scum! And I suppose you have discussed this with our house master?"

"No."

"Then that allows me to take matters into my own hands, as a prefect I find you guilty of not doing what I told you to do."

"Its obvious to me Ian Trenchard that my precious schooling was certainly more productive than yours since I've been forced to do your maths and geography papers. So the answer is, no longer will I be doing either!"

Trenchard whirled him around and boxed his ears twice.

"The first is for your impudence, and the second is for that nonentity of a brother, your brother, seeing my sister you are both low grade scum." With that he opened the door and called for his fellow classmates, Gore and Williams.

"To the gym lads we have another recalcitrant with us." The three of them

marched Ash through the corridors, not a boy moved to his defence, but as they passed the house-masters room he called out.

“Are there problems Honourable Mr. Trenchard?”

“None that concerns you Mr. Flint, only disobedience and a cure.”

“Go ahead, can’t have that in my house.” Flint shouted from his open door.

“They are bulling me Sir” cried Ash out aloud as he was dragged along the corridor, he thought of Tom Brown’s school days, and of calling Ben, but he shook these from his mind. The other lads in his class said the prefects were only allowed to apply the cane once on the open hand. So he was dragged into the gymnasium thrown over the bar and the two others gripped his arms and pulled them taut whilst Trenchard whipped him with a cane, stroke followed stroke, with such frenzy that the others, in alarm, released Ash’s arm and held a panting Trenchard back. Enough they both cried out as Ash fell to the floor. They left him there, his shirt and trousers torn and his body stiff with pain and fatigue. Some hours later a boy from Ash’s class, found him lying struggling to move to the gym door. The boy helped him up and Ash thanked him.

“Robertson, check the entrance gate to see if it’s clear, then tell me when the coast is clear.”

“You are badly injured Ash Mallings, let me get the house-master.”

“No, he’s a part of the problem. I know I cannot move far but I can get to the gate and beyond, I need to get home.”

“The reception desk is clear I could telephone a taxi.”

”Thanks Robertson, I’ll owe if you can do that. I’ll come slowly, I’ll use the wall to help hold me up, now you go and make that call please.”

True to his word Robertson had rung for a taxi then steered Ash quickly out of the college. He lent against the wall until the taxi driver appeared. He told the driver his brother would pay the fare and to take him to Mallings.

“I know Mallings, I used to live in the New Forest, still do. What happened to you?”

“I got bashed up by some students.”

“Friends of yours? You look pretty grim, I guess I know the best place for you.”

“The hospital, they’ll only send me back.”

“Next best thing then. Ferguson will know what to do.”

“Sergeant Ferguson?”

“The very one, now I know you come from Mallings kid, hold on we’ll be there soon.”

But Ash didn’t make a sound he had fainted with exhaustion. The taxi driver

had to carry him into the police station where Ferguson had him put in a cell, and then he called Dr. Matheson down to the station who examined Ash, eventually putting him in the hands of a local retired nurse. They had discussed taking up to Mallings but the sergeant wanted Ash to make a statement by himself, no outside interference.

The following morning Sergeant Ferguson took down a full statement and using the police camera had the nurse photograph the injuries. He then downloaded the pictures and printed them out. Then he placed Ash into the police car and drove to Mallings, where he arrived at midday, parking behind a green MG car. He helped Ash up the steps and across the hall into the kitchen to Alice's ministrations. He turned to Dunning and asked where Nick was.

"I believe he's showing Miss Acton around the estate Sergeant."

"Is there no way you can contact him?"

"I believe we can call him on his cell phone."

Dunning succeeded in getting hold of Nick after two attempts, and advised him Ash had been severely injured. Nick arrived at a gallop with Cassandra close behind. The sergeant took him to one side and showed him first a copy of Ash's statement and the photographs the nurse had taken. Meanwhile Cassandra had taken to trying to hold Ash's hand but he rejected her move quietly going to sit close to Alice. Nick read the long statement twice, then turned to Cassandra.

"I understand your family name is actually Trenchard is that not so?"

"Yes Nick that's correct, Acton is our fathers name for the life peer title he chose."

"You have a brother Ian, what's he like?"

"A real charmer all my friends adore him, so well mannered, you are the only man I've met who resembles Ian's good nature."

"Cassandra, I must ask to leave our house and never return."

"Why Nick? We were getting on so well."

"May I ask you a blunt question?"

"Of course my dearest Nick."

"Was it your father who suggested that you bring that old chair to me at Mallings, having heard that I was sufficiently rich to be a catch for his daughter?"

"That's preposterous Nick, my father would never allow any association with someone of lowly birth."

"Such as me, yet when I met him at your home he seemed only interested in the monetary side of my affairs, I would suggest Cassandra your brother is

certainly not what you described, however I am not at liberty to discuss this with you, as you can see the sergeant is here on police business, so I insist you leave at once and that you do not contact me or this house again. I do not want to see you, I have been taken for a fool and the one true person I love in this world has been hurt.”

“Well I do not know what its about but I would suggest if he had not the gumption to stand up and fight he obviously shows what sort of breeding you Malling’s have. It is I who no longer wish to be associated with you, anyway you said you were penniless and it was your mysterious Uncle who actually owned the estate. So goodbye and good riddance.” Cassandra rose stiffly and marched out the house with Dunning and half the invisible Malling family, in attendance close behind.

“Well Sergeant it seems I have been amiss in sending my brother to such a horrible place, I wonder how we should proceed?”

“There is an obvious case of grievous bodily harm and it is for me to proceed with or without your permission, since you obviously know that family. I shall of course interview the offenders and should you wish to accompany me tomorrow, you will be welcome. Be at the station at ten in the morning which should give me time to make an appointment with the college.” The sergeant rose gave Ash’s head a little pat then left.

“Ash we need you to get to bed, have you eaten?” Nick asked.

“Nurse fed me this morning, I don’t need anything else except my sheets and blankets, I’m going to live in the cottage, don’t follow me Nick, just leave me alone. When I can walk properly I’ll go and find Molly for some herbs, but if Alice can leave me some food each day I’ll be fine. I want to recover myself. I don’t need your help Nick, look to your self, you must be naïve to take to such a person.”

“I have always loved you Ash, you are too harsh.”

“I heard your words to that Cassandra, about your love and care for me, but Alex told you about that school, it was obviously cheaper to send me there rather than the one Peter and Alex went to. I guess that’s a bit harsh as it is your money. Just for once, do what I want. Mr. Dunning please could you fetch my pillow and clothes and bring them over to the third cottage, I’ll make that my own if you don’t mind Nick.” With that Ash limped out of the kitchen and down the driveway to the path to the old cottages.

Shortly after Dunning followed with the bed cloths and Alice bought his ordinary clothes.

Chapter Eleven. A day of reckoning.

Nick arrived at the police station on time, he hadn't bothered Ash knowing how angry the youth was, no longer a boy, that's for sure. But he was angry with himself and boiling mad with those he had entrusted with Ash's care. Sergeant Ferguson recognised the tension in him.

"As Ash's guardian you are entitled to come, I realise that normally parents are left out of an interview but in this case you would have made your own way there, and no doubt kicked up a stink, I figured this be the best method but you keep your temper under control Mr. Mallet."

Nick reluctantly agreed so they drove over to Ashdown. At the reception desk the sergeant asked for Dean Creswell. They were duly shown into the Dean's study.

"Good morning gentlemen, I understand you wished to see me reference a complaint of a fracas that occurred between Mr. Mallings brother and one of our most reliable Prefects. You will have my full co-operation, but sadly it appears that Ash Mallings did not fit in well with our college and was a difficult student, when asked to do something by his prefect he disobeyed, we have the house-masters agreement as to this."

"Perhaps we should start at the end instead of the beginning, I would first like to interview a student called Robertson in young Master Mallings class please."

"That may not be possible we cannot allow interviews of children in our care unless we have parental permission."

"I'm carrying out an investigation and therefore I can only assume you are

obstructing me in my duty as a police officer. As you are well aware Dean, the same rights applicable to a parent are carried over to your good self as head of this college.”

The Dean asked for Robertson to attend them, which he did some minutes later.

“Robertson, I am investigating allegations of a brutal attack on one of your classmates, can you tell me about it?”

“I found Ash Malling in the gym, badly beaten and crawling across to the door Sir. I helped him up and managed to call a taxi to take him home. Some hours before I was studying in my house room and I saw Trenchard, Gore and Williams drag Ash along the corridor past Mr. Flint’s room. I believe Mr. Flint spoke to them. I looked out and saw that Trenchard was carrying his cane. That’s all I can tell you sir.”

“Are you sure Robertson you are not mistaken?” the Dean asked.

“Mr. Creswell, kindly do not interrupt, perhaps you could ask the house-master to locate the cane or stick, I would like to see it.”

The Dean rose from his chair as if to go out.

“No, Dean Creswell you will use your phone on your desk please. Thank you Master Robertson you may leave now.” The Dean did as he was told, and shortly Mr. Flint arrived with the cane, the sergeant wrapped a plastic bag around it and placed it on the floor.

“That is of course Trenchard property and must be requisitioned.”

“Indeed thank you Dean, I did notice dark stains that could be blood. So it will be sent to the forensic and I will give Mr. Trenchard a receipt. Now Mr. Flint I’m sure you are aware of the allegations, so I will ask you tell me what you know occurred. ”

“Malling had never really settled in my house, he was given the position of fag to Trenchard who found him disobedient and attacked the Prefect. Trenchard within his rights in this College proceeded to cane him.”

“A fag is?”

“A young first grader is allocated to a senior boy for cleaning duties.” The Dean answered. “We believe here at Ashdown, that this teaches boys a proper respect for their elders. It’s a policy that used to be carried out by other public schools.”

“And why was Master Mallings given this task when he was at a much higher grade?”

“Because he had not come to the school at a normal entry year at eleven.”

“Mr. Flint, the Dean has told a different story of a fracas and that it was a fight?” Flint stayed quite, “ I believe I would like to interview the boys Williams and Gore please.”

“I have Mr Trenchard outside at the moment.”

“Then bring him in and perhaps you could ask the other two to come and wait outside. Perhaps Mr Mallet you would like to wait outside, I wish to interview the boy alone.”

Nick rose up and opened the door as a tall obnoxious youth strode in at the Deans call.

‘Don’t worry Nick I’m here and will report the interview.’

So Alex was here as well that was a relief. Mr Flint came out and barely gave him a glance as he asked the secretary to find Gore and Williams. He then returned to the room.

Alec relayed the proceedings by mind speak, so Nick waited for the two youths to turn up.

‘Mr. Trenchard there has been a serious allocation made against you and two of your colleagues. I wish to hear your side of the story if you please.’ The sergeant continued writing in his book as Trenchard began describing Ash’s impertinence, his disobedience, and the punch he threw at the Prefect.’

‘Did he hit you?’

‘Of course.’

‘Did you take him down to the gym and cane him?’

‘He received one cane on his hand that is all we prefects are allowed to administer.’

‘Mr. Flint have you noticed over the last few weeks an improvement in Mr. Trenchard’s written work?’

‘Now you mention Mr. Trenchard has shown a remarkable improvement both in Maths which I take and Geography which Mr. Gregory takes. A quality we expect from all our prefects, good academic and social skills.’

‘Mr. Flint I would be obliged if you would fetch the students work papers for the relevant period of the last few weeks. I will give you a receipt for them and for the cane.’

‘Look here my man, are you accusing me of cheating as well as beating up that arrogant Malling boy?’

‘No just searching for the truth Mr. Trenchard’

‘You are aware Sergeant Ferguson that Mr. Trenchard’s father is Lord Acton and further questioning and insinuations would bring certain unfortunate, to your own career.’ The Dean spoke coolly.

‘Well Dean that’s as maybe but I have a duty to perform but I will give your warning serious thought. I am aware my own Inspector has a child at this school, so I shall be as transparently honest as I can.’ Turning to Trenchard, ‘Thank you for your time young sir and perhaps you could ask your fellows to join me here, by the way I need your books, please have fag, or whatever

you call them, bring them to me. By the way before you were allocated the Malling boy you had another young fag, he was sent home with severe trauma, I understand Inspector James of the Avon force is interviewing the lad as we speak. I would suggest that your father contact his solicitors, as it's likely we will want you to come to the station to make a full signed statement. The Dean will advise you when we contact him soon.'

'Nick the other lads are coming in soon, what have they been discussing?'

'They are worried Alex, they are arguing about the story they made up in their rooms when we came in, the Dean obviously told them about the visit. Anything you can help me implant in the sergeants head?'

'They don't have their story straight about the caning, they say they just watched on.'

'Not much to go on, but we can fool them with a little science. Follow Trenchard.'

Trenchard left to fetch his books Nick followed behind; eventually they came to Trenchard's study where he ran through his exercise books on his table.

"Ah got them but alas they have been lost how unfortunate," he dumped them in his bin then called a fag to empty it. Nick had hidden in a linen cupboard. When the young fag went in to Trenchard's room.

"What the hell are you doing?" Said the young fag.

"I'm the new janitor here! Just show me where all this paper is taken too please?"

'Liar.' Said Alex.

Nick followed the boy down to a basement where the lad tipped the bin into a skip then went out and clutching the bin with Nick following clutching the books. He re-entered the Deans study.

"Trenchard's books" he said to Mr. Flint, "I presume they are his?"

Flint looked at them closely.

"Yes they are his, why should he give them to you?"

Nick made no comment but passed the books to the sergeant who then started to interview the two youths.

"We watched to see fair play, we took no part in the caning," they looked at one another to confirm the story but the sergeant had a strange sensation of a question forming in his mind independently.

"Did you help drag Malling down to the gym?"

"No."

"So at no time did you touch him only watched Trenchard cane him." They nodded.

So if I was to ask you both to scrape your arms and hands with the Dean's

ruler, into the plastic bag I have here, so we can lab test for Mallings DNA?”

There was silence; the Dean started to rise from his chair,

“You cannot do that here.”

“Very well Dean based on the evidence so far heard I have no alternative but to arrest these two with a charge and take them down to the station and give a formal warning and a charge, I advise you to ring their parents.”

“Its true Sir,” said Gore shaking now, “We both did hold Malling while Ian Trenchard caned him.”

“Shut up you fools, the sergeant has no cause to arrest you, it’s a ploy to get you to own up.”

“Thank you Dean Creswell, that will do nicely for my report, we have Mr. Flint and Mr. Malling as witnesses. You boys are more than welcome to come to the station with your parents if you so wish. I think we have sufficient evidence for a criminal charge, but more importantly, Mr. Mallet no doubt will start civil proceedings against the College, but that is entirely in his court. Thank you for the time you have given us Dean.”

“You will not here the last of this Mr. Mallet Malling, we took your orphan lad and it was entirely his fault, our defence will be his indifferent education.”

“Dean I believe Ash has been doing Trenchard’s homework, thus the beating, the sergeant will show the extent of that, photos were taken by the police.”

The sergeant gave Nick one of the photographs to the Dean, who sat down to study it.

“I’ll have that now Sir,” The sergeant took the photo and he and Nick left a stunned Dean.

Nick returned to the manor then went onto to see how Ash was. He knocked on Ash’s cottage door and a golden head poked out from an upper window.

“What do you want?”

“Just to say I’d like to come in a see how you are, I’ve returned from the college and it look like Sergeant Ferguson will continue with the interviews at the city station, he has first to inform his inspector, but I expect Trenchard will get his just deserts.”

“You expect too much Nick, Trenchard’s type manage to squeeze out of the tightest corner.”

“They’ve sent someone to interview the previous fag and his parents to build up a case of sustained brutality against him.”

“You ever read Tom Browns school days.”

“No.”

“Then your education is not complete, no wonder you are so naïve, probably

because you spent most of your youth running from your siblings, down to a dusty mine. You should get out and read more. I think you've lead a monastic life, you need to see a bit more."

"I'm not going to bandy words with you stuck up there and me down here, are you going to let me in or not?"

"Not."

"Right, you've made my mind up. I was going to apologise to you about sending you to the cheaper college, its because the mine has had problems and I only had sufficient money for the two years you would have been at Ashdown. I do apologise Ash it was stupid of me not to listen to Peter and Alex, they were trying to tell me something."

"That's what I mean Nick you only care for yourself, I expect you were mesmerised by that Cassandra woman, who was a good looking type, but that's only skin, you don't seem to be able to read deeper down than that. I think you look upon me as some sort of pet, The best thing you can do is to go and re-organise yourself, re-born is a good word, go check that opal mine of yours and do something worthwhile." Ash slammed the window shut.

Nick walked over the manor and found HE in his study practising his typing. He heard the keys clicking on the keyboard.

"I seem to be a bit of a bad smell with Ash, how long do you think he'll stay in the cottage locked up?"

'Well he went down to Molly soon after you left, so I'd say he was not prisoner in his little house, least ways as long as you aren't about. Nick it will blow over, he has been truly hurt and instead of blaming the real culprits he chooses those he closest too, his nearest and dearest.'

"He's as good as told me to go back to Oz and sort out the mine."

'The mine not bringing in sufficient cash?'

"No I don't know was going on, of course it could they have not hit any seams but I sent a telegram last week and no reply."

'Maybe Ash's advice is good then; give you both a break from one another. Absence makes the heart if you see what I mean.'

"What about the civil case against the Trenchard's."

'That's up to Ash to decide, not you or I. I had a talk with him and he is undecided far too hurt and angry to think straight.'

"Like all civil suits it will be initially expensive, as it's my fault I'll pay of course, but I'll need to go back to find out what has happened."

'Then go. The solicitors will carry out our instructions, Dunning can be your mouthpiece, and I can advise Dunning. You'll need to sign all these cheques for the Malling family funds and I can fill them in as required.'

"Well there's no time like the present, I'll go and book a ticket, best I sign all

those cheques now. I'll leave a note of authority for Ash to take over my duties as squire."

A Malling letterhead floated towards him, Nick wrote the letter, in the form of a will giving all his property to Ash Malling, then to another to write authorising Ash to be in his legal representative and manager of Mallings. He then signed all the cheques that HE had.

'Best go up and say your goodbyes to your Aunt, she won't be happy to see you go, and then get Dunning to drive you to the station.'

Nick packed as lightly as he could, said his goodbyes to Lady Celia and Joan. Peter and Alex promised they would keep an eye on Ash.

"I'd like him to continue at the secondary modern, and if possible go onto to higher education."

'You'll back by then Nick.'

"No Peter, I don't know what has happened with the mine, half a dozen things could have occurred, its pretty rough country out there in the sticks." Dunning drove him to the station with a light suitcase.

"Travel light, travel alone Dunning, and use the car as long as you want, thanks for all your help, I'll miss this place. Ask Alice to keep an eye out for Master Ash. He won't miss me but as sure as hell I'll miss him."

"Good luck Master Nick, come back soon." Dunning lifted the case out of the boot and left him to catch the train to London then onto Heathrow. On the train Nick suddenly felt insecure, once again he had chosen a solitary road, he shrugged, a new path to follow and he doubted if he would ever return to Mallings, there was nothing left for him there. Then he smiled; at least a small fragile golden-headed boy had grown into a fine youth and had at last found a secure domain. Mallings was for Ash and Ash for Mallings, Nick only the precursor, the means to an end and perhaps the Malling family had always foreseen this.

Chapter Twelve. A battle in the outback and hard work.

When Nick arrived in Sydney he found his old partner had died, so he continued on to the diggings at Lightning Creek. He found the old store still serving prospectors but the staff had changed. He first found a place to stay and then took a battered old taxi out to his mine and found his partners still there. They were surprised to see him but gave him a beer and warm welcome.

“We were bought out couple of months ago, least you and Uncle were. Before he died he sold his share to a bunch of cowboy solicitors in Adelaide. We work for them now.”

“Why did your uncle sell, he made no communication with me, as his partner he could have given me and you both an option to buy?”

“It seems he got friendly with a nursing lady in the hospice where he was, an she did things for him to ease his end of life. I guess she claimed he married her in a civil service, but not knowing what to do, some smart joker came down. Uncle died, nurse sells the mine and a smart joker comes down with legal documents stating he and his mates had bought the place.”

“I still hold the licence for the mine.”

“Don’t know how they got round that, lets see it Nick?”

Nick delved into his jeans pocket and produced the document.

It turned out to be a forgery, that’s what Kehoe, the government man said.

His old partner had had it photocopied and apparently kept the original.

Nick knew he had the original but Kehoe’s word was law so he called him a thief and liar to his face. Kehoe laughed at him so he flew down to Adelaide to find a lawyer. No one would touch him, the partnership of lawyers had seen to that, so he purchased a new lease from an exuberant Kehoe and thus his fate was sealed to work an area miles from any of the other leases.

He was forced to buy cheap equipment and having to constantly to repair broken parts. The initial shaft took months to dig and shore up by hand, his constant hope to hit pay dirt drove him on. He would ride his Honda into town collect supplies and attach any wood and drag it behind the bike. It was lonely existence, he thought of chucking it in and returning to Mallings but would remember Ash's hardened features looking out the window at him below, no shadow of any affection in his face just anger, perhaps loathing. So Nick would soldier on, buy another pick and shovel and dig deeper, until a year later he reckoned it was safe to put a couple of drives at the bottom. He found nothing on the East drive, it had taken four months of sweat and grime to shovel out six metres so something in his head one dream filled night told him to go West. So he started on that direction. After two years his money ran out and he started to live frugally and ask for credit from the store. Initially receiving a blank stare Greg the store owner gave in but told him to get out of the lease before it killed him.

Nick was determined to find a seam so back he would go always by day as his lights had given up. One day he couldn't start the bike and wheeled it the five miles into town to Murray's garage, who put Nick up until a new magneto arrived. So his days passed into months. And one night he sat and cried and decided he had to give it away, one more month. Then quit, get a job in Adelaide or Sydney labouring and get back to the UK.

XXX

Chapter Thirteen. A falling in underground and a sale.

Ash arrived at the store and asked where the Nick Mallet site was. The girl behind the counter eyed him up and down and obviously approved. Her cool slang changed instantly to a soft fruity twang. She hailed her partner in the back dugout room.

“Bloke here wants Nick Mallet, can you drive him out or shall I.”

The bearded husband took a long lazy look at Ash.

“Another Pom trying his luck in the leases. I’ll drive him out though he ain’t exactly dressed for the dig. Where you from Mate?”

“The UK.”

“Right I guessed that, I’ll drive you out and you tell your mate he owes the store and we want paying.”

“How much?”

“Ain’t non of your business boy.”

“He’s my brother, I’m sixteen and no boy, how much?” Ash looked at the bearded man with the ample gut right in the eye.

“Martha what does Mallet owe?”

“Nine hundred and sixty five.”

“You heard that?”

Ash pushed a thousand dollars into his hand.

“That enough to pay for the trip Mister is it far out.”

“Bout five K’s, come on hop in.” The man pointed to the tray behind the cab.

Ash jumped on board and they drove swiftly along a bull dust track. The red cloud he left behind also covered Ash and his sweaty face was soon like sandpaper. On either side of the road, if you could call it that, lay piles of rubble and dirt until finally the vehicle stopped and the man got out.

“You see that marker over there, the one with the yellow tag on, that’s his hole.”

“I can’t see any other leases out here, why not?”

“Cause your brother took out the cheapest site he could, he’ll find nothing here, remember to tell him he or you pay cash in future. My we are a dusty little chap, eighteen or whatever. You’ll find him down his hole the stupid

bastard, digging fruitlessly.”

“Ah but he made a small fortune out of it a few years ago!”

“Not here he didn’t he was run off the old lease by some scalpers. Should have fought back, the stupid Pom. Anyhow it’s a long walk back to town if his bike’s out of fuel, I don’t give you hope, you’ll find him a depressed dead loss.”

“Thanks for ride.”

“Well you look like a red Indian now. HOW.” The bearded man roared with laughter.

Nick strolled over to the lease and found the shaft; Next to it was a small khaki tent and a camp bed inside, leaning by it was and Honda motorcycle. He went back to the shaft and peered in, it had a rope ladder stretching down. He couldn’t see anything but he did hear the muffled sounds below, so he gingerly climbed down until he reached the dusty bottom. The shaft had two passages, so he listened for the sound, and then he walked carefully forward until he saw a bare figure swinging a pick into the far wall.

“Nick, that you?”

The figure swung once more then drooped the pick and rubbed his ears.

“Could have sworn I heard something.”

“Yes you heard me, how have you been.” Ash shouted.

But Nick had bent his ear, looking around all he could see some stranger behind him, so he ran towards Ash who had put his arms out to receive him, but all Ash got was to be lifted up by Nick and pushed back along the tunnel.

“Up mate, the ladder quick, cave in coming, move, fast as you can.”

Both clambered up the swinging ladder Nick pushing Ash’s backside ahead of him until a sudden blast of air swamped them both. They clung desperately to the ladder as it swayed dangerously. They reached the top and Nick swung the stranger around. They just stood looking at one another until Nick grasped the situation.

“Is that really you Ash, thought you’d long forgotten me.”

“No, missed you a lot, just popped in see how you were, and what a welcome I get!”

“The sun can kill by dehydration, you are as red as an Indian chief.”

“Without the feathers. Some bearded guy at the store drove me out.”

“Name of Gary ugly manner. Has a habit of bashing people he doesn’t like, I owe money but still that is my business. What are you doing in this hell-hole? I’ve missed you so much.”

“Not Mallings?”

“No, that’s just a house, big as it is. I’ve given it to you anyhow. It’s you I’ve missed, your voice, and your presence. Well look at you, beautifully dressed

as an English gentleman, covered in red desert bull dust.”

“You can talk here you are half naked working down a hole which has a tendency to fall about your ears, our ears. Tell me what happened the store guy said you lost your plot?”

Nick nodded and shrugged his shoulders, and then he held Ash’s shoulders by his grimy hands. Ash looked at his torso, there were cuts and bruises over his chest, arms and Ash turned him around and saw the same scratches and grazes down Nick’s back and legs.

“Just minor damage Ash, I’ve some cans of beer in the Esky be a bit warm but its wet. We’ll sit in the tent out the sun then I’ll tell you, by the way I better get you back to the pub where I expect you staying, it better be soon as the sun goes down pretty quickly and I’ve no lights on the bike.”

“No, I’ll stay tonight I want to hear what happened and why you are digging into useless dirt,”

“Guess Gary told you that, it was the only lease I could afford. Any how I’ll fold this camp bed and it can go outside give us more room, I got to lie down my back is aching. Hard work this crouching down then swinging a pick. Only got some crisps but you’re welcome to those.”

“Nick I’ve bought money with me, I paid your bill so don’t worry about Gary, now out with it.”

So Nick gave Ash a full account of the previous lease, which he had lost, then his finding and working his current lease for the past two years, using up every cent of his money.

Ash in turn gave Nick a run down of his adventures at Malling. They talked well into the night. Ash rose to bring in Nick’s camp bed and looked up into the night sky and the brilliance of the Milky Way. Nick called not to bother with the bed as it the temperature would drop and it was better they sleep side by side. So Nick donned an ancient cardigan and both lay down on an old tarpaulin, covering themselves in blankets.

“Snakes?”

“Hundreds, won’t come here though, you are safe.”

“You aren’t, you are coming home tomorrow.”

“I thought you’d never ask. Got to find my pickaxe tomorrow though.”

“I’ll help, then out of this god forsaken place.”

“Stars were nice though.”

“True, my turn to look after you Nick.” The blankets weren’t the best but the cold was kept at bay by the closeness of their bodies.

In the morning Nick took Ash down the mineshaft to help him find his equipment Nick had given Ash the torch whilst his helmet carried a chemical

one. They soon came across the ceiling fall and while Nick prised some of the fallen rocks to the side so they could walk forward towards where he estimated the tools were. Ash was peering intently at the ceiling.

“Move the torch down here Ash a minute.”

“You’ve got water coming in to the ceiling here Nick.”

Nick looked up and taking the torch closer studied the coloured glistening seam.

“Well I never, Ash you’ve done it again.”

“Done what?”

“Found the biggest seam of opal that I have ever seen. Well Ash that’s the good news.”

“OK Nick the bad news is to follow isn’t it.”

“Do you love me enough to stay with me and mine this over the next week.”

“I will if we can have a decent meal at night, then I suppose I might. I suggest we buy a car and come here during the day and go to the pub at night.”

“The cars a good idea, sell the bike, but whilst the opal is there we don’t leave it, we sleep here, buy a foam mattress and better blankets. If you can afford it, those people will think my brother is taking care of me, Ash not a word of the find to anyone.”

“Do you promise we will leave for home at the end of one week, even though we may not finish.”

Nick came close and held Ash tight.

“No, its all mine, its all mine.” They roared with laughter and with relief.

“My place is with you, and you with me, of course we leave here next week, so we buy a utility van. That way we carry the opal out without anyone knowing. Come on lets get on the bike and do some shopping. You’ll need jeans and a helmet.”

“I bought the jeans already, in case you needed a hand, but I do need a helmet,” Ash looked up expectantly at the ceiling.

“Perhaps you better work top side and let me dig it down here.”

“If the roof does cave in its better we both go together, now lets get that bike of yours running Nick.”

“Nonsense. You can just dig me out, but don’t take all day about it. It needs someone up top to bring up the bucket Ash.” They climbed up the ladder and were soon on their way to town, getting covered in red bull dust again. The flies were shocking as well, so both were heavily splattered.

Nick headed for Murray Goldburn’s garage and found him under a Nissan four-wheel drive. He and Ash climbed off the bike and walked over to the

pair of boots protruding under the bull bar.

“Sounds like my old mate Nick and his down trodden Honda, guess he’s come to pay that bill for the replacement magneto. Or more likely come to buy a six volt battery for his lights.”

“Well I’ll fix the bill of course Murray, but I also want to buy a vehicle, preferably one that drives straight and the wheels won’t fall off.”

Murray laughed,

“And you’ve bought along a load of dirt from that claim of yours to pay for such a vehicle. I’ve got a dinky toy one Nick if you are desperate, for loan only.”

“Thanks Murray but instead of dirt I’ve bought a long lost brother who has an ample wallet.”

Murray slid out from under the Nissan,

“By crikey you have Nick, and great looking Pom he is too, but looks like you both need to clean up, red does not suit either of you geezers. The bill for the magneto was forty three bucks if my memory served me right.”

Ash dug into his wallet and produced a fifty note, keep the change my man.”

Ash used his false English accent and they all laughed, Murray then looked at them both seriously.

“Nick how much longer are you going to work that flaming hole in the ground, let me tell you and your kid brother something. The reason Old Man Kehoe sold and issued that licence to you was because its unstable ground. When you took issue with him over the previous lease you made an enemy out of the government man in these parts. He hates the English because he’s as Irish as a green bog, and that’s not a Dunny in the back garden.”

“I wondered what the reason was, he gave me a discount price as well. Still Ash here has given me one more week at the dig then we both quit and return to the UK.”

“You a rich little Pom then Ash. You sure aren’t very tall so you’d do well down a mine.” Murray looked over him hard.

“Well Nick you want a vehicle to escape this dump, take this Nissan I’ve just welded a new exhaust, should be good for a few thousand clicks, yours or brother Ash’s for twelve fifty.”

Ash counted out twelve hundred and fifty dollars and handed it to Murray who looked amazed.

“Haven’t you taught your kid the art of haggling yet Nick? Look here kid you’re supposed to say eleven, then I say twelve, then you say split the difference. Got it?”

“You can have the Honda a well, for your museum collection Murray.”

“Gosh Nick its worth a fortune I don’t think. But I would have taken eleven

seventy, here kid.” Murray handed a fifty back, Ash returned it with a nod to the forecourt diesel pump.

“By the cringe your kid brothers a quick learner. But Nick you got no right putting his life in danger. You keep him on the camp fire cooking duty, whilst you do the digging.”

“Murray you’ve been a good friend to me and I know you keep your business to yourself so you wouldn’t tell me who the previous owner was of the Nissan?”

“Its perfectly legal. Being sold under commission, I’ll blank out the owners name when you sign the transfer. That’s the way I operate. Nobody knows any ones business. A place like this can be a hive of gossip, and that don’t bode well in this community. You had a flaming strike didn’t you my old son?”

“Yes, that's why I asked, you don’t gossip, I might have found a small seam, Ash has given us both a week to work it, but I don’t have any lifting equipment to bring it to the surface.”

“You want to borrow the tow truck and winch cable, well Nick I need that here during the day I could only bring it over at night.”

“That’s fine we can barrow to the shaft bottom, heap it and move it up the last two nights, say next Thursday’s the best for me. Triple rental applies. Also I need the address of your stepbrother in Sydney, I hear he’s the most honest of the dealers. Can you ring him I reckon we could get there by Monday next?”

“OK I’ll ring him and let you have the address after I come out, it might be just a flash in the pan Nick. Still for your sakes I hope its better, all the work you’ve put in there.” Then turning to Ash, “ Make sure he puts in some pit props and holding boards before he chips away, he’s a great guy, but irresponsible sometimes.” Murray motioned them into the garage, to sign the vehicle transfer form, then he filled the tank. They went back to Ash’s hotel for both to take a shower, pay his bill and collect his suitcase. Next stop was the store where extra blankets, some pit poles and wood, rope, a heavy hammer then a pile of food, beer and water were purchased. Gary asked the same question as Murray, and Nick told him Ash had allowed him one more week then he had to leave the lease. Gary had nodded his approval and surprisingly wished them well.

“Don’t expect too much from your drives, but that the most sensible you’ve said all year Mallet. Get out while you can and stay alive, that ground out there has subsidence that’s why that bastard Kehoe let you have it. You really got up his nose accusing him of fraud and theft. Look after the young fellow and don’t overwork he looks pretty frail to me.” With that Gary

helped them load the truck, but looked surprised, but Ash quickly countered. “On loan, part of the agreement with big brother, his last dash effort, got to give him a chance, Gary by the way, thanks for letting Nick have credit for so long.”

“Won’t do it again, old enough to know when he’s beat, can’t see a man starve though.” He ruffled Ash’s head, “Mark you boy you take real care of him. I reckon its you my boy that’s got the brains. He’ll take risks, I’ve seen them do it just before a lease expires they dig like crazy. By the way Mallet I hear though the grapevine that all leases in your general area to called in, and since you’re the only fool out there I guess the Old Man Kehoe hasn’t got round to telling you yet. He’ll be so disappointed if you finish up unhurt so watch your back, that land is dangerous.”

They returned to the site and Nick went down the shaft and using the rope they bought they inched down the poles and then the timber strapping. Ash joined him and they set about protecting the ceiling with the battens and poles spaced evenly along the drive. They went topside for a breather and a beer. Then down again to clear a pathway under the glistening ceiling. That took them into the evening. Nick lit a fire and opened up two cans of baked beans and sausages. After a couple of cans of beer they pulled planks over the shaft the retired to the tent collapsing onto the tarpaulin floor and falling asleep.

Next morning Nick drew up a plan for building a tripod using four by two’s and heavy twine. He gave Ash the job of constructing it whilst he went below to continue hunting for his pick and shovel. By lunchtime he had uncovered them and had started to chip away at the seam in the tunnel roof. Ash having finished the tripod came down and finding a barrow in the opposite drive, wheeled it under the falling chips of opal.

“Looks like coal with fire impregnated,” Ash was shovelling up the material that Nick had already brought down.”

“Lightning Ridge is black opal, the other place Cooper P that’s white translucent opal. Also there’s the mud brown opal from Queensland, not so valuable but easier to mine. Mud-stone is soft.” Nick hooked his pick and pulled down sharply, a long oblong piece fell into the barrow and cracked into two. He picked them up, and examined them. They were about twelve inches long almost perfectly square at each end, they glistened under Ash’s torchlight.

“Valuable?”

“Yes, I’ll put them aside for our souvenir of the dig. I’ll see if I can do that

again with the pick, the seam is rich here but peters out toward the face over there.” Nick wielded the pick upwards to create a hole then dug in at an angle as Ash pushed the barrow forward and a fresh piece landed on to into the barrow with a soft thud, Ash had bundled his shirt in to save the fall. Nick picked it up a piece fifteen inches long, just narrowing at the very end. “This one we sell Ash, better empty the barrow at the bottom of the shaft, we’ll take up what we’ve got, so you’ll find a Hessian sack in the tent, tie a rope around and we’ll get as much of the good stuff into the Nissan. That means sitting on our haunches and sorting. Tomorrow we’ll continue to pick the rest but as you can see with the large piece is narrowing so its odds on it will peter out by the time we hit the end of this drive. To think I’ve been digging away for the last year and it was just above me all the time.”

After lunch with a celebratory beer each they stowed away their three large pieces under the rear seat of the Nissan. Then they returned to the heap below and both sorted three heaps the pure opal fragments, rock with ingrained opal and rubbish. Ash went up top and they hauled the bag of opal fragments.

The next day they followed the seam right to its end. Initially they used the barrow with the sack inside to limit the fall of good stick opal, they unloaded the barrow and brought the opal to the surface tucking it away into the Nissan. Returning to the shaft they Ash shoved from the floor any rock with opal in it while Nick finished his search for any other seams. After pushing numerous loads of opal rock Ash went down to the other drive where Nick was studying the roof.

”I don’t think so Nick.”

“Well you do wonder Ash if there’s more up on this side, Perhaps we’ve only seen the tail end of a massive seam?”

“Well that is something you are going have to dream about, Murray is coming tonight and we’ve got all that opal rock to bring up. How much do you think we’ve got?”

“In weight, at a guess about a half ton. You are half right about dreaming, but not opal, something richer. We both know what that is.”

“To get you out of this crazy mine and patch you up, look at all the scratches and bruises, a holiday for us both maybe, by the sun and surf.”

“You got money to spend on that?”

“Too right I have, honestly I do not want to be down here any longer than I have too. Come on Nick, a beer and a rest and hard work tonight.”

Murray came at nightfall as he promised, he had thoughtfully bought a steel

pulley with him, which they tied with a chain then passed his tow hook and cable down to Nick who was filling the sack. A call from Nick, Murray would pull up the bag, Ash And Murray would carry it over and between them lift and dump it in the Nissan passenger well, then throw the sack down for Nick to refill. The night began to cool down and they all worked feverishly sometimes changing positions to aid tired muscles. They continued until dawn and the last bag was ready to pull up.

“Don’t put that in the Nissan, that goes in Murray’s tow truck.” Nick climbed up the shaft and pulled the rope ladder up with him. “Just help dismantle the tripod and we’ll use the timber and the spare planks to cover the shaft.” Murray hauled in his cable then he and Ash took his sack to his tow truck.

“Then we’ll push some rocks onto the wood to hold it in place and I suggest we knock in the your tent poles around so people know its an shaft Nick.”

Ash stripped down the tent and took out the poles.

“What about the barrow, pick and shovel Nick?”

“I think they are best left underground, the end of my adventure in the desert, but we will take the blankets and the tent, and put the tarpaulin over the opal Ash.”

Murray shook hands with them both, and handed Nick a piece of paper,

”That’s the address I promised you Nick, by he way this is yours I suspect.”

Murray had found a small four inch oblong piece of pure opal, he tried to hand it back, “I’m very happy what’s in the sack Nick, its much more than a nights work.”

“Ash and I thought a souvenir from two stupid brothers. One more thing, Ash has an envelope for Gary; it’s a little something for keeping me alive the last few months. This way Murray, he’ll owe someone else and not the other way about. I reckon he’ll enjoy the thought. We’ll rest up down the track until midday find a hotel or pub and have a shower.”

“No you won’t, you’ll shower at my place, have a decent breakfast, lie low, have a sleep I’ve two bunk beds in the dugout. Then get away in the afternoon. Better store the Nissan in the garage and I’ll lock up, I have to stay in the office for call outs as I’m a registered tow driver, but I can kip in my easy chair.”

So they drove out of the lease down to the Ridge and after a clean up, breakfast and a sleep they drove on to Sydney with a heavy load and a full tank plus two jerry cans of diesel. Driving the first night and morning, sleeping in hotels, they covered the distance in three days so not to overheat the old Nissan.

They found an Internet café on the Monday morning for Ash to do a transfer into Nick's Australian bank, Ash was over an hour but he came out with a broad smile. Nick then drove directly to Murray's step brother Lee who had been waiting for them since the break of day.

"Hey you guys Murray told you'd be here first because of the load you are carrying, here you come in at half ten! Back the Nissan into my garage, right at the back you'll see a big metal skip with a cover, I suggest the opal is put in there. One of you unloads into the barrow, I check and do my calculation and the other then tips it into the skip. I've borrowed my next-door neighbour's barrow as well so we can keep the transfer going. Agreed?"

Nick and Ash nodded and once the Nissan was tucked close to the skip, they commenced to unload. Lee whistled in amazement as each load reached him and then he would stir the opal and rock with his gloved hands and jot down a chalk figure on a small blackboard beside his chair.

"Murray warned me this was going to be a big load, and he sure wasn't kidding. Nick I'm not going to be able to pay for this lot, it will have to be split and sold to other dealers."

"No Lee I only want you as the dealer, no one else, I did tell Murray."

"He must think I'm a multimillionaire Nick, but I can pay you in dribs and drabs until the whole lot is moved, Its best we don't flood the market, how does that suit?"

"Fine with us."

They continued emptying the Nissan until only the three sticks of opal were left. Nick left the two smaller pieces and bought out the long one."

"Hell that's for auction, it's the best I've seen. I'll go my usual ten percent after auctioneers commission if that's agreeable. Ten percent of course on the rest but an extra two percent distribution and insurance."

"Insurance?"

"A rental lorry in front of the garage as added protection plus a security man I know to run around with me making deliveries. I've never handled so much good stuff before there are bound to be questions. How about the authorised owner for the auction house, they'll need some details."

"Solicitors and bank references, official legal owner?" asked Ash.

"You got it in three mate."

"All done, I've contacted our UK solicitors Mason Brothers and Nick is owner of the Mallings estate, the bank in the UK have been asked for a reference and Nick can get one from his OZ bank. Oh we can give you as photostat of the lease holding licence."

"So that's why you were so long in that café?"

"Well I had to rent a beach cottage for us up the Northern Beaches, first for

us to recover and secondly for the solicitors to send the documents to us from the UK.”

“If that suits you Lee we will send them on, Ash will give our address in case you or the auction house need to see or contact us. I don’t want to hurry you but can we have an estimate?”

“Hard to say Nick but it could be well over million and a half if we release the opal slowly, say a year or two at most. The piece for auction could be over a quarter of a mill.”

“Best if you bought the lorry then rather than hire one.”

“What do I do with it afterwards?”

”Give it to Murray with our best wishes.”

“OK guys we now go to my bank and I will give you fifty grand bankers cheque, which you take straight to your bank Nick. Leave me the details of your bank account and I will arrange a term deposit into your name linked to your account every month being the sum of the sale for that month. I will pick out more carefully the really high-grade opal free of rock. That also may need to go to auction. But it’s my decision I don’t want to be ringing you guys everyday. You agree?”

“Agreed.” They all shook hands, Nick drove the Nissan out onto the road and Lee locked up, rang his security friend, and then took them to his bank.

Chapter Fourteen. A sea view, a healing process and a battle in the dark.

It was late afternoon when they finally picked up the keys for the beach house, they had banked Lee's cheque, bought some clothes, and paid the full rent to the agent in cash plus a ten percent deposit to cover breakages. All this came via Ash, and Nick wondered whether this was Mallings money. Ash assured him it wasn't. They drove into the beach house garage and went inside. The view of the sand and sea made them stop in their tracks, and after dropping all their luggage in the lounge they ran out over the deck and onto the sand heading straight for the water where they stamped through the shallows and ultimately dived fully clothed in. Returning dripping wet they soon showered and changed, went out to a celebration dinner at a local seafood restaurant.

Returning late evening they sat on the deck looking at the glowing sky. "Come on Ash, tell me how you accumulated all that cash, it certainly wasn't by investing the pocket money I left for Dunning to hand out to you!" "Nor by mining some old vacant patch of earth."

"OK, but I didn't want to return to Mallings with my hand out and my tail between my legs. I should have asked, what's happened to you and the others over the past three years, but you were right when I left, I can be a selfish whatnot, and on the lease, all I could think of was it's down here, the next pick strike will find it."

"Right strip off we can talk whilst I attack you with this herbal lotion. I popped out to the chemist when you were paying the bill." Nick did as he was told whilst Ash spread a dry towel over the bed sheet, then helped Nick onto it. Ash saw how emancipated Nick had become with running sores on his legs and scratches to his back. He used cotton wool balls to impregnate the lotion into the cuts, but the seawater had cleaned the two sores nicely and he left those alone just placing plasters over them. Before he turned Nick over he smacked his rump hard,"

"What was that for?"

"You did it once to me after dressing that welt on my bum, but I'm getting my own back about that Acton woman!" Ash continued smoothing the lotion over Nick's torso. There were old and new scratches and cuts, and he applied the healing ointment liberally.

"Better put the light out and I'll tell you all about it." Ash undressed and put a bathrobe on then lay on the bed with a deep sigh.

“Yes I was jealous of her, she took you away from me, I had always loved you, at first it was hero worship.”

“I thought it might be something like that. After all you were pretty shaken up and I felt it better to ignore any deep feeling I could have had for you, you were so young and needed security as well as love and affection.”

“So you chose affection and security, but it was when you washed me in the Dunnings laundry tub, that I knew mine was a both physical security need and a mental love combined. I found it hard, on one hand I wanted you to find happiness and gave the Acton woman the benefit of the doubt, she was a pretty petulant little madam.”

“Do we need this discussion, I was a simple fool, I guessed your true affection but ignored it because I was intrigued by this strange impetuous creature. I soon learnt she wasn't your normal affectionate person. Remember I went over to her place, her father talked incessantly about money and I soon grasped which way the wind was blowing, roaring towards my hard earned cash. I saw how she dealt with her staff remembering how the Mallings looked after theirs. I had no intention of joining their little game and became positively repulsed by her machinations, but I couldn't just drop her like a brick. Years ago in my teens the same thing happened to me and I was heart broken, probably why I ultimately fled to OZ. So history repeated itself when you locked me out of your life” Nick rested his head on Ash's chest.

“I'm sorry Nick, but I needed space to try to sort myself out. I talked to Alex about my feelings and he suggested to me that if you truly missed me you would return. Of course Alex doesn't know your proud stubborn nature like I do. So I finished High school, got fed up waiting for you to come back, obtained a passport and came out searching for this wonderful rotten person that you are.”

“And am I glad you came, I guess a few months more I would have called it quits but would I have had the possibility of hurting you again by my presence, probably I would have crept back into some corner of England and laboured. How come you found the money?”

“Long story, lets leave it till tomorrow, we'll take a few beers and a beach broly onto the sand. I'll tell you and anybody else on the beach how I made a few hundred thousand.” Ash switched off the sidelight.

“Before I go to sleep how are people at home?”

“I thought you'd never ask, Jack is engaged to Betty Smallwood, Uncle Ted has finished upgrading Molly's house, after a deal of trouble I might add, the Mallings are all fit and well, and we have a new old lodger, Dunnings great grandfather, HE's fathers old steward no less, lives in a secret room over the

portico, you'll have to meet him. The rooms are now mostly finished with the exception of the attics, Joan and Aunt Celia told me what and when to buy, so all in all the manor's fit for prince now. I still live in number three cottage, but I've called it Welcome cottage in case you did come back." Ash put his fingers through Nick's hair, it had grown long and strayed over his face and shoulders, so he prised it away, Nick was asleep, Ash held him until he also fell asleep with the surf rolling nosily onto the beach through the open sliding window. A large grey shape drifted through the breeze blown curtains, swept up onto the bottom of their bed and nestled its large head by Ash's feet.

After breakfast Ash cut back Nick's hair, then they found some canvas deck chairs in the garage and hauled them out onto the sand. Ash had found a working computer in the small study and worked for an hour whilst Nick cooked breakfast. Then they carried a can of Fosters each and collapsed into the chairs, it was warm but hazy so they left the broly in the house.

"So Molly didn't kick up a fuss about the renovation, I mentioned it to her and she objected strongly."

"Well she didn't want strangers around, like the Thatcher who did our cottages, so Uncle Tom and Jack had to do all the work. As you know thatching is a skilled job and they made several attempts because if Molly wasn't happy that he reeds would be on the ground the next day!"

"Well that being so why couldn't Molly put it up herself if she had that sort of ability."

"Jack reckoned she used some of the reeds to make her broomstick, he told me he was thinking this as he was passing up the reed bundles to his Dad. Imagine his surprise went one of the pitching forks whacked him on the shin! Tom and Jack have moved into number one cottage, we've left number two spare so you can decide what we do with that."

"Well there's Jason to consider, I think he's got a family even though he's divorced, maybe we could hold it open for him?"

"I think Alice is pleased to have him under her and Dunning's roof, but in the meantime it could be used as a temporary place for visitors, maybe work people, whatever."

"Whatever, now Mr. Millionaire your accounting!"

So Ash related how Trenchard had been charged with assault of both Ash and the previous lad at the college. Both Trenchard's colleagues had turned Queens evidence by their parents, scared by HE's solicitors Mason Brothers who were going to prosecute a civil action against all three. The Dean had

removed Robertson from the school on some trumped up charge. Mason Brothers handled the civil action for that as well.

“Of course all roads led to Lord Acton and he was the culprit so HE through myself and Dunning, who would accompany me, told Mason Brothers to do there best with no expense spared.” Ash swallowed some lager and continued.

“So Mason’s organised everything with Sergeant Ferguson’s unofficial help. Initially the Crown Prosecution were going to hold up the case though some political interference but fortunately the Gazette got hold of a private note from you know who and that forced them to back on the prosecution.”

”Alex doing his burglary tricks?”

”The very one, stop interrupting Nick and let me come to the climax!

Trenchard got one hundred hours community service, of course that’s what we expected, the magistrate being an old golfing companion to Acton.”

Ash then related how the Mason’s forced the civil actions in one combined case against the college, the Trenchard’s and the Gore Williams lads. The case took several weeks with top highly paid silks. The Mallings account funded the action so as HE had requested no expense was spared. The result was a clean sweep for us all. Apparently after the case was won the Acton’s chose the wrong judge to try to limit the damages. Without success, we were awarded full costs, Robertson was paid one hundred grand from the Dean and college, the fag before me and I received five hundred grand each for our trouble. The combined amount of the damages was exceeded by the legal costs, which we were also awarded.

“So really the lawyers won Nick, as they always do.”

“I would have expected Acton to contest.”

“He couldn’t, not with the community service already accepted and served out. That went uncontested, which meant they were in a corner with no where to go.”

They both went inside as the breeze had picked up and rain was spotting down. They grabbed another lager and sat down in the lounge.

“That’s not all though.” Ash looked dreamily up at the ceiling recalling a more disturbing incident.

“OK I don’t like to ask but something tells me it’s to do with revenge, vengeance.”

“You read my mind Nick!”

“No Ash I can’t, unless we both mind read together, so lets try that to see if works for us again!”

So they sat quietly sipping their lager whilst Ash related in mind read the

happenings at Mallings, in the attic corridor.

‘It happened the year before last in autumn about four months after the costs and damages had been settled and the money was safely banked. I had moved back into the manor and was in HE’s study showing how he could use the web for investigation of hobbies, gardening, antiques, famous people. HE was interested in catching up with history. Aunt Celia with furniture and household stuff. She came in to join Uncle and I. I sat between them and eventually they tried their hand. It was an eye opener for them both and I left them happily clicking away on their mouse. Peter, Joan and Alex were away so I drifted outside wondering whether Alex had taken the dogs. I called Ben and both rushed over from the cottage to where I was on the steps. I walked around the manor checked that number two and three cottages were padlocked. Jack was out with his girl and Uncle Tom over with the Dunnings. So I came inside, locked the door and went to our room to bed.

About three in the morning I felt a growling, long and low, a knock on the door and Uncle came in and shook my shoulder. He asked me if I was awake, and I said it was Ben growling at him, he said no we had invaders. To be honest Nick I didn’t quite know what Uncle was talking about, but I hurriedly dressed and he shooed me up to the attic to stay with Dunning senior. I knocked on the door quickly and he hauled me in, and then slid the door shut. He told me to climb the ladder and lie over the ceiling battens of the attic corridor. He unsheathed something made of steel climbed up beside me. He vanished for a moment and took the dogs with him, and then he came up through the ceiling with his finger to his lips. Then pointed to his ear. Shortly I heard footsteps creeping up the stairs and low voices like a low hum. It sounded like two voices the corridor door opened with a tiny squeak and footsteps padded slowly along the corridor until they were right under me. I heard a can dropped to the floor and Trenchard’s voice. Gore he said, these houses of stone and marble have one huge disadvantage and that’s a wood beam roof with lots of smaller battens, these rotten piglets won’t know what’s hit them. Suddenly Old Mr Dunning vanished and I heard the attic stair door slam and locked with sliding bolts. Then from the other end the dogs charged and the louts were screaming as the visions appeared, Mr. Dunning grabbed his steel stick, slid through the ceiling, his steel handle making a small hole where the handle was, then as I peered through the hole all I could see was two great animals and glinting piece of steel stabbing and cutting. By the time I had climbed down the ladder and opened the sliding door the Trenchard and Gore were alone crouched fearfully against the locked door. I picked up the can of petrol and walked over to them. I could

feel both Bill and Ben on either side of me, I walked forward, knocked on the attic steps door, and it opened. I kicked them down each of the floors stairs until they came to our ground floor. I opened the door and showed them out, but I saw they had brazenly parked Cassandra's MG right in front of the steps. So I tipped the contents of the can over all the leather seats. Now get in and never come back here, now you know about the truth of the manor and its estate, its haunted by the wildest of animals and people. And I'm not really here at all. Uncle must have been following all this because he superimposed himself over me and how those louts screamed. I chucked the can into the car and Uncle said something about having a match in his pocket. They roared away smashing through the drive gates. In the morning Dunning reported the smashed gates to Sergeant Ferguson and the number plate of the offenders, well Cassandra got had up for dangerous driving and Mason's sent a bill for three thousand to her insurance company.'

"You still with me."

"I'm not sure I like the steel sword bit, what else has Dunning Senior got in that room of his?"

"I saw some sabres, cutlasses, two shotguns and Enfield three oh three."

"Do you expect any more problems from that family, or have we heard the last of them?"

"Who can tell? But I think Mallings won't be visited again by any of them. Uncle says if I can get you home, we will hold a council of war."

XXX

Chapter Fifteen. Coming home and company.

They remained in Northern Sydney soaking up the surf and sun, then at last they booked Nicks ticket home and packed. They gave the Nissan away to the local surf club. Nick packed up his tent,

“I’m taking this back to Mallings as a souvenir, and it can reside next to yours and Jacks shelter.”

They flew out and a few days later unpacked in the cottage. True to his word Nick hacked out a couple of tent poles and erected the tent next to Jack and Ash’s, now falling apart.

They then collected the opal sticks and took them up to the attic. Ash knocked quickly and then introduced Nick to Dunning senior.

“Mr Dunning we’ve bought some valuable things from our travels.”

“Indeed Mr Nick. May I have a look?” Nick and Ash handed them over, Dunning slid open a narrow flat drawer containing what looked the family jewels. He laid the opal sticks apart, studied them quietly, turned one about the other, and then slid them together.

“They mesh exactly, such beautiful colours,” He turned but Ask and Nick had slid the door behind them and they walked the corridor. At the final attic room Ash opened it wide.

“Well, if the window is now repaired. One question before lunch, how did those louts get in?”

“A crowbar into the scullery. They left it their hurry, so I gave it to Uncle Tom for his tool box.”

“Ash you should have sent it back, that’s pilfering.” They both laughed and went down to the kitchen and Alice’s Hampshire ham salad. Aunt Celia met them in the hall where she stopped Nick and pushed Ash away towards the kitchen.

“Now Nick have you remembered Ash’s birthday is tomorrow, Alice is preparing a special dinner in the ballroom for the evening, Horace has released funds for the meal and wine and brandy. Dunning has gone to buy all the food. Now I want you to keep it quite from Ash as it’s a surprise, also a celebration for having you back safe and sound and finally a topping off ceremony, for Joan Ash and I to have completed the furnishing of the manor.”

“Well Aunt I had forgotten, can you cover for me while I pop into town, I have to pick up something I wanted for Ash. By the way we haven’t furnished the attics yet!”

“That’s true but currently we are short of staff, which I think you will agree we may have to rectify in good time, there’s no great urgency and we should

be careful whom we should employ, we can't have staff fainting every time one of us appears!" Celia slowly disappeared.

"True, since you bought it up there is likely to be someone you have thought of?"

'Horace had apoplexy! Apparently Molly suggested to Ash that Greg Gordon might be a wise choice as a gamekeeper, he being an old poacher and having been brought before Horace on several occasions.'

"Uncle not too keen?"

'He will be guided by what you think, so perhaps you could visit Horace when you come back from your gift search? Tell Ash we want him in the study for another lesson on the use of the translation web site Horace and Peter have found, that will give you time to get away'

Nick nodded and went on down to have lunch, he gave Ash the message and then swiftly left for the town. When he came back Ash was sitting on the stairs.

"How did the Internet stuff go?" Nick asked mildly.

"Now where did you go so quickly after lunch?"

Nick touched his nose,

"Well Peter was researching some material from France and Germany reference to his time over there, something to do with a league of nations, though I don't think that lasted too long. I suspect Aunt Celia sent you on a mission. I couldn't get anything out of them at all, like being at school again with those three. Anyway I'm waiting to take you around the whole of the house to see what Aunt and Joan accomplished whilst you were playing at being a mole, so come on we'll do the left wing first."

They walked past the study and down a dark corridor where Ash opened doors as they went along. Opposite HE's study was a room with cloths pegs lining the wall plus a cubicle for a toilet and washbasin. The next room to that was a reception place for visitors to await summons from HE. There were several Windsor chairs and two comfortable settees. Facing the front of the house next to the study was a larger morning room where the lady of the house could entertain. The floor was marble with a large round Wilton carpet, easy chairs and small tea tables. Nick could see Aunt Celia's footprint in this room and wondered if she still had spirit guests to tea?

The next room to this was a small kitchen galley. The room opposite was a large panelled smoking room, certainly large enough for two billiard tables though these were missing, in their place Ash had put a table tennis table. Great, thought Nick and they played a couple of games. The next room to this facing the house rear was the game room for hunting shooting and fishing. It was well stocked with fishing rods and suitable pictures not to

Nicks taste!

Having completed the ground floor they retraced their way and took the stairs up the first floor. Turning left they came to the ballroom door which had a notice swinging from the door handle, scrawled in orange chalk was 'Closed for redecoration.' Ash was a bit upset for to his mind the ballroom was the grandest room of all. So they turned to visit the right wing rooms, which were obviously living rooms, a breakfast room, a bathroom and toilet, which Nick remembered using years ago? Finally at the end was a wonderful sitting room, beautifully fitted out with easy chairs some sofa's and two desks facing one another next to a huge semi circular bow window. Nick had not seen the room before, he was positively stunned by its proportion and layout, turning to Ash he raised one eye and Ash blushed. They retraced their walk up to the second floor over the ballroom to the Mallings wing. Joan was there to greet them and she showed them the layout was a duplicate of their own wing. All were bedrooms and a single bathroom at the end. Each bedroom was furnished differently with Regency furniture in one, Edwardian in one and a very modern 20's clean cut for Alex, and there was a large fluffy carpet for Bill and Ben. Alex came through the door. "Have you noticed Nick, that Ben is now with me?"

"I once saw him in Australia on the end of the bed, a huge grey formless thing, eyeing your big toe with obvious relish." They all laughed and the walk continued onto to the left wing. Here all the bedrooms were fitted out in a modern style. Nick counted ten in all including his and Ash's because most of them were smaller than the Mallings. Nick supposed these had originally been guest rooms. Nevertheless they were still substantial and each had a fireplace with a large electric heater installed, something the Mallings did not have.

"We don't need the heat only when we want to appear, we use the heat of the rooms to create the vision."

"Central cooling throughout the house Nick?" Ash felt Alex's hand pass close to his ear. "Missed!" he said.

"Passed through, you're lucky there was not a brain to hit! When am I getting my Ben back you cheeky devil?"

"Never." And ducked as another playful cuff that came his way.

They continued up the attic rooms but did not disturb old Mr. Dunning. Their inspection finished they went down and out to the where the pier used to be. HE joined them.

"Do you remember what Molly Clarke told you after you came in to see me all tearful because you thought you had lost Nick though your own jealousy?"

“Yes you told me to go and see her and take her a bunch of Aunt’s roses. She told me that the chair we burnt, Nick and I, it would leave a scar on the ground for three years.”

“Well Ash, look down now at that spot.”

“It was my fault we let that dammed chair into the house Uncle.”

“True my boy, but the rain and frost and snow and Ash’s tears have drenched the spot clear of any contaminating influences.”

“Its growing new shoots of grass again Uncle Horace!”

“Indeed Ash, now how about you two take a walk into the forest and let Nick see all the work you and Jack have done so far? I’ll come with you, at least in spirit.” They all laughed.

They walked through the forest Nick looked around and it was obvious Tom Trent and his forestry experience had been imparted here.

“We did all the lifting and carrying though Nick.” Ash exclaimed. Nick looked up to the old oak tree with its cast down branches.

“And I can see where most of the wood landed up.” High above him lay a large house like structure. Because it was made from branches and it melted into the Oaks framework.

“We used it to spot for poachers.”

‘Did your aunt mention my concern about that very thing Nick?’

“Yes Uncle, use a thief to catch a thief is the expression. I think if Molly recommended him I think we could take him on, your decision though.”

‘How about you Ash one more soldier in defence of the realm?’

“Fine with me Uncle, let him have one of the attic rooms, be company for old Mr. Dunning.”

They carried on through the forest until they reached the fields. There was not a cow to be seen, just small trees protected by tubes and plastic bags.

“The farmer bought a farm down Blandford way so gave up the lease. We thought, Alex and I, that we could try our hand at an arboretum.”

“Well it could have been a line of dog kennels knowing you two, that’s what I would have expected, but Ash it’s a lovely idea.” Nick studied the huge mixture of trees planted and their arrangement with wide paths winding right down to the school.” They walked on across the field, the two being made one now. At last they came to the school playing area.

“The school governors have requested that we end the lease for the grounds, they are trying to save money.” Ash turned to Nick, “It means that they put money into teaching the pupils. Jack had a word with some friends in the village and they would like to keep at least the two pitches for football, hockey and cricket. That means about fifty acres reverting back to us.”

“So we donate that to the village and you can extend your arboretum?”

‘Your arboretum Nick, this is Ash’s sorry gift to you, just open your eyes and understand my boy.’

“Yes Uncle it’s a wonderful gift, Ash did you buy every one from your own account.”

“Yes and planted and tended them, I’m so happy you are back to take over the watering chore!” Ash took Nick by the arm and they walked into the middle of the plantings.

“Except this grove of Acers, Uncle and Aunt Celia bought these for me to plant.”

The light was fading and they slowly walked back along the riverbank where they saw the otters flipping in and out the water fishing and playing.

‘A new brood by the looks of it young Ash.’

‘Well was it your Lordship made ‘is mind up then me hearty lads I did overhear as you was passing my old Oak. Tis nice see that Master Nick back in control and I thank he for doing up me cottage. Tis nice and dry now’

“My oak Molly, and it was Uncle who asked Uncle Tom to mend it” Ash shouted turning in all directions, Molly’s voice seemed to boom out everywhere.

‘If you must know you cantankerous old witch Molly Clark, I had a vote and it appears your request has been approved by the board of Directors.’

‘You’ll be sorry you taught that old fool HE the compute young Ash.’

“As a matter of fact Molly if I could see you, I’d tell you to your face that Uncle is a fast learner and had looked up all the spells he could on the internet, and potions too!”

Molly suddenly appeared and shook Nick’s arm,

“I told young smarty pants there that once the grass re-grew you’d be back. But with treasure as well. Well two treasures.”

“Three actually Molly,” He looked down at Ash who was still a head below his.

“Ah, I was glad he scooped you out of that sun, sand and spinefix, you needed your head read sometimes Master Nick, just you keep young fancy pants close by, he be the brains in the outfit. See you right soon!” Molly vanished.

“What did she mean see you right soon?”

“No idea Ash, that was a lovely gift but what can I give you in return? But of course you already have it haven’t you. Are you there, Uncle?” There was no reply, so the two of them walked slowly arm in arm though the gathering dusk, ahead two badgers crossed their path and there were bats flying through the trees chasing after moths. They checked the front door of the

manor, it had been locked so they continued onto the welcome cottage and all was quite. They sat outside on a bench and listened to world of the night creatures, the dusk had bought a light-cooling breeze to follow the heat of the August day. They talked quietly about Nick's time in the desert, which Molly had spoken about, and Ash shivered, at the scorpions, the snakes and other strange creatures that lived so close to Nick and his tent.

The following day Nick and Ash commenced to rebuild a new pier. Tom Trent had managed to acquire some hardwood piles and these they dug into the river, which being the height of summer was not high. They piled rocks around each pile to hold them straight then placing a steel cover over the top they pounded with sledgehammers until each pile was rigid. By the time they had forced the last pile into the bank, Nick said they were expected to dinner. He and Ash showered in the cottage, dressed and marched over to the manor. The hall was ablaze and with light and all the Mallings greeted Ash. "Happy birthday" they rang out their wishes then escorted him up the broad staircase to the ballroom where Peter flung open the doors for Ash to view the banquet held in his honour. Nick guided him forward and HE sat him at the head of the table. Alice and Dunning came out of a side room with streaming bowls of soup, and wine. The Mallings scooped up the brandy and poured into crystal glasses.

"You see darling Ash although the food and wine would go straight through us the brandy evaporates so we can enjoy getting inebriated without leaving a mess for Alice to clean up." Just then Molly appeared at the door followed by old Mr. Dunning and Greg Gordon.

"Scoundrel." Shouted HE, but Lady Celia hushed him, though he still scowled.

"Your honour, I be obliged for the position, thank ye kindly."

"Then come and join us Gordon you reprobate. You are to have a room in the attic according to Master Ash."

"And I might be asking your Lordship for Mrs Gordon to accompany when I come."

"I'm not a lord so call me HE like everyone else. Molly introduce Greg to the family and a brandy for you both."

"And food for me HE and I have a potion that allows it."

"Really, did you bring it with you?" Molly nodded, "Alice do we have sufficient food for all the table."

"Indeed we have a microwave in the kitchenette here, too late for the soup, but I'll put more new potatoes on and Dunning bought a huge ham."

"Bring it out here, Dunning and Alice have your soup, I shall carve and

Molly pass that dam potion round this side of the table.” Dunning carried the ham out and HE started carving.

Ash had never seen such a fantastic dinner party, Alice had made a special rum and sherry trifle and what with the wine, brandy and the very alcoholic pudding, the party rolled on until HE banged the table.

“Presents time. Molly?”

“Bought mine already, it was the potion that I gave you all, I thought young Ashley would appreciate that since he appears so fond of you all.”

“Right, Peter and Alex?”

“One of my favourite adventure books, a bit tattered but still a good read Ash.”

“Thank you Peter.”

“The loan of my Ben for a month.” Alex said, everybody groaned. “Alright for the next twelve months then.” They all applauded.

“From myself and your Aunt, I have purchased one of those new office chairs that swivel, Dunning has put it in the study.”

“Thank you Uncle.”

“Now you Nick.”

“Well what I’ve bought is in my tent down on the river bank, its two sleeping bags to remind both of us about the desert we survived.”

“You survived, Ash was quite safe!”

“Yes HE, also I’ve bought a gold chain to hang around his neck as my commitment to his happiness.” Nick took a dark blue velvet box out of his jacket, opened it up and placed a light bright gold chain around a blushing Ash.

To Ash, Jack and I have bought a brass telescope and a small wood burning stove he can see even farther from his tree house and stay there on the coldest of nights.”

“Bad ideas Tom Trent, the wood stove be best in welcome cottage not my oak tree. Sides which with Greg on patrol young Ash don’t need no telescope” Molly scowled.

“But it would be useful studying the forest life at a distant, so thank you both.” Ash bowed his head in thanks to Tom and Jack.

“We Dunnings have, well Jason actually, has painted some scenes of Mallings for Ash to hang in the cottage.”

“Thank you all very much it’s the finest birthday one could have, but thank you all for your thoughts.”

“That’s the good news Ash,” said HE. “The bad news is all the family males have to do the washing up whilst the ladies sit.”

So the men of the house went into the kitchenette loaded with dirty plates

and whilst HE swished the suds around, Ash washed up and the others dried.

“Why two sleeping bags Nick, in your old tent.

“Well I guess it was for me really, I’ve booked you in for driving lessons, that’s my real gift, but I wanted to be in the tent here at Mallings, just one time. You can go back to the cottage, I’ll be fine, after all you are your own master, and no longer am I guardian to you, though I have that strange feeling I never was.”

“No we go together Nick, lets get out of our good suits and become desert nomads for one more night.”

“No my Ash, not nomads, we’ve found our home, never to roam, well maybe not for a couple of years.”

“Decades Nick.”

So they changed into old clothes and went down to the riverbank, Nick in his tent and Ash in his dilapidated shelter, until it started to rain, then he crawled in with Nick.

They awoke and Nick brushed the tent flap aside, the rain clouds had replaced by bright blue sky. He checked his watch. Ten.

“I’m off to the pool, and Ash I’ll go the cottage and pick up some towels, how about popping into the kitchen and asking Alice for some sausages and rolls, we’ll build a fire and have a cook up.”

“Right I’ll meet you by the pool, Ash veered off the river path towards the scullery door while Nick continued onto to the cottage. They met in the pool. Nick was the first get there, undressed and slid into the luke warm water. Ash arrived soon after dumped the sausages under the towels and jumped in setting up a rolling wave hitting Nick in the chest. They washed with their hands using sandy gravel as an abrasive. Despite the rain and the increased water flow the river was relatively warm.

‘I guessed I’d find you two here!’

“I missed Ben last night Alex, I won’t keep you to your birthday wish as I know you miss him when he’s with me!”

‘Well that’s thoughtful of you Ash but here he comes now.’ And two large grey shapes bounded into the pool jumping and swirling in obvious delight. Nick got up and climbed out.

“Too boisterous for me Alex.’ So Alex and Nick sat on the bank watching the dogs and Ash rampaging in the pool, and loving every minute.

‘Greg wants you and Ash on a history tour this afternoon,’ Alex then repeated it loudly to grab Ash’s attention. ‘And he said he’d give Ash a lesson on poaching!’

“Well you can tell Greg his poaching days are over,” Ash shouted back, “or I’ll put the dogs onto to him!”

‘Well I’ll come along too it might be worth watching, about one thirty outside the manor you two.’

The dogs vanished and Ash came out and dried himself then they returned to the camp site, built a fire, spiked their sausages onto bamboo sticks and roasted them in the fire.

“We can’t live like this for ever and a day, we’d get bored with it.”

“You might Nick, but saver every minute, I personally think it’s a great way to live.”

“No Ash, what I meant was we’ll need to have some sort of work to combine with our relaxation, say management of the estate, to make it self supporting and not rely on the Mallings funds.”

“We could hold ghost tours for the general public at five pounds a visit.”

‘Too cheap young Ash, anyhow you presuppose Alex and I would be willing to join in your escapade.’

“That’s rotten Peter, creeping up on us, anyhow Joan might agree, have a sausage.” Ash held out his bamboo stick with a spitting sausage attached to it into the air.

‘No thanks Ash, you leave my wife out of your peculiar plan. But I agree with Nick, an estate is not just for the pleasure of enjoying it, it needs to be worked as well. Our problem is that it was severely reduced after Father and Mother died. Compulsory purchase by the government helped in no small way. Years ago we had a home farm and north of the road bridge we owned a large acreage, which was converted into cash to pay off death duties, even then they had trouble finding someone to inherit Mallings.’

“I was going to ask you Peter about that. How Mallings had withstood the test of time, when I first came here I swear the house both inside and out seemed as if someone had left it the day before. The hall was clean, the steps brushed, presumably the Dunnings had kept it right through the years.”

“And Dunnings father, who isn’t about now as he chose to move on. Yes they did a fine job. However Alice and Dunning are soon to retire and Father was wondering, in order to keep the tradition, that we offer Jason the position. Did you know he has children who are now in foster care?”

”No I didn’t but we could offer them the second cottage if Ash agrees.”

“Fine with me”, said Ash biting into his bread and sausage roll.

“Then we can discuss the details with Father and the Dunnings tonight. I know they want to see their grandchildren, having not had that pleasure, ever since their mother took them away”

“What happened to them to be fostered?” Nick glanced at Ash.

“She met and remarried, and alas her beau didn’t care for them.” Peter at last appeared.

“Bit like the a new male lion taking over a harem of lionesses.” Ash finished his roll and wiped his hands on the grass. “Can Alex do his normal burglary?”

“No need Ash, the Dunnings are putting in an application, Father had agreed for them to use Mason Brothers. So it’s well in hand. I’ve just realized that we fourth dimension spirits will soon be overwhelmed by the three dimension!”

“Ah Peter, you do have Molly Clark on your side!” They all laughed, damped down the fire then walked back arm in arm to the welcome cottage.

xxx

Chapter Sixteen. A walk and adventure with an old poacher.

They had changed into old shirts and jeans and armed themselves with a pair of stout walking sticks, sitting down on the steps at exactly one twenty five. Alex joined them but without the dogs. Nick and Ash had learnt that a sudden coolness in the air meant one of the Mallings was close.

'Greg is afraid Bill and Ben might take a fancy to him, because the dogs were trained to be on the lookout for poachers in our early years, so I've left them in the house if you don't mind, lying on the bed snoring.'

'Right you are, I was just settling Mrs. Gordon into the attic room, I think Master Alex, I might ask HE if she could become a maid in the house, she used to do for the vicar when he had company.'

'I'm sure Nick and my Father would agree, but terms need to be discussed.'

'Just bed and board Master Alex and she do love fishing, so when the Masters Ash and Nick finish the pier maybe she could use it?'

"Well I'll get Tom to buy some hardwood planking and we also need some ground treated bearers, I'll write him a list this evening, anyhow Ash and I want to finish it now we've started."

"And there are fishing rods in the game room on the left wing, I suppose they belong to HE?" said Ash.

'Mine and Peters so Maggie's welcome to use them, in fact I might be interested to take it back on. Presumably Ash and Nick would eat anything we caught.'

"Bar ells!" They said in unison.

'Now I'll try to become visible if I must, Master Alex has been teaching me, so I'm going to give it a go now, so be prepared for a truly horrible sight.'

Lots of hissing and blowing followed by a short stocky crumpled man in a long leather coat appeared, still huffing and wheezing.

'Right Greg you can stop that horrible noise, can you see us clearly?'

"More importantly can they see I?"

"Yes!" came a chorus and Alex appeared as Peter also came down the steps.

"Father has sent me to keep you lot out of trouble, just in case Gordon gets carried away." Greg Gordon looked hurt.

"I've changed me ways now Mr. Peter, still lets be having you and first we start by walking up the Beech Drive. Then we cut across the forest and move up toward the eastern road."

They all trudged up behind Greg Gordon as he walked along at a surprising speed. They stopped halfway up the long drive then turned right. Nick marked the nearest beech tree with a chalk mark. Then they proceeded through some laburnum bushes to find a clear path snaking through the

woodland into the forest proper. Here it was dank and shafts of sunlight streamed through the branches.

“Tis a new experience for me as I normally walked these paths at night.” Greg pointed ahead.

“If I had known that I would have stayed out longer with my shotgun.” Peter looked directly at Greg.

“Would have been no use Mr. Peter, Guzzling, your gamekeeper, always gave me a whistle when you or Master Alex went inside, then we’d split the night takings. Molly caught us at it one night, splitting up the rabbits and partridge, that’s when young Alex caught me good an proper.”

“No Gordon, when I came with the dogs, Guzzling had his hand on your collar, it was he that had nabbed you.”

“Was for the show, I got nicked, Guzzling got a bonus from your father, we split that between us later when I came back. Still taught us to leave the partridge and just hunt for rabbits seems Molly never minded that! Well come on then I’ll show you the cave and tunnel.” They walked on and then veered up toward the road where they came across a deep bowl like depression in the ground. The ground was carpeted with dead leaves Greg skipped across them and drew back a holly trees branch, beyond was a yawning tunnel entrance.

“Any guesses?” Gordon looked around the party.

“Hidden treasure. Possible opal mine,” Nick cried out.

“A quarry”, Ash struck his toe into the ground, it was rocky, “used to build the new manor as infill for the sandstone.”

“Cheat, Ash you’ve been reading the manor’s history manuscript Mother wrote up.” Peter wagged his finger. “Do we go in or stay out here?”

They all filed in, the tunnel was fairly long and led eventually to a cavern, it was bare but the floor was even. It was dark so Alex and Peter puffed up and lit the interior with their exertions.

“Can’t keep this up for too long, so Ash and Nick better take a quick look and make for the exit.” Alex started to fade so they dashed out back along the tunnel.”

“Wonder what we could use that for?” asked Ash.

“I guess some sort of storage, I expected it to be damp but seemed perfectly dry. Did you notice the evenness on the floor?”

“Was used to store munitions during the war. I used to stay here on a rainy night, best time to snatch a rabbit early morning. That was my shift, nights.”

“Presumably Greg Gordon you want continue with a nightly shift?” Peter asked.

“Of course as a sort of night watchman, that would suit me fine Master Nick

and Mr. Peter, would suit me fine.”

“Right then I’ll ask Molly to count all the rabbits before you start.” Alex laughed but Gordon looked serious.

“It wouldn’t mind doing a little catching, for the manors pot, I’m sure Alice would appreciate. I’ve heard she can make a fine rabbit pie.” The others looked at him squarely.

“She did mention it when she showed me up to the attic, I met Old Mr Dunning and I asked him, said I should keep my hand in like.”

“That’s fine with me, as long as you are restricted to rabbits. If you make it swans, birds or otters Alex and Ash will hand you over to Molly!” Nick said seriously.

“You can be sure it will be only be rabbits, after all it was I who taught Master Alex the ways of the woodland, weren’t it Master Alex? And if young Master Ash would like to see and learn, we could arrange that. Well lets walk on, we’ll bye pass Molly as you know her ground, but there’s a hidden area where I used to come in at night and has a big old oak with a rotten inside, where we could all hide. I hammered steel pins inside so I could climb up the funnel like inside, and spot out at a good height!”

They continued along a path leading upwards towards the road when they came to the hollow oak, Ash wrote up the location on a small map he was drawing.

“Nick did you notice there was an old plank door in the cave, I glanced about me quickly before Alex dimmed.” Ash and Nick were outside waiting for the others to come from the tree.

“Can’t say I did see it, the walls all looked the same colour, are you sure of what you saw?” Before Ash could reply the others appeared and they all walked on now forcing their way through overgrown shrubs. They eventually reached a two-metre high brick wall; it had fallen in at one spot. “Lorry hit it, never been repaired, I used to come in this way” Greg pointed at the fallen bricks. Ash made a note for Tom to repair it.

They continued along a path that eventually led to Molly’s back garden. A shrill voice reached them.

‘You mind me garden now, don’t thee be treading any closer, go around where the fallen logs be.’

They skirted around Molly’s house and yard and soon came to the original drive, still clear of shrubs and trees.

“Funny nothing has grown here, or on the old building site for that matter” Nick brushed his hand along the remnants of a broken wall.

“Haunted,” said Peter with a smile.

“More likely to be shallow earth, I expect its rock underneath.” Ash

scrapped a small pathway of leaves until his foot yielded rock.

“No bad for a young un.” Greg called them over to a tree on the edge of the site and pointed to it. “Can you see anything different to this tree to the others further on?”

“The barks twisted like a corkscrew.” Ash said as he felt the rough bark.

“Its Elm, and the twist is a sure sign of water beneath.”

“Its true Ash”, Alex leaned up against it, “ The rock floor looks solid enough so the house was pitched here, but there’s an underground stream running through it, the rocks soft and Peter’s partly right. The sound forced the family to move. Also one of the exterior walls started to buckle.”

“I thought Peter was alluring to a tragedy of some sort with his ghosts!”

Nick knelt and put his ear to the ground.

“Do you feel anything untoward about this place?” Peter asked them both quietly.

XXX

Chapter Seventeen. Mystery upon mystery.

Autumn had come to Mallings and some of the trees had started to lose their leaves.

Nick and Ash had moved from their cottage to the house for winter. During September they had had a new boiler and radiator system installed in both wings much to Aunt Celia's concern as it meant moving all her prized possessions around and even worse letting strangers into the wing! The plumbers had complained of the excessive cold in the right wing and told Nick that area needed double the heating. Had they known Aunt Celia and the family had been keeping a close eye on them and thus altering the temperature level, they would have understood. In any event Nick organised the same radiator heat output for both wings, explaining that the right wing windows were not double insulated. Neither was the left wing but when the radiators had been installed he arranged for all windows to be double insulated. This took up the budget from the years Mallings fund but all agreed the house for much warmer and more pleasant to live in. As Joan said, they could use the heat with great effect and appear more often because of it.

Jason's two children, Pip and Polly had arrived and the family settled into Number Two cottage. Pip was twelve and Polly ten. Jason had enrolled them into the village school.

There was the question telling the new family of the Mallings and Dunning agreed that he and Alice would take that responsibility on. Jason was introduced to HE and it was agreed that Ash and Jason should choose the best time to introduce the children to their neighbours. Ash agreed to do this with Alex's help.

"But not at dinner, Alex, perhaps introduce you as my cousin."

'Which I am.'

"And perhaps you in the flesh so to speak fishing on the new pier with me?"

So it was arranged that warm July evening with the fishing rods and bait ready on the pier, Jason bought Pip and Polly down to the riverbank. Here Ash and Alex were busy putting old trout skin onto their hooks. Jason explained to the children they could have a chance to fish as he had bought his old rod with him.

"Master Ash and Master Alex will show you how its done and I am away to the house to help grandpa size up the windows in the house as Mister Nick is talking about double glazing."

"Double glazing but its so warm here Dad?"

"In winter Pip it gets quite cold and it's a big house to keep warm. If you've noticed Mister Nick had double glazing put in on our cottage windows when

they renovated it.” Jason winked at Ash and left the children holding his rod. Alex carefully threaded a piece of silver trout skin onto the barbed hook and explained to the two children how dangerous the barb could be. Then he showed them how to cast up stream allowing the hook and float to gently follow the river flow. As he handed the rod to Pip he vanished. Polly gulped as Alex’s rod was still held up in the air.

“Where’s Master Alex gone?” she asked Ash.

“He is still here, but he has this impressive talent of being able to disappear whenever he wants too. All the Mallings have that gift, except Nick and I.”

“He’s a ghost!” Pip exclaimed, and Polly gulped.

“He’s as much alive as you are, look to prove it I’ll ask him to remain hidden and still catch a fish, then will you agree?”

“Don’t you disappear Mister Ash, please stay with us,” Polly was close to tears, but suddenly Alex’s line jerked and he reeled in a large fighting trout. It took Alex several minutes to fight the fish.

‘Now Pip you take the rod, if you think you are better than me.’

“I didn’t say that Mister Alex, but it daunting watching a flailing fish on a jerking rod.” Pip took the rod and the fish twisted then dived pulling him off the pier. Ash reacted by grabbing one leg but Pip was seen to be rising out the water and was gently lain back on the pier.

“Gosh, how did that happen?” Pip spat water from his mouth, and then Alex appeared climbing out of the water.

“And you lost my fish Pip!” Alex stood with his rod and line and no hook.

“Now I’ve got to find that fish and remove the hook, do I have your permission Polly to go and search for it, if it can see me then I won’t be able to catch it.”

Polly nodded, and Alex disappeared for a second time.

“Wish I could that, where do you think Mister Alex has gone?”

“See that thin line of movement in the water over their moving toward the rushes, just wait and see.” Ash motioned the children to see and suddenly the trout jumped up in the reeds and stayed poised for several seconds.

“Alex had to take the hook out, now you see Polly and Pip, a fine cousin I have and a ghost as well!”

“Is Mister Peter like that?”

“Yes and how lucky you are. You will always have them as special friends, but they are special and no one outside our family and friends are allowed to know about them.”

“Why’s that Mister Ash.”

“Firstly just call me Ash please, I don’t call you Mister Pip or Miss Polly do I? Well people might try to capture them so we keep it to ourselves, do you

agree?” Both children nodded as Alex climbed back onto the pier. He shook himself to get rid of the moisture.

“Listen Pip, you better get back to the cottage to dry out and no fishing for you or Polly without one of us to rescue, understand!”

“Come on you two I’ll explain to your father,” Ash picked up the rods as Alex disappeared again.

“Where’s he gone now Ash,” asked Polly now more amazed than frightened.

“Off to help that old trout we nearly caught I expect.”

“I like Mister Alex,” Pip squelched behind them.

“Then you’ll like his dogs, they’re invisible as well!”

“Can we see them?” Polly looked around her, so Ash called them. They came romping in bodies gradually appearing. Polly was entranced, but Pip held them away as they tried to lick him dry.

The following evening saw Nick and Ash fishing on the end of the pier.

There was a bucket with three trout in and another on Ash’s line, which he reeled in.

“Makes four, just another Nick and Alice will have enough”. As Ash spoke Nick felt a twitch on his line and jerking upward snared another fish, he reeled it in and they returned elated to the manor. Two fish each for tea! Alice soon prepared and cooked the trout, Polly and Pip were called in so it was only one fish each. Ash bought up the cavern door but noticed Peter at the kitchen doorway with his finger over his lips then pointing to HE’s study. After tea Ash went along to the study, knocked and entered when bidden. The computer keyboard was tapping away.

‘Yes Ash?’

“Uncle, I was wondering what that door in the cavern was, As you know I read all about Mallings from your history file but their was no mention of a door.”

‘Nor of the cavern if my memory serves me, why do you ask?’

“I was going to bring up the subject over dinner with Nick but Peter motioned me to be quite, I just wondered why?”

‘Well I expect it’s a secret door, if you noticed it you have got sharp eyes as I had the door painted the same colour as the walls. Did you observe any handle?’

“No Uncle just the boards, they looked old and heavy!”

‘Indeed Ash, and for a purpose, Peter could take you and Nick up there again with lamps this time. Ask him when you next see or rather hear him. Now come here please and tell me what this Internet auction is about’

“First up Uncle you’ll need a credit card.”

“A credits what?” HE appeared dressed in an old smoking jacket.

“A bit of plastic, a card which allows cash transfers.”

“Well Ash cash was good enough in my day and plastic which we called Bakelite was cheap and nasty.”

“Fetches good money on the antique scene so Nick tells me.”

“Bakelite! You’ll tell me next that cheap transfer porcelain also fetches a good price.”

“Indeed it does Uncle.”

“To think we could have invested in a warehouse of the stuff for pennies. Do we know anyone with a credit card Ash?”

“I’ve got one for my Trenchard trouble money, and Nick has one from his Australian mine money. But the solicitor supervises the Malling accounts so alas you don’t get one.”

“Well look here my lad there’s something here on this web site I’d like for your Aunt, can you lend me your card?”

“Yes of course but still Uncle I’ll send the application for you, now you know what an auction is?” HE nodded his head, so Ash showed him the intricacies of Internet auctions, and the various types available. By the time they had finished it was late and Peter popped through the wall to see his father.

“Ah Peter, can’t see why you miss the door every time you come in! By the by young Ash wants to see behind the cavern door so I suggest you take them both with a search light down the tunnel if that’s convenient?”

“Fine, Ash tell Nick to be ready at ten tomorrow, and ask Alice to pack sandwiches when you have breakfast. But mind you tell no one where you are going.” Peter disappeared as Ash nodded.

Next morning Nick and Ash came out of the kitchen bearing a torch each, plus a plastic bag of sandwiches and a flask.

‘Right on time, Ash can you pop into Father he has a list you are to take then up to Old Mister Dunning to get the cavern key, Nick can you go up and see Mother, she’s in the with drawing room above the ballroom.’

Nick proceeded up the main staircase to the second level and turning right he carried on down the corridor to the twin doors that led into the Mallings drawing room. Aunt Celia was there to greet him.

“Now Nick please sit down and tell me what is missing in the room?”

Nick looked around the double cube room with all its magnificent furniture, much of it returned by the villagers. He stood up and walked around each piece, then to the windows, and the curtains recently acquired from a local house auction.

“Look carefully dear.” Aunt Celia interrupted his examination of two large gilt mirrors on the wall beside the massive sandstone fireplace.

“No Aunt I can’t say I do see anything missing though I grant you it’s a magnificent room, especially the moulded ceiling and those chandeliers.”

“You were looking at the mirrors that could be a clue for you?”

“No pictures or picture frames, of course a room like this would have had them! But normally one can see their shading on the wallpaper, but I suppose they were taken over seventy years ago and the sunlight would have faded the sites.”

“Absolutely right Nick, and other rooms had them including those in your wing and the ballroom, now Ash and Peter are waiting and I believe Joan is coming with you as well.”

Joan entered the room and waved Nick to follow, so both went down to meet Ash and Peter in the hall.

Equipped with their torches they entered the tunnel and the cavern. Ash handed Peter the key and he slid a wedge of wood from the door at waist height.

“Notice the peculiar knot on this piece I’ve slid aside, that indicates the keyhole Ash.”

Peter turned the key and the heavy plank door was pushed aside by Nick. Joan and Peter went in first and Ash followed a torch and a list in his hand. It was a veritable Aladdin’s cave stuffed with picture frames covered in sheets, also room ornaments in bronze and porcelain. Towards the end of the row, Joan had brushed aside a sheet revealing a wonderful portrait of her in a gilded frame.

“Peter had it painted when we were engaged!”

“Its beautiful Joan, and look at the hills behind so life like,” cried Ash stunned at the quality of the picture. “But those aren’t hills around here are they?”

“I was born in central Wales and the picture represents my own home area.”

Joan glanced at Peter then joined him to link their hands.

“When Aunt Celia let me guess about the walls I naturally thought the pictures had been taken by villagers or pillaged by others.” Nick swept a sheet aside and swore he was looking at a Stubbs horse scene.

“Yes Stubbs, a Renoir, some Reynolds portraits, several Italian and French masters. Clever Joan had these taken down and kept here after Father died. She knew this was pictorial family history to be kept for the family. My clever wife!”

“No Peter, you came into my head at HE’s funeral, I can hear your voice so

clearly advising me to use labour from another county so none here would know.”

“Mind speak?” Ash queried.

“Exactly Ash, I rather think HE requires these items back into the house.”

“The insurance will need to be updated which means bringing in assessors. Also what strikes me about this chamber is it’s so dry, perhaps damage to the canvas will be minimal?”

“We made sure that a deep ditch was dug north of here to keep the granite rock free of water. I think this spot was an old volcano core and its pretty waterproof. A foot or two below the surface we laid a rubber saturated cotton sail, which Alex acquired. People in Scotland did all the work. Joan had a special house constructed to shelter the men, as they had to excavate this room and then move the pictures by night. I’m surprised that Greg Gordon never let on what was going on, I think that’s why Father agreed to his employ. He must have known what was going on as he was always poaching in the estate!”

‘True Mister Peter, but I felt it was Mrs Mallings business not the worlds!’ Greg’s voice came from the doorway.

“Then come in and stop your wondering, no doubt you will helping Tom and Jack Trent move this back to the house?” Nick called out as Greg appeared and appraised the room. He brushed his hands against the rock wall.

“Not quite dry even so after all these years, a little moisture just past Miss Joan’s head on that far wall as you can see the start of stalactites. Not much bigger than a pimple, presumably Miss Joan knew that.”

“Quite right Gordon, canvas needs a slight dampness in the air to preserve it, not too much, I believe I suggested an art historian give advice and make a list which Ash has in his hand.” Peter nodded at the list.

“Maybe an error Peter letting an outsider know?”

“Not at all Nick he survived the war, he was my batman. I ended my physical life on a sortie. He had kept in touch with Joan and did his appraisals whilst Father was alive so he had the opportunity on seeing these in the light of day. Which we have to do, so perhaps you could arrange for Jason, Tom, Jack and yourselves to start moving them out. I suggest we use sacking on the floor to drag the larger frames out. They got them in and we should be able to get them out, then use the tractors large hay tray to carry them out. Fortunately its only shrubbery from here to Beech Drive.”

“Then we can go exploring for my dormitory house.” Joan put in.

“We might do that but the others need to move these home, and we will show them your building another day my love.” Peter led them all back out, locked the door, handing the key to Ash. Nick went to fetch the Trent’s,

Jason and the tractor.

It took them all several days to drag, load and hang the various canvases. Each frame had been marked on the rear with a letter and number. Aunt Celia had shown Nick where those codes had related to the rooms and their walls. Nick could just make out the pencilled marks and he Jack and Ash carried and hung each frame in their designated place. Eventually all were hung to Lady Mallings approval, leaving only the various pottery artefacts for her to position. The hall had the distinction of receiving two large marble sculptures bought by HE's grandfather. Other Victorian pots and planters were distributed along the corridors. Two large chandeliers were brought in from the storage area, HE pointed out the holding posts in the Hall ceiling then were lifted up and secured. An Electrician was called in to install the cable and power points.

Once the cavern storage had been cleared Ash and Jack went up with Alex to have a final look around. They found a smaller door within the storage chamber and Ash tried Peters key but couldn't find a keyhole.

"It pushes along Ash." Alex placed his hand on the left side and gently slid the door to the right. Before him gaped a black hole.

"Seems to be just a black empty space Alex?" Jack nosed forward with his torch.

"Nonsense Jack Trent look below!"

Jack and Ash lowered their torches and found stone steps leading downwards in a semi circular curve.

"Where does this go Alex?"

"To the river eventually, lets go down you'll find an underground stream that comes out near the old house site. Remember Nick heard running water when you were there with Greg Gordon and Peter?"

"What was it used for?"

"Well slide the door back and follow me down, and we'll see how far it goes." Alex floated down the stairway followed by the others their boots ringing on the stonework.

At the bottom they proceeded along a low tunnel each dipping their heads until they came to the gushing water. A narrow pathway followed the stream at a gentle slope and they followed it down until they reached a doorway set into the earth on their right. Alex pushed the door and it creaked open to reveal a musty room with a table and chair set in the middle. A candle holder and stub sat on the table, encrusted in dust.

"Who on earth would live down here Alex?" Ash looked up but Alex had

vanished.

‘Don’t worry Ash, I’m still here but I’m taking a breather from having to be physical. Nobody lived here, you read our history, the Malling background, put that, this place, and the entrance by the river and the mystery is solved. Lets continue down the path, this place is damp I’m surprised the table is still standing!’

Jack touched the tabletop and it fell to the ground its legs disintegrated. He managed to catch the old candle holder before it to fell.

‘Well done Jack, that was three centuries old!’

“Sorry Alex. Would have collapsed anyhow sometime soon.”

They carried on down the path with Ash scratching his brain trying to remember the history he had read. They reached the exit and pushed their way through the riverbank willows.

“Got it!” exclaimed Ash.

‘Fine, lets hear it.’

“Back in the seventeen hundreds there was a Malling sea captain, the river here at the tunnel exit is deep, deep enough for a cutter to get here. Your forefathers Alex were into spirits in a big way!”

Alex laughed and slapped Ash on the back. Ash returned the compliment by a quick poke of his elbow but hit nothing.

‘Missed, Ash old son I’m on your other side.’

“Right you can tell me how near I am as Jack has a question on his lips.”

Alex appeared between the two of them.

“Back then we had owned a large portion of this land, in fact I do believe we still own some acreage on the other side of the river. We had substantial costs and little revenue, as we were not represented at court to any great level. Thus we had to make our own revenue and Captain Malling did indeed import liquor and wine from the continent and it was bought here stored and sold. So Ash you hit it in one, we Mallings built this place not on slavery, or illicit skulduggery from the monarchs treasury, but by evading the Revenue people and marketing our own very fine vintages!”

“Why did they stop?”

“Well Captain Malling had to leave this world at some time or other and there was enough to build the house and the estate. The early Mallings weren’t greedy. Well lets get back to the said house, next time you have glass of wine remember the tale, I suggest we put the candle holder in a prominent place in the hall to remind us all of our good fortune!” They followed Alex along the riverbank. Here the river pooled into a broad basin and at Alex’s instruction Ash took a long thin branch and poked it under water to ascertain the depth, it was deep. They then continued up and out

into the woodland.

“Ash I believe that the forest extending from the village outskirts right up to the Trent cottage on the other side and several hundred yards back, is our property. I’ve been perusing the deeds held at the county council records department, and I think I’ve found where the original survey was altered in favour of the government. They took that survey after Father died and Joan was looking after the estate. She accepted their survey line but if you and Nick walk over there you will come to a line of old rotting posts. The point I’m making is that buried along these posts is an old galvanised wire. That shows on our own deeds the extent of our land. I will let Father have the various details. If you and Nick can confirm the old posts and wire by photographing them, then we can send the material to Masons for application for the return of the land.”

Ash nodded and said he and Jack used to explore that very same area and vaguely remembered the rotting posts. So they would borrow Nick’s camera and a spade and take the relevant photographs.

“We are talking about several hundred acres Ash so its important we get all the details correct. I’ll need Nick to come with me to get copies of the county records as well so I’m off now to warn him, meanwhile enjoy your walk you two and we will discuss this further with HE when you get back.” Alex promptly disappeared leaving the cousins to wend their way up to the mansion.

“I forgot to ask Alex if the Mallings ever got to repay the tax they owed.”

‘Of course, they were given the Captains ship in recompense, all legal, and HE has a receipt filed away.’ Came Alex’s mind speak.

“Presumably no one in the family wanted it?”

‘True, we all suffer from sea sickness, will you two hurry up now, and Alice has lunch waiting!’

xxx

Chapter Eighteen. The Barrack block.

Jack and his father called around the house on the following weekend. Joan had promised to find the blockhouses she had constructed all those years ago.

“I was left with ample land to farm after HE died and tried to find the other Mallings in the hope of getting them to help me. The few cousins left were not interested as the land and house was not destined to be theirs. HE had willed the estate to myself, and I suppose my own siblings would have had been in line. HE had stated that should I remarry or die without issue, the estate was to be left in trust with Masons our solicitors. Well I needed labour to work the fields and forests. Granddad Dunning and his son already took the three cottages that you all currently occupy. Nick and Ash’s was rented to Miss Chambers, Peters and Alex’s governess. So lets hunt for the barracks as I called them!” Joan was sitting on the edge of the tractor-trailer with Nick, Ash and Jack. Peter and Alex and the dogs were floating on behind them dodging the tractor smoke. Eventually they arrived at the top of the drive and the Trent’s parked the vehicle between the tall beeches. Joan led them through the undergrowth until they came to a low wall. She followed along until they came to a gap. Here was obviously a driveway studded with cobblestones so they advanced through the gap and continued for several minutes. Alex expressed surprise; he thought he knew every inch of the estate.

“How far Joan?” he asked.

“Not to far, I do hope the building survived the ravishes of time, HE told me during the second war a bomber dropped its load about here after it experienced engine trouble and returned to the airfield on the heath.” As she said this they came upon deep craters about them and one right smack into the cobbled road.

They continued on with Nick noting to get the area checked out for any unexploded bombs.

Eventually they hit a high brick wall, upon further examination they discovered windows under the invading ivy. Peter found the main door and Jack put his back into it. It didn’t budge but Joan pointed to the handle and he managed to turn it and open the heavy oak door. Inside was a large workshop with tools still on the benches that circled the walls. There were an assortment of chairs in various stages of distress but the main staircase seemed to be firm enough for each to climb carefully up. But Peter went first to gauge the strength. On the top floor lay bedrooms each with an iron bedstead and a dusty mattress.

“Well looked after. How long did they stay?” Peter asked as Joan and Alex

followed him up.

“I thought you might have been around me at that time?” Joan said quietly.

“Not till later my love, had some fixing up to do.”

“Excuse me Peter,” yelled Ash from below, “are the stairs safe, you being somewhat lighter than the rest us down here?”

“Well we can tell the difference young Ash, so come on up but keep to the railing side.” Came the reply.

“Presumably we could get it surveyed and perhaps find a use for it again?”

Ash looked at Nick as they carefully climbed up.

“That’s what we need Ash and perhaps Jack and his father could cut away the vegetation to at least make it accessible. The crater will need filling in but before we all do this I’ll ask bomb disposal to check the area. Sergeant Ferguson will know who to contact, so we retreat along the same way we came and nobody comes here until it’s fully checked out. I suggest we mark the trees as we return so they can bring the disposal team here.”

They all nodded agreement and slowly followed their tracks back to the tractor.

Once they had all retraced their journey marking a tree with a chalk stripe as they went, they returned to the manor to debate the future use of the barracks over a pot of tea, and a brandy in the Mallings case. The bed and breakfast, youth club and indoor shooting range ideas were all debated and argued and ultimately rejected. Ultimately Lady Celia came up with the idea of an art and craft type commune to encourage potters, painters and metal artists. The large workroom could be divided into cells and the dining room kitchen area to be left as it was with modern cooking facilities, plus allotments at the back for the members to grow their own, added HE to his wife’s suggestion. After an hour of banter it was agreed that Jason should, with Ash’s and Alex’s help, investigate and explore this possibility. Rents and rates to be decided if there was any interest in the barracks in the meantime the Trent’s would cut a new road in after the area was checked by bomb disposal. They all retired exhausted except Joan who was delighted the prospect of her buildings might well be in use again.

A week or so later the bomb people arrived and several hours later came four explosions following Bill and Ben as they leapt out of the bushes and down the beech drive in full view of the army team who could only gape at the speed of the animals as they dived through the manor door. Luckily Alex had managed to open the door in time otherwise the soldiers would have been shocked to see the dogs diving through a solid door!

The plans progressed and soon the barracks were repaired and a year later leased out. Joan was pleased to use Ash as her interpreter. Ash, then turned eighteen the following August and passed his driving test, he bought a small Fiesta. He rarely used it, he only bought it in case either Nick or the Dunnings needed a lift to town or God forbid a trip to hospital. But he enjoyed seeing Peter occasionally giving it a spin up and back down the driveway. When nobody was about of course.

Nick and Ash lived quietly enjoying the house, their summer cottage which they nicknamed Opal Cottage, and the forest they were growing down towards the school. Nick never returned to Australia, he learnt the government had closed the northern lease where his treasure had been discovered, but on the sideboard in their first floor study at Mallings, lay the two pieces of black opal that never lost their brilliant deep colour.

“We will keep these safe for any future troubles,” said Ash quietly.

“Better still, they are to remind me of you coming to fetch me back.” Nick called from his desk. “I have made my will, you are the sole beneficiary Ash and I know it will be in safe hands.”

“But you have family somewhere out there Nick, surely they should benefit.”

“You are all the family I want or need Ash, you and the Mallings, I love you all, but most especially you.”

Finally the end!