

Ben

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the
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Chapter One

"Family Owned Since 1906," said the plaque beside the front door.

"I wonder what that means?" I said to myself, reaching out to touch it.

The plaque had been cast in metal and painted and set into the wall at some point, although whether in 1906 or some time later was impossible to know. Conceivably it could even have been installed before 1906 in anticipation of a future happy event in which the butchers shop would become family owned. That was, of course, assuming that the sign was true.

"Does it simply commemorate the fact that one or more families had owned the place?" I mused, thinking that that would seem a little pointless. Maybe whoever put the plaque there was trying to reassure potential and actual customers. As though the business being owned by a family made it somehow more trustworthy or better quality or something, which also seemed a little pointless. After all, the family that owned it could have been the biggest crooks in the South of England.

"Maybe the plaque is trying to say that the business is small and caring," I speculated, although that didn't seem to make a lot of sense either. There was no reason why the family couldn't run hundreds of butchers shops and other ventures and be just as huge and faceless as any global multi-national. In fact, come to think of it, there was the implication that the business differed in some significant but unspecified way from a public company with shares on the stock exchange. As if the people who owned those shares, and hence owned the company, didn't have families themselves.

"Oh, who gives a toss anyway," I said and hit the lock with a large stone I'd picked up a little way down the road.

I looked around to see if anyone had seen me. No one had, in large part because there was no one around. I slipped inside and shut the door behind me, putting the stone against it to stop it opening accidentally. I dumped my rucksack on the floor and propped the case against the wall.

“Jenkins Butchers” the sign outside had said, although it wasn't that clear since the sign looked to have not been touched up since it was installed back in, presumably, 1906. But then, probably all the locals knew that the Jenkins family had a butchers shop at this end of the village so they didn't need a fancy clear sign to tell them where it was. Which made you wonder why Jenkins had bothered to install a plaque saying the shop was family owned. Puzzling.

What wasn't puzzling was the fact that the interior of the shop was completely empty apart from a varied collection of spiders' webs and a large placard that read “Closing down ~ Everything Must Go”. Everything except the placard had gone. And the plaque, of course, since it was firmly set into the wall. Which made me wonder, since the business had gone, was it still family owned? Maybe it was now owned by the family of a debt collector or the receiver who'd liquidated it.

“Is someone who liquidates a butchers a liquidiser or a blender?” I wondered, and laughed to myself. There was no one there to laugh with me.

There was a double electric light switch just inside the door so I turned them both on. Not a lot happened although it looked as though there was a bulb in the light hanging from the ceiling. Two switches for one light seemed a little excessive so I pushed the stone out of the way with my foot and opened the door. There was an outside light as well, although it didn't illuminate the entrance since it wasn't on either.

“Probably no power,” I said to myself.

That made sense since anyone closing down a business would probably make sure that the bills ended when the business did. Oh well, power would have been too much to hope for. I lingered in the doorway for a few moments to inspect the damage I'd done and was intrigued to see that there was virtually none. The little metal plate the lock fitted into on the frame had been screwed in but the top screw had been wrenched completely out and the plate dangled precariously from the bottom screw. A little bit of wood filler and a screw driver would fix it, not that I would be doing that since I needed to get in and out and I didn't have a key. Still, the door wasn't

obviously damaged so it was unlikely to attract attention. I left the plate dangling and pushed the door shut and put the stone back to hold it in place.

“Hello,” I called.

I didn't expect anyone to answer since the stone hitting the lock would have brought out anyone who'd been inside. I was just curious about the acoustics and whether there would be an echo. My voice sounded a little flat, hollow and empty but there wasn't an echo. Mind you, butchers shops weren't designed for good acoustics. Not that it mattered since I had no intention of spending any time in the shop itself. On the whole, people don't worry too much about squatters in empty buildings so long as they are discrete and living in a shop front wasn't being discrete. I was more interested in what lay behind the front room.

Being a butchers, it was inevitable that immediately behind the shop itself was a cool room. I don't mean the room was cool in the sense of being great or awesome, I mean it was the room that kept the meat chilled before Mr Jenkins, I was sure the butcher was a man, took it out to display in the shop. It might be a useful room to sleep in when the full summer heat arrived but it was still spring and the nights were still chilly and I had no intention of still being here when summer arrived. Hell, there was a good chance I wouldn't still be here after two or three nights. Besides, sleeping in a metal lined room didn't seem a particularly attractive option.

Behind the cool room was another room the size of the shop room itself. Like the shop it had a wooden floor although the walls were covered in a faded floral wallpaper which gave it a homely atmosphere. There was a fireplace with a mummified dead bird in it and some wooden boards bolted to the wall beside the fireplace to make some shelves. Variations in the fading and scuffs and dirt marks suggested the outlines of once present cupboards or other items of furniture, but they were no longer there. As the placard suggested, everything had gone.

“This'll do me,” I said, nodding.

The acoustics were slightly better than in the shop, probably because of the wallpaper. The shop was tiled and had a big, glass window. These hard reflective surfaces give sounds a slightly harder edge whereas paper and fabrics soften and dampen sounds. I went through the door-less doorway and discovered a tiny kitchen. The “Everything Must Go” placard couldn't have extended this far since there was still a cooker in there and a sink. Both looked pretty old so maybe no one had wanted them. Well, who'd want an old stained sink anyway, but the cooker might have been worth a few quid.

I twiddled one of the cooker's knobs and there was a sudden faint hiss and a smell of gas.

“Awesome,” I said, feeling pleased.

Whoever had closed down the business must have forgotten to get the gas disconnected. I crossed my fingers and looked at the ceiling then twisted the handle of the solitary tap on the sink.

“Yay!”

I did a little jig and leaned against the cooker to watch the rusty water spit and struggle its way out of the tap to see if the water would clear. Not a lot happened so I turned the tap another quarter turn and the water dwindled to nothing. Some faint banging noises sounded in the wall behind the sink then, with an almighty, retching cough, a lump of something nasty and grungy shot out of the spout and a strong stream of filthy blackish-red water appeared and started to gurgle down the drain. Slowly it lightened in colour until it looked to be clear. I let it run for a bit longer then cupped my hand under the stream and held it to my nose. It smelled peculiar.

I tossed away the handful of water and smelt my hand again. It still smelled peculiar so I sniffed the other one. That smelt a little peculiar too so I laughed and washed my hands in the water a couple of times which seemed to do the trick. Anyway, the water tasted OK. Not great but OK. There was a faint earthiness to it but that was infinitely preferable to some chemical pollutant taste.

This was looking good. A working gas cooker and a water supply. All

I needed now was something to cook and something to cook it in.

“There are no such things as problems,” I said, trying the handle of the back door, “merely situations you don't yet know how to deal with.” The door was locked and opened inwards so there wasn't a lot of point hitting it with a stone. I either needed to find the key, improvise a screwdriver or figure out how to get around the back and hit the lock from the other side. Cool. All options easily explored.

I turned to go back to the shop to get my sax and rucksack and bring them down to my new home then paused.

“It's worth a try,” I said. “The way my luck's been going today.”

I reached up and felt along the top of the door frame.

“Ohh baby, come to daddy,” I said in ecstasy when my fingers felt a key.

Happiness is a key that fits the lock in front of you. I was happy. Even the door creaked happily when I opened it. Not that there was much on the other side, just a small, open-ended, walled and paved courtyard. Still, it opened onto an alley which led down to the side street which meant I had a more discreet means of coming and going.

I went back into the shop and used the stone to bang the screw that had come out back into the frame. It would be about as effective as a piece of sellotape but it made the door look normal and respectable again which is the main thing. I grabbed my rucksack and sax case and disappeared from sight.

There is something fundamental about the nature of shelves that makes you want to put things on them. Not only put things on them but do so in a neat and orderly fashion. I could have just dumped my rucksack in a corner of the room but the presence of the shelves gave me this overwhelming urge to unpack and arrange my belongings. Maybe I'm just house proud.

I put my little screw top jar of coffee in the exact centre of the bottom shelf and my battered enamel mug exactly halfway between the jar

and the left end of the shelf. I put my tea spoon neatly in front of the mug, parallel with the shelf itself. It looked good. I fished my nested pair of army surplus mess tins out of the rucksack and aligned them in the centre of the right half of the shelf. Still looking good. I laid my fork and spoon in front of the mess tins.

I stepped back to admire my handiwork then moved on to the second shelf. My clean spare pair of jeans took pride of place in the centre but my clean spare shirt looked funny on the left so I put it on the right.

“Yeah,” I said, eyeing it. “It belongs on the right.”

My spare pair of socks and two spare pairs of underpants went on the left.

“No,” I said, thoughtfully, studying the overall effect. “That just isn't right.”

I swapped the mug and the mess tins over. That felt better so I edged the enamel mug a little closer to my coffee jar and lined up my utensils, teaspoon, spoon, fork, to the right of the mug.

“Hmm.”

I moved the teaspoon over so it went mug, spoon, fork, teaspoon.

“Perfect!”

Satisfied, I put my half empty pouch of tobacco, spare packet of papers and spare disposable lighter on the top shelf, out of harm's way. The place was already looking like home. My bed roll I unrolled on the floor and laid in the middle of the room, facing the shelves so I could lie in bed and check my inventory if I ever felt so inclined. My sax, as always, went at the head of my bed so I could feel it in the night with my hair. I get nervous if I don't know where my sax is, but then, we all have our little idiosyncrasies. My rucksack and towel, of course, were my pillow and my soap, in its resealable plastic sandwich bag, went beside the sink in the kitchen.

I sat cross-legged on my bed absorbing the atmosphere. It felt good. I could feel the positive energy coursing through my veins. A cup of coffee would round it off perfectly but I was loathe to break the symmetry of the shelves by taking away the mug. Coffee could wait a few more minutes.

“You’re a fruitcake,” I said to myself and snorted. “Find a shelf and it goes to your head. You’ll be wanting a job next to buy furniture. That’s no way to live.”

I got up and grabbed my mess tins and took them into the kitchen. I half filled the smaller one and used the lighter from my sweetie tin to light one of the burners on the cooker and put the water on to heat. I went back into my room to put some coffee in my mug but I found the gap left by the mess tins disturbing so I went back to the kitchen to get the bigger mess tin and put it back on the shelf. That was better but the mug’s absence left a feeling of unreality so I put my sweetie tin in its place.

When the water boiled I filled my mug and took my coffee back to my bed. I put the mug on the floor beside me and lay back, resting my head on the sax case.

The sweetie tin was calling me.

I sighed and got up and retrieved the tin. Back on the bed I fished the papers out of the sweetie tin and used one to roll a ciggie. The tin kept the tobacco fresher than constantly reopening the pouch.

“I suppose I’d better get some food,” I thought, savouring my ciggie.

I sat up and opened my sax case and fished out my money bag from inside the bell of the sax. It was a lovely little bag, made from a green cloth and embroidered with little brown elephants and it had a neat little red drawstring. I don’t know who had made it but it had been given to me the previous Autumn by a girl I met in London and I kept most of my money in it. Ready cash, of course, I kept in my pocket since you don’t want to rummage around inside a sax when you need to pay for a bus ticket or whatever.

I sat on my bed and counted up my fortune. £87, mostly in coins although there were a few notes, which was a tidy little sum. I put £20 in my pocket and shovelled the rest back in my elephant bag and tucked it neatly away inside the sax. I swallowed the last of my coffee and checked the key opened the back door from the outside. Reassured, I strode off down the alley and out into Pouncers Lane and headed for the bright lights and heady excitements of Fairchester-on-Sea, a scant three miles away. Fairchester-on-Sea also had supermarkets, useful now that the food emporiums of Little Fairchester – Jenkins Butchers and Peamans Bakery, next door – were both now defunct.

I'd been told that Fairchester-on-Sea was only three miles away and, in a strict sense, it was but that was the edge of town closest to Little Fairchester. Sainsbury's was a couple of miles further on, near the centre of town. Still, what's five miles when all's said and done? Just about perfect for working up an appetite.

"Hello," said the nice looking girl standing outside Sainsbury's.

"Hello," I said, trying to match her smile for smile although she seemed to have more teeth than nature intended.

"I'm Anne," she said. "What's your name?"

"I'm Ben," I said. "Nice to meet you."

"Have you ever thought about sky diving?" she asked.

"I must confess I haven't," I said. "Are they a band?"

"Nooo," she said, her smile getting wider and more inviting. "I mean soaring through the air, experiencing the thrill of flying like a bird."

"I went in an aeroplane once," I said. "I went to Majorca with my parents when I was a kiddie."

"Did you enjoy that?" she asked.

"Flying or Majorca?" I asked.

“Flying,” she said.

“I loved it,” I admitted. “Especially those little bags of honey coated nuts the lady gave us. Didn't like Majorca much.”

“Would you like to extend that experience?” asked Anne. “Would you like to go beyond your wildest dreams and escape the everyday sameness of life?”

“Will you be there?” I asked. Anne looked as though she could change the sameness of my every day quite easily.

“I'm sorry?” she said, looking a little startled. “Why would I be there?”

“Just wondering,” I said, then inspiration struck. “So, err, why don't we talk about how we can extend our experiences over a coffee or something?”

“I'm sorry,” she said, repeating the same words but with a different inflection this time, a definite note of finality. “My boyfriend wouldn't like it.”

“He can stay at home then,” I said, trying to impress her with my wit and sophistication.

She half laughed, uncertainly.

“Can I give you a leaflet?” she asked.

“If you like,” I said. “What's it for?”

“Fairchester Sky Diving And Parachuting Centre,” she said. “Beginner's jumps start from as little as £45.”

“Oh,” I said. “I get you. You're trying to sell me something.”

“What did you think I was doing?” she asked, looking confused.

“I thought you were being friendly,” I said. “I'm new in town.”

“Ahh,” she said. “Sorry. It's my first day. I haven't got the hang of it yet. Excuse me.”

She turned to a rather large lady in yoga pants with three small children.

“Hello,” she said, smiling enthusiastically at her.

The woman glowered at Anne and smacked one of the children on the head.

“I ain't bleeding telling you again,” she screeched.

The child ignored her and Anne looked at me.

“I've got to do my shopping,” I said, encouragingly.

“Have a nice day,” said Anne, her smile wavering.

She was still there when I came out again, clutching my packet of sausages, a carrot and an onion. I figured I'd do myself a nice little stew. I was about to ask Anne if she'd like to join me then I remembered she had a boyfriend.

“Hiya,” I said, “remember me?”

“Hello, John,” she said warmly. “Have you given some more thought to sky diving?”

“Yes,” I said, not wanting to admit it had gone right out of my mind as soon as I'd walked away from her. “Can I have a leaflet?”

“Of course you can, Ron,” she said, handing me a leaflet. “And if you have any more questions, you can ring this number here.” She pointed to a phone number hand written in the 'for more information' box at the bottom of the leaflet.

“Is that your phone number,” I asked, hopefully.

“No, it's the Fairchester Sky Diving And Parachuting Centre,” she said.

“Right,” I said. “What's your phone number?”

“I don't give my phone number to the public,” she said.

“Oh well,” I said. “Can you tell me how to get to the sea front?”

“It's about half a mile down there,” she said pointing.

“Thanks,” I said, “see you round, maybe.”

She relaxed her smile slightly and cast around for another punter, my existence already leaving her mind.

“Win a few, lose a few,” I thought and set off towards the sea front.

Despite being late April and still a bit chilly there was a reasonable number of people wandering along the esplanade which was encouraging. Fairchester-on-Sea had a pier and the road down from Sainsbury's had come out barely a hundred yards away and, at first glance anyway, it looked to be a definite possibility. I wandered along the sea front, sniffing the salt air and watching the seagulls then turned onto the pier. There was a little imitation train with rubber wheels that took people out to the far end of the pier if they couldn't be bothered to walk all that way. It looked a fair old trek.

“How long's the pier?” I asked the man sitting precariously astride the little train engine.

“Seventeen hundred and twenty yards,” he said, sounding bored, “almost a mile. Wanna ticket?”

“No,” I said, “I'll walk.”

He grunted and rolled his eyes so I handed him Anne's skydiving leaflet since he looked like he could use expanding his everyday experiences.

Out at the far end of the pier I could see a number of boats so there was either a mooring point or a boat hire outfit and down this end were a number of stalls selling sweets and ice creams and souvenirs.

Intriguingly there was a fairly large building about half way and the pier bulged around it. I was curious to see what it was – surely no one would build a hotel smack in the middle of a pier? – so I headed in that direction. Well, I didn't have much choice actually; either go in that direction or get off the pier which, I realised as I walked past a handful of keen fishermen fishing off the sides of the pier, was one option more than skydiving gave and the pier was free.

Closer up I could see “Fairchester Pier Vaudeville Theatre” in large gilded but faded lettering over two sets of double glass doors. Either side of the doors looked to be posters of, presumably, forthcoming attractions so I wandered closer to see if there was going to be anything in the next few days that would help or hinder me.

“Oh, that's a shame,” I said, when I got close enough to read the posters on the doors.

“Closed Indefinitely,” said the posters.

Chapter Two

I tried one of the doors but it was locked which was hardly surprising. Whoever had closed down the theatre would have been a little silly to have left it unlocked. I peered in and it looked to have been quite a decent little place once upon a time. Still, more importantly, there was a roof sticking out over the entrance which would provide some shelter from the rain.

“And the seagull poo,” I thought to myself, standing under the roof and gazing back down the pier to the town. They were cawing and squawking as they wheeled overhead, keeping a sharp eye out for any titbits of food that got tossed or dropped. The rails on the sides of the pier were spotted in places with their droppings and the roofs of the row of converted beach huts a little further down were thick with the stuff.

The little train slowly made its way towards me on its rubber wheels, the driver occasionally dinging a bell when a stray pedestrian didn't step out of its way. It looked fairly sedate but still moved a little faster than a walking pace. The five carriages strung out behind were empty, apart from a young mum with a toddler and a preschooler, or maybe a little older, who were in the last carriage. She looked relaxed and happy and the preschooler was trying to climb over into the carriage in front while the toddler sat on her knee and watched everything with huge eyes.

The driver headed straight at me, a defiantly cool look in his eye.

“Ring the bell, I dare you,” I said in my mind, trying to look defiantly cool as well.

He did one of those 'make a gun and point' moves with his hand that people do when they want to acknowledge you and, about three yards away, he nonchalantly turned his little steering wheel to the right so the train veered away and brought it to a halt.

“Fairchester Pier Vaudeville Theatre,” he said, twisting round to look at the woman in the last carriage. “Next stop the Marina and Pleasure Boat Centre.”

"I want an ice cream, mummy!" said the preschooler from the back of the second to last carriage. He, at least it looked like a he, seemed to be trying to work out how to climb back so he'd probably forgotten how he'd got there.

"On the way back, sweetie," said the young mum, serenely. The toddler on her lap started to pick her nose. At least, she looked to be a her and was far too young to have started to learn the rules for lady-like behaviour.

"Wanna go to the marina?" asked the driver, looking at me.

"Not particularly," I said, giving him a glance then looking back at the young mum who was far better looking than he was, even though she had two kids. I smiled at her and she pulled out her phone and started swiping it.

"All aboard what's going aboard," called the driver and dinged his bell.

"I wanna play with the bell," said the preschooler and abandoned trying to climb back into the last carriage and instead tried to climb into the third and middle carriage. His mum took a photo of him then bent to pick up the hat of the girl on her knees.

With a lurch the little train moved off and started to make its way around the side of the theatre and, for want of anything better to do, I followed it. There didn't seem to be much the other side of the theatre apart from the marina at the far end and occasional fishermen fishing in the deeper water so I kept going round until I got back to the theatre entrance.

Judging by the handfuls of people milling round, the theatre was, to all intents and purposes, the end of the pier. Most people seemed to walk the half mile or so to get to it, go round it and then go back rather than carry on to the far end and, to commemorate their trip, there were some shops in the converted beach huts although they were all closed at the moment.

"Yeah," I said, nodding "I'll give it a go here. See what happens.

Maybe have a chat with Madame Xara if she's open tomorrow.”

Madame Xara had the use of the second to last of the beach huts and, judging by the faded sign, was highly skilled in the art of divining the future through the use of tarot cards, crystal balls and casting stones as well as reading palms and interpreting dreams. Such people were useful to know since if you believe something is going to happen, it often does. The trick is to find a diviner who is believable then go with the flow.

“Aha!” I said when I got back to the esplanade.

There was a Tourist Information Office right next to the pier so I went in, because Tourist Information Offices have, strangely enough, information. This one was deserted, apart from Janice, although it did have an enticing selection of leaflets and a small selection of books on local history.

“Hello,” I said to Janice.

I knew her name because she had a very tastefully designed name badge which combined an artistic sensibility with legibility, something which can often seem mutually exclusive.

“Hello,” said Janice, enthusiastically, looking up from the book she was reading. She could have been Anne the Sky Diver's older sister. “How can I help you?”

“Do you know if there are any buses that go to Little Fairchester?” I asked.

Her face fell and she slipped a Post-It note into the book to mark her place.

“I'm afraid there aren't,” she said. “The County bus service cut the route about three years ago because they had no passengers.”

“Oh, that's a shame,” I said. “I'm staying out there at the moment and it's a long walk to the beach.”

"You don't have a car?" she asked.

I gave her a sad smile to acknowledge that deficiency in my life.

"It's a bit of a vicious circle," she said, clearly feeling in a chatty mood. I got the impression that few tourists had been seeking information that day. "The services decline because people move away and people move away because of the decline of services."

"Yeah, I noticed the only two shops in the village had closed down," I said. "I guess the locals didn't use the bus to go shopping in Fairchester."

"There used to be quite a number of people living there," she said. "As recently as World War 2 there were over three hundred people living in Little Fairchester, mostly because of the Cheese Factory but that closed in the 50s and the population's been declining ever since. Did you know Little Fairchester is a Doubly Thankful Village?"

"They're thankful because the cheese factory closed?" I said, puzzled. "I know they're smelly but ..."

"Noooo," she said, with a giggle, then turned serious. "It's nothing to do with the factory. No, a Thankful Village is a village which sent men off to fight in The Great War and all of them returned. A Doubly Thankful village is one which lost none of their soldiers in World War 2 either. There are tens of thousands of villages in Britain but there are only fourteen that are Doubly Thankful."

"Jesus," I said, genuinely shocked. "I never realised that the wars were so widespread."

"It didn't last, though," said Janice. "Corporal Wallace Ingram from Little Fairchester was killed in Korea in April 1951, at the Battle of the Imjin River."

"You know a lot about it," I said.

She held up her book ~ Little Fairchester Since 1340 by Stanton Carmanson.

“He's our local historian,” she explained. “We've got all his books here if you're interested in local history.”

“So why is Little Fairchester declining?” I asked, to avoid having to admit I didn't want to buy a book. They probably had a copy at the library, anyway.

“After the cheese factory closed, people moved away looking for work,” she said. “A lot got jobs in Fairchester-on-Sea but some had to leave the village altogether and, of course, with Fairchester itself depending on tourism, and the decline in tourism since the 80s Little Fairchester's been very hard hit. There's only about forty people living there now and they're nearly all retired. Stanton thinks the village will be a ghost village in fifteen years with no one living there at all.”

“Surely people who work in Fairchester will move to Little Fairchester?” I said. “After all, the houses must be getting cheaper there.”

“People are moving away from Fairchester as well,” she said. “It's the overseas holidays.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The original pier was built in 1873,” said Janice, clearly delighted to have someone to talk to. “As the railways expanded people started to travel to the coast for day trips and holidays and, at the time, it was the longest pier in Britain, although Southend Pier is now. The pier brought a lot of visitors and Fairchester boomed. That carried on though up until the 1970s but since then the English have preferred to go overseas and the foreign tourists go to the historical places like Stonehenge and the Tower of London.”

“Is that why the Vaudeville Theatre closed?” I asked. “I saw the signs when I was on the pier.”

“Yes,” she said. “Vaudeville itself died with the coming of moving pictures before World War 1 although the theatre continued to be popular with plays and rock concerts but it's really too small now. When you get 10,000 people turning up for a rock concert and the big

names filling places like Wembley Arena, our pier theatre just doesn't have the capacity. It can only seat about 400 people so no one well known would waste their time with it and the acts that might wouldn't be able to attract as many as 400 people. If it wasn't on the pier it would have been knocked down for redevelopment long ago.

"That's a shame," I said. "I peered in through the door and it looked to be a nice place. Oh well, that's progress, I suppose. I guess I'd better be off. It looks like I've got a long walk ahead of me."

"Are you going to be in the area for long?" asked Janice. "We have a number of events coming up in the next two months, including Fairchester In Bloom in early June and the Fairchester Regatta in May."

"Only a few days," I said. "I'm touring the South Coast and this is my starting point. I'm planning to get all the way round to Bristol by mid Autumn."

"How delightful," she said. "Is this an extended holiday?"

"A working holiday," I said. "I'm a musician. I'll stay here for a few days doing some street performances then move on before people realise just how bad I am and run me out of town."

That made her laugh.

"Well, good luck to you," she said. "Where are you planning to play? I might drop by and listen to you."

"Actually I thought I might start at the pier theatre," I said. "There seemed to be a number of people around earlier."

"There'll be more later in the season," she said. "Especially since they're predicting a hot summer."

* * *

"He couldn't have had a large family," I reflected to myself as I chopped my carrot and onion into my stew, using the cheap

Taiwanese equivalent of a Swiss Army knife that I kept in a little leather holster on my belt. "Apart from the shop there's really only this one room."

Being Taiwanese it didn't have a screwdriver or one of those things for getting stones out of horses hooves, but it did have a pair of pliers and a crimping tool for making your own computer cables which would be very useful if I ever got a computer or learnt how to make cables.

I peeled the casings off the sausages and broke off lumps of meat and rolled them into little meatballs and added them as well then remembered I hadn't got any salt or stock. I was going to end up with boiled meatballs, carrot and onion rather than a stew. Oh well, it was still food.

"I wonder if the Jenkins family lived somewhere else and this room was really just an office? Maybe they lived in the house next door?"

Since it was a mild evening I sat on the back step looking out into the courtyard while I ate my thin stew.

"I wonder if any of them were in the First or Second World Wars? I'm sure they must have been unless butchers were reserved occupations."

I had a feeling that butchers hadn't been exempted but I wasn't too sure since I'd been more interested in music at school than history. Still, it must be a cause for celebration that if one or more Jenkins had been in the wars that they'd got home safely.

"Jesus," I said, pausing in my eating. "Being Thankful just means no one was killed. They could still have been horribly mutilated though. Maybe Jenkins was a one legged butcher or he couldn't work and his wife ran the business. Maybe he was gassed. I wonder if they knew Wallace Ingram? Maybe his mum used to buy her meat from this shop to feed her son when he came home on leave before he was killed."

This is the trouble with squatting. Sometimes you get to speculate about the lives of the people who used to live there but you never had any way of finding out. I washed my jeans, shirt and undies in the darkness and left them draped over the sink to dry. I hadn't seen any

washing line in the courtyard and it didn't seem worth getting one.

There didn't seem a lot of point getting to the pier early so I set off around nine thirty or so for a leisurely walk into town. It looked like it was going to be another sunny but cool day. To my relief there were a fair number of people wandering up and down the pier and there was a couple in the Tourist Office talking to Janice as I walked by. All the beach hut shops were open and there was a strong smell of fried food and sugar. Madame Xara had an A-board sign outside her door which amused me.



I took up position under the roof of the theatre entrance and laid my sax case on the ground. Surprisingly I felt very exposed and alone which was strange. After all, I'd been busking in London for several years and last summer I'd toured the south east coast from Southend almost as far as Eastbourne. I stood there looking around and sucking contemplatively on my reed, since you can't play the sax with a dry reed. Maybe it was simply because this was the first gig of the trip or maybe it was because I wasn't on a street with buildings. The only real building was behind me, out of sight, and the others were really just beach huts. Maybe it was because I'm a street performer and this wasn't a street.

I got out my harness and slipped it over my shoulders. It's much better for extended performances than a neck strap as it takes the weight of the sax off my neck and right thumb. I hid my elephant money bag under the top of the sax case and scattered some coins and a note in the case itself since people like to see where to put their donations. 'Donation' is a legalistic euphemism as busking has to be technically free of charge otherwise it would be classed as street vending. So, people don't pay to hear the music, they donate gifts. A

middle aged couple stopped their walking to watch.

“Beautiful day, isn't it,” I said, fitting the reed to the mouthpiece.

They both smiled and nodded at me, so they were obviously English. Americans would have come over to exchange life histories.

I fitted the mouthpiece on the sax and blew a couple of scales to check everything was working. I adjusted the mouthpiece slightly and blew a few long notes to hear how the breeze affected the sound. It didn't seem too bad.

“Any requests?” I asked the couple who were still watching.

“How about 'Hey Jude'?” said the man.

“Sure,” I said with a smile and groaned inwardly.

I don't like the Beatles at the best of times and I hate 'Hey Jude'. It's slow and dull and doesn't fit either the sound of a sax or my style of playing. The thing is, 'Hey Jude' is one of the most popular Beatles songs and, because it's a slow and fairly simple number, it's done to death by every poxy little school and community band. Still, my fault for asking. I played it a little faster than it should be played, just to get it over with. The couple walked off part way through and didn't give me any money but I kept going to the bitter end as a few more people had stopped to listen. Someone clapped when it was over, no doubt as relieved as I was.

“Bit bloody mournful for a sunny morning,” I said. “We need something happy.”

I launched into Clarence Clemens' solo from Springstein's Born To Run which is just as recognisable as Hey Jude and a lot more entertaining. There were four or five people now, standing and watching although they were careful not to get too close. After all, there was the risk I might try to involve someone and the English really don't like to get involved. Still, no one gave any money, even though there were a couple of kids in the audience. The English like to give their kids the money to give to buskers; it saves drawing attention

to themselves.

“Anyone like cartoons?” I asked.

No reaction although only one person had walked away and three more had joined.

“There's a prize for anyone who can tell me what this is,” I said and played two short notes, “de dah”.

“Jaws,” shouted out a woman with a shopping bag.

“Close,” I said, “but no. That wasn't a cartoon.” I played the two notes again then repeated them a tone and a half higher.

“No one?” I said, wandering around and looking in people's faces.

“The Pink Panther?” said a man hesitantly.

“Brilliant!” I said, holding out a hand in his direction. “The Pink Panther Theme. What's your name, my friend?”

“Stan,” he said.

“Give Stan a round of applause, ladies and gentlemen,” I said, applauding him myself.

“What's his prize?” piped up an obnoxious young teenager.

“He gets to hear the whole tune!” I said and Stan and a few others laughed.

I played the whole of the Pink Panther Theme and a couple of people put some money in my sax case. It usually takes people a while to get into the swing of things.

“So you like the Pink Panther?” I said, hamming it up a little. “Let's stay with the wildlife and get into the Bear Necessities.”

That's a great number to get a crowd going and pretty soon there

were some people clapping along and cash was starting to flow in. Even the man driving the pier train detoured around my small crowd rather than dingding his bell to make them get out of the way. Sensing the mood of the crowd I kept the tunes upbeat with numbers like 'Walking On Sunshine' and 'Take Five'. Not many people stayed for longer than maybe a minute but several passersby put money in my case. It was fairly normal.

“OK, folks,” I said after I'd been playing for half an hour or so, “I'm going for a break. Have a great day.”

I took my sax off and cradled it while I scraped together the money in the case and put it in my pocket. I'm not sure why but I've always felt it bad taste to count it in public. I took apart the mouthpiece and gave the sax a clean and packed it all away. I sauntered over to Jo's Fish and Chips for a can and a bag of chips, feeling fairly happy with the morning. I took my chips over to the railing and sat with my back leaning against the post of a sturdy telescope.

“You planning on staying here long?” asked a voice behind me.

Chapter Three

I looked round to see an extremely large black man in a policeman's uniform. He smiled genially.

"Do you want me to move on, officer?" I said.

I'd had run-ins with the police before as some towns have an aversion to street performers and experience had taught me that it's by far and away easiest to do what they tell you to do, particularly as I had no way of knowing what peculiar by-laws Fairchester might have. Even when you are technically in the right, the police can make things very awkward if they want to.

"Do you have a current Street Performer's Licence?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I said, feigning innocence. "I didn't know I needed one."

Not all local councils require a licence but those that do always charge a fee and some charge a very high fee which can make things very expensive for an itinerant performer like me. If I stayed in one place, £20 or so for a licence for the summer is neither here nor there but staying only a couple of days in each town and getting a licence for each could run into the thousands. Even more if you take into account the loss of income from waiting round in council offices when I could be out performing.

"We take a relaxed view," he said, happily. "You're one of the few that actually knows how to play so I'm not going to worry if you play some more today, so long as you don't try to sell any CDs. You'll need a Street Vending Licence for that."

"I don't have any CDs," I said, pointing to my sax case. "That's all I've got."

"Right you are then," he said and looked out to sea for a few moments. "Mind you, if I see you here tomorrow I'm really going to need to see a street performer's licence."

"Where do I get one from?" I asked.

He looked back into town and pointed.

“You see that flat white building at the end of the esplanade?” he asked.

I got up and looked where he was pointing. “Yeah,” I said.

“That’s the Council Offices,” he said. “Ask for Maureen Pethybridge in the Leisure and Tourism Department, she handles the licences.”

“How much is a licence?” I asked.

“£85 for six months,” he said.

I groaned since I only had about £65 and I had planned on getting some food for dinner.

He laughed. “Take your sax with you,” he said. “It’s only £85 to discourage people who can’t play. Maureen will get you to play her something and if she likes what you play she’ll waive the fee. Good musicians are good for tourism.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll go round later this afternoon. Would you like a chip?” I held out my half empty bag of chips since he seemed like a decent copper.

“Ohh, attempting to bribe a police officer, are you?” he said, looking stern.

“God, no,” I said, panicking slightly inside. “Just being friendly, like.”

He laughed and brushed a little dried seagull poo from his sleeve.

“Enjoy your day, sir,” he said with a friendly nod and strolled away.

I sat back down to finish my chips and decide what to do. On the one hand he had been a friendly chap and not out to cause me any trouble but on the other hand, £85 was a lot of money for a day or two’s busking especially as I probably wouldn’t make much more than that this early in the season and I would be very unlikely to be back within

the next six months. Then again, he had said that this Maureen Pethybridge might waive the licence fee. I slowly ate the last few of my chips under the watchful eye of a one legged seagull and, taking pity on him, tossed one over the rail. The one legged seagull fell off the rail and neatly caught the chip and returned to its perch to eat it so it could watch me in case I had another.

“Sorry, mate,” I said. “That’s the lot.”

I balled up the chip packet and finished my can and stood up. The seagull didn’t believe me and watched my every move intently.

“I’ll go and see Maureen,” I told the seagull, “and if she wants eighty five quid I’ll move on. Can’t say fairer than that, can I.”

“Caw,” said the seagull, giving up on me. It launched itself in the direction of a group of teenagers throwing chips at each other down on the beach beneath the pier.

I’d played a couple of numbers and amassed a crowd of nearly half a dozen, several of whom were actually listening to me play, when I spotted the policeman again. His size tended to make him stand out a little and his uniform didn’t help. He was chatting with a large lady in a long black and purple dress outside Madame Xara’s hut.

“I’d like to dedicate this next number to our wonderful police,” I said loudly. “Those brave guardians of law and order and protectors of our public safety.”

I saw him look over in my direction and a couple of the onlookers clapped half heartedly. I waved at him to come over and, after a couple of moment’s hesitation he did, standing a little away from my small audience.

I launched into ‘Every Move You Make’ by The Police and, to my relief, the policeman started to smile. A few more people joined the group, one even daring to stand next to him.

“That’s right,” I said, coming to the end. “Every move I make, every breath I take, he’ll be watching me!”

I gave a deep bow with an exaggerated flourish of my arm towards him.

“Come on everyone,” I called out, starting to clap my hands. “A round of applause for the Police!”

I left it deliberately ambiguous so that people could either applaud the Police as an institution or the Police as a rock band according to their personal preferences.

“Are you going to arrest me now?” I asked, holding my hands out in his direction, wrists held together. Several people in the audience laughed.

“I’m going to have to ask you to accompany me to the station,” he said in a loud voice and the small crowd fell silent, certain that they were about to witness an arrest and intent on not missing a single moment of it.

“You tosser,” I said to myself, trying to keep calm. “You’ve gone too far this time.”

The policeman waited three or four heartbeats to let the tension rise then said “it’s time we had some decent music in the canteen.” He winked at me and my knees went weak with relief. I gave him a big smile and a thumbs up then launched into ‘Sitting On The Dock Of The Bay’ because it was still the only tune I could think of that had anything remotely to do with piers. I noticed the policeman talking quietly into his radio then he departed off down the pier, presumably to attend to some law and order issue.

I was packing away preparatory to going to see the licensing lady when the large lady in the black and purple dress who’d been talking to the policeman came over.

“Hello,” she said.

She seemed fairly friendly which was a good thing. Sometimes shopkeepers take exception to buskers appearing nearby. Mind you, some buskers I’d met only knew three tunes and played them endlessly

on the grounds that the passersby were passing by and wouldn't notice but, of course, shopkeepers are there all day and they get very bored with the same tunes over and over again, especially when they're badly played.

"Hello," I said, looking up from cleaning my sax and giving her a smile. "Are you Madame Xara?"

"Am I that predictable?" she asked, looking pained. "I like to think I'm mysterious."

"I saw you earlier talking to that policeman," I said, giving the sax a final polish and laying the cloth over it in the case. "Outside Madame Xara's hut."

"I s'pose they are huts," she said, looking back at her hut, "although I prefer to think of it as my establishment."

"That's cool," I said, shutting the case and fastening it. "So is he one of the good guys?"

"Who? Samson?" she said. "The cop?"

"Yeah," I said. "He seemed a nice guy. He's got a sense of humour which is unusual."

"His name's Samson Gakuru," she said. "He's the beat policeman for the pier and the esplanade. If you stay here for any amount of time you'll see him round a lot. Will you be around much?"

"I don't know," I said. "Apparently I have to get a licence from the council and I'm not too sure I can afford it."

"Oh you'll be fine," she said. "I've a feeling we're going to be seeing you a lot. I'm Lucy, by the way. Lucy Fullbright."

She held out her hand and I shook it.

"Ben Webster," I said. "So is that an official forecast?"

She smiled. "It's an opinion," she said, "not a prediction. Do you want me to tell your fortune? Make it official?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "Are you any good?"

"That's a penetrating question," she said. "Do you mean good at predicting people's futures or telling them what they want to hear?"

"Predicting their futures," I said.

"Pretty good," she replied, "although that isn't what they pay to hear. No one wants to know their future if it's going to be bad. Do you?"

"Not really," I said. "Maybe I'll drop in tomorrow."

"I'll look forward to it," she said. "So are you going to stay here?" She waved her arm at the theatre entrance, "or will you be moving somewhere else?"

"Whatever happens with the licence I'll be moving on sooner or later," I said, "although as long as I'm in Fairchester I'll probably stay here. I kind of like the setting and it's nice to have a roof over my head."

She nodded. "It's called a portico," she commented. "Not a lot of people know that."

"Cool," I said. "You learn something everyday."

"What time tomorrow?" she asked.

"For what?" I said, puzzled.

"You said you'd come and see me," she replied. "I was just wondering when, roughly."

"You mean you can't predict it?" I said teasingly.

"Do you want me to?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, feeling bold. "Let's call it a test."

She looked appraisingly at me. "OK, give me your left hand."

I held out my right hand and she snorted so I held out the other one and she studied my palm.

"Can you really predict a specific time from my palm?" I said.

"Oh god, no," she said. "Palms just give general pointers. I'm looking to see which approach is the most appropriate for you."

"Oh," I said, "so, what, the tarot?"

"Balls," she said tersely, dropping my hand. "Come on, this will only take a moment."

She headed off towards her establishment and I grabbed my sax case and wandered unhurriedly after her.

"Stay here," she said at the entrance. "I'll be back in a moment."

Sure enough, she was back within a minute or so and handed me an envelope.

"Come round whenever you feel like it," she said. "I've written the time on a piece of paper and sealed it inside the envelope so don't open it. We'll open it when you turn up and see how it compares."

"Sounds good," I said, folding the envelope and putting it in my hip pocket. "I'll, err, see you then."

"Yes, you will," she said. "See you."

I headed off down the pier towards the esplanade.

"She's expecting me tomorrow," I mused to myself, "so what if I don't go round until Thursday?"

I was sorely tempted to open the envelope and see if she'd predicted Thursday but I decided I'd be embarrassed if she knew I'd opened it. Besides, it wouldn't be a real test if I knew what she'd written since I'd,

presumably, then be able to change the future. Unless, of course, I decided not to turn up at the time she'd written but circumstances forced me to anyway.

The council offices weren't particularly impressive but then it was a small town so inevitably they had a small town council.

"Upstairs, third on the right," said the girl on reception when I asked for Maureen Pethybridge.

I thanked her and she simpered a little for some reason. The third door on the right upstairs had a slim plastic nameplate that read 'Leisure And Tourism' and I hesitated, wondering if I should knock.

"There's nothing on the door about knocking," I thought to myself, "and the girl downstairs didn't say anything about knocking either."

I steeled myself, as I'm not a huge fan of bureaucracy, and opened the door expecting to find another receptionist or a secretary or something for the department. Instead I found it was a small office with a solitary, elderly lady sitting at a very large desk liberally covered with papers and brochures and assorted bits and pieces. The elderly lady looked at me as I burst in.

"Can I help you?" she said in a chilly voice, looking over her half moon glasses.

"Umm, I'm looking for Maureen Pethybridge," I said, feeling awkward.

"I am she," replied Maureen.

I felt very conscious that I looked rather scruffy.

"I, umm, was told I had to see you to get a street performer's licence," I said.

She gazed at me as though I was a beetle in a schoolboy's beetle collection then got up and went to a grey filing cabinet and rummaged through it for a few moments. Extracting a piece of paper she returned to her desk and sat back down. There was another chair

in front of her desk but she didn't invite me to sit and I felt too self conscious to sit without permission. It was like I was back at school, being hauled up in front of the headmaster, yet again.

"Name," she said, without looking up.

"Umm, Ben Webster," I said.

"Address." She was making statements, not asking questions.

"3 Pouncer's Lane, Little Fairchester," I said, giving what I hoped was the address of the butchers shop and hoping she wasn't overly familiar with Little Fairchester.

"Telephone."

"I don't have one," I said. There wasn't much point since my lifestyle made it difficult to recharge the things.

"Nature of performance."

"Musician, umm, saxophone," I said, holding up my sax case to try to establish my credentials. She didn't deign to notice.

"Pitch."

"Umm, B flat tenor," I said, wondering why she needed to know what sort of sax it was.

She sighed and looked up at me with thinly veiled contempt.

"Where do you propose to perform?" she asked.

"Oh, you mean that kind of pitch," I said. "On the pier, outside the theatre."

"Under the portico?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, thanking Lucy in my head for telling me what the word meant.

“Level of competency.” We were back to the statements.

“Umm, pretty good,” I said, trying to smile.

She looked up at me again and her nostrils flared slightly.

“Is that your saxophone?” she asked, pointing at my sax case with her pen.

“Yes,” I said.

“Play something for me,” she said, leaning back in her chair.

“Umm, OK,” I said and put the case on the spare chair. I got my sax out and put my harness over my shoulders. I figured the reed would still be wet enough and quickly assembled the mouthpiece.

“Anything you fancy?” I asked.

“Whatever you like,” she said, “except Wonderwall. I am so sick of Wonderwall. Why do buskers think they have to play it all the time?”

“Because it's popular and easy,” I said, wondering if I had the courage to play Teddy Bears' Picnic. “I don't play it much myself. How about a little jazz?”

She nodded so I launched into Harlem Nocturne since I didn't have the courage for Teddy Bears' Picnic after all. After the opening bars a tiny smile started to play around her lips and her eyes softened behind her glasses.

“That takes me back,” she said when I finished. “I had my first dance with my first boyfriend to that, back in, ohhh, 1965.”

I felt we had established some tiny connection and she gazed at me, almost misty eyed, for a few moments then turned her attention back to the form where she ticked something then signed and dated it. She got up and went back to the filing cabinet and got out another piece of paper.

“You can put that away now,” she said, sitting down.

She filled in the second form while I dismantled my sax and tidied it away then pulled open a drawer and took out a rubber stamp and an ink pad. She gently touched the stamp on the pad then slammed it viciously on the form as though she was beheading a chicken. She returned the stamp and ink pad to the drawer and waved the form in the air a few times, presumably to let the ink dry. She copied the number on the top of the second form into a box at the bottom of the first form then neatly folded the second form twice.

“There's your licence,” she said, handing it to me. “It's valid for six months from today. It covers all performances on the pier only and between 8am and midnight. Performing elsewhere within the district or outside those hours may result in a fine. Always carry the licence with you when you are performing and present it when requested to do so by a duly authorised person. Failure to produce this licence may result in a fine.”

“Thank you,” I said, re-opening the case and putting the license inside the bell of my sax with my elephant bag. I closed the lid of the case and secured the clasps and wondered what to do next.

“Was there something else, Mr Webster?” she asked, clearly giving me my marching orders.

“Umm, no,” I said. “Thank you.”

I picked up my sax case and quietly left the room, gently shutting the door behind me in case the noise irritated her and she remembered to charge me the licence fee.

“Well, that was pretty easy,” I said to myself and went to a nearby cafe that was still open for a celebratory mug of cappuccino and an apple and cinnamon muffin. I don't much like apple and cinnamon muffins but they were all out of blueberry muffins.

“So if she's in her late 60s,” I calculated while the girl was doing things with a snorting coffee machine, “that means she must have been thirteen or fourteen when she danced with her first boyfriend.”

I found it hard to imagine Maureen Pethybridge as a nervous teenager dancing with a boy in some 60s dancehall. Since Harlem Nocturne is a slow number, it must have been a smoochy dance. Maybe she had her first kiss at the same time. My coffee turned up and I added a couple of sachets of sugar.

“You little hussy,” I said, admiringly and raised my coffee in a toast to the fourteen year old Maureen smooching with her first boyfriend to a sultry sax on a dim dance floor. “Good for you.”

I sat in the cafe for a while remembering some of the good first kisses I'd had with girls, and one or two of the bad ones, then decided to really splurge and have a toasted bacon and egg sandwich as well. The sun was low on the horizon when I emerged. Playing Harlem Nocturne had brought out a need in me to get lost in some mellow jazz of the kind played by the man whose name I had appropriated, the man who was the all time master of the breathy, atmospheric sax. The kind you can never play while busking. I sat on a bench at the entrance to the pier, watching the sun set and losing myself in the moment. Well, quite a few moments, actually. The sun had long set by the time I felt renewed and the pier was deserted, although I half fancied there was someone sitting quietly in the darkness up around where the pier train started and ended its journey. If there was anyone there he or she was alone. It was still too early for the courting couples to come along for their privacy.

At peace with the world I started walking back to my little butchers shop and on the edge of town where the street lights gave way to overcast darkness I fell over an abandoned bicycle.

Chapter Four

I cursed a couple of times and pushed the thing away with my foot so I could free my other leg from its innards and give my shin a good rub. Strangely the bike seemed to be able to stand up on its own which was more than I could do for a couple of minutes as I discovered while rubbing my shin that I had grazed my hand and it stung. I got up and hobbled around a bit until I decided that my ankle didn't really hurt after all then picked up my sax case and checked that it hadn't come open. It was too dark to check the sax itself but the case was made of something similar to Samsonite and was padded inside so the delicate little levers shouldn't have been damaged. In any event, there wasn't much I could do until the sun came up the next morning.

I put the sax case carefully on the ground, away from the road just in case a car went by and ran it over since the case wasn't that strong, and turned my attention to the bike. As far as I could make out in the dark it had three wheels so it was probably a trike rather than a bike. Peering at it I could make out a largish basket slung between the two real wheels.

"Interesting," I thought.

I'd toyed every now and then with getting myself a bike since it was a pain walking everywhere but a bike seemed to be even more of a pain as the sax case was quite large and there was nowhere really to put it on a bike. The only real option would be to cycle round one handed carrying the case in the other hand which would be a nightmare. Either that or figure out some way of strapping the case to my back but that would then make carrying my rucksack awkward. All in all a bike seemed too much trouble. But a trike? With a big basket on the back? Interesting.

There's an old saying; every silver lining has a cloud. Yes, here I was presented with a suitable means of transport that was, importantly, free, but, and it was potentially a big but, why was it there in the first place and where was its owner? Either the owner was nearby, maybe having a pee in the bushes or lying unconscious or the owner had abandoned it and, if it had been abandoned there would be a reason.

Like it was damaged and too expensive to fix or something like that.

Well, the noise I had made falling over it and cursing would have alerted the owner if he or she was nearby so I wandered round a little to see if I could find a body, ideally unconscious rather than dead, but I couldn't. Back at the bike I grabbed its handlebar and gave it a pull. It rolled forward fairly easily but there was a loud groan from the front wheel and a pronounced wobble. Squatting down and investigating it seemed that the front wheel wasn't a circle anymore, more of a buckled oval. Still, damaged front wheels were repairable and, if needs be, replaceable at not too great an expense. Standing, I lifted the front end by the handlebar and pulled it forward again. It moved smoothly, which suggested the back end was fine. I went round the back end and gave the basket a hard yank and it seemed secure enough so I put my sax case in it.

“Never look a gift horse in the mouth,” I said, then realised that that's exactly what I had been doing. Metaphorically speaking, checking the wheels and the basket had been looking inside the trike's mouth.

“Well, if you're the trike's owner,” I said, moderately loudly, “come and claim it now.”

I counted to ten slowly and no one turned up or said anything so I carried on walking, pushing the trike and ignoring the groaning coming from the front wheel and the shudders that went through the trike's frame. It was a little slower than walking freely would have been but maybe if I could fix it it would make moving round easier and quicker. Worst case scenario I could just leave it at the butchers when I moved on, and anyway I could probably sell it for a few quid if I couldn't fix it.

I could see why its former owner had abandoned it the following morning.

The primary cause was the front wheel. Some spokes had come loose and the rim had distorted so the front end of the trike went up and down like a circus clown's bike and it was also curved like a banana so for a quarter of each revolution it crunched up against the left side of the brake caliper and for another quarter it scrunched up against the

other side and the rubbing made everything vibrate. Still, as I had suspected, that was repairable. It's just that the rest of the trike made it look like it wasn't worth repairing. I had no idea how old it was but Noah could maybe have used it to ferry around pairs of animals that couldn't walk on their own if he'd ever got to England. The trike looked as though it had been blue at one time since there were still a couple of faded blue patches showing through the rust here and there but the saddle was badly torn and looked to have lost most of its padding. The two pedals were badly worn, the little front light had no lens or bulb and the chain hung so low it nearly touched the ground. All three tyres were completely bald and could use pumping up although none of them were completely flat. Still, the brakes worked, after a fashion, and the three gears still seemed to work. Intriguingly there was a plastic coated chain with a combination lock wrapped around the handlebars.

I made some coffee and sat on the back door step looking at the trike. It looked old and tired and depressingly forlorn like a mistreated old horse that had been worked almost to death.

"You poor thing," I muttered. "So, what am I going to do with you?"

I sipped my coffee and felt sad. Once upon a time it had been brand new and its owner might well have sat on a doorstep, gazing at it with pride and joy, maybe even calling to friends and neighbours to come over and have a look or getting out a cloth to polish its gleaming blue frame and sighing when drops of rain fell on it. Maybe, years ago, it had even had a tarpaulin or something to protect it from the rain.

I put down my coffee and rolled a ciggie. There was something about that trike that made me feel sad, maybe even a little guilty. I lit my smoke and leaned back against the door. An image of Maureen Pethybridge going misty eyed over Harlem Nocturne came into my mind. A fourteen year old trying to look grown up in the latest 60s fashions with a tight skirt and a ponytail, maybe tongue tied and nervous as a boy came over and asked her to dance and then, seemingly all too soon, on the edge of retirement, sitting behind an oversized desk in a lonely council office listening to fourth rate musicians trying to play Wonderwall. There was nothing I could do about Maureen, except dedicate Harlem Nocturne to her whenever I

played it, but I could do something for the trike. OK, maybe I didn't have the skills to restore it to its former glory but at least I could give it back some of its self esteem so it wasn't ashamed of its very existence any more.

“Right,” I said, standing up and flicking my butt into a corner of the courtyard. “Let's at least get that wheel fixed then we can see about giving you some pride again.”

I took the Taiwanese Army Knife out of my belt holster and opened out the little pliers. I'd learnt how to straighten bent bicycle wheels as a kid when I'd crashed mine. It's simply a matter of tightening the little nuts on the right spokes so that they pulled the rim back into shape. Time consuming but straightforward. You didn't even need to take the wheel off.

It took a couple of hours and some head scratching until I realised I'd tightened a couple of the wrong spokes which was stopping the wheel becoming flat again but I got there and it spun freely between the calipers with only the tiniest of weaving. After another cup of coffee I was still feeling enthused so I fiddled with both the rear wheels so they ran true as well. Then I took the trike for a test drive.

I nearly undid all my hard work when I discovered at the first bend in the road that trikes may look like bikes but don't handle like them. You have to steer them properly, not just lean a little to one side. But I got the hang of it quickly since it was either learn or crash and I didn't want to crash.

“Seems to handle OK,” I said to myself, slowly pedalling back to the butchers. “The frame seems solid enough, too.”

I scraped together some leftovers for a scratch lunch and decided to brave the trip into Fairchester to see if there was somewhere I could get some new tyres and brake pads. I hadn't seen anywhere but I hadn't explored the town. All I'd done so far was visit a supermarket and spend a day on the pier.

“I wonder what the combination is?” I muttered, fiddling with the security chain. I tested the combination lock but it didn't give way.

“Hmm, well, there are four digits,” I reasoned, “so that means there are a thousand possible combinations so if I try one a second it will take, umm, that's a thousand over sixty, which is a hundred over six which is, say, sixteen minutes to try them all.”

I was bored with that technique by the time I'd got to 0007 so I rolled another ciggie and smoked it sitting astride the trike. Trikes are good – you can sit on them and they don't fall over!

“You're a tosser,” I said to a cat that had wandered into the courtyard and was sitting wondering who the hell I was. “Four digits means 0000 to 9999 which is ten thousand not one thousand so trying every combination will take a hundred and sixty minutes not sixteen. Call it three hours.”

Just in case, I tried the day and month of my birthday then the year I was born. Neither worked, unsurprisingly. I gave the end of the chain that came out of the lock a little tug and felt it give slightly.

“Hmm,” I said. “I wonder?”

Pulling the chain very tight I slowly rotated the first of the combination's rings and on 6 there was the tiniest of lurches as, hopefully, the notch in the ring lined up with the lug on the end of the chain. I slowly rotated the second ring, keeping the chain tight, and felt another tiny lurch on 3. Same with 8 on the third ring and at 4 on the last ring the end of the chain came free.

“You have got to be kidding me!” I said, looking disbelievingly at the lock. “It's that easy? Seriously?”

I pushed the end of the chain back in the lock and twiddled the rings. It was locked. I set the combination to 6384 and the end slid out. I had a strong feeling that the bicycle industry needed to continue development of the security side of things.

“I wonder what that's for,” I said, noticing a two inch nail hanging from a piece of string tied to the handlebar. It had no readily apparent use but I fought back an urge to untie it. After all, it might turn out to be useful.

“Well,” I said, glancing over at the cat only to find it had disappeared, “if I’m going to get some new tyres and new brake pads I’m going to have to have some money. Better get back to work.”

Apart from yet another scuff on the case my sax was still in perfect working order so I put it neatly in the basket on the back of the trike and sedately pedalled out of the courtyard. Impressively it took just over half an hour to cycle to the pier, a third of the time it took to walk although it would take longer to ride back since part of the way would be uphill. I pulled up at the entrance to the pier and lifted the trike up the three steps then self-consciously cycled along to the theatre and parked the trike beside the glass doors. There was no sign of Lucy although her A board was outside her establishment so I figured she was working with a client.

I ostentatiously undid the security chain and looped it through one of the rear wheels then got my sax ready. I was mid-way through my fourth number when my friendly neighbourhood policeman turned up. He joined the three or four others and started tapping his foot in time with the music. I gave him a wave with my right hand when I had a section of high notes, the right hand being the one in charge of the lower notes of each register on a sax. Actually this isn’t strictly true since there are people who customise saxophones to fit the needs of individual players and there have been one or two left handed saxophones produced over the years. In fact, the Oscar Adler company, and no doubt some others, made saxophones for WW2 veterans with hand injuries for a number of years but my sax is completely standard, apart from a little modification I made myself to make the high D key playable with less hand movement, thereby allowing me to play it a little faster.

The policeman very kindly waited through a couple more numbers until I had a break before coming over.

“Hello,” he said. “Remember me?”

“Samson, isn’t it?” I said, holding out my hand. “I’m Ben. I’ve got a licence.”

He agreed his name was Samson and shook hands with me which

made him a doubly unusual policeman since most police don't like divulging their names until its on the bottom of their arrest report and I'd never yet met a policeman willing to shake hands without holding a pair of handcuffs. I retrieved the licence from my elephant bag and he gave it the merest of glances.

"Did she charge you?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Maureen seemed a very nice lady and she didn't mention money once."

"Good," he said and turned his attention to the trike. "That looks familiar, is it yours?"

I suddenly realised that Fairchester-on-Sea was a small town and that trikes were a rarity. Probably everyone in town knew this trike as it was probably the only one in town.

"I didn't steal it," I said, quickly. "I found it abandoned beside the road last night. The front wheel was damaged and I fixed it this morning."

He sauntered over to inspect it and I cursed myself for not thinking this through.

"Well it hasn't been reported stolen," he said, giving me a look that I took to mean that he'd know exactly where to go if and when its loss was reported.

"I'm going to tidy it up a bit," I said. "It's a good solid trike under all that rust. Just needs a little TLC. Is there a bike repair place in town?"

"There's a Halfords in Deepdene Street," he said after thinking for a few moments. "And the recycle yard in Benton Road has a few bicycles if you're looking for parts."

"Thanks," I said. "Where's Deepdene Street?"

"Go up the High Street, opposite the council offices, and it's the second on the right." said Samson.

"Nice and easy," I said. "By the way, I hope you weren't bothered by yesterday's performance?"

He looked faintly puzzled.

"You remember?" I said. "The Police number?"

"Oh yes," he said, smiling. "No, it's all part of Working With The Community. Good for public relations."

There was a burbling from the walkie talkie attached to the lapel of his uniform.

"Excuse me," he said and moved away to the side railing to converse with whoever it was in private.

I went back to my sax case to collect the coins that had been thrown in it. I'd figured that with a policeman close by no one would have taken any while my back was turned. There was a heavy footfall behind me and I turned.

"Do be careful with your donations, Ben," said Samson. "We get quite a few pickpockets and other light fingered people on the pier."

"What about muggers?" I asked.

"A few," he conceded, "but after dark, particularly after the pubs close but they're mostly around the entertainment centre on the esplanade. The pier is generally fairly quiet since the tourists don't come here much after dark. Not now that the theatre's closed."

"So there's no point in me playing here after dark?" I asked. I'd got that impression the night before but it's always useful to get inside information.

"No, these days the only people who come on the pier after dark are a few fishermen and courting couples."

"OK, thanks," I said. It was a little disappointing since drunks and people going home after a good evening out can often give generously

to buskers, particularly young men trying to impress a girl.

“Have a good day, Ben,” said Samson, touching his cap and turning to go.

“Oh, by the way,” I said. “Any suggestions on how to remove rust?” I nodded towards the trike.

“Mix some baking soda into a paste with vinegar and a dash of lime juice,” he said. “Smear it on the rust and leave it for ten to fifteen minutes then scrub it off with some steel wool.” He looked over at the trike then added “you may need to do it a few times.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Do they teach that in Police College?”

“No,” he said. “But I grew up in Kenya and over there we never throw anything away.”

He touched his cap again and disappeared down the pier and I went and got a can from Jo's Fish and Chips.

“Nice to hear some decent music,” said the woman as she took my money.

She was an appalling advertisement for fish and chips since she was stick thin. “Never trust a skinny cook,” my dad had often said and, like most children, I believed what my dad said to be universal truths.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling mildly appreciated.

“Staying around for long?” she asked. “I'm Jo by the way.”

“Ben,” I said. “A few days probably. Got any requests?”

“Do you know any Beyoncé?” she asked. “I like Beyoncé.”

“Only 'Single Ladies',” I said, “and you're too good looking to be a single lady.”

“Oh yeah, sure,” she said dismissively but looking pleased.

“So are you?” I asked, looking at her hand.

“Nah,” she said. “Me old man’s got the camping shop in town.” She noticed me look at her hand and held it up. “Can’t wear me rings ‘cause of the batter.”

She turned to deal with the next customer and I wandered out and went back to my pitch. I played ‘Single Ladies’ for Jo and it went down like a lead balloon with the people milling around the theatre and seemed to set a mood of some sort since hardly anyone stopped to listen and no one tossed even 1p my way. A couple of hours later the sky was clouding over, depressing the mood even further and causing people to start thinking about going somewhere else in case it rained, and I hadn’t made more than about 50p.

“I’ll give it another ten minutes,” I said to myself, eyeing the clouds since I didn’t want to get soaked on the way home either.

Busking can be soul destroying at times. But, it’s also very unpredictable.

I was winding up an uninspired performance of ‘Is This The Way To Amarillo’ and being avoided like a skunk with plague when I spotted Janice from the Tourist Information Office walking towards me. I gave her a wave and she waved back which was the first positive that afternoon since Samson told me how to get rid of rust.

I started to play Roy Orbison’s classic ‘Pretty Woman’ in the hope that Janice might know the words – *Pretty woman, walking down the street, pretty woman, the kind I’d like to meet* – and take the hint. She smiled, so maybe she had, and stopped to light a cigarette. She leaned against the telescope and watched. She wasn’t the only one. For some reason Roy Orbison was attracting attention and people were stopping to listen.

I toyed with continuing with Roy and ‘Only The Lonely’ but decided that was way too uncool and might give Janice the impression I was desperate and slightly pathetic so I launched into “Knock Three Times” in the hope that a little autosuggestion might work, as in *knock three times on the ceiling if you want me*. She stubbed out her ciggie and

came up close to join the seven or eight people standing round me. There's something joyful and energetic about 'Knock Three Times' and my little audience were almost getting playful and one lady even managed to punch her arm in the air three times while mouthing the words 'knock three times'. I figured I'd finish the tune then give up for the day and go and talk to Janice.

Then it happened. Someone threw a £2 coin in my case then someone else threw in a pound and a passerby who hadn't seemed to have been paying attention threw in several coins. What do you do? Go and talk to the girl or follow the cash flow?

I made an instant decision and launched into 'Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round The Ole Oak Tree' since that was the style that seemed to be catching the moment and the cash flowed. More people stopped to listen, no one left and Janice gave me a huge smile and a £2 coin before she turned and went back to the esplanade. It only lasted fifteen minutes or so but I made £57 and they were standing three deep in places. It felt like Wembley Arena.

Chapter Five

Of course the £57 didn't last long.

I spent £51 in Halfords on three new tyres, the cheapest they had, and a cute little puncture repair kit which came with a couple of tyre levers and a neat little spanner. I also got an adjustable wrench and a packet of steel wool and, just as I was about to pay for it all, I spotted a sexy looking battery operated headlight, complete with batteries. The other £6 went on some baking soda and a lemon and some mince and a crusty loaf of bread for dinner. The vinegar caused me a lot of confusion and indecision as I'd always thought that vinegar was vinegar and you put it on chips but it turns out that it isn't. There was brown vinegar, apple cider vinegar, balsamic vinegar, wine vinegar, malt vinegar, even raw organic apple cyder vinegar. I asked someone filling shelves in the aisle which kind of vinegar would be best for getting rust off a bicycle but he just shrugged his shoulders helplessly, echoing my own state of confusion. Fortunately a very bent old lady overheard and, in a quiet shaky voice, told me to get plain white distilled vinegar, so I did but she didn't know why the organic apple vinegar was 'cyder' and not 'cider'.

It's one of the ironies of ownership that I needed the trike to carry all the stuff I'd had to buy for the trike. Without it I would have only had to carry the mince and, of course, the £55 or so in cash that I didn't have to carry now because I'd replaced it with things for the trike. I pondered why I was getting involved with commercialism and ownership on the ride home but didn't come to any satisfactory conclusion. Maybe I was just getting tired of walking everywhere and living in whatever accommodation I could find. After all, apart from a few clothes and my sax and my little collection of cooking utensils I hadn't owned anything since I walked away from my parents' home seven years previously. Freedom does have its downsides.

One disadvantage of a trike, or a bike come to that, is that you get no protection from the weather although an upside is that you travel faster on a trike than you do when walking so at least when the heavens open you aren't in it as long. On the other hand, since I'd have been soaked to the skin in about a minute either way, it didn't really matter whether I was walking or on the trike. It did occur to me

that possessing the trike now meant that once I'd got rid of the rust and repainted it I was going to have to get a tarp or something to cover it when it rained since, unlike a bike, I couldn't bring it inside wherever I was dossing. More consumer/owner expense for the sole purpose of maintaining the consumed/owned goods. Once on the wheel it starts to get difficult to get off it and the trike had three of them.

I was debating the merits and demerits of abandoning the millstone of trike ownership by the side of the road when I arrived back at the butchers shop and trundled into the courtyard at the back. To my surprise someone had apparently been round and dumped an old tatty looking bundle of rags on the back doorstep. I gazed at it for a few seconds, wondering if the owner of the shop had turned up and was even now wondering who had left my clothes and bedroll inside. Oh well, if it was an issue I'd just move into the bakery next door.

I pushed the trike into a corner where it was slightly protected from the rain and put on the handbrake. Yes! My rat trike was sophisticated enough to have a handbrake! It was the nail that hung on the piece of string from the handlebar. At some time in the past someone had drilled a hole through the front brake lever so that the nail locked it in position thus leaving the front brake on. Elegant in its simplicity if not in its implementation although a prettier nail wouldn't have been any more effective.

I gathered my sax case and assorted plastic bags, the inevitable polluting by-product of consumerism, and fished my key out of my pocket and went to open the door and the old bundle of rags opened its eyes and looked sorrowfully at me. One particularly ragged piece of cloth started tentatively thumping on the doorstep.

"Hello," I said, "so you're a dog then."

The bedraggled mess whined throatily. The back door was still locked so I put the key in and it opened so whoever was inside hadn't snibbed it. I dumped the plastic bags in the sink to drain.

"Hello?" I called out. "Hello?"

There was no answering call or sound of feet. In fact, there was no sense of anyone else being there. I carried the case through to my bedroom, then went to inspect the shop and the cool room. There was no sign that anyone had been there at all. As far as I could tell, nothing had been disturbed.

“Come on in, why don't you?” I said conversationally to the dog in the kitchen.

It stood there making a puddle on the floor, presumably from all the rainwater since the puddle wasn't just at the back end. I was making a puddle as well. The dog tried to do the doggy water shake but staggered a little and gave up.

“Where've you come from?” I asked. “Shouldn't you be back home?”

The dog just stood there, everything drooping. It looked quite pathetic.

“Well, we're both going to catch our deaths, standing here like this,” I said. “No peeking.”

I stripped off my clothes and draped them around the sink to dry and went to get my towel. I rubbed myself reasonably dry and reflected that I wouldn't be needing a bath or shower for a few more days then pulled on some clean clothes. Back in the kitchen I saw that the dog had taken itself off into a corner and was licking one of its paws.

“Come on then, mate,” I said, “let's get you dry then we'll see what's what.”

The dog looked plaintively at me but otherwise didn't move. He, as was now apparent, was a small dog, made tinier by having all his fur plastered closely to his little body.

“Come on out,” I said in a friendly tone, “can't dry you off huddled over there.”

I made those strange clucking noises that people make when they want to attract a dog's attention and waggled the towel invitingly.

With a visible effort the dog got up and limped over to where I was standing.

“Hurt your leg, have you?” I said. “Poor boy.”

I sat cross-legged on the floor and started to towel him dry, avoiding the leg he'd limped on. All dogs look scrawny when they're wet but rubbing him I could feel just how thin he actually was. Fluffed up he didn't look too bad so I told him to sit and, impressively, he sat. I gently lifted his front left paw to try and get some idea of what was paining him and almost immediately saw a swollen, suppurating ulcer on the top of his paw. It looked quite nasty and seemed to be a good half an inch long although it was difficult to tell because of the hair. It had a gaping hole in it and was streaked with pus.

“Ouch,” I said. “That must hurt.”

I gently dried the rest of his leg, which didn't seem to cause him any discomfort then, very delicately, patted around the ulcer to try to get it dry. He tried to pull his paw away a couple of times and once growled in the back of his throat but he seemed to get the general idea that I was trying to help him.

“Good boy,” I said when I'd done just about all I could and patted his head. He gave a little whine and nuzzled my palm.

I looked thoughtfully at his leg.

“There's nothing we can do about that tonight,” I said, “and I'm not too sure what we can do about it tomorrow. Are you hungry?”

He just sat there and looked sadly at me then lay down and started licking his foot.

“Would you like some sausage?” I said. “Sausage?”

I still had one left over which was getting a little manky since there wasn't a fridge here and I didn't fancy eating it myself so I got up and fetched it and offered it to the dog. It disappeared in approximately a third of a second.

“Liked that did you?” I said. “How about some tomato?”

He sniffed the half tomato suspiciously then took it out of my hand and laid it on the floor and sniffed it again, no doubt trying to pretend that the thing was really a funny coloured sausage. He picked it up in his mouth again and looked at me then spat it out.

“You liked the tomato in the sausage,” I said, accusingly.

The dog retreated a step or two.

“How about some bread then?” I asked and he just looked at me.

I retrieved my plastic bag from the sink and pulled out the loaf of bread. Impressively the plastic bag had managed to keep most of the rain out and only one end of the bread was soggy. I pulled it off and offered it to him. That disappeared as well. I fancied that I could see some light returning to his eyes. Perhaps it was the light of hope.

“You'd better bloody appreciate this,” I said and made a hole in the plastic wrap of the packet of mince. His nose quivered and the light of hope grew stronger. I pulled off a small lump and offered it to him.

“Hey, leave my fingers,” I said. “You liked that, didn't you.”

He wagged his tail to show his agreement so I pulled off another lump. And another. And another.

“I hope you realise that's tomorrow's dinner you've eaten,” I said.

I'd got a 500g packet with the intention of making it last two meals. No chance of that now. There was maybe 200g left.

“That's enough,” I said. “I want some too.”

He watched hopefully as I unwrapped the rest of the packet and tipped it into a mess tin. He watched less hopefully as I put it on the burner and chopped half an onion and a carrot and tipped them in. He continued to watch as I cooked it, his eyes following my every move.

“Come on,” I said, when it was cooked. “Let’s go in the other room.”

I turned off the gas, grabbed the bread and my spoon and headed for the other room. He followed me in, limping, and I sat on my bed to eat. He huddled up beside me, his thin little body shivering. I dug my spoon into the mess tin and he watched it intently.

“Oh for god’s sake,” I said and tipped the spoonful onto the floor. He vacuumed it up effortlessly, carrot and all.

“I’m too soft hearted,” I said when he’d eaten the rest of the mince in the mess tin. “No, you’re not having the bread as well.”

He seemed to get the message and, after checking the floor and the tin to see if he’d missed a bit he curled up at the end of the blanket and started licking his foot again.

“That looks pretty nasty,” I said. “How did you do it?”

He carried on licking it and I slowly worked my way through the bread. It wasn’t the first time I’d just had bread for dinner and, apart from the soggy bits, was pretty good. I decided to splash out on some peanut butter the next time I went shopping.

“I’m guessing you’re a stray,” I said, after a while. I’d noticed he didn’t have a collar when I was drying him but he was too well mannered to be a wild dog so he’d either run away or been dumped and since I hadn’t seen him round in the last couple of days I figured he wasn’t a local dog either.

When I’d finished the bread I got up and opened my sax case and got out my elephant bag. I upended it on the blanket and counted out my savings and added the little bit I had left from the day that was in my pocket.

“I wonder how much vets cost?” I said to the dog. “Do you think £65 is enough?”

He stopped licking his foot and lay his head on the blanket and looked at me.

“We can but ask,” I said, “assuming that there is a vet in town. Bound to be, since they get a lot of tourists and tourists often take their dogs with them. What are we going to do with you, though, hmm? Once the vet sorts your foot out?”

The following morning I spent an hour or so fitting the new tyres and exhausting myself pumping them up since the pump I'd got was the smallest and cheapest they had. Still, the new tyres made the trike look a lot happier already.

“Come on then, boy,” I said, “let's go find you a vet.”

I put the sax case in the basket and tapped it to encourage the dog to jump in on top. He just looked at me and wagged his tail as if to say “you are joking.”

“Well, you can't run all the way into town,” I said. “Not with that foot. Come on.”

He was looking much brighter now that he had eaten and spent the night on a warm, dry blanket although the ulcer was looking bigger. I lifted him up and put him in the basket and he looked over the edge at the ground and whined and tried to climb out.

“Stay,” I said, holding up a finger.

He looked at me and wrinkled his nose then lay down on the sax case, looking worried.

“Good boy,” I said and he thumped his tail and tried to climb out again.

“Stay!” I said sharply.

He looked at me and then slowly subsided on the case again.

I pulled the nail out of the brake lever and slowly wheeled the trike around the courtyard a couple of times so he'd get used to the general concept. He looked decidedly worried but didn't try to jump out again.

“Good boy,” I said, patting his head. “There’s a good boy!”

His tail thumped and he laughed at me.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s go find a vet.”

I kept checking to see he was still there on the ride into town and, impressively, he still was. I asked a few people before I found one who knew of a vet and he gave me directions.

“Name?” asked the girl at the desk.

“Umm, Ben Webster,” I said.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, umm, I didn’t know I needed one.” I said.

“I can’t find you in the system,” she said, studying her computer screen. “What was your address?”

I gave her the address of the butchers shop.

“Have you been here before?” she asked worriedly. I noticed her name tag said Tanya.

“No,” I said. “Look, it’s about this dog. I found him last night. He’s hurt his foot.”

“Right,” she said, looking over the counter at the dog. “Aren’t you a cutie then.”

“So are you, Tanya,” I said before I realised she wasn’t talking to me.

She gave me a look. It was somewhat indecipherable but had definite overtones of “sod off”.

“So he’s a stray, then?” she said, settling herself in front of her screen again.

"I guess so," I said.

"Will you be paying the account?" she asked.

"Umm, I'm not sure I can afford to," I said. "What happens if I don't?"

"The dog will be sent to the pound," she said, "and if he's not claimed within seven days he'll be euthanised."

"What, you mean killed?" I said, taken aback.

"Yes," she said. "It's a shame but that's the way it goes."

"I'll pay the account," I said, reaching a decision.

I did have a bank account with my emergency money in it. Up until now the only emergency I had envisaged was having my sax stolen or destroyed so I'd been slowly putting a little aside when I had spare cash since saxophones are not the cheapest of instruments.

"We require accounts to be settled on the day," she said, rapidly assessing my net worth.

"I can get cash out of the bank," I said, trying to look as honest as I could.

"OK," she said. "I need some details. What's the dog's name?"

"I've no idea," I said.

"I need a name," she said, her fingers twitching on the keyboard.

"Alfie," I said suddenly. The dog reminded me of a dog I'd seen in the opening credits of a movie called Alfie. There had been a pretty neat jazz backing solo by Sonny Rollins while the dog ran around the streets of London, which was why I remembered it.

"Black and tan, mixed breed, domestic medium hair, male," she muttered, typing busily. "Has he been neutered?"

“No idea,” I said.

She got up and came round the front of the counter and lifted Ben's tail.

“He's been neutered,” she said, going back behind her counter.

I wondered how she could tell but was reluctant to ask.

“What seems to be the trouble?” she asked.

“He's got a big ulcer on his foot,” I said. “It's all yucky and it seems to hurt him.”

I wondered if there was a technical veterinary term for 'yucky' but I couldn't read what she was typing upside-down.

“If you'll take a seat, one of the vets should be will be able to see Alfie soon,” she said.

“Umm, any idea how much it will cost?” I asked.

“It depends,” she said. “A basic consultation is £45 but if he has to stay overnight or needs surgery it could be quite expensive.”

I went and sat down as I couldn't think of anything else to say. Ben sat next to me and started licking his foot again.

“Oh yes,” said the vet, whose name tag said Miriam. She'd barely looked at Ben's foot. “Grass seed ulcer. By the look of it probably a week or so ago. You can see the seed is working its way across his foot.”

“I didn't know grass seeds were dangerous,” I said. “Will he need surgery?”

“Oh we should be able to get it out easily enough,” said Miriam, “but I'll need you to hold him still.”

She got a set of forceps out of a cabinet on the wall and peeled off the

sterile wrapping.

“Right,” she said. “I’m going to insert the forceps into the wound and try to get hold of the seed. It might hurt a little so don’t let him jerk his foot away.”

She inserted the tips of the forceps inside the ulcer and Alfie whimpered and kept jerking his foot away.

“There’s a good boy,” I said soothingly, stroking his head with one hand while clamping his body with my other arm and holding his paw in my hand.

She made several attempts to find the grass seed then turned the forceps around and tried in the other direction.

“Aha,” she said. “Gotcha.”

She slowly pulled the forceps out and a large slimy seed came with it.

“That’s a big one,” she said, inspecting it then showing it to me. “The problem’s not so much the seed,” she added, turning it over, “it’s the husk. The sharp pointed end gets embedded in the skin and every time he moves it works its way in a bit further but the husk acts like a barb, preventing it from coming back out.” She wiped the seed onto a piece of tissue paper.

Pus streaked blood was now welling out of the wound and she used a bit of some sterile dressing to mop it up.

“What would have happened if you hadn’t taken it out?” I asked.

“It would have carried on working its way up his leg,” she said. “It might well have come out eventually but his entire leg would have been ulcerated and he’d have been in a great deal of pain.”

“Ouch,” I said, staring at the grass seed.

“He’ll be feeling a lot better already,” she said. “I’ll give him some antibiotics to clear up any infection and the wound should have closed

in a couple of days. Bathe it in some warm tea two or three times a day to keep it clean.”

“Any particular tea?” I asked.

“Black,” she said. “No milk or sugar.”

“Thank you,” I said. Alfie seemed to be a lot happier already.

“Just pop him on the scales,” said Miriam. “He’s looking a bit thin.”

I put him on the scales in the corner of the room and she frowned.

“He should be at least double that weight,” she said. “What do you feed him on?”

“I found him last night,” I said. “I think he’s a stray and I fed him some mince.”

“Ahh, right,” she said. “I’ll just scan him.”

She went to reception and got something that looked like a TV remote control. Coming back she waved it over his neck and shoulders.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“He should be microchipped,” she said, frowning, “but it looks like he hasn’t been. Are you keeping him?”

“Yes,” I said, having made the decision during the night when I’d woken and found Alfie snuggled in the crook of my knees.

“OK, well you ought to get him microchipped in case he runs away again. Let me just give him a check over.”

I didn’t really like the idea of having him microchipped since it smacked of a police state to me so I didn’t say anything and after a moment, Miriam started running her hands over his body and then looked inside his mouth.

“OK,” she said. “Let me take his temperature.”

Alfie didn't appreciate having a thermometer pushed up his backside but he accepted it manfully, or dogfully. Miriam pronounced him generally fit although malnourished and did various things to her computer, then picked up the tissue and headed off to reception. I grabbed my sax case and Alfie and I followed.

“Look what was in this dog's foot, Tanya,” she said. “Isn't it huge?”

Tanya whistled. “Oh the poor thing,” she said. “I bet he's glad to be rid of that.”

“I'll just get the antibiotics,” said Miriam and disappeared out the back.

“So how much do I owe you?” I asked, putting the sax case on the counter so I could retrieve my elephant bag.

Tanya checked her computer. “£22.50,” she said. “It looks like Miriam has waived the consultation fee. I'll just check when she comes back.”

Miriam came back a minute or so later with a small packet of tablets in her hand and Tanya held a brief, muted conference with her.

“Use it to buy extra dog food until his weight's back up again,” she said, smiling at me. “Now, give him half a tablet twice a day with food until the tablets are finished.”

“That's very kind of you,” I said, gratefully.

“No trouble,” she said, giving Alfie's head a pat. “We need to encourage responsible ownership. Make sure he gets plenty to eat.”

I counted out a pile of coins and slid them over to Tanya who didn't bother to count them herself. She just scooped them into a plastic bowl and dumped it on a shelf before printing me a receipt.

“Well, Alfie,” I said, as we emerged into the weak sunshine again. “Looks like I'm now a responsible owner. How bourgeois can you get?”

Alfie's tail was now sticking straight up and he seemed to bounce a little as he happily found a tree and made his mark on the world as a responsibly owned dog.

“Let's go get some breakfast.”

Chapter Six

Alfie was bothered by my sax at first. He didn't understand what was causing all the strange loud noises and barked at it and pranced stiff legged for a couple of minutes. Still, nothing attacked him and I guess my presence reassured him a little. After a while he calmed down and started to pay more attention to the people which was more productive from both our points of view.

From Alfie's, of course, passersby thought he was cute and stopped to give him pats and titbits, which would help with his weight, and he loved the attention. From my point of view passersby thought he was cute and, after patting him and giving him a titbit, they stopped to listen for a while and, on the whole, felt we were deserving of their beneficence. Then again it could simply have been because it was a Friday or the day after a storm or any one of a thousand possible things that affects the mood of individuals and groups. I swear even a minor change in humidity can make people more generous or more tightfisted. Some scientist should study this one day, although if it was all boiled down to some formula it would take a lot of the joy out of busking and street performing. After all, none of us are in it for the money, as such. If we were we'd be stock brokers or something like that.

Anyway, I stopped somewhere around lunchtime for a break and went over to Jo's for a bag of chips and a can; my usual lunch when I bother to have lunch.

"Cute dog," she said when we got to the head of the queue. "Chips?"

"Please," I said. "You haven't got any fish scraps I could give him, have you?"

"Sorry, luv," she said, scooping up a bagful of chips and tossing salt on them. "All our fish is pre-filleted. Ask Anton, at the end, he might have something."

She handed me the chips and I paid her and got a can out of the chiller at the end of the big serving hatch and we wandered to the other end of the row of beach hut shops to investigate Anton's place. I

hadn't been there before since I tend to avoid places that do burgers and hot dogs since my mum used to tell me that they only use the crappy bits of the animals to make these things, like cheeks and noses and tails and stuff. She was quite possibly wrong but parental guidance in the formative years is a very powerful thing and since I've never been able to make a homemade burger that tastes anything like a burger from a stall I've not had any real motivation to break that conditioning. Fish, on the other hand, you can't really muck around with unless you get those really cheap fish fingers where whatever they're using that passes for fish is all mashed up and shaped into neat little oblongs.

Anyway, Anton proved to be reluctant to part with any scraps to someone who had a bag of chips and a can from a competitor's establishment, at least for free anyway

"Sorry, Alfie," I said, tossing him a chip. "That's all there is for the moment."

I saw someone emerge from Lucy's establishment and a brief flash of a black and purple clad body from within and remembered I'd said I'd visit her on Thursday.

"Looks like she's free," I told Alfie. "Let's go and have a chat."

I wandered up to Lucy's hut and Alfie followed, which was encouraging. He was interested in what was going on around him but he didn't seem to be inclined to wander far although we had yet to encounter another dog on the pier.

"Knock, knock," I said, peering in.

"We're closed," said a voice from the back somewhere. "Just haven't put the sign up yet."

"Oh, sorry," I said. I didn't seem to be having much luck with the local traders today. Maybe I had overstayed my welcome already. I turned to go back to the theatre portico and Lucy came bustling out with a 'Closed For Lunch' sign in her hand.

“Oh it's you,” she said. “Didn't expect you 'til after. Come on in. I'll just put the sign out. Fancy a cuppa?”

“Can Alfie come in too?” I asked.

“Who's Alfie?” she asked, hanging the sign over her A board.

“The dog,” I said, gesturing with my can.

“Ohhh, isn't he a sweetie,” she cooed bending over to pat his head.

Alfie handled it like a seasoned professional and started sniffing her ankles when she straightened up again.

“Where've you been keeping him?” she asked, going back inside. “Haven't seen you with a dog before?”

“I found him last night,” I said, following her in. “He was hurt so I took him to the vet this morning and he seems to have decided to stay with me.”

“Interesting,” she said. “Fancy a cuppa? Only teabags, I'm afraid.”

“Oh, yes, please,” I said. I didn't much like tea but it never hurts to accept other people's generosity. “I don't suppose I could buy a few teabags off you? The vet said to bathe Alfie's foot in warm tea but I don't want to get, like, a box of a hundred or something.”

“Oh, take them,” she said, grabbing a handful and handing them to me. “Can't let the little bugger suffer, can we.”

“Thanks,” I said, pushing them in my pocket.

“What's wrong with his foot, then?” she said, organising mugs and things.

I explained about the grass seed and the ulcer and she clucked sympathetically.

“He looks a bit skinny, too,” she said. “What have you been feeding

him?"

"Mince," I told her, "and people have been giving him bits of burgers and stuff since we got here. I'd rather he had some proper food but Jo and Anton don't have any spare so he'll have to wait 'til we get to the supermarket."

"Try some of the fishermen," she suggested. "They usually chuck the guts and stuff back in the sea before they take them home. Milk and sugar?"

"Please," I said, as anything that disguises the taste of tea is a bonus. "Won't he choke on the bones or something?"

"Not with guts and heads," she said, carrying two mugs out into her ..., I don't know what to call it, the main part of the room where she did her fortune telling. 'Office' doesn't begin to describe it since it was dim and lined with books and hanging cloths and there were charts with impressive mystical looking symbols on the walls. The small couch and comfy looking armchair suggested 'lounge' but that didn't seem appropriate either. Maybe 'lair'?

"What do you call this room?" I asked, sitting on the couch.

"My divinery," she said. "There's your tea. Did you bring the envelope?"

"What envelope?" I asked, perching the tea mug on my knee and peering suspiciously at the tea bag floating inside it. How did you get it out without scalding your fingers?

"The one where I predicted when you'd come and see me," she said. "You remember, you said it was a test."

"Oh yeah," I said and stood up and put my hand in my hip pocket. "Damn, it's in my other jeans."

Alfie was wandering around the room, sniffing things. No doubt the smells were fascinating since the room smelt of incense with an under layer of salt air and the faint tang of fish.

"Don't let him pee in here, will you," she said as he disappeared behind the couch on the trail of something deeply fascinating.

"Alfie, come out, boy," I called, tapping my other knee. "Come on, good boy."

He emerged the other end, grinning happily, and came and sat beside me.

"Good boy," I said, encouragingly. "Who's a good boy?"

He thumped his tail against the front of the couch and lay down with his head resting on the top of my foot.

"I was going to come around yesterday," I said, apologetically, "but I had a good run with the punters in the afternoon and I didn't want to break it. Sorry if that ruined your prediction."

"Actually, I predicted today," she said with a relaxed smile. "Although not for another hour or so. I saw you come after lunch. Still, you can check it when you get home."

"Actually it is after lunch for me," I said, wondering if she'd guessed that my jeans got soaked and the envelope was probably now an indecipherable wad.

"Perhaps," she said. "So are you going to move on over the weekend? You did say you'd only be here for a couple of days."

"That was my plan," I admitted. "But the vet was really good so I'm thinking I'll stay on 'til Alfie's foot is healed in case I need to take him back. If we go somewhere else they may not even have a vet and what if his foot gets infected or something?"

Lucy just smiled and nodded as if she knew that something like this was going to happen. But then, maybe fortune tellers just get into the habit of implying they already know it when you happen to mention something of your future plans.

"So how long have you been busking?" she asked, and took a long

drink of her tea.

I cautiously sipped mine, noticing that she had left the teabag in hers. It was ... tolerable.

“Nearly seven years,” I said.

“What made you start?”

“Oh, that's a long story,” I said, shifting position slightly. Alfie sighed in protest. “But the short version is that I was feeling completely stifled living with my parents in their little two up two down suburban conformity. I'd finished uni and my dad had got a job sorted for me as a trainee at the insurance company where he worked and I woke up one morning a few days before I was supposed to start with this nightmare vision of me spending the rest of my life as a drab little non-entity getting the train to work every morning and eating sausages and baked beans in front of the telly every night. It freaked me out so I grabbed my sax and ran away from it all.”

“That was brave,” she said.

“No, not really,” I said. “What would have been braver would have been to stay. A uni friend let me sleep on his couch for a few weeks and I've pretty much been on the move ever since, couch surfing, living in squats, stuff like that.”

“You've never wanted to settle down?” she asked, much the way my mother did whenever I went back to visit them, although mum phrased it more like 'you're still not settling down, then?' with a disappointed emphasis on the 'still'. My dad's boss had had words with him when I failed to show up for work but they'd both gotten over it pretty quickly. Well the boss had. I wasn't too sure about dad. Mum, on the other hand, was torn between wanting me to be happy and grandchildren, with the balance weighted fairly heavily towards the latter.

“God, no,” I said.

“So you're a loner?” she asked. “That doesn't seem right. From what

I've seen you're good with people. What about girls or friends generally?"

"Oh sure," I said, perhaps a little complacently. "There've been girls. I've even lived with a couple of them but it never lasts long. After a while I start to feel stifled again and need to move on. Bit like jobs. I get a job for a while, mostly during the winters but then, after a while I have to get out and about and be free in the sunshine again. Guys, though, no, I've never really got along with guys. Too much posturing, always trying to be macho and prove how manly they are. I can't be bothered with it."

"You haven't ever wanted to stay in one place then?" she asked. "For more than a short time?"

"No, not really," I said. "There's too much responsibility with that. Like the trike, for example," and I told her about finding the trike and about the responsibility and hassles of ownership that that had entailed. My own tiny little treadmill of consumerism.

"Maybe you are finding your place in the world," she said, "and these things are now beginning to become acceptable to you. After all, it's not just the trike, is it."

"Well, no," I admitted. "I've always had to maintain my sax, you know, reeds and pads and so on and if it's ever damaged or stolen I'll have to get another, but that's different. Sax is what I do and without it I'd be nothing. I'd just be a bum."

"I didn't mean the sax," she said. "I meant him," and she nodded at Alfie.

"How do you mean?" I said, puzzled.

"You've taken on the responsibility for another life," she said. "You've committed yourself to looking after him."

"No, I haven't," I said. "He isn't even on a leash. He can go anytime he wants."

“OK,” she said. “Would you like some more tea?”

“So are you going to predict my future?” I said, wondering why she'd dropped the subject so quickly.

“I already have,” she said. “I saw in your hand that the best tool for you is the crystal ball and that evening I viewed you.”

“So what did it say?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing much,” she said evasively.

I laughed. “Didn't it even say when I'll be moving on?” I asked.

“Oh you'll definitely be going places,” she said, getting up and going to make some more tea. “And very soon, too, I think, just not in ways that you expect.”

“Well that's pretty obvious,” I said. “I would have expected to walk or maybe get a train but now I'll be riding my trike, and Alfie can come with me, if he wants.” I left the 'surely you can do better than that?' hanging unspoken in the incensed air and Lucy didn't seem disposed to take it any further.

“I was talking to Janice in the Tourist Information Office a couple of days ago,” I said when Lucy came back with another mug of tea and a thick sandwich.

“She's a nice girl,” said Lucy, “although I think she's got a boyfriend.”

“Ohh, too bad,” I said, disappointed. I'd had one or two hopes in her direction, although nothing as permanent as 'boyfriend'. That said, maybe her boyfriend wasn't that permanent either, or maybe he was a little dull. You never know.

Alfie was eyeing Lucy's sandwich and she broke off a crust and he carefully took it from her fingers.

“She said the town is dying,” I said.

“Definitely,” said Lucy. “I’ve been here, ohhh, twenty five years now. We don’t get half the visitors we used to. Back then I’d have two, maybe even three people waiting outside to see me but now, some days I don’t get anyone at all. It was getting slowly quieter before the theatre closed but since then, its got a lot worse. Especially in the evenings. The pier is completely dead now in the evenings.”

“How long’s it been closed?” I asked.

“Coming up to eight years,” she said, “although it was running at a loss for a few years before that. I don’t know though, is the town dying because the theatre’s gone or is the theatre gone because the town’s dying?”

“I’d say the town was dying before the theatre closed,” I said, thinking about it. “Theatres need a certain number of people at every performance just to break even so if the numbers were dropping because you weren’t getting the visitors the theatre would have had to close.”

“You’re probably right,” she said. “Although with the theatre gone Fairchester is really just a beach and a pier. It needs something more to attract people than a pier that isn’t the longest in Britain any more with a fish and chip shop and a run down old fortune teller. You know, I rather think that if someone were able to get the theatre back up and running again it just might bring the town back to life. Give people a reason to come here.”

“Why don’t you look in your crystal ball?” I said.

“I have,” she said, “many times.”

“And?” I asked.

“There’re a lot of factors, she said. “The future’s never as clear cut as people like to think it is. There are always lots of possible futures and it’s not until options disappear that any clear future comes along and even then, things can still change.”

“What about fate?” I asked.

“Oh fate is just the word we use for when there are no more options for someone to choose between. It doesn't mean the future is fixed. It just means that a certain pathway is now being followed by that someone but since no one lives in complete isolation the influence of others will always have some effect, however small, that may lead to unexpected options opening up for that someone further down the path. Fate isn't fixed, it's merely the perception that it's fixed.”

“That's very profound,” I said.

“Not in the least,” said Lucy with a chuckle. “It's pretty obvious really. I might think it's my fate to sit here in my little divinery for the rest of my life but chance has brought you along and you might cause a gorgeous hunky rich man to pause outside for a few moments while he listens to you playing which might mean he notices this place and decides to come in to get his fortune told rather than walking on without noticing and end up whisking me away to a life of luxury and decadence.”

“So do you think that is your fate?” I asked. “To stay here for the rest of your life, I mean, not the luxury and decadence bit.”

“Oh, perhaps,” she said. “Or perhaps the luxury and decadence will come to me. We'll just have to wait and see. Anyway, you run along now. I have to open up again. After all, luxury and decadence isn't going to force its way in here, I have to leave the door open.”

She seemed to find that very funny although I didn't really see the funny side of it. I just found it a little sad that she saw her life rolling along in a little wooden hut on a pier in a dying town.

Alfie and I followed her out, Lucy to get her 'Closed For Lunch' sign and me to make some more music.

“Oh, look,” she suddenly exclaimed, 'there's Zeki,' and waved at an elderly eastern European looking man. “Zeki, Zeki, just a minute.”

Zeki paused in his march along the pier when he heard his name and looked around shortsightedly.

“Zeki's Hungarian,” said Lucy to me by way of explanation. Of what I wasn't too sure.

“Ahh, Luzi,” he said in a guttural voice when he recognised her coming towards him. He propped his fishing rod against the railing and put down his bucket.

“Zeki goes fishing almost every day,” Lucy said to me, “don't you, Zeki.”

“Yuss,” he said, “other side teater,” waving a gnarled hand at the theatre.

“Do you eat the fish you catch?” she asked, miming eating.

“Yuss, I eat,” he said, looking puzzled as though he could see no other reason for going fishing. “You want I catch fish you?”

“Could you save some fish heads for my friend Ben?” she asked, putting her hand on my arm.

“I throw water,” he said, miming throwing something over the railing. “You want heads?”

“Yes,” I said, “for Alfie, for my dog,” and pointed at Alfie.

“No problemo,” he said. “You come, teater, two hour, OK?”

“OK,” I said. “In two hours, thank you.”

“Is good fish,” he said. “Is dogfish,” and he burst into cackles of laughter. “Dog fish is dogfish, is wery good, yuss?”

“Yes, very funny,” I said, smiling to show him how funny I thought his joke was.

“How is your arthritis, Zeki?” asked Lucy.

Zeki made a twisting waving movement with his hand and grimaced. “Cold no good,” he said. “Summer, it is coming, no. Warm sunshine,

yuss. Is good. Two hour, OK.”

“Yes, in two hours,” I said, holding up two fingers.

“He doesn't always catch anything, poor love,” said Lucy as we watched him stomp away, “but he's here every day.”

“Thanks for that,” I said. “Hey, I think you might have a customer.”

Lucy looked round and saw someone peering in through her door.

“Ooops, gotta go, ciao,” she said, moving rapidly off before the man could get away.

I laughed gently since he didn't look to be either gorgeous, hunky or even well off, and went and retrieved my sax from just inside the doorway, where I'd left it.

Chapter Seven

I'd noticed this guy the day before. He'd sat all alone on one of the benches that faced out across the eastern side of the beach just down from the beach hut shops tossing the occasional piece of bread from a paper bag to the seagulls. I hadn't paid him any attention beyond noticing that he stayed there longer than anyone else did. People listening to me stayed for maybe an entire number and sometimes two. People simply enjoying the pier seemed to sit on the benches or lean over the railings and eat their fish and chips or burgers then move on after a while but this guy didn't. He just sat there, quietly, feeding the birds.

Today, after I'd left Lucy's and played a couple of tunes, I noticed him again, only this time he was closer. When I saw him he was leaning against the railing just down from the telescope I used as a backrest when I took a break. He was just gazing out over the beach, watching the seagulls although he wasn't feeding them so they didn't take a lot of notice of him. I was maybe into my fifth or sixth number when he turned around and started staring at me.

I guess what made me notice him, apart from the fact he stayed fairly still whereas the other tourists tended to bustle round, was that he wasn't dressed like a tourist. I'm no fashionista and I couldn't tell you how this year's fashions differed from last year's but the tourists tended to dress, I don't know, cheerfully, I guess. This man was dressed in dark grey trousers with a pale blue work-style shirt and a sleeveless knitted cardigan. He carried a dark grey jacket over his arm and looked as though he should be wearing a tie. He looked like he was on his way to work but obviously wasn't because he had that aimless way of loitering that people have when they don't have anything else to do. People who are on a break and will be rushing off shortly tend to loiter with a sense of purpose, almost as though they're making themselves loiter.

Anyway, someone asked me what Alfie's name was and I told her and after patting him and cooing over how cute he was she asked me why I'd called him Alfie.

“Only people usually call their dogs something like Blackie or Rover

or something like that,” she said. “Alfie’s such a non-doggy sort of name. Was Alfie your dad or something?”

“Actually I called him Alfie after a film I saw a long time ago,” I said. “It was from the sixties, I think, and it had Michael Caine in it but the soundtrack was by one of the all time great sax players. A guy called Sonny Rollins and the movie opens with a little dog who looked a bit like Alfie roaming the streets while Sonny Rollins does this great sax solo.”

“Ohh, cool,” she said. “Can you play it for me? I’d love to hear it.”

“Sure thing, love,” I said, accidentally on purpose stumbling over the corner of my sax case.

The lady took the hint, no doubt aided by Alfie sitting beside her and wagging his tail happily. She opened her purse and dropped 50p in my case.

“You’re a lovely person,” I said smiling at her and she smiled back expectantly.

I don’t usually play jazz while busking since it’s a bit of an acquired taste and people generally prefer the pop hits from a few years ago but there weren’t many people standing round and she had, very kindly, made a donation.

“I’ll be honest,” I said, playing for time while I tried to remember the opening fingering, “I haven’t played this for a while, but it goes something like this.”

I don’t memorise music note for note. My brain seems to be able to work around the general feel for the melody but I do depend a lot on the first bar. So long as I get the first three or four notes right then the rest of the melody follows along naturally. Of course, if I stuff up the first few notes then the tune often ends up a shambles since it doesn’t sound right and I don’t get into the flow. Some musicians, of course, can transpose in their heads while they are playing but I’ve never developed that skill. On the odd occasion I’ve played with a band I have to do all the transposing the long way on manuscript paper and

play it a few times until it starts to sound right in the new key.

Still, Apollo, the god of music, was on my side today and I got the first couple of notes right and then the rest just naturally flowed on. It's a happy, lively tune and I played it with gusto.

"Oh, that is so Alfie," said the lady, beaming, when I came to the end. "I can just see him running around to that. Awesome," and she tossed another 50p into my sax case. "Thanks, see ya round."

"Nice one, Alfie," I said to Alfie and he ran off to pee against one of the railing supports.

I watched him, wondering if I ought to try and stop him or something then decided not to worry about it until someone complained. After all, peeing against poles is what dogs do. I turned back to see that the loitering office worker type man was coming over from his spot by the telescope and was fumbling in his pocket. He brought out a few coins and selected 20p.

"I enjoyed that film," he said quietly and dropped the coin in my case and walked away without expecting a reply.

"Thank you," I called after him but he didn't acknowledge.

"Do you know 'Wonderwall'?" someone else asked.

"Nah, never heard of it, mate," I said and he scowled at me and walked away shaking his head.

I chuckled to myself. Wonderwall is a great song but it's really a vocal number and doesn't have a strong melody for a solo instrument to pick up on. It's much better for buskers who can sing along while strumming a guitar but, as anyone who had heard me sing will attest, the sax is the best instrument for me since I can't sing with a sax mouthpiece in my mouth.

The loitering office worker man had returned to his spot against the railing and was staring out to sea. I forgot about him as I launched into a few more numbers that the people in the vicinity appeared to

enjoy then decided it was time for a break. I like to take a break every now and then, not only to rest my jaw and lips but also to change the reed and clean the sax. Spit and condensation build up and can affect the sound and if you've been using the same reed for too long it can start to feel a bit soggy and unresponsive. This particular reed had started to develop a slight buzzing which meant that there was a droplet of spit trapped between it and the mouthpiece. It didn't seem to bother the listeners but it was bothering me and, as any musician will tell you, if your instrument feels 'off' your playing goes to pot.

I sat on the wooden beams of the pier and leaned back against the telescope post and rolled a cigarette. One of the nice things about playing here was that sitting on wood is so much more comfortable than sitting on a cement pavement and the wood of the pier was worn smooth by the passing of time and wasn't going to give me a splinter in my bum. I lit my ciggie and grabbed Alfie and looked at his foot. It already seemed a lot less inflamed than it had been.

"Looking good," I told him and he waggled his eyebrows at me.

I put him down again and he went to peer over the edge of the pier and it occurred to me that when he had peed against the railing earlier he might have peed on someone underneath.

"Maybe they thought it was raining," I said to myself with a chuckle.

I pulled the cleaning cloth through the sax a couple of times to get rid of any excess moisture then took the reed off the mouthpiece. I gave the mouthpiece a wipe with the cloth then gave it a good rub down with a toothbrush I carry for cleaning the sax. Since the mouthpiece spends a lot of time in your mouth it's a good idea to give it a good clean regularly as the dried spit can build up and there is always the possibility of bacteria accumulating. Not that I've ever heard of anyone getting a mouth infection from a dirty mouthpiece but I don't like the idea of it.

"Scuse me, mate," said a gruff voice over my shoulder.

I looked up from my scrubbing. A bearded man in a dayglo vest was bending over me.

“Gorra empty the telescope,” he said.

“Oh right,” I said and pushed the sax case away and stood up.

He opened the lower section of the telescope with a key and pulled out the cash box inside. It didn't seem particularly full but he tipped it into a canvas bag and replaced it inside the telescope frame and locked the door again.

“Ta, mate,” he said and looked at his watch then wrote something in a little notebook. He pulled out a cloth and gave both lenses a perfunctory wipe.

“Didn't sound like much,” I said conversationally, taking a puff on my ciggie.

“Ha,” he said. “Ain't hardly worth bothering with.”

“How often do you empty them?” I asked when it became apparent that he was in no desperate hurry to be off.

“Once a week,” he said. “Probably could do it every two weeks. Few years back I was emptying 'em every day but no one hardly uses them anymore. 'Cept maybe on a bank holiday.”

“I don't suppose there's much to look at,” I said.

“S'right,” he said. “Used t'be the fishing boats coming and going but that's died orf now. Just about all that's left to look at is the nudie sunbathers at the far end of t'beach,” and he leered at me.

“Bit cold for that, isn't it?” I asked, peering up the beach to see if I could see any nude sunbathers with my naked eyes. I couldn't. The far end of the beach looked to be deserted.

“Few more weeks, yet,” he said, “although there ain't as many of them as there used to be neither.”

He paused then spat over the railing. “Mostly men now, too,” he said sadly.

“Yeah,” I said sympathetically. “Who wants to pay to use a telescope to look at naked men?”

“S'right,” he said, shaking his canvas bag to emphasis his lost earnings although I had the feeling he regretted the passing of the women nudists more than the fishing boats. “See yus.”

“Ciao,” I said and settled myself back and rolled another cigarette. I toyed with playing 'Poetry In Motion' when I went back to playing but figured the allusion to female nudists would be lost on the tourists without an explanation and it didn't really seem worth the effort.

I rummaged through my reed box and found another reed. This will make no sense to anyone who's never played a sax, or perhaps a clarinet, but even though they seem to look the same, after a while the pattern of grime on the reed makes each one instantly recognisable and your favourite reeds jump out at you, begging you to play with them again. I decided, reluctantly, not to use any of my favourites as I like to keep them for those special occasions and, instead, chose a reed that was still fairly new and almost obscenely clean looking. I stuck it in my mouth to moisten it and wondered if it was getting close to the time I should go looking for Zeki to see if he had any fish heads.

“Excuse me,” said a soft voice.

I looked up. It was the loitering office worker man. I took the reed out of my mouth and smiled. “Hello,” I said, as you do.

“Was it you playing down by the entrance a couple of nights ago?” he asked. “Only I've heard you during the day a few times and you only play that pop music but I haven't seen any other sax players round here.”

“You mean Wednesday?” I asked.

He nodded. “Playing jazz,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, “that was me. Were you there?”

“Yes,” he said. “I was sitting further up listening to the surf when you turned up.”

“Oh sorry,” I said, fitting the reed to the mouthpiece. “Didn't know you were there.”

“Oh don't be sorry,” he said. “You were great. I loved listening to you. Why don't you play like that during the day?”

“The punters don't like it,” I said, fitting the mouthpiece to the neck of the sax. “They like to hear what they're familiar with and jazz hasn't been popular for ohh fifty or sixty years. I only play it for myself, when I'm alone. You like jazz?”

“Yes,” he said and went to lean against the railing. He looked sad and maybe lonely.

“I like your style,” he said abruptly. “You reminded me of Stan Getz or maybe Ben Webster with that haunting, breathy quality.”

“Hey, that's great,” I said, warming to him. How can you not like someone who thinks you're wonderful? “You seem to know your jazz.”

“I used to have quite an extensive collection,” he said sadly, but didn't elaborate.

I had the feeling he wanted to talk but didn't know how to. I wondered what to say myself, actually, since I generally respond to people talking to me rather than initiate conversations, unless she's cute, of course.

“My name's Ben,” I said, after a couple of heartbeats, “Ben Webster.”

“Really?” he said, with a disbelieving quality to his voice.

“No, not really,” I said. “That's my professional name though since I'm a huge fan of the real Ben Webster and I modelled my style on him.”

“Right,” he said. “I'm Cyril, Cyril Delaney. Nice to meet you.”

He held out his hand so I shook it.

"I'd have given you more," he said, "only I don't have much cash on me at the moment."

"Hey, not a problem," I said. "Don't stress about it. Whatever you want to give is fine by me."

He gave me a half smile then turned to go and paused.

"Will you be playing jazz tonight?" he asked, "like Wednesday?"

I'd been toying with playing the entrance to the pier as it would be Friday night and my licence let me play on the pier up to midnight so I should be able to get the attention of a few pub goers around closing time but decided against it.

"Not tonight," I said. "My dog's hurt and I need to give him his tablets and he ought to get a good night's rest as well. I'll be here tomorrow though."

He nodded and turned to go again.

"Hey," I said, feeling unaccountably sorry for him, "stick around for a few minutes, OK?"

"OK," he said and leaned expectantly against the railing.

"Give me a couple of moments," I said, getting up and picking up my sax case.

I went back to my spot under the portico and Alfie followed me. He was looking a little tired and went and sat beside the trike as if to tell me he'd had enough for the day.

I put on my harness and attached the sax and gave it an experimental toot before adjusting the mouthpiece so it was at the right angle. I glanced over at Cyril and gave him a thumbs up then launched into Stan Getz' *Girl From Ipanema* which is, in my humble opinion, one of his best recordings.

It actually didn't go down too badly with the passersby, probably because it had been a hit back in the sixties when jazz had briefly been fashionable before the Beatles ruined everything by making everyone want to be like them. Oh, if only the Beatles had had a sax player!

Cyril smiled in recognition but when I glanced over again towards the end of the number he'd gone.

"Do you know the Benny Hill theme?" asked a middle aged woman, coming up to me.

"I suppose so," I said, reluctantly.

I don't really like that tune. Not because it isn't a good tune, because it is. It's just that Boots Randolph, who wrote and recorded it – as Yakety Sax – before Benny Hill appropriated it, was a brilliant sax player and it's just too fast for me to do it justice. I played it for her at about three quarter speed, and about three quarter accuracy, and she seemed reasonably happy although not ecstatic. I felt exhausted afterwards and decided to give up and go to find Zeki.

Alfie seemed pleased when I put the sax case in the trike's basket and happily let me lift him in on top where he lay with his head hanging over the rim. I undid the security chain and wrapped it round the handle bar and we majestically trundled off round the side of the theatre.

"Hello Zeki," I said, coming to a stop beside him.

He didn't move. His fishing rod was propped against the railing and he was leaning with one foot on the lower rail and his head propped on his arm on the upper rail. He seemed to be asleep.

"Zeki?" I said a little louder. He didn't react.

I peeked inside his bucket and there were two fish struggling in a couple of inches of water.

I reached out and touched his arm and he started.

“Mi a fene?” he grunted and twisted round to see who was disturbing him and knocked over his fishing rod.

I grabbed it and passed it back to him and he peered at me before taking it.

“Ahh, dog fish man,” he said, a little blearily. “Is good, two fishes,” and he held up two fingers in a sign that is generally rude. I figured he didn't speak the language so he didn't know. You learn quickly when you deal with the public to not take offence with things unless you really have to since that usually ends in a fight.

“Very good,” I said, smiling encouragingly. “Two fish are good.”

“Yuss,” he said. “I eat tonight well,” and gave a hoarse laugh which turned into a racking cough that brought tears to his eyes.

“Umm,” I said when it looked as though he was getting over it. “The fish heads?”

“Yuss,” he said and pulled out a knife that looked as though it might have been a WW2 bayonet.

He reached into the bucket and grabbed one of the fish and nimbly whacked its head on the railing. It went limp and, with what looked like a lot of experience, he thumped the bayonet down and the fish's head fell on the planking. Alfie looked up with sudden interest.

“You want?” he said and mimed slitting his belly open and pulling out his intestines.

“Please,” I said, lifting Alfie out of the basket and putting him down.

Alfie ran over to the fish head and sniffed it suspiciously then looked to me.

“This isn't mince,” he seemed to be saying.

“Try it,” I said and Zeki watched interestedly.

Alfie sniffed the fish head again and looked questioningly at me.

“Haven't you had fish before?” I asked.

Zeki flicked the fish head with his foot and Alfie clearly decided that he was about to lose whatever this strange smelling but potentially edible thing was so he took it in his mouth and went round the back of the trike to taste it in peace. He must have decided it was palatable since a few moments later he came back and sniffed around to see if there was any more.

Zeki gave a distinctly east European grunt and, with flick of his wrist, slit the fish from tail to oozing neck and used his thumb to scoop its innards out. They fell onto the planks in a quite disgusting way but Alfie was waiting. The fish guts disappeared.

“He like,” said Zeki, tossing the headless, gutted fish into the bucket. He grabbed the other fish and held it up. “Want?”

The fish flapped wildly and one eye stared at me. I nodded, feeling quite sick.

Moments later that fish's head hit the planks, closely followed by a mess of intestines. Alfie didn't share my qualms and licked the planks clean.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling I ought to shake Zeki's hand but reluctant to since they glistened with fish juice.

“Is good,” he said. “Tomorrow, you want?”

“Umm, yes,” I said. “If you don't mind.”

“No problemo,” he said, starting to wind in his line. “two fishes, is good. I go now. Tomorrow, yuss?”

“Yes,” I said. I rather fancied I saw one of the fish move in the bucket but it couldn't possibly have since it was now more or less just fillets.

“I'll be back,” said Zeki, “no problemo,” and he grinned, showing that

he still had some of his teeth left.

I gave him a wave and Alfie and I got back on the trike. I figured Zeki must have used the Terminator films to help him learn English.

“Actually, that was probably water on his hands,” I thought as we made our way down the pier, “although I really don't fancy fish for dinner tonight.”

Chapter Eight

We stopped off at the little kiosk at the entrance to the pier to get some more cigarette papers and a Mars Bar. I gave my disposable lighter a shake beside my ear and it sounded very low so I decided to get another as well.

“Ohhh, look at that cute little doggie,” came from behind me.

I'd been hearing it all day and I was getting quite used to it. People liked Alfie and stopped to talk to him and, frankly, he was definitely not hurting my business. I paid for my things and turned to smile at the lady. She was one of those fluffy ladies in her fifties who always seem to gush over everything and get flustered easily.

“He's looking very thin,” said her companion, gruffly. She looked to be made of sterner stuff with iron grey hair in a short, somewhat masculine style.

She bent over Alfie and inspected him closely. Alfie, attention where that he was, rolled on his back wagging his tail and all ready to be loved and fussed over.

“He's looking very happy,” cooed the fluffy lady, fondling his ears.

“He's emaciated,” said the gruff lady. “And look at his foot, it's disgusting.”

“His name's Alfie,” I said, too inexperienced with pets to recognise the warning signs.

“Isn't he adorable!” and “is he your dog?” came from the ladies simultaneously.

“Yes,” I said, unsure of which lady I was answering.

“You should take better care of him,” growled the gruff lady.

“Umm,” I said, unsure of what to say. Alfie didn't like the tone of her voice and rolled back on his belly and looked up at me for

reassurance.

“Oh my god,” said the gruff lady. “Look at that, the poor dog is cowering!”

She glowered at me and I instinctively backed away.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, abusing an innocent little dog. I’ve a good mind to report you to the RSPCA.”

“He doesn’t look too badly treated, Dorothy,” said the fluffy lady looking worried. “Perhaps he’s just naturally thin and wiry. Some dogs are like that. Greyhounds for instance.”

“This is not a greyhound, Alice,” snarled Dorothy. “And look at that foot! I’d say that revolting man has kicked him or thrown something at him.”

“It was a grass seed,” I said, nervously, wishing I could get my sax out and play them something soothing.

“Oh don’t be so absurd,” said Dorothy, waving a finger at me. “How could a tiny grass seed do that much damage? You have clearly been abusing this creature.”

She glared at me, all puffed up with self-righteousness. Alice plucked ineffectually at her sleeve.

“We ought to go, Dorothy,” she said, with a slight waver in her voice, “we’re supposed to be back at the hotel in fifteen minutes.”

Alfie didn’t like the atmosphere and tried to hide himself between the sax case and the edge of the basket.

“I won’t let that man hit you,” said Dorothy, protectively, putting her hand heavily on Alfie’s back. “Oh my god, there’s no meat on him at all. He’s all skin and bone.”

“Dorothy,” said Alice, trying again, “don’t you think we’d best leave it, it’s none of our business.”

A few people had stopped to watch since public commotions are often entertaining.

"E is looking a bit thin, like, isn't he," piped up an older woman to her husband who was leaning heavily on his walking stick.

Alfie whined and scrabbled a bit with his front paws.

"He so weak he can barely move," said Dorothy.

"You sort 'im out, then, love," called a man in his thirties. "Give 'im hell." He laughed and walked off.

I had no idea what was happening and had a strong urge to run away but I couldn't as my sax was on the trike and Dorothy and the elderly couple were blocking it from moving.

"There's a policeman," said Dorothy, suddenly. "Run along and get him, Alice, while I protect this poor little animal."

Alice looked uncertainly from Dorothy to me to Samson then back to Dorothy.

"Go on, Alice," said Dorothy, staring challenging at me, daring me to make a run for it. She adjusted her grip on her handbag as though readying it for use as a weapon. She probably kept a brick in it for emergencies like this.

Indecisively Alice wavered then took a couple of steps backwards. She was saved from having to make a decision by Samson. He'd spotted the small crowd and his finely honed policeman's faculties sensed a brewing breach of the peace and he came over briskly to investigate.

"Ahh, officer," said Dorothy. "I want you to arrest this man for cruelty to animals."

Samson looked at Dorothy then at Alfie then at me then at the small group of people watching.

"Move along, please," he said to the onlookers. "There's nothing to see

here.”

No one moved and Alfie looked worried.

Satisfied that he had stamped his authority on the situation, Samson turned to Dorothy.

“Now what seems to be the trouble, madam?” he asked, politely.

“This man is abusing this dog,” she said, pointing to me and Alfie.

“Is this your dog, Ben?” he asked.

“Umm,” I said, not quite knowing what to say. I had a vague recollection that dogs needed to be licensed.

“Of course it's his dog,” said Dorothy. “He was about to get on this contraption when we intervened. Look how thin he is and just look at the state of his paw!”

She gave the trike a look of complete contempt.

“Ben?” said Samson, calmly waiting for an explanation.

“I found him last night,” I said. “He's a stray.”

“Oh for god's sake,” said Dorothy, “what utter nonsense.”

“If you wouldn't mind,” said Samson to Dorothy, looking at her.

She bristled but remained silent.

“Ben,” said Samson.

“Like I said,” I said, “I found him in last night's storm so I took him in and he was starving so I gave him my dinner and took him to the vet this morning so they could look at his foot.”

“Balderdash,” said Dorothy. “Anyone can see that paw has not been attended to.”

“Which vet was this?” asked Samson.

“I don't remember,” I said, my mind going blank.

Dorothy snorted as if this amounted to a full confession.

“Umm, it was out near Sainsbury's,” I said, “about three streets away. I don't remember the name of the road either.”

“Hope it wasn't the one near that Chinese Takeaway,” called out a comedian lounging nearby, “or they won't have no meat for their dinners,” and laughed. No one else did.

“Oh, look,” I said, suddenly remembering the invoice the receptionist had given me and rummaging through my pockets to find it. “They gave me an invoice.”

As inevitably as the sun sets, I couldn't find the invoice in my pockets.

“I must have put it in my case,” I said and leaned over to lift Alfie out of the basket.

“Don't you dare touch that dog,” said Dorothy, puffing herself up and raising a hand as if to strike me.

“Calm down, please,” said Samson. “Please, madam, if you wouldn't mind stepping back so this gentleman can access his saxophone case.”

Dorothy reluctantly stepped back about three inches. I picked up Alfie and the basket must have nipped him or something since he gave a little yelp. He hadn't yelped before, not even when the vet was rummaging around inside his ulcer. I could feel the forces of darkness massing around me.

I held Alfie under my arm and opened the case with my other hand.

“Oh thank god,” I muttered, looking inside the accessory space. There, wedged between the bag of spare pads and my little set of jeweller's screwdrivers I used for repairs and adjustments was the neatly folded invoice from the vet and the slim packet of antibiotics.

I grabbed the invoice and flapped it, trying to open it with one hand. Samson reached over, took it and unfolded it.

“Carpenter Street Veterinary Clinic,” he read out loud. “Ulceration of front left dorsal metatarsal region, cause embedded grass seed, consult waiver reason, stray animal, 7 times Amoxyclav tabs 250mg £22.50, paid and it's dated today.”

He handed it to Dorothy to inspect and she tried to burn it with her eyes.

“Hummmph,” she snorted derisively and seemed to be considering whether or not to claim it was a forgery. Samson picked up the packet of tablets and noted that the label read 'Amoxyclav 250 Broadpectrum Antibiotic Tablets for animal treatment only' and 'half tablet twice daily with food'. He opened the packet and inspected the strip of seven blisters and noted that one had been opened and that there was a half tablet inside it.

“I gave Alfie the first this morning,” I said. “He isn't due the second half for a while.”

Samson put the tablets back in the packet and retrieved the invoice from Dorothy and gave them back to me.

“It seems to me,” he said, looking at Dorothy, “that this is a rescued stray animal and it appears to be being cared for. I see no evidence to the contrary.”

Dorothy looked at Samson, thin lipped, then at Alfie. She ignored me completely.

“Perhaps I jumped to a conclusion prematurely,” she said. “Come along, Alice, we can't waste any more time here.”

Alice gave me and Samson a tentative smile and reached out to pat Alfie then the pair of them moved off along the esplanade, Dorothy a half pace ahead of Alice.

“I think that's the closest you're going to get to an apology,”

murmured Samson, watching them go.

I put Alfie on the ground so I could put the invoice and tablets back in my case and he ran over to sniff Samson's boots.

"Are you planning on taking the dog to the pound?" asked Samson.

"I was going to keep him," I said. "If that's all right."

"It should by rights be returned to its owner," said Samson.

"I've no idea who his owner is," I said. "He didn't have a collar and the vet said he wasn't microchipped."

"All dogs are required by law to be microchipped," said Samson, "so I suggest that you take him back to the vet and ask them to chip him. It doesn't cost much but there's a £500 fine if he's caught without a chip."

"Oh," I said, worriedly. "Are you going to fine me?"

"Oh I'll give you a couple of weeks," he said with a smile. "So long as you don't leave it too long."

"I'll do it on Monday," I promised, relieved that I wasn't going to be fined £500 but still a little worried about how much microchipping would cost. It did cross my mind that if I moved on the police in the next town wouldn't know he wasn't microchipped but then it occurred to me that if a cop took exception to me for some reason, and it does happen, they might check Alfie's chip just for devilment.

"It's also the law that dogs have collars," said Samson, gently, "with a tag that gives your address."

"It's an expensive business having a dog, isn't it," I said, putting Alfie back in the basket.

"It's because so many dogs get dumped," he said. "Somewhere around a hundred thousand a year. If they weren't tagged and chipped there would be a lot more."

"That's not very nice," I said, shocked. "Why do people get dogs then abandon them?"

"A number of reasons," said Samson, reaching out to pat Alfie. "Still, this little lad is one of the lucky ones."

"Oh, why's that?" I asked.

"He's found someone who cares," said Samson. "Best get him a collar soon, they're more obvious than microchips. Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Thanks," I said, automatically. "And you. Are you on duty every day?"

"Only week days at the moment," he said.

"Doing anything exciting over the weekend?" I asked.

"I'm taking the wife over to France for a weekend getaway," he said. "It's our tenth anniversary."

"Oh that's great," I said. "Are you taking your children with you?"

"Oh no," he said, smiling happily. "I'd never met a policeman who smiled as much as Samson did. "They're staying with her mother for the weekend."

"It'll be a nice break for you then," I said. "How many children do you have?"

"Just the two," he said. "Lawrence, who's eight and Bethany, who's five."

Samson hesitated for a moment then pulled his wallet from inside his uniform jacket.

"That's Bethany," he said, showing me a small passport sized photo of a very happy little girl beaming at the camera, "and that's Lawrence." Lawrence had been snapped while whizzing by on a skateboard but it

hadn't stopped him from grinning at the camera as well.

"Nice kids," I said, since it's more or less a requirement, although these did look quite nice.

"And that's Adele, my wife," he said showing me a picture of a rather bosomy blonde. He folded his wallet and put it away.

"So there's going to be another kiddie then," I said, "in about nine months?"

Samson guffawed and looked almost embarrassed.

"You never know," he said, then his walkie talkie started to make noises. "Now what," he muttered then excused himself to answer the call.

I gave Alfie an absent minded pat and climbed on the trike and started to cycle home. It struck me that something significant had just happened. Perhaps Samson was just being friendly but if I was a cop I wouldn't be showing my wife and kids' photos around. After all, policemen do have enemies.

I cycled slowly out of town reflecting that it was quite invigorating to be looked on positively by a policeman. Generally buskers are seen as not far above pickpockets and, whenever possible, the cop's instinct is to shut us down and move us out. Actually, it's not just the police, it's anyone in authority. The authorities on the whole want everyone neatly identified and locked into specific addresses so the entire populace can be found and taxed and licensed and generally controlled and prevented from doing anything remotely subversive. Music, of course, is highly subversive since it plays on emotions and emotions, when roused, can be uncontrollable. National anthems, for example, are designed to stir patriotic fervour and every rebel group worth its salt has some form of rallying song. Even "The Wheels On The Bus Go Round And Round" can be subversive in the right context, such as when sung by striking bus drivers.

It was still quite early so when we reached Sainsbury's I popped in and got a few odds and ends for dinner as well as some bread and

cheese and a small jar of coffee. I spotted a packet of dried pigs ears on special and got them as treats for Alfie. Leaving Sainsbury's I started to think about Dorothy and my resentment left me when I realised that her heart was in the right place. She wasn't to know that I had only recently rescued Alfie and, yes, to an outsider, it very probably did look as though I was ill treating him. Fair play to her for trying to do something about it rather than just walk on.

On the edge of town, not far from when I had probably found the trike, there was a pile of refuse beside the road. Someone's bin had been put out but not collected and animals or kids had knocked it over and strewn packets, cans, nasty looking shapeless soggy things, burst tea bags and coffee grounds all over the verge and no one had bothered to clear it up. Maybe if I had been less of a couch environmentalist I might have stopped to clear it up myself but I wasn't – I didn't even have a couch – and kept on going. Perhaps half a mile later something was niggling at my mind and I turned around and went back to investigate.

“Aha,” I said triumphantly and leapt off the trike and grabbed a 1.8 litre plastic tub of soft scoop vanilla ice cream. It was almost empty although it was pretty disgusting inside and was covered in ants feasting off congealed tomato sauce that had bled from a broken sauce bottle. “Perfect!”

I wiped it down with some kitchen roll that still had a few dry patches and put it in the trike's basket. Alfie sniffed it a few times then looked at me askance as if affronted that I expected him to share his sleeping compartment with such things.

“Get over it,” I said and he twisted round so that his nose was upwind of it. Maybe he didn't like the smell of roast garlic or perhaps it was the sun-dried tomato.

“Hey, that'll be useful, too,” I muttered and picked up a cereal bowl that had a small chunk missing from the rim. It looked fine otherwise, apart from the remains of crusted on muesli and yogurt. The bowl went into the basket as well. At this rate I was going to need to find a front basket for the trike. Once you start on the treadmill of ownership and consumption, one thing leads to another and your acquisitions

start to accumulate.

Back home I gave Alfie his evening half tablet with a piece of cheese in case the fish bits had already left his stomach. The label did say to give the tablet with food. I heated up some water and made myself a coffee and some tea with a tea bag. I left the cereal bowl to soak in warm water for a while and mixed some cold water with the tea so it wasn't too hot and gave Alfie's foot a good clean while he sat there patiently. Only a couple of times did he try to jerk his paw away. The vibrant redness had faded away to a dull redness and the wound didn't look angry anymore. In fact, apart from a few dried flecks there didn't seem to be any pus either and the open sore looked to be drying. When I thought he'd had enough I let him go and he spent a few minutes licking all the tea off.

I gave the ice cream carton a good clean and dried it off as best I could with the bottom of one of the legs of the jeans that had dried during the day and used my teaspoon to mix up a paste of baking soda using the vinegar and a decent squeeze of lemon juice. It smelt pretty virulent and would no doubt be useful if I ever felt faint but the lid of the carton was a good tight fit. Using my fingers I smeared the paste fairly liberally over the down-tube of the trike and left it to do whatever it was going to do while I scrubbed the cereal bowl with my fingernails.

"There you go, boy," I said when it seemed to be sufficiently muesli free, although muesli is supposed to be good for you. I filled it with water from the tap and put it in a corner of the little kitchen so he could have a drink when he wanted it. He seemed quite thirsty and, for the first time, I wondered what he'd done during the day. I hadn't noticed him drinking and, come to think of it, I'd only noticed him pee a couple of times. Maybe he was dehydrating? Still, he was still alive and reasonable bouncy and he had plenty of water now so no great harm done. The fish must have been fairly wet anyway.

I spent the next couple of hours grinding away at the trike's frame with the steel wool and paste and, impressively, it seemed to work although it was going to take a fair amount of elbow grease. When the light started to go I mixed up some more paste in the carton and left it ready to take with me the next day. If things were quiet or I fancied

a break from playing I could squeeze in a little more rust removal. I made a mental note to stop off at Sainsbury's on the way to the pier to buy a bottle of water for Alfie. I could always refill it from the tap but I didn't have anything to carry water in at the moment.

It wasn't until I lay down on my bedroll that I realised I was hungry. My enthusiasm for polishing up the trike had run away with me and I'd forgotten to do any dinner. It wasn't particularly late since, when you don't have any lights, you tend to go to bed when it gets dark and get up when you can't sleep any more. I got my bread and cheese and Alfie and I had a picnic in the dark although I didn't have any of the pigs' ears.

"It's been a good day," I told Alfie and he kind of agreed. At least I assumed he agreed. He was still here and, judging by the smells, his stomach was coming to terms with being fed again. It occurred to me that he might need to go to the toilet in the night so I got up and wedged the back door open so he could go outside if he needed to.

I lay in the dark, listening to Alfie snoring.

"I like it here," I thought. "It's a nice little town and the people are nice. Like that vet and Samson. And Zeki. He didn't have to give me the fish heads, he could have asked for money but he didn't. Even Dorothy. She stood up for Alfie and didn't take it too badly when Samson showed she was wrong. And people seem to be liking my music. It's pretty cool here, I think I might stay for a few more days. And what about old Cyril, eh. Giving me 20p for playing some jazz when he clearly couldn't afford it. I wonder what his story is? Oh and what about that guy with the telescope and his nudie sunbathers! Yeah, nice little town. Shame it's dying."

Chapter Nine

I felt unusually positive about things in the morning. I'm normally fairly positive, don't get me wrong, but that morning I was more than usually positive. The sky was cloudless and, when the sun came up, it was pleasantly warm and the day looked cheerful. Alfie, on the other hand, after opening an eye and watching me get up moved over to the warm spot where I'd been sleeping and curled up again. Clearly he wasn't a morning dog.

I sat on the doorstep in the early light, smoking and drinking my coffee. I always have it black as its easier than having milk and worrying about transporting it or storing it. The trike was looking noticeably better. The parts I'd worked on were significantly rust free so after discussing it with the cat that sometimes wandered past I got back to work. The paste in the ice cream carton had dried out a little but a splash more of vinegar and some vigorous stirring put that to rights.

Saturday!

Always a good day in the busking world. Even when you've got a not too good site it still seems to do better on Saturday. Maybe because it's the weekend or maybe because the people who are out and about aren't on their way to or from work and are more relaxed about life. Anyway, the pier was turning out to be a good little site. The number of people stopping to listen had increased as the week progressed and they seemed to be staying longer and, which doesn't always happen, seemed to be becoming more generous.

Alfie announced his readiness to face the world again by chasing the cat out of the courtyard and barking. Satisfied that he had stamped his authority on his territory he marked out the key spots then went to replenish his fluid levels. Maybe, when I painted the trike I'd paint 'Alfie' on his bowl, give him a sense of ownership and belonging although it would probably depend on what colour I ended up with. Speaking of ownership and belonging, I needed to get him a collar to satisfy the local bureaucrats.

“Come on Alfie,” I said, getting up from the trike. The downtube at

the front was probably about as rust free as I was ever going to get it. "Time for your tablet and some cheese."

Alfie seemed to be familiar with the word 'cheese' and, after one final check to make sure the cat wasn't an immediate threat, he went and sat by the sink, since the packet of cheese was sitting in the drainer.

I got out a fresh tablet and cut it in half and in the process found an exciting new use for the pliers on my Taiwanese Army Knife. I cut off a couple of pieces of cheese and moulded a piece into a ball with a tasty crunchy tablet centre. Alfie swallowed it whole and watched with a hurt expression as I tempted him with the other slice of cheese and kept pulling it away just as his jaws were about to close on it. He didn't find it as amusing as I did so I soon got bored and gave it to him.

I made some more coffee and had another ciggie while Alfie explored the courtyard and wandered out into the alley before coming back and catching up on his sleep. He seemed to have put on a tiny bit of weight already and I hadn't seen him lick his foot. Reassured I went back to the trike and inspected the chain to see if there was any way to adjust it so it didn't hang so loose but I couldn't figure it out. With the bike I'd had as a kiddie you simply loosened the rear axle nuts and pulled the wheel backwards a little but there didn't seem to be any way of doing that on the trike. Still, the chain could wait. Today was an anti-rust day.

The sun was getting high in the sky when I decided to call it quits. Back in the kitchen I had a quick overall wash, got dressed and loaded Alfie and my sax into the basket and we headed off. There was an elderly lady in the front garden of a house a few doors down, watering her plants with a hose. She looked up as we went past and I gave her a wave. She was the first person I'd seen in Little Fairchester.

I got a two litre bottle of still mineral water in Sainsbury's. Alfie and I then went round the side, as Alfie wasn't allowed in the supermarket. Behind the store was a smallish mall. As luck would have it there was a reject shop just inside the entrance and I took Alfie in to find a collar for him. I rather fancied the black macho ones with silver studs in but they were too big so we ended up with a dark green one with a

blue lining and little white bones dotted around it. Out in the main concourse there was one of those stalls that cut keys and fitted new heels and stuff like that. They had some cute metal disks for dog collars and I found a green one, although it was a different shade of green. I asked the man to engrave it with Alfie's name and my parents' phone number, since I didn't have a phone, and he said to come back in fifteen minutes.

I could hear some music playing so we wandered off and found another busker. She looked to be about twelve and was trying to play a guitar that was a little too big for her but I figured in a couple of years she'd have grown some and would be able to play it properly. Her vocal was a bit thin as well, maybe she was trying to sing in the wrong key for her voice.

"Hey," I said, when she paused at the end of a soft ballad.

"Hey," she said, eyeing my sax case suspiciously. She probably thought I was going to get nasty about her taking my spot or something.

"I didn't recognise that tune," I said. "What was it?"

"By The Waters Of Avalon," she said defensively. "I wrote it myself."

"Awesome," I said, impressed. "Do you write all your stuff?"

"Yeah," she said, self-consciously. "Did you like it?"

"Yeah, it was pretty cool," I said. "I'm not a big fan of ballads but as ballads go that was nice. Easy on the ear. Maybe if you tried it three or four tones lower?" Hint, hint.

"Are you a muso too?" she asked, stumbling over the word 'muso' as though she'd heard it but hadn't tried it out yet.

"Yeah," I said. "Sax. I play down on the pier. Hey, don't let me stop you. Plenty of punters around."

I gave her an encouraging smile and walked back a few steps to give her room. Personally I don't like to do shopping malls on Saturday

mornings as, although there are usually a lot of people, they're focused on doing their shopping.

She self-consciously started another ballad and I empathised with her. When you're just starting out it's hard enough playing in public but the presence of another musician makes it considerably worse as you imagine they are more critical. Some are, of course, but on the whole buskers are very supportive of newcomers, so long as the newcomer hasn't stolen your spot, of course. I noticed she avoided making eye contact with the passersby. In fact it looked like she was trying to hide behind her guitar. No one gave her any money, although there were a few coins in her guitar case – probably the ones she'd put there herself.

"It's me again," I said, wandering over when she'd finished that tune.

"Hello," she said unenthusiastically.

"You don't seem to be attracting much attention," I said. "How's it going?"

"Like shit," she said then looked guilty as though her mum was going to tell her off for swearing.

"Hey," I said, warily as some people appreciate these things and others don't. "Would you like some friendly advice?"

"I suppose so," she said, contradicting her expression.

"Make eye contact with people," I said. "Let them know you're here and not just some background music on the PA system. If you make eye contact it becomes personal and they'll appreciate it."

"Oh god," she said, worriedly and looked as though she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Just try it," I said. "The worst that can happen is they look away and they're doing that already and if you're going to perform in public you're going to have to get used to people looking at you."

She visibly drooped then lifted her guitar strap over her shoulder and undid it.

“Are you going?” I asked, surprised.

“I’m not cut out for this,” she said and bent to put her guitar in its case.

I knew exactly how she felt as I’d gone through the same thing myself when I first started so I did what another busker did for me.

“Don’t be a wimp,” I said, putting down my sax case and opening it. “Watch me and give it another half an hour.”

I gave my reed a quick lick on both sides and fitted it then put the sax on my harness.

“Watch people’s eyes,” I said, “and watch mine.”

I figured something a little livelier might get the attention of the shoppers and launched into ‘The Bear Necessities’ from the Jungle Book cartoon which is one of my warm-up stand-bys and made a point of consciously looking into the eyes of the people around. Ordinarily I just do it unconsciously but I wanted the girl to see what I was doing. To her credit she was still there and watching me closely. It was only a few seconds before a young mum with a kiddie looked over and made eye contact. It only lasted a half second then she looked down and said something to the little boy and they came over and stood a few feet away. I caught the eye of someone else and he quickly looked away and veered off so he didn’t get too close so I switched to look at someone else. After a minute or so there were three or four people standing listening and, of course, people’s natural curiosity means that other people just have to come over to find out what’s going on. A couple of people tossed some money in the girl’s guitar case since I hadn’t bothered to put any in mine.

“You see?” I said. “You try.”

She was very reluctant but after several moments of indecision she put the strap back on the guitar and slung it over her neck. In order to

delay the moment of reckoning she decided to tune the guitar again, even though she'd been playing it only a few minutes before.

“Do that Avalon one again,” I said, since it was the only one in her repertoire I knew the name of and she still needed encouraging. Her hands were shaking and she misplayed the first couple of chords.

“Make eye contact,” I muttered to her, as she was looking at the floor a yard or so in front of her.

Her voice faltered and her timing went to pot for a few seconds but she rallied and started looking at some of the passersby. An older man stopped then moved on after half a dozen bars but it was enough to improve her confidence and her timing improved dramatically. A woman in her thirties stopped and her companion, heavily laden with shopping bags, walked into her and muttered something and she gave him a filthy look. A couple of others stopped then someone else then another as the first couple moved on. Then it happened. A pound coin landed in the guitar case and spun for a moment then settled down. A few seconds later, 50p clinked on top of the pound coin.

“Smile and nod at them,” I hissed. People generally like it when you acknowledge their generosity.

They'd gone by the time she got round to smiling and nodding at them but others saw her do that and a few more coins came her way which she acknowledged, her confidence increasing by the second, although it had been so low it was going to be a while before she was truly confident.

“Oo-er,” she said when she came to the end. “That was, like, wow!”

There is nothing so sweet as the first coin that comes your way when you start busking. I still have mine, all 5p of it, tucked away in my wallet. It just won't be the same when we've moved to a cashless society. There's nothing romantic whatsoever about swiping a QR code on a phone. I just smiled and put my sax away.

“Thank you,” she said.

“No worries,” I said. “Just stick with it. You’ll get there. See you round.”

She looked worried as her sole moral support seemed to be disappearing so I said “just don’t play the pier when I’m there,” even though it would be a while before she’d cause me any problems and I’d be long gone before that happened. I looked around for Alfie but he’d disappeared.

Then I spotted him, at least fifty yards away, extracting every last ounce of attention he could from an elderly couple sitting on a couch. As I headed off in his direction I heard the girl start playing again. Her voice seemed to have gained a little strength.

There were some people sunbathing on the beach as we got to the pier and, by the looks of it, a few brave souls were in the water although it must have been cold. I weaved slowly through the people on the pier and Lucy was just saying goodbye to a client when we reached the beach huts. She waited for me to draw level.

“Hello,” she said, “I was beginning to think you’d moved on.”

“I was working on the trike,” I told her, “then I got involved with a girl at the shopping mall.”

“Ohhh,” she said, knowingly. “Like that is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” I said with a laugh. “She was only twelve or something, way too young for me. She was trying to busk with her guitar and ballsing it up so I gave her some tips.”

“Of course you did,” said Lucy. “That’s why you’re here.”

“What?” I said.

“Sorry,” said Lucy. “My mind was still on my last client. Oh I’ve got something for you.”

“Oh? What’s that?” I asked just as a couple of women stopped beside Lucy’s A Board to study it.

“Come over later,” she said, watching them closely. “I think I might have some more clients. Yes!” She smiled gleefully at me then turned to welcome the women who went inside her establishment.

I parked the trike under the portico and put some water in Alfie's bowl and left it beside one of the rear wheels. He ignored it and went off to check no usurping canine had peed on his railing post since yesterday.

A handful of people stopped to watch as I got my sax ready. Saturdays and warm sunshine always make people more genial. The people seemed to be looking fairly happy so I launched into 'The Bear Necessities' again since there is absolutely no mileage in playing sad tunes to happy people. Well, not until after dark anyway. It seemed to go down well and a respectable number of coins came my way as well as a note which I pocketed before it could get blown away. A few years ago I'd been playing near a bar in west London one evening and a trophy wife/super model type woman had gone past with a stockbroker type guy. She'd seen me and squealed “make him play 'Hold Back The River'” which irritated me immensely for some reason. Anyway, out of devilment I played Adele's 'Skyfall' instead, which she seemed to think was the same song as she'd tried to sing 'Hold Back The River' to it. I guess since she couldn't sing she hadn't noticed the difference. Anyway, the guy pulled a couple of notes out of his pocket and tossed them at me without bothering to look at them. It's the only time I've ever been given £50 notes. I pocketed them before they blew away as well.

I'd just finished my foray into the world of Disney cartoons when I heard a voice call out “there he is!” excitedly. I looked over and the woman who'd asked me to play 'Alfie's Theme' the day before was making her way towards me.

“Hello, hello, my luck's changing,” I thought, since she was rather cute in a way. “Or maybe not,” when I realised she had a man with her.

“Thought you were going to be here,” she said breathlessly then “this is the man I was telling you about,” to the man with her before I could say anything.

He nodded at me and she carried on breathlessly.

“Play that song again for me, you know that one about the dog, so Reggie can video you.”

Reggie held up his phone obligingly.

“Sure,” I said.

“Where's the doggie?” she said looking around. “Ohh there he is, get some video of him too, Reggie.”

Reggie smiled apologetically and moved off to film Alfie drinking some water. Alfie looked enquiringly at him then realised he wasn't going to get any food or love and wandered over to sit beside me. Reggie followed.

“What's the tune called?” he asked, moving the phone to get me in shot as well.

“It's the theme to a film called Alfie,” I said to the phone. “Originally played by Sonny Rollins.”

“Great,” he said, “and who are you and where are you?”

“I'm Ben Webster,” I said, holding up my sax,” and we're under the portico of the Fairchester Pier Vaudeville Theatre.”

“And play,” he said so I just looked at him wondering if he realised how stupid he sounded.

“The tune,” he said, glancing up from his phone at me, “you know.”

I looked around and several people were watching with amusement so I started to play, trying not to laugh myself. Plenty of people have videoed me in the past although few had been quite so ostentatious about it. He filmed the entire number without moving then did a quick pan to show people watching and listening and, I'm delighted to say, applauding in that reserved way the British do.

“Thanks,” he said, putting the phone in his pocket.

The woman beamed at me and said “Thank you,” as well and they walked off, without, I noticed, putting anything in my case. Still, I wasn't going to do anything as undignified as run after them and beg.

After a while I noticed Cyril take up his customary seat a little further down so when I stopped for a break I went to say hello. Lucy was ensconced in her establishment and there were a couple of people waiting outside her door.

He smiled when Alfie and I arrived and shifted over a few inches as if inviting me to sit with him so I did and rolled a ciggie.

“How's it going?” I asked.

“Fine,” he said.

Clearly he was English. Ask that of most non Brits and you'll get a brief summary of the last hour or so. Ask it of an American and you'll get a detailed account of the last 48 hours.

“So are you on holiday?” I asked. I lit my ciggie and offered Cyril the tin and he shook his head.

“Yes and no,” he said and fell silent.

“OK,” I said, wondering if I should go and leave him in peace.

He must have realised the inadequacy of his answer.

“I've been working overseas,” he said, after some little hesitation, “but I got tired of the deserts and the heat and I wanted to see England again. I was born here in Fairchester so I came back but, yes, I suppose I am on holiday since I'm looking for a job.”

“What do you do?” I asked. If pressed I'd have probably put him down as an accountant or administrator of some sort.

“I'm an engineer,” he said.

“Oh really?” I asked, my interest suddenly sparking. “Hey, I don't suppose you could take a look at my trike, could you? I can't figure out how to tighten the chain.”

“If you like,” he said with a shy smile, “but I'm not that sort of engineer. I'm a civil engineer. I specialise in water supply and waste disposal systems.”

“Oh, you mean like a plumber?” I asked.

“Not really,” he said. “My last project was working on water barrages on Wadi Marabah in Saudi Arabia.”

“Oh,” I said, “so what's a water barrage?”

“It's a type of low-head, diversion barrier that consists of a number of flow gates that can be opened or closed to control the amount of water passing through,” he said. “A particular problem in that part of the world is the variability of flow from flash flooding.”

“Right, so you mean like a dam or something?” I said.

“Umm, yes,” he said. “Where's your trike?”

“It's over there,” I said pointing. “Under the portico.”

“Let's take a look, shall we?” he said standing up. He was wearing the same grey trousers and sleeveless cardigan that he'd worn the day before although he hadn't brought his jacket this time.

“Thanks,” I said and grabbed my sax case.

“I heard you play Alfie's Theme again,” he said after we'd walked halfway in silence. Alfie was trotting along a little ahead, looking back every few paces to check we were still following.

“Yes,” I said. “The lady came back wanting to video it. That's my trike.”

Now I was showing it to a professional engineer I was conscious of a

feeling that the trike was a bit rough and ragged. I wasn't exactly ashamed of it but I felt it could look a little better.

"Looks like a good, solid piece of engineering," he said, looking it over. "Last forever that will."

"It's a bit rusty," I said, apologetically.

"That shows it's iron," he said, going round the back to look at the chain. "Easily got rid of and a lick of paint will make it as good as new."

"I'm working on that at the moment," I said, hoping he'd comment on how rust free the tubes I'd been working on were, but he didn't.

"Ah, yes," he said.

"With my bike, I just moved the wheel back to tighten the chain," I said. "But I don't see how to do that with this."

"It's got two wheels on an axle," said Cyril. "If you try to move the axle back you'll struggle with alignment which is more of a problem than with a single wheel. That's why there's an eccentric cam here."

"Oh yes," I said, wondering what an eccentric cam was.

"All you need to do is slacken off this nut and rotate the cam counter-clockwise to take up the chain slack," he said. "Easy."

Now that he'd pointed it out I could see that the thing he was pointing to wasn't circular.

"Only trouble is," he said, lifting the bottom part of the chain and peering at it, "this chain is almost completely worn out. I'm surprised it hasn't broken yet. Look how thin it is, just here."

"So I need a new chain, then?" I asked.

"Sooner rather than later," he said. "Although the rest of the trike looks fine. "I wouldn't be surprised if that's the original chain."

“I wouldn't have a clue,” I said. “I found it abandoned by the roadside a few days ago.”

I turned to give Zeki a wave as he ambled past carrying his fishing rod and bucket. He peered at me and grinned.

“Dog fish!” he shouted. “I catch, two hour, you want?”

Chapter Ten

“Bit of a character,” said Cyril when Zeki had disappeared round the side of the theatre to start his day's fishing.

“Yeah, but he's a nice guy,” I said. “Must be difficult living in a foreign country when you don't speak the language particularly well. How did you get on in the Middle East?”

“Interpreters mostly,” he admitted, “although I did pick up a fair number of technical terms which made things easier.”

“How long were you out there?” I asked.

“18 years, give or take,” he said. “Are you restoring this trike?”

“Sort of,” I said. “More just to make it feel better about itself than to win prizes though.”

“That's a strange thing to say,” said Cyril, sitting astride the trike and putting his feet on the pedals. “Seat's a bit hard for me though,” and he quickly got off again.

“Is it strange?” I said, curiously.

“Of course,” said Cyril. “It's just a machine, a few bits of metal and so on. It's not alive, it doesn't have feelings.”

“I guess,” I said, pulling out my tobacco tin to roll another ciggie. “It just looked very sad when I found it and it's been looking a lot happier since I fixed its wheel and gave it new tyres and the more rust I get off the happier it looks.”

Cyril looked at me a little strangely so I shut up and concentrated on rolling the ciggie.

“Are you going to re-chrome the handlebars?” he asked after a while. “Only these look too rusted to clean up.”

“I wouldn't know how to,” I said.

"There are specialist places that will strip off the old chrome and re-plate it," he said. "I think there's one in Hastings."

"Wouldn't that be expensive?" I asked.

"Depends what you think is expensive," he said.

"I'm an itinerant busker," I told him. "What do you think?"

"Maybe not, then" he said after a few moments of picking at the remnants of the trike's seat. "Probably cheaper just to get a new trike."

"You've got it," I said laughing. "So do you live round here?"

"Just down the end of the esplanade," he said, nodding to the non-nudist end.

I looked in that direction but couldn't see any houses after the end of the esplanade shops. Maybe he lived a few streets back.

"So what do you do with yourself all day?" I asked. I had a feeling he wanted to talk but couldn't for some reason.

"Oh not much," he said, looking faintly embarrassed. "I spend the mornings in the library looking for jobs then I usually come out here in the afternoons to watch the people. I lead a quiet life. Not much call for people my age in civil engineering except in management and I've been out of the country too long to have worked my way into the management side."

I nodded sagely, although I didn't actually know anything about corporate life other than that people who worked for large companies usually seemed to be sad and tired a lot of the time although that could be because sad, tired people got jobs in companies rather than the companies made them sad and tired. I wouldn't have a clue although now my dad was approaching retirement he seemed to be getting less sad and less tired every time I saw him.

"I'm going to get a bag of chips," I said. "It's been a good morning."

Cyril didn't respond although I'd kind of expected him to say something like "good idea" or "I've just had lunch" or something. I hesitated then went off to Jo's to get my usual. Waiting in the queue I saw Cyril give the trike a pat then head off down the pier.

"There's something not quite right here," I thought to myself, "although I'm bugged if I know what it is."

I glanced back while Jo was dealing with the customer in front of me and saw Cyril back in his usual seat and staring out to sea. An image of a few coins in his hand and him carefully selecting a 20p coin popped into my head,

"Your usual?" asked Jo.

"Twice," I said, without thinking and held up two fingers.

"Sea air's making you hungry then, love?" she said and quickly bagged up two portions of chips.

"It's to compensate for my unrequited love for you," I said, giving her a broad grin and she laughed and put a few extra chips in each bag.

"Den goes bowling Thursday nights," she said, very casually.

"How nice for him," I said, wondering if that was an invitation and, if so, what to do about it. "How much do I owe you?"

I handed over the money and grabbed a couple of cans from the chiller. I stuffed one into my jeans since it was hard to carry two cans, two bags of chips and a sax case at the same time.

"I wonder if Jo would let me leave the sax inside her shop when I'm not working," I thought then decided that she might read more into it than I intended. In fact things might get awkward if I took her up on what might have been her invitation and she wouldn't give it back. Maybe Lucy would be a better bet?

"Got you some chips," I said, putting down the sax and waggling a packet of chips in front of Cyril.

“Oh,” he said, surprised. “Thank you.”

“And a can,” I said. “Which do you want, coke or tango?”

“That’s very kind of you,” he said, taking the chips. “Umm, yes, very kind.”

I put the coke on the bench and pulled out the tango and put it next to it then sat down.

“So you’re not working, then” I said, stuffing a few chips into my mouth.

Cyril pick up a single chip and slowly ate it.

“No,” he said when he’d finished.

“So is your wife in engineering too?” I asked.

“I’m not married,” he said. “Never got around to it before I went to the Middle East and, of course, you never meet any women out there.”

“So you’re young, free and single,” I said, jokingly.

He laughed sourly. “I’m 49,” he said. “That isn’t young.”

I’d figured he was in his late fifties. My bad.

“Must be tough on benefits,” I said after we’d both chomped on chips for a while. Neither of us had made the decision about which can to take. “I get more than that just busking.”

“Yes, it probably is,” he said, looking sideways at the cans between us.

“Aren’t you on benefits?” I asked, “or are you one of these rich layabouts I hear about?”

He laughed. “Do I look rich?” he said.

“Nah,” I said, “but I’m in the music biz. Some of the richest rock stars

look like they live in the local rubbish tip. Maybe it's just your image.”

He sighed and picked up the tango to my relief as I find tango a bit cloying.

“Thanks,” he said, holding it up to me then popping the ring pull. “No, I don't qualify for benefits.”

“Oh,” I said, taken aback. The few people I'd known who didn't qualify for benefits had just lied until they did qualify. “How come?”

Cyril gazed out to sea while he finished his chips.

“You need an address to get benefits,” he said after checking they'd all gone.

“OK,” I said, willing him to expand on that.

“And you can't get anywhere to rent if you haven't got an income,” he said, screwing up the chip bag.

“I thought you had a place,” I said. “Down the end of the esplanade.”

He must have reached some sort of conclusion on my trustworthiness or sympathy level or something.

“I live in the car park,” he said. “In my car,” and he looked down the pier, away from me.

“Oh,” I said, flatly. He was basically homeless. A bit like me except there wasn't much call for civil engineers on the streets. No one would ever come up and say “I'll give you a couple of quid if you'll build this bridge for me.”

“So why don't you just make up an address?” I asked. “Then when you get benefits you can find somewhere to live.”

“They want to see rent books and things,” he said, staring at the can in his hands in his lap.

“So get a rent book from a newsagent and make up some details,” I said. I knew a girl in London who'd done just that. I'd never claimed benefits so I didn't know the ins and outs.

“That would be fraudulent,” he said. “I couldn't do that.”

I didn't quite see how it was fraudulent since presumably he was entitled to benefits but was slipping through a crack in the bureaucracy but who am I to argue with someone else's ethics.

“So you're living on your savings then?” I asked. I had a vague feeling that Brits who worked in the Middle East were on good incomes so he probably had a fair amount saved up.

“Yes,” he said. “Shouldn't you be getting back to work?”

Obviously he'd told me all he was comfortable with telling me for the time being and, since I'm not a social worker, there wasn't a lot of point in pushing him as there wasn't a lot I could do to help him. By the looks of things he probably needed a friend more than anything and that is within my capabilities. Besides, not having a 'proper' job or being on benefits either I had to make some money too. After all, I had dependants now, although Alfie seemed to be getting fish guts for free.

“Yeah, you're right,” I said, emptying my can and standing up. “You going to stick around and listen or are you heading off? I can't promise any jazz though. These don't look like jazzy people.”

He laughed and promised to stay around “for a while, anyway,” although he'd gone by the time I had my next break so Alfie and I went round to talk to Zeki instead.

He scowled at me when we turned up.

“No fishes,” he said sadly although I guess he was sadder about having nothing for dinner rather than nothing for Alfie.

I told him it wasn't a big deal, since it wasn't, and we chatted as best we could about the vagaries of fishing and the tides and how the

number of swimmers affected the fish and what phase of the moon it was and things like that. Zeki seemed to know a lot about fish and fishing although he struggled to communicate.

“Were you a fisherman in Hungary,” I asked.

“Steel worker,” he said, tapping his chest. “ISD Dunafer, I work, twenty four year, is good, yuss?” No, no forty two year.”

“Where did you learn to fish?” I asked. “Did you live near the sea?”

“Hungary no sea,” he said, and gestured all around him. “All land, no sea. I live Dunaújváros, fish Danube.”

“Wow,” I said. “The River Danube?”

He nodded his head and I started to hum Strauss' Blue Danube Waltz and conduct it with my hands.

“Ja, ja, An der schönen, blauen Donau!” he exclaimed excitedly and we started to waltz around the side of the pier with him doing the deeper 'dah dah de dah dah' bits and me doing the higher “di di do do” bits and both laughing like idiots with Alfie running round and barking out of tune until we stumbled over each other's feet. Several passersby stared like we were idiots or something and gave us a wide berth.

“Yuss, is good!” laughed Zeki then caught sight of his fishing rod lying on the planking with no fish attached to it. His mood changed instantly and he scowled. “No fishes,” he muttered and kicked the rod.

“Maybe catch fish tomorrow,” I said.

“Urgghh,” he growled and spat over the railing to show his contempt for the sea. He picked up his rod and cast, if that's the right word, it out to sea again.

Alfie and I left him to it.

“Going to have to go to the supermarket and get you something,

then,” I said to Alfie. I still had the sausages I hadn't had the night before but there wasn't enough for the two of us and we could use some more cheese too since Alfie was very partial to cheese. I needed tobacco too and it's cheaper at the supermarket than it is at the tobacconist on the pier.

“We'll do another session,” I said, “then we'll pop over to Halfords and get a chain and some brake pads, then go to the supermarket then come back here and see if there's anyone around for a sunset show. How's that?”

Alfie gave a little 'yup' kind of bark and wagged his tail as if to say “that's a plan.”

“Cool,” I said.

I put Alfie and the sax and his water bowl in the trike and paused outside Lucy's since I'd promised to drop in to see her. I could hear faint voices so it sounded like she had a client.

“We'll drop in later,” I said to Alfie as we wove our way down the pier. There seemed to still be a fair number of people around.

“Oh no,” said the young lad in Halfords after looking at the trike. “We don't have any chains that long.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling deflated since I had no idea where else to go. “Where can I get one?”

“I'll ask Mr Dennison,” he said, “I only do Saturdays.”

I followed him inside and watched as he explained the situation to Mr Dennison who came outside to assess the situation personally.

“Reckon you need a 140 chain,” he said, frowning. “Biggest we stock is 112.”

“So do you know where I could get a 140 chain?” I asked.

“We could order one in special,” he said, “but that'll be expensive and

I don't reckon that 'un will last long enough. Best bet is two 96s."

"Oh," I said, wishing I had Cyril or some other engineer to translate for me. "Umm, what does that mean?"

"You need a chain with 140 links," he said, patiently. "If we join two 96 link chains together we can then take off 52 of them to make it fit and you can keep the spare 52 links for the next chain so's you don't have to get two of 'em."

"Right," I said, understanding what he was talking about. "Is that hard?"

"Piece of piss," he said. "Wally here can split and join 'em for a couple of quid."

Wally didn't look as confident about that as Mr Dennison did but practice makes perfect.

"OK," I said, "how much will that be?"

"Call it £19 fitted," said Mr Dennison.

Actually that didn't seem too bad.

"I need some brake pads as well," I said.

"Want us to fit them too?" he asked, "since it's going in the workshop anyway?"

"Please," I said.

"Call it £45, all in," he said. "Cash?"

I counted out £45 and handed it over and Wally handed me my sax case and Alfie's water bowl and wheeled the trike round the back of the shop.

"Expensive things, trikes," I thought to myself. Alfie and I went to look at the paint. Mr Dennison followed us over since there was no

one else in the shop.

“How much paint do you think I'll need to repaint it?” I asked. The cans of spray paint were £7.50 each.

“Are you taking it down to bare metal?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You'll need a couple of cans of anti-rust primer,” he said enthusiastically, “then four cans of colour to give two coats then three or four coats of lacquer to protect it. Say twelve cans in all.”

“Ninety quid?” I yelped. Busking on the streets makes you quite good at mental arithmetic.

“Eighty seven,” he said happily, showing he was at least as good at mental arithmetic as I was. “The primer is only £6 a can.”

“I'll think about it,” I said, going over to look at a rather fancy Voodoo Zobop E-Shimano Full Suspension Electric Mountain Bike with an 18” frame that, after a sale discount of £300, was supposedly a bargain at £2699. I had a friend in London who never paid more than £100 for a car.

“Very nice,” I said.

“I could give you £25 in part exchange on the trike,” he said, “if you pay a deposit today.”

“It's got £45 of new accessories on it,” I said sarcastically.

“There's no demand for trikes,” he replied, shrugging.

“Would you throw in a basket big enough for my sax?” I asked.

“Get a trolley from Sainsbury's,” he said, showing he did have a sense of humour after all, “and I'll throw in a tow bar for thirty.”

At least I think he had a sense of humour. Maybe he was serious.

Wally saved the day by wheeling my trike back, replete with new chain and brake pads. The spare fifty or so links were neatly coiled in the basket.

The new chain felt nice and tight as we zoomed along and I nearly crashed when I braked coming up to the pier. The brakes actually worked and I hadn't been expecting to stop quite that quickly. Alfie wasn't impressed as he banged his chest on the basket frame.

"Ahh, you came back," said Lucy. "come on in."

"I had to get to Halford's before they shut," I said. "I was afraid you'd be shut by now too."

"No, it's been a busy day," she said. "Fancy some tea?"

"Do you have any coffee?" I asked, fingers crossed.

"Of course," she said. "I've got you a present."

"That's very kind of you," I said. "What is it?"

"I had a garden chair re-covered a few weeks ago," she said, cryptically. "Milk, sugar?"

"Milk, no sugar," I said. "Thanks."

She handed me a mug of coffee and disappeared into her back room.

"I thought you could make yourself a new seat with this," she said, handing me some off-cuts of foam rubber and a piece of dark green vinyl. "They're for an outdoor chair so they should handle the rain."

"Wow, thanks," I said, taking them. "Umm, how do you think I'd go about making a new seat? I don't know how to sew beyond the odd button."

"I'd glue it rather than sew it," she said, "since the needle holes will probably tear when you sit on it."

“Right,” I said. “I can probably manage that. Nice colour, though. Very smart.”

“I’m glad you like it,” said Lucy, picking up a number of tastefully ornate Tarot cards spread out on her little round table. “So how are you liking it here?”

She started to sort them into some sort of sequence and Alfie found a comfy spot and curled up, watching in case any food was produced.

“Actually, I like it a lot,” I said. “It’s a nice town and most of the people seem very kind and friendly. Even that lady at the council offices was helpful.”

I gave a happy little laugh and tasted the coffee, It was quite nice. Definitely a level or two about the cheapie coffee I got for myself. Lucy finished sorting the Tarot cards and neatly put them in a handsome wooden box.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said, looking me in the eye.

“I’ve never had one of the local tradespeople give me a present before,” I said, trying to indirectly thank her again for the foam and vinyl. “There was no need.”

“Of course there’s a need,” she said. “We’ve got to make you feel welcome, since you’re here to save us.”

Chapter Eleven

Obviously she was going doolally.

“You what?” I said.

I suppose it was possible I had misheard but nothing else really sounds like “since you are here to save us.”

“The town's dying,” she said seriously. “I sensed something when I first met you and later when I looked in the crystal ball I saw you and I've checked several times with the Tarot.”

“I was right,” I thought to myself. “She's been doing this stuff so long that she's starting to believe it herself.”

“Right,” I said, unconsciously putting my coffee mug down in case I had to make a run for it. “A saviour.”

I wanted to laugh but it seemed rude.

“Yes,” she said. “There's no doubt about it.”

“Umm,” I said, “so does the Tarot say just how I'm going to do this?”

“Sadly not,” she said. “As I've explained to you before there are a lot of uncertainties and many possible futures. It's hard enough to predict the future when someone comes in wanting to know if her boyfriend loves her or something like that where there are only two people involved, but here there's the whole town of three thousand or whatever and god alone knows how many outsiders. It's simply impossible for me to predict what you will do or how you will do it.”

“Oh great,” I said. “So how do you know that it's me?”

“Every future I can see where the town prospers involves you,” she said. “That, at least, is as clear as day.”

“Am I in any of the futures where it doesn't prosper?” I asked.

It seemed a reasonable question since, if not, it wouldn't actually matter what I did.

"Oh Great Mother, yes," she said. "Even more than where it does, so whatever you do has to work and the odds are that it won't."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You're saying that the town may prosper and it may not but that either way it's my fault?"

"Oh, stars alive, no," she said, finishing her tea and upending the cup to look at the tea leaves, probably more out of habit than anything since she barely gave them a glance. "It's just that if you stay here and do something for the town there's a decent chance the town will benefit from it, but it may not and if you go too soon it definitely won't."

"Well that's as clear as mud," I said. "Specially as you won't give me any clues as to what it is I'm supposed to do."

"Well, if you come up with any ideas, tell me," she said cheerfully. "I might be able to see if they're going to work before you invest too much effort. Anyway, don't stress about it. You like it here, you said so yourself, so stick around for a while and see if anything occurs to you."

"Why did you tell me?" I asked.

I still wasn't convinced she was entirely right in the head and, it occurred to me, she might even be starting some devious scam to get her hands on all my worldly goods.

"You needed to know," she said, simply. "So if and when you do decide to move on you are aware of the consequences to us, not just to yourself."

I had to laugh at that one.

"This is me you're talking to," I said. "Mr Always Going Somewhere Else. I've never in my life moved on and worried about what could happen to those I leave behind."

Actually that wasn't entirely true since there was Charmayne who'd claimed she was pregnant shortly before I moved on and I had, from time to time, wondered what had become of her, although not enough to actually make any enquires. After all, there had been seven of us living in it that squat at the time and she'd had a generous nature.

"Perhaps you are entering a period of personal growth," said Lucy. "Would you like me to look in the ball?"

"I like my life," I said. "I don't want to grow, except maybe as a musician."

"If that's truly how you feel," said Lucy, looking down at the sodden mess of tea leaves, "then perhaps you should just move on and forget about us."

"Oh, so now you're trying to guilt me?" I said, a touch angrily. Charmayne had said something similar.

"Oh, silly me," said Lucy with a sheepish titter. "These were my tea leaves, not yours. I forgot you had coffee."

"What's that got to do with anything?" I asked, puzzled.

"You see those leaves sticking out over there?" she said, pointing with the tip of her dusky pink polished little finger nail. "That's my conscience, not yours."

"So I'm not in there?" I asked.

"Of course you are," she said. "You're part of my future, if only for a while."

"Where am I, then?" I asked, curious in spite of myself.

"You're the sweetener I used instead of sugar," she laughed and refused point blank to point out which tea leaves represented me or what they meant.

"Makes no odds," I said after studying the tea leaves. "I know what's

me,” and I pointed to a droplet of tea that had rolled away from the leaves and gone off the edge of the table. To prove my point I sang her the opening lines from *The Wanderer* by Dion.

*Oh well, I'm the kind of guy who will never settle down
Where pretty girls are, well you know that I'm around*

“There are plenty of pretty girls in Fairchester,” said Lucy. “Nothing to stop you wandering around without leaving town.”

Actually this was undeniably true. I'd seen any number of very cute girls on the pier over the last few days although so far they'd all seemed to have had a guy very close by. Still, early days yet.

“Well, I'd best be going,” I said. “I want to catch the sunset walkers. It's been, uhh, very interesting and thanks for the coffee. Come on Alfie.”

There were still quite a few people wandering along the pier as the sun descended to the horizon over towards the west. Mostly couples, mostly in their forties or older, very few children. I took up my spot and started a series of fairly slow, romantic tunes, mostly softer jazz like *Petite Fleur* and *La Vie En Rose* and some of the older pop classics like The Platters' *Red Sails In The Sunset* as well as a few more modern but still mellow numbers like Enya's *Caribbean Blue* and Elohim's *Love Is Alive*. Slowly couples came closer, some gathering around me and others staying close to the railing and watching the sunset. Apollo, the god of music, kept some clouds on the distant horizon so they streaked the fading blue sky with reds and greys until the pale gold sun finally disappeared. It was one of those magical times and I had maybe fifty or sixty people enwrapped as the twilight gave way to a star lit night. I finished with a slow version of *Somewhere Beyond The Sea* and then let the gentle wash of the waves take over. Filled with positive energy and a love of everyone, I began to think that maybe, just maybe, I could, somehow, save the town. God knows how though.

Of course, it all went to shit the next day, as is so often the case.

I'd spend the morning with the wheels off the trike, scrubbing and

polishing, and the frame was getting to be nearly as rust free as I'd be able to manage without some sort of high pressure sandblasting equipment. I figured I'd give the whole frame one more good going over in a day or two and then decide what to do about painting it. Without wishing to destroy the magic and romance of the Saturday sunset it had been quite lucrative as most of the couples showed their appreciation and I could, if pressed, buy all the cans that the guy at Halfords said I should. On the other hand, my innate miserliness coupled with a desire to put some money in the bank towards my emergency 'sax repair or replace' fund made me want a second opinion. Cyril was my man to ask. Surely water barrages needed a lick of paint to keep them from dissolving?

The day was overcast and threatening to rain so I decided to put off going into town to see what the weather would decide to do. I put the wheels back on the trike and, with a bit of effort since it was rust welded in place, managed to remove the seat stem. Inspecting the seat closely it looked like the seat was made of a moulded plastic, or possibly even metal base, with the remains of a rubber-like pad glued onto it and at one time the whole had been covered with some sort of plastic outer cover that was now cracked and torn and leaking bits of rubber.

As the cloud got thicker and darker I sat on the doorstep scraping all the old crud off the moulded part of the seat until it was fairly crud free then played around with the bits of foam and vinyl Lucy had given me until I began to see how to cut and shape the pieces so they could be glued to the base. I even realised that if I cut strategic triangles out of the vinyl I could fold the edges under the base and glue them without it all bunching up at the corners. All I needed was some glue.

I made some coffee and a cheese sandwich while Alfie had cheese without the sandwich. Studying the sky, it looked to be lightening and the clouds were to be thinning so I figured we could do an afternoon session on the pier then stop and get some glue in Sainsbury's so I could work on the seat in the morning. With a bit of luck Cyril would be there too and I could ask him about paint. Of course, I hadn't realised that even the ragged and torn old seat cover still gave some protection. Without it, I gained an appreciation over the five or six

mile journey of what my life would be like if I ever went to prison and became the sex toy of some hardened criminal named Bubba.

I wheeled the trike up the pier trying to walk without wincing too much. I casually rifled through the rubbish bins on the way since I couldn't face riding any more until I found a temporary seat cover substitute. A newspaper would be perfect or a couple of those polystyrene takeaway food containers but no one seemed to be throwing these things away today. Maybe there'd be something when I left or, worst case scenario, I could walk to Sainsbury's and get some really cheap stewing steak. At the very least the meat would get tenderised, the way my bum cheeks had been.

Under the portico I got Alfie out of his basket and filled his water bowl then stood there and rolled a ciggie. There weren't many people and, although the clouds were still thinning it was overcast and there was a depressed feel to the pier. I had no idea what to play. Upbeat and happy didn't feel right and slow and downbeat would merely add to the depression and send the money scurrying for cover. It was one of those odd, indecisive days.

Lucy was having a day off. Jo was too by the look of it as some young stranger was tending to the fish and chips. Zeki was either having a day off or having a late start as his side of the theatre was deserted and Anton and I didn't really have a chatty kind of relationship. There was no sign of Cyril either. Down by Cyril's bench there was a youngish chap in a thick khaki ex-army sweater and a thick bushy beard surrounded by sheets of card covered in surreal abstract art that was being studiously ignored by virtually all of the people going by. He looked a little fierce and, not helping, pissed off. I can't see people's auras but Charmayne could and she would have said that the artist's aura was a dark cloudy red meaning he was filled with a deep seated anger. Apparently mine was yellow-green which meant I was a musician, or perhaps being a musician meant my aura was yellow-green, Charmayne was never very clear on cause and effect.

Anyway, I digress. The point is there was no one I knew to talk to and there were no punters loitering around looking to be talked to either. I seriously thought about going home.

“Oh sod it,” I said, flicking away the cigarette butt. “Give it half an hour and if nothing happens bugger off.”

Not the best frame of mind for Solveig's Song – from Edvard Grieg's Peer Gynt – but for some reason I felt it's soaring high register notes would pierce the depressed atmosphere and lead into a few more upbeat numbers. Solveig's Song has a certain abstract, ethereal quality and isn't usually a good choice for busking and, in all honesty, it's better on a soprano sax than a tenor but I didn't have a soprano.

The first few bars rise up and soar before descending then there's a pause before repeating the rise and fall and it was in that pause that a really loud voice called out harshly, “you can't effing play for shit!”

It's a sad fact that, whilst most people either ignore buskers or are generally positive, there are always a few who go out of their way to be nasty. I've found over the years that the best strategy is to ignore them. They don't always want to be ignored, however.

The owner of the voice came round from behind me. He, inevitably it was a he since women don't heckle unless they're drunk, was youngish, thickset and pushed a respectable beer belly in front of him and sported a couple of days worth of stubble. He carried a half empty 6 pack of beer cans looped in his belt and was supported by a couple of weedy looking cronies. One had tattoos up his neck.

I carried on with Solveig's Song.

“Look at that effing tosser,” “play some decent friggin' music, asshole,” and similar remarks came my way. Frankly I wasn't in the mood for this. Ordinarily it's never a good idea to bite back since it upsets the punters and they disappear quickly but there weren't any today.

I let Solveig's Song fade away and started to play Tones And I's Dance Monkey but he was too stupid to realise I was musically referring to him as an ape and he started to move his feet as though trying to dance. His belly wobbled in strange ways. I switched to Loser Of The Year by Simple Plan.

“You calling me a fuckin’ loser, pal?” he said belligerently and came up close to eyeball me.

Alfie growled at him and his cronies tittered.

“If the shoe fits,” I said, slipping the mouthpiece off my sax and putting it in my pocket for safety. The mouthpiece is the most important part. A few dents here and there in the body of the sax make no difference but the mouthpiece is very delicate and precise and makes the sounds. The rest of the sax is more or less there for resonance.

I don't think Belly Man knew what 'if the shoe fits' meant so he stood there for a few moments wondering what to do then he had a brilliant idea. He pulled a can of beer from the 6 pack on his belt, gave it a shake then sprayed it in my face. Inevitably I stepped back but it had taken Alfie by surprise and he launched himself at Belly Man's leg. Belly Man didn't like that and tried to kick him.

“Don't you kick my dog,” I shouted, raising my sax threateningly.

That, apparently, was the signal and all three jumped on me. The fight didn't last long. No sooner had I hit the ground and curled myself protectively around my sax than there was a roar and a khaki ball of hair flashed through the air taking Belly Man with it. Moments later something blue pulled one then the other crony off me.

Winded, I lay there for a few moments then got shakily to my feet. Alfie, being far more intelligent than I had credited him, had jumped into the trike's basket and was sitting there, interestedly watching the proceedings. A policeman was holding one of the cronies in a firm grip while pushing the other towards the door of the theatre. Another policeman was trying to stop Belly Man and the cloudy red aura'd artist who were wrestling and managing to throw the occasional punch at each other. In the end the policeman simply knelt on the back of the artist, pinning them both to the ground.

I took advantage of the policemen lining up the four of them against the theatre doors to quickly pack away my sax and put it on the trike, beside Alfie.

“Oi! You too, mate,” said one of the policemen as I tried to surreptitiously wheel the trike away. I pretended I was just picking up Alfie's water bowl.

“That fat 'un started it,” called out an elderly lady, pointing to Belly Man.

The two policemen rolled their eyes at each other and one of them shrugged resignedly. He dug a notebook out of his pocket and walked over to her.

“Would you like to make a statement, madam?” he said.

She talked to him at length while the other policeman questioned the five of us, which seemed to involve a lot of finger pointing, mostly by me.

After probably ten minutes or so the two policemen conferred and reached some sort of consensus.

“Right,” said the older policemen, pointing to Belly Man and his cronies. “You three, hop it and don't cause no more trouble or you'll spend the night in the cells.”

They needed no urging and hopped it. I guessed they were locals.

“Right,” he said, looking at me then the artist. “You were busking, you were street trading. I want to see your licences.”

I had the feeling he'd let the others go as he was expecting neither of us to have the appropriate documentation. He was clearly disappointed when I produced mine and the other policeman accompanied the artist to his pitch to get his. Casting around for something to charge me with, he saw Alfie and his eyes lit up.

“Is that your dog, sir?” he said with that special emphasis on the 'sir' that the police use to express their complete and utter contempt while at the same time remaining polite in case anyone is filming.

“Yes,” I said.

“Does it have a collar and ID tag?” he asked, savouring the moment.

“Yes, look,” I said and called Alfie over and showed him.

He snarled. The policeman, not Alfie. Alfie was on his best behaviour. Maybe he'd been to the pound before.

“And is your dog microchipped and registered?” he said.

“No,” I said.

He smiled happily and reached for his arrest book or whatever it is they use in this county's police force.

“Are you aware that under the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015 you are required to have your dog microchipped and registered with an approved database?” he asked.

“Samson said I had two weeks,” I said.

“Who?” he demanded, his eyes narrowing as he sensed his prey might conceivably have a possible Get Out Of Jail Free card.

“I've forgotten his surname,” I said, “but he's on duty on the pier during the week.”

“You mean Constable Samson Gakuru?” he said, looking completely disgusted.

“That's him,” I said. “I'm taking Alfie to the vet on Monday to get it done.”

“Be sure you do, sir,” he said and turned away in disgust. His promotion or annual bonus or whatever was now in doubt.

“He's clean,” said the other policeman coming up, gesturing with his thumb to the artist, who was sitting back on the ground beside his art looking considerably happier. No doubt his cloudy red aura was now a rich, deep satisfying red.

“Bugger,” said the first one, turning to look at my trike. “Is that light working?” he barked.

“Yes,” I said, turning it on.

He glowered at me then muttered something to his companion. They stalked off and I stuck my tongue out at them.

“Let’s go home,” I said to Alfie. “I don’t like this place any more.”

The jobs and the antagonistic policemen had really given me a downer on Fairchester-on-Sea. I got on the trike and immediately got off again when my backside protested. I walked the trike over to where the artist was.

“Thanks for helping me,” I said. “I’m Ben,” and held out my hand.

“Baz,” he said, shaking it firmly, “from London. No need to thank me. I was in a foul mood and spoiling for a fight. I feel a whole lot better now.”

“That’s good,” I said, feeling depressed. “I can’t stand cops like that. They really piss me off. Anyway, thanks again.”

“See you around,” he said as I turned to go.

“Maybe,” I said, turning back. “Nah, I’ve had enough of this place. Time I moved on to Leaminsters.”

Leaminsters was the next town along the coast.

“OK,” he said. “Good luck. Maybe see you there in a few days.”

I gave a half smile then went over to the rubbish bin. Someone had thrown away their Mail On Sunday and I fished it out and folded it in half and sat on it. It was surprisingly comfortable.

We slowly made our way down the pier and passed the two policemen. I could see in their eyes they were trying to work out if tricycling on the pier contravened any local by-laws. Apparently not.

I lifted the trike down the steps to the esplanade and refolded the Mail On Sunday and got back on.

“OK,” I said to Alfie. “We’ll go to the supermarket then home and tomorrow morning we’ll get you microchipped then head off to Leaminsters. How’s that for a plan?”

Alfie didn't have any obvious objections so I waited for a gap in the traffic then pulled out and crossed the road and pulled up again.

“Actually, the car park at the end of the esplanade is only just back there,” I said to Alfie. “Let's go visit Cyril first and ask him about paint.”

Chapter Twelve

I hadn't been down this end of town before. The shops I went to were the other side of the pier but the only real thing of interest was Briley's Camping And Outdoor because that was the store that Jo's husband ran. The chap who went bowling every Thursday night, leaving his wife alone. My gut told me that there had been an invitation there but my brain told me Jo simply might have been thinking about something else and just casually mentioned about the bowling. Still, my gut is generally right more often than my brain so the real question wasn't whether or not she intended anything, it was whether or not I would do anything about it. And, of course, the easiest thing to do would be to simply be in the vicinity of Jo's Fish and Chip shop around the time she closed on Thursday.

“Play it by ear,” I said to myself, with a little grin. “Might even score some free fish and chips if there's any left over.”

I trundled into the car park at the end of the esplanade. It was around dinner time so the day people had gone home to eat and the evening people hadn't yet arrived so it was almost deserted. Right on the edge was a newish looking car with an elderly couple sitting in the front seats looking determinedly out across the road at the waves rolling in on what was left of the beach. The tide was almost at its highest and spray from the occasional wave dotted their windscreen. They sat in silence, steadily munching on sandwiches with cups of something hot from a thermos on the dashboard. Half a dozen seagulls squatted on the low barrier wall protecting the car park from higher than normal tides and waited for some crusts. Every now and then one of the gulls would peck its neighbour in irritation and there'd be a brief squabble, some irritated cawing and outstretched wings.

Further into the car park, also looking out across the esplanade, was one of those big power SUVs that are normally driven by nervous young mothers who think their kids are safer in them. The gulls avoided it like the plague since it was surrounded by buckets, spades, inflatable water wings, beach balls, towels and all the paraphernalia needed to take three kiddies, ranging from three to six by the look of them, for a day at the beach. A harassed and, it has to be admitted, nervous looking young woman was trying to get the three kiddies out

of their wet and sandy things and into their dry and not sandy things. The kiddies, who were tired and irritable, weren't cooperating. The little girl was crying and refusing to do something or other and the older boy was hitting the younger boy over the head repeatedly with what looked like a large, yellow, inflatable hammer and the younger boy was trying to kick him while mum was trying to dry one or possibly both of them with a towel.

As I slowly cycled past, the young mum glanced up with a look that clearly said that if I was a white slave trafficker she'd let me have these three for a knock down price. Not ever having been family inclined my feet didn't falter for a moment on the pedals. Still, the cavalry was on its way in the form of dad, equally harassed looking but not noticeably nervous, striding along the esplanade with an armful of ice creams and cans, seemingly unaware that mixing ice cream and fizzy drink with tired, irritable kids at a beach would inevitably end with two if not three of them throwing up in the back of the SUV not too far from the car park.

I reflected that my own mother's style, while not overly pretty, was certainly effective. Whenever she took me and my two sisters on a trip somewhere without dad she'd make us stand beside the car, leaning forward slightly with our hands firmly pressed against its side like hoodlums being frisked by the cops in New York. Unable to move she would then calmly deal with each of us in turn. The removal of a hand before she'd given approval earned the culprit a sharp slap on the back of a calf. Perhaps our individual freedoms of expression had been cramped but arrivals and departures had always gone like clockwork.

Thinking about it, it was much the same when dad came with us. The only difference being that he sat in the driver's seat with the news on the radio while mum dealt with the kids. Anyway, since there were only three cars in the car park, the other car must, by elimination, be Cyril's, unless it was the wrong car park or he'd gone for a drive.

It was a nondescript looking hatchback, reversed into the parking bay at the back of the car park, in a walled corner from the back of the buildings in the street behind the esplanade and the side of the launderette that marked the end of the line of shops. It looked like

Cyril had spread his sleeping bag over the back of the car to dry and it was held in place with a couple of smallish rocks on the roof and some largish pebbles on the lip of the hatch.

Cyril himself was in the driver's seat, leaning back and slightly twisted so one shoulder was pressed against the window. His head lolled forward and I could see that he was beginning to go bald on the crown of his head. He looked to be asleep. I pulled up alongside and peered in. There were some food wrappers and a half empty bottle of water on the dashboard and the back of the passenger seat was fully lowered so it was almost flat. There were some official looking papers casually discarded on the passenger seat. A couple had Arabic script on their letter heads.

I've always admired Arabic as a written language. I have no idea what Arabic writing says or even what letters they have in their alphabet but the way it flows across the page is gloriously elegant and beautiful. Anything written in Arabic, be it a love letter, a tax demand or a death threat, always looks so majestic and stylish, not that I've ever had a love letter, a tax demand or even a death threat in Arabic. Or in English, come to think of it, although I did get a couple of highly suggestive and inventive text messages from a girl a few years ago, complete with nothing left to the imagination pictures, back when I could be bothered with a mobile phone. Her boyfriend had broken the phone not long afterwards, as well as one of my fingers, and I'd never got around to getting another since playing the sax is far more important to me than texting.

I tapped on the window with my finger nails, wondering why such an ordinary little car had tinted windows, but Cyril didn't react so I gave the window a wallop with my fist. He still didn't react so I got off the trike and pushed it out of the way and tried to open the door. It was locked. Alfie was staring at the dad handing out ice creams and, no doubt, calculating the relative probabilities of being able to acquire some ice cream versus acquiring a kick. A seagull swooped over the wall to join the others and Alfie barked excitedly at it, although, to my delight, he didn't try to jump out of the basket.

I tried the back door of the car and that was locked too so I went round the boot end to see if the boot was locked since it looked like it

was slightly open underneath the sleeping bag. Strangely, there was a thick tube, like from a vacuum cleaner, over the end of the exhaust which went up under the sleeping bag. It was very strange. Maybe he'd been trying to use the hot exhaust to dry a particularly wet patch on the sleeping bag or something using a piece of hose he'd found.

I was back at the driver's door when it hit me. Cyril wasn't trying to dry his sleeping bag and he didn't have tinted windows. The car was full of exhaust fumes.

"Oh you stupid freaking idiot," I cried out and tried banging on the window several times and shouting "Cyril!" to wake him while trying to open the door with my other hand.

"Jesus Christ, wake up! Cyril!"

I looked around and the power SUV was just pulling out of the car park. I grabbed one of the rocks off the roof and hit the window as hard as I could.

Whenever I'd seen something like this in a movie, the hero taps the car window with a rock and it shatters neatly, with all the broken glass falling backwards so it doesn't cover the person inside. Turns out it isn't like that in real life. In real life, when you hit a car window with a rock, the rock bounces off and the shock waves go running up your arm so it hurts and the glass isn't even scratched, let alone broken. Still, unlike in the movies, Cyril's car didn't burst into flames.

In retrospect, of course, I can make sarcastic comments about movies and pretend that I calmly dealt with the situation by throwing open the boot, which had to be open so the vacuum cleaner tube could feed into the car, and bodily dragging Cyril, who was somewhat larger than me and unconscious, to safety and applying the first aid training I had picked up during saxophone practice.

The reality wasn't like that and, like so many before me and no doubt yet to come, I panicked. I tried to break the window a couple more times, hurting my arm more in the process, then dropped the rock to scrabble at a door which had not opened when I was trying to open it calmly. The only good thing I can say is that I didn't drop the rock on

my foot. After several attempts, I realised I wasn't getting anywhere and, still panicked and not yet aware that the boot was actually open, I ran over to the elderly couple in their car shouting for them to call the police.

I imagine the elderly couple did what most elderly people would do in a deserted public car park when a madman comes running at them shouting. They locked their doors and wound up the windows.

I banged on the elderly man's window, shouting "call the police, call the police," and, impressively, he did, although in retrospect it was probably to say they were being attacked rather than that there was a man dying on the other side of the car park.

You can say what you like about police victimisation of buskers, and I have on any number of occasions, but when it counts they are wonderful. I was barely back at Cyril's car when sirens started to blare and less than ten seconds later a police car skidded into the car park, leaving a trail of rubber as it fishtailed slightly and two burly uniformed cops leapt out of it. They rapidly assessed the situation and concluded that, as I was the only person not inside a vehicle in the car park that I was the deranged attacker. It didn't help, or perhaps it did, who knows, that I was obviously trying to smash my way into a car.

"He's trying to gas himself," I shouted a couple of times as they grabbed me. "He's got a pipe from his exhaust, look!" I pointed with my foot to the back end of Cyril's car.

Fortunately one of the policemen believed me and looked at the back of the car then inside then said "oh shit!" and ripped the sleeping bag off the back and flung open the boot.

"Get an ambulance," he shouted to the one still holding me and forced his way past Cyril's belongings to reach the door handle of the rear passenger seat. The other policeman dropped me in a heap on the ground and ran to his car. The first one ripped open the passenger door and unlocked the front door then ripped that open too.

Cyril was unconscious but still breathing as he flopped out of the open door and the policeman grabbed him under the arms and heaved him

out onto the car park and dragged him a few feet away from the car.

“Pulse, still breathing,” he shouted over to his colleague and proceeded to check Cyril for signs of any other injuries.

By this time I had got myself off my bum and was sitting on my knees, rocking backwards and forwards. I might even have been moaning a little, I don't remember. Another police car shot into the car park and pulled up beside the first.

“Ambulance is on its way,” the policeman at the police car reported to them. “No apparent danger,” and, to prove his point, an ambulance arrived and the ambulance people took over.

The policeman spotted the elderly couple in their car and went over to talk to them. One of the new arrivals went to talk to the policeman with Cyril and the other came over and touched my shoulder.

“You all right?” he asked.

I looked up at him and nodded so he helped me to my feet and led me over to his car.

“So what happened?” he asked.

I leaned against the police car and told him how interesting it was that the pitch of the ambulance siren was F[#], two octaves above middle C, whereas the ones in London were A^b which he didn't bother to note down. The policeman was obviously used to handling people in the aftermath of an emergency and let me ramble semi-coherently until my brain seemed to be re-engaging. It was only then that he took his notebook out. I got out my ciggie tin and tried to roll one but my hands were still shaking so he rolled one for me.

“I came to ask him about paint,” I said. “And I found him locked in the car with that tube over the exhaust.”

“Do you know him?” asked the policeman.

“Cyril,” I said. “Cyril Delaney, I've met him a few times.”

The ambulance people were loading Cyril into their ambulance.

“Do you know where he lives?” asked the policeman.

“There,” I said, nodding at Cyril's car. “In his car.”

“Doesn't look like a derro,” said the policeman.

“He's an engineer,” I said. “Just back from the Middle East, hasn't got himself organised yet.”

“Right,” said the policeman. “Makes sense,” and he noted that down as the ambulance pulled away, its siren making me jump.

“Is that your tricycle?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Yes,” I said. “Where are they taking him?”

“Probably Conquest Hospital in Hastings,” he said. “I'll get the station to find out,” and he went to the front of the car to call Head Office.

It was several seconds before I realised Alfie wasn't in the trike's basket.

“Alfie?” I called out, staring to panic again. “Alfie? Where's Afie?”

“Who is Alfie?” demanded one of the policemen inspecting Cyril's car, no doubt concerned that there might still be a baby or another body in the car.

“My dog,” I said, “he was on my trike.”

Both policemen relaxed as missing dogs weren't high on their list of priorities, although just to be sure one of them peered underneath Cyril's car in case he'd stashed a body there before trying to kill himself.

“Small black and tan dog?” he asked, straightening up.

“Yes,” I said.

“Under the car,” said the policeman, “up against the far rear wheel.”

It took me a few minutes to coax Alfie out, during which time the police had conferred and concluded no crime had apparently been committed although there was some doubt over whether Cyril had broken a by-law by staying in the car park longer than the twenty four hours permitted. They lost interest in even this point when I said Cyril had arrived late the night before, after my public performance on the pier although, just to reassure their Chief Inspector that they were on top of their jobs, they checked my busking permit and one of them noted down its reference number.

“This is your current address?” he asked, pointing to the address of the butchers shop.

“Yes,” I said, since it was, regardless of how legal my residency actually was.

“Can we leave you to deal with the car?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll look after it ’til Cyril’s out of hospital.”

The policeman looked relieved that he didn’t have to go through all the paperwork pertaining to having vehicles towed away and impounded and he gave me the keys that had been in the ignition. The two police cars departed a lot more slowly than they had arrived.

I rolled another ciggie and tried to reassure Alfie, although he seemed to be getting over the noise and kerfuffle faster than I was. I was lighting it as the elderly couple came over. There’s nothing like a suicide attempt to bring strangers together.

“Sorry about that,” said the man.

I looked at him blankly, the flame of my lighter just millimetres from my beard.

“We thought you were a mad man,” said his wife. “That’s why we locked the doors. Can’t be too careful.”

“Ohhh,” I said, finally figuring out what they were talking about. “Doesn't matter. You called the police, that's what's important. Probably saved his life.”

I only said that last bit to make them feel better but it occurred to me that it could have been true since he had still been breathing in the carbon monoxide even though the engine wasn't running. We chatted for a few moments then the couple went off, no doubt to tell all their friends and relatives about what an exciting time they'd had on their day trip to Fairchester.

I picked up Alfie and hugged him while leaning against the bonnet of Cyril's car. I needed some comforting physical contact and Alfie didn't seem to mind.

“So now what do we do?” I asked him.

He licked my nose but didn't have anything more constructive to add.

“I reckon we'd best get the trike home,” I said, thinking about it, “then I'll walk back into town and pick up the car. Maybe I'll go to the hospital to see how Cyril's doing.”

I didn't want the trike stolen, now that I'd invested so much into it and Cyril's car was lockable and probably safe in the car park for a few more hours, even though it was unattended. Given the smell of exhaust inside and the piles of stuff in the back it didn't seem particularly desirable to a car thief.

I picked the sleeping bag off the ground and shook it out then rolled it up and put it in the boot of Cyril's car. After a moment's thought I put the vacuum cleaner tube in as well since Cyril may well have the rest of the vacuum cleaner somewhere else. I had a quick glance at the papers on the front seat; they were mostly in Arabic but they looked official and one seemed to be some sort of bank statement although the figures seemed fairly absurd. After all, if Cyril had £33 million in a bank account, why would he be living in his car in a car park in a small coastal town? At first glance I couldn't see any document box or briefcase so I left the papers on the floor of the passenger foot well, face down so no one could read them then I opened all the windows a

tiny bit so some fresh air could get in and locked all the doors.

“Right, Alfie,” I said, loading him into the basket. “Off to the supermarket then home for some grub. Remind me to get tobacco too. I’ve got maybe two smokes left.”

I got back to Cyril’s car around ten that evening, having left a well-fed Alfie on my bed roll. It didn’t take long to figure out why Cyril was still alive.

Chapter Thirteen

It felt strange sitting behind a steering wheel.

I'd passed my driving test, of course, back when I was 18 and ran an old banger through my years at uni but I'm pretty sure I hadn't driven a car since. The seat was a bit too far back and the mirrors were in the wrong position but that was easy enough. What was more problematic was that Cyril's car wouldn't start. It turned over easily enough but wouldn't catch. I tried a couple more times before checking the fuel gauge.

It should have been obvious. The car wasn't running when I had found Cyril and since he was unconscious he couldn't have turned it off. Therefore, as simple logic should have told me, it must have stopped running on its own and the most likely reason for that was that it had run out of petrol. Of course, if we're going to stay on a logic trip, you would expect an engineer who is sufficiently clear thinking to run a tube into the car from the exhaust and to use a sleeping bag to make sure as little exhaust as possible escaped would have thought to put in a few extra litres of petrol, but maybe he'd thought there was enough or maybe he was just too depressed to think of it. Anyway, the long and the short of it was that Cyril was in hospital and I was sitting in his car, with no petrol, in a public car park in the middle of the night and six miles from where I called home. It still smelt of exhaust fumes as well.

I could walk all the way home but that wouldn't actually solve the problem since the car still wouldn't have any petrol the next day. On the other hand, even though I had a little money on me, I didn't know where there was a petrol station since these places don't impinge on my life anymore. I locked the car and wandered out to the esplanade. Off to the left the pier stuck out into the sea, two or three shades of black darker than the night although there was a light at the end to guide any night boats out there. More importantly there was a pub a few doors up and there were three young lads coming out and heading my way.

"Scuse me," I said, "is there a petrol station round here, only my car's run out of petrol?"

One of them lit a cigarette to help him think while his companions looked blankly up and down the esplanade.

"Couple of miles," said the smoker, "down the esplanade, just before the airfield or there's one up past Sainbury's but I think that's closed now."

"Oh great," I thought, discouraged. "Four mile walk and I'll have to buy a fuel can as well."

"Is there a bus?" I asked.

"On a Sunday?" He laughed. "Wanna smoke?"

He offered me his packet of ready rolled ciggies and I took one. Friendly people leaving pubs at closing time can sometimes get nasty if their generosity is rejected.

"Thanks," I said, accepting a light.

I started to head back towards Cyril's car and for some reason the three of them followed me, which made me a little nervous.

"That one, is it?" said the smoker. The other two hadn't said a word, they just smiled amiably and nodded at everything.

"Yes," I said, since it was the only car in the car park and hard to deny.

"Out of fuel, then?" he said, keeping on walking towards it even though I'd stopped.

"Yes," I said.

"There's a seagull," said one of his silent companions as something flew overhead.

"Don't be daft, Darren," said the other silent companion.

"Who you calling daft, tosser?" said Darren twisting round to watch

the bird and nearly falling over.

“Seagulls don't fly at night,” said Tosser. “Most likely a nightjar.”

“We'll give you a push,” said the smoker, ignoring them.”C'mon, lads.”

“What we doing?” asked Darren.

“This guy needs a push,” said the smoker.

“Oh, right,” said Darren.

“Could have been a stone curlew,” mused Tosser.

“You get in and steer,” said Smoker.

“Bleeding seagull,” said Darren, taking up position at the back of the car.

“Go there and push,” said Smoker to Tosser.

I got in the car and let the handbrake off and wondered if I should put on the headlights. It seemed safer so I did even though there was a fair chance that the battery would be flat before we got to the petrol station.

“I s'pose it could have been a nightingale,” said Darren, conceding it might not have been a seagull.

I steered towards the car park exit as the three of them got the car moving. Once underway it didn't seem to take much effort to keep it rolling and I hoped the petrol station wasn't at the top of a steep hill.

“Nightingales sing, dimmo,” said Tosser, who was walking backwards with his bum against the boot of the car. “Reckon it was a barn owl. They's don't make a sound.”

There didn't seem to be any traffic so we sailed out onto the esplanade and off out of town.

“Fancy another?” said Smoker, who was walking beside my open window making no pretence at pushing.

“Thanks,” I said and he lit one and passed it in to me.

“Or a woodcock,” said Tosser.

“You’re a tosser,” said Darren. “Don’t half fancy a burger.”

“They’ve got burgers at the petrol station,” said Smoker.

“Well, it weren’t no bleeding seagull,” said Tosser.

“Just up there on the right,” said Smoker as we went round the corner just past the car park. It was maybe three hundred yards from the car park and was brightly lit. I steered the car into the station and pulled up beside one of the pumps.

“Jesus, it’s getting heavy,” said Tosser, still trying to push. Since he was facing backwards he hadn’t seen that we’d arrived. Darren had already peeled off and was heading inside to get his burger.

“See ya, mate,” said Smoker, following him.

“Thank you,” I called after them.

“Oh,” said Tosser, looking round. “Where’d they go?”

“They went inside for burgers,” I said.

“Weren’t a seagull, mate,” he said. “Have a good one,” and he disappeared inside as well.

“Thanks,” I said again, this time to myself.

I walked around the car and discovered that, more by luck than good judgement, that the filler cap was on the pump side of the car. The only problem was that it was covered by a flap with no apparent means of opening it. I stared at it, trying to remember how I’d put petrol in my car but it had been fifteen years old when I’d said

goodbye to it at the scrap yard and technology must have moved on since. I looked at the key fob which had buttons for locking the doors and tried both of them but neither operated the filler cap cover.

“Maybe you open it from the driver's seat,” I thought.

I went back to the driver's seat and peered closely at all the buttons but they all had symbols on that looked like things other than filler cap covers, like hazard lights and rear windscreen demister. I got back out and knelt on the ground and peered at the bottom of the dashboard. There seemed to be two small levers there. I pulled one and the bonnet clicked open so I tried the other. Nothing seemed to happen so I tried it again. Nothing happened again.

“Oh for crying out loud,” I muttered and stood up and leaned on the bonnet to lock it shut again.

“Ahh, maybe the manual's in the glove box,” I thought.

I went round the side of the car to open the passenger door to get at the glove box and saw the flap was now sticking out.

“Cool,” I thought. “Must have been that other lever.

There was no lock on the filler cap so I unscrewed it and looked at the pump.

“Well, it's probably not diesel,” I said to myself, “and that nozzle for LPG won't fit so is it Premium Unleaded or Super Unleaded?”

I didn't know but the Premium Unleaded was cheaper and I figured a few litres of that wouldn't hurt the engine if it was the wrong type. I counted up all the cash I had on me and, making extensive use of my maths degree and a vague recollection that I used to get around eight miles per litre with my old banger I calculated I could afford enough petrol to get the car home and back into town in the morning easily enough but not get to Hastings to visit Cyril in the hospital. I'd forgotten how expensive running a car was. Still, once home I could raid my elephant bag cash reserve.

It took a while for the engine to catch and I was mightily relieved when it did. It had crossed my mind that the car wasn't starting for some other reason and that I might have wasted my money on unnecessary fuel. Still, it started again when I stalled it and seemed to run smoothly enough so I drove it home and parked it in the alley behind the butchers. Alfie was ecstatic to see me again. Maybe he'd thought I'd abandoned him as well. I felt exhausted from all the new stresses in my life and slept like a log.

It was raining in the morning as Alfie accompanied me into town, in Cyril's car. We stopped off at the vet's and they injected a microchip into his neck and charged me £15 for the privilege and I gave them my parent's address for the database. If anyone found Alfie there was no way they'd take him all the way to Manchester and my parents had no way of contacting me but at least he was legal. I asked Tanya, the receptionist at the vet, how far it was to Hastings and estimated how much fuel I'd need and figured that £10 should get enough fuel for the round trip and found that the petrol station near Sainsbury's was 1.3 pence per litre cheaper than the other one, which was nice.

"Visiting hours are from 3pm to 8pm," said the ward nurse when I eventually found the hospital and tracked Cyril down to a ward for acute respiratory patients.

"So he's still alive then?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "although he's asleep at the moment. He only came onto the ward from Accident and Emergency an hour ago."

"What time is it now?" I asked, wondering whether to wait or go somewhere else for a while. Parking cost £1.70 an hour.

"Eleven thirty," she said.

"I'll come back this afternoon," I said. "How long's he going to be here?"

"Are you a friend or family?" she asked.

"A friend," I said. "As far as I know he has no family."

I figured that if he did he'd probably have made contact with them by now to help him with his accommodation problems rather than live in his car.

"We have no next of kin information," she said. "Can I put you in?"

"I suppose," I said jokingly, "although I'm not going to have to make any resuscitation decisions or anything, am I?"

She gave me a wan smile. "Perhaps," she said. "Mr Delaney has suffered acute carbon monoxide poisoning and we'll be keeping him in for a few days for observation and he will, of course, have to stay in frequent contact with his GP for at least the next six months."

"Oh," I said, feeling very deflated. I really, really didn't want to have to make decisions about whether or not someone was to live or die. That was way outside my comfort zone.

She brought up Cyril's details on her computer and I gave her mine. She wasn't impressed that I had no phone and probably thought I was hiding it so I wouldn't have to make any decisions if the need arose.

"We don't seem to have Mr Delaney's home address," she said, looking at me. "His driver's licence gave an address in the Yemen."

"He's been in the Middle East for a number of years," I said, wondering if I ought to tell her that he was currently living in a car. After all, he probably didn't want that widely known. I decided Cyril could tell them what he wanted when he woke up. "He lives in Fairchester-on-Sea, although I'm not exactly sure where."

The nurse left it at that and I found my way back to the car park. Alfie had found Cyril's sleeping bag and was making full use of it although he was pleased to see me.

"We need to make some money," I told him. "It looks like I'm going to have to come here more than once."

Fortunately I'd stopped in Hastings for a couple of weeks the previous summer when I started my touring of the coast so I had an idea where

there were some good busking spots. Hastings had a pier but it wasn't as good as Fairchester's. A better place was Warrior Square Gardens, particularly as the weather didn't make the beach attractive.

I didn't make a whole lot of money but I made enough to cover the petrol and a few hours of parking which, when all's said and done, is really all I needed. Working to cover your needs is one thing but working for the sake of working seems rather pointless.

I got back to the hospital around fourish and Cyril was awake, if not feeling particularly bright.

"Hello," I said, breezing in.

He stared at me.

"What are you doing here?" he wheezed hoarsely and grimaced.

"I'm the one that found you," I said.

"Ohh," he muttered. He probably felt a bit embarrassed.

"So how are you feeling?" I asked, sitting on the hard, uncomfortable, too high chair provided. The man in the next bed started coughing violently and held a handkerchief to his mouth while his visitor, presumably his wife, looked on helplessly.

"Crap," he said sourly. "My head hurts, my throat hurts, my chest hurts, I feel weak all over and on top of all that I've got a psychiatric evaluation tomorrow to look forward to. Yeah, thanks, buddy."

I laughed. I had no guilty conscience about saving him.

"Hey, no need to thank me," I said, getting up to look at his charts hanging at the bottom of the bed. "I'm looking after your car so when they let you out you can do it again, if you want. It's your choice."

"What if they decide to put me in a mental home?" he asked.

"I wouldn't think they'd do that," I said. "They need the beds for the

really sick not just tossers like you.”

“Urghh,” he said and reached for a water bottle with a nozzle.

“Says here your pulse is a bit high and your temperature is too,” I said. “Says something about an ECG as well although that isn’t here.”

“I’ve no idea,” he said. “I remember waking up at some point and being covered in wires but I went out again and woke up here. I keep falling asleep.”

He fumbled the water bottle trying to put it back and it fell on the floor. I hung his charts back on the bed frame and picked it up.

“Hey,” I said, awkwardly. “I don’t really know what’s going on in your life but whatever it is I’m sure there’s still some more life left in you. If you need a friend, I’m here,” and I reached out and patted his hand. I find this sort of thing a little embarrassing, to be honest. I think Cyril did too since he turned his head away but he moved his hand to grasp mine and squeezed it tightly for a couple of seconds.

“Thanks,” he said, then let it go.

“So what’s the food like?” I asked, after a few moments.

“No idea, they haven’t fed me anything yet,” he said.

Judging by the other visitors to the sick people in the ward, animated conversation wasn’t the norm. I wondered if the nurses would be upset if I brought my sax in for an impromptu concert to maybe cheer things up a bit.

“Umm,” I said, “I came in earlier and the nurse insisted on putting me down as your next of kin. I told her we weren’t related but she said they needed someone in that box.”

“Well, there’s my sister,” he said, “but she’s an anthropologist and I’ve no idea where she is. Last I heard she was somewhere in Papua New Guinea.”

“OK,” I said, deciding to grasp the nettle by the thorns or whatever the saying is. “I think they thought they needed someone to make decisions if you couldn't. Like resuscitation and stuff.”

“Oh,” he said and groaned. “Why would a suicide want resuscitation?”

“Search me,” I said, “but just so's you know, I'd never decide to let you die.”

“Wouldn't be up to you anyway,” he said, looking at me. “If there isn't a close relative then it's down to a court to decide.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yup.”

He closed his eyes and seemed to drift away for a few moments.

“Hey,” I said, “you need to sleep. I'll come visit you again tomorrow, OK?”

“OK,” he said and started to cough so I waited until he stopped.

“You want me to bring you anything?” I asked.

“No, that's all right,” he said.

“See you tomorrow,” I said and started to move off in the direction of the ward exit.

“Ben!” he called then clutched his throat and grimaced.

“Yeah?” I said, going back.

“Thanks,” he said, quietly. “I mean it.”

I patted his arm and smiled then walked away. There didn't seem much to say.

The nurse I'd talked to earlier wasn't around but there was another

sitting at the front desk for the ward.

“Hi,” I said, cheerfully.

“Hi,” she replied, tiredly.

“I’m, umm, a friend of Cyril Delaney,” I said. “I was wondering if you could tell me how he is?”

“At the moment he’s stable,” she said, reaching behind her to grab a slim file from a rack. “Carbon monoxide has a half life of about four hours in the body and his most recent blood tests show the level is becoming negligible.”

“So you think maybe he’ll be coming out tomorrow?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” she said, flicking through his file. “The carbon monoxide may have left his system but there can be serious effects that may not show up for a day or two.”

“What sort of effects?” I asked.

“Possible lung damage,” she said, “possible heart damage, also the kidneys and liver and quite possibly the brain. It all depends on how much CO got absorbed and circulated.”

“His brain?” I said, taken aback. “You mean he might have suffered brain damage?”

“It’s a definite possibility,” she said. “The CO attaches to the haemoglobin in the blood, replacing the oxygen. The brain uses about 20% of the body’s oxygen so about 20% of the CO inhaled can end up in the brain with potentially serious consequences.”

“So is that why Cyril’s got a psychiatric evaluation tomorrow?” I asked.

“No,” she said, and pushed some stray hair back under her cap. “That’s because the police reported him as an attempted suicide. It’s routine procedure to psychologically evaluate such people to assess their ideation patterns and likelihood of re-attempting.”

I thought about this for a while.

“So there could be some underlying mental illness?” I asked.

“Quite possibly,” she said, “although it could also be due to extreme pressures and stress or be as simple as a sense of loss of control. That's really down to the psychiatrist. Mr Delaney may need psychiatric care or counselling or conceivably simply a change in his circumstances.”

“OK,” I said. “So, umm, when do you think Cyril might be released?”

“This isn't a prison,” she said, with a half smile. “We don't release patients, we discharge them. Ohh, assuming no untoward symptoms appear, perhaps Wednesday or Thursday.”

Chapter Fourteen

After leaving the hospital I took Alfie and we sat in Warrior Square Gardens for a while, enjoying the flowers and the lovely old buildings that surrounded the Gardens and the view out over the beach and the sea. I was bothered by Cyril. At root I felt an element of guilt as I had sensed he'd wanted to talk over the last few days and I hadn't put as much effort into making it happen as I could have. In a moment of self-clarity I also realised that the only reason he was still alive was because I had gone to see him because of my own selfishness, to ask about paint, and not because of any concern for his welfare. I'd offered him the hand of friendship but had I really meant it?

Then again there was the psychological evaluation. I don't know much about psychology but Cyril didn't strike me as being a nutter, and god knows there are enough of those on the streets. Really, he seemed to me to be lonely and depressed. Some people have a need to have a solid defined base and others need to have the freedom to come and go. I'm definitely one of the latter and, no matter how comfortable somewhere is, sooner or later I need to move on and get back out into the world. Maybe Cyril, despite having gone to the Middle East, was one of those who needed a solid base. Maybe he'd come back to England to re-connect with his solid base only to find it had disappeared and he was being swallowed up in the quicksands of unfulfilled expectations and lacked the flexibility or experience to tread lightly.

Still, and this I freely admit, I am shy of taking responsibility. For myself? Of course I take full responsibility for myself. Like that incident with the yobs on Sunday. I could easily have handled it differently and the only reason it turned out the way it had was because of me. I know that and I take full responsibility. For others? There's the rub. No, I shy away from that. Girls come and go because I don't want to be 'too involved'. I squat in places because I don't want the responsibility of being committed to a place, not even a rental. I busk where I want because I don't want any responsibility to an employer.

Alfie?

"You're a conundrum, boy," I said, reaching over to scratch his ears as we lay on the grass.

He was a conundrum because, while I tried to kid myself that he was free to go at anytime I knew, deep down, that dogs are pack animals and he'd never go until I abused him really badly and yet I had taken on responsibility for him. For his health and welfare, even for his legal standing in the world. And, in doing so, I was restricting my own freedom. Now I had Alfie there would be places I couldn't go simply because I had a dog with me and there was the conundrum – I was OK with that.

So what to do about Cyril?

I had no legal responsibility for him but the law is irrelevant most of the time anyway. No, the thing was, by going to visit him in the hospital and offering the hand of friendship I was, to an extent anyway, taking responsibility for him. What if I wasn't around when he came out of hospital and went back to his life in a car? What if I was just me and bugged off to another town? Would he try to gas himself again? Would he succeed? Would it then be my fault? Yet another rejection to add to the pile that weighed him down?

Moral philosophy was never my strong point.

"Come on, boy," I said to Alfie late in the afternoon. "Let's go along to the pier and see what's happening."

It's only a short walk so we left the car where it was parked, although I took my sax out of habit. Nothing much seemed to be happening at the pier but a little further along was the White Rock Theatre which was having an evening of classical music courtesy of the Brighton Symphony Orchestra from Rochester.

"Excuse me," I said to the doorman in his neat frock coat.

"Sir?" he enquired.

"I'm not too hot on geography, but isn't Rochester in the North of England and Brighton on the south coast?"

"I believe you are right," he said and leapt forward to open the door of a taxi that pulled up. A middle aged lady got out of the taxi, thanked him and walked into the restaurant next door.

"Sir?" he asked, noticing Alfie and I were still there when he took up his position again.

"So how come the Brighton Symphony Orchestra is from Rochester?" I asked.

"They're American," he said. "From New York State."

"Oh right," I said. "Are they any good?"

"They're American, sir," he said, expressionlessly, which made me laugh. Some people love Americans and other hate them. I tend to love them as American tourists have absolutely no idea about tipping, which means they tip too much, if that's possible, and they wear their hearts on their sleeves. If an American likes what I'm playing they leave me in no doubt about it which is nice. Even buskers need love too, sometimes.

Mind you, the people who hate Americans use their tendency to over-tip to criticise them which only goes to show that those people don't depend on tips. I've never yet met a busker or a waitress or anyone else who does depend on tips who criticised Americans. Anyway, I'd never seen an American symphony orchestra perform so I asked how much tickets were.

"No dogs allowed, sir," said the doorman, not bothering to tell me prices and, to an extent, confirming my inner debates from the Warrior Square Gardens.

"OK," I said. "Come on Alfie, let's go find something to eat."

My freedom was being curtailed by Alfie and I was happy with that. We walked past the fancy restaurant next to the theatre with our noses in the air – well, mine was, Alfie's was pointing towards the kitchens at the back – and found the nice little kebab shop in Carlisle Parade which I had frequented the year before. It was one of those hole in the

wall type places and run by an industrious Turk called Mehmet who pretended to remember me. It turned out he liked dogs and let Alfie have the knuckle ends of one of those big cylinders of meat they use for kebabs.

The next day was gorgeously sunny and I spent the morning, stripped to the waist stripping the trike and giving the frame a final rub down with the paste and the last of my steel wool. Even as bare metal it looked heaps better than when it had been a rust bucket although the wheels, which hadn't been too bad before, now looked dowdy and shoddy. The bare seat was something of an embarrassment as well and I remembered I still hadn't got any glue to make the new seat. It was only as I was re-attaching the front forks that I realised that I was also taking responsibility for the trike. After all, caring and repairing is an act of responsibility.

"Jesus, what is happening to my life?" I asked out loud, sitting back on my heels. "I'm becoming a friggin owner!"

Mid afternoon Alfie and I drove over to visit Cyril but he had just left the ward for his psychological evaluation and wouldn't be back for an hour or more so I left word that I'd visited and Alfie and I went down to the beach. The lovely weather had brought droves of people out to the beach and, never one to miss an opportunity, I whipped out my sax and we went busking.

I got moved on by the police a couple of times because I didn't have a permit but the good weather had put them in a good mood so they didn't give me any particular hassles. I just picked up my stuff and Alfie and I wandered off to another area and started again.

It was a superb day, well worth the risk of an arrest. The warm weather not only brought out the people but it made them generous and the coins and more than a few notes rained like there was no tomorrow. Apart from breaks I didn't stop until after sunset. I asked someone the time and found it was almost nine o'clock which killed any chance of dropping in on Cyril so after visiting Mehmet, who didn't have any convenient knuckles this time, we went home. I remembered, driving through Fairchester, to stop at Sainsbury's for some glue.

It is truly astonishing the range of glues these days, even in a supermarket. They had super glue, power glue, wood glue, nail glue, glitter glue, even gorilla glue although why anyone would want to glue a gorilla is beyond me. More importantly they had silicone glue for foam rubber and vinyl glue for the vinyl so I got a little tube of each plus some more cheese and a bag of bones for Alfie and a bag of marshmallows for myself. We'd made just over £200 in Hastings, after kebabs, and I felt the urge to celebrate. The recent, unplanned expenses of vets bills, trike repairs, fuel and whatever had left me a little short but after topping up my liquid cash reserves, specifically my elephant bag, I was planning on putting £150 in the bank the following morning for my emergency fund.

Decent saxes are expensive and this deposit would take my fund to just over £2000 and into the bottom end of the world of decent saxes, should I need to replace mine in the near future. Mouthpieces alone can be very expensive. My main mouthpiece, an Aizen Jazz Master metal mouthpiece, had cost me £435 and that was three years ago. It was, however, the best mouthpiece I had ever used, with a beautifully warm, rounded tone and precisely focused sound and I'd fallen in love with it the first time I tried it. So much so that I held down a disgusting job in a meat processing plant for almost three weeks to pay for it. It wasn't the most expensive mouthpiece by any means, some are more than £1000, but it suited my style of playing. I had a spare, which I'd picked up for £50 in a music shop's closing down sale and would do in an emergency but it was nowhere near as good.

Wednesday was a drizzly day of the kind that has made England famous throughout the world, that kind of wetness that is more than mist but not quite actual raindrops and can linger for days and seep into everything, including your soul. I spent the morning working on the trike seat since Cyril would be out of hospital any day and would, presumably, want his car back. Certainly I had no desire to subject my delicate bottom to the seat base again so the padding was a priority. It was a fiddly job and the end result wasn't as professional as it could have been but, and it's an important but, just as my butt is important, it worked. I snipped away at the vinyl with my cute little pliers and managed to get the cover glued to the underside of the base with the minimum of bulges and overlaps.

I left it to dry and went to do my banking before we headed off to try to catch up with Cyril. I took the sax because I don't like to leave it unattended and someone could come into the butchers at any time. Replacing my odds and ends wouldn't be a problem but the sax was precious. When we got to Hastings the weather there was the same and hardly anyone was on the streets so doing any busking seemed to be rather pointless and I left it in the car with Alfie guarding it.

"Hey, you're here," I said, going up to Cyril. He was sitting up, half-heartedly reading a three year old copy of, cruelly ironic under the circumstances, *Home And Gardens*.

He smiled when he saw me, which I took to be a good sign.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Oh good," I said. "I came by yesterday but you were out so I went down to the beach to do some busking and ended up staying until after dark. Sorry I didn't get back before closing time."

"Closing time?" he said, looking puzzled.

"End of visiting hours," I said, taking advantage of the empty bed next to Cyril's to swap its more comfy looking chair with the medieval torture chair I'd sat on last time. I hoped the previous occupant of the bed – the man with the nasty cough – had got better. "So how are you feeling?"

"A lot better," he said. "Only my throat hurts now."

"Umm, how did the evaluation go?" I asked, diplomatically avoiding the 'psychological' word.

He thought about it for a while.

"Oh, what the hell," he said. "You might as well know. The psychiatrist didn't really want to commit himself but he thinks I might be borderline Aspergers although he wants to do more evaluation before deciding whether or not it is significant."

“So what's Aspergers?” I asked. “That doesn't sound too nasty, like psycho or schizo.”

“Apparently it's fairly common among people with high intelligence,” said Cyril, looking slightly pleased with himself, which was a good sign as well. I have no idea if anyone has done a study of it or what the statistics are but I doubted if people who are feeling pleased with themselves try to do away with themselves.

“OK,” I said, picking at the dried glue on my fingers. “But what is it?”

“He said it was a difficulty with social interaction and non-verbal communication,” said Cyril. “He thought that was probably why I don't make friends easily and misunderstand what people really mean.”

“OK,” I said, peeling off a long, thin strip of glue and holding it up to the light to see if it had my finger print in it. “So what's that got to do with, you know.”

“Nothing,” said Cyril flatly. “That was straightforward depression, although he said that if I didn't have Aspergers I'd have a support network of friends which would have made the depression easier.”

He snorted, a little derisively.

“You don't agree?” I asked.

“I had friends in Yemen,” he said. “Not many admittedly but the expat community there isn't that large. I've only been back in England a few weeks and it's difficult to make friends when you're my age and living in a car.”

“Did you explain that to him?” I asked. Somehow I'd managed to get glue on my elbow as well.

“Yes, but he was only interested in his neat little pigeon holes,” said Cyril.

“I guess,” I said. “Although maybe if you'd had more friends in Yemen

or a wife or someone you wouldn't have come back to England and you wouldn't be living in a car."

He grimaced at me and didn't answer so I twisted my arm around to try to look at my elbow.

"I missed the green English countryside," he said after a while. "Does that mean I've a personality disorder?"

"You obviously haven't been outside today," I said, grinning. "Only a fruitcake would miss that," and nodded towards the window.

"Live in the Arabian desert for a while," he said. "You miss any form of moisture after a while. Except sweat."

"I suppose," I said. "I've never been outside Europe. I'd love to see a desert. Have you ridden on a camel?"

"Yes," he said. "Horrible things. Have you ever seen a horse running?"

"Probably," I said, "why?"

"When a horse runs," he said, "it pushes forwards with both its back legs onto both its front legs so it's a bit like a rocking horse and its body stays more or less level but a camel runs like two people walking one in front of the other with both legs on the same side moving forwards and backwards together which means that it lurches from one side to the other and you get seasick. That's why they call the bloody things ships of the desert. And by crikeys are they vicious and stubborn. They'll bite anything, just for the fun of it. Horrible creatures, give me a Landcruiser any day."

"They've always seemed very romantic to me," I said.

"That's in the movies," said Cyril. "In real life they spit and bite and regurgitate everywhere."

"Excuse me," said a young guy in a neat two piece suit who materialised at the end of the bed, "are you Mr Cyril Delaney?"

“Yes,” said Cyril.

“I’m Faizan Baqri, with the hospital social liaison department,” he said and held out his hand for Cyril to shake.

“Would you excuse us for a few minutes?” he asked me.

“Do you want me to leave?” I said, standing up.

“Oh there’s no need,” he said. “But I must discuss Mr Delaney’s discharge arrangements, if you don’t mind.”

“Go right ahead,” I said. “Don’t mind me.”

He smiled distractedly and opened a large briefcase on the bed. It was actually quite an impressive briefcase since it opened fully into something like a small desktop, complete with a flat writing area and had a neat little strip full of pens. He rummaged in the top section and pulled out a file which he opened on the writing area.

“Now you are reported as living in a car at the time of your, umm, incident,” he said, running his finger down a page. “Is that correct?”

“Yes,” said Cyril.

“Do you have any more permanent accommodation?”

“You mean like a house?” asked Cyril.

“Yes, or an apartment or perhaps a room?” asked Faizan. “With heating and sanitary facilities?”

“There’s a public toilet near the car park,” said Cyril.

“I take it that’s a ‘no’, then,” said Faizan.

“That’s right,” said Cyril.

“And were you living in this vehicle through choice or necessity?”

"I can't afford to rent anywhere," admitted Cyril.

Faizan ticked a box on the form, which suggested it must have been a sufficiently common occurrence to warrant its own tick box.

"Do you have access to any accommodation with heating and sanitation, perhaps through a family member or a friend?" he asked.

"If I did I wouldn't be living in my car," said Cyril, sounding a little tetchy.

"Quite," said Faizan. "Now, I have arranged an interview for you tomorrow with the Social Services Department who will review your case."

"Oh jolly good," said Cyril sarcastically. "Why?"

Faizan looked startled to be asked that question.

"You are currently classified as primary homeless," he said, "in that you are living in a vehicle not designed for accommodation with no immediate prospect of a change in your circumstances."

"Oh, right," said Cyril. "Pretty fair summary. What's there to review?"

"Social services will review your case in order to determine your base accommodation needs as it is hospital policy not to discharge a patient with no adequate accommodation."

"So you're saying they will find me somewhere to live?" asked Cyril.

"Yes," said Faizan, "although with the current waiting list the temporary accommodation assigned to you will only be adequate, so don't get your hopes up."

"How long is the current waiting list?" I asked. I'd known a few people in London who had been assigned temporary 'adequate accommodation'. All but one had been back on the streets the next day since that was preferable.

“Six to nine months,” said Faizan.

“Jesus,” I said, looking dismayed.

“Why?” asked Cyril, looking at me with some urgency. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“These are the places where Social Services house people who are serious drug addicts or are mentally ill,” I said. “The ones who are waiting for places in community care centres. You really don’t want to go to one of those places.”

“That’s as may be,” said Faizan rather primly, “but in order to be discharged, Mr Delaney really has no alternative. He will not be permitted to return to a car.”

“Of course he has an alternative,” I said. “He can stay with me if he wants.”

Chapter Fifteen

It was surprisingly easy to get Faizan to agree since he knew how strained the social services were. Cyril was more difficult to convince since he didn't know how to accept help but he came round to the idea. Fortunately he didn't remember that I lived in a squat, or if he did he kept it quiet, because I was currently what the social services would term secondary homeless and therefore only one small jump ahead of Cyril and Faizan would have felt obliged to try to house me as well. Still, the important thing was that I had an address which, bureaucratically speaking, was the only thing that mattered. At some point the Social Services would send someone round to check on the standard of the accommodation but that would be later rather than sooner since the Social Services have too much responsibility and not enough resources and we'd have moved on by then. Or I would have at any rate. What Cyril did would be up to him.

“Look at it this way,” I told him when Faizan had finished filling in his quota of paperwork and dematerialised again. “You now have an address in the system so you'll be able to claim benefits and once they start coming through you'll be able to rent somewhere. And once you've got somewhere to live you'll find it easier to get a job.”

This seemed to cheer him up a bit and I made my farewells. I remembered on the way home that I still hadn't asked Cyril about paint but there was no urgency for that. More importantly the glue on the seat seemed to be thoroughly dry so I refitted it to the trike and took it for try-out.

“Maybe I should set up a bike repair service,” I thought happily to myself winding through the quiet, deserted lanes of Little Fairchester. The old lady who'd been watering her garden a few days before was doing something to her roses and I gave her a friendly wave. She watched me go by but didn't respond.

Back in my little squat I made some food for me and Alfie.

“We need to give this some serious thought,” I told him.

To be fair, Alfie did try his best to look serious, although when it

came to it, there didn't seem to be much to think about after all. Cyril could either sleep in the cool room on his own or in my room or in his car in the courtyard or anywhere else come to that. He had a sleeping bag and, if needs be, we could get him an air bed or a cheap foam mattress and, having lived in a car, he'd be used to no lights after sunset. At least he would now have access to a toilet and basic cooking facilities, even if there was no shower or hot water.

The nurse at the reception desk had said to come back in the early afternoon so Alfie and I drove into Fairchester in the morning to get some more food since there'd now be three of us at mealtimes. I asked the girl at the checkout if there was a charity shop in town and she thought there was but couldn't remember where so we drove round for a while but couldn't find one. No doubt I'd come across it when I was looking for somewhere else.

"There's your keys," I said, handing them to Cyril when the nurse finally found a doctor to sign his discharge forms and I'd got him outside.

"Would you drive?" he asked. "I feel totally drained."

"Sure," I said and unlocked the car.

Cyril got in the passenger seat and groaned. He stared at his feet for a few moments then bent forward and picked up the papers I'd left in the footwell.

"I put them there since I didn't know where else to leave them," I said, pulling out of the car park.

"Yeah," he said disinterestedly and leaned back and shut his eyes. We drove home in silence.

"Well, here we are," I said, pulling up in the alley. "Do you want to bring your stuff in now or later?"

"Later," he said. "They warned me about this, at the hospital."

"Warned you about what?" I asked, leading him in through the back

door.

“They said I’d have bouts of fatigue and headaches for several weeks,” he said, leaning against the wall and looking faint. “Also irritation and maybe memory loss, although I’m always irritable, at least as far as I can remember.”

He laughed feebly at his little joke and I nodded.

“Would you do me a favour and get my sleeping bag?” he asked. “I need to lie down for a bit.”

“Where shall I put it?” I asked, bringing it in together with a pillow I’d found. I carried it so the dog hairs weren’t immediately visible.

“Anywhere,” he said, still leaning against the wall with his eyes closed.

I laid his sleeping bag in the corner of the room and he got in without undressing. He was snoring within thirty seconds.

“Oh great,” I thought, “maybe I’ll move to the cool room.”

It felt very strange having someone in what I now considered to be my place but I’d get over it soon enough. There was no point going out busking so I whiled away the time taking my sax to pieces and giving it a thorough clean and checking for wear and damage. Saxes look pretty solid but they are still precision instruments and they have any number of fiddly little springs and screws. Since I play outdoors virtually all the time I also accumulate a fair amount of dirt under the pads which can cause air leaks.

Cyril woke up an hour or so later, full of the joy of life.

“Damn, I needed that,” he said, getting up. “Sorry.”

“All cool,” I said. “Want some coffee?”

“Lovely,” he said and went to inspect the toilet facilities.

“No hot water?” he asked, coming back.

"This is a squat," I said. "No facilities. Bloody lucky to have gas to cook with."

"Oh," he said, looking round. "So what do you sit on?"

"The doorstep mostly," I said, grinning. "Hey, it's free."

"I guess," he said. "So, what, you sleep on the floor?"

"Yup," I said. "You get used to it after a while. Here's your coffee."

"No sugar or milk, either?" he asked, taking it.

"No fridge," I said.

"I suppose I'll get used to that as well," he said with a laugh and sat in the courtyard with his back against the wall since there wasn't much room on the door step.

"Ahhh," he said, drinking some coffee and looking round. "So, by the look of it you're not much better off than I was in the car."

"It's a state of mind," I said. "When you're happy with what you've got you don't need much and I'm quite happy. Possessions are just annoyances. You've got to look after them and worry about them and all that crap. The only thing I've got that I worry about is my sax, and Alfie, of course."

He stared at me for a long while then sighed. "Interesting philosophy," he said.

I went back to reassembling my sax and after a while Cyril went inside to make some more coffee and came back out with the papers he'd picked up in the car. He'd dumped them on the side of the sink when he'd arrived.

He looked through them and sighed and sipped his coffee.

"Not too bad without sugar," he said. "I suppose you looked at these?"

“Only briefly,” I said. “They were scattered over the seat and they looked important.”

“Just scrap paper now,” he said sadly.

“OK,” I said, putting the sax down and looking at him. “You don't have to tell me anything but it looks like you've got 30 million quid in a bank account somewhere so how the hell did you get into this mess here?”

“Oh I wish,” he said with a snort. “It's 33 million Yemani Rials which is roughly £100,000.”

“OK,” I said, picking up the sax and bending to reattach the G key. “That's still a tidy amount.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That's what I thought. I figured I could use it to tide me over until I found a job but I can't get at it.”

“How come?” I asked.

He sighed.

“I worked all over the Middle East,” he said, “but I was based in Yemen and put all my savings into the Wahda Islamic Bank. A couple of months before I was due to come back to England the bank declared itself insolvent.”

“Oh wow,” I said, stopping to look at him. “So you lost everything?”

“Oh no,” he said. “Deposits with the bank were secured by the Yemeni government. That's what this letter is about,” and he waved a densely packed but ornate Arabic letter at me. “All the money is still sitting in my account, although I seem to have lost about three month's interest which is no big deal.”

“So what's the problem?” I asked.

“This letter,” he said, holding up another one. “I got it last week, through my British bank. It seems my money is all ready for me to

collect, any time I want to.”

“But?” I said. “Sounds like there's a really big 'but' coming.”

“Yup,” he said. “But I have to go to Aden, which is the banking centre of Yemen, and prove my identity to the Southern Transitional Council in order to collect the money. I can't get it out of the country otherwise.”

“Right,” I said, “and I'm guessing you can't afford to go back to Yemen.”

“That's right,” he said, “and Middle Eastern governments aren't the fastest of organisations so I'd have to stay there for a while as well. It was all my own stupid fault.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“When the bank folded I knew they were covered so I came back to England anyway. If I'd only stayed out there for another two or three months I'd have sorted it out and transferred the money to my English bank but I didn't.”

“How were you to know?” I asked.

“I've been out there for a long time,” he said. “I really should know how the Arab mind works by now but obviously I don't.”

“So is that why you, ummm ...” I searched around for an alternative to 'tried to gas yourself' and continued with “... got depressed?”

“Yes,” he said. “All my possessions are still in Yemen, in storage, waiting for the money to be released so they can be shipped over. But because I'm so stupid I'm here, with no money, no job, no where to live and all my money and my records and my furniture and books and everything is over there and I can't bloody well afford to go back and get it. I can't even sell the car because it's my sister's and she doesn't even know I've got it. I've been racking my brains for a solution for days but in the end it all got on top of me and I gave up. I think what really got to me was when you bought me those chips and I

started to realise that I was going to have to depend on handouts and then you played some jazz and it all got too much.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Want me to charge you for that coffee?”

He laughed and finished it quickly.

“No,” he said reflectively. “I’m only now realising that I was lucky to have met you. Maybe you can teach me your philosophy and how to be happy with not a lot.”

“I’ve got music,” I said. “That’s all I need, plus a little food every now and then but I’m not fussy. How did my playing come into all this? Surely it isn’t that bad?”

“Oh god no,” he said. “You’re a great player. No, I love music. Jazz in particular. I’ve got somewhere around a thousand albums and CDs but they’re all in Yemen. When I finally realised I’d never hear them again I got sad and, well, you know.”

“What for?” I asked, genuinely puzzled. “CDs aren’t music, they’re just things to make it easier to carry music. If you’re going to live this kind of life, you could learn to play an instrument and make your own music and do a bit of busking.”

“No,” he said sadly. “I’ve tried. I used to take clarinet lessons but it never gelled. No way could I ever play like Sidney Bechet or Benny Goodman or Anat Cohen. Anyway, speaking of living this life, I’m far too old to sleep on the floor for long. I’m going into town to find something to sleep on. Do you want anything?”

“Actually, yeah,” I said. “I need to get some paint for the trike but I wanted your advice.”

I explained about the primer, paint and lacquer and the endless cans that I seemed to need.

“Don’t waste your time with aerosols,” said Cyril. “Most of what’s in the can is propellant to carry the paint so they’re incredibly expensive relatively speaking. Get a can of liquid paint and brush it on. Get

something like Hammerite which is very durable and doesn't need primer or a lacquer. Just give the trike a couple of coats and you'll be fine."

I vaguely remembered seeing some Hammerite paint in Halfords so Alfie and I went into town with Cyril and I got a little can of sexy red paint and a narrow brush for the tidy sum of £12. Afterwards we wandered through the shopping mall looking for somewhere that might sell cheap mattresses or foam or something Cyril could sleep on.

"Oh cool!" I said, suddenly stopping outside one of those cheap variety stores. "Look at this!"

They had a rack of things they were getting rid of for 50p an item and my eye had caught a sheet of transfers.

"Looks a bit like Alfie," said Cyril, holding it beside Alfie.

"Yeah," I said, "hey, how could I attach them to the bike? Would they stick on the paint?"

"Probably not," he said, looking thoughtful, "But if you put them on while the second coat is still wet it'll dry and hold them tight."

He looked around.

"Aha, yes," he said, spotting a discount chemist. "Get some clear nail polish and when the paint's dry put some on top of the transfers to stop them chipping or peeling."

"Awesome," I said and splashed out 50p for the transfers and £1.75 for some nail polish. "This is going to be spectacular!"

I showed Alfie the transfers and he looked away. He probably didn't know what he looked like.

"Hey," I said, having a sudden thought. "Can I put a couple of the transfers on the seat?"

“God, no,” said Cyril. “Every time you sit on it they’ll just crack more and flake off in no time.”

“Bummer,” I said. Still, little pictures of Alfie running down the frame would be very distinctive.

“I haven’t seen anywhere that does mattresses,” I said, “apart from that mattress shop.”

It sold mattresses, of course, but none that fitted into our concept of ‘cheap’.

“Isn’t there a camping shop out on the esplanade?” said Cyril. “They might have an air bed or maybe some yoga mats.”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering the one I’d seen on Sunday. “It’s near the pier.”

It wasn’t until we got close and I saw its name – Briley’s Camping And Outdoor – that I remembered it was run by Jo’s husband and that he went bowling on Thursday evenings.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Just gone 6,” he said. “Damn, they’re closed. Looks like I’m out of luck.”

“Shit, you and me both,” I said. That meant Jo was shutting up shop as well and she’d probably have gone by the time I got there. Oh well, it probably wasn’t an invitation anyway.

“Although if it was it just might still be open next Thursday,” crossed my mind, “Might be an idea to go back to the pier tomorrow and say hi. After all, I haven’t been there since Sunday and she’s probably figured I’ve moved on.”

“Have you got any blankets?” I asked as we walked back to his car.

“No, just the sleeping bag,” he said. “Why?”

"I was thinking you could lie on top of the sleeping bag tonight if you had something you could put on top of you," I said.

"Good point," he said. "I think I'll try that, just stay in my clothes."

Half way back to Little Fairchester I remembered something.

"There's a community notice board in the foyer of the supermarket," I said. "Let's go back and have a look. Someone might be selling an old bed."

"It's worth a try," said Cyril, doing a rather dangerous U-turn near a blind corner. Fortunately nothing was coming.

"No beds," he said scanning the notice board.

"No," I agreed, "but look at this."

Someone was selling an old set of garden furniture which consisted of two folding chairs and a lounge for the knockdown price of £10.

"You could sleep on the lounge," I said, "and for the price of an air bed we get two chairs as well."

"There's no address," he said, looking at it, "just a phone number."

"No problem," I said, "there's a payphone over there, by the toilets. Give them a ring."

He went off to ring the seller and Alfie and I went out the front for a ciggie.

"Still available," he reported back a couple of minutes later. "9 Mansell Road. She said it was OK to come round now. Do you have any idea where Mansell Road is?"

"Excuse me," I called out to a fairly cute lady loading her supermarket shopping into the back of a battered old Ford Escort. "Do you know where Mansell Road is?"

“Mansell Road?” she said, straightening up and looking thoughtful. “Isn’t that out on the Hastings Road? I think it’s just past the Lion And Castle.”

“Thanks, love,” I said. “If you’re not doing anything, why don’t you join us at the Lion And Castle for a drink?”

“Oh my Alfie wouldn’t like it,” she said, patting her hair.

“Maybe not but my Alfie would,” I said. “Say hello to the nice lady, Alfie.”

Alfie gave her a polite woof and she laughed. “Ohh, isn’t he cute,” she said, squatting down to pat him. “Why don’t we swap Alfies? This one’s much nicer than mine.”

I laughed. “Another time maybe,” I said. “We’re off to buy some garden chairs.”

She stood up again and regarded Cyril and me.

“Are you two, like, you know?” she said.

“God no,” I said, “he’s my dad.”

She raised an eyebrow and got in her car. “Bye bye Alfie,” she called then shut the door.

“How do you do that?” asked Cyril.

“Do what?” I said.

“Talk to strangers like that. I couldn’t do it.”

“I just asked her for directions,” I said, puzzled.

“And you asked her out,” said Cyril. “I could never do that, not with a total stranger.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well surely you’ve talked to strangers since you came

back to England.”

“No,” he said, “well no one except in shops and things. You're the only person I've had a conversation with.”

“Wow,” I said and tried to think of something else to say but I couldn't.

We walked back to the car.

“You must have asked girls out,” I said, opening the back door for Alfie.

“Yes,” he said, “but only after I've got to know them a bit, like at work or something. Not a complete stranger. I've got to be fairly sure she's going to say yes first.”

“Well, what's the worst that can happen?” I said, getting into the front seat. “I'll probably never see her again so what does it matter if she says no? Anyway, she might have said yes.”

“What would you have done if she had?” asked Cyril.

“Let you use my bedroll tonight,” I said grinning. “But she didn't so let's go get these garden chairs.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Well, hello stranger!” said Lucy when Alfie and I rolled up the pier on the trike. “I thought you’d buggered off and left us.”

“A mate of mine was sick,” I said. “What’s he doing on my patch?”

Baz had taken advantage of my absence to claim the portico for himself and his art was propped up along the full width of the theatre doors as well as covering a decent proportion of the area in front.

“I heard you had a fight on Sunday,” said Lucy, looking over at Baz then back at me, “and a run in with the cops. I thought maybe you’d had enough.”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, “I did decide to leave but my friend got sick Sunday night and had to go to hospital so I’ve been over in Hastings the last few days.”

“So you’re going to stick around for a while, then?” asked Lucy, over casually.

“Another week or two, at least” I said. “Cyril’s staying with me while he recuperates. Didn’t you see all this in your ball?”

“I did look on Monday when you didn’t show up,” she said seriously, “and there was a lot about death and despair and I saw you doing well in another town so when I heard about your fight I jumped to a conclusion. I shouldn’t have done but I’m only human. By the way, Ethan’s gone.”

“Who’s Ethan?” I asked.

“He ran the pier train,” she said. “You know that little train that run people out to the end of the pier and back? He finally gave up on Wednesday and took his train away on the back of a truck. Not enough customers you see.”

“That’s a shame,” I said, although I hadn’t known Ethan. “So is he doing well?” nodding towards Baz.

"I haven't really been watching," she said, "but I don't think anyone's bought anything. He generates waves of negativity which puts people off. By the way, there was someone looking for you yesterday."

"Not a cop, I hope," I said, with a smile.

"He didn't look like a policeman," she said. "He was small and fat and didn't look too healthy."

"So what did he want?" I asked.

"He didn't say. He just asked about a sax player called Ben Webster and when I told him you hadn't been around for a few days he said he might come back next week. You think he's a bailiff or something?"

"God, no," I said. "I have no debts and no responsibilities. I wonder what he wanted?"

Actually, Ben Webster was just the name I was using in this town as I like to ring the changes with the names of great sax players from bygone years. It makes me feel a little important since my own name will never go down in history. When I'd been in Hastings last year I'd been Coleman Hawkins and when I moved on from Fairchester I was half in mind to become Lester Young. Anyway, if someone was after me for something I'd done or was accused of having done they'd be looking for me with my real name not the performing name I'd only been using for a week or so.

"So if he comes back it's OK to tell him you're back?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, wondering what illusions she held about my past. "I'm not on the run or anything, you know. I'm just an itinerant busker."

She laughed. "We get all sorts here," she said. "Ohh, must be seven or eight years ago we had a man doing chalk drawings on the esplanade down by the Tourist Information Office who turned out to be a serial rapist. Samson said he tried to choke himself to death with his chalk when they put him in the cells."

"Ugh, nasty," I said, remembering the taste of chalk from my

schooldays. Most of the classrooms had whiteboards but one, French, had one of those really old blackboards that went up and round and rattled whenever old Monsieur Jourdain Donadieu wrote something on it. He was as dry and dusty as the chalk he used and reeked of the unfiltered cigarettes he chain smoked when he wasn't in the classroom. On the rare occasions he was on playground duty and caught kids smoking he was more likely to offer round his own cigarettes than to send the offenders to the Head. His view was that, as vices go, smoking wasn't that bad which was why he was rarely on playground duty. It was only several years after I'd left school that I realised it could easily have been a ploy on his part to avoid playground duty as he didn't like the outdoors. Smokey Joe, we called him, behind his back.

“Anyway, I'm glad you're back,” she said, giving me a very significant look.

Baz gave me a very significant look as well when I went to reclaim my spot.

“Thought you'd gone,” he said.

“Just took a break,” I said, “and now I'm back.”

“I s'pose you want this pitch back,” he said, looking up at me from his sitting position beside some of his pictures.

“Well, it is on my permit,” I said, mainly to see if the legalistic approach would work. “Do you want to see it?”

“It's big enough for both of us here,” he said, amiably enough.

I considered this for a few moments, as it actually was a fairly wide entrance. He must have taken my silence as disagreement.

“How about I do your portrait?” he said, grabbing an A3 Artist's Pad.

“Are you any good?” I asked, “only I don't like caricatures.”

A couple of years ago I'd met a rather cute street artist in London

and, by way of getting to know her, I let her do my portrait and she turned out to be a caricaturist. The nature of caricature is to pick on one or two distinctive features and exaggerate them to make them funny. As a caricaturist she had been very good but her inter-personal skills hadn't been quite as good and I had been more than a little offended.

"I can do whatever style you like," he said. "How about a sax player in the style of Rubens?"

"I've heard of Rubens," I said, "but I've no idea what his style is. Tell you what, clear away half your stuff and give me room and do me a nice cute picture of Alfie and me that I can put on the trike when I'm playing."

"OK," he said. "Deal. Gimme half an hour."

Twenty five minutes of that half an hour was spent moving pictures around and grumbling over which ones to put away and which to leave out. When he'd cleared enough space I moved my trike under the portico as well and got out my sax. Alfie was off checking for new smells.

"Right," said Baz, sitting back down. He pulled out a black marker pen and rested his A3 pad on his lap and gazed at me intently. Suddenly his hand blurred over the pad and, after a few seconds, he tore off the sheet and tossed it away then he blurred his hand again and tore off another sheet and looked critically at it then screwed up his nose.

I picked up the first one and was stunned. In what looked like maybe ten lines he'd captured a sax player in that stereotypical pose where the player is leaning backwards with the sax raised in the air and a small, black dog was watching, looking very similar to both Alfie and that dog in the HMV ads. It was at the same time both schmaltsy and skilful.

I picked up the other and it was just as good although this time the sax player was in the other stereotypical pose where he is hunched over a low hanging sax and the dog was sitting with his back to the

player, looking out of the picture directly at the viewer.

"These are really good," I said, holding them both up.

"Representational," he said dismissively.

"Oh," I said, wondering what he was talking about. "Can I keep them?"

"Why would you want to?" he said.

"Because I like them," I said, propping them against the trike.

He laughed and rolled a cigarette and I got on with my own business of playing some music. Much to his disgust several people were also impressed by his pictures of me and Alfie and he had to draw some more. The fact that they were for money seemed to irritate him and I heard him mutter things like "philistine" and "bourgeois plebeian taste" while he drew although he never actually outrightly refused.

"So you're back, then?" said Jo when I went for a lunch break.

"Yeah," I said. "A friend of mine had to go into hospital for a few days. He only came out yesterday afternoon."

"Oh right," she said, scooping up some chips into a bag. "Salt?"

"Please," I said. I had the distinct feeling that, if there had been an invitation, that it had been withdrawn. I paid her and got a can out of the chiller. "See you," I said but she was already serving the next customer.

I sat with my back against the telescope post and looked out over the beach while Alfie helped me eat the chips although he preferred the water from his bowl to the nasty fizzy stuff in the can.

"Afternoon, Ben," came Samson's strong, deep voice.

I twisted round and looked up.

“Hello, fancy some chips?” I said, holding up the packet.

“Are you trying to bribe a police officer?” he asked.

“Are a few chips enough?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m pretty cheap actually,” and took four.

I laughed. “So how was France?”

“Very nice,” he said, eating the chips. “We went to Paris and stayed in a hotel just off the Champs-Élysées.”

“Did you get to see the Arc de Triomphe?” I asked.

“Only from across the road,” he said. “The traffic was dreadful. I’ve never seen a roundabout with twelve joining roads before.”

“Hey, you should go to the Magic Roundabout in Swindon,” I said. “That’s five roundabouts inside a bigger roundabout.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it,” he said. “Apparently its one of the scariest intersections in the world.”

“Still, you didn’t go to Paris to look at the traffic, did you get to see the Eiffel Tower?”

“Yes, that was very impressive,” he said, “although we didn’t go up it. Adele nearly fell in the Seine near the Jardins du Trocadéro but she had a wonderful time. Lovely place, Paris.”

“I’ve only been there the once,” I said, “but, yes, it is a great place, although I prefer London.”

“I don’t really like big cities,” he said, “although Adele comes from London. I am from Watamu, which is a small town in Kenya on the Indian Ocean. It’s a little smaller than here. Have you heard of Masha Mapenzi?”

“No,” I said. “What is it?”

“She’s a very famous Afro-Fusion singer,” he said. “She won the first season of Pop Idol in Kenya. She is from Watamu as well.”

“Cool,” I said. “Umm, what’s Afro-Fusion?”

“It’s really just the pop music of Nigeria and Ghana,” he said. “Do you have YouTube?”

“I don’t have internet access,” I said.

“Too bad,” said Samson, “you could play some when you’re busking. I’m sure it would be very popular.”

“I’m sure it would,” I agreed, wondering just how popular Ghanaian pop music played on a sax would be in a small English coastal town. After all, the English Channel is a cold grey parody of the clear blue tropical Indian Ocean.

“Well, I must get back to the beat,” he said with a broad smile. “I hear you upset a couple of my colleagues while I was away.”

“There were two policemen who checked my permit,” I said carefully, since you never know just how much cops stick up for each other.

“You had a permit, which is what matters,” said Samson. “No, what upset them was that you told them I’d given you two weeks to get your dog microchipped.”

“Oh,” I said, nonplussed, “is that a problem? Did I get you into trouble?”

“Not at all,” said Samson. “Two weeks grace is our normal procedure. It’s just that certain people don’t always apply policy as even handedly as perhaps they should. If you’re going to be around for long it might be an idea to keep a low profile at weekends.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks for the, ah, advice.”

Zeki paused to listen to me play for a while on his way to his fishing post. Since he fished just around the side of the theatre from where I

played he very likely heard everything anyway but it's always nice to have someone stop to listen. His lined face creased in a gappy smile and he held up two fingers which I guessed meant either two fish or two hours but could just have easily meant two tunes was all he could stomach. Who knows.

The afternoon went fairly quietly with not a lot happening. Baz sold one of his abstract pieces to an Indian gentleman who was highly skilled in the art of bargaining and knocked Baz's asking price of £100 down to £7 which caused Baz to complain bitterly to me. I told him that if he didn't like the offer he should turn it down and went and chatted to Lucy for a while. It was quiet for her as well and she'd brought a chair out into the mild sunshine to soak up the ambience.

"Hello," said Cyril to me, studiously ignoring Lucy.

"Hey," I said. "How'd it go?"

He'd been intending to visit the social security people and re-apply for benefits now he had an address.

"It went well," he said. "I've got some forms for you to sign since you are now my landlord."

Lucy looked curiously at me but didn't say anything.

"I hope you didn't say you were paying rent," I said. "That way lies trouble."

"No, I told them you were a friend and I was living with you. You, umm, need to sign a statement that we're not, umm, cohabiting or in a de-facto relationship."

Cyril looked embarrassed and Lucy started grinning.

"Whatever you say, lover," I said and Lucy burst out laughing. Cyril went red and looked like he wanted the pier to open up and swallow him.

"I'll leave you two love birds to talk privately," she said, putting her

hand on my arm. She picked up her chair and went inside her establishment.

“What did you say that for?” hissed Cyril.

“Just joking,” I said. “Why? Are you homophobic?”

“No,” he said, “but I don't want people thinking I'm, you know.”

“What does it matter if they do?” I asked, puzzled. “It's not illegal. Anyway, no one heard except Lucy.”

“Her name's Lucy?” he asked, nodding towards Lucy's door. “I thought it was Xara.”

“That's just her professional name,” I said. “Her real name's Lucy Fullbright.”

“Oh right,” he said, then paused. “Is she, erm, married?”

I don't get light bulb moments very often but I do get them.

“I think she's a widow,” I said. “Why don't you ask her?”

Cyril didn't say anything.

“You ought to ask her out for a coffee or something,” I said. “After all, you're both around the same age.”

“No,” said Cyril, in a slightly squeaky voice. “No, that would be, umm, no.”

“Don't worry,” I said. “She won't bite, well, not unless you ask her too.”

I found that hilarious and Cyril scowled at me.

“Oh for god's sake,” I said, “don't be so uptight, women like being asked out and you're a nice enough guy. It's not like she doesn't have a sense of humour.”

“So you think me asking her out is funny?” demanded Cyril.

“Oh god, no, that's not what I meant. I was just trying to say she's not as uptight about things as you are. Hey, you want to know what she thinks of me?”

“I can't imagine,” he said, looking disdainful.

“She thinks I'm going to save the town,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“That's right,” I said and told him what Lucy had told me about what she'd seen in her crystal ball and tarot cards.

“Do you think she actually believes any of that stuff?” he asked.

“I'm sure she does,” I said. “Don't you?”

“I'm an engineer,” he said.

“I'm not,” I said. “I'm a musician and to me engineering is like magic because I don't know anything about it.”

“Right,” he said. “So you're saying I shouldn't knock fortune telling until I know more about it?”

I clicked my tongue and pointed a finger at him in a gun-like way to say “absolutely”.

“And even if it is bullshit,” I said, “she's still a nice person and, let's face it, she's making more money from it than you are from engineering.”

He didn't like that remark either.

“So are you going to ask her out or not?” I asked.

“Umm, I don't think so,” he said. “I'm no good at that sort of thing.”

"It's like playing an instrument," I said. "All you need is practice."

"That's no help," he replied, sadly. "I practised for ages on the clarinet, never got me anywhere."

"OK, bad example," I said. "Hey, do you want me to ask her out for you?"

"God no," he said, looking horrified.

"Then you're totally bugged," I said cheerfully. "Although the door's open so she's probably heard every word."

"Oh good god," he said, looking aghast. "I can't handle this, I'm going home."

I laughed.

"Here," I said, giving him a tenner, "get some food on your way."

"What does Alfie have?" he asked.

"Whatever we're having," I said, "unless Zeki's got some fish for him. Get some more cheese too."

"When will you be back?" he asked.

"I've no idea," I said, a little surprised since it had been a long time since anyone had asked me that.

"Just wondered when I should do dinner for," he said.

"You two sound just like a married couple," said Lucy, reappearing in her doorway. "Just leave his dinner in the oven, that's what I always did."

"Oh god," said Cyril, not looking at her. "Umm, if you'll excuse me, umm, nice meeting you."

"I don't think we actually met," said Lucy as we watched him hurry

away.

“Give him time,” I said, “or not, it's up to you.”

She laughed then turned serious.

“You know the benefits people will check up on you two,” she said. “They're very suspicious of people living together who claim they aren't.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it'll take them a while to get themselves organised and he should have a place of his own by then.”

“But what about you?” she asked. “Don't you live in a squat? Won't they cause you trouble?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I'm not claiming benefits and I'll find somewhere else too. I know how to live under the radar.”

“Yes, I'm pretty sure you do,” she said, “but does he?”

“He hasn't a clue,” I admitted. “He's part of the establishment. He doesn't even know there is radar.”

“Poor love,” she said, “he needs someone to look after him.”

“Know anyone do you?” I asked. “You were listening, weren't you?”

“Listening to what?” she said innocently, and we both laughed.

“I'm going to see how Zeki's fishing's been going,” I said. “Catch you later.”

Zeki had had a good day, probably because there was no one in the water disturbing the fish, and Alfie got a healthy ration of protein and essential oils. Now his foot was healed, apart from a patch of stubble where the vet had shaved it, his fur was looking very healthy and glossy. Baz gave up after a while, irritated that he'd only sold one 'proper' picture despite selling quite a few 'bourgeois representative' pictures. I think he sold two of me and Alfie and two or three portrait

type pictures of people. I stayed for a while longer but not a lot was happening.

"I'm doing some chicken and rice," said Cyril when I got back. "I've only just started so it'll be a while."

"That's cool," I said.

Sitting in a garden chair seemed a little strange. It wasn't that I never sat in chairs, it was more that I'd never sat in a chair in the butcher's shop so the context felt wrong.

"I was thinking," said Cyril chopping up some chicken thighs ready to fry, "you know plenty of musicians and singers and street performers, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Why?"

"Well, it occurred to me that you could ask the council to reopen the theatre," he said.

"Why would I do that?" I asked, mystified.

"If the theatre was open again, you could get some of your friends together and put on some shows. Maybe get some of the tourists back. That way you could do what Lucy said, bring the town back to life."

Chapter Seventeen

“Don't be a tosser,” I said, “I wouldn't have a clue about how to put on a concert.”

“Oh don't worry about that,” said Cyril. “I've worked on multi-billion dollar civil engineering projects. I'll help you with the organising, give me something to do.”

“You've actually managed these projects? I asked, impressed.

“Well, no,” he admitted. “But I've been involved at a reasonably high level and I know about organising resources and budgets and things and, let's be honest, just how hard can it be to organise a concert in a small theatre? What's really important is getting people to perform and that's where you come in. The rest is just piddly little details.”

“Umm, we'd need an audience as well,” I commented.

“Do a few posters and get something out on social media,” he said. “The council can probably do things through the tourism department too.”

“I suppose,” I said, “but how's it going to stop the town dying?”

“I was thinking about that when you came back,” said Cyril. “Seems to me that nothing is going to stop the town's decline in one giant swoop but if you set up something fairly small that's new and which can be repeated year after year word will spread and given a little time it could build into something bigger. And, once the theatre is re-opened other people will think of things to use it for and maybe in five or ten years it'll be running shows and events every night and people will be flooding in. I don't know, maybe it can be used for conferences and markets, not just shows.”

“Actually, you could be on to something,” I said, thoughtfully. “When Lucy told me about what she wanted me to do I was thinking I'd be doing it all on my own but I don't have to, do I. All I have to do is start something and let it grow.”

“Large streams from little fountains flow, tall oaks from little acorns grow,” said Cyril pontificatingly.

“Is that Shakespeare?” I asked.

“No idea,” he admitted. “I just heard it somewhere once and liked it. Applies in civil engineering too. If a dam develops a leak, no matter how tiny, it soon grows to burst the dam. That’s the power of small beginnings. Why don’t you mention the idea to Lucy and see what she thinks?”

“I think I will,” I said, “if only to show willing. She might even be able to see it in her crystal ball and tell us what direction to head in once we commit to the concept.”

“That’s right,” said Cyril. “And you might just mention it was my idea.”

“Ohhhhh,” I teased, “so that’s what this is all about. Cyril’s got the hots for Lucy, woo hoo!”

“I always like people to get the credit for their ideas,” he said, defensively, “even if other people do the work.”

“So why don’t you organise this yourself?” I asked. “I’m sure that would impress Lucy even more.”

“No,” he said. “It wouldn’t work. She’s convinced you’re the one. Even if someone else does it and saves the town she wouldn’t put any credence on it because she believes in you so you have to be the figurehead. I’m happy to help and I’m sure she’ll appreciate that but you’re the one in the spotlight, mystically speaking.”

“Bit of a bummer,” I said. “I’m far too lazy for something like this. Sounds like a lot of hassle for not a lot of return.”

“It’s for a good cause,” he said, stirring the frying chicken and adding a chopped onion and some salt.

“What, the Xara Warrior Princess Leg-Over Campaign?” I said

laughing.

“No, the Save Our Town Campaign,” he said, blank faced. “And Xena was the Warrior Princess, not Xara. We used to get the repeats on cable in the Gulf.”

“Oh,” I said. “I don't think I ever watched it. Wasn't she that chick in a leather corset or something?”

“And very nice she looked in it too,” said Cyril. “When the few women you see are wearing robes and hijabs, the occasional leather corset is a treat. Ohh, damn.”

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“Do you have a strainer?” he said, looking at the rice bubbling away in a mess tin of water.

“No,” I said.

“OK,” he said. “Let's call it a risotto instead,” and he used the smaller mess tin to keep most of the rice in the other mess tin while pouring off most of the water. “Let's eat.”

I took advantage of the remaining evening light to give the trike its first coat of paint so it could dry overnight and wrapped the brush in a piece of the plastic rice bag so it wouldn't dry out before the second coat.

“So what sort of show did you have in mind?” I asked after we'd gone to bed.

I was in my usual bedroll on the floor and Cyril was in his sleeping bag on the lounge, up against the wall. It creaked every time he moved but seemed to stop him snoring which was a benefit, although I suppose at his age it could have been his joints creaking and not the lounge. Mind you, the lounge looked to be at least as old as Cyril so maybe it was the both of them.

“I didn't really,” he said, creaking as he rolled over to talk.

“Oh,” I said.

I'd been running through some of the people I knew in London and wondering how to get in touch with them. I had a few phone numbers and email addresses but I knew a lot of people I didn't have those things for and, regardless, I didn't have a phone or email access.

“I suppose it could be just music,” he said, thoughtfully, “although that can put off as many people as it attracts since most people only like certain kinds of music. Maybe some sort of variety show to attract as many people as possible. Isn't the theatre a vaudeville theatre?”

“Yeah, I think it says that on the front,” I said. “It's funny how you don't notice things like that after a while. Jesus, how old is vaudeville?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Although I have a feeling vaudeville died when films started to become popular so maybe the 1920s, maybe a bit earlier.”

“Do you think anyone wants to come and watch some old time vaudeville type show in a clapped out seaside town?” I asked. “Wouldn't it be better to get some rappers or something?”

“I hate rap,” he said. “It's so aggressive and rude.”

“Yeah, most rap uses minor and diminished chords,” I said, “which makes things tense and negative and there's a lot of dissonance and staccato or abbreviated rhythms to heighten the aggression. Saxes don't really fit that style although I've heard a couple of OK saxes in hip-hop.”

“What's hip hop?” asked Cyril.

“It's basically rap,” I said, “although rap focuses on the words and hip hop focuses on the music. Someone like, ohh, Eminem or Biggie Smalls is rap because what music there is is in the background and fairly simple whereas Nicki Minaj is hip hop since the music is more up front. Have you ever heard of J Dilla?”

“No,” said Cyril, “should I have?”

“No,” I said, “just thought you might have. J Dilla did quite a lot of hip hop instrumentals and he almost crossed over into jazz. The divisions blur a lot between genres and sometimes some performer becomes big in a certain genre and steers that genre's mainstream towards something else and away from its roots. Personally I can't be bothered with it all. As far as I'm concerned there's only two genres of music.”

“You mean like jazz, classical and pop?” asked Cyril. “Aren't they just very broad?”

“That's three,” I said. “No, there's only two. Music you like and music you don't like. If you like it what does it really matter if someone else calls it doo wop, or bee bop or hip hop and if you don't like it who cares what it's called anyway?”

“Isn't that a bit simplistic?” said Cyril.

“Not really,” I said. “Look, suppose I play you a piece of music you've never heard before and you like it, right?”

“OK,” he said.

“Cool, now what if afterwards I say it's hip hop? Are you really going to stop liking it simply because you've got it in your head that you don't like hip hop? Wouldn't that be an incredibly stupid thing to do?”

“Well, of course,” he said.

I laughed. “It happens all the time,” I said. “I'll play something on the street and someone will come up and say 'that was really cool, what was it?' and I'll say something like 'it was a jazz piece called whatever' and they'll say 'oh, I don't like jazz music' and walk away. That really pisses me off. There's great jazz and there's crap jazz, just as there's great hip hop and crap hip hop. Like I used to know this guy who said he loved music but that ABBA didn't play 'real' music as though music can be fake, like somehow Mozart is more 'real'. Music is just organised sounds and organise it one way and you like it and organise it another way and you don't like it, but either way it's just as 'real'.”

“I suppose,” said Cyril, but he didn't sound convinced.

We lay there in silence for a while.

"I remember watching a film when I was a kid," I said. "On TV. It was an old black and white film and I can't remember what it was called but it was about a guy who wrote a song way back before they could do recordings so he went round selling the song to bands. What really grabbed me about that film was that I realised for the first time that songs aren't fixed and final because each band he sold his song to played it in a different style. One did it as a slow ballad, another as a swing tune, one as a hoochie coochie number. It was fascinating and later when I started going outside the pop music in the charts I found the same thing was happening only now they call them remixes, so you get the same words and melody in whatever style you want. That was so cool."

I was starting to get enthusiastic about this topic but Cyril's breathing had changed and it was pretty obvious he'd lost interest and fallen asleep.

In the morning we both admired how stylish the trike looked in its new red paint and I decided to paint the wheels red as well since there were red smudges on them as I'd been too lazy to take the wheels off before painting the frame. I held the sheet of transfers against the frame and figured they were going to look just plain awesome.

"Got any plans?" I asked Cyril over coffee and a smoke.

"I'm going in to the library," he said. "I still want a job even though life here is idyllic."

"No problem, Mr Conventional," I said, "good luck. Hey, keep an eye open for a really cheap A3 picture frame. I want to frame those drawings Baz did so I can prop them against the trike."

"Will do," he said. "Are you going to the pier?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll have a chat with Lucy too, if she's there. See what she thinks of your idea. Might drop in on that lady I know at the council too. She might know who to talk to about the theatre, seeing as how she works in the tourism department."

“On a Saturday?” said Cyril.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I’d forgotten. Monday then.”

“Hey Lucy,” I said mid afternoon when I was taking a break and she came out for some fresh air and tea when her client left.

“Hi Ben,” she said. “Where’s Cyril?”

“He’s in town somewhere,” I said, “looking for a job.”

She was curious about what sort of job he was looking for and seemed to be impressed he was an engineer. I teased her gently about not having looked up his credentials in her crystal ball and she took it in good spirit.

“Sometimes you just have to let things happen,” she said, “and you can savour it more that way as well. Wouldn’t life be very tedious if everything was totally predictable?”

“I have to agree,” I said. “I love never knowing what each day will bring. Hey, Cyril had an idea last night. I wanted to run it by you.”

I explained about his idea for reopening the theatre and getting some variety street acts to come along and that we thought, if it worked, that it might be something that would snowball in time.

“Sounds like an idea,” she said. “When the theatre started running at a loss the council started to cut back on what it was used for to try to save money which always seemed like a silly idea to me. I thought they should open it up more but who am I to argue with the mayor?”

“I wondered if you’d do the tarot or look in your ball or something and see if it’s worth taking further,” I said.

She smiled and nodded. “Sure,” she said, quite simply. “Come inside.”

She sat on her couch and put her tea on the low table and I sat in the armchair.

"I'll do a simple five card decision spread," she said, "since all you want to know is whether or not to do this."

"OK," I said, "you're the expert."

She opened her wooden box and took out her tarot cards and took a small pile of them off the top.

"We only need the Major Arcana for this spread," she said noticing my look, "not the full set. Now, I'll hand you the cards and you shuffle them while asking your question and concentrating your mind on it. You don't have to say the question out loud if you don't want to."

I took the cards and started to shuffle. "Should I try to get a concert going here?" I said out loud then handed them back to her.

She dealt five cards, face down, in the form of a simple cross and put the rest of the cards aside.

"Now," she said, tapping the card at the top of the cross and the one at the bottom, "these represent your motivation and your values so we'll look at them first."

She turned over the top card.

"The Sun," she said, "yes, I rather expected that to represent your motivations. It signifies success and vitality."

"So it's a good idea, then?" I asked, feeling encouraged.

"Oh we don't know that," she said. "This is saying that you are motivated by success, fun and positivity. That's what drives you, to excel but to have fun at the same time, and being the sun it's about warmth so your success comes from being outside in the warmth of the sun and of the people around you. You're not someone who works in a cold back room, whatever success there might be there."

"Well, OK," I said. "I wouldn't disagree with that."

The bottom card was The Fool.

"This is your values," she said, "and before you say anything it doesn't mean you're a fool. It means you are a free spirit and that you value new beginnings and spontaneity."

"Yeah," I said. "I kind of like the sound of that and I love going places and starting over."

"Now this one," she said, tapping the centre card, "represents the ideal outcome, which may or may not be achievable but it is what you hope could happen if everything turned out perfectly."

"Wow," I said, when she turned the card over. "Someone's going to die? That's the perfect outcome?"

"Death doesn't mean death," she said, "it means an ending. We have to look at it in context. You want to run a concert or two in order to change the future of this town. This card symbolises the death of the old town so it's signifying the end of the way it is now."

"So since the town is declining you're saying it means the end of that decline?" I asked, intrigued.

"Exactly," she said.

"So what are the other two?" I asked.

"They're the two most likely outcomes," she said. "One or both could support the ideal but one or both could contradict it. Let's have a look."

"How interesting," she said looking from one to the other. "That is unusual."

"What?" I said, "come on, tell me."

"This one is Judgement," she said, "which signifies rebirth, success, a positive judgement and is the perfect card to support the ideal outcome card."

"Great," I said, "but that one doesn't look too good. There's a bolt of

lightening knocking down that building.”

“That’s what’s so interesting,” she said, “and I have to admit I don’t quite understand it.”

“So what does it mean?” I said. “The theatre’s going to collapse or something?”

“It’s possible,” she said, staring at The Tower. “It represents chaos and destruction, upheaval, loss, ruin. This really isn’t a good card to have as a likely outcome. Hmmm.”

“Well?” I said. “So what do I do now?”

She didn’t answer, just sat there staring at the cards and drumming the fingers of one hand on the table.

“Lucy,” I said, “talk to me, Lucy.”

“Hmmm?” she said, coming out of her reverie.

“What do I do now?” I asked again.

“I like this spread for decisions,” she said, ignoring me and continuing to stare at the cards, “because generally the two likely outcomes agree with each other, whether it’s for or against. The cards never lie so I think what’s happening here is that you asked the wrong question.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “We’re thinking about holding a concert here and that’s the question I asked.”

“Indeed,” she said. “But there’s definitely something wrong about it although I don’t know what it is which is why there’s no clear outcome, one way or another. There’s something missing and until we know what that missing something is, it could be a great success or it could be an unmitigated disaster.”

I leaned back in the armchair. “Well that’s no help,” I said. “What am I supposed to do now?”

She leaned back in her armchair and beamed at me. “There’s really only one thing to do,” she said. “Go forward with the idea until you find out what the missing thing is then make the right choice then. That way you’ll get Judgement and everything will work out beautifully.”

“Oh great,” I said. “And what if I make the wrong choice?”

“Then we’re all bugged,” she said. “But you won’t. That’s why you’re here. You were sent because you will make the right choice. That’s your destiny.”

Chapter Eighteen

I stayed on the pier quite late as it was Saturday night and the weather wasn't too bad so there was a decent flow of people. The flow of cash was pretty fair too and, mindful of Samson's advice I kept a low profile when there looked to be potential troublemakers around and, of course, when his esteemed colleagues did their periodic walk-bys. The only thing of any note, and not much at that, was that I heard a rather geeky looking teenage boy say "look, there he is," and point me, or Alfie, out to a girl. Such things do happen occasionally as people do sometimes talk about buskers or other interesting things they've seen on the streets to their friends so I figured something like that had happened. What made it noteworthy was the fact the boy was with a girl. Geeks like him generally aren't seen in public with girls, but then, maybe she was his sister or his gay best friend.

It was after dark when we got home so there wasn't a lot of point in trying to put the second coat of paint on the trike. It would have to wait although I have to say the trike was already looking pretty freakin' cool in just the one coat. The extra bit of lustre of a second coat and the Alfie transfers would take it one step beyond. Maybe I should get a bell for the handlebars so I could ride round tring-tringing to attract even more attention.

"Honey, I'm home," I called just to embarrass Cyril as I went in the back door. He blew a raspberry at me so I figured there wasn't much mileage left in that particular meme.

"Anything going at the library, today?" I asked, cautiously finding my way through the little kitchen to the living room.

"There was one job worth applying for," he said. "Assistant Director of Highways, Transport and Waste with Kent County Council."

"I thought you didn't want to work for a council," I said, finding my bedroll and sitting on it.

"That's right," he said. "No one with any talent or ambition wants to work for a council which is why I thought I stood a decent chance."

“You have no talent or ambition?” I asked, teasingly.

“Actually I do,” he said, “so I’ll stand out against the competition. I’ll send in the application on Monday. By the way, I left you some sausages and baked beans, they’re in the pan on the cooker.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. “I had some chips earlier but, hey, food’s always good. Good luck with the job.”

I made my way back out to the kitchen and found the pan. I couldn’t be bothered to reheat them so Alfie and I polished them off cold while the water was heating in the other pan for coffee. Cyril creaked out of his lounge and came to join us.

“I got you a couple of frames,” he said, putting coffee granules in our mugs and some milk and sugar into his. He’d bought himself a little jar of powdered milk and some sugar as he wasn’t getting used to neat coffee.

“Thanks,” I said. “How much do I owe you?”

“They were £1.50 each,” he said. “They’re plain black with wooden frames and plastic instead of glass but I thought that would be better. Not so easily broken. They’re in the car.”

“Yeah, good thinking,” I said, since I’d be carrying them round on the trike. “I suppose I’m going to have to get a waterproof cover now, jeez. Ownership, huh.”

He laughed.

“Did you talk to Lucy about my idea?” he asked, as we sat side by side on the doorstep.

In the pale moonlight I could see he was wearing his pale blue pyjamas, although they looked dark grey in the thin washed-out light and, with a supreme effort, I managed to refrain from making a comment about what Lucy might think if she saw him in his pyjamas snuggled up close to another man in the moonlight.

“She thought it was a brilliant idea,” I said, hyping things up a little to encourage him, “and she hopes you’ll talk about it with her sometime.”

“Did she really?” he said, with a little something in his voice. Possibly hope but you never knew with Cyril. In the few days I’d known him, hope hadn’t been something that had come up so I didn’t know what it sounded like.

“Yeah,” I said, “and she did a tarot spread to see how it would work out.”

I told him about the reading and about the ambiguous result.

“Well, that’s only to be expected,” he said. “It’s not really, well, genuine, is it. So it really all comes down to what the person doing it thinks the person asking wants to know.”

“If that’s the case,” I said, “why didn’t she say it would all work out fine?”

“Protection,” he said. “Just in case it doesn’t.”

“Protection from what?” I asked. “You don’t think she thinks I’m going to sue her or hunt her down or something, do you?”

“Who knows what she thinks,” he said gloomily. “She’s a woman. I’ve never been able to fathom them.”

I lit the ciggie I’d been rolling.

“I know she thinks you’re a nice man,” I said, “so the least you can do is say hello to her even if you are too much of a wimp to buy her a coffee.”

“I’m not much of a catch, though, am I,” he said.

“Well, you’re not my type,” I said, “but for an engineer your logic’s a bit fucked.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You said you can’t understand women,” I pointed out, since I had a degree in maths and my logic was faultless, “so how can you possibly know what they think is a good catch or not?”

“You’re just playing with words,” he said. “You know what I mean.”

I grinned to myself in the darkness and let it lie. We sat in silence for a while.

“I tried it today,” he said, after a while. “What you do.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“You know, talk to strangers.”

“Hey, cool,” I said. “What was her name?”

“Nooo, not a woman,” he said. “Talk about jumping in at the deep end. I went out to the pier and couldn’t find you and when I saw that fisherman chap you get the fish from I decided I’d go up and talk to him.”

“Good for you,” I said. “Although he doesn’t talk much English. How did it go?”

“Actually he isn’t too bad. His grammar isn’t too good but he knows a decent number of words and we had a long chat. Did you know he is Hungarian?”

“Yeah, I think Lucy said that,” I said.

“He was born just two years after Hungary was taken over by the Russians after the second world war,” said Cyril. “His father had been in the army and when he finally got home to his wife the country lost its independence. Isn’t that sad?”

“I guess,” I said, not being politically minded. All governments seem much the same to me.

“Anyway, Gyorgy, that was his father, was anti-communist and became an underground rebel fighting for the return of Hungarian independence which was why he disappeared in 1953. The AVH arrested him.”

“What's the AVH?” I asked, rolling another ciggie.

“I don't know. The way Zeki talked about them it sounded like they were the secret police, something like the KBG. Anyway, Stalin died a few days later and his mother hoped Gyorgy would be released but he never was. Zeki thinks he was killed.”

“Nasty,” I said, “maybe the Tories aren't that bad after all.”

Cyril snorted.

“Anyway when he grew up Zeki got a job at the steel plant in his home town. He did tell me the name of it but it's totally unpronounceable. Anyway he was good at his job but he never got promotion or anything because of his father. He said he hoped things would change after the 1989 revolution but they never did. Even though Hungary became an independent democracy old attitudes still continued at the steel plant which was still run by former communists.”

“Is that why he came to England?” I asked.

“No, he was in his forties by then and settled even though he'd never married. He was an ardent ..., I've forgotten what he called it, but it was some left-wing Hungarian party. Anyway, he was a party member and did a lot of work for them in the 2004 elections and was overjoyed when they won but it all turned sour in 2006 and he gave up and just walked out of Hungary.”

“What do you mean, it went sour?” I said.

“Oh, someone found a recording of a secret meeting where the prime minister and leader of Zeki's party admitted he had lied about almost everything in order to win the election and there was widespread rioting and protests. Zeki, apparently, was heartbroken. Everything he'd believed in and worked for and hoped for was shattered and he

just picked up his accordion and walked away from it all.”

“I didn't know he played the accordion,” I said. “That's pretty cool. So is that when he came to England?”

“Sort of,” said Cyril. “Fancy another coffee?”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, and handed him my mug. Alfie was nowhere in sight so presumably he'd gone to bed already.

“So what did Zeki do?” I asked through the door.

“He walked from his home in wherever it was with the steel plant down to Croatia. There are a lot of Hungarians in Croatia and some of them helped him and found him some manual work but he hated it there so after a while he walked away from there as well and went to Slovenia.”

“When you say he walked away you mean he just left, don't you?” I asked.

“No, he literally walked. All the way across Croatia and slipped through the border since he doesn't have a passport.”

“Wow,” I said. “That's cool. So what did he do for food?”

“He played his accordion,” said Cyril. “Just like you.”

“Neat,” I said. “A Hungarian busker. Just a minute, this was in 2006?”

“Yes,” said Cyril, bringing out our coffees.

“So that means he was 60 or so.”

“58 when he left Hungary,” said Cyril, sitting down beside me again.

I have to admit I was impressed. OK, I'm an itinerant busker myself but I'm younger, a hell of a lot younger and I wasn't crossing borders illegally either.

“So I'm guessing he didn't stay in Slovenia for long either.”

“No. Zeki said he decided to go to the West. He'd heard all his life about how terrible it was in the West and how they exploited the workers and so on but as he was walking through Croatia he got to thinking how he'd been exploited as a worker all his life and that his party had lied about everything to get elected. He started to wonder what if they and the communists had lied about the West as well and if there was anything in his life that was actually true and not just some political ideological manipulation.”

“Wow,” I said. “And Zeki actually said all that? He said political ideological manipulation?”

English was my native language and I wasn't too sure I could say that myself.

“No,” said Cyril, laughing. “His English isn't anywhere near good enough. I just got the gist of it and I'm putting it into a short form, if you like. Anyway, he decided in Slovenia that he wanted to go to the west and see for himself. See just how dreadful life was under these oppressive capitalist exploiters. So he walked into Austria then across Germany and all the way to Holland then he walked down the coast through Belgium and into France. He said the further west he went the better life seemed to become and he figured if he kept going into Britain it must be like a paradise.”

“Well I hope we weren't a disappointment,” I said.

“No, he likes it here,” said Cyril. “He prefers the food in Germany and the French food was good too but other than that he likes England.”

“That's nice to know,” I said. “I guess he's lucky to have got here before we actually left Europe.”

“I don't know that luck came into it,” said Cyril. “Zeki seems to make out that he just walked across all those borders. He may have done since there are always remote unsecured sections he could have used but Britain is an island. The only way you can walk across our border is through the Channel Tunnel and you don't get to walk the length of

the Channel Tunnel like it was a Sunday outing.”

“So how did he get here do you think?” I asked. The one time I'd been to France I'd gone on the ferry so I had no experience of the Tunnel.

“I don't know,” said Cyril. “He didn't really go into details but there seemed to be some reference to a Sudanese truck driver although how he was involved I've no idea. I'm pretty sure Zeki wasn't smuggled in since he seems to have had next to no money since he left Hungary. I wouldn't be surprised if Zeki has a finger or two in something illegal.”

“Surely he wouldn't go fishing for food off the pier everyday if he was a crook,” I said. “You'd think he'd be able to afford to go to the supermarket. Maybe he's a spy for the Hungarians.”

“What's he going to spy on round here?” asked Cyril. “Not even the Navy bothers to come here.”

“Where does he live?” I asked.

“I'm not sure,” said Cyril. “I got the impression he has a room somewhere in town but that's all.”

“Oh, what does it matter?” I said. “Is he happy? That's the important thing.”

“I think he is,” said Cyril seriously. “He doesn't have much but he said that ever since he got to Germany he has felt free. No one bothers about what he is doing or thinking. Even the police who move him on are nice about it. He's only been in a prison cell once and that was in Belgium on a bitterly cold night. A policeman found him and offered him a warm cell for the night and a hot breakfast. He is still astonished at how different everything is here in the west. How non-political everyone is.”

“Well good for him,” I said. “He's 71? Damn, I can only hope I'm still living this life when I'm in my 70s. You can only admire him, can't you.”

“Yes,” said Cyril. He tossed the dregs of his coffee across the courtyard

and stood up. "I'm going to bed. It's been a funny old day."

"Yeah, me too," I said. "Hey, I've decided to go and see the council about re-opening the theatre on Monday. You wanna come?"

"If you think I'll be any use," he said. "Not like I've got anything better to do."

* * *

"I remember you," said Maureen Pethybridge on Monday afternoon when Cyril and I walked into her office. "You played Harlem Nocturne. What can I do for you?"

"We wanted to run an idea past you," I said, "and get your advice."

"That's intriguing," she said. "Are you sure you want Tourism? We don't get many ideas coming our way these days. Take a seat."

"Thanks," I said and we sat down. Cyril seemed more at ease in an office than he did on the pier or maybe he just felt more comfortable now he was wearing a tie. I was in my usual bomber jacket and jeans.

"This is Cyril," I said, by way of introduction.

"Are you a street performer as well?" asked Maureen.

"Lord, no," said Cyril. "I'm an engineer."

"You don't want to set up a tram system, do you?" asked Maureen. "That was suggested several years ago but a study concluded there wouldn't be sufficient visitor interest to make it worthwhile."

"No," I said, glancing at Cyril. "Umm, we want to reopen the theatre."

"What on earth for?" she asked.

"For a concert of some sort," I said.

"We think that if we staged an event, it might stimulate tourism and

encourage others to do the same,” said Cyril smoothly, “thereby stimulating a growth trend through a cycle of events attracting tourism leading to more events leading to increased tourism in a positive feedback system.”

“An excellent objective,” said Maureen. “Tourist numbers have been declining significantly for years. What makes you think it will work?”

“It's like an acorn,” I started and Cyril leaned forward and touched my arm to tell me to shut up.

“Tourism depends on the provision of suitable attractions,” he said. “Fairchester has a number of attractions but we feel that they aren't being shown in the best light.”

“OK,” said Maureen. “How do we improve the lighting?”

“The pier, for example,” continued Cyril. “I believe it was built in 1873, in simpler times when a pier alone was sufficient to attract attention. However, this is the 21st century and the times have become more complex and faster paced. But we believe that this has in turn generated a desire for those simpler times when life was slower. We believe that there is a market for a return, if only for a brief period out of busy modern schedules, to the charm of those days.”

“So you're taking the nostalgia angle,” said Maureen. “Continue.”

“You may recall,” said Cyril glancing at me, “that the name of the theatre on the pier is the Fairchester Pier Vaudeville Theatre. We propose to re-open the theatre for a vaudeville entertainment. A nostalgic alternative to Netflix or zoning out over the vacuousness of Facebook and other internet based so-called diversions.”

Maureen stared at Cyril for a few moments then turned her gaze onto me.

“Would you be part of the vaudeville entertainment,” she asked, “or merely an organiser.”

“Well,” I started, as it hadn't occurred to me not to be performing

since that's what I do.

“Naturally Ben will be performing,” interrupted Cyril. “Indeed, as a performer Ben will be inviting many top London performers to join him.”

“So a bit of a buskers reunion, then?” asked Maureen, demonstrating that she hadn't been born yesterday.

“Many of the best artists in Britain were or still are street performers,” he said.

“Indeed,” said Maureen. “So have you both got experience of event management and promotion?”

“Cyril has extensive experience with multi-million dollar projects in the Middle East,” I said, “and I have a lot of experience of working with and managing performers in multiple venues.”

Admittedly it was more along the lines of arguing over whose turn it was in a particular pitch and running to find another on those occasions when I lost but it was a form of managing.

Maureen sat back and watched us both. I smiled back nervously and Cyril sat there calmly.

“Do you have a name for the event yet?” she asked suddenly, making me jump.

“Busk The Pier’ is one possibility,” said Cyril, “although I'm more inclined towards 'Pier Revue' as it encapsulates the essence of vaudeville with the essential romance of a pier.”

I hadn't heard him mention either name before. In fact it hadn't even occurred to me to think of names.

Maureen nodded and looked thoughtful.

“The theatre has four hundred seats,” she said. “You think an event of this nature could attract that many patrons?”

"I think it is important to see this as a counterpoint to the contemporary trend of binge watching," said Cyril. "It is commonplace for people these days to watch a series of episodes or even related movies in one extended session. The nature of vaudeville is variety, a collection of short, high entertainment set-pieces linked only by their location which, in itself, is an entertainment. A nostalgic, old world theatre on a pier as opposed to a living room or a modern entertainment complex."

Maureen nodded and doodled abstractedly on a pad for a few moments.

"I like it," she said, picking up her phone.

"Rod," she said, "Maureen in Tourism. Can we get together soon? I've something I want to run by you."

She listened for a few moments then said "thanks" and hung up.

"Right," she said, looking at me for some reason. I would have thought that Cyril had clearly shown himself to be the leader of this little venture, "I'll put your proposal to the Mayor tomorrow at eleven. How can I contact you afterwards?"

"Sadly we do not yet have a project office," said Cyril. "I would suggest for the present you contact either of us through Madame Xara's establishment on the pier, which has the advantage of close proximity to the theatre itself. Here's her phone number," and he recited it to Maureen who noted it down on her pad.

"How did you know Lucy's phone number?" I asked after we'd left Maureen's office.

"I, umm, rang her this morning," said Cyril.

"You cagey bastard!" I said. "And?"

"We're having a drink at the The Old Fish Head Inn tomorrow evening," he said, shyly. "Umm, you couldn't lend me a tenner, could you?"

Chapter Nineteen

“Did you know dogs can't eat while walking?” I asked Baz.

“You what?” he said, looking up from a somewhat abstract portrait he was drawing from a photograph a woman had left with him. She wanted a 'different' picture of her husband for his birthday and would be back to collect it the next day.

“Dogs can't walk while eating,” I said. “Sometimes Alfie picks up some pizza or a scrap of meat pie and when he's following me he just keeps it in his mouth until we stop then he scoffs it.”

“Oh right,” said Baz, clearly not in the least bit interested. He drew another couple of lines then did a bit of crosshatching.

“Probably 'cos he's got no hands,” he said after a while, without looking up. “Amazing what you can't do when you got no hands.”

“But you'd think he'd still be able to chew though, wouldn't you?” I said, taking a final draw on my ciggie.

“Maybe his brain ain't big enough to move his jaw and his legs at the same time,” said Baz, putting the picture on the ground and standing over it to see how it looked.

He glowered at it as if it offended him then very deliberately put his left boot firmly on the centre of the picture and stood on it.

“Nice,” he said, bending down to look closer. “What size are your feet?”

“9,” I said.

“Awesome,” he said. “Come over here.”

“What for?” I asked.

“I'm a 10 so I want you to put your footprint on mine so there's a bit of perspective.”

“Won't the dirt be the same colour?” I asked, going over to have a look.

“Grrrr,” he growled, startling Alfie. He marched over to the nearest rubbish bin and rummaged through it.

“Aha!” he said triumphantly, pulling out one of those little things of tomato sauce that you fold in half to squeeze the sauce out. “Give us your foot.”

I lifted my foot behind me and he carefully smeared tomato sauce around the outer edge of my boot.

“Put your foot down on the picture,” he said, “right where mine is.”

Obligingly I hopped a couple of steps and plonked my foot down more or less where his footprint was. The only problem was the drawing stuck to my foot so Baz had to peel it off.

“Awesome,” he said, holding it upside down at arm's length. “She'll love it.”

I suspected she probably wouldn't but then who am I to judge another person's taste?

“I'm sure she will,” I said. “Her husband will too.”

He grinned happily and tossed the tomato sauce packet back in the bin.

“You heard from the council yet?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, picking up my sax and attaching it to my harness. “Maureen phoned Lucy earlier. She said the Mayor is interested and is making some more enquiries. Lucy said I could use her phone later to start ringing people in London, see if they'll come down.”

“Cool,” he said, then “yeah, mate, all my own original work,” to a man who was probably in his sixties looking at one of Baz's less abstract, more surreal pieces in bafflement.

“What is it?” the man asked.

“A dog eating while he's walking,” said Baz, winking at me.

“Oh right,” said the man.

A woman joined him with two wrapped packages of something from Jo's fish and chip hut.

“Look at this, dear,” he said, pointing to the picture. “Very Daliesque, don't you think?”

“More reminiscent of Vladimir Lush,” she said, peering at it. “What is it? A Dalek?”

“A dog eating while it's walking,” said the man. “Or that's what this man said, anyway.”

“I think he was pulling your leg, dear,” she said. “Oh, I do like that one.” She pointed at the portrait with the boot prints and tomato sauce. “That's a very political statement. Didn't we see a Dana Schutz like that in New York last year?”

“You have a perceptive eye,” said Baz. “That's actually my interpretation of Boris Johnson's future in politics in this country.”

“Oh quite,” said the lady. “You know, dear, I think that would go well in the downstairs toilet, don't you?”

“If you think so, dear,” said the man. “How much do you want for it?” looking resignedly at Baz.

“Fifty,” said Baz, quickly. “Do you want it signed?”

“Please,” said the lady. “It'll help with the provenance.”

Baz scrawled 'Baz' in large letters in the middle of our heel prints with a thick green marker pen and handed it over while the man fished in his wallet for fifty pounds.

“Thank you,” said the lady and Baz simultaneously and they wandered off to eat their fish and chips on Cyril’s bench further down the pier.

“Better do another one,” he said, grinning at me and sat down with his pad again.

I laughed and started to play something vaguely reminiscent of Elley Duhé’s ‘Counterfeit’ but Baz didn’t get the joke and no one else seemed to like it either so I gave up and switched to ‘The Bear Necessities’ for the twenty seven millionth time.

* * *

Lucy stood in the doorway to her tiny back office and half smiled expectantly at me.

“So where’s the phone, then?” I asked.

“On the desk,” she said.

Apart from paperwork, a half eaten apple, a box of pink scented tissues, three dirty mugs and a plate with the remains of something yucky on it, there was just a large black plastic boxy thing with a dial on it. It looked vaguely familiar, I realised; a distant memory from my childhood.

“You mean that?” I said, pointing to it.

“Yeah,” she said. “Haven’t you seen a phone before?”

“Jesus,” I said. “How old is it?”

“No idea,” she said, “it came with the building. Still works though although I’ll have to get a new one when BT finally goes all digital.”

I sat in her knackered and threadbare office chair and studied it.

“How do you turn it on?” I asked, not immediately seeing a power button.

“You don't,” she said. “You just dial the number you want and talk to whoever it is when they answer.”

“Oh right,” I said. Now she mentioned it I vaguely remembered my mum doing that back when I was seven or eight.

I got out my little black book of phone numbers and looked up Cass. She was a singer who knew a lot of musicians so she seemed a good starting point. I seemed to remember mum had stuck her finger in the dial and rotated it – the dial, not her finger.

I stuck my finger in the hole next to 0 and tried to move the dial and the whole phone slid across the desk a couple of inches and my finger got maybe a third of the way round before it came out.

“Where's the display?” I asked, wondering if I'd rotated the dial enough to get a 0.

“Doesn't have one,” she said, watching in fascination for some reason.

“OK,” I said, turning my attention back to the phone. There didn't seem to be a cancel button so I figured you needed to rotate the dial all the way in order to register a 0. Holding the phone firmly with one hand I tried again and got all the way round to a little bar that stopped my finger going any further. I had a strange feeling of satisfaction as the dial slowly rotated back to its original position. I tried again with the 7 and it seemed to work.

“Cool,” I said to myself and dialled the rest of Cass' number.

“Where's the 'call' button?” I said, searching the phone for a button to make it connect to Cass' phone.

“There isn't one,” said Lucy with a barely suppressed snort. “It connects as you dial the number.”

“Oh, that's pretty cool,” I said. “So why can't I hear it ringing?”

“You have to pick up the handset,” she said.

“What handset?” I asked, puzzled.

“That thing lying across the top,” she said.

“Oh this?” I asked. There was something like a handle on the top of the phone with a tightly coiled cable coming out of it.

“Yes,” she said so I picked it up and held it to my ear.

“I can't hear anything,” I said after listening intently for a few seconds.

“Hold it the other way round,” she said, reaching over and twisting it. “You talk into that bit and listen with that other bit.”

“Ohhh, right,” I said. “Hey, it seems to be ringing.”

I listened for quite a while and the low continuous brrrrr sound didn't change then it suddenly went quiet.

“Hello?” I said, “hello, Cass, you there?”

There was no answer, just complete silence, until Lucy couldn't hold back her laughter any more.

I put the handset down on the desk and looked at her, wondering why she was laughing.

“It's so true,” she said, between laughs. “I've heard about it but I never believed it. Oh my word!”

“What's true?” I asked, picking up the handset again and checking but it was still silent.

“Millennials don't know how to use real phones,” she said and started giggling again.

“I've never used one before,” I said, defensively. “I seem to remember mum had one but I never used it.

“Ohhh,” she said, pulling a tissue from the box and dabbing her eyes

with it. "That was hilarious!"

"Please show me how to use it," I asked plaintively. I was feeling very embarrassed

She reached over and put the handset back on top of the phone.

"When you pick up the handset you get a dialling tone," she said, picking it back up and holding it to my ear. "Hear that?"

I could hear that low continuous brrrrr again.

"What's the dialing tone?" I asked.

"It means the phone is ready for you to dial your number," she said.

"Ohh, right," I said. "So I've got to pick up the handset before dialling, then."

"Yes," she said, "and put the handset back on top at the end of your call otherwise you'll stay connected."

"Oh, OK," I said. "So how do I put it on speaker?"

She started laughing again so I deduced you couldn't put it on speaker. Jesus, how old was this thing? I bet it didn't even have a camera.

"Hey, how am I supposed to know how to use antiquated technology?" I said. "I bet you couldn't use a ..." then ground to a halt because I couldn't think of anything that would have been around before she was born.

"Try again," she said so I did. This time there was a definite ringing in the ear end.

"Who's that?" said a suspicious sounding voice.

"It's me," I said, "that you Cass?"

“Who the frig is me?” said the voice.

I desperately tried to remember the name I'd been using in London when I'd known Cass. It wasn't Ben, that's for sure, since I'd only become Ben when I got to Fairchester. Oh yeah.

“Sonny,” I said, “Sonny Stitt, the sax player.”

“Who?” she said.

“Oh, I mean Eddie Davis,” I said hurriedly, remembering. If I'd had any sense I would have put my casual name in my little black book as well, but it had never occurred to me. “You remember, we were both in that squat in Islington two or three years ago.”

“Oh yeah, Eddie,” she said, “that guy with the trumpet, how you doing, man?”

“Saxophone,” I said.

“Isn't that the same thing?” she asked.

“More or less,” I said, realising there was little to be gained by getting technical. No one except brass and woodwind players really care about the difference between brass and woodwind.

“So, what? You looking for a squat again?” she asked. “Only, like, I'm living with this guy now and ...”

“No, no,” I said, wondering who the lucky guy was since Cass was a nice girl. “Are you still busking? As a singer?”

“Sure,” she said.

“Cool,” I said, relieved. “Hey, listen, I'm down in Fairchester and I'm trying to put a concert together. You want in?”

“Hey, cool,” she said. “Sure, where?”

“Fairchester,” I said.

“Where the frig's that?” she asked.

“On the South Coast, near Hastings?”

“Oh. How do I get there?”

“I might be able to get you a lift,” I said, hoping someone would have a car, “but there's always the train.”

“So, is there, like, any money in this?” she asked. “Only I've got a kiddie now and stuff.”

“It's like a proper concert,” I said, improvising, “in a theatre and you'll get a cut of the profits and travelling expenses.”

“Oh wow,” she said. “Sounds cool. When is it? Only I'm busy this weekend, you see.”

“I don't know yet,” I said, “but I'm thinking, like, the end of June.”

“Sweet,” she said.

“So are you in?” I asked.

“What do you want me to sing? Who'll be backing me or do you want me as a backing singer?”

“I want you as the headline act,” I said, improvising again. I really should have talked this through with Cyril but he'd been out the night before and I was asleep when he'd got back.

“Wow, cool,” she said.

“So are you in?” I asked.

“Yeah, OK,” she said. “Sweet.”

“Awesome,” I said. “I'll get back to you soon.”

We exchanged a few pleasantries and I put the handset down then

remembered it had to go on top of the phone.

“Well, that's one,” I said, going into Lucy's divinery. Once I'd got the phone working she'd left to give me some privacy.

“Excellent,” she said, looking up from her book. “Are you going to contact some others this evening?”

“No,” I said. “I need to sort out some things with Cyril. What are you reading?”

“Eat, Pray, Love,” she said. “You should read it sometime.”

“What's it about?” I asked.

“A woman travelling in search of herself,” she said. “A bit like you.”

“I'm not in search of anything,” I said. “I just like having fun.”

“No,” said Lucy, “I think you're looking for your destiny.”

I laughed. “Nah,” I said. “I know my destiny. I'm going to keep busking and moving on until I drop dead on some street corner.”

“Oh rubbish,” said Lucy, marking her page and closing the book. She stood up. “You may not know it yet but you definitely have a destiny and one day you will find it. Would you like some tea?”

“No thanks,” I said. “I need to get home. I need to sit down with Cyril and do some planning. Hey, how did it go last night?”

“He's a nice man,” she said, putting the kettle on. “But he's very shy, isn't he.”

“He is 'til he gets to know you a bit better,” I said, hoping this was true. He seemed alright talking to me and he had managed a long conversation with Zeki. Maybe it was women he couldn't talk to? It seemed weird to me since women generally have a lot to talk about and are far more interesting than guys, who generally only want to talk about football and cars. I don't have a car and football bores me

to sleep. On those rare nights when I have trouble sleeping I count footballers rather than sheep and that usually does the trick. Three or four of them and zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Infallible.

"I think he's sweet," she said, "although he didn't say anything about going out again."

“He’s got no money,” I said. “That’s why he’s living me at the moment. He’ll probably take you out every night when his benefit starts coming through. He’ll get a place of his own, too, somewhere.”

“Yes, it must be difficult for him,” she said. “Men of our generation were brought up to be the breadwinners so having nothing must be a huge embarrassment for him.”

“So, you want to see him again?” I asked, “or am I being too nosy?”

She laughed. "Give him a message for me," she said. "Tell him I'm inviting him to dinner on Friday night, if he wants to come round."

"Will do," I said. "We'll be off, thanks for letting me use your phone."

* * *

"We need to talk," I said, when Alfie and I got home.

It was a pointless thing to say since Cyril wasn't there and I should have realised when I hadn't seen his car in the courtyard but I was wrapped up in my own thoughts. He turned up twenty minutes or so later, just the mince was ready.

“Hi,” he said, looking sadder than usual.

"Hi," I said. "Food's just about ready. Hey, what's the matter?"

“Oh, nothing,” he said, as I doled some of the mince into the other mess tin for him. Alfie’s went in his water bowl, without the water, of course.

I was just scraping out the last of my mince with some bread when he

sighed.

"I went to my bank," he said. "I have £143 left. And thirty eight pence."

"That's cool," I said, getting up to get some cheese. "At least you're solvent."

"It could be six or seven weeks before I get any benefit through," he said, staring at his half eaten mince. "What am I going to live on until then?"

I looked at him in bemusement.

"It isn't like your living expenses are high," I said. "You've no rent to pay, no gas or electric bills, no ..." I struggled to think of things 'ordinary' people had to pay for and couldn't. "Oh some petrol, I guess, but hell you could walk everywhere for a while. Wouldn't kill you."

"There's food," he said.

"So I pay for the food," I said. "It's no big deal. Not like you insist on caviar or stuff like that."

"But I can't live off you, not without contributing," he said. "It would be wrong."

"So what's the big deal?" I said, surprised. "So I give you some food, it's no problem."

"A man has to pay his own way," he said.

"And you will when you get your benefit," I said. "Won't be long."

"But that's the same, isn't it," he said gloomily. "I'll still be living on handouts."

"OK," I said. "Makes no odds to me. Give me back that mince and Alfie can have it if you'd really rather starve."

“Are you serious?” he said, staring at me.

“Sure,” I said, “that’s what society is about, helping other people when they need help and when they don’t need help any more they help others in turn. That’s why we have a welfare state but if you don’t want our help that’s your choice. I’m not going to force you to eat my food. I want to help you but if you don’t want it, sod you.”

“You have a knack for getting to the essence of things, don’t you,” he said, thoughtfully.

“Well, it’s all a load of bullshit, really, isn’t it,” I said, feeding Alfie some cheese. “You’re part of the tribe and the tribe looks after its own but if you want to put your pride before the tribe, that’s cool. By the way, Lucy’s invited you to dinner Friday night, at her place.”

“Ahh, Lucy,” he said, heavily. “No, I think I’ll have to decline.”

“What on earth for?” I said, all astonishment. “She a nice lady, why don’t you want dinner with her?”

“Because I’m unemployed,” he said. “What have I got to offer her?”

“Oh we’re not back on this shit again, are we?” I said, starting to get irritated. “She knows you’re not working and she still invited you to dinner. What does that tell you?”

“She thinks I need charity,” he said.

“You really are a tosser,” I said. “Now, I’m all for live and let live but I’ll tell you this, if you don’t go to dinner with Lucy on Friday I’ll damned well drag you there myself. She likes you, you retard, and if you being out of work doesn’t bother her why should it bother you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “but it does.”

“Hey,” I said, brightly, “look at the positives.”

“What positives?” he said shovelling mince into his mouth.

"At least you can be sure she isn't after your money," I said and laughed my head off. "Hey, are you doing anything tonight?"

"What do you think?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Only we need to do some planning," I said. "I rang a singer I know and she asked if we were going to pay people for this concert. I told her we'd give her a share of the profits and pay her travelling expenses but we need to sort something out before I ring anyone else."

"Yes, that's a very good point," he said. "Mind you there's not a lot of budgeting we can do until we know how much the council is going to charge for the use of the theatre. Once we know that we can figure out how much to charge for tickets and then we can work out how much to pay the performers. We'll probably have to hire some people to be ushers and things and we'll have some marketing expenses as well, oh, and people to clean the theatre afterwards if it isn't part of the hire. Do you think we'll need to hire sound equipment?"

"Sound equipment?" I asked.

"You know, loud speakers and amplifiers and all that stuff. We need everyone in the theatre to be able to hear properly. It's not like you busking for a handful of people."

"Shit," I said. "This is a lot more complicated than I thought."

"It always is," he said. "Still, with a bit of luck we might make a profit. Shall we split it 50-50?"

"A profit?" I said. "I hadn't thought of that."

I thought about it for a few moments.

"You know," I said, "since we're doing this to save the town, maybe we shouldn't aim for a profit. Maybe we should keep ticket prices down so we cover the costs. That way it might be more attractive. What do you think?"

"I'm inclined to think we ought to get some recompense for the effort

we're putting in to it," said Cyril, "but I see your point."

"Maybe you could ask Lucy on Friday," I said teasingly, "give you something to talk about."

"Good thinking," he said, brightening up. "I'm always much better when I have something concrete to talk about."

"So you're going then?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," he said.

Not that it mattered, as it turned out. The whole idea was dead in the water by Friday.

Chapter Twenty

"You're kidding me," I said, in disbelief. "You are kidding me."

"I'm afraid not," said Maureen.

"But why?" I said, standing there like a lemon, my sax hanging loose from its harness. "I thought you said the Mayor thought it was a good idea?"

"He did and, for what it's worth, he still does," said Maureen. "But the Borough Engineer says safety work is required on the theatre before it can be re-opened to the public and, while not major, it isn't cost effective for a single event. After all, the theatre has been closed for seven years now."

"Bugger," I said.

There wasn't a lot of point in arguing. When bureaucrats invoke liability, however indirectly, the show is over, literally. I slowly unhooked my sax and took off the mouthpiece so I could put the sax in its case. Suddenly I wasn't in the mood for playing anymore.

"I'm sorry," said Maureen, actually looking as though she was sorry. "I thought I'd come over and tell you myself rather than leave a message."

"Yeah, thanks for that," I said, abstractedly as I took off the ligature and stowed the reed away in my reed box.

For some reason it hadn't occurred to me that the council would turn us down. Maybe Lucy's prognostications about destiny had made me think these things were a foregone conclusion. Fortunately I'd only talked to Cass so I wouldn't look like a fool in front of anyone else and, if truth be known, I'd made a fool of myself with Cass before so it wouldn't come as a huge surprise to her.

"It's nice out here," said Maureen, looking around. "It's been a while since I've been on the pier. I should come out more often. I used to come out sometimes, when the theatre was open. Still, I'd best be

getting back.”

“Oh, err, bye,” I said. “Umm, thanks.”

“Tell them to go stuff themselves,” advised Baz who’d heard the entire conversation. “It’s always the same. Us workers in thrall to the whims of the capitalist owners. You’ve just been oppressed, my son, oppressed like the working class hero that you are. A visionary cut down for daring to challenge the omnipotent dollar.”

“Oh, go jump off the pier,” I said. “You heard the lady. They can’t afford to make repairs and it’s not going to be much of a fun concert if half the audience falls into the sea and drowns when the floor gives way.”

“If it needs repairs,” he said. “Sounds all too convenient for my liking.”

“Jesus, you’re full of shit,” I said. “It hasn’t been used for years and probably didn’t get enough maintenance for years before that either.”

“Believe that if it makes it easier for you,” he said, picking up his pad and doodling in a corner of the cover. “Us downtrodden types need whatever mental strength we can find.”

I blew him a raspberry and grabbed my sax and Alfie followed me down to where Cyril was sitting, tossing the last of our stale bread to the seagulls.

“Was that Maureen?” he asked. “Looked like her.”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting down beside him. Alfie went to investigate the bread.

“So it’s a no go, then?” he asked. “You don’t look your usual happy self.”

“The council can’t afford the repairs to make the theatre safe,” I said.

“I can understand that,” he said, looking up the pier towards the

theatre. "I used to go to dances there when I was a lad and it was old then."

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"Think of something else," he said, "or give up. Whichever you prefer."

"Why's it up to me?" I asked then waved my hand at him. "Yeah, I know, Lucy's prediction."

He nodded. "Want some chips?" he asked. "My treat."

"You don't seem that bothered," I said, handing him a handful of loose change that had been thrown in the sax case.

"I've worked on a lot of projects," he said. "There are always setbacks, just as there are always ways of overcoming them. I remember one project in Oman where the geophysics got misinterpreted and we tried embedding barrage foundations in soft substrata. We had to resurvey and reposition the barrage seven metres upriver."

"That doesn't sound too bad," I said.

He laughed. "No, a \$49 million budget overrun isn't 'too bad', I suppose. At least the project was completed. They aren't always."

He handed back the cash.

"My treat, I said," he said. "I sent an email to my bank in Yemen while I was at the library this morning. I might have found a way to get at my money there."

"Hey, cool," I said, cheering up immediately. "What was it?"

"I've asked them for a debit card on my account. If they give it to me I'll be able to use it to pay for things, maybe even get cash out. I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

"Will Sainsbury's take a card from a bank in the Yemen?" I asked,

dubiously.

“Don't see why not,” he said. “They're part of the VISA system and all sorts of weird outfits do cards nowadays. Sainsbury's even do their own.”

“Well, good luck,” I said, not knowing much about credit or debit cards since I'd never had one.

I probably wasn't as optimistic as I might normally have been because of the bad news about the theatre but the important thing was that Cyril was, at last, being positive himself. I've heard that creativity flies out the door when you're depressed. He now had somewhere to live and a woman in his life and his depression was lifting, even though the place to live wasn't much better than his car and he was fighting a losing battle to try to keep Lucy out of his life. The human brain is a very strange thing.

We sat quietly for a while munching the chips he brought back.

“Have you told Lucy you're accepting her invite?” I asked.

“Umm, no, not yet,” he said.

“Uh huh,” I said noncommittally.

Alfie started barking at a couple of seagulls who were taunting him from the safety of the pier railing.

“She hasn't got a customer at the moment,” I said, casually.

I'd noticed her take her A board inside while Cyril was getting the chips so she was either taking a break or shutting up for the day.

“Oh yes,” he said, gazing out across the beach while finishing his chips.

“Come with me,” I said, standing up.

“Where are we going?” he asked, standing up as well.

“You'll see,” I said.

Within a few steps he realised I was taking him to Lucy's establishment and he stopped. I grabbed the lapel of his jacket and started to drag him and, reluctantly, he followed.

“Hello, Lucy,” I said, when she opened the door to my knock. “Cyril wants to say something to you.”

She transferred her gaze expectantly to Cyril who went red.

“I've got things to do so I'm off,” I said. “I probably won't be back today but don't let him go until he confirms he's going to have dinner with you tomorrow. OK?”

“OK,” she said, grinning. She leaned against the door frame, crossed her arms and fixed him with an intent look. “Well?” she said.

“See you later, Cyril,” I said and clapped him across the shoulders. “Ciao. C'mon Alfie.”

I really did have things to do.

Cycling in to town earlier I had come up with a brilliant idea and I wanted to put it into practice. The trike, resplendent with its new paint, Alfie transfers, tyres, brakes and chain, was lacking a certain something and I'd finally figured out what it was. It needed a flag. A happy, gaudy flag that would wave in the breeze and tell the world that the trike was something to be reckoned with. Something that was proud to be out in the world.

I'd even figured out how to do it. There was a DIY place out on the edge of town on the Hastings Road where I could probably get a length of rod which I could tie to the basket at the back. Then it would simply be a matter of roaming the shops looking for a nice piece of cloth I could use as a flag. I figured I could stitch some string around the hem to attached it to the rod.

The rod was easy but I had to go to several sewing and fabric shops before I found any material I liked and, inevitably, when I did I found

two and had to dither for ages making up my mind. One was white with black, pink and green splotches and lines on it that looked very happy and energised and the other was a formal design of Roman helmets and SPQR standards that looked very elegant. Eventually I decided on the abstract white one.

“Can I have a square piece about that big on each side?” I said to the girl, holding up my hands to indicate the size.

“You want it for a bandana?” she asked.

Damn, there was an idea! I could use my flag as a bandana. Way cool!

“Yes,” I said casually. She probably wouldn't have understood a flag for a trike.

“Make it a little bigger,” she said. “55cm is about right for a bandana.”

“OK,” I said and she deftly cut a piece for me, running a pair of scissors along the material without snipping. I was very impressed.

I got some red string too, roughly the same colour as the trike although I had to buy a packet of ten needles since they didn't sell them individually but they also had some iridescent metallic thread!

It took me a couple of hours to figure out a way of attaching the string so I could easily remove it when I wanted to use the cloth as a bandana and probably another hour to stitch it. I used some of the red string to securely attach the rod to the basket and then fitted the flag to the rod.

Awe-some!

* * *

I got a couple of glances when I arrived at the pier the next day, which I attributed to the sheer style and elegance of my vehicle and I saluted the people with a cheerful yet snappy salute any marine would have been proud of.

Lucy was sitting on her chair outside her establishment, enjoying the sun, when I arrived.

“Hey, nice flag,” she said, admiringly.

“Thank you,” I said, modestly.

“I, umm, wanted to have a little chat,” she said.

“Oh yes,” I said, my heart sinking. Women have had 'little chats' with me in the past and they're invariably not fun.

“About Cyril,” she said and my heart started rising again. Whatever trouble he was in, at least it wasn't me.

“What's he done?” I asked.

“You embarrassed him yesterday,” she said, “making him come and accept that dinner invite.”

“Well he'd never have got round to it if I hadn't,” I said defensively.

“I know,” she said, smiling and putting her hand on my arm, “and I think you did the right thing, but I also think you need to step back a little now. He needs to start getting his confidence back but by doing things for himself, not by you making him do them.”

“OK,” I said. “Whatever. Just trying to help.”

“There's no rush, you know,” she said. “You like to meet a girl and have some fun then move on a day or two later but we're not like that. We both a lot older and neither of us are going anywhere. We can take our time.”

“No sweat,” I said. “I'll leave him in your capable hands, then.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I'm going to make some tea, fancy a ... ahh, a customer. Got to go, sorry.”

I gave her a wave and cycled off to my pitch under the portico, my

flag waving proudly in the fresh breeze coming off the sea. A couple of seagulls took offence and flew away squawking peevishly. There was no sign of Baz but he didn't keep to a regular schedule.

I played for three hours or so, with frequent breaks, and noticed that there seemed to be a slightly larger crowd than usual and some of them hung around for a while. A couple even filmed me with their phones but that wasn't that unusual.

I was beginning to think it was time to get some chips when an elderly lady made her way over and, leaning heavily on her walking stick, bent over to pat Alfie.

"Hello, Alfie," she said, "there's a good boy."

I looked over in surprise, wondering how she knew his name.

"Would you play Alfie's tune?" she asked, opening her hand bag.

"You mean the one that goes ..." and I whistled the first few bars of the Sonny Rollins tune.

"That's right," she said and dropped two £1 coins into my case with a gnarled, arthritic hand.

"Sure," I said, surprised. No one had ever asked me to play that tune before, or paid me in advance.

I played the tune and, since she was a nice lady I played it for her alone. Normally when I'm busking I keep moving around and making eye contact with as many people as possible but with her I stayed still and played to her, without looking around. I played it soft as well since she was only a few feet away and saxes can be very loud.

She leaned on her walking stick and watched me, a half smile on her lips. I let the last note hang in the air then fade away and she softly clapped her hands, her walking stick hanging from what looked like an old cat's collar from her wrist. There was a smattering of applause around me.

“That was beautiful,” she said. “Thank you, Ben.”

She turned and walked slowly down the pier while I stared after her in astonishment. How did she know my name?

I packed away the sax and went and got some chips and we ate them at the telescope. Cyril was spending the afternoon at the launderette trying to get his suit clean so I probably wouldn't see him again until Saturday, assuming he did go to dinner with Lucy which wasn't a cast iron certainty, despite what Lucy thought.

I was quietly having a ciggie with Alfie curled beside me having one of his five minute snoozes when I heard a click and glanced up and there with this guy with a big camera and a lens the size of a surface to air missile taking some photos of me.

“Hey,” he said when he saw I'd noticed.

“Hey,” I said, as you do when someone says 'hey' to you.

“Love the cigarette,” he said. “Very atmospheric, very sixties.”

“Oh right,” I said, not knowing what the hell he was talking about.

“Could I get one of you sitting just there as you are with your sax in your arms?” he asked.

“I guess,” I said, not moving.

He stood there, camera at the ready, poised and expectant. Alfie opened his eyes, looked at him and went back to sleep. Clearly the man wasn't a threat or a source of food.

“When you're ready,” he said.

I sighed and flicked my ciggie butt over the railing. I opened the sax case and got out my sax and fitted the neck but not the mouthpiece and cradled it.

“Could you light another smoke?” he asked. “Let it dangle from your

mouth in a sullen way.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Do you mind?”

The world is full of strange people and many of them are interesting so just in case he turned out to be one of them I rolled another ciggie and lit it.

“Lean back and relax,” he said, changing position, presumably to get a better angle.

“Let the smoke dribble out of your nose,” he instructed, “and close your eyes.”

Click, click, click.

“Put your hand on your dog and let the sax rest against your shoulder,” he said.

Click, click, click.

“Awesome,” he said. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome,” I said. “So are you a pro photographer?”

“Oh no,” he said. “Just an amateur. I'm with the Fairchester Photographic Society. I'm putting you in for this month's Portrait competition.”

“Well, good luck to you,” I said. “Wouldn't a pretty girl be better?”

“Everyone does pretty girls,” he said. “I wanted character and atmosphere.”

Me on a pier was 'character and atmosphere'? Maybe he was good with Photoshop.

“So when's the competition?” I asked.

“Third Wednesday of the month,” he said. “If you want to, the entries will be on display at the Scout Hall before the judging, so feel free to come round, from about 6ish.”

“Will do,” I said, having no intention of bothering. I know from my mum's albums that I'm not photogenic and it had been a while since my hair and beard had been brushed.

“Thanks again,” he said, wagging his camera.

I smiled and nodded and he walked away, pausing only to try to take a picture of a seagull in mid flight.

“Good luck to you, mate,” I muttered.

I drained the last of my can and told myself I ought to get back to work and decided to have another ciggie. It was nice, sitting in the sun.

“BEN!” ripped across the pier. “BEN!”

I looked around and Lucy was rushing over, waving what looked to be a newspaper.

“Look at this,” she said breathlessly, thrusting the newspaper at me. “In the Out & About section.”

“You what?” I said trying to grab the paper as she was still waving it.

“It's about you!” she yelled, from about fifteen inches away. I shook my head to try to get rid of the ringing in my ears. “The South Coast Chronicle!”

“Stop waving it about,” I said, managing to grab it. “Oh shit!”

Jazz Giant Ben Webster Spotted in Fairchester!

Jazz giant Ben Webster was spotted in Fairchester by eagle-eyed jazz fans recently.

Busking sax player Ben Webster was filmed jazzing it up under the theatre portico on Fairchester Pier and is now on YouTube where he has amassed an awesome 30,000 viewers.

Of course he isn't the original Ben Webster. That sax man died in 1973 and, jazz fans tell me, he is generally reckoned to be one of the three greatest tenor sax players of all time, along with Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, both also long dead. Webster played with Duke Ellington for ten years before going solo and recorded with Oscar Petersen and other jazz superstars in the 40s and 50s.

Our Ben Webster is a young up-and-coming sax player with the same name. Jazz fans tell me that our Ben Webster is almost as good as the original but with two big pluses in his favour – he is alive and well and has the cutest dog on the South Coast! The dog's name is Alfie and he likes to play too, but – alas – not the sax. What a duo that would be!

Your roving reporter has yet to catch up with Ben and Alfie but, rest assured, no stone will be left unturned to find out more about our local phenomenon. Go watch him on YouTube – playing a Sonny Rollins jazz favourite – or take some time out and go down to the pier at Fairchester. You never know, you just might be able to one day tell your grandkids you saw this talented musician before he became famous. This boy is going places.

Shamus McMann

I read it through three times, not grasping it. There was even a photo of me and Alfie and what looked to be the theatre doors in the background.

“What the hell?” I said, bemused. “What is this?”

“It's the South Coast Chronicle,” said Lucy impatiently. “It comes out every Friday. You're a star!”

“But,” I said, “but ...”

Lucy snatched the paper back off me and read it again, giggling like a teenager.

“How the hell did I get in the papers?” I said.

“Says here someone took a video of you,” she said, pointing with her finger at the paper although it was facing her so I couldn't read it. “This Shamus McMann must have found it on YouTube and written about you. Hey, I wonder if he was that man looking for you?”

“How did he know I'm in Fairchester?” I said and even as I said it I remembered that woman who'd come back and asked me to play something while her husband recorded me. I vaguely remembered he'd asked me to say who and where I was. I'd probably played that Sonny Rollins number since the article mentioned it.

“Oh right, now I get it,” I said as realisation dawned.

“Get what?” said Lucy.

“When does the paper come out?” I asked.

“Every Friday morning,” she said, “although I don't get mine 'til the afternoon. Why?”

“There was an old lady here earlier,” I said. “She knew my and Alfie's names and asked me to play that tune. She must have seen me in the paper.”

“Half of Fairchester will be coming out to see you this weekend,” she said. “We never get anyone famous here.”

“Can I keep the paper?” I asked.

“Get lost,” she said, pulling it out of reach. “Get your own. I’m framing this.”

“Where can I get one?” I asked. “I want to send one to my mum.”

“Any newsagent,” she said. “Hey, you’ve got 30,000 views on YouTube, that’s awesome!”

I had to admit it was even though, to put things in perspective, Katie Perry’s Roar had about three billion views, last time I looked. That’s right, three *billion*. Still, 30,000 wasn’t bad considering I didn’t even know I was on YouTube. I sometimes played Roar since it was a nice slowish number and I could make the sax growl nicely whenever the word ‘Roar’ appeared.

“Friggin hell,” I said, as it slowly sank in. “I’m in the papers! Where’s a newsagent?”

“There’s one on the esplanade,” she said. “Just up the left, on the other side.”

“Back in a few minutes,” I said, “I’m going to get one. Would you keep an eye on my sax and Alfie?”

As it turned out, I got five copies. One for my mum and the others for, well, me really. Cyril could read Lucy’s copy.

Chapter Twenty One

Alfie sat outside the post office while I went in and posted off a copy of the South Coast Chronicle to my parents. I was sure they'd be proud of me even though they wouldn't know who Ben Webster was, not being jazz fans. Still, they were used to my ways and frequent name changes.

Call it vanity but the post office also had a laminating service where, for £3, they cut out the article and laminated it so it could join my little trophy collection. The lady at the post office seemed quite impressed and smiled as she read it then glanced at me to check it actually was me. She called me 'Mr Webster' too when she asked for payment which felt odd. Usually it's only the police who use surnames.

Alfie wasn't outside when I came out. He'd got bored and gone off to talk to some children who were making a fuss of him while their mums had a natter. I gave him a whistle and he reluctantly detached himself from the gaggle and sauntered over so I showed him his laminated picture. He gave it a desultory sniff but didn't seem impressed. Maybe he thought he should have been in the centre of the picture rather than off to one side.

"You're the cutest dog on the South Coast," I told him "It's official, look," but he already knew that.

Walking back to the trike one of those pink freshly-scrubbed looking smart-casual estate agent types saw me and waved and gave me a cheery 'hello' as though he knew me. I smiled back and gave him a 'hey' and he stopped to ask how it was going. I could see in his eyes that he half recognised me but couldn't quite place where from. Maybe he thought I was a past customer or something. Anyway, after I said 'fine' he still hadn't figured out where he knew me from so he made some excuse about being late for an appointment and hurried off. I clearly wasn't the type to be in the market for a highly desirable executive lifestyle family residential home with double garage and sea views.

Cyril still wasn't back when I went to bed which was a good sign and I dozed off, feeling rather self-satisfied. I'd send Mr Clarkson, my old

school music teacher, a copy of the article if I knew his address. He had totally disapproved of my choice of saxophones, calling them 'an ill wind that nobody blows good' and generally being sarcastic. He'd wanted me to take up the cello and concentrate on classical music and when I insisted on a sax he'd concluded I'd never amount to anything as I had no 'taste' for fine music. I guess I could have sent it to the school but the old sod would undoubtedly have retired by now.

I woke up in the dark with a start. Something had woken me but I didn't know what. Alfie was wheezing quietly on his corner of the bedroll and no sense of life came from Cyril's lounge in the corner. In fact the place felt pretty much the same as normal. I sat up and listened but there was no hint of an intruder. For some reason I was feeling out of sorts. Like there was an itch inside my head that I couldn't scratch.

I rolled over a few times but sleep eluded me so I got up, pulled on my jeans, grabbed my ciggie tin and went and sat on the doorstep. Alfie groaned and snorted and slowly padded after me and let it be known that this really wasn't the right time of day to be up and about so I gave him some cheese.

"It's got a certain ring to it, doesn't it boy," I said, lighting my ciggie, my mind going back to the article. "Ben Webster jazzing it up under the theatre portico. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it. Nice turn of phrase."

I'd read the article several times and almost knew it word for word.

"Jazzing it up under the theatre portico."

I chuckled to myself. It sounded cool.

"Jazzing it up under the portico."

My ciggie had gone out so I lit it again.

"Jazz under the portico."

"Holy shit," I said to myself and jumped up, making Alfie bark in

alarm.

"Jazz under the portico. Jazz under the portico!"

I don't often get brilliant ideas but this one jumped out at me in the darkness of the cloudy night, lit with neon lights.

JAZZ UNDER THE PORTICO

I could see the whole thing clearly. An evening of jazz, under the portico. No need for the theatre, do it all outdoors, *under the portico!* Just me and a few other buskers and an audience on the pier. Like a street party. In the evening. No fancy lighting, no sound equipment, no building repairs, just the music and the vibe. A happening!

"Jesus, Alfie," I said excitedly. I couldn't sit still so I started to walk around the courtyard. The idea felt good, damn, it felt *right*.

"Just get some jazz players," I muttered to myself, "keep it simple. No need for jugglers and magicians and comedians and stuff like that. Keep it all as jazz and keep it simple. Maybe put out a few flyers, spread the word by mouth, maybe get that Shamus guy to say something in the Chronicle. No tickets, no payments, just people playing and listening in one big busk fest. Damn that'll be awesome!"

I was still pacing and being excited when the courtyard lit up as Cyril's headlights came in and I jumped out of the way.

"Thought you'd be asleep," he said, getting out of the car.

"I've had an idea," I told him, "and I can't sleep."

"K," he said, lighting the gas stove so he could see to make coffee. "Want some?"

"Yeah," I said. "So do you want to hear my idea or do you want to tell me about your evening?"

"My evening was fine," he said, "tell me your idea."

“Couldn't have been that good if you're back already,” I teased.

“Lucy's a lady,” he said. “Where've you hidden the sugar?”

“Haven't touched it,” I said, sitting back on the doorstep.

“OK, found it,” he said. “Hey, Lucy showed me that thing in the paper. Not a bad picture of you.”

“I think it was a still from the YouTube video,” I said. “Hey, did you read that bit about jazzing it up under the portico?”

“Probably,” he said. “I read it all but I don't remember that much about it.”

“Well, that's my idea,” I said as he handed me my coffee. “Thanks.”

“What's your idea?” he asked, slowly making his way into our communal lounge/bedroom.

“Jazz under the portico,” I said.

He reappeared carrying his garden chair and set it up in the courtyard. It was a cool but slightly muggy evening, as though there was going to be a storm the next day.

“OK,” he said, sitting down. “Jazz under the portico. Great. So what's your idea?”

He got up again and went into the kitchen to get his coffee.

“What do you mean?” I said, wondering why he didn't get it.

“Tell me your idea,” he said, “and don't say jazz under the portico again, it doesn't help.”

“But that's my idea,” I said. “Instead of a vaudeville show inside the theatre, let's get a few buskers together and do a jazz show under the portico.”

“How's that different?” he asked, “apart from just being jazz?”

“It's under the portico,” I said.

I could feel his baffled stare.

“I don't get it,” he said. “The council won't allow it so what's the big idea?”

“It's outside,” I said, feeling frustrated, “not inside. Doesn't matter what repairs are needed inside, there's nothing wrong with the outside. It's open air and we don't need to hire anything. Just get some players together and busk. Nothing to organise, no expenses, just keep it really simple.”

“Oh right,” he said. “Now I get you. But you'll still have to pay the performers, won't you?”

“That's the point,” I said, starting to get excited again. “Since we'll be busking we just get whatever donations the public want to give us, except the audience will be people who've come along specifically for the show.”

“Where's the audience going to come from?” he asked.

“I thought maybe get some leaflets printed and hand them out or something,” I said. “The tourists are going to be here anyway so it's just a matter of letting them know it's on.”

“I don't expect Lucy'll be impressed,” he said. “She seems to think you're going to achieve great things, not just get a dozen or so tourists on the pier one evening. That's not going to save the town.”

“Oh sod it,” I said, irritably. “I have no idea how to save the town. I'm just a sax player, I've no skills in marketing or public relations or even tourism and no way can I pour tons of money into this. If she's pinning all her hopes on me she's going to be badly disappointed.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Cyril. “Well, it's an idea so we may as well go along with it for now, until something better comes along. After all,

Lucy says it's foretold in her crystal ball or something so I would say that the ball has to take some responsibility as well."

"You don't think it's a good idea?" I asked, disappointed.

"I think it's a lovely idea," he said, "and there'll be at least one in the audience, me. I just don't see that it's going to be big and set the place alight. Mind you, the vaudeville idea wasn't that big an idea either. Frankly, if the clever sods in the council's planning and tourism offices haven't come up with anything what chance have we got?"

"So you reckon forget it?" I asked.

He thought about it for a while.

"No. Let's do it. After all, it'll not cost anything to do and who knows what may come of it. After all, every revolution starts with someone deciding to do something. Anyway, I'm tired. Let's sleep on it and talk some more in the morning."

Cyril went off to sleep pretty quickly but I tossed and turned for quite a while. I still felt it was a good idea even though Cyril's negativity had made me a little sad about it. When I woke up in the morning I lay in bed for a few minutes and decided to abandon the idea. In the cold light of day it seemed pretty stupid after all. People come across buskers on their way to things, they don't go out looking for them so who would make an effort to go out specifically to see a bunch of buskers halfway down a dark pier?

"Up at last?" said Cyril when I joined him in the kitchen. He was sitting in the doorway watching the rain.

"Yeah," I said, scratching the backs of my legs. "Didn't sleep too well."

I rolled a ciggie while watching the water in the mess tin slowly heat up.

"You've got some bites on the backs of your legs," observed Cyril.

I'd like to stress at this point that I wasn't standing there naked. Cyril

and I didn't have that kind of relationship. I was in my underpants. Just so we're clear on this point. Cyril, of course, was fully dressed since he'd been up for a while and had got over his "just got up" grumpiness.

"Oh yeah?" I said, craning round to try to look then running my hands over the backs of my thighs when I couldn't see round that far. "Oh yeah. Wonder what they are?"

"Do they itch?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, scratching.

"Alfie's probably got fleas," he said.

"Bugger." I thought for a moment. "Where'd he get fleas from?"

"Could have picked them up anywhere," said Cyril, moving his garden chair further away. "The eggs can stay dormant on the ground for years and god knows what dogs with fleas have been along that pier. You've probably got fleas in your bedding as well, since that's where Alfie sleeps."

"Oh Jesus," I said irritably.

I lit my rollup and tried to take it out of my mouth but the ciggie stuck to my bottom lip and my finger and thumb slid along it and took off the burning end. The burning tobacco stuck to my thumb for a few moments and I yelped in pain, then snarled at the world. There's nothing like standing in your underpants with a dead cigarette stuck to your lower lip while sucking your sore thumb to make you feel very pathetic, vulnerable and stupid. And bad tempered. My itchy legs didn't help.

I pulled the ciggie off my lip and the paper tore so now I had a ciggie with both ends missing and a sliver of paper stuck to my lip. Irritably I shredded the ciggie into the plastic bag we used as a rubbish bin and rolled another, twice as thick, since by rights I should be into my second of the morning by now. I inhaled deeply and felt new life surge through my body. I turned to say something irritable to Cyril and

burnt the side of my wrist on the boiling hot mess tin.

“#####” I said, very loudly.

“Go and sit down,” said Cyril. “I’ll make the coffee.”

I glowered at him but went and sat down and focused my entire universe on my smoke. When it was finished I put one ankle on my knee and twisted to inspect the back of that leg. There were several small red dots and a number of long scratch marks.

“Bugger,” I said again.

I was no stranger to fleas, or lice or bed bugs come to that. When you live in squats with other people such things spread like wildfire and can be a real bastard to get rid of. I keep myself pretty clean as a rule but not everyone who squats has the same standards but you do what you can.

“It’s going to rain most of the day,” said Cyril, putting my mug on the floor beside me while I inspected my other leg. “I heard the weather forecast on the car radio.”

“OK,” I said. “Time for operation Debug, then.”

“What’s that?” he asked, sitting back in his chair to watch the rain.

“All bedding and clothing to the launderette,” I said, “then dust the whole place with flea powder and give Alfie a bath. I don’t suppose you’ve got a vacuum cleaner in your car?”

“Damn, I knew there was something I forgot to pack,” he said, hitting his forehead.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said grumpily and giving Alfie a dirty look. “We’ve no electricity anyway. Fortunately there’s no carpets so I’ll get a broom and sweep the place out afterwards. What time is it?”

“Just gone eleven,” he said, glancing at his watch.

"The vet shuts at 1," I said. "OK, let's go into town and get some stuff for Alfie from the vet and some powder for the floors from the supermarket then while that lot's working I'll take everything to the launderette."

"Sounds like a plan," he said. "My clothes as well?"

"Yup," I said, finishing my coffee. "There could be some fleas in there too. Come on, let's go."

The vet charged a small fortune for some stuff that went on the back of Alfie's neck but I didn't trust the supermarket dog treatments. The stuff for floors would be OK but I didn't want Alfie to get any allergic reaction or skin problems. Tanya, the receptionist, very kindly put the treatment on Alfie for me and gave me the second capsule to use in three months time.

Back at the butchers, we packed all our clothes and bedding into Cyril's car then I squirted a can of flea and tick treatment for carpets all over the place and we shut the door to let it all settle and headed back into town.

"There's a launderette at the end of the esplanade," said Cyril. "Next to the car park I was in."

"Is it open on Saturdays?" I asked.

"It's twenty four hour," he said. "Sometimes I could hear the washing machines going in the middle of the night."

He pulled into the car park and parked in his usual spot. He got out and looked out across the esplanade and the beach at the sea.

"Home sweet home," he muttered. "Jesus."

There was a young mum with a toddler in the launderette when we went in who glanced over then went back to her phone while the toddler made a castle out of her laundry basket.

"What are you doing?" said Cyril, aghast, as I started stripping off

after we'd loaded everything else into three machines. Fortunately I had plenty of coins.

"We've got to wash everything," I said. "There could be fleas or eggs in what we're wearing. Come on, you too."

"I'm not stripping off in here," he said, looking over at the young mother.

"Go and sit in the car, then," I said, "but your clothes are going in the wash."

He stared at me then went out to the car and I followed, stripped to the waist.

"You can leave your undies on," I said as he took his clothes off and passed them through the window to me.

"Oh thank you," he said sarcastically.

I smiled sweetly and took the clothes into the launderette. I put them in the third machine and started the other two then sat down and took off my boots. I peeled off my socks and chucked them in the machine then emptied the contents of my jeans' pockets into one of the boots. The young mother was watching me out of the corner of her eye. I ignored her and slid my jeans down. I heard a sharp intake of breath and glanced at her. She was studiously studying her phone so I dumped my jeans in the machine as well, tossed in a cupful of washing powder from the dispenser on the wall and fed in some coins.

I just knew she was going to look over at me again so I leaned nonchalantly against the side of the washing machine.

"Fleas," I said when she looked over. I gave her a broad smile. "Got to wash everything. The dog's damned lucky not to be going in the machine himself."

"That's cruel," she said, fixing her eyes on my face.

"Only joking," I said. "Wasn't I, Alfie."

“Woof,” said Alfie, keeping a close eye on the toddler who was now underneath the laundry basket and was making it move around like a giant tortoise.

I sauntered over and sat in the chair next to the one next to the girl.

“Ben,” I said, holding out my hand, “and this is Alfie.”

“I’m married,” she said.

“How nice for you,” I replied. “And what’s your husband’s wife’s name?”

“You what?” she said, looking puzzled.

“What’s your name?” I asked, patiently.

“Rita,” she said and looked over at her machine to see how much longer it would be.

“Do you come here often, Rita?” I asked, for want of anything better to say.

“Every Saturday,” she said and concentrated back on her phone again.

Alfie decided the laundry basket wasn’t a threat and went over to sniff Rita’s ankles.

“Gerroff,” she said, shaking her foot at him.

“He only wants to get to know you,” I said. “He’s just being friendly.”

“Don’t like dogs,” she said, tucking her feet under her chair.

“That’s a shame,” I said, “he likes you.”

Actually Alfie had lost interest in Rita and had gone to investigate the back of the launderette.

“Allo, Rita,” said a decidedly large woman bustling in. She looked to

be in her late sixties and dumped a bulging bag of washing on top of the machines. "Who's yer boyfriend?"

She studied me intently.

"E ain't me boyfriend, Alice," said Rita, "I don't know 'im from Adam."

"Is fig leaf in the wash as well then, girl?" She laughed and everything quivered abundantly.

"E's got fleas," said Rita, by way of explanation.

"You been checkin' him, has ya?" laughed Alice, quivering some more. "Best get yer knicks in the wash as well then," she said to me and leered.

"Do you really think so?" I said, standing up and hooking my thumbs inside the waistband of my undies.

"Don't you freaking dare," said Rita and Alice laughed happily.

"When you've finished with 'im, send 'im round my place," said Alice.

"You don't have a washing machine," I said.

"I'll 'and wash 'em for ya," she said.

"That's a treat to look forward to," I said, taking my thumbs out of my waistband and Alice shrieked with laughter. Rita looked faintly disgusted.

"Don't know 'ow to 'ave fun, she don't," said Alice, opening a washing machine and starting to load her washing into it.

"I bet you do though," I said.

"Oh, chance would be a fine thing," she said, pouring in some powder from her own packet and shutting the lid. She put some coins in the slidey thing and slid it in.

“Ere, where've I seen you before?” she said. “I seen you before somewhere.”

“Probably in your dreams,” I said.

Alice stomped over and sat herself down in the chair between me and Rita, despite there being another half dozen chairs in the place.

“You didn't used to work down the Old Fish Head?” she asked, peering at me.

“That pub down the road?” I asked. “No, I didn't.”

Rita's washing machine came to the end of its cycle and she got up and started transferring its contents into one of the big driers.

“Ere,” said Alice, slapping her thigh. “You was in the paper, wasn't ya. Yeah, that busker what's on the pier.”

“More like a friggin' male stripper,” muttered Rita.

“What? You's a stripper as well?” asked Alice.

“No,” I said, “I just play the sax.”

“Stay away from 'er, then,” said Alice, laughing again, “she can't get enough 'o that sort of thing.”

“Oh gerrou of it, you old bat,” said Rita, going red.

Her toddler couldn't find a way out of his plastic prison cell and started to cry so she put the laundry basket on top of the washers and picked him up. Alfie watched with interest from his safe spot beside the washing machine at the end.

“What's his name?” I asked

“Tammy,” she said huffily.

“Bugger,” I thought. Young mothers really don't like it when you get

the gender of their pride and joy wrong.

“So you's live round 'ere?” asked Alice.

“No, I'm just passing through,” I said, “although I'm hoping to get a concert going on the pier in a few weeks.”

“Ooooh,” she said. “Ere, Rita, you oughta tell your Charlie, 'e likes a bit o' live music.”

Rita ignored her and concentrated on Tammy who was still snivelling.

“Er Charlie plays trumpet,” said Alice to me, “with the Salvation Army Band. 'E likes them there gospel tunes. You doing a gospel concert?”

“No,” I said. “Probably jazz.”

“What?” said Alice, “you mean that there devil's music?”

Chapter Twenty Two

"If I give Alfie a bath it'll wash all that flea stuff off his neck," I said as we drove home.

Cyril was happy again now that he had clothes on and no one was giving him funny looks as they went past, although the windscreen wipers beat a slow discordant rhythm that I found irritating.

"Good point," said Cyril. "Let's not bother. We don't really want a wet dog running round the house anyway. Listen, I've been thinking."

"About fleas?" I asked. "We ought to powder the car as well."

"I suppose," he said, sighing. "No, about your jazz idea."

"I've abandoned it," I said. "Didn't seem such a good idea when I woke up."

"Oh, that's a shame," he said, turning the wipers to a higher speed as the rain got distinctly heavier. They had a happier beat now with a bit of a swish rather than a screech. I found myself improvising to a Glen Miller swing tune in my head with the wipers on bass.

"Why? You think it's a good idea now?" I asked, my fingers twitching as they half fingered an imaginary sax.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I was sitting in the car while you were in the launderette, looking at the pier and I felt the mood of live jazz in the evening with the waves on the beach. That was before some kids came over and poked fun at me but still. You want to make it a free event?"

"What do you think?" I asked. "If we charge then we've got all the hassles of doing tickets and collecting money and security and stuff whereas if it's free people can come and go as they please. Anyway, that's what busking's all about, free fun entertainment and people can give what they want when they want. If we charge they'll expect professional organisation and proper seats and stuff and no way can we do that."

“Yes, I agree,” said Cyril. “Are you sure you can get some decent performers to come down?”

“Yeah, I know a few,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll come down for an event like this. It’s the closest most of us will ever get to a proper gig.”

“Will they want paying?” asked Cyril.

“I hope not,” I said grinning. The swing music in my head was improving my mood. “I kinda hoped they’d come down for the fun of it and whatever the punters give them. A few won’t, of course.”

“How many do you think you can persuade?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe half a dozen, plus me, of course.”

“So if we say twenty minutes each that’s over two hours,” he said, thoughtfully. “Maybe you could even do thirty minutes each. Do you think they could do that?”

“The people I’m thinking of could do the whole evening on their own,” I said. “They’re all great street musicians, not wannabees with only two or three tunes.”

“We would have to have some organising, though,” said Cyril thoughtfully as we pulled into the courtyard. “We’d have to say who plays when and make sure one stops so another can start otherwise it’ll just be a giant mess.”

We went inside and I put on some water for drinks. Alfie begged for some cheese but I’d forgotten to get some more.

“I don’t know if twenty or thirty minutes is long enough though,” I said. “It’s a long way to come for a short play time.”

“I was wondering that too,” said Cyril, “and with a fairly captive audience they may not be willing to dole out the cash or may hold on to it to see if the next performer is better. That seems to me to be a sticking point.”

Cyril started to sweep out the rooms and, in the absence of cheese, Alfie tried to help by repeatedly attacking the brush end of the broom. Still, Cyril managed to get most of the stuff out into the courtyard where it dissolved in the rain and ran off down the drain. The acrid smell lingered for a few hours though.

“How's this for an idea?” he said as we were sitting in our garden chairs looking out at the rain. “They come down in the morning or maybe the night before and they do their normal busking up and down the esplanade and on the beach then we get them together for the concert itself.”

“Why the hell didn't I think of that myself?” I said, feeling kind of stupid. After all, I'm the busker, not Cyril.

“You were distracted by your fleas,” he said.

“Pffft,” I said. “They could even stay over and do some more busking on the Sunday before going back to London.”

“Sure,” said Cyril. “Or maybe stay a little longer. Where would they sleep?”

“We can probably fit them in here,” I said “They're all used to dossing wherever. So would you be able to organise them for the event itself?”

“Me?” said Cyril. “Why me? It's your idea and you're the one Lucy says is the new messiah.”

“I'm no frigging messiah,” I said, “and I couldn't organise a piss up in a brewery. You're the clear minded logician with project management experience. I would think it would be a walk in the park for you.”

“I can do the planning side,” he said slowly. “That's no problem but I'm not good at managing people. I can say so and so needs to be under the portico at 8 o'clock but if they aren't I'm buggered. I don't even know who any of these people are or where they're likely to be.”

“I can do the people side,” I said. “I'm good with people but I get confused with schedules and stuff. I generally do things when I feel

like it.”

“No, you can't be doing that stuff,” said Cyril. “You'll be performing yourself. You can't be running round looking for Joe Bloggs when you're supposed to be getting ready or actually performing.”

“I guess,” I said. “So what you're saying is we need to get someone else in on this. Someone to do the running round who can get people to stick to your schedule.”

“Looks like it,” he said. “Who do you think we should ask?”

“How about Lucy?” I asked.

“A lady of many varied and rare talents,” said Cyril, “but I don't really see her as a stage manager. She'll probably try to do everything through her crystal ball or predict someone's not going to turn up and not bother to hunt them down as a result.”

“What about Samson, then?” I asked, “or Jo at the fish and chip stall. She's a bit of a tough, bossy no nonsense type.”

“Possibles,” he said. “Although I think Jo would rather be selling fish and chips and Samson'll probably want paying, seeing as how he's a policeman and will be doing it in his off duty time. He might even have to be on duty then anyway if the police need him. Besides, he's one of the few who won't be benefiting if the town starts to boom again. More tourists means more crime. Let's ask Lucy on Monday, she might have some ideas.”

“OK,” I said, relieved that it wasn't going to have to be me doing the organising or the running around. “Any other thoughts?”

“Marketing,” said Cyril.

“Oh,” I said, my good mood dropping noticeably. “Goody.”

Cyril laughed.

“We're going to have to do some marketing,” he said. “No one's going

to turn up if they don't know it's on."

"I guess," I said. "I suppose I could ask Baz to do a poster or something but god knows what it'll turn out like."

"I wonder if we could get a photo of you from that video on YouTube," said Cyril, pensively. "Then we could get Baz or someone to design a simple poster around it. After all, it's you that Lucy says is the key element here, not jazz or the portico."

"We don't have a computer or internet access," I said. "I'd love to see my video!"

"We can do it at the library," he said. "Use their computers."

"Don't you have to be a member?" I asked.

"I am a member," he said. "I kept my library card from when I was a teenager here. Actually that'll be good because I can use a spreadsheet for all this. I think better with spreadsheets, although I can only use their computers for an hour a day."

"Hey," I said, suddenly remembering. "There was some guy on the pier yesterday taking photographs of me for some portrait competition he was entering. He had all this fancy equipment and he said he was with the Fairchester Camera Club or something. He might give us a copy of his entry or maybe even take some more shots if it isn't suitable. It's bound to be a better picture than a still from a YouTube video."

"Good thinking, Ben," said Cyril. "What was his name? Did you get his address or phone number?"

"I've no idea," I said ruefully. "I never thought to ask."

"Oh great," said Cyril, slightly sarcastically.

"He did say the entries will be at the Scout Hall for viewing and judging," I said. "He said I could go round and look at it."

“Well that’s something,” said Cyril. “When?”

“Umm, I don't remember,” I admitted.

Cyril just sighed.

“Well, we can probably find out. I think the library has a scanner so we can scan in a photo and anything Baz does and put it all together. How are we going to pay for posters to be printed?”

“How much do you think they'll cost?” I asked. “I can probably afford them myself if they're not too expensive.”

“I don't know,” he said. “I know the library will do A3 colour prints for £1 but we'd need them bigger than that and I don't know how we'll get them to a printer anyway but we can find that out too. You know, I think it would be a good idea to get the council involved.”

“Oh god, why?” I have an instinctive aversion to bureaucrats as their instinct is to say 'no' not 'yes' and invoke all sorts of strange excuses like 'liability' and 'health and safety' and 'community good'.

“They've got all sorts of channels for promoting tourism,” he said, “like 'what's on' listings on the internet and the Tourist Information Office and so on. They might even be willing to help with the design or printing of the posters.”

“I suppose,” I said.

“Actually, now that I think about it,” he said, “you're going to have to talk to the council anyway. You're wanting to have bus loads of buskers all over the beach and the pier and they're all going to need permits. We don't want the police shutting it down before it's even begun, do we.”

“I suppose not,” I said glumly. “OK, I'll go see Maureen on Monday, although I bet they decide to shut the pier down instead.”

* * *

The afternoon storm blew itself out after a while and by early evening the rain had settled into a steady downpour and leaked into the butchers shop at the front around the door since it wasn't as tightly fitting as it had been before I broke the lock. Fortunately the water pooled in the doorway, no doubt in a small dip created by generations of people coming in to buy meat, and didn't run across the floor into the back. Virtually no rain came in the back door because the wind came from the north and in through the front. We kept the door open because rain is cool to watch, when you're not in it. Not a day for busking. More a day for lounging round and taking advantage of Cyril's car radio to catch up on what's new in the music world.

I've been told that I'm quite lucky although I suspect most people can pick up a tune pretty quickly. Anyway, if I listen to a tune a few times I get the general gist of it and, once I've worked out the first bar or two, I can transfer it to the sax pretty easily. One huge advantage of busking, or at any rate being solo, is that you don't need to be spot-on perfect, the way you have to with, say, an orchestra. Passersby are generally happy with a decent approximation since most of the time they don't know the tune exactly either so a lot of the time people don't notice wrong notes. With an orchestra, all the other instruments play the right note so your wrong note stands out, unless by happy chance you get it wrong with a harmonic so it sounds deliberate. That's actually an advantage of jazz; you can bullshit afterwards and claim to have been improvising a discordant phrase.

Anyway, I spend my free time during the winters browsing sites like YouTube and Spotify where I can play tunes I like repeatedly until I get them in my head so I have contemporary stuff as well when I head out on the road in the spring. Cyril's car radio was nice for seeing how chart music the previous winter was holding up but since I couldn't replay anything it was no good for learning new material although there was some pretty cool new stuff that would be worth investigating next winter. We passed a happy couple of hours sitting in his car listening to Jazz FM and quizzing each other. Cyril's knowledge of jazz was prodigious and across the spectrum whereas mine tended to be more limited to wind players as I'm not a fan of piano or guitar. Obviously saxes are my thing but clarinets, trumpets and trombones grab me and even the oboe on the very rare occasions that the likes of Jean-Luc Fillon or Yusuf Lateef get air time.

Sunday dawned clear and sunny with that freshly washed smell the world has not too long after heavy rain. I wanted to get back to the pier and do a bit of playing as I hadn't played since Friday and my lips get twitchy if I don't play for a while. Maybe my mum weaned me too early, who knows. I make it a rule never to play my sax at a squat since it's pretty loud and attracts attention although if there were any neighbours they would assuredly have seen Cyril's car coming and going and wondered what's what. Still, cars seem to be less intrusive than loud music.

Alfie and I headed off into town after a light lunch of coffee, for me, and water, for Alfie. I was planning on getting some food, including cheese, on the way back and there was a decent chance Zeki would be out and about and gutting fish but if not, I'd get Alfie something as well.

Since it was a nice day and there were a lot of people strolling the esplanade and a fair few on the beach I decided to explore a bit. I was mindful of what Cyril had said about getting my friends to busk along the esplanade and beach and figured it would be useful to see what they were like. After all, I'd found the theatre on the pier the first time I came into town and, partly through idleness and partly through my permit being for the pier only, I'd stayed pretty much on the pier.

I went down to the end where, supposedly, the nudists did their thing although everyone seemed to be decently clad and, intriguingly, the beach was sandy. Most of the beach at Fairchester was shingle, like most of the south coast, with the occasional patch of sand. Maybe that was why the nudists had appropriated that section. I had to get off and walk the trike through the sand since it sank in and was almost impossible to ride through. Still, the esplanade and the beach seemed to be reasonable for possible busking although there were no really choice spots, such as a solid wall to echo back the sound or a narrow place to concentrate passersby or even, I realised after a while, much in the way of attractions to attract passersby in the first place. There were shops on the town side of the esplanade but, beach-side, there wasn't anything really, apart from the beach itself and the pier.

When the shingle took over from the sand again I got back on the trike, the smell of salt and rotting seaweed in my nostrils and my flag

hanging limply with not enough sea breeze to lift it. Alfie stayed on the shingle to investigate clumps of weed, cornetto wrappers, empty cans and the occasional small crustacean, ambling along roughly level with me and a few yards away. As best as I could judge, the tide seemed to be coming in. Certainly the sand we'd been through was dry, not wet the way it would be if the tide had just gone out.

"Hello," I said, stopping the trike and looking at the girl sitting on the shingle reading a book.

That in itself was sufficient reason to pause, although an attractive girl alone on a beach is normally enough reason in itself. People don't read books any more, they consume sound bites from social media on their mobile phones.

"We've met before," I said.

The really cool thing about trikes is that you can sit on them and be cool without having to prop it up and balance on one leg the way you do with a bike.

She looked up and gave me a cool look. "I don't think so," she said.

"Sky diving," I said, remembering. "Umm, Anne, isn't it?"

"Oh," she said. Obviously she was in a chatty mood.

"You probably don't remember me," I said, smiling.

"You're right," she said and went back to her book.

"I'm Ben," I said, getting off the trike like Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones*. "What are you reading?"

She sighed and held up the book so I could see its cover.

"*The Art of Selling to The Affluent*," I said, rather stupidly since she'd probably have figured out the title by now. "Are there many affluent people in Fairchester?"

“A few,” she said. “Mostly retirees.”

“I don't suppose they take up sky diving,” I said.

“I only did that for one day,” she replied, slightly irritably.

“Did you get many people taking up the offer?” I asked.

“Enough,” she said.

“So that's why you stopped after one day?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I had a feeling things weren't going my way.

“I'm a musician,” I said, “and Concert Promoter.”

Well, it would be true as soon as I started promoting Jazz Under The Portico.

“You don't look like one,” she said, turning a page.

“Oh really?” I said. “So, erm, what do I look like?”

“A bit of a deadbeat, actually,” she replied.

“Ouch, that hurts,” I said, not minding since I actually was a bit of a deadbeat.

“Sorry,” she said, sounding as though she wasn't. She turned another page so clearly she wasn't actually reading, she was just doing it for effect.

“I was just taking my dog for a walk,” I said.

“On a ..., whatever that is?” she asked, nodding towards the trike.

“It's a trike,” I said. “The limousine of bicycles.”

“Right,” she said. “So where's your dog?”

“He's over there,” I said, pointing behind me, past the trike.

“I can't see any dogs,” she said, looking around.

I twisted around and, sure enough, Alfie was nowhere in sight.

“Oh shit,” I said, turning around completely and looking up and down the beach. “Where'd he go?”

She laughed gently as if to say “you really are a bullshitter.”

“No seriously,” I said, feeling rather alarmed. “His name's Alfie. He was here just a minute ago. He was over there.”

I think something in my manner must have alerted her to the fact I was telling the truth. She neatly folded a corner of the book to mark her place and put the book on her bag and gracefully stood up.

“What does he look like?” she asked.

“He's quite small,” I said, using my hands to show roughly how big he was, “and he's black and tan.”

She peered up and down the beach.

“I can't see a dog,” she said and turned around to look at the esplanade, “other than that one.”

I turned to look myself and saw it was a large labrador, walking on a leash beside its owner.

“Can you hear barking?” she asked, turning back. The labrador obviously could since it was now alert and staring out to sea.

Now she'd pointed it out I could hear barking. Thin and faint on the gentle breeze.

“Where's it coming from?” I asked. It sounded a little like Alfie.

“What's that in the water?” she asked, pointing.

I searched the water and, eventually, saw a small black dot quite a long way out.

“Oh god,” I said. “That had better not be him.”

I shielded my eyes with my hand against the sun so I could see better. I couldn't make out what the black dot was but it seemed to be moving.

“I hope it isn't,” said Anne. “The tide's going out and there's quite a rip out there.”

“Jesus,” I said, feeling the panic start to rise. “Jesus!”

I started to run down the beach towards the water and stopped ankle deep.

“Alfie!” I shouted.

There was an answering series of urgent barks, cut short as the black head disappeared under a wave.

“Shit! Alfie!” I cried, as the head reappeared.

I started to run as best I could through the water. I could feel the suction of the outgoing wave pulling at my feet. Getting closer I could see the panic in Alfie's eyes as he struggled to make headway. Then he disappeared under another wave.

“Alfieeeeeee!”

Chapter Twenty Three

I caught up with Alfie, maybe fifteen yards from the water's edge. The water was only three feet deep at that point but as he only has little legs he was way out of his depth and struggling badly. He must have chased a seagull into the water and got caught by the undertow and was slowly and inexorably being dragged out to sea. He was doggy paddling madly but going further and further out and his little head kept being swamped by the gentle waves. Poor sod.

I, of course, didn't realise the water was that shallow and as I was trying to run out to get him, high-stepping and thrashing my arms about, I dived, intending to swim, and hit my head on the shingle. Still, I grabbed him and held him tight as I surfaced. His little body looked even scrawnier with his sopping fur plastered tightly and his heart pounding against my chest.

"Come on, boy, I've got you, you're safe," I crooned, wading through the shallow surf.

The panic in his eyes started to fade and he licked my face a couple of times and whimpered and huddled against me for safety, his little tail beating a staccato five four rhythm against my lower ribs. When I got back to the shore I put him down and he immediately retched a couple of times, bringing up some sea water.

"Is he all right?" asked Anne anxiously. She'd followed me down to the water.

"Seems to be," I said, watching Alfie throwing up.

"You're soaked," she said, then "ewww, so am I!" as Alfie did the doggy water-shake all over her, causing her to leap backwards and hold her arms out at her sides in disgust.

Standards vary, of course, in soaking as well as in everything else. She may have considered she was soaked but she was still a long way off the level of a wet tee-shirt contest which is more my idea of soaking. There may have been a droplet or two of water on her lower legs.

“Come on,” she said, heading back up to where she’d been sitting, “you can use my towel.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking it as she passed it to me.

I started to rub down Alfie so he ended up looking like a big ball of fluff and, probably fortunately, didn’t see the expression on her face.

“I meant that for you,” she said as I held it out to her after Alfie was reasonably dry.

“Oh right,” I said, “my bad,” and wiped my head and face and squeezed out my beard, patting gently where I’d banged my forehead. There was no sign of blood on the towel and Anne hadn’t gasped when she’d looked at me so it couldn’t have been particularly bad. “I’ll dry soon enough. I didn’t want Alfie catching a chill. He’s not long over an injured foot and he still needs building up. Umm, I’d best be getting along. Thanks for your help and the towel.”

“I should be getting back to work as well,” she said, putting her book in her bag. “Can I walk with you?”

She held the towel at arm’s length and gave it a vigorous shake then, with a shrug, stuffed it in her bag as well.

“Sure,” I said, playing it cool although inwardly I was kind of excited. Mental note: saving a drowning dog is a useful pickup strategy. Alfie could become very useful!

“Where do you work?” I asked, pushing the trike. Anne, interestingly, walked round the back of the trike to walk beside me without the trike between us.

“At the Art Gallery in Trelaine Street,” she said.

“Do you like it there?” I asked. That pretty much explained the book on selling to the affluent and, to an extent, her attitude. People like me don’t buy original artworks as we’re not affluent. Hell, I don’t even buy prints since I don’t have a wall to hang them on.

“Yes,” she said, “although I don't know that much about art yet.”

“I like landscapes,” I said. Alfie seemed to be over his narrow escape and was back chasing seagulls and chewing seaweed. “My mum had a lovely picture by someone called Constable although it was only a print. She had another with all these thin, bent-over people outside a factory or a school or something. It used to fascinate me.”

“That was probably L S Lowry,” she said, moving away to skirt a large lump of seaweed with what looked like a dead crab in it, then coming closer again. “He did a lot of pictures like that, you know, industrial scenes in the north of England. Umm, are you really a Concert Producer?”

I laughed. “No, not really. I'm just a busker. I play up on the pier most days although I am trying to get a concert organised there. We're calling it Jazz Under The Portico.”

“We?” she asked.

“Me and my mate Cyril,” I said.

She nodded.

“I work just up there,” she said, pointing across the esplanade. On the corner was a discreet shop front with 'Lynda Blair Perspectives' in casually discreet lettering.

“Nice looking place,” I said. “Are they always open on Sundays?”

“Yes,” she said. “Weekends are our busiest time.”

I wondered if they'd let me in to use the toilet to strip off and wring out my clothes. My boots were full of water too and I squelched a little with every step. Probably not as Lynda Blair no doubt had a perspective on homeless layabouts as well as art. Although, I did sense the slight possibility Anne might be willing to see me again.

“Hey, I don't suppose you'd ...” I started to say but she interrupted me.

“Listen,” she said, turning to face me, looking serious and a little nervous. “Umm, I really want to get into Event Management and I’m booked on a five day course in Eastbourne next July but there’s no events round here and no one in London will touch me without any experience. I couldn’t help you out with organising your concert, could I? To help with my resume?”

“Of course you can,” I said, seizing the opportunity with both hands. She could help me out with one or two other things that wouldn’t be suitable for a resume as well, but one step at a time. “Give me your phone number and we’ll get together and talk about it.”

“Great,” she said, smiling properly for the first time, as opposed to the executive sales type smiles she’d been bestowing on me so far. This smile was reflected in her eyes and made cute little dimples in the corners of her mouth. She rummaged in her bag and pulled out a small cigarette case.

“Great! She smokes, too,” I thought happily.

To my disappointment, she slid a business card out of the cigarette case and handed it to me. Disappointments, like soakings, are also relative. I now had her mobile phone number, as well as the Gallery’s, even though she didn’t smoke so my disappointment was very short-lived. Non smoking wasn’t much of an issue as I’ve found in the past that if a girl likes you she’ll put up with almost anything. I wouldn’t be surprised if they harbour the fantasy that they can get me to give up smoking as well.

“Anne Berrycloth, Assistant Art Consultant,” I said, reading the card. “Sounds impressive.”

“It’s mostly making tea and coffee,” she said, wrinkling her nose, “and passing round biscuits and cake. They won’t let me loose on a customer yet. Hey, I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll call you,” I said and she gave me a little wave and skipped across the road.

“Sweet,” I said, watching her go. I opened my sax case and put her

card inside my elephant money bag for safety. "Come on, Alfie, oh for god's sake."

The damned dog had disappeared again but he emerged from behind a couple of municipal rubbish bins a few seconds later with a half eaten burger in his mouth.

Back on the pier I took off my boots and drained the water out of them. I left them in a patch of sun to dry and took off my socks as well. If Sandie Shaw, Sade and Shakira can perform barefoot, so can I.

"Why are you all wet?" asked a middle aged lady as I was getting my sax ready.

"I fell off the pier," I said, "trying to get away from him," and pointed at Baz.

She looked thoughtfully at Baz and nodded as if she could see what I meant.

"Only joking," I said as Baz glowered over at me.

I launched into 'We All Live In A Yellow Submarine', which seemed to go down well and followed up with Creedance's 'Have You Ever Seen The Rain?'. There were a lot more people around this weekend and a few "there he is" type comments and a couple of requests for 'the dog song like in the video'. I slowly dried out and a small, ever changing crowd formed.

"Hey, Baz," I said when I took a break and he wasn't doing someone's portrait, "the idea for a gig is back on."

"The council's going to fix the theatre?" he asked, trying to square that idea with capitalist oppression.

"No," I said. "I'm going to try to get some buskers to come down from London and do some jazz under the portico."

"They won't let you," he said. "You know that, don't you? You're not one of them, not part of the establishment."

He said 'establishment' in much the same way a pathologist would say 'ebola virus'; a curious mixture of fear and loathing.

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'll ask that tourism lady tomorrow but if they OK it would you design a poster for me?"

"Sure," he said enthusiastically. "I'll do you a poster for when they turn it down too."

"Hey, nothing political," I said hastily. "Just a simple poster with the name and the date on it. I might be able to get you a photo or two to design around as well."

"So my drawing ain't good enough for you, then?" he snarled.

"Of course it is," I said pacifically. "Those two you did for me are great. It's just that a local photographer took some shots of me and he deserves a chance as well. After all, not everyone gets their work displayed in public like you do. In fact it's harder for photographers now everyone has a camera in their phones."

He curled his lip but my appeal to fair play for the oppressed seemed to have worked. I just hoped Baz never found out if that photographer actually won the competition since winning something like that would make him a witless lackey of the exploiters. Baz didn't approve of competitions, seeing as how they were a tool to keep artists tightly bound within the system. The rules of competitions were there, apparently, to confine and limit freedom of expression.

"Great, thanks," I said, assuming his lack of further protest meant agreement. "I'll let you know what's happening."

I lit the ciggie I'd been rolling during our little chat and looked around for Alfie. He'd disappeared again.

"Oh where the hell is that dog now?" I groaned.

Ordinarily Alfie came and went as he pleased but since his near drowning earlier that day I'd become sensitive to his absences. No doubt I would get over it.

“He went that way,” said Baz, gesturing round the side of the theatre.

I padded off, barefoot, to see what he was up to and found him, sitting patiently on the deck beside Zeki who was leaning against the railing with his fishing rod. I kind of wished I had a camera as it would have been a cute picture, the man fishing and the dog adoringly expectant with the waves and seagulls in the background. The only thing that would have made it better would have been the reds and golds of a sunset but that was a few hours away yet. I watched for a few seconds then padded away again.

* * *

“Hello,” said Maureen the next day, “nice to see you again. What can I do for you this time?”

Cyril was in his usual suit and I was in my usual jeans. Maureen, however, was wearing a neat white crepe bandage around her right hand and wrist.

“What happened to your hand?” I asked. “Nothing too serious I hope?”

She held her hand up and looked at it as people do when you ask about an injury.

“I fell over in the garden yesterday,” she said. “It's just a sprain. My own stupid fault. I wasn't looking where I was going and slipped in some mud after Saturday's downpour.”

“Were you on your own?” I asked.

I had a sudden vision of Maureen, who wasn't as young as she used to be, falling over and hurting herself badly and not being able to get help.

“No, no,” she said, “Vincent, my husband, was there. He's a senior nurse at Conquest Hospital in Hastings. He took me over and got some x-rays organised.”

“Pretty handy,” I said. “Just your wrist?”

“I scraped my knees too,” she said with a coquettish laugh, “but I’m not showing you those.”

“Shame,” I said and she smiled happily.

Cyril coughed so we returned to business and I quickly explained our new idea. Maureen didn’t respond as quickly. She leaned back in her chair and cradled her injured hand in her lap.

“Ohhh Kayy,” she said slowly and blinked a couple of times.

Cyril and I sat there expectantly.

“Nice name,” she said, after a while. “Jazz Under The Portico. Catchy, evocative.”

I smiled. “I got the idea from this,” I said, opening one of the copies of the South Coast Chronicle to show her the article about me. She read it with interest.

“I haven’t had a chance to look at mine yet,” she said. “I wasn’t in on Friday.”

She got up and hobbled over to a table in a corner where there was a small pile of unopened mail and a fresh copy of the paper.

“Did you do anything exciting?” I asked.

“My daughter went into labour on Thursday night,” she said hobbling back. “I went with her to the hospital.”

“Oh, how nice,” I said. “Did she have a boy or a girl?”

“A boy,” she said, sitting back down and favouring her strapped up wrist. “Seven pounds four ounces.”

That didn’t mean much to me but babies aren’t my field.

“What are they going to call him?” I asked.

“Miles,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “My daughter's name's Davis now.”

I laughed. “Was Miles your idea?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking pleased with herself.

“Miles Davis is a famous jazz trumpeter,” I said to Cyril, who was looking puzzled.

“I know that,” he said. “I've got several of his albums.”

I'd forgotten that Cyril knew a lot more about jazz than I did, but I was puzzled as to why he was puzzled. Still, it could wait.

Maureen opened her copy of the paper and checked the article was in there as well. Maybe she thought I had had a fake copy printed.

“Excellent,” she said, tapping it. “This will help with your application. Now, tell me about who will be performing?”

“Nothing is confirmed yet,” said Cyril, “but Ben will be approaching a number of his musician colleagues in London with a view to their performing.”

“So they're all buskers?” she asked. “How good are they?”

“They're all at least as good as me,” I said. “It would be pointless bringing in anyone second rate for something like this.”

“And you want them to be able to perform on the beach and esplanade before and after the event as well?” she asked.

“Ideally, yes,” said Cyril. “Since they won't be paid for their performance at the event, there needs to be some incentive for them to make the trip.”

“Quite,” she said. “Well, I don't, in principle, see any particular

problem with the concept although we will have to take Ben's word for their competencies.”

“Is there any reason to doubt Ben's judgement?” asked Cyril.

“For me, no,” she said. “I am familiar with Ben's skills and have no reason to doubt his judgement. However, Council will need convincing and this article will be a tremendous support.”

“So you think it's a good idea?” I asked.

“Ben means 'is it feasible?'," said Cyril. “There's no problem, for example, in holding it under the theatre portico or getting permits for the performers?”

“In principle, I don't think there'll be any particular problem,” she said. “How many people do you anticipate attending the event?”

“Perhaps two or three hundred,” said Cyril, “conceivably more.”

“That means you will have to submit a plan to Council for approval,” said Maureen. “Don't worry, though, you only need a full scale plan if you anticipate more than a thousand attendees.”

My heart sank, as it always does when faced with bureaucrats and 'procedures'.

“How do we submit a plan?” asked Cyril.

“I'll print you off a form,” she said. “Just a tick.”

She leaned forward and did things on her computer then looked expectantly at her printer. Nothing happened.

“Oh,” she said. “I wonder what's wrong?”

She got up and checked the paper tray was in properly and contained paper.

“Perhaps if I ...” said Cyril and got up and went to have a look.

He pushed a button and something lit up and it started to whirr.

"That seems to have done it," he said and went back to his chair.

A sheet of paper unfurled itself from the machine and Maureen went back to her chair, leaving it in the printer. It was still whirring.

"I'm curious," I said, watching the printer out of the corner of my eye, "why do we need a plan and Council approval? I didn't for my street performer permit."

"This would be classified as an Event," she said as a third sheet of paper emerged. "You as an individual have little impact on the environment but an event such as this could be significant."

"The environment?" I asked. "You mean, like, the seagulls and pollution?"

"Well, there's that aspect as well," she said, "but it's more about the impact of attendees on amenities at a public event."

"Oh, right," I said, not understanding. Hopefully Cyril would be able to translate for me later. Paper was still coming out of the printer.

"So, erm, would we have had to get Council approval if we'd been able to use the theatre?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "but that would have been much easier as it would have been inside an approved venue. This is an outdoor event on council property."

The continuing ejection of paper from the printer was dragging on my attention.

"So, err, what is this you're printing?" I asked.

"It's a Fairchester Event Management Plan form," she said. "It's pretty straightforward now."

The printer ejected another page and the whirring subsided. Maureen

got up and took the stack from the output tray and sat back down. She patted the sheets neatly into a squared off pile and handed the lot to me.

“Fairchester Event Management Plan” it said in large letters at the top of page one. I flicked through the pages to the end.

“Jesus!” I said in horror. “It’s thirty eight pages long!”

“Yes,” said Maureen, misunderstanding. “It’s impressive isn’t it. We redesigned the form two years ago and it’s substantially smaller than it used to be. The old form was sixty three pages.

I rapidly handed the paperwork to Cyril, as that was his department. He took it and started glancing through it, page by page.

“That’s a small forest worth of paper,” I thought to myself. “So much for the environmental impact. No wonder the town is dying.”

“It does look straightforward,” said Cyril. “Some years ago I was involved in a tendering application for a waste treatment plant in the Emirates. That ran to roughly 40,000 pages.”

I stared at him, speechless. How could anyone even read a document that big and keep enough of it in their head to make a decision?

“When are you thinking of holding this event?” asked Maureen.

“Probably the last weekend in June,” I said, my mind still filled with Cyril’s tender. 40,000 pages? Shit!

“Hmm,” said Maureen. “Council will need a minimum of thirty days to process your application so you’re cutting it a bit fine. I suggest you get the application in by the end of the week.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” I said, bravely, crossing my toes in my boots and hoping Cyril was up to it. Left to myself I could probably just about manage the box labelled Event Organiser Name on page 1. Maybe the date of the application as well if I asked someone what the date was.

“Right,” said Cyril. “We’d better get on with it. Do we give the form back to you, Maureen?”

“Yes,” she said. “Or just leave it with reception. Probably a good idea to keep a photocopy in case the original goes missing. Paperwork sometimes gets lost round here.”

* * *

“So what was all that about babies?” asked Cyril as we walked back down the stairs to the exit.

“It’s called networking,” I said. “Show an interest in other people and they’re more likely to help you.”

“Right,” he said. “That’s my weak area. It would never have occurred to me to ask about her grandchildren.”

“Goes with the territory,” I said as we went through reception. I said ‘goodbye’ to the Receptionist and she smiled at us. “So how much of those forty thousand pages were yours? In that tender?”

“Three,” he said. “I had to give the specifications for a subsidiary inlet valve.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering how you could fill even three pages about a valve. “Was the tender accepted?”

“No,” he said. “Apparently we made some errors in the tendering documentation. Easily done when there are over a hundred people working on it.”

“So you think this application will be no problem?” I asked. “You can handle it?”

“I found it almost incomprehensible,” he said. “Like, for example, umm, here. ‘Audience Profile’. What on earth is an ‘audience profile’? I know what an engineering profile is but how do I quantify the structure and tolerances of people in an audience?”

“Oh,” I said. I had no idea what he was talking about but I didn't like the sound of it. It seemed pretty negative to me. Maybe Cyril was still suffering the after effects of carbon monoxide poisoning and his finely honed engineering brain wasn't functioning on all cylinders.

I took the sheaf of paperwork off him and leafed through the pages. They could have been in Arabic for all the sense they made to me, except that the writing wasn't beautiful. It was hard and angular and the pages were full of empty boxes waiting to be filled in.

“Ugh,” I said, “I see what you mean. How would we know if the stage is fire retardant to BS standard? What is a BS standard?”

I flicked through some more pages and stopped.

“What control measures will we have for storing LPG?” I read out. “Hell, why would we even be using LPG?”

He shrugged.

“Maybe you should think of something else,” he said. “Something that we can actually cope with.”

“Hey, I'm open to suggestions,” I said, getting into the car, “but all I know is music.”

“What the hell am I still doing here?” I asked myself as Cyril sorted out his seat belt and started the car. “Maybe it's time I moved on. Jesus, I've been here three weeks already!”

Chapter Twenty Four

"You're taking this far too seriously," said Lucy, looking through the form.

We were huddled round a small, sticky table outside the front of the Old Fish Head Inn later that afternoon and she'd patiently listened to us bitching. My trike was neatly parked not far away and Alfie was curled up on the doormat so he could maximise attention from the occasional person going in or out of the Saloon Bar.

"What do you mean" asked Cyril.

"This is a generalised form," she said. "It covers car boot sales, Pilates classes on the beach for old people and charity fundraisers. All the Council wants to know is that you've thought it through and it's not going to end up a shambles with them left to sort out the mess. It's just worded in a formal way, that's all. Someone might organise a barbeque or something and need to use LPG so the council wants to know that they're not going to blow everyone up. Are you planning to use LPG?"

"What for?" I asked.

"Exactly, so leave that bit blank or put 'not applicable' or something," said Lucy looking for a reasonably clean spot on the table to put the papers. She couldn't so she handed them to Cyril. "Don't go getting your knickers in a twist over it. Oh, and keep your answers simple, I've met some of the people on the council and, well, let's just say they're not technically minded."

"So what's this about an audience profile?" I asked. "Isn't that, like, demographics or something."

Lucy burst out laughing. "All that's asking is what sort of people are you expecting so they've some idea about whether the rest of your plan is OK. Like if you put 'Hell's Angels and assorted Outlaw Biker Gangs' they're going to expect some pretty heavy security arrangements. This is an evening of jazz so just put 'middle aged jazz lovers' and leave it at that. No one's going to check on the day and sue

you or anything if a few young people turn up.”

“Right,” said Cyril. “I think I'm understanding. I was reading it as an engineering proposal and to an engineer a profile is a very detailed, precise thing.”

“So you think it's still feasible?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Lucy. “Just work it through and sort out some of the details.”

“Good,” I said. “I got worried when Cyril thought he couldn't handle it.”

“It wasn't that I couldn't handle it,” said Cyril, bristling. “I was merely under a misapprehension as to its nature.”

Lucy and I both smiled placatingly and she patted his arm then grimaced when she had to peel her sleeve off the table.

“I'm going to get a cloth,” she grumbled. “This place is disgusting.”

She got up and headed off towards the bar.

“By the way,” I said. “I think I've found someone who can do the stage managing bit, you know, running round and sorting people out.”

“Oh good,” he said. “Who?”

“A girl I met on the beach,” I said.

He started to chuckle. “Right, she's going to be your personal assistant, then?”

I tried to look innocent. “Well we might have a few details to sort out in private, like.”

He snorted and buried his nose in his beer for a moment. “Has she any experience?” he asked then realised I might have misunderstood the question and hurriedly added “with concerts and so on?”

“She works in sales,” I said, “and she's going to do a course in Event Management. She wants to be involved so she can get some experience to help her find a job in London.”

“It's a shame she hasn't already done the course,” he said. “Oh well, when can I meet her?”

“Meet who?” asked Lucy, coming back with a wet cloth.

“Ben's found someone to help set this thing up,” said Cyril.

“OK,” she said, scrubbing the table. It wobbled, despite the beer mats under one of the legs.

“How about tomorrow evening?” I asked. “You can spend the day going through the application and then tell us what we need to do.”

“OK,” he said and looked at his watch. “I need to get a notebook to jot things down in so I'd better get to the shops before they close.”

He stood up and finished his beer.

“Oh, here's something you can do, Ben. Start contacting people and see if they'll come down. If we can't get a show together the rest of this is a waste of time. Shall we meet at the cafe in, say, twenty minutes, Lucy?”

“If nothing else this'll give him a sense of purpose,” she said, after he'd gone.

“Well, for a couple of months at least,” I said.

“Ohhh, maybe there'll be more things for him to do afterwards,” she said, cocking an eye at me.

“Maybe,” I said, decisively, “but not with me. This is already outside my comfort zone. Jesus, I've even got a frigging business meeting tomorrow. This is no way to live.”

I finished my own drink and leaned back then had to grab the table

when I remembered I was on a backless bench.

“Oh well, better get it over and done with. Can I use your phone?”

“Sure,” she said, handing me the keys to her establishment. “Drop them in to the cafe on your way past.”

* * *

“She’s late,” said Cyril, looking at his watch. “

“Girls are always late,” I said. “Stop worrying, it’s only been fifteen minutes.”

We were in the rear garden of the Old Fish Inn as they allowed dogs in there and my sax was, as always, beside me. Cyril had his briefcase with him, a little old and battered but suitably business-like. Well, business-like anyway. I wouldn’t know if it was suitable or not.

“I hate people who are unpunctual for meetings,” he said. “It shows a lack of personal organisation and is disrespectful.”

“Get over it,” I said. “She’s cute, she’s allowed to be late.”

The door to the garden slammed noisily and Anne appeared.

“Oh there you are,” she said, coming over. “I’ve been waiting in the saloon bar for you for over twenty minutes. I thought you said the saloon bar?”

“Umm, sorry,” I said and Cyril gave me a dirty look.

“I’m Cyril,” he said, standing up and holding out his hand. “You must be Anne.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said. “I was expecting someone ..., umm.”

“Younger?” he said, expressionlessly.

“More like Ben,” she said diplomatically, “downbeat.”

"I'm an engineer," said Cyril, "not a musician."

"He's the brains behind this," I said, "can I get you a drink?"

"Ohh, can I have a Cuddle On The Beach?" she asked.

"Sure," I said somewhat taken aback. This was going as planned but the timing was considerably ahead of schedule. "But would you like a drink first?"

She laughed. "It's a mocktail, silly."

"A what?" asked Cyril, frowning.

"A mocktail," she said, "umm, a cocktail without any alcohol. I want to keep a clear head."

"Ohh," I said. "So what's a Cuddle On The Beach?"

"Cranberry juice, grapefruit juice and peach juice," she said. "It's so pretty."

"Right," I said. "Back in a minute."

"I gather you want to be involved in our little project?" I heard Cyril say as I headed inside for the bar, demonstrating that he could talk to pretty girls when he had a topic to talk about. Fortunately the barman knew about Cuddles On The Beach and didn't even raise an eyebrow when I asked him for one, although he charged me £8.50 which made my eyes water. Still, it was very pretty as it was rich red at the bottom and graduated through to pale pink at the top and had a cute little green and pink paper umbrella sticking out.

She smiled her thanks. She looked slightly glazed already so Cyril had probably been explaining about the nature and history of jazz while I'd been at the bar.

"So what do we have to do, Cyril?" I asked, hoping to get the meeting over with fairly quickly so I could get to know Anne a little better.

“Right,” he said, opening his briefcase. “I’ve been through the planning form and made some notes. There are some serious points we need to address.”

He brought out the form in a neat plastic sleeve then got out a spiral bound A4 note pad and four biros, black, blue, red and green, and put them neatly in front of him. Not to be outdone, Anne picked up her bag and brought out a leather bound A5 note book and an elegant gold-plated pen. I pulled out my cigarette tin and started to roll one.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said. “Serious points make me nervous.”

Cyril gave a half smile and Anne looked anxiously at us both. She was probably wondering if the whole thing was going to fall apart almost immediately or that Cyril and I were about to have a falling out.

“How did you get on with finding performers?” he asked.

“Ahh,” I said. “I’ve got some, just a sec.”

I lit my smoke then dug in my jeans pocket to get my notes. I’d found a pen on Lucy’s desk but no paper so I’d stuck half a dozen ciggie papers together and made notes on that.

“A few said no right away,” I said, “but some have agreed. Shall I read it out?”

“Fire away,” said Cyril, opening his spiral bound pad. Anne opened her leather pad as well and they both sat there with pens poised.

“Umm,” I said, trying to read my own scribbles. Cigarette papers are rather thin and tear easily. “Right, Cass, who’s a singer guitarist, and Shea who’s another sax. Brianne on clarinet. Penguin who’s another guitarist ...”

“Penguin?” interrupted Cyril.

“He always wears a black jacket and a white shirt,” I explained. “No one knows his real name so we all call him Penguin.”

“OK,” he said dubiously. “Carry on.”

“Kenny on trumpet, umm, Damiyr on violin and Kebe on keyboard,” I said. “Oh and a definite maybe from the Flowerpot Men.”

“Who are the Flowerpot Men?” asked Anne.

“They’re twins,” I said. “Bill plays the drum and a harmonica and Ben plays guitar.”

“Why are they called the Flowerpot Men?” asked Cyril. “Because they’re Bill and Ben?”

“Sort of,” I said, “and also because they’re heavily into weed, so with them you’ll never really know if they’re turning up until they get here but they’re great musicians.”

Neither Cyril nor Anne reacted to this which was, hopefully, encouraging. Cyril cleared his throat.

“Assuming this goes ahead,” he said to Anne, “we were hoping that you would be willing to manage the performers themselves, umm, getting confirmations, making sure they arrive, getting them to the pier at the right time, accommodation, transport and so on.”

“No problem,” said Anne, efficiently. “You’d better give me their contact details, oh and, what’s my budget?”

I gave the contact details to her and she noted them down as well.

“So, including you Ben, that’s nine acts,” said Cyril. “Assuming they all turn up and giving them twenty minutes each, that’s a total of three hours, give or take a bit.”

“Sounds pretty decent,” I said, “although they’d probably like longer.”

“Cyril said something about letting them busk along the esplanade and beach beforehand,” said Anne. “I suppose part of my role will be to track them while they’re busking as well?”

“Yes,” said Cyril. “Actually that's an important part of it.”

“OK,” said Anne, looking thoughtful. “So, my budget?”

“Umm, we don't have one,” said Cyril.

“That's OK,” said Anne, cheerfully. “It's early days yet. Why don't we spend a few minutes hashing out a preliminary breakdown of the budget so I have at least a vague idea of what's available for transport and accommodation?”

I looked at Cyril and he looked at me.

“Umm,” I said then gave up.

“Umm,” said Cyril, “that could be a bit of a problem.”

“Oh?” said Anne. “Why's that?”

“We don't have a budget,” said Cyril. “We have no money at all.”

Anne stared at him.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“We're both more or less skint,” I said. “I make some money busking but that's about it. Certainly not enough to fund a concert.”

“Wow,” she said quietly. “You have no money and you're putting on a free concert? Jesus, this is going to be an experience. So, umm, how do I handle transport and accommodation if there's no money to pay for anything?”

“You'll just have to be creative,” said Cyril, sympathetically. “You haven't heard the worst of it yet.”

“I knew it,” I said, sagging in my seat.

“Tell us,” said Anne.

Cyril gave a bleak smile and flicked back to the start of his note book.

“We're probably going to have to get some temporary toilets,” he said. “There's only one set of toilets on the pier and the ones in the theatre probably won't be available.”

“What about the esplanade?” asked Anne.

“Probably too far away,” he said, “but we might be able to get away with what's there if the numbers aren't too high. The council specifies one toilet for every sixty attendees.”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“No,” he said, checking his notes. “We're going to need security people as well as people to manage the flow of visitors. The council seems pretty hot on security.”

“Go on,” I said, rapidly losing heart.

“I don't know if this is a requirement,” said Cyril, “but the plan has a section on first aid facilities. It seems to imply that we need first aiders at the actual event.”

“Jesus,” I said. “So, what? We're going to have to hire toilets, security people and first aid people? I mean, like, we're probably only going to have a hundred or two people turning up. That's less than the number of tourists they get anyway.”

“You never know,” said Anne, “it could be a lot more. It probably depends on your marketing. What are you planning for that?”

“Umm, a friend of mine is designing a poster,” I said. “I thought maybe put ten or fifteen up around town.”

“Are you serious?” she said. “You need to get it out there on social media. Target the specialist interest groups, get a hashtag going, things like that.”

“Umm, we can't,” said Cyril.

“Why not?” demanded Anne.

“We don't know how too,” he said, “and we don't have computers anyway.”

Anne burst out laughing. “What have I got myself into?” she said.

I figured it was rhetorical so I didn't bother to try to think up an answer.

“Do you still want to be involved?” asked Cyril.

Anne stared at her Cuddle On The Beach and Cyril and I watched her. I had the strangest feeling that everything depended on her reaction. As though her saying 'yes' made it a serious venture and not just some doomed-to-failure stupid idea. Maybe I just needed some reassurance.

“You know,” she said thoughtfully. “I wanted to be a part of this so I could get some experience of events so I can get a decent job somewhere.”

“We'll understand if you want to pull out,” said Cyril. “I appreciate we aren't in the most advantageous position to create and implement a successful project.”

She looked up and gave us a half smile.

“It seems to me,” she said, “if we can pull this off I can probably get a job anywhere.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. It felt like a validation, even though there seemed to be a lot of problems that needed solving.

“Well, don't be too hasty,” said Cyril the Killjoy. “You haven't heard the best bit.”

“I don't want to know,” I said. “Let's just abandon the whole idea.”

“We can't do that,” said Cyril.

“Why not?” asked Anne. “It’s just an idea at the moment or is there something you haven’t told me?”

“It’s his destiny,” said Cyril, smirking a little.

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

Cyril told her about Lucy’s predictions and how I was, apparently destined to save the town.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. “How’s a tiny free concert going to save Fairchester?”

“We’re hoping that it will get other people running other events,” I said, “and snowball.”

“Right,” she said, sitting back. “Actually it says something like that in my book. It’s about selling to the affluent,” she added in an aside to Cyril. “It says that if you can sell something non-essential to a wealthy person, a lot of the time they will present it to their friends as an achievement, something that shows off their good taste and judgement and their friends will then want to copy them so they’re not looked down on. I guess this is the same sort of thing. Get some momentum going then sit back and let it happen.”

“Something like that,” said Cyril. “Anyway, I was talking to Lucy about this last night. She said something very interesting and it gave me a change of heart. You remember the tarot reading?”

“Vaguely,” I said.

“Lucy wrote down your question and the cards you got,” he said. “She thinks she now understands what they were trying to say.”

“OK,” I said. “Hit me.”

“Lucy thinks your question was ambiguous,” he said, “which is why you got contradictory outcomes. Apparently you asked if you should get a concert going here but you weren’t clear on where ‘here’ was. I’ve forgotten which card it was but one of them was about ruin and

destruction and Lucy thinks that was referring to having the concert in the theatre. Since it's in need of repairs, she thinks that if the 'here' was the theatre it would have been a disaster. The other card was saying it would be a great success. Lucy thinks that that's the outcome if the concert is held under the portico."

"Why the portico?" I asked. "Couldn't here have meant London or New York or something?"

"That's what I said," said Cyril, "but Lucy said that you definitely said 'here' so it has to be somewhere very close to where you were when you said it and it would be pointless to have a concert in her hut. London or New York or anywhere else would have been 'there' not 'here'."

"I'm not convinced," I said. "How the hell are we going to deal with toilets and first aid and stuff?"

"Lucy says you'll work it out," he said. "And my guess is that it'll more or less just happen, you just have to keep the ball rolling since you are the focus."

"I didn't think you believed any of Lucy's prophesying," I said.

"I'm coming round to her way of thinking," he said with a shy smile. "She's, erm, told me one or two things about me and my past, present and future."

"Oh really?" I said, leaning forward. "Sounds interesting. Come on, tell us."

"No," he said, "it's private but there certainly does seem to be more to it than just mumbo jumbo."

"Who's Lucy?" asked Anne.

"She's Madame Xara," said Cyril. "She runs the fortune telling place on the pier."

"Oh right," said Anne. "I know her, well of her anyway. My mum's

been to see her a few times. She thinks she's brilliant. Mum took me with her when I was ten or so and I got very scared and I've never been back but she helped mum, especially when she divorced dad."

"In what way," asked Cyril, "or is that too personal a question?"

"Umm, I don't really remember," said Anne, "but I think Madame Xara suggested a strategy that her lawyer thought was really stupid but mum insisted and the divorce went through uncontested or something like that. So Madame Xara's predicting this is going to be a great success?"

"Yes," said Cyril. "That's why I haven't given up yet, despite ..."

"Oh yeah," I said. "The best bit that we haven't heard yet. What is it?"

"We have to have public liability insurance," said Cyril. "It could run to thousands of pounds."

Chapter Twenty Five

“Got any plans today?” I asked Cyril in the morning.

I hadn't slept well. I'd kept waking up and had several dreams in which I was in a house I'd never seen before and every time I went into a room the floor fell away, leaving me perched over a yawning abyss. In one of the dreams the abyss was full of flames. I'd had that dream three times. The other dream had been about being chased by blob-like aliens and I'd had to escape in an old, worn out three engined red spacecraft with a large basket on the back and when I landed on what looked like a safe asteroid, yup, you guessed it, the ground fell away and I could see stars through the hole.

“I'm going to the library to work on the plan,” he said yawning and scratching his stomach. “Are you going to the pier?”

“Yes,” I said. “Somehow I've got to raise thousands of pounds in the next few weeks.”

“Good luck,” he said pouring water into our coffees. He shook his head to try to wake up a bit. “So when shall I meet you?”

“Anytime you want,” I said. “Why? Have you got some surprise planned?”

“The competition,” he said, looking puzzled.

“What competition?” I asked, taking my coffee and sitting on the doorstep to roll a ciggie.

“The photographic competition,” he said.

I looked over my shoulder as if to say “what the hell are you talking about?”

“Didn't I tell you?” he asked, sitting in his garden chair and gazing at his feet. “Hmm, my toenails need cutting.”

“Tell me what?” I said. Now he'd mentioned it, my toenails could do

with a trim as well. That probably explained why I'd developed a hole in my one and only pair of socks. Ohh, what the hell. Summer was nearly here and who needs socks anyway? Socks were just a nuisance invented by over-zealous mothers.

"Maybe I didn't tell you," he said, picking at a callous on the ball of his foot. "That man who took the photos of you on the pier? For the competition? You remember that, at least?"

"Yeah," I said. "Is that today?"

"I asked at the library yesterday," he said. "Fairchester Photographic Society have their competitions on the third Wednesday of the month, at the Scout Hall and today's the third Wednesday. I thought you wanted to go see your picture."

"Yeah," I said. "I kind of wondered if we could maybe use it for a poster or something. Anyway, that guy probably entered a different one once he saw how unphotogenic I am."

"Probably," said Cyril. "I wouldn't want a poster of you on my wall. Anyway, it starts at 6. I thought I'd pick you up and we'd go together."

"What about the trike?" I asked, feeling detached. I've heard people wax lyrical about the first cigarette of the day but for some reason no one ever talked about the second which was, in my opinion, just as good.

"Leave it here," he said. "I'll run you down and we'll come back after the show."

"OK," I said. "Why couldn't concerts be as easy to organise?" I wondered.

* * *

Of course I had no real idea what the time was so Cyril had to come up the pier to get me. It had been a good day although I hadn't made anywhere near a thousand pounds but I had talked about the concert several times during the day to the people gathered around and a

couple of people had even made a note of it. More importantly, no one laughed and someone asked if I'd be there too.

"You know where the Scout Hall is?" I asked.

"I looked it up," he said. "It's in Little Beech Drive."

"Wouldn't that be down near the sea?" I asked, since we were heading inland. "That's where the beaches are."

"Beech," he said, "not beach. Trees."

"Ohhh," I said, wondering which joker at the council thought that name up.

"Speaking of road names," said Cyril, "did you know that there's only one road name in the whole of the UK that starts with a punctuation mark?"

"Is it Swahili or something?" I asked.

"No," he said. "They were talking about it on the radio. It's (Old) Middlewich Road, in Sandbach, Cheshire."

"OK," I said, wondering when I'd be able to use that snippet in general conversation. I couldn't immediately think of a way of using it while busking either.

"I didn't know brackets were punctuation marks," I said after a while. "I thought they were commas and things."

"A punctuation mark is anything that separates the elements of a sentence," said Cyril, the know-it-all.

"Oh," I said, thinking about it. "So a nail is a punctuation mark, then?"

"What on earth are you talking about?" he said.

"If you write a sentence on a piece of board and nail it to a wall the

nails will separate the elements of the sentence,” I said.

“You’re really not of this world, are you?” said Cyril. “The nails aren’t part of the sentence.”

“Yes they are,” I retorted. “They’re holding the sentence together. That seems a pretty important part of a sentence to me. Not much point in having verbs and nouns and stuff if they won’t stay up.”

“Go back to sleep,” he said. “I’ll wake you when we get there.”

“What if you nailed the bracket to the wall and hung the sentence from it?” I asked.

“Shut up,” said Cyril. “I wish I hadn’t told you now.”

“I suppose if you hung the sentence from the bracket it would be a dangling modifier,” I said, “so that must mean that nails really are part of punctuation.”

“One more word and I’ll make you walk home,” he said.

“Alfie,” I said, tempting fate.

“Him too,” said Cyril. “This is Upper Beech Road so Little Beech Drive must be near by.”

“It’s over there on the left,” I said, pointing to a road sign. It had bolts holding the name plate part to the backing support but they were around the edge and not between the words so I didn’t bother to mention the bolts to Cyril. He didn’t seem to be in the mood.

“That looks like it,” said Cyril pulling up outside a large garden shed with Fairchester Scout Hall on a board nailed over the door. There was a woman standing outside next to a man who was smoking and doing things to his phone. They seemed to be ignoring each other.

“Hello,” she said when we got out of the car and walked up the path. “Are either of you Jerome Sailsman?”

“No,” said Cyril. “We’re just here to see the competition entries.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. “We seem to have lost our judge.”

“That was careless of you,” I said. “You’re courting disaster.”

“I’m sorry?” she said looking confused.

“Judge, court?” I said.

“Ignore him,” said Cyril. “He still hasn’t recovered from his head injury.”

She still looked confused for some reason.

“So are they inside?” said Cyril after we’d all stood there in silence looking at each other for what seemed like a long time.

“Yes,” she said, “you’re not members, are you?”

“No,” said Cyril, “but we were invited.”

“Only you look familiar,” she said to me.

“I’ve got one of those generic faces,” I said. “I could be anybody.”

The puzzled look seemed to be permanently fixed on her face.

“Umm, come on in,” she said. “I’m Pamela Williams.”

“The saxophonist?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “I’m President of the Photographic Society.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Cyril. “I’m Cyril and this generic person is Ben.”

She gave us an uncertain smile and told Ken, her silent companion, to try Jerome Sailsman’s number again.

Inside were a dozen or so plastic chairs, a small urn with steam coming out of it and about thirty large photographs nicely mounted in white mats and perched on easels. A woman was at the urn putting hot water into a polystyrene cup while talking to a man sitting on one of the chairs. I wondered if it was a good idea to have raw steam in a room full of photographs.

The man on the chair glanced up at us as we walked in then did a double take.

“Hello!” he said warmly, jumping up. “I’m delighted you could make it. Magda, this is the chap whose portrait I’ve entered for the comp.”

He hurried over and firmly grasped my hand.

“Want a coffee?” called Magda.

“Please,” said Cyril. “White with for me and black without for Ben.”

“Come and have a look,” said the man, not letting go of my hand and dragging me to the far end of the room. Not wanting to seem rude I let him hold my hand until we got there then I tried to scratch a non-existent itch on my nose to make him let go.

“What do you think?”

“Wow,” I said.

It was, I suppose, me since I looked familiar but I was sitting cross legged, leaning back against a post, cradling a saxophone almost as though it was a child in need of protection. My eyes were almost shut and there were wisps of smoke from a cigarette that dangled from my lips. The picture was dark and brooding and very atmospheric and what could have been a seagull, shadowy and out of focus in the background, added to the tension.

“Do you like it?” he asked, anxiously.

“Wow,” I said again.

"I think he likes it," said Magda, bringing over our coffees. "Personally I think it's overly sentimental."

"Magda likes to photograph machinery," he said. "Anything that isn't rusting or sparking is sentimental."

"That's a great photo, umm, Nigel," I said.

There was a little card that said *Nigel Barnes ~ Portraiture* attached to the mat of the photograph.

"Actually, it's very impressive," said Cyril. "Was it really that dark when you took it?"

"No, I digitally enhanced it," said Nigel, "it seemed more atmospheric that way, more ... active despite the passivity of the subject."

"So what do you think?" I asked Cyril.

"I think it would work," he said. "It's a pretty powerful image. Shame Alfie isn't in it."

"Who's Alfie?" asked Nigel. "Work for what?"

"Alfie's my dog," I said. "You took some with him in too."

"Oh yes," he said. "I remember. No, I couldn't use those since his head was blurred in every shot. I should have used a faster shutter."

"Shame," I said. "Hey, listen, we're organising a concert down on the pier and we'd like to use your picture for the posters."

"Awesome," he said, looking very happy. "Of course you can. Do you want it raw or jpeg? What's your email address?"

"Don't give up your copyright!" said Pamela coming over to join us.

"Oh, right," said Nigel. "Umm, I get to keep the copyright, don't I?"

"If you like," I said.

“How much will you pay him?” asked Pamela.

“Umm,” I said. This had taken an unexpected turn.

“Did you sign a release, Ben?” said Cyril.

“I haven't signed anything for years,” I said.

“You're a twat, Nigel” said Magda.

“What's going on?” I said plaintively.

“A photograph can't be published unless the model signs a release authorising it,” said Pamela with a sigh. “I keep telling the members that but they never bother.”

“Umm,” I said, “so?”

“So Nigel owns the copyright but he can't do anything with it until you let him,” said Cyril. “I'm not even sure he can enter it in a competition since technically that's an invasion of privacy.”

“Umm,” said Nigel.

“So what do we do?” I asked. I surreptitiously managed to lose my coffee cup since it was quite disgusting.

“Use one of mine,” said Magda, laughing.

“Can I suggest that Ben signs a limited release authorising public use of this photograph for our concert and Nigel authorises the use of the photograph for the concert while retaining copyright” said Cyril, “with no fee either way?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Nigel.

“Make sure your name is on the poster as well,” said Pamela, “as the photographer.”

“OK,” said Cyril.

"Fine by me," said Nigel.

"Umm," I said. "Now what?"

"We've got some forms," said Pamela and headed off towards a small filing cabinet in the corner of the room.

"What's raw?" I asked, stupidly since I was surrounded by enthusiastic photographers who were all only too delighted to explain in great, and often contradictory, detail. Apparently, it was a particular type of picture format used by the camera.

"I'll email it off to you as soon as I get home," bubbled Nigel as we filled out the forms and signed them. "Does this mean I'm a professional photographer now?"

"Not technically," said Cyril, "since no money ..."

"Better hope not," said Pamela, interrupting him. "This club is strictly for amateurs. Oh, I wonder if that's our missing judge?"

A portly man, sweating profusely, had just come into the room. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "I got lost down by the beach."

We stayed for the judging and, unsurprisingly, Nigel's picture of me won the Portraiture division.

"He's our best photographer," said Pamela quietly as we made our farewells. "He really ought to be a professional but he lacks the confidence. Getting one of his images out there could be the making of him. Please, please make sure his name goes with the picture."

* * *

Sure enough, the next day when Cyril checked his email at the library the photograph was there and they printed it out on A4. He brought it out to me at the pier and I took it over to Baz.

"Uninspiring," he sniffed, glancing at it, "but then photography isn't real art."

“But can you do me a poster?” I asked.

“If I must,” he said disdainfully. “What do you want on it?”

“The name,” I said, “nice and big and the date, of course ...”

“When is it?”

“The last Saturday in June,” I said.

“Oh yeah? So when's that then?” he asked.

“I dunno,” I said.

Cyril was over talking with Lucy so I joined them.

“When's the last Saturday in June?” I asked.

“I've no idea,” he said. “What's today?”

“I know it's Thursday,” I said, “but I don't know the date.”

“It's the 21st,” said Lucy.

“How does that help?” I asked.

“That means next Saturday is the 23rd,” said Cyril. “So the one after is the 30th so the last Saturday in June will be the 28th.”

“Isn't it the 27th?” said Lucy calculating on her fingers.

“Are you sure today's the 21st?” asked Cyril.

“We need a calendar,” I said. “Where would we find a calendar round here?”

I spotted someone looking at their phone.

“Excuse me,” I said, going over. “Could you look up on your phone when the last Saturday in June is?”

“En puhu englantia,” he said, waving his spare hand at me.

“Thanks,” I said and went back to join Lucy and Cyril.

“Why don't you call Anne?” asked Lucy.

“Good thinking,” I said.

“It's the 27th,” I told Baz after calling Anne. Lucy and Cyril followed me over.

“Of what?” he asked.

“June, of course,” I said. “The last Saturday in June is in June.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” he said and wrote 27th June on a sheet of A3 below “Jazz Under The Portico”. “There you go,” and he handed it to me.

“What's this?” I said, taking it.

“Your poster,” he said. “Put that photo there.”

“Is that it?” I asked, horrified.

“You said nothing political,” he said.

“But there's nothing on it,” I said. “It doesn't even say it's free!”

“Everything's political,” he said, disinterestedly. “Especially prices. Shit, 'free' is one of the biggest political statements there is.”

Lucy laughed and Baz scowled at her which made her laugh even more.

“Oh Jesus,” I said. “Cyril, you talk to him, I want to talk to Samson.”

I thrust Baz's poster into Cyril's hands and abandoned him.

“Hey Samson,” I said going over to meet him as he strolled up the

pier.

“How are you today, Ben?” he asked.

“I'm good,” I said. “Hey, I wanted to ask something. Where can I get some some policemen?”

“It's easy,” he said, “just commit a crime and we'll come to you.”

“Yeah, very funny,” I said. “No, I need some people to manage traffic and handle security and stuff. What do I do?”

“There are any number of private security companies for that,” he said, “and quite a few police are available for hire when they're off duty. I am myself. It can be a useful additional income and we have the power to make arrests which security companies cannot do. What do you want them for?”

I quickly explained about our idea to hold a concert on the pier.

“Interesting,” he said. “Will there be drugs there?”

“Probably,” I said, “that's the world we live in. There are probably drugs here right now if you look hard enough.”

“Very true,” he said. “But a free concert? That is unusual. Why are you organising a free concert?”

I quickly explained about the idea of trying to start a snowball that would benefit the town in years to come.

“Very commendable,” he said, smiling happily then his face fell. “It's on a Saturday, you say?”

“Yes,” I said, “is that a problem?”

“I would suggest you try to get some off duty police rather than a security company,” he said. “Ones who are, shall we say, friendly towards the concept of street performing.”

“Why?” I asked, then it dawned on me. His two colleagues who patrolled the pier at weekends were not particularly in favour of me and a bunch more buskers just might cause them conniptions. “Oh, you mean ...?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding, “and private security operatives come under the authority of the police in the event of a dispute.”

“OK,” I said, “makes sense. Umm, how expensive would off-duty police be and how many do you think we need?”

“This has been approved by the council?” asked Samson.

“Not yet,” I said. “We’re still working on the Event Plan but it will be approved or it won’t be happening.”

“Good,” he said. “Let me talk to the Chief Inspector. She’ll be reviewing the security element of your plan anyway but she may have some suggestions that will help.”

“Great, thanks,” I said, although I didn’t hold out much hope of the Chief Inspector being particularly helpful towards a bunch of street performers from London, especially where drugs might be involved. In fact, I now had the problem of keeping The Flowerpot Men out of sight, or at least downwind, assuming they turned up.

“Samson’s going to talk to the Chief Inspector about our security,” I told Cyril and Lucy when I rejoined them.

“Oh good,” he said. “What do you think of this?” and he held up a reworking of Baz’s poster, using a finger to hold the photo in place.

“BEN WEBSTER and freinds present JAZZ UNDER THE PORTICO” it read, along with “FREE” and the date and place and a few caricatures of musicians.

“Looks good,” I said. “Only ‘friends’ is spelt wrong and we need Nigel’s name with the photo. Do you think we ought to say something about us all being buskers and that donations will be gratefully accepted?”

“Good thinking,” he said and Baz sniffed.

“Jesus,” he said, “you’re bloody fussy for freeloaders.”

“We’re uniting the unsung heroes of the streets,” I told him, “and you’re one of us. This is your opportunity to strike a blow in retaliation.”

“Frigging hell, you’re full of crap,” he said, rapidly doing things to another sheet on his sketchpad. “There, that’s the last one, OK.”

“Perfect,” I said. “You’re a one off.”

“Too bloody right,” he said. “Now piss off, I’ve got customers waiting.”

He didn’t but who was I to argue?

Chapter Twenty Six

“I call this meeting to order,” said Cyril, tapping his pen against the side of his beer glass.

“You what?” I said, looking up from the pork scratchings I’d been feeding Alfie.

“Can I quickly pop to the loo?” asked Anne, standing up. Now that she knew the state of our finances she was having a small shandy that she’d bought herself. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“The Second Meeting of the Portico Management Committee,” said Cyril, opening his spiral bound notebook.

“Since when have we been the Portico Management Committee?” I asked, feeling baffled.

“Since the Inaugural Meeting last Tuesday,” said Cyril, “when Anne joined us.”

“Hold on,” I said, “we’re not managing the portico. The council does that. We’re just trying to run a gig there.”

“Oh, OK,” said Cyril. “Fair point. I just thought it sounded good.”

“Actually it makes us sound like a bunch of tossers,” I said. “Wouldn’t it be more realistic if we were the JUTP Wannabes?”

“But that would look stupid on the planning document,” said Cyril. “We have to put a name for the organiser on the first page but there’s only room for one name and I didn’t think you’d want yours there. Besides Anne wants this on her résumé so if we do everything in the name of a team we have to show the team members on page three when we detail the management and organisational structure so we can put her in there so she looks important.”

“Oh right,” I said, “now I get you. How about the ABC?”

“What’s that stand for?” he asked.

“Anne Berrycloth Club,” I said, giving Alfie the last of the scratchings. He didn't believe me and pulled apart the bag to check I wasn't hiding any.

“I don't think you're taking this seriously,” said Cyril.

“Damned right there,” I said, leaning back and putting my feet on the corner of the table. “I'm allergic to bureaucrats and paperwork.”

Cyril pursed his lips. “Do you want this to succeed or not?” he asked. “If the council doesn't take us seriously we'll never get anywhere and councils think in terms of management teams and steering committees. They'll never give permission to a group called the Disinterested Wasters.”

“Oh faf,” I said. “How about the Pier Revival, Awareness and Transformation Squad?”

“Oh, I like it,” said Cyril writing it down in his note book. “It has a certain forward-looking ring to it.”

“What does?” asked Anne, coming back.

“We were talking about a name for our group,” he said. “Ben suggested the Pier Revival, Awareness and Transformation Squad. I'm not too happy about 'Squad' but what do you think?”

“I think Ben's having a little fun with you,” she said, sitting down and making sure the hem of her skirt went below her knees.

“What do you mean?” asked Cyril looking down at what he'd written. “Oh, right. PRATS.” He scribbled over the name.

“How about Fairchester Gig Management?” I said, stifling a yawn. I'd run away from home and taken up busking to avoid stuff like this and now it was catching up with me. I felt I was becoming institutionalised already.

“No way!” said Anne, “that's just nasty.” Cyril ignored me.

“How about the JUTP Team?” said Cyril. “It’s simple and specific.”

“OK,” said Anne after thinking it over for a few moments.

“Ben?” asked Cyril.

“Whatever,” I said, looking at the moths circling the light overhead. “Do either of you have any peanuts?”

“Two in favour, one abstention,” said Cyril, “motion carried.”

“Awesome,” I said. “Are we done?”

Cyril pushed my feet off the table and I lurched forward.

“Of course we’re not done,” he said. “We’re meeting so we can update each other on what we’ve been doing and keep things coordinated. Tell Anne what you’ve achieved so far.”

“OK,” I said, putting my elbows on the table. “Umm, well, we’ve got a poster designed and I talked to a guy in a print and copy shop and he’s going to print twenty for us.”

“Brilliant,” said Anne. “Can I see it?”

“The printing guy’s got it all,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Actually it’s based around this photo of Ben,” said Cyril, taking his printout of it from his briefcase. “The print and copy man has the digital version.”

“That’s a nice picture,” said Anne studying it. “Very artistic. Can I have a copy of the file to put online? And the poster if possible?”

“Sure,” said Cyril, making a note in his book. “What’s your email address?”

“I’ve made contact with most of the performers,” said Anne after giving him her address, “and introduced myself and explained the plan so far and they’re all still coming. I haven’t been able to get in

contact with either of the Flowerpot Men but I'll keep trying. Now, Damiyr's cousin works for a mini-cab business and Damiyr is going to see if he can get hold of a spare mini-bus that weekend. Apparently if there's one spare his cousin can have the use of it for free. If he can get one he said he'd be happy to give a lift to anyone else who wants one for a share of the petrol money."

"That's pretty cool," I said.

"What if he can't get a mini-bus?" asked Cyril.

"I made some calls and to hire a mini-bus is about £90 a day," said Anne, "and the train is £31 each way which is too expensive although the coach is only £6 each way. I haven't said anything about travel expenses, I thought I'd wait until someone brought it up, but I thought, worst case scenario, we're looking at just over £100 to get everyone down by coach so maybe we could find that ourselves? I mean, only if they kick up a fuss about it."

"I suppose," I said glumly, "although I'm already up for eighty quid for the posters."

"Let's hope Damiyr comes up with a mini-bus then," said Anne brightly. "I'd pay for it myself only I get a pittance at the gallery. Also I've made a start on the internet. I've put details about the gig on my Facebook page and created a Twitter account and a hashtag so we can send out updates and I've asked all the performers to put the word out on their social media as well. By the way, Ben, that video of you on YouTube is now up to 47,000 views and there are four or five other videos of you up there too."

"That's pretty cool," I said. "I really ought to have a look at them some day."

"When I get your picture and the poster I'll get those out as well. Either of you mind if I create a Facebook page for the gig itself? That would be the best place for the poster unless you want to fork out for a domain and a website."

"Facebook's free, isn't it?" asked Cyril and Anne nodded. "Let's run

with that then,” he said, glancing at me for approval. I shrugged since this wasn't really part of my world.

“That's an impressive start,” said Cyril. “You're clearly a valuable asset to the team, Anne.”

She smiled enthusiastically and I groaned inwardly since I wanted to get this meeting over with so I could see if I could tempt Anne into another Cuddle On The Beach, of one sort or another.

“OK, my turn,” said Cyril. “I've been working my way through the plan form and it's almost complete, barring the issues of toilets, security, first aid and insurance. Maureen wanted the form in today but that's, frankly, impossible. I saw her early this afternoon and she said to hand it in on Monday with a note explaining that we are still working on the outstanding issues and will update the council as and when we can. Apparently that's what usually happens and Council knows that not every detail can be in place at the time of the application although, of course, they need to be before final approval is granted.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “I've just remembered. I talked to Samson and ...”

“Who's Samson?” asked Anne, interrupting.

“He's a friend of mine,” I said, “a policeman. Anyway, he's going to talk to the Chief Inspector about maybe hiring us a few off-duty police to handle security. Christ knows how we're going to pay for it but we'll see what he says.”

“I'll put that in the covering letter,” said Cyril. “It'll look impressive if nothing else and they just might forget to follow up on it, you never know.”

“Fingers crossed,” I said. “Are we done?”

“Just one more thing,” said Cyril. “I also phoned an insurance company to find out about public liability insurance and we're looking at something in the region of £950.”

“Frigging hell,” and “oh dear,” came from myself and Anne, respectively.

“We might be able to get that down if we shop around but it's still going to be expensive. However, Maureen did say that she'd see if the council would be willing to pay that themselves, particularly as there is the possibility that it could be included with a council event the same day for not much extra. Apparently there's an under 16's Fun Run in the afternoon and a Moonlight Market in the evening. She's going to let me know but we have to get the application in first so it's in the system.”

I rolled another cigarette and lit it in moody silence. Nigel Barnes should have been there to take a photo since it would have been a lot more broodingly atmospheric than the one that had won his competition. Anne coughed pointedly and waved her hand a couple of times, making me sullen as well as brooding.

“Stay with it,” said Cyril, noticing my mood. “Don't give up until every avenue has been closed.”

“I suppose,” I said, suppressing a desire to pack my stuff and move on before dawn. “Are we done?”

“Umm,” said Cyril running a finger down his notes. “Oh yes, I forgot about this. We ought to contact that journalist and see if he'll do a piece about the show in advance. Do you want to talk to him or shall I?”

“What journalist?” asked Anne looking up from her notes. Her ears seemed to be twitching.

“Shamus something or other,” said Cyril. “He's with the South Coast Chronicle and had a piece in last week's paper about Ben. Didn't you see it?”

“We don't get the Chronicle,” said Anne. “I'm happy to work with him if you like. Do you know his full name? Have you got a copy of last week's paper?”

Cyril glanced at me. "Anne's got more of an appreciation of marketing than we do," he said.

"Fine with me," I said, "It'll probably look good on her CV to have experience working with the press as well."

A ghost of a smile crossed Anne's lips as Cyril wrote ANNE in green next to the point about the article.

"Right," said Cyril, "anything else for today?"

"A copy of the article?" asked Anne.

"I've got one outside," I said, "I'll go get it."

I went out to the trike, Alfie following in case I tried to escape without him, to get the laminated copy I had. I bumped into Cyril, who was leaving, on my way back.

"You're off then?" I asked. "Home or Lucy?"

"Home," he said. "Lucy's babysitting tonight. See you later."

Back in the garden I handed the copy to Anne and asked if she wanted another drink. She didn't answer as she was concentrating on what Shamus had written.

"Can I hang on to this?" she asked, glancing over to me.

"Umm," I said, "it's kinda useful when I'm busking the pier."

"Don't suppose the pub has a photocopier," she said, looking round then picked up her pen and copied the article, longhand, into her note book.

"Right," she said, closing it with a snap. "That was a very productive meeting, I thought. I'll be off then."

"You don't want another drink?" I asked, surprised.

“My boyfriend’s waiting in the saloon bar,” she said, putting her note book in her bag and standing up. “We’re off to a club in Eastbourne but thanks anyway.”

She flashed me one of her executive sales smiles and disappeared with a faint rustle leaving only the merest after smell of her perfume.

“Wow, that happened quickly,” I said to Alfie, scratching my beard and blinking a couple of times.

It was after dark and only a couple of cars made their way along the esplanade. On impulse I turned off when we got to the pier and slowly pedalled through the dark. The stalls were shuttered and silent. Even the sea gulls were gone. The gentle waves swooshed the shingle and quietly gurgled round the pier supports.

I felt sad for some reason. Maybe it was Anne’s rejection or maybe I just felt oppressed by the impossibility of the task that lay ahead. I pulled up in my usual spot outside the theatre, more out of habit than anything else. It seemed very different; looming, almost threatening. The rising half moon cast a long reflection over the water that pointed at me, like an accusing finger.

“Maybe this path is the disaster card,” I said to myself, quietly as I felt shy of breaking the atmosphere. I heard a faint giggle and muted voices as a couple slowly made their way along the beach.

I sat on the trike, while Alfie checked his usual haunts for new smells, gazing out over the beach and the sea for maybe ten minutes, although it seemed longer. My soul felt deflated, malnourished, inadequate. Slowly I put my sax together and put on my harness. Slow, sad, subdued. That’s how I felt and that’s how I played. Unthinkingly, ‘The Love Theme’ from Blade Runner, one of the most plaintive sax solos around, came out then I carried on, improvising sadness, and slowly my mood improved. The moon was considerably higher in the sky when my soul felt replenished. The accusing finger across the water now more of a beacon. Alfie seemed to sense my change of mood and came up, tail wagging, and jumped into the basket of the trike and licked my hand.

“Let's go home, now,” he seemed to be saying, “everything's going to be just fine.”

“OK boy,” I said, patting his head and scratching behind his ears. “I'll just put the sax away.”

We slowly made our way back down the pier and headed for home. On the way I stopped at Sainsbury's and bought some more cheese for Alfie, a packet of eight crumpets and a little pot of honey for Cyril, since he was partial to that sort of thing for breakfast, and a big bar of caramel chocolate for me. I'd scoffed all the chocolate before we got home.

“I saved you some crumpets,” said Cyril in the morning.

He was looking sleek and happy and pointed to the two remaining crumpets, ready and waiting to be toasted over one of the burners. Half the pot of honey seemed to have vanished as well.

“You were back late,” he said. “Have a good time with Anne?”

“She left right after you,” I said, making some coffee as I couldn't face crumpets and honey. “She was going clubbing with her boyfriend.” Actually I still felt slightly queasy from all the chocolate.

If Nigel had been there he could have created an interesting photostudy contrasting the atmospheric picture he'd taken of me with one of me in the kitchen, slouched against the cooker in my underpants and holey socks vacantly watching a pan of water heating.

“That's a shame,” he said, “although it's never a good idea to mix business with pleasure.”

“Easy come, easy go,” I said and yawned. I don't do mornings. Yet another reason to avoid the old 9-to-5.

“Still feeling negative about the show?” he asked.

“Nah,” I said, albeit unenthusiastically. “It's a happening that going to happen. It'll be awesome.”

He laughed.

I lit my ciggie and took a deep, enervating drag.

“Hey, I've got a bone to pick with you,” I said.

“What have I done now?” asked Cyril.

“You shouldn't have let me order those posters before telling me about the problems,” I said. “What if we'd decided to abandon it?”

“Sorry,” he said, “never crossed my mind. Have you paid for them yet?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “I'll pay him when I pick them up.”

“OK,” he said. “If we'd cancelled you could have just never gone back there. Do you want those crumpets?”

“Have 'em,” I said, taking my coffee to the doorstep.

“When are you picking them up?” he asked, holding a crumpet over the burner with a fork.

“Oh, no rush,” I said. “We've got plenty of time.”

“Five weeks today,” said Cyril, stabbing the other side of the crumpet with the fork.

“Oh,” I said. I took a couple of drags. “I thought it was at the end of June?”

“It is,” he said, “but it's almost the end of May now.”

“OK,” I said. I smoked some more and had some coffee. “You're trying to tell me something, I can feel it.”

“Might be an idea to pick them up today,” he said. “The sooner they're up the sooner people will see them. After all, it's only five weeks away.”

“OK,” I said, “I’ll pick them up today. No sweat.”

“I thought we’d put some up in Eastbourne and Hastings as well,” he said.

“You can do that,” I said, “seeing as how you’ve got a car. Where can I get a big piece of cardboard?”

“How big?” he asked.

I made vague gestures with my hands to indicate how big.

“Too big for a supermarket,” he said, pouring honey onto his crumpet. “Why not try that electrical goods place? They might have some big boxes from fridges and things.”

“Good idea,” I said. “You’d better clear up that bloody mess. It’s all sticky.”

Late in the morning I made my way to the electrical goods store and they found a large piece of polystyrene which had been used for packing which they let me have. It was far too big to fit in the trike’s basket so I had to ride along with it tucked under one arm, slowly so it wouldn’t break from the air flow.

I paid the print and copy man and gave him Anne’s email address so he could send her the digital versions of the poster and my photograph. He also let me use his stapler to staple one of the posters to the sheet of polystyrene and I trimmed it down to fit the poster with my knife. It was a bit ragged around the edges but what the hell. It was still too big for the trike so I carefully snapped the polystyrene in half without tearing the poster so it could go in the basket. I figured I could tie it to my flagpole when I was busking or if I left the trike anywhere for a while so the poster would be easily seen.

I spent a couple of hours pedalling around town and asking shopkeepers if I could put a poster in their windows. I found homes for eight despite several shopkeepers being reluctant to put them up because of their size. Being A2 they were twice the size of the normal A3 advertisements for things. I kept one to put in the Tourist

Information Office, if they'd let me, and figured Cyril could put the rest up in Eastbourne and Hastings. Feeling positive and energised, I went out to the pier to try to get my eighty pounds back.

My placard seemed to work although it flapped around a bit in the breeze and, of course, I couldn't put up either of the drawings Baz had done of me as there wasn't room.

I'd been busking for a while when a familiar looking girl appeared, standing over to one side of the people listening. She was a bit on the young side so I didn't bother to try to involve her or say anything the way I might if she'd been a few years older. I stopped for a break after a bit and as the people dispersed she hung around. I went to get my usual chips and when I got back she was patting Alfie and telling him how cute he was. Alfie lapped it up.

"Hello Ben," she said, so I nodded and smiled, as you do.

"You don't remember me, do you," she said.

I had a momentary panic thinking I was about to be arrested for doing inappropriate things with an underage girl – after all, she did look familiar – then I realised she'd called me Ben and, sadly, I hadn't done anything inappropriate with anybody all the time I'd been here. If she was from my past she'd have called me whatever name she'd known me as.

"Sorry," I said. "I know you from somewhere but I've a shit memory for places."

"You helped me," she said, which didn't help since I'll help anyone if they needed help. "At the mall," she prompted, "three weeks ago. I was playing my guitar."

"Oh yeah," I said. "How's it been going?"

"Like, totally awesome," she said. "I've been back to the mall four times and each time gets better and better."

"That's great," I said. "Never forget you're playing to people."

Some buskers, like this girl, were simply nervous but others get wrapped up in what they're playing and stand there with their eyes shut engrossed in their music and the punters just walk on past. When you look them in the eyes, even for a split second, it's like some sort of connection and you, the busker, stop being background noise and become a person. No one gives money to background noise.

I started to eat my chips and wondered why she was still there. There was no sign of a guitar so she obviously wasn't looking to do duets.

"I saw you in the paper," she said, "so I wanted to come down and say thank you."

"No need," I said. "You'd have figured it out soon enough. Fancy a chip?"

She shook her head. "I was just about to give up," she said, "when you came over. I was so scared and it was all going wrong and ..., well, thank you."

I shrugged and smiled and carried on eating my chips. I gave a couple to Alfie since he was sitting there with pleading eyes trying to look as though he hadn't been fed for weeks. The girl was still there, even though she'd said her thank you. I was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable and wondered if she was trying, god forbid, to pick me up.

"My name's Kyra," she said after a while. "Kyra Cadanet."

"Nice to meet you," I said, "I'm Ben, as you know."

She smiled nervously and I got the sense she was building herself up for something so I backed away slightly.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fifteen," she said stepping forward slightly, "ummm ..."

"Jailbait Alert!" flashed in neon in my head and I stepped back a little further. She pulled her shoulderbag around from behind her and

rummaged inside.

“Ummm,” she said, even more nervously, “I, ummm, wrote this for you,” and she thrust two sheets of folded paper into my hand and turned and ran away. Fortunately no police happened to be watching. I watched her go then gave the rest of my chips to Alfie before unfolding the papers. They were sheets of music manuscript paper with the heading:

A Kind Word, A Helping Hand by Kyra Cadanet
for saxophone and guitar

Chapter Twenty Seven

I can't give you the lyrics to the song since her record company won't give me permission to use them in this story. They're probably afraid I'll sue them for royalties or something. Anyway, there's a decent chance you know the song since it briefly made it into the lower reaches of the Top 40 and got played on national radio for a few weeks. Kyra recorded it with Willy Wildinghouse on sax and he did it very creditably. Her second release was the one that got to the top of the charts in the UK and broke into the top 10 in America although she didn't have a sax on that one.

A few years later I came across a TV interview with Kyra on one of those late night American chat shows where she said she'd written the song about a busker called Ben Webster who'd helped her out when she was just getting started with her music career. Fortunately she never knew my real name so my peace and tranquillity remained undisturbed. Anyway, her story you can read in one of the many biographies about her, this is my story and the next phase of my story was completely unexpected.

A week or so after Kyra had given me her song, Cyril went to see Maureen about some details in our plan and I was sitting on the flagstones of the courtyard at the back of the butchers shop with a mess tin of water trying to find a puncture in an inner tube. I'd just found the point where a thin trail of bubbles was coming out when Alfie started barking. I looked up and there was an elderly lady standing in the alley watching me. What made her distinctive was the double barrelled shotgun folded in the crook of her right arm while her left arm held a stout walking stick.

"Hello," she said in a polite, slightly soft voice. Actually it was more of a posh "hair-lair" than an "allo".

"Hello," I said, frozen to my spot. If this was America I'd have probably done a somersaulting roll to my sax case to pull out my semi-automatic assault rifle and emptied an entire magazine into her without bothering to say 'Hi' but this wasn't America. This was England and I'd never seen a gun that wasn't on TV before. So I sat there, cross-legged and frozen to the ground with air bubbles bleeding

out of my inner tube. Alfie, having never watched TV, ran over to give her a good sniffing. She looked at him tolerantly then fixed me with an intense stare.

“Who are you?” she asked.

I misheard and said “Fine, thanks, how are you?”

She gazed at me without malevolence since I was obviously harmless, although possibly mentally deficient.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “What is your name and why are you here?”

“Umm, I’m Ben,” I said, “and I’m staying here temporarily.”

“How nice,” she replied. “I’m Mrs Jenkins.” She paused for a moment to consider then added, “I own these premises.”

“Ahh,” I said. “I suppose you want us to leave, then.”

“Us?” she said. “Who else is staying here?”

“My friend Cyril,” I said.

“Where is this Cyril?” she asked.

“He’s gone into Fairchester,” I said, wondering if she’d mind if I put down the mess tin of water or if she’d shoot me if I made an unexpected move.

She nodded a couple of times so I, very slowly, put the mess tin on the ground, keeping my hands visible at all times.

“Have you had a puncture?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, searching my mind for something else to say, ideally friendly. “Umm, can I make you some coffee?”

“Black,” she said. “I’ve seen the state of your milk.”

“Ahh,” I said, “well, there's no fridge.”

“That was very remiss of me,” she said. “Had I been expecting tenants I would have made better arrangements.”

“Would you like to come inside?” I asked.

“Very well,” she said and walked towards the back door without, I noticed, needing to use the walking stick. I jumped when she flicked the gun and the barrels locked into place but she just propped it against the wall inside the doorway.

“Have a seat,” I said. “I'll just put some water on.”

She'd obviously been there before since she sat in one of the garden chairs without bothering to look around for anything else to sit in.

“So the gas is still connected,” she said. “Interesting.”

“I'll reimburse you for the gas,” I said, lighting a burner and putting on a pan of water.

“There's no need,” she said. “The account has been closed for several years. If the gas company can't be bothered to disconnect it that's their problem, not mine. Is there electricity?”

“No,” I said.

“So you have no lighting?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said. “We just go to bed early.”

“So am I right in thinking you are essentially camping here for the short term,” she asked, “rather than moving in permanently?”

“Yes,” I said. “Just temporarily squatting. I'm sorry if we've inconvenienced you.”

“It's no inconvenience,” she said. “Ahh, thank you,” as I passed her Cyril's mug. “The place is unoccupied and there is no immediate

prospect of a purchaser. I have been round several times to see you but there has been no-one here.”

“We’re out a lot,” I said. “Evenings is the best time.”

“My primary concern was damage,” she said, putting the mug on the floor, “but other than the front door lock the place seems to be in reasonable condition.”

“I’ll get the door fixed,” I said, sitting in the other chair. “It just needs some of that plastic wood to repair the screw holes. Umm, how did you know we were here?”

“I’ve seen you riding your contraption in the village,” she said, “so I investigated.”

“Ahhh, you’re the lady from the top of the road,” I said, realising who she was. I’d waved at her a couple of times as she did things in her garden. “How are your roses?”

“Coming along nicely,” she said. “They’ll be in full bloom in a fortnight or so.”

“Do you mind if I smoke?” I asked.

“Not at all,” she said. “I think I’ll join you.”

She took a tin of Henri Wintermans Cafe Creme cigars out of her pocket and lit one. Its pungent aroma filled the air while I rolled one of mine.

“So, umm, what’s with the gun?” I asked, nodding at it.

“I didn’t know if you were an escaped criminal or ruffian,” she said, “holed up here while the police searched for you.”

“So why didn’t you just call the police?” I asked.

“That would have been so tedious,” she said, blowing out a cloud of blue smoke. “Don’t worry, it isn’t loaded.”

"You came round to confront some potentially dangerous criminals with an unloaded gun?" I asked. Damn! Not even my mother would have done that.

"Can't afford the cartridges, you see," she said. "They're so damned expensive now and you need a license. It was Reggie's gun, of course. He had the license, not me."

"Reggie is your husband?" I asked.

"Was," she said. "He died eight years ago. He was the butcher here and he needed the gun for hunting."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What on earth for?" she asked, looking puzzled. "He was eighty three. He's had a good innings."

She sipped her coffee and tried not to grimace then put it back on the floor.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't afford the good stuff."

"So why are you here?" she asked abruptly. "You're obviously not a criminal."

"I'm a musician," I said. "I travel from place to place and play on the street."

"Are you that chap that was in the paper a few weeks ago?" she asked. "I thought you looked familiar. Is Cyril a musician also?"

"No," I said. "He's an engineer."

"Why would an engineer need to live like this in someone else's property?" she asked. "You I understand but an engineer?"

"He recently came back from working in the Middle East," I said, "but his money is trapped there and he couldn't find anywhere to live. He was living in his car in a car park when I met him."

“But surely he could ...” she started then changed her mind. “No doubt he has already explored all options available.”

“Yes,” I said. “Staying here has given him an address so he’ll be getting social security very soon and once he gets that he’ll be able to find a room or even a flat in town.”

“And will you move with him?” she asked, dropping the butt of her cigar into her coffee mug.

“Oh no,” I said. “We’re not a couple. He’s just a guy who needed a helping hand. I’ll be moving on to another town soon.”

“So how long did you intend to stay here?” she asked, gesturing to her property.

“Originally just a few days,” I said. “But I’ve got myself involved in something in town but that will be over with by the end of June. Umm, you didn’t say if you wanted us to move out?”

“So Cyril could be moving out in a week or two?” she asked, not acknowledging my question.

“Possibly,” I said. “He certainly doesn’t want to stay here, he’s not that sort of person.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“And you’ll be gone by the end of June?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “For sure.”

“May I enquire what is keeping you here?” she asked.

“I’m not entirely sure how it happened,” I said, “but I seem to have got involved with setting up a jazz concert on the pier. As soon as it’s finished though I’ll be moving on. Fairchester’s a nice enough place but my feet are getting itchy.”

“Jazz?” she asked, frowning. “You don’t mean that thing at the theatre?”

I saw a poster in the bank a couple of days ago.”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s the one, although it’s not definitely happening yet. We’re still waiting for council permission.”

“I’m sure you’ll get permission,” she said. “They’ll do anything to get the tourists back.”

“I hope so,” I said, “but we’ve got no money to actually run the concert and there’s things we need to pay for before they’ll give us permission.”

“What sort of things?” she asked, curious.

“Ohh, err, public liability insurance for one,” I said, “and we have to hire some security people and get some temporary toilets because there aren’t enough on the pier and things like that. They may even want us to hire some seating although they haven’t said anything about that yet.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, “I can see that that lot would cost a pretty penny. Forgive me for saying so but it would seem a little foolish to set up such an event without having the funds to see it through.”

“I know,” I said with a little laugh. “The whole thing is a stupid idea, I just got bullied into it and now I can’t get out of it. Anyway, the council will almost certainly say no in which case I’ll move on and if by some chance they say yes I’ll move on as soon as the concert is over with. I have to stay for that because I’m the main event.”

“Are you famous.” she asked, “a celebrity?”

“God no,” I said. “I’m just a nobody busker. If I was a celebrity I wouldn’t need to live in a squat, it’s just that stupid newspaper article.”

“Explain,” she said. “I don’t recall the text, merely your likeness.”

“Here,” I said, getting one of the papers from my little store of them. “Read it again.”

“Ahh, yes, I see,” she said after reading it. “But, forgive my asking, how does this connect to a concert.”

“You know Madame Xara, the fortune teller on the pier?” I asked.

“Of her, yes” said Mrs Jenkins, “but I have not yet had the pleasure of making her acquaintance.”

I briefly explained how Lucy felt I was key to the future of the town and that the concert had been the only thing I, or anyone else come to that, had thought of.

“I see,” she said. “Well, that's very noble cause. It would be churlish of me to evict you ahead of time then, wouldn't it.”

“Well, yes,” I said, “although it's your place so you can do what you want. There's plenty of other places I can stay.”

“Don't worry,” she said, accurately assessing the reason for me saying that. “I won't be charging you rent. How do you manage without hot water?”

“I'm happy with cold water,” I said. “If cold water was bad for you Britain would never have built its empire on its navy and sea trade but Cyril can't handle it so he goes to the sports centre every few days for a hot shower.”

“That's not very good,” she said. “Feel free to come to my house whenever you want to wash, both of you.”

“That's very kind of you, Mrs Jenkins,” I said. “Umm, forgive me for saying this, but you seem unusually generous. Usually when owners find out they have squatters they do whatever they can to get rid of us, not let us stay or invite us round to use their bathrooms.”

She burst out laughing.

“Call me Amelia,” she said. “I'll be seventy five on the first of August but I haven't always been old. Back in the 60s I was a hippy and lived in squats and communes myself. It was a different world then but my

sympathies still lie in that direction.”

“Hey,” I said, “that's pretty cool. So how did you end up here in Little Fairchester, married to the local butcher?”

“Ahhh,” she said. “I met Reggie at a Procul Harem concert at the Camden Fringe Festival in 1969 and we got married in 1972.”

“But Little Fairchester?” I asked. “It seems a long way from London.”

“We came here to run the butchers shop when his father died,” she said. “There's nothing particularly strange about that. The sixties were over and things were changing. Everything was becoming commercialised, even the Free Love festivals of the sixties had been taken over and were becoming rock festivals run by corporations for profit. It was all very depressing. Have you seen the sign out the front?”

“You meant the one about being family owned?” I asked

“Yes, that was Reggie's little joke,” she said. “He had it made in 1975 to try to counter the wave of independent local butchers being amalgamated into large chains.”

“Why's that a joke?” I asked. “Surely he was proud of keeping the shop family owned and not selling out?”

“That wasn't the joke,” she said. “The joke was that the shop was first set up in 1906 by Julian Jenkins who was the illegitimate son of Viscount Foxlands by a local girl when he was visiting Fairchester. The Viscount never acknowledged the boy hence the irony of the plaque. Julian and his heirs had been disowned by the family, you see. Just think, I could have been a Viscountess.”

The thought seemed to amuse her although I found it a little sad. No doubt Baz would have had a lot to say since he regarded the aristocracy as a running sore on the backside of capitalism. Still, we chatted for a little while then Amelia made her excuses and repeated her offer of hot water and left, taking her shotgun with her.

I finished fixing my puncture and, after leaving the glue to fully set for half an hour or so, Alfie and I made our way into town. Things had been quiet over the weekend and there weren't that many people around so I decided to go for a swim in the sea. Alfie declined the opportunity and stayed safely on the beach, barking at each wave that came in and watching me anxiously as I gave myself a thorough scrubbing. The sun was pleasantly warm and there was a mild breeze coming in off the sea which helped me dry off. I was still going to need an all over body wash when I got home to get rid of the salt though.

We went back on the pier for a while and there was hardly anyone there.

"It's pretty quiet," I said to Jo when I went for some chips.

She'd been standing behind her counter looking thoroughly bored all the time I'd been there and I hadn't noticed a single customer. Lucy either hadn't turned up – perhaps she was able to predict a bad day? – or had given up and gone home and Anton was in the process of shutting up his own greasy food emporium.

"Yeah," she said, "you get days like this. Want a couple of pieces of fish? Half price? Only gonna chuck em out otherwise."

"OK," I said.

"Your mate's gone," she said, shaking salt on the fish and chips and wrapping them. "Had enough, he reckoned."

"My mate?" I said, surprised. "You mean Cyril?"

"No, that artist feller, what's-'is-name," she said, taking my money.

"Oh, Baz," I said. "Yeah, he's been threatening to for a few days."

"You going too?" she asked, leaning on her counter.

"Yeah, soon enough," I said. "Can't stay anywhere too long. I get restless."

"You're staying for the concert though, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess," I said, "although it probably won't run. Too many problems, not enough money."

"Yeah, tell me about it," she said. "I reckon I've got one season left then it won't be worth keeping this place open. Not enough business for the two of us and Anton is staying slightly ahead. Fish and chips ain't what it used to be, not now that cod and haddock's so expensive. I dunno how they keep the price of burgers down. Still, with me gone he might last two or three years."

"What'll you do if you shut down?" I asked. "Work with your husband in the camping shop?"

"That's dying too," she said. "It has its good weeks and bad weeks but it's struggling. One wet summer and we're done for. People just ain't camping as much as they used to and those that do ain't buying new stuff, they're just repairing what they've already got. I blame them online lodging places, seems like anyone with a spare room is renting it out now and the prices are dropping there's so much available now. Mate of mine works for the Imperial Hotel, says bookings are down fifteen percent on last year. Why stay at the hotel when you can get a room in the next street for half the price?"

A seagull landed nearby and squawked noisily at Jo. Alfie chased it away before Jo could throw it a chip.

"Oh sod it," she said. "I'm going home. No point keeping the oil hot at this rate."

She started turning off her appliances.

"Here, you want these?" she asked, pointing to four pieces of fish looking lost and lonely in her bain-marie. "Only going to get chucked."

"Why don't you have them for your tea?" I said.

"Already done it," she said, pointing to a large wrapped bundle at the

end of the bain-marie. "Can't eat this lot as well."

"OK," I said, "but let me give you some money for them."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "A few quid isn't going to make any difference. Let's call it quits for you cheering this dump up for the last few weeks."

"Well, OK," I said, taking the fish, "if you insist. I'm sure things will pick up."

"Bloody hope so," she said. "If I shut the shop me sister can get me a job at Cranstonby's Pet Foods in Hastings but who the hell wants to shift sacks of dog food round all day?"

"Alfie would help," I said which brought a bleak smile to her lips.

"See you tomorrow," she said, "if I can be bothered to get out of bed."

"Ciao," I said, "thanks for the fish," but the shutter was already down.

I didn't see a lot of point staying either so I went off to see if Zeki was fishing. He was but he was having no more luck than Jo so I gave him a couple of pieces of battered fish instead.

"Zank you, zank you," he said, beaming. "Is good, yuss, my friend."

We chatted for a few minutes while he dismantled his fishing rod and we walked down the pier together while he ate his fish while it was still warm.

"You make yazz?" he asked when the fish was gone. "Like notice says?"

"You mean the concert?" I asked.

"Yuss, yuss," he said, "concert, yazz."

"I hope so," I said.

"Good, good," he said, giving me a thumbs up. "Booskers, what is,

huh?"

"Buskers?" I said. "They're people like me, we play music on the streets and people give us money."

"Ahh, utcai előadók," he said, "zo, concert all booskers?"

"Yes," I said, "all buskers."

"Good, good," he said. "Me play booskers wit you?"

"You?" I said, stopping in astonishment to look at him. "You want to play in the concert?"

"Yuss," he said, "me play good, harmonika, yuss."

"The harmonica?" I said, my normal fluency deserting me. "You want to play the harmonica at the concert?"

He started tapping the fingers of his right hand on his chest and waving his left hand from side to side. I watched for a while wondering what the hell he was doing then I realised. He was miming an accordion.

"Oh, the accordion," I said, imitating his movements.

"Yuss, yuss," he said, "harmonika, I play booskers."

"Do you know any jazz?" I asked. I'm no expert on accordions but I'd never heard of a jazz accordion. In fact the only accordionist I'd ever heard of was Buckwheat Zydeco who played zydeco music which was a form of New Orleans Creole blues and, come to think of it, New Orleans was also famous for its jazz.

"Yazz, yuss," he said, "Gábor Szabó me play, yuss."

"Well, OK," I said. I had no idea what Gábor Szabó was but I figured there was a better than even chance the concert wouldn't even happen so what the hell. Worst case scenario I could leave Cyril to deal with him.

“Good, good,” he said, grinning his gappy grin. “Me boosker man, ha ha.”

* * *

“Fish for dinner,” I said when I got home, “although it’ll be cold by now.”

“That’s nice,” said Cyril, from the depths of his garden chair. He put his library book down.

“Do you know someone called Amelia?” he asked.

“She’s our landlady,” I said, putting a couple of pieces of cold battered fish and some cold chips on his plate and handing it to him.

“Our landlady?” he said, staring at me in astonishment. “We have a landlady?”

“Well, sort of,” I said, sitting own with my own plateful. “She owns this building. She came round this morning.”

“Are we being evicted?” he asked anxiously.

“Nah,” I said. “Actually she’s letting us stay at least until the concert.”

“Thank god for that,” he said. “Only I had an email from Wahda Islamic Bank. They’ve turned down my request for a debit card. Apparently I have to prove my identity in person first.”

“That’s a bummer,” I said. “Still, you’re no worse off than you were before.”

“True,” he said, “but I really don’t want to be evicted from here, at least not until I start getting benefits.”

“Don’t worry, you’re safe,” I said. “Amelia was a squatter herself back in the sixties, so she’s on our side. Anyway, how do you know about Amelia?”

“Oh,” he said, “she left a note on my chair.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“So what does it say?” I asked.

“Says her nephew is a building contractor in Hastings and he can let us have four portable toilets the last weekend in June,” said Cyril. “She says to phone him if we’re interested and she’s given a number but she doesn’t say how much he wants.”

“Well, it’s nice of her to think of us anyway,” I said, “even though we won’t be able to afford them. Do you think it’s worth ringing him or not?”

“Might as well,” said Cyril. “If nothing else it shows the council we’re still working on it. One thing’s for sure, we’re not going to get any toilets if we don’t follow up on things. They don’t fall out of the sky, you know.”

“Actually, they do,” I said. “I’ve heard of them falling out of aircraft.”

“That’s not the actual toilet,” said Cyril, rolling his eyes. “It’s called blue ice and it’s human waste and disinfectant that’s leaked and frozen as it fell.”

“Ugh, nasty,” I said. “You’re sitting on the beach and a load of frozen shit falls on you from the sky, gross.”

“Pretty much,” said Cyril. “I’ve had jobs like that too. Shit always comes down from management.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “the few jobs I’ve had have always been short casual jobs. Any hassles fall on the supervisors who don’t pass it on ‘cos they know I’ll just walk out.”

“Good attitude,” said Cyril, I think admiringly but he could have been being sarcastic. “You want to ring him or shall I?”

“You do it,” I said. “He’ll probably want to talk technical stuff like piss flow rate tolerances and craps per minute and you know more about that than I do. I’ll just fall asleep then find I’ve committed us to a

grand's worth of hire charges."

"Yeah, probably," he said. "I'll try and do it tomorrow although builders can be very difficult to get hold of. Don't forget we've got another meeting with Anne."

"What, another?" I said. "Jesus, she loves meetings, doesn't she."

"She's just keen," said Cyril. "Also she knows we live together so she's probably a little afraid of being left out of the loop. Besides she's liaising with the performers so she needs to know about anything that might affect them and don't forget they'll need to be able to use the toilets as well. It'll be no damned good if someone has to walk two miles to use the toilet just before they do their show."

"Yeah, true," I said. I'd had to loiter more than once while waiting for the pier toilets to be free myself. It's difficult to play well when you're busting for a pee. "Oh here's something for your agenda. I've got another performer."

"Ahh, right," he said, opening his briefcase to get out his note book. "I didn't think we wanted any more but I daresay we'll get a no-show or two on the day. Anything else for the agenda?"

"Nah," I said. "Nothing much is happening."

* * *

We'd taken to meeting twice a week in the garden of the Old Fish Head since it was convenient. Tuesdays and Fridays, although Cyril said we'd probably have to meet more often if the council approved the plan and as we got closer to the day. Apparently the council was due to announce their decision on the Tuesday before the gig which didn't leave a lot of time for meetings, let alone anything else. Fortunately my own approach to management is classified as *laissez faire* which is why I'll never have a job as a manager. Leaving things to sort themselves out isn't really considered to be an effective management strategy although it generally works for me.

Cyril had also, thank god, given up saying things like "I call this

meeting to order,” since there was only the three of us and me and Anne usually waited for him to talk first anyway once we’d had our little ‘how’s life with you?’ and “have you broken up with your boyfriend yet?’ preliminaries. The significant moment seemed to be when Cyril got out his notebook and arranged his biros. Anne would lean forward expectantly and I would slouch back dejectedly. There’s nothing like a meeting to suck the fun out of a day.

“I’ve got some good news,” said Cyril looking, it has to be admitted, happier than usual. Well, since his expression was normally one of dejection, even looking sad was an improvement.

“You’re getting benefits at last?” I asked.

“Oh, I wish,” he said. “I had a meeting at the Job Centre this morning. They wanted me to explain, yet again, why I’m claiming benefits when I have £33 million in my bank account.”

Anne frowned, no doubt wondering why, if Cyril was so rich, we were bothering with this little gig.

“Well, it’s your own fault,” I said. “There’s no way they’re going to find out about your account in Yemen so why you had to go and tell them about it is beyond me. You’re just determined to make life difficult for yourself.”

“I’m too honest,” he said. “I just don’t have the personality to play the system. I don’t have that much,” he added when he saw Anne’s look. “It’s 33 million Yemani rials not pounds and I can’t get it out of the country anyway, although DWP don’t seem to be able to comprehend that fact.”

“But why can’t you get at your money?” she asked so Cyril explained. She was shocked.

“But it’s your money,” she said, perhaps beginning to appreciate that the affluent may have issues poor people like her and I didn’t face, even though Cyril was still technically some way short of being affluent.

“And when I’ve proved I’m who I claim to be I’m sure they’ll give it back to me,” he said. “Anyway, the good news.”

Anne reluctantly subsided.

“I phoned that building contractor in Hastings,” he said, referring to his notes. “Apparently Amelia has convinced him to give us the use of whatever spare portable toilets he has for no charge. Isn’t that excellent news?”

“So he’s going to be a sponsor?” asked Anne.

“No, I asked him that but he wants his name kept out of this,” said Cyril. “He’s only doing this because his aunt asked him to and he doesn’t want to be hassled with endless requests for free equipment. It seems he’s also got a reputation for being a hard-nosed businessman as well which he wants to keep intact. Doing things for charity wouldn’t look good.”

“So why’s he doing this?” I asked.

“I asked him that as well. It seems Aunt Amelia gave him the money to get through a bad patch a few years ago and she’s called in the favour,” said Cyril. “He’s only got four spare that weekend but that should be enough. With the two on the pier already that’s enough for 360 people. He’ll send them round on a truck on the Friday and take them away on the Monday.”

“Well, that’s nice of him,” I said. “Did you accept?”

“Of course,” said Cyril, “and I’ll let Maureen know on Friday when I give her a progress report. Well, that’s it for me. Ben’s got an update though.”

“Have I?” I asked, looking puzzled.

“Another performer, you said,” he prompted.

“Oh yeah,” I said. “Sorry, yeah, a guy called Zeki.”

“How do you spell that?” asked Anne.

“Z-E-K-I, probably,” I said, “although I don't really know. He's Hungarian.”

“Do you have a phone number or email address?” she asked, writing down his name in her leather clad note book.

“Nope,” I said.

“You mean Zeki from the pier?” asked Cyril.

“That's him,” I said.

“Is he a busker?” asked Anne.

“No, he's a fisherman,” said Cyril. “Used to be a steel worker back in Hungary.”

“But he plays an instrument,” asked Anne “or does he sing?”

“He can barely speak English,” said Cyril.

“I think he plays the accordion,” I said, “or the harmonica. I got confused.”

“I'm pretty sure it's an accordion,” said Cyril.

“But if he doesn't speak English and hasn't got a phone or email how do I contact him?” asked Anne, “and is he any good on his harmonica?”

“I've no idea,” I said. “I've never seen him play but he often gives Alfie some fish. He's a nice chap even though he's about a hundred and five.”

“Right,” said Anne, looking as though she was debating internally whether she had sufficient power in our 'management team' to tell me off for signing up a no-hoper. She must have decided she didn't as she studied her note book intently and underlined Zeki's name twice and

wrote 'fish' in brackets next to it.

"I'm pretty sure he's in his early seventies," said Cyril, "although he probably looks older because he's a refugee."

Anne was of an age where even I seemed borderline 'aged' and looked remarkably unconvinced at the desirability of his involvement but didn't say anything, despite the waves of disapproval. I figured her boyfriend was in for a hard time later.

"Any idea what he's going to do?" asked Cyril.

"He seemed pretty hot on the idea of jazz," I said, "although he calls it yazz, unless he meant Yazz And The Plastic Population. Maybe he wants to play 'The Only Way Is Up'."

Cyril looked blank so I sang the first couple of lines, which didn't help.

"Doesn't sound like jazz," he said.

"He also said something about a cardboard sabre," I said, "but I didn't have a clue what he was talking about."

"What cardboard sabre?" asked Cyril, frowning. "He's going to do a sword fight or something?"

"Maybe he's a sword swallower," said Anne, deciding to rejoin the conversation.

"Maybe he meant the Sabre Dance," said Cyril.

"Oh, right," I said, "by Khachaturian. Wasn't he Hungarian?"

"No, he was Armenian," said Cyril. "Oh, you don't mean Gábor Szabó, do you?"

"Could be," I said. "Why?"

"Gábor Szabó was a brilliant Hungarian jazz guitarist, back in the sixties," said Cyril. "He died a long time ago but I've got one of his

albums, 'Dreams'."

"Oh cool," I said. "That sounds a lot better than a fake sword fight. Maybe Zeki was a fan."

"So you're saying that you want this Zeki playing some Hungarian jazz on his harmonica thing at the gig?" asked Anne in a flat, neutral voice.

"Sure," I said, "why not?"

"I suppose I'd better talk to him, then" she said. "How do you spell cardboard sabre?"

"Ask Cyril," I said, "he's got the album."

"G-a with a dash on top-b-o-r S-z-a-b-o with another dash on top," he said calmly as though spelling out Hungarian names was a daily occurrence for him.

"Well, that's it for us," he said after Anne had painstakingly written that down. "What's been happening in your area, Anne?"

"Not much," she said. "I managed to get hold of Ben from the Flowerpot Men who said it was the first he'd ever heard of the concert but he'd love to be there and he'll talk to Bill about it."

"Yeah," I said, smiling. "They're kind of unreliable. Probably best to keep ringing them everyday to remind them just in case. Might be an idea to get one of the others to pick them up as well. Demiyr knows them, so does Cass."

She wrote that down as well.

"I also phoned Shamus McMann of the South Coast Chronicle. He was very interested and he's going to talk to the editor about whether to put something in his column the day before or the week before. He also wants to do an interview with you, Ben and maybe get a picture or two. I told him I'd try to get you to drop in and see him in the next day or two."

"I don't do interviews," I said. "I like to stay anonymous. I don't want to be famous."

"I hardly think the South Coast Chronicle is going to make you famous," she said.

I wrinkled my nose. "I'd rather not," I said.

"Well I can't make you," she said, "but I'm sure it would be good publicity for the concert. You don't have to tell him anything, you know. You can make up answers to whatever he asks."

"I'll think about it," I said.

"His office is 52 Ashdale Road, Eastbourne," said Anne. "It's down near the station. Aren't you going to write it down?"

"I'll remember it," I assured her, making a mental note not to.

"He also asked what time the concert starts," said Anne. "We, ahh, forgot to put that on the poster."

Cyril frowned.

"Oh yeah," I said, "I suppose that would have been useful."

"Useful?" said Cyril, sounding annoyed. "I would have thought it was essential. Damn, I should have thought of that."

"I told him that we hadn't decided yet," said Anne. "So, umm, do you want to decide?"

"How about 7 o'clock?" asked Cyril.

"Does it really matter?" I asked. "Why don't we just wait and see who turns up then put up a sign on the pier on the day?"

"People do like to have a fixed time," said Anne. "That way they can plan their day."

“Oh right,” I said. “Do they really?”

“Ben does have a point,” said Cyril. “At this stage the only person we know for sure will be there is Ben and we don't even know if it's going to happen anyway. I agree with Ben, let's just wait and see. We can always go round and write it on the posters if we need to. Has anyone asked on social media?”

“Actually I've had no reaction at all so far,” she said. “I've tweeted a few updates and I know they've been retweeted and there are quite a few likes on Facebook but no one's talking about it.”

“Is that good or bad?” asked Cyril.

“Umm, it would be better if it was being talked about,” said Anne, diplomatically. “That way it might even get classified as trending which would add momentum.”

“So what you're saying is that there isn't much interest out there?” said Cyril.

Anne shrugged and we sat and stared at our drinks for a while.

“So basically what we're saying,” I said after a while, “is that the council probably won't allow it, we can't afford the security and insurance if they do and either way no one is going to turn up anyway.”

They just looked at me and I started to laugh.

“This is so cool,” I said. “It's like the calm before the storm. When the shit hits, it's going to hit big time!”

* * *

“Something very strange is going on,” said Cyril, joining me on the pier the following Friday.

He'd been to see Maureen to get an update on the progress of our plan and had come to join me for afternoon chips.

"I know," I said. "I've been getting a lot of people stopping and talking to me. They seem to know about me already and they're asking about the concert and who's going to be there and what styles of jazz there'll be. It makes no sense to me since it's still three weeks away and most of them seem to be tourists and they'll have gone by then."

"That is strange," he said, pondering it. "No, I can't see a reason for that either. Maybe it's just that word is beginning to spread. I suppose it is possible a few might be planning to come back especially for the concert."

"Maybe," I said. "Ahh, whatever. Once they get back to their normal lives they'll forget about it anyway. They'll just do whatever they normally do on a Saturday, not make the effort to traipse out here again. So what strange things have happened to you?"

"I went to see Maureen," he said. "Apparently the council isn't able to roll the concert into the other events' insurance. It seems that because it's on the pier it's considered high risk and therefore the insurance company wants it as a wholly separate policy."

"Why's it high risk?" I asked.

"Probably the risk of people falling off the pier and drowning," he said. "Anyway, that's not what's strange, since I more or less expected that. I've never yet come across an insurance company that is actually helpful. No, what's strange is the the Chief Inspector has approved our security plan."

"You're kidding me," I said with my mouth full of half chewed chips. "But we don't have a security plan."

"That's right," he said. "I just left that section blank with 'to be finalised' on it. And Maureen didn't have any details either. All she knew was that section had been approved."

I slowly ate some more chips and watched Alfie watch the passersby watch him.

"You don't suppose it's anything to do with Samson?" I said after a

while. "He did say he was going to have a word with the Chief Inspector."

"Has he said anything to you about it?" asked Cyril.

"He's on a course this week," I said. "Advanced Truncheon Technique or something. He'll be back on Monday, I think."

"Well, it can't be anything else," he said, "unless the council's calling in the SAS or something."

"I'll ask him when I next see him," I said. "So what are we going to do about the insurance?"

"God knows," he said. "Maureen said the council didn't want to pay for it themselves either."

"Oh well," I said. "We've still got three weeks to find the money. Oh shit!"

"What?" said Cyril, sitting up in alarm.

"What the hell is what the Chief Inspector's approved going to cost?" I said. "What if he's hiring us the entire Fairchester police force at 500 quid a day each?"

"Oh god," said Cyril. "Doesn't bear thinking about."

There was more of the same all over the weekend. A lot more people were milling about and listening to me playing. Quite a few took videos and asked questions. I asked a few why they were asking but the only answers I got was variations along the lines of they'd heard something big/interesting/significant was going to happen but no one had any real idea of what. They just wanted to come and see for themselves. Certainly a lot had seen the videos of me and some had seen Facebook posts and tweets about the gig.

"Yo, Samson!" I said when I finally saw him on Monday morning.

"Hello, Ben," he said smiling happily, as always.

“Learn a bit of truncheon kung-fu?” I asked, doing a little bobbing and weaving.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Your course,” I said.

“That was on counter-terrorism and preventative policing,” he said. “Nothing to do with kung-fu.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “So there’s a big terrorist threat in Fairchester, is there? They’re planning on taking out the sports centre?”

“Terrorist groups set up training cells in rural areas,” he said, “even though the primary targets are generally in the major cities.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “So is there much terrorist training going on around here?”

“Do you really think I’m going to tell you something like that?” he asked.

“You think I might be a terrorist?” I asked.

“Of course not, you’re far too public. You draw attention which is the last thing any terrorist group wants while training. No, you talk to a lot of people. If I give you any information you could cause a public panic.”

“Wow!” I said. “So there is some terrorist training going on round here.”

He laughed. “This is Fairchester,” he said. “So far off the beaten track not even terrorists come here. It was an interesting course though. By the way, I spoke to the Chief Inspector about security for your concert before I went on it.”

“I thought you must have,” I said. “Our security plan has been approved but since we didn’t have a plan I figured it must be something you and the Man cooked up.”

“I didn't know that,” he said. “I haven't seen her since I got back.”

“Ooops,” I said. “I just assumed the Chief Inspector was a guy. Sorry. So what's the plan? And, more importantly, how much is it going to cost?”

“Assuming nothing has changed,” he said, “the Chief Inspector has approved me covering the event as an off-duty police officer.”

“Oh cool,” I said. “Just you? How expensive are you, anyway?”

Chapter Twenty Nine

“Something strange is going on.” said Anne at our meeting the next day.

The concert was supposedly going to be happening in barely two and a half weeks and, even though we were looking unlikely to get council approval as not a single idea had surfaced about the insurance, we were all, I think, beginning to feel it was a lost cause. Well, I did anyway and Cyril was his usual dour, phlegmatic self. I think he only expected it to happen for Lucy's sake. Anne, of course, didn't really care whether it happened or not so long as she looked good in the way it was organised. It didn't really matter if the event came off or not, assuming it wasn't her fault.

“What do you mean?” asked Cyril.

“I've had some messages on Facebook,” she said, “and a tweet from people confirming they'll be at the concert.”

“Why's that strange?” he asked. “Some people like to book ahead.”

“It's strange because they seem to think they're performing,” she said, swiping and tapping her phone. “Like this one, 'yo sugar I be there don't you worry yo sweet lil self' from someone called King Rat.”

“King Rat!” I exclaimed, surprised. “Jesus.”

“You know this person?” asked Anne, coldly. “You really need to keep me informed when you invite more participants. I am the stage manager and coordinator after all.”

“I didn't invite him,” I said. “He's not a jazz musician, he's a pannist and plays soca and reggae music.”

“A pianist?” asked Cyril. “What, is he going to bring a piano or something?”

“Pannist,” I said, “not pianist. He plays those oil drum drums. He's a, well, a bit strange.”

Anne raised a neatly sculpted eyebrow in mute query.

“Umm, well, he's in his fifties,” I said, “from Trinidad originally, I think, and he's like 30 stone with dreads all over the place even though he's going bald. He plays a lot in Hackney and Tottenham pubs and does the carnivals at Notting Hill and stuff. He's kind of into weird philosophies and things, like I've heard he sleeps under a pyramid with his two wives.”

“Must be a big pyramid,” said Cyril.

“But why is he messaging me?” asked Anne.

“Maybe he's coming to hear some jazz,” I said.

“Hmm,” said Anne and looked down at her phone. “And this one from someone called Anya. She, I'm guessing she's a she, says she'll be getting the Friday ferry from the Hook of Holland to Harwich and will drive to Fairchester overnight and wants to know if we'll pay for the ferry.”

They both looked expectantly at me.

“Hey,” I said, holding up my hands defensively, “I don't know anyone called Anya.”

“If she's coming over as a spectator she wouldn't be asking for travel expenses,” mused Cyril. “I wonder if she's expecting to be part of the show? Does she say anything about that?”

“No,” said Anne, “but let me just ... half a sec ... oh.”

“What?” Cyril and I said simultaneously.

“What's a glock ... a glockenspiel?”

“It's a bunch of metal bars you hit with hammers,” I said.

“So it's an industrial thing?” she asked, “not a musical instrument?”

"No, it's an instrument," I said, "kind of like a piano made of drums, why?"

"Her profile says she plays the glockenspiel," said Anne. "She's into bikes as well."

"Pushbikes or motorbikes?" asked Cyril.

"Does it matter?" asked Anne.

"Well, she said she'd drive down from Harwich," said Cyril. "That's a long way on a pushbike."

"Especially with a glockenspiel," I said, "they're pretty big."

"Probably a motorbike, then" said Cyril.

"Maybe," I said, "but the Dutch are heavily into push bikes, aren't they? Isn't it pretty flat over there?"

"That's because they've reclaimed so much land from the sea," said Cyril. "In fact some of their reclamation has been very impressive, engineering-wise, and ..."

"Stop!" said Anne, holding up a hand. We both looked at her. "Who cares if she's on a pushbike or a motorbike or how she's going to cart her glockenspiel around? The real question is why is she messaging me and why is she coming over?"

"Oh yeah," I said.

"Are those it?" asked Cyril, "or are there more?"

"Someone called Billy asked if we want him acoustic, electric or both," said Anne, "and someone called Ricky Manning tweeted to say that if we were doing blues he'd be there but not if it's only jazz."

"I know Ricky," I said. "He's a guitarist but he only plays the blues. That's why I didn't invite him."

“So what the hell is going on?” asked Anne. “And should I be replying to any of these and, if so, what should I say?”

“You know what it sounds like to me,” I said thoughtfully. “It sounds like the word is spreading and some people are getting the idea it’s an open mic session for buskers. The two I know are both buskers and I bet that Dutch chick is as well. And that other guy.”

“A what session?” asked Anne.

“Open mic, umm, it’s a gig where anyone can turn up and play. The microphone is open to anyone,” I said. “Kind of like karaoke.”

“Are you serious?” she asked. “Shit, I’d better tell them not to come.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s just a thought.”

“You know,” said Cyril, “You did ask the people we invited to get the word out on social media. Maybe that’s what they’ve been doing, telling other buskers there’s a free gig going on.”

“So are you saying this is my fault?” said Anne, flaring up. “Like neither of you wanted to work with the performers or do any promotion. You guys just sit there and bitch about money all the time.”

“Hey, calm down,” I said. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“I suppose we could post on the internet that only people who have been invited should come,” said Cyril.

“By the sound of it they all think they’ve been invited,” grumbled Anne. “Like that King Rat asshole. Don’t you worry sugar, I’ll be there, like he’s god’s gift or something. I bet he brings all his frigging wives as well.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll find some time for you, sweetie,” I said with a malicious grin, then “woah, woah,” and I held my hands up again as she started to flare up indignantly.

She contented herself with glaring at me and Alfie growled protectively, which was nice of him. Not that his 1 foot 1 inch frame would stand much chance in a fight against Anne's 5 foot 5 inches.

"So what do we do?" asked Cyril, leaning back and watching us.

"Cancel the show," said Anne. "It's probably not going to run anyway but we can't have a general free for all if it does."

"I don't know," he said. "Cancelling seems so defeatist, somehow. What do you think Ben?"

"Bring it on," I said, suddenly feeling happy. Bureaucracy was on the run!

"You cannot be serious," said Anne, looking as though she was going to burst or ignite or something.

"Sure," I said. "Since it's probably going to be cancelled, why don't we just have a big beach party anyway? A bunch of buskers and whoever else wants to turn up and just have a big music festival."

"I can see possibilities in that," said Cyril. "Lucy's ..."

"But that's just crazy" said Anne, angrily. "The police and the council and everyone will just freak out!"

"OK," I said, "so maybe we'd better be prepared to skip town straight after."

"That's all right for you two," she said, her jaws clenching, "but some of us live here and my name's on the frigging forms!"

"You'd better get a job in London, then," I said, "pretty bloody quick."

"How the frig can I get a job in Event Management when the only frigging event I'm involved in is frigging unmanageable!" she shouted and threw her leather note book at me.

Fortunately I've been a busker for many years and my reactions to

incoming missiles have been finely honed so I was able to dodge it and it crashed into the half dead plant behind me. Alfie disappeared under the table.

“Calm down,” said Cyril.

“Oh sod you too,” said Anne and twisted in her chair so she was glowering at an inoffensive couple having a quiet drink on the other side of the garden. They quickly stopped watching us and pretended not to have noticed a thing.

“As I was saying,” said Cyril, “Lucy’s prediction is for something that will restore Fairchester to its former glory and we’ve all wondered how a fairly conventional little concert will do that, haven’t we.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m still not convinced.”

Anne was pointedly ignoring us although, to her credit, she hadn’t stormed off. Maybe her boyfriend hadn’t arrived in the Saloon Bar yet.

“We’ve been hoping that this will stimulate others to organise events,” continued Cyril, “but it does occur to me that something unconventional, something that perhaps even gets into the national news, international even, something dramatic, noteworthy, well, it just might be very effective in the long term. It might get people talking about Fairchester, put it back on the map.”

“So what are you saying?” I asked.

“Well, it occurs to me that we didn’t actually specify on the plan exactly how many performers there would be so, umm, why don’t we just open it up to anyone who wants to take part?”

“Keeping it jazz or any music genre?” I asked, getting interested. This was sounding like it could be fun.

“Well, jazz is a pretty broad umbrella,” he said.

“But how do we do it all on the pier?” I asked. “The portico isn’t that big.”

“Hmm,” he said, “let me think about that.”

“Keep the Jazz Under The Portico as the main event,” said Anne, not looking at us. “Restrict it to only performers Ben knows are good jazz musicians and let the rest spread out along the beach and the esplanade. They can do whatever they want then.”

“I love it,” I said enthusiastically.

“But what if the police get upset?” asked Cyril.

“Think of the headlines,” said Anne, turning back to face us. “Police Arrest 500 Buskers On Sea Front’, that’ll probably go round the world on social media, especially if they’re not having a mass punch-up or doing anything nasty. It’ll probably go viral, especially if they have to bring in extra police from outside.”

“I have to say I’m not comfortable with that,” said Cyril.

“Yeah,” I said. “Samson’s a mate, I wouldn’t want him getting blasted on the net or anything.”

“Samson’s that policeman, isn’t he?” asked Anne.

“Ahh, we haven’t told you yet,” said Cyril. “That was the first item on the agenda except you pre-empted us. We’ve been approved for the security aspect of the event plan.”

“I didn’t think we had a security plan,” said Anne.

“We didn’t but the Chief Inspector dreamt this up with Samson,” I said. “Basically Samson will police the gig as an off-duty cop and he’s got a gang of volunteers to help him and all for free.”

“Hey, that’s cool,” said Anne, her body language showing she had rejoined our team, “all cops?”

I retrieved her note book from the shrubbery behind me and passed it to her. She smiled a thank you.

"No," said Cyril. "Samson's the only policeman and he'll be on the pier coordinating nine of his friends from his rugby club who'll be helping out with parking and people flow. She's going to let them use police walkie-talkies to communicate with Samson."

"Right," she said. "That's great."

"It's just that Samson and the others are volunteering and don't expect to be paid and the Chief Inspector's doing this in good faith so I don't want to treat them badly," said Cyril.

"Me neither," I said. "Hey, you haven't heard the best bit yet. The two cops who patrol the pier and the esplanade at weekends aren't busker friendly so the Chief Inspector is sending them on a course that weekend and putting on a couple of cops who are more tolerant. Something to do with Working With The Community, so we'll have three decent cops and nine rugby players. Pretty cool huh."

"Yes, that is good news," said Anne. "So what are we going to do about these extra performers, if that's what they are?"

"Oh yes," said Cyril, and relapsed into silence.

We sat there for a while, each thinking our own thoughts. Well, Cyril and Anne probably were, my mind was on a tune I'd heard on Cyril's car radio. The couple who Anne had frightened had got over it and were tucking into their scampi and chips that had just been brought over by one of the barmaids who had, incidentally, half smiled at me on her way back to the bar.

"You know," I said suddenly, as it had only just occurred to me, "buskers are pretty informal."

"So?" asked Anne.

"So if three or four have contacted you then there's probably a whole bunch who are just going to turn up without saying anything," I said. "We haven't got a hope in hell of stopping them all."

"Oh great," said Anne, sarcastically. "I didn't want to work in Event

Management anyway. I wonder if they need any more bar staff here.”

I slowly rolled a cigarette.

“Hey, Cyril,” I said, pausing before lighting it, “if the council rejects the plan, the security arrangements will be cancelled, won't they?”

“I would imagine so,” he said, “since they won't be needed any more.”

“So,” I said, thinking it through on my feet, as it were, “if the gig's rejected and there's no security there'll be no comebacks on Samson and his mates if there's a big party on the beach.”

“Well, it would hardly be their responsibility,” he said. “I would guess it'll just be a normal policing task. So what you're saying is that if the concert is cancelled, we tell people it's been cancelled when they turn up, and leave it up to them what they do next?”

“Yes,” I said. “Just as long as we make it clear that we can't pay anyone's travelling expenses, especially if we didn't invite them in the first place.”

“Well, I can post something about that on the internet,” said Anne, “just to make it crystal clear. If they've heard we are paying travel but it's plastered all over the net that we aren't then, it's not our fault. And when we hear from the council that they've rejected it I'll get that out on the net immediately as well.”

“OK,” said Cyril. “I'm not too happy about it but since people we've never heard of are probably going to be turning up anyway, there's not a lot we can do about it. Looks like we're going to have a beach party.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Only there's one tiny little possible problem.”

“What's that?” asked Cyril.

“What if the council approves the plan?” I said. “What if they give it the go ahead?”

“Well, it's always a possibility,” he said.

I got up and went over to the couple eating their scampi and chips. Alfie had gone over to help them and they didn't seem to appreciate that he hadn't been fed for at least a year so I had to retrieve him before they complained to the publican.

“Sorry about that,” I said, picking him up.

The man smiled uneasily at being spoken to by a stranger and the woman ignored me. I carried Alfie back to our table and put him down and he immediately ran back to the couple again.

“Sorry, again,” I said apologetically as I picked him up again and carried him back.

“I'm getting some scampi,” I said, “either of you want anything?”

“Oh, another beer,” said Cyril. “Thanks.”

“Bacardi and Coke, since you're offering,” said Anne.

“Keep an eye on Alfie,” I said, dumping him in Cyril's lap.

He was still in Cyril's lap when I got back, intently watching the couple with their scampi.

“He was half starved when I found him,” I told Anne. “I guess he hasn't got over it yet.”

“Oh,” she said. “I'm more of a cat person.”

“Seems to me,” said Cyril as I took Alfie back off him, “that there are really only two options if the council gives the go ahead. Either we ignore the approved plan and go ahead with Anne's idea or we tell the council that we want to change the plan and see what they say.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “I reckon we should tell them. That way we're being up front and if they turn it down we still go ahead with the beach party.”

“What if they approve the changes?” asked Anne.

“How likely is that?” asked Cyril. “I doubt they’ll even have time to consider it.”

“But what if they do?” she persisted.

“I guess we’d better have a plan ready to implement,” said Cyril. “We’ll need to give it to them anyway.”

“Exactly,” said Anne, “so I can still put it down on my résumé, can’t I?”

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“It depends on how many performers turn up,” she said, “but how about we start at, say, midday and just keep going until all the jazz people have had a go and we give them each a time limit. I don’t know, say 30 minutes, like Cyril was saying. So if we end up with fifteen performers that’ll be, umm, ...”

“Seven and a half hours,” said Cyril, “call it eight.”

“Cool, so it finishes in the early evening, and all the ones who aren’t jazz or Ben doesn’t know can spread out along the beach and go for however long the council says they can. That way the audience can stay on the pier or go off and check out other performers. There’s even time for them to go away and maybe eat or something and come back. It should be good for the shop keepers as well, and with a bit of luck there’ll be something for everyone rather than just the jazz fanatics.”

“Sounds pretty good,” I said.

“Wouldn’t that put a lot of strain on Samson and his team?” asked Cyril.

“If the council approves it I’m sure he could get some more volunteers,” said Anne. “The important thing is to have a contingency plan.”

“Oh, they're for me,” I said to the barmaid who'd brought over my plate of scampi. “Thanks.”

It was a different barmaid and this one didn't smile at me.

“Want some?” I said, offering them to Cyril and Anne. The both took a couple of pieces and Alfie stopped staring at the couple and started salivating on my jeans so I put him on the floor and started feeding him pieces, one at a time.

“So we're agreed, then?” asked Cyril.

“Yes,” said Anne and I nodded.

“So what do I say to these people who've contacted me?” asked Anne.

“Tell them they're welcome,” I said.

“No, better not do that,” said Cyril. “That'll make it look as though we're inviting them. I don't think you should reply.”

“Not even about travel?” she asked.

“No,” said Cyril. “Just don't reply at all, to anyone.”

“OK,” she said. “But I'm still managing the performers on the day, aren't I.”

Chapter Thirty

It had been a week or so of surprises but then everything went quiet again. Anne had nothing much to report at the next couple of meetings other than she'd had another apparent confirmation that some unknown was going to turn up and there seemed to be some positive general feedback on Facebook. The number of 'likes' had risen appreciably and her occasional tweets, infrequent now because little was happening, were being retweeted. It seemed that the number of views of the videos of me on YouTube had pretty much levelled off as well. Life on the pier, too, seemed to be going back to normal.

“OK, I'll be off,” said Anne, the following Tuesday. “Hopefully we'll get the council's decision before Friday's meeting.”

“I'll let you know as soon as we do,” said Cyril, “then we can decide what we do next. It's only another eleven or so days to go.”

“This waiting is getting to me,” she said, standing up. “Can't really do anything now until ..., ohh, I'm going home. See you.”

“Bye,” said me and Cyril more or less together.

We watched her go.

“Is the waiting getting to you as well?” he asked.

“A little,” I said, “but not much. I'm not overly fussed what happens one way or the other although if it happens it could be fun. Want another drink?”

“Actually, I wouldn't mind,” he said.

I went and got a couple more beers and asked for a dish of water for Alfie.

“Soda or still?” asked the barmaid.

“I don't think dogs like soda water,” I said.

“Ohh, the dog,” she said with an apologetic smile. “I thought you meant the older gentleman.”

“Why would he want a dish?” I asked.

“Work behind a bar, love, and you’ll soon stop being surprised what people want,” she said. “I’ll just get a bowl from the kitchen.

She came back carefully carrying a big shallow bowl of the kind they serve wedges and things in. It was filled to the brim with water. She managed to put it on the bar without spilling a drop. I looked contemplatively at it and the two drinks for a few moments.

“Can I have a tray?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said and handed one over. It had an old painting of the pier on it and the caption said ‘Fairchester Pier, 1888’. From memory it didn’t seem to have changed much. I carefully carried the tray back to our table, narrowly avoiding spilling the dish of water down the back of a woman who was walking backwards.

“There you go,” I said, putting Cyril’s drink in front of him then putting the dish on the floor for Alfie. He sniffed the water then ignored it. Cyril picked up the tray and studied the picture then put it back down.

“You don’t seem to be overly worried about the concert or saving the town,” he said, conversationally.

“Nothing lasts forever,” I said. “People, places, things come and go. That’s the nature of things.”

“So you don’t think Lucy’s right about you doing something that could save the town?” he asked.

“Hey, I’m happy to help,” I said, “and maybe we will have some influence.”

I had a slurp of beer and sat back and looked at it.

“OK,” I said. “Suppose this gig works and tourists start coming back. Then what?”

“They’ll bring money into the town and it’ll start to rebuild itself,” he said. “Create more jobs so the locals won’t have to leave to find work, more taxes for the council so better amenities are provided, things like that.”

“You’re right,” I said, “so each year more tourists come here but sooner or later it’ll have to stop. You can’t keep increasing the number of tourists every year, so the growth will have to come to an end sometime.”

“Well, yes,” he said. “So?”

“Oh nothing,” I said. “I was just wondering out loud. Of course, what’s good for Fairchester may not be good for other places. Tourists don’t just magically appear. If they’re coming to Fairchester then they’re not going somewhere else.”

“Well, obviously,” he said, frowning. “So?”

“So saving Fairchester will come at the expense of other places,” I said. “The more Fairchester benefits the more other places will lose out. Maybe in a few years time there’ll be another Lucy somewhere else hoping for someone to come along and save that town. And maybe someone will and Fairchester will start to fade again. Or maybe tourism will go out of fashion and people will just plug into the internet for their holidays and no one will come to Fairchester.”

“You are in a mood tonight,” he said.

“No, I’m not,” I retorted, taking the lid of my tobacco tin. “I’m just explaining why I’m not particularly worried about saving Fairchester. I just wonder what I’m saving it for and what will have to die to save it. This place doesn’t exist in isolation and who’s to say whether it’s worth saving.”

“I suppose you don’t really think much of Lucy,” he said.

“She’s a nice lady,” I said, surprised. “And I’m sure she believes her prophecies and doesn’t worry too much about how desirable they are. After all, telling someone they’re going to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger doesn’t actually mean that stranger is going to be a particularly nice person. After all, he could be the person that kills you!”

“Actually, you’re right,” he said, thoughtfully. “Just because something is forecast it doesn’t mean it’s the best option or even necessarily a good one.”

“I wasn’t being serious,” I said. “I was just talking.”

Cyril put his beer down and gazed thoughtfully at me.

“What?” I said, lighting my cigarette.

“Lucy said something today,” he said, slowly, “which I thought was a good idea at the time but I’m beginning to wonder now.”

“Don’t tell me she thinks the gig is a waste of time now,” I said. “After all the work we’ve put in, well, you and Anne have put in at least.”

“Hmm? Oh no, she thinks it’s a good idea and she’s convinced it’s going to work,” he said. “No, she suggested I move into her spare room.”

“Wow! Cool,” I said. “That’s really great!” and I leaned forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

“She said it would help me out temporarily and we’ll see how it goes,” he said. “What do you think that means? She is, after all, clairvoyant, surely she should have some idea of how it’ll go.”

“Are you asking me if you should move in with her?” I asked.

“Well, yes,” he said. “I suppose I am.”

“You’d be a bloody idiot not to,” I said. “I see how you two are when you’re together and I think you make a great couple.”

“So you think that's what this is all about?” he asked. “It's not that she's just being charitable?”

“Oh frigging hell, Cyril!” I said. “Women don't ask you to live with them because it's 'charitable'. If that's all it was she'd give you some money or something or try to find you a job. She obviously thinks you two have a future together.”

“So why doesn't she just ask me to move in with her?” he said, looking confused. “Why offer me a room and say 'we'll see how it goes'? Especially as she knows I have a place to live.”

I sighed.

“You don't have a place to live, Cyril,” I said, “and Lucy knows that even if you don't. As soon as this gig is over, I'm off. I was only going to be in Fairchester a few days anyway. The only reason I didn't move on weeks ago is because you were sick but you aren't any more and don't kid yourself that you can get by living in squats. You'll just get depressed again living in the butcher's all by yourself. Lucy isn't a fool and she knows I'll be going and you'll be homeless again and that's why she's offering you a room in a proper house.”

“So it is charity, then” he said.

“You and bloody charity,” I said. “What happened in your childhood that made you hate people helping you so much? You should be bloody grateful a nice woman like Lucy is willing to help you. Anyway, like I said, Lucy's no fool. She knows that if she says you should move in as part of a couple you'll freak out and panic and probably try to swim back to Yemen. Take her offer of a room and get used to the idea of living with a woman.”

“Oh god,” he said, looking panic stricken. “What am I going to do?”

“Knowing you,” I said callously, “probably try to kill yourself again but that isn't the best idea. She likes you, you daft pillock, and you like her so move in and get yourself a frigging life. And, if you've got any sense in that water valve you call a brain you'll say a prayer every morning to Allah or whatever god you believe in that someone in this world

actually cares about you.”

“You care about me,” he said, trying to change the subject.

“Me? I couldn't give a fuck about you,” I said.

“You saved my life,” he said, quietly.

“Only because I wanted that length of vacuum cleaner tube,” I said, “so I didn't have to get up in the middle of the night if I needed a piss.”

He burst out laughing.

“Hey,” he said. “I never did thank you, did I.”

“No,” I said, “so next time I'm not going to bother. I'm dumping you on Lucy and she can worry about you, not that I ever did. When are you moving in?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I, err, I don't know.”

“Does this pub have a phone?” I asked, looking round.

“I think there's one behind the bar,” he said. “Who are you calling?”

“I'm not,” I said. “You are. You're going to ring Lucy and tell her you would love to move in and can you move in tomorrow.”

“I haven't got any money,” he said.

“Yes you have,” I said, dumping a pile of coins in front of him.

“I mean for rent,” he said.

“Did Lucy say anything about rent?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“Come on,” I said, standing up and sliding the coins off the table into

my hand. "One of us is ringing her and it would be better if it was you. Get up."

He stared at me like a rabbit pinned by a car's headlights.

"Oh god," he said.

"Alfie, stay," I said and grabbed Cyril's lapel and pulled. Alfie followed us to the bar's phone. He's a bit of a romantic and hates missing out on the action.

"So what did she say?" I asked when he hung up.

"She asked if I'd been talking to you about it," he said. "Why would she ask that?"

"Because she knows you better than you know yourself," I said.

"I need a drink," he said. "Something stronger than beer."

"No you don't," I said. "You've got to drive. Was she OK with tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said, sitting down. "Umm, she already put clean linen on the bed, she said."

"How nice," I said. "Not that you'll be in that bed for long, I'm guessing. OK, I'll see you back, well, it's not home for you any more, is it. I'll see you back at the butcher's."

I was relieved to find he was there when Alfie and I arrived back on the trike. I had been half afraid he'd have driven off into the great unknown although, for Cyril, that was what he was going to be doing in the morning.

I helped him pack his stuff in his car, which didn't take long as he didn't have much stuff, and waved goodbye. He didn't take the garden furniture as we figured Lucy probably already had garden furniture although if she didn't he'd come back and get it.

“So, Alfie boy,” I said, after he'd gone. “We're back on our own again.”

It was quiet and empty without Cyril but, as I knew from long experience, I'd get over it, probably too quickly. I've always been comfortable being alone. Alfie didn't seem to mind. He seemed to be happy so long as he knew where I was.

I spent a little while tidying up and putting my things back on the shelves the way I liked them then we had a bite of lunch and headed off to work. Lucy, predictably, hadn't turned up to open her establishment.

It felt a little strange, to be honest. No Cyril, no Lucy, no Baz, no Zeki. Even Jo seemed to be taking the day off and her part-time casual girl was running the shop. There weren't even that many people on the pier. Still, Wednesdays were hump days for tourists as well as workers.

I'd been there maybe an hour when I saw a tall, thin suited man with an Einstein-style hairdo casually walking up the pier, acknowledging the occasional person and smiling a lot. Even though just about every type imaginable could be found on the pier sooner or later, he looked out of place.

He joined the handful of people standing round and watched for a while, smiling almost as much as Samson, then he moved over and studied the poster on the back of my trike. Then he moved away and leaned against the railing, half watching me. He seemed to be enjoying the weather or the atmosphere or my playing but even so, I had a sense he was waiting for something. His casualness was affected although I couldn't tell you exactly how I knew that. Still, I got no sense of danger either so I brought things to a close and announced it was break time.

My small audience dispersed and Einstein came over.

“Hello, Mr Webster,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Hello,” I said. I didn't take it as I had my hands full of my sax as I was dismantling it and putting it in my case. He withdrew his hand with no sign of embarrassment.

"I'm Rod Fyffe," he said, "Mayor of Fairchester-on-Sea. Please call me Rod."

"Nice to meet you," I said. "Shouldn't you be wearing a chain or something?"

He laughed. "No, no, that's only for ceremonial occasions," he said. "I was wondering if we could have a chat?"

"Sure," I said, clicking the locks on the case and standing up. "I'm all yours."

"Perhaps over a coffee?" he asked. "There's quite a nice cafe on the esplanade, next to the pier."

"Yes, their coffee's pretty good," I said. "I've been there a couple of times. I'll just dump my sax."

He nodded and smiled and I took the sax over to Jo's to ask her girl to look after it for me. I called Alfie and joined Rod.

"You're not a resident of Fairchester, are you?" he asked as we walked down the pier.

"No," I said. "I'm originally from Manchester, although I live in London these days when I'm not travelling round busking."

"You play well," he said. "Where did you learn?"

"At school to begin with," I said, "then I was part of a band with a few mates from school but mostly I just picked it up as I went along."

"And why the saxophone?" he asked.

"Ohhh, too much TV as a kiddie," I said. "I used to love the Muppets and Zoot was just so cool, I wanted to be Zoot."

"Zoot was the sax player?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"I always liked Animal on drums," said Rod. "I always empathised with his character."

"And yet you became mayor," I said.

"Ahh, I empathised," he said, "but I wasn't like that at all. He was more the personality I would have liked to have been. What do you think of Fairchester?"

"It's a nice little town," I said. "Very English but with none of that bustling sprawl that a lot of the seaside towns have."

"Yes, indeed," he said. "I know exactly what you mean. I was born here myself, never wanted to leave."

"What do you do when you're not mayoring?" I asked, "or is local politics a full time thing?"

"No, I taught science at Hastings Grammar School," he said. "Ahh, here we are. What would you like?"

"A cappuccino would be nice," I said.

"Get us a table," he said. "I'll be right back."

He joined me a few moments later and sighed happily as he sat down.

"I've ordered a few muffins as well," he said. "They make their own here, you know, although the bakery itself is on the edge of town."

"Great," I said, wondering when he'd get to the point.

A girl brought over our coffees and a plate of muffins with two smaller plates and two forks.

"Thank you, Carrie," said Rod as she offloaded her tray onto the table.

"That one's Apple and Cinnamon," he said, pointing with his little finger, "that's Blueberry, that's White Chocolate and Raspberry and

that one is Chocolate Chip. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I said, and did. The muffin was warm and just exactly moist like a good muffin should be.

He let me eat a couple of mouthfuls while watching me indulgently.

“I wanted to have a chat with you about your Event Management Plan,” he said after a while.

“Oh yes,” I said, trying, not completely successfully, not to spit any crumbs.

“It's just that Council will be meeting on Friday to make a final decision and I notice that your plan is not, as yet, complete.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We've run into a couple of problems.”

“What sort of problems?” he asked.

“Money,” I said bluntly. “We can't afford to pay for public liability insurance or hire first aid people.”

“That's unfortunate,” he said. “We're unlikely to give approval without at least the insurance. We're not a wealthy municipality, we cannot afford to assume any liability ourselves.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “Anyway, it's turned out to be rather awkward. In fact, even if we did have the money we'd have to change the plan anyway.”

“And why is that?” he asked. “Please, have another.”

I never need much prompting where free food is concerned so I took another muffin.

“We invited eight acts to join me,” I said, “but we made a mistake when we put it out on social media and a bunch of other people are coming to perform as well and we have no way of stopping them.”

“Yes, I can see that would be a bit awkward,” he said. “But you have another plan for dealing with that?”

“Well, we thought, if the council approved the original plan,” I said, “that we’d change it a little so all the jazz players would perform on the pier as part of the Jazz Under The Portico event and everyone else could do their thing up and down the beach and esplanade. Make it more of a free, open air music festival.”

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. “But you and the jazz would still be the main event?”

“Yes,” I said, scraping the paper wrappers of the two muffins with my fork and licking it. Rod gently pushed the plate with the other two towards me. I didn’t want to be rude so I took another one.

“But surely, if you have more performers than planned, the event will last longer?” he asked.

“Yup,” I said. “The changed plan calls for a midday start and we were thinking of just letting it run until all the jazz people had had their turn.”

“And you don’t know for sure how many performers will turn up?” he asked. “So it could conceivably continue into the night or even the following day?”

“Haven’t got a clue,” I said, “but, yeah, if enough turn up it could run into Sunday. Anyway, it’s all pretty academic since you guys are going to turn it down.”

“Quite,” he said. “Do you want that last muffin?”

Actually I wouldn’t have minded but since he was paying I figured he ought to be able to have one, at least.

“The thing is,” he said, peeling the muffin, “we’d really rather like it to go ahead.”

Chapter Thirty One

I paused chomping on my muffin to look at him in surprise.

"I'm ... intrigued," I said, "why on earth would the council give a damn? I didn't think you guys cared that much about music."

I could feel a sliver of white chocolate on the side of my lip so I licked it off and concentrated on using my tongue to get a raspberry seed from between my teeth. Ordinarily I'd use the cardboard cover from my ciggie papers but it seemed a little crass under the circumstances.

"Would you like another coffee?" asked Rod. Clearly he was in no hurry to get to the nub of things. Typical politician.

"Thanks," I said.

He went off and ordered while I rolled a ciggie, wondering if he'd mind if I went outside to smoke it. He saw me as he made his way back.

"Ahh, let's go outside, shall we?" he said and headed for the door, making pointing gestures at Carrie to show we were going out.

We settled ourselves at one of the outdoor tables and I gratefully lit my ciggie.

"I don't suppose you know Jorgen Larssen, by any chance?" asked Rod.

"No, I don't," I said.

"Very nice chap," said Rod. "Good friend of mine. He's the manager of the Imperial Hotel on the esplanade. You might have stayed there?"

"No, bit out of my league," I said, "although I've been past it, of course."

It was difficult to miss since it was the largest hotel in Fairchester and looked to be the most expensive.

“Well worth a visit,” said Rod, “very comfortable. Ahh, thank you Carrie.”

Obligingly Carrie had brought our coffees out although there were no more muffins.

“Jorgen phoned me last week, you know,” said Rod, slowly stirring his espresso even though he hadn't put any sugar in it. “He'd had an unexpected booking from an American group called the Ben Webster Society, from Kansas City. I imagine that's in the state of Kansas. It's rather quaint how the Americans like to name cities after states and vice versa.”

“Actually it's in Missouri,” I said. “Or part of it is. Kansas City is on the border between Kansas and Missouri and Ben Webster was born on the Missouri side.”

“Was he really?” said Rod, trying to look interested. “Still, what caught my attention was that only the day before I had been looking at your event plan and the coincidence of the name was striking.”

“I'm surprised the mayor gets involved with things like event plans,” I said, for the simple reason that I was surprised by that.

He laughed gently. “Oh, we're not a large borough,” he said. “There are only seventeen of us within the central council, although there are more on waste disposal and roads of course. We all pitch in. 'Mayor' is really just an honorary title. This year it happens to be my turn and so I get to chair Council meetings and represent Council at various functions. My primary role is Strategy and Growth, such as it is.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. “I always thought mayors were peers or something like that.”

He thought that was very funny.

“That's because you're from Manchester and London,” he said, “both of which have a Lord Mayor although neither is a Lord, it's just because they're big cities. We are, however, getting away from the point. Jorgen phoned me because this American society had booked

53 rooms for the last weekend in June and he wondered if I might know anything about it.”

“Are you serious?” I said, surprised yet again. “53 is a lot of rooms. It's a prime number too.”

“Indeed,” said Rod. “It's also the atomic number of iodine but that's beside the point. Jorgen tells me that he's never had a single booking for more than four rooms before, and that was for a wedding. He also told me that all one hundred and nineteen of the hotel's rooms have been taken, most for just the weekend but a few for a little longer.”

“OK,” I said, “that's pretty impressive but why are you telling me?”

“Ahh, straight to the heart of the issue,” said Rod. “Naturally I was intrigued when I heard that the Ben Webster Society was coming to Fairchester en masse the very same weekend that an event is being planned by none other than Ben Webster.”

“Just a coincidence in the names,” I said. “I'm not that Ben Webster.”

“I realise that,” he said. “I Googled Ben Webster and he is black and you are not. More to the point, however, the American Ben Webster was a renowned jazz saxophonist and, intriguingly, you are also a jazz saxophonist and the event you are planning is a jazz event. It seemed to be a remarkable coincidence.”

“Well, yes,” I said, “it probably is just a coincidence since the people who belong to the Ben Webster Society probably know the guy is dead. After all, he died, like, fifty years ago.”

“So Wikipedia informed me,” said Rod. “Still, I got my clerk to do some phoning around the local hotels, motels and registered B&Bs and some other coincidences came to light. Would you like to know what they are?”

“Sure,” I said, wondering if I was somehow going to be in trouble. Whenever my headmaster at school talked to me about coincidences I usually ended up in detention.

Rod took a pair of spectacles from the breast pocket of his jacket and unfolded a sheet of paper from his inside pocket.

“In addition to the 53 from the Ben Webster Society,” he said, peering at the paper over the top of his glasses, “we also have 18 rooms at the Metropole booked by the Ben Webster Foundation of Copenhagen, 22 for the Dutch Jazz Club at the Grande, 16 for the New York Jazz Club at the Holiday Inn.”

He slapped his piece of paper and looked at me. “The list goes on,” he said. “The South London Jazz Club, The Hot Club of France, Jazz Italia, Boston Bebop And Boogie, something unintelligible but which looks like Gaelic.”

He sighed and put the piece of paper on the table. I sat there silently as I had no idea what to say. This was fast becoming surreal.

“Fairchester is dependent on tourism,” he said, picking up his cooling coffee cup. “We have quite a few hotels to cater for them and with tourism declining it's been a long time, a very long time, since any of our hotels have been fully booked. But, for the night of Saturday 27th June the Imperial Hotel is full. The Metropole is full. The Grande is full. The Quality Inn has one room available, the Holiday Inn is full, the Oriental is full, the Formula One has two rooms available. The Travelodge has one. The Fairchester Motel has three rooms available.”

“That's, umm, pretty impressive,” I said.

“My clerk checked as many of the registered B&Bs and guest houses as she could. Some, of course, no longer operate but have not been deregistered but most are booked for that weekend. She also used her initiative and contacted some of the hotels in Hastings and Eastbourne. They, too, are experiencing abnormally high bookings. Sadly we have no idea what the situation is with AirB&B and other web based properties or with the camp sites and, of course, we have no idea whatsoever just how many people are going to drive here on the day or take the train or whatever.”

“Right,” I said, feeling more than a little overwhelmed. Surely this was all a joke? All these people coming from around the world for my silly

little buskers' get-together?

He sat there, sipping his coffee and watching me for a reaction.

“Did Cyril send you?” I said suddenly. “This is a joke, isn't it. Cyril and Lucy have dreamt this up, haven't they. Or Anne. Yeah, this smells more like Anne's sense of humour. Cyril doesn't have one. So, what, you're with the local amateur dramatics or something?”

“This isn't a joke,” said Rod. “This is serious.”

“But you aren't the mayor, are you,” I said. “The mayor wouldn't come to see me, he'd send a skivvy.”

He stared at me thoughtfully then went inside the cafe and returned with a battered newspaper.

“This is the South Coast Chronicle from, umm, two weeks ago,” he said. “Let's see, ahh, yes, I remember that. Look.”

On page three was a quarter page photograph of Rod shaking hands with a very fat man in ill fitting grey overalls who was holding up something very small with his other hand and grinning broadly. The caption read “Mayor Rod Fyffe Congratulates Bill Benson For Winning Contract”.

“Bill won a contract with the British Army to supply mounting washers and split pins for the Challenger Main Battle Tank,” said Rod. “The contract is worth several thousand pounds a year.”

“Shit,” I said. “So this isn't a joke, then.”

“Ben,” he said soothingly in much the same way a used car salesman might say “would I lie to you?”, or so I imagined since I'd never met a used car salesman since the only car I'd ever had was a gift from my dad. “We have two thousand seven hundred and eighty four registered rooms in Fairchester and in the last fifteen years we've not had more than fourteen hundred occupied at any one time. On the 27th of June two thousand five hundred and sixteen of those rooms are booked. Plus AirB&B, hotels and guest houses in nearby towns, campsites and

heavens knows what else.”

“It's going to be chaotic,” I said. “What the hell is going on?”

“There's good chaos and bad chaos,” he said, putting down his empty coffee cup. “This is good chaos. Do you want to know what bad chaos is?”

“Umm, not really,” I said.

“Bad chaos,” he said, ignoring my answer, “is when all these people turn up and your show doesn't happen. Can you begin to imagine how the town's reputation will suffer if we stop your jazz show from running? Can you begin to imagine the outcry from all the hoteliers and shopkeepers if this is cancelled and everyone goes away angry?”

“Umm,” I said. “It won't be good?”

“That's the understatement of the year,” he said. “Fairchester will become a global laughing stock.”

“But what if it turns out to be a disaster?” I said, uncomfortably aware of the lack of thought that had gone into the gig because we didn't really expect more than a hundred or so to turn up, and then only if the weather was good.

“Ahh, yes,” said Rod. “Indeed. What if it turns out to be a disaster. You know, people on the whole are very forgiving. If it is a disaster they'll say things like 'well, Fairchester is a small place, they'll do better next time,' 'full marks for trying' and things like that. We can also put out some publicity blaming problems on things outside our control.”

I sat there in silence, watching the traffic go past on the esplanade.

“What if no one turns up?” I said.

Rod tapped his piece of paper. “They'll turn up,” he said.

“No, I mean the performers,” I said. “They're all buskers, not the most

reliable of people and they aren't even getting paid.”

“You know,” said Rod, sitting back in his chair. “I wondered about that myself when I reviewed your plan. You ought to meet my clerk, Zoe, one day. She’s a wonderful girl, not afraid to use her initiative, which is unusual in local government. Do you know what she did after she’d phoned the hotels?”

“I can't imagine,” I said.

“She went on the internet and found out what she could about your event,” said Rod. “Do you know what she discovered?”

“Do politicians always ask rhetorical questions?” I asked. “Just tell me, OK.”

“Actually, we do,” he said, smiling. “It’s very dangerous to ask a question you don’t already know the answer to. Potentially disastrous. Right, what Zoe discovered is that no one, anywhere, has any idea who will be performing. Although the event is being talked about all over the internet all anyone knows is that there will be an unspecified number of unknown buskers. Isn’t that remarkable?”

“That’s not right,” I said. “”My name’s on the posters and stuff.”

“Yes,” he said. “Your name. Zoe also searched on your name. Do you know what she discovered? I’m sorry, rhetorical question. Apart, of course, from a lot about the real Ben Webster she found quite a number of YouTube videos of you and the article about you in the South Coast Chronicle. And, once again, Zoe used her initiative and phoned the webmaster of the newspaper and persuaded him to check the internet logs. Interestingly the article about you has had nearly fifteen hundred times more views than any other article the paper has put online. Zoe thinks that many of these jazz clubs have put links to it in their own forums and newsletters since it was quite difficult to find.”

I was beginning to get a headache. 1500 times more? If the articles normally only got a hundred views, and that was unlikely, that meant the one about me had had 150,000 views. Probably a lot more.

Rod folded up his piece of paper and put it back in his pocket then took off his glasses.

“You see, Ben, the critical point is this. A lot of people are coming to see this event and no one knows who will be performing, other than you. Which means, unless my logic is very faulty, they’re coming to see you. I’m not fond of jazz and I have no idea who the original Ben Webster is but judging by the number of jazz clubs who are coming really quite long distances, you are the attraction. I don’t think it really matters if anyone turns up or not, so long as you are there and you play well.”

“Oh shit,” I said. “So what the hell do we do now?”

“You need to get your modified plan in to Council as soon as possible, bearing in mind the next Council meeting is on Friday,” said Rod, briskly. “Much as we want to approve it we still have to have the paperwork or there’ll be the devil to pay with the external auditors. Now, you mentioned liability insurance and first aid provisioning, are there any other unresolved issues?”

“Umm,” I said. “I’ve no idea. I’m still in shock.”

“Well, not to worry,” he said. “We’ll discuss all that at the Council meeting and make recommendations as to outstanding issues. Maureen Pethybridge in Tourism will be delegated to help you in any way possible. How many toilets have you got organised?”

“Toilets?” I said, confused. “Oh, umm, four.”

“Clearly not enough,” he said. “You’ll probably need fifty.”

“For 3000 people?” I said, remembering we needed one toilet for every sixty people. Surely we weren’t going to get as many as 3000 people turning up?

“Oh, at least,” he said. “Probably more but since a lot of people will be staying in nearby hotels and guest houses we can probably assume that those facilities will be used before they attend the event. Well, I must be off, no peace for the wicked. You will make sure the amended

plan is in before Friday lunchtime, won't you?"

"Oh, err, yeah, sure," I said. "No problem."

"So nice to meet you, Ben," he said standing up and extending his hand. This time I shook it.

He disappeared up the esplanade in the direction of the council offices and I continued to sit at the table outside the cafe.

"You done with these?" asked Carrie, appearing at my elbow and pointing to the empty coffee cups.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Sorry."

"Want anything else?" she asked, picking up the cups and wiping the table with a cloth.

"Umm, no," I said. "Umm, thanks."

She smiled and went back inside.

"Cyril," I said suddenly. "Alfie, we need to talk to Cyril."

My mind was filled with an urgent need to talk to Cyril. If nothing else his generally calm, phlegmatic approach to anything that didn't involve women would help calm me down. Except ...

"Oh shit!" I shouted, making a couple of elderly ladies at another table jump.

Cyril was now living with Lucy. I didn't know where Lucy lived. I didn't know Lucy's home phone number. Lucy wasn't at her beach hut today. How the friggling hell was I going to talk to Cyril?

"Anne," I said, suddenly. "Anne works at that art gallery just down the road."

I leapt up then sat back down again. Anne almost certainly wouldn't know Lucy's home phone number.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “her mum, though!”

Anne's mum had consulted Lucy several times. I leapt up then sat back down again. But would she have Lucy's home number? Probably not.

“But Anne knows the new plan,” I said to myself, “after all, she thought it up. I need to see Anne!”

I leapt up then sat back down again. Cyril had all the paperwork. Anne might well know the plan but she didn't have the paperwork to fill in.

“I need Cyril,” I said to one of the ladies at the other table who was anxiously watching me jump up and down and mutter and swear.

She started and turned to her companion and I heard them say something about 'gay marriage' and 'shouldn't be allowed' and 'probably drugs'.

“Maybe Lucy's come back,” I wondered. “She might have dropped in for the afternoon, or maybe Jo's got her phone number.”

I jumped up again and called out 'come on Alfie' and set off up the pier at a fast walk.

“Do you know Lucy's home phone number?” I asked Jo's casual girl.

“Lucy who?” she asked. “There's yer sax by the way.”

“Oh thanks,” I said and grabbed it. “Lucy, the fortune teller next door.”

“Sorry no,” she said. “Jo might. Want me to ring her?”

“Oh, please, yes,” I said, feeling relieved.

“Hello Jo, Stacy,” said Stacy. “That sax guy wants to know if you've got that woman next door's phone number, call me back, OK.”

She hung up. "Phone's off," she said. "Went to voicemail."

"Thanks," I said. I turned around and Alfie had disappeared.

"Hello Anton," I said, going to his hut the other side of Lucy's. "Do you know Lucy's home phone number?"

"Fraid not," he said. "Try the phone book."

"What's her surname?" I asked.

"Fullbright," he said, "or something like that."

"Have you got a phone book?" I asked.

"Sorry mate," he said and turned to a waiting customer.

I went back to Stacy and waited until she'd finished with her customer.

"Do you have a phone book?" I asked.

"No idea," she said. "I just work here, like."

"They have phone books online, don't they?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

"Could you look up Lucy Fullbright on your phone?" I asked. "It's important."

"Oh, all right," she said. "Gimme a mo."

I waited as patiently as I could while she served another customer. Alfie wasn't anywhere in sight but he'd probably turn up in a minute, Maybe he'd gone to see if Zeki had turned up.

"What was the name again?" asked Stacy, doing things on her phone.

"Fullbright," I said and spelled it out.

“No Fullbrights in Fairchester,” she reported.

“Try Fulbright,” I said.

“Nah, none of them neither.”

“Try Madame Xara,” I suggested.

“Oh yeah,” she said a few moments later and read out a number. I recognised it as the phone in Lucy's establishment.

“OK, thanks,” I said, dejectedly.

I wandered off to the side of the theatre to find Zeki. After all, he'd known Lucy a long time. He might know her home phone number. There was no sign of him. Or Alfie, come to that.

“Oh fffffff,” I muttered and went back to my trike. I put the sax in the basket and slumped on the seat and rolled a ciggie.

“What the hell do I do now?” I wondered. “Maybe Anne's mum does have Lucy's number. Even if she doesn't she might have some idea of where Lucy lives if it isn't in Fairchester which would help with getting her number online.”

I decided to go and see Anne. If nothing else she might have some more ideas. Maybe Lucy had a Facebook page.

“Oh, where is that damned dog?” I muttered and lit my ciggie. “He was here just a moment ago.”

As I sat on the trike it occurred to me that, actually, Alfie hadn't been there a moment ago. In fact, I'd been inside the cafe with Rod and they didn't allow dogs inside and he hadn't been outside either. I sat there, smoking, thinking back. When had I last actually seen Alfie?

“Oh, sweet shit,” I said, jerking upright from my slouch over the handlebars. I hadn't actually seen him since Rod had turned up and I'd left my sax with Stacy. I'd gone off down the pier and not looked to see if Alfie was following.

“That's gotta be a couple of hours ago,” I said, horrified.

“Have you seen my dog?” I said, running over to Stacy.

“What dog?” she asked.

“That little black and tan dog,” I said anxiously. “His name's Alfie.”

“Nah,” she said. “Ain't seen no dogs.”

I stared down the pier as hard as I could and shouted “Alfie!” a couple of times and whistled but he didn't come running. I ran all the way around the theatre and he wasn't pestering either of the fishermen.

“Oh shit,” I said, jumping on the trike. “Where the hell's he got to? Sod Cyril, I've gotta find Alfie!”

Chapter Thirty Two

It was strange at home. No Alfie. No warm snuffling body on my bed roll, no pleading for cheese or a share of dinner. No presence, just a couple of empty silent rooms. I had always said that Alfie was free to come and go as he wanted but somehow I'd never really expected him to go.

I'd searched for him on the pier, asking a few familiar faces if they'd seen him. No one had. Not even Samson, who contacted the police station to see if he'd been handed in. Of course he hadn't been. The tide was just beginning to turn when I discovered Alfie was gone and I was desperately afraid he'd maybe fallen off the pier, or been pushed, and landed in the sea and got washed away. It didn't bear thinking about. I'd pedalled up the esplanade as far as the council offices, scanning the street and the beach in case maybe Alfie had followed Rod from the cafe, although I had a strong feeling Alfie had never made it to the cafe. Then I'd pedalled all the way back to the pier and out along the other end of the esplanade. Then, with a heavy heart, I'd pedalled slowly back home, the trike a few pounds lighter than usual.

I didn't bother to go to see Anne. Lucy would almost certainly be back at her establishment the next day and Cyril might even be there too. Rod's news and the whole issue of revising the plan really didn't seem that important any more, especially as it looked as though the council would bend over backwards to give approval. A little cynical because of the heavy sadness that had come over me I figured if the council was that bothered they could do the paperwork themselves.

I made some dinner but could barely eat half of it and I sat in the growing darkness in my garden chair, just waiting. Maybe, somehow, Alfie was making his own way home and would come bounding into the courtyard, tongue lolling and tail wagging, but he didn't. Eventually I went to bed but sleep didn't come easily and was fitful when it did.

I was quite depressed when I got up in the morning and found Alfie hadn't come back in the night. OK, it was pretty unreasonable to expect him to but you do hear of dogs making their way home across

hundreds of miles. I made some coffee and lit a smoke and nearly cut off some cheese then remembered he wasn't there to eat it.

"I don't know where you are, Alfie mate, but I hope wherever it is there's some cheese there," I muttered. He loved his morning cheese, did Alfie.

I took my coffee out and sat on the doorstep. The trike was where I'd left it, its new paint still clean and sparkling in the morning sun. The flag fluttered slightly in the gentle breeze that made its way into the courtyard. I rolled another smoke and lit it then drank a little coffee.

"Oh sod it all," I said out loud. "I really couldn't give a shit any more. I'm outta here"

I finished my coffee and balanced my ciggie on the doorstep so it would go out. I went inside and picked up my rucksack. I packed all my stuff then pulled the drawstring tight and tied it in a little bow and clipped down the cover. I rolled up my bedroll and tied it securely under the rucksack then grabbed my sax and went out to the trike. I put the sax in the basket with the rucksack on top and went back to the doorstep. Picking up my ciggie I relit it then wandered back inside. It didn't feel right so I folded the garden chairs and the lounge and stacked them neatly against the wall then propped the poster for the gig against them.

"That's better," I said to myself. "All neat and tidy."

I'd promised Amelia that I'd fix the front door lock but I had no intention of going into town to get some plastic wood then come all the way back here so I went out into the alley and found a couple of heavyish stones and brought them in and put them against the front door.

I grabbed a few bits of rubbish then dug the back door key out of my pocket and put it back on top of the door frame where I'd found it. One final look around then I went out and pulled the door shut behind me. I heard the lock click and gave the handle a twist to check it was locked. I got on the trike and slowly did a U-turn in the courtyard and cycled up the ally and out into Pouncers Lane. I spotted

a rubbish bin outside a house some way down that hadn't been taken in yet from the last collection so I stopped and dumped my bits of rubbish and headed for the coast road. Little Fairchester was a reasonably nice place but I was glad to be leaving. I was weeks overdue.

“No bloody point in being an itinerant busker if you stay in one place all the time,” I said out loud as I rode along the leafy lane. “Damn it's good to be back on the road again.”

I paused at the junction with the coast road. Left went to Fairchester-on-Sea and right went to Leaminstor and Eastbourne.

“I'm done with it,” I said. “Just too full on, I've gotta go.”

I waited for a car to go past then pulled out and turned right, heading for Leaminstor and pastures new.

“I'm going to skip Leaminstor,” I said as I pedalled along in the warm sun. “I think I'll skip Eastbourne as well. Maybe I'll go to Beachy Head and just chill for a couple of days. Have a look at the lighthouse then go on to Seaford.”

It seemed like a plan so I started to whistle to drown out my thoughts. It didn't work. Half a mile down the road I stopped pedalling and the slight incline brought the trike to a stop.

“What if someone found Alfie and kept him overnight and has taken him back to the pier?” I said. “What if he did fall in and managed to survive and has been washed onto the beach by the incoming tide? I can't just abandon him so quickly. If he's gone then he's gone but I owe him at least one more look. Poor little sod.”

I put my feet on the ground so the trike didn't roll backwards while I made a ciggie then I did a U-turn and headed into Fairchester-on-Sea. It felt right for some reason. I'd walked away from everyone and everything without a qualm since I left my parents' house years ago but I couldn't just give up on Alfie so soon.

“Oh yeah,” I said to myself as I pedalled past Sainsbury's, “might as

well get a message through to Cyril and Anne as well. They ought to know about handing in a new plan and someone'll turn up, they don't need me. It's not like there won't be any musicians there at all."

When I got to the esplanade I turned right towards the pier. I needed to see if I could find Alfie first. Besides, Lucy or Cyril might be there but if not I could go down to see Anne before I headed off to Beachy Head. There weren't that many people on the pier so I figured there wouldn't be any point in doing any busking. Not that I was in the mood anyway.

Lucy was there. She must have had a client as her door was shut but her A-board was out the front. There was no sign of Cyril so he was probably down at the library looking for a job or whatever else he did there. I decided to wait for Lucy rather than to go roaming about the town looking for Cyril so I parked the trike and went over to the telescope to see if I could see any sign of Alfie on the beach. I scanned the beach thoroughly but there was no sign of him so I sat down and propped my back against the telescope post.

I'd been there maybe fifteen minutes when I heard a dog barking.

"Hey up," I said, "that sounds like Alfie!"

I jumped up and tried to identify which direction the barking was coming from but the sound of the waves on the beach made it difficult. I looked down the length of the pier then went to the railing and peered over but there was no sign of him.

"Probably not him anyway," I said to myself. "Lots of dogs on the pier," although there actually weren't any in sight. Still, Lucy's door was now open and she was standing in the doorway talking to her client.

Her client walked away and Lucy turned to look at the theatre then started to go back inside.

"Hey Lucy!" I called and headed over.

"Oh there you are," she called back. "I've got something of yours."

She went back inside then reappeared with Alfie on a length of rope. Alfie saw me and went berserk, barking like a mad thing and trying to break the rope. My heart flipped and I started to half run towards him. Lucy slipped the rope from Alfie's collar and he took off like a greyhound on acid and tried to leap into my arms but, as he's only got little legs he barely got as high as my hips. Still, I caught him and hugged him and he started licking my face and nearly wagged his tail off.

"Alfie, boy, Alfie, boy," I kept saying as I hugged him.

He started barking excitedly again and nearly ruptured one of my eardrums but I didn't care. I was just over the moon at having him back. I may even have had tears in my eyes but, hey, I'm a romantic softie at heart.

Lucy stood there watching, as did a few other people and someone was filming us on their phone so that would probably be on YouTube within an hour or two. There really is no privacy any more.

"Where did you find him?" I asked after our fairly lengthy reunion.

"Anton gave him to me when I got here," she said. "Apparently someone found him yesterday and took him home and phoned your mother, or that's what Anton said anyway."

"It's my mum's number on his collar," I said. "I don't have a phone."

"OK, I suppose," said Lucy, looking slightly puzzled. "Anyway, your mother is too far away or something, Anton didn't quite understand what the man was saying, but anyway, he kept him overnight and came out to the pier this morning on his way to work and dumped him on Anton who was just opening up and Anton dumped him on me since he can't have dogs inside his kitchen."

"My mum's in Manchester," I said, "so she probably didn't fancy driving down to get Alfie."

"Well, I'm glad the two of you are safely reunited," she said.

I was still hugging Alfie but Alfie was over it by now and wanted to check out the pier for any new smells so I put him down and he immediately ran off to one of the railing posts and peed on it.

“Thank you,” I said. “I searched everywhere for him last night. I thought I'd lost him.”

“I don't think the man fed him,” said Lucy, “and Anton wouldn't have done and I haven't so he's probably pretty hungry.”

“Oh right,” I said. “I'd better get him something to eat then.”

“Ohh, looks like I've another client, talk to you later,” said Lucy. “Oh by the way, Cyril will be along in a bit. He's just gone down to the Social Security office to change his address, just in case they ever do get around to paying him anything. Catch you later.”

I'd forgotten about Cyril, to be honest, so I went to Jo's for some unbattered fish for Alfie and went to sit on Cyril's bench to wait for him. The fish disappeared in seconds and Alfie sat on the pier beside me watching the world with that contented air that happy dogs have.

“Well good for you, mum,” I thought to myself. It must have been a surprise getting a phone call out of the blue from someone saying he'd found her dog when she didn't have a dog but she must have put two and two together and linked the found dog with the one in the photo in the article I'd sent her. That's probably why the man had brought Alfie back to the pier. Mum must have remembered that I'd been on the pier and figured if the dog was found in Fairchester that I was probably still there. I resolved to phone her and thank her.

“Hello, Ben,” said Cyril, appearing in front of me. Alfie wagged his tail in greeting but didn't leave my side. “Can I join you?”

“Sure,” I said. “Hey, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Fire away,” he said sitting down.

“If I got myself a mobile phone, where can I recharge it?” I asked, thinking maybe I ought to get a phone and a new tag with the number

on for Alfie's collar.

"You can usually get phone credit at supermarkets," he said.

"No, I mean electricity," I said.

"Oh right," he said. "The library's a good place. They let you use the power outlets for free and you can read something while you're waiting."

"Cool," I said. "Where can I get a cheap phone?"

"I saw one in Sainsbury's for a fiver," he said, "I was thinking of getting one myself now I'm getting benefits."

"Oh cool," I said. "When's that starting?"

"Next week apparently, I was just down at the benefits office."

"Yeah, Lucy said," I said. "Oh hey, I forgot. How's life with Lucy?"

He went red and started to touch his collar and scratch his nose.

"Umm, very nice," he said. "The, umm, bed's very comfortable and she's a much better cook than you are."

"Good for you," I said. "Well you've landed on your feet all right. You'll get a job soon, I can feel it."

"Yes," he said, "no complaints. Oh, Lucy wants to invite you over for dinner soon."

"Damn," I said, "I'm not sure when I've got a free evening. I'll have to ask my secretary."

"What?" he said. "You're looking puzzled."

"Yeah," I said. "There's something in the back of my mind about wanting to tell you something but I can't remember what it is."

"Don't try to force it," he said. "It'll come soon enough on its own. Where's your poster? I don't see it on the trike."

"I left it behind," I said, which was true as far as it went. Actually, now Alfie was safe and well, I'd cheered up a lot and I'd probably go back to the butchers tonight. In fact I'd probably stay for the gig now too and Cyril probably didn't need to know that I'd been going to disappear.

"That's it," I said, slapping my leg. "The gig. We've got to get the new plan in to the council as soon as possible!"

"What on earth for?" asked Cyril.

"We've got millions of people from all over the world coming to watch and the council doesn't want it cancelled," I said.

"What on earth are you talking about?" said Cyril.

"The mayor came to see me yesterday," I said. "He said that every hotel in town is booked out and there are people coming from America and all over, I think he even said China or something. Anyway, I told him we had no idea who was going to turn up to perform but that we thought there'd be a bunch of people we didn't know anything about."

"And you told him about Anne's idea?" asked Cyril. It occurred to me later that he was probably quite used to getting garbled updates from people who didn't speak English and who hadn't bothered to get the facts straight beforehand anyway.

"Yeah," I said, "and he seemed quite happy with it but it has to be audited or something. Anyway, I think he's going to sort out the insurance and we need more toilets."

"Well, if a million people are coming we're going to need about 20,000 toilets so there won't be any room in Fairchester for people so we won't need the toilets," said Cyril. "Do you think you got the bit about the million right?"

"Well, maybe not," I said. "But it's a lot anyway. And we have to get the new plan in asap, like today because they're meeting about it tomorrow."

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?" asked Cyril, quite reasonably under the circumstances.

"I didn't know where you were," I said. "I've no idea where Lucy lives or her phone number then I lost Alfie and, well, I kind of forgot about it."

"You forgot about it," he said looking at me with a funny look in his eye.

"Well, yeah," I said. "It's only a gig but Alfie could have been hurt! Like what was I supposed to do, anyway? That mayor guy should have gone to see you not me. You're the one running it and I didn't know where you were."

"OK," he said. He rummaged through his pockets then sighed. "Do you have anything to write on?"

"Umm, no," I said. "Would a fag paper do?"

"I suppose so," he said.

I handed him my ciggie tin and he took out a paper and rested it on top of the tin while he wrote on it. He always had at least one biro in his breast pocket and today he had his full set of black, blue, red and green.

"That's my new address," he said, "and that's Lucy's phone number," and he passed it over, with the tin. I slipped it inside for safety.

"Thanks," I said.

"Right," said Cyril, standing up, "I'd better go and see Maureen."

"Maureen?" I asked. "What for?"

“Another plan form,” he said. “I only had the one.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “I never thought of that. I figured you'd have plenty of copies.”

“Are you staying here for a while?” he asked.

“Probably,” I said, “why?”

“Could you tell Lucy I've gone back to her house?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said. “No problem.”

He turned to go then noticed the trike parked further up the pier, near the theatre.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Your rucksack's on the trike,” he said, “and what looks like your bedding.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “I, erm, I was thinking I might try to find somewhere closer now the gig's actually happening.”

“Good idea,” he said. “And yet you forgot about the gig. Your mind works in mysterious ways.”

“I'm an artist,” I said. “We're supposed to be strange. We can't all be engineers.”

“True,” he said. “And what a dull place the world would be if everyone was an engineer. You'll be at the Old Fish Head tomorrow for the meeting?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world,” I said.

“Good. I'll update you both then,” he said, turning to go. “See you tomorrow.”

He walked off but after a few paces stopped and came back.

"I'm glad you decided to stay," he said. "Wouldn't be the same without you. حتى الغد."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"Until tomorrow," he said and walked off.

I watched him go then patted Alfie on the head.

"He's not as dumb as he looks," I said thoughtfully. "I suppose I'd better go get a phone and get you a new ID tag. Come on boy."

I stood up then sat down again when I remembered I had to give Cyril's message to Lucy and she was still with her client. I rolled a ciggie to pass the time until she was free but it wasn't until I'd nearly finished smoking it that I remembered it was the paper Cyril had written her details on.

"Bugger," I said. "Still, I can always ask Lucy. She probably knows where she lives."

Chapter Thirty Three

Anne was sitting all alone in the garden of the Old Fish Head when I got there. It was mildly amusing since she didn't look the type of girl who would ever sit alone in a pub or bar for long but, at the same time, there was an air of 'I'm here on business, go away' about her. Not that most guys would have been sufficiently sensitive to pick up on that. Still, being before six on a Friday evening helped as most guys on the prowl wouldn't have started prowling yet. They'd still be home having dinner with their wives.

She was looking very business-like; studying her note book with a small frown and tapping her pen on the table thoughtfully. The epitome of the smart, effective business woman, not that I knew anything about smart or effective business women but I had seen advertisements on hoardings.

"Hey," I said, not being well versed in smart, effective business social interchange.

"Hey," she said, looking up.

Whoever said the art of conversation was fast disappearing had clearly got it wrong.

She looked at my nice new tee shirt and her nostrils flared, no doubt in appreciation. My old tee shirt was getting a bit tatty and I'd decided to treat myself to a new one, I'd seen this one on a rack of miscellaneous clothing for £1 an item that very morning and it had seemed good value, especially as the slogan, in large white letters against a black background, amused me.

IRONY
the opposite
of wrinkly

"Nice tee," she said, presumably ironically since her nose was wrinkly.

"Thank you," I said proudly, pulling the bottom hem out a little so the slogan didn't get creased. Admittedly it was a size too big but what do

you expect from the £1 rack?

"I've had an email from an American trumpeter," she said. "He said his flight doesn't get in to Heathrow until early Sunday morning and he is apologising in advance for disrupting our schedule. Why the hell would he think this'll still be running on Sunday?"

"Want another drink?" I asked.

"I've got one, thanks," she said. "I broke silence with this guy. I emailed him back saying it was only running on Saturday so he might as well cancel his flight."

"OK, no problem," I said. "Keep an eye on Alfie for me, would you, Anne."

I got myself a drink and a dish of water for Alfie and a bag of pork scratchings to share with him and, because I was feeling happy, a bag of peanuts to share with Anne and Cyril.

"So where's Cyril?" asked Anne when I got back to the table. "You two usually go everywhere together."

"No we don't," I said. "It's just that we usually get here before you, that's all. Anyway, Cyril's shackled up with a woman now. He's got more important things to worry about."

"Oh really?" she said, switching on her attention the way women always do when you mention relationships or children. "Who is she?"

"Lucy," I said, "you know, that fortune teller woman."

"Really?" she said, "I wonder if she saw that coming?"

I shrugged. I don't find relationships that interesting to be honest. People are either in relationships or they aren't so what is there to talk about? I suppose someone not in a relationship might want to talk about how to get into one or, conversely, if they're in one then how to get out of it but either way, I'm not the person to talk to. Which, thinking about it, is rather ironic since about 90% of music is about

relationships, even rapper Biggie Smalls and his 'guaranteed to fuck her till my nose bleed' is sort of about a relationship, even though it's at the opposite end of the spectrum to Johnny Tillotson's 'Poetry In Motion'.

I have a soft spot for 'Poetry In Motion' because, back in 1960, Johnny recorded two versions of it, one with Boots Randolph and the other with King Curtis, both brilliant sax players. Having said that, Biggie Small's 'Want That Old Thing Back', which had the line about making his nose bleed, was released after his death and didn't go anywhere until a Norwegian called Matoma did a remix with a sax backing that went viral so I should have a soft spot for that but, to be honest, I don't. I've also heard that Biggie Small's distinctive voice was created by jazz saxophonist Donald Harrison who apparently lived just down the road from the Notorious B.I.G., before he was notorious or big. Hey, saxes are rarely up front but they have a serious influence.

"How does Cyril feel about that?" she asked. "After all, he's been on his own for a long time. Isn't this a big step for him?"

"Probably," I said. "Wouldn't have a clue, though."

Actually it was a huge step for Cyril but I'm a guy and I really didn't want to spend the evening talking about relationships. Fortunately she subsided, probably because she didn't find an introverted middle aged, penniless engineer that interesting.

"He's probably with Maureen from the council," I said. "They were going to make a decision this afternoon. After all, there's only a week to go."

"Ahh, that's a shame," said Anne. "Still, it was fun while it lasted."

"Oh it might still go ahead," I said. "The council seemed to like the idea but they need the insurance cover. Anyway, Cyril's on to it. I just hope he got the modified plan in on time."

"What modified plan?" said Anne with a touch of anger. "Why wasn't I told? I'm part of this team too, you know."

“Nothing to tell,” I said. “You already know about it since it was your idea.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“The one where we have the jazz on the pier and everyone else on the esplanade,” I said. “You haven't forgotten already?”

“Of course I haven't forgotten,” she snapped, “I just didn't realise it was a formal submission. Who put it in? You or Cyril?”

“Cyril,” I said. “I'm shit with forms.”

“Do you suppose he put my name to it?” she asked.

“You'll have to ask him,” I said. “I wouldn't have a clue.”

“Only I've got an interview with Rivers Global Management next week,” she said reflectively. “I mentioned this project in my application but it would be great if I had some documentary evidence of my involvement.”

“Never heard of them,” I said. “Are they any good?”

“One of the biggest event management companies in the world,” she said. “They're based in London but they run events all over the world.”

“Hey, cool,” I said. “Good luck.”

“I need more than luck,” she said. “It's only a junior position but I heard they've had over three hundred applicants.”

“You're doing well to have got an interview then,” I said. “Fingers crossed, hey.”

She held up both hands with her fingers crossed and smiled. “Toes too.”

We started to talk about working overseas and the kinds of

opportunities that that would open up for a young, dynamic, forward thinking event executive. Since I wasn't particularly forward thinking or dynamic I thought it sounded rather dull but, hey, each to their own. Anne probably had nightmares about living in a squat and performing for coins on the street. She probably owned a lot more than two tee shirts as well.

"Sorry I'm late," said Cyril when he eventually arrived. He was out of breath even though he'd only come from the car park.

"Hey, all cool," I said. "Want a drink?"

"Great tee shirt," he said. "That's funny."

"Thanks," I said. "Anne didn't like it."

"It's not that I didn't like it," she protested, "I just don't understand it."

"You know what irony is, don't you?" asked Cyril.

"Of course I do," she said, "kind of."

Cyril looked at me then back at Anne.

"Irony is when you say something that is the opposite of what you mean," he said, "so, for example, when someone makes a mess of something you might say 'good job'. You're saying it ironically, not literally."

"OK," she said. "But why's his tee shirt supposed to be funny?"

"Because it's being ironic about irony," said Cyril "and playing on words at the same time. It's saying that irony is the opposite of something but playing on ironing things that are wrinkled."

"Oh," she said, "I get it."

She obviously didn't but what the hell. It was my tee shirt and it'd only cost £1 and that was the real irony.

“Ben says you submitted a new plan,” she said, focusing on what was important to her.

“That’s right,” he said.

“I’ll get some drinks while you explain,” I said since I either knew what it was or didn’t want to be there when Anne found out it was something else and she’d been bypassed. I loitered at the bar until I could see she was smiling then I went back.

“I’ve got you a copy of the new plan as well,” said Cyril putting it on the table in front of me. “Maureen let me use her photocopier.”

“Great,” I said.

I picked it up and flicked through it more to compliment Cyril on a job well done than anything else but I could see that Anne’s name reappeared quite frequently although, depressingly, my name was at the top of the organisational chart on page three.

“The reason I’m late is that the council meeting overran,” said Cyril, taking the drink I’d got him. “Maureen tells me that our plan has been approved but another issue cropped up which caused the overrun and they ended up adjourning the meeting until next Tuesday.”

“Is there a problem with the plan?” asked Anne.

“According to Maureen, no,” said Cyril, “but because the meeting’s been adjourned the formal paperwork can’t be signed off by the mayor until Tuesday but Maureen says that Jazz Under The Portico is definitely approved.”

“Way cool,” I said. “Fancy some peanuts?”

“But what about the issues?” asked Anne. “The insurance and so on?”

“I don’t know the details,” said Cyril, “since Maureen got this informally from the Chief Clerk, but it seems that the council has decided to pay for the first aid support from the Red Cross since they’ll be attending the other events that day anyway so there isn’t a

huge extra expense and they had a long discussion about toilet facilities and decided that, since the event was now going to cover the esplanade as well and a lot of the visitors are staying in the town's various hotels that there would be sufficient sanitation."

"What do you mean 'a lot of the visitors'?" asked Anne. "How many are they expecting?"

"Several thousand," said Cyril jerking his head at me, "and not a million like he said."

"A million?" said Anne, clearly baffled. "Several thousand? What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you told her," asked Cyril.

"I thought I'd leave it to you," I said.

"Told me what?" asked Anne.

Cyril gave Anne a run down on the figures the mayor had given me, although he presumably had got them from Maureen.

"You are joking," she said. "They're coming in from America, Denmark, France, Holland?"

"Yes," said Cyril. "Pretty impressive, isn't it."

Anne stared at him then asked him to repeat the figures and carefully wrote them all down in her note book.

"I just want to get something straight," she said thoughtfully, sucking the end of her pen. "It must have been a good quality pen since whenever I suck the end of a pen I get ink all over my tongue and lips and Anne's seems to remain ink free. "You guys didn't do any marketing, did you?"

"We did those posters," I said. "We put them up all over town and in Hastings."

“And that's all?” she asked. “how much did they cost?”

“Umm, eighty quid,” I said, “oh and I talked about the gig when I was busking.”

She wrote this down as well.

“Why are you writing all this down?” I asked.

“Because we've got several thousand visitors coming from around the world with an expenditure of £80 on purely local posters,” she said.

“Hey, yeah,” I said, “pretty cool posters!”

“So obviously it was mainly about social media,” she said.

“But didn't you put a poster on the internet?” I asked.

“Yes, I'd forgotten that, thanks,” she said and noted that down as well.

“Is there anything else we need to talk about?” asked Cyril, “only Lucy's doing a pot roast.”

“Yes,” said Anne. “Why's the council being so helpful?”

“It's because of the bad publicity if they block it,” I said. “The mayor told me that because of all the hotel bookings there'd be hell to pay if they all got cancelled.”

“Right,” she said thoughtfully and noted that down.

“Actually, it's just occurred to me,” said Cyril. “If we've got all these visitors coming in because of the social media, just how many buskers are going to turn up?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” said Anne and she repeated what she'd told me about the American trumpeter.

“Hmm,” said Cyril. “I wonder why he thought it was going to continue into Sunday?”

“He probably assumed it would be a weekend festival,” I said. “A lot of them are in the States.”

“Maybe,” said Cyril, “or maybe he's hearing things we aren't. What if he's heard a lot of performers are going to turn up and assumed that it will overflow into Sunday?”

“You think?” said Anne, putting down her pen. “Shit. So what do we do? Keep it going all night or stop at a certain time and start again the next day?”

“I think we're going to have to end it,” said Cyril. “If we keep it going all night there's going to be a noise problem. The last thing we want is the police forcing us to shut down. We'll have to see what happens on the day and how many players turn up but I really don't think we should let any of them go past 10 or maybe 11.”

“If we get the numbers do we start up again on Sunday or do we turn them away or do we shorten playing time?” asked Anne.

“They'll need to get a decent playing time,” I said. “They're buskers, they depend on enough time to make some money.”

“So we can't turn them away either,” said Cyril. “They'll have had to pay out to get here so as a minimum they need to be able to get their travel costs back plus a bit of profit. Jesus, this is going to be difficult. If we carry on on Sunday we're going to have problems with our security volunteers and the Red Cross people, not to mention the insurance.”

“What is happening about the insurance?” I asked. “Are we going to have to find the money for that, since we haven't got it.”

“I'm not sure,” admitted Cyril. “Maureen said that the council can't afford to pay for the insurance but she seemed to think it was being taken care of anyway. I didn't want to press her too hard in case they decided to cancel after all.”

“So we could be up for a grand or so?” I asked. “Does that mean another grand if it goes into Sunday?”

"I imagine so," he said. "Insurance companies aren't charities and the longer it goes on the more risk there is of an expensive incident."

"Well let's suppose it does," I said, "and ends up being a couple of grand and we have to pay it. How do we do that?"

"I've got no money," said Cyril. "OK my benefit will be coming through next week but no way can I come up with two thousand. Maybe if I could get my money out of Yemen but not until then."

"I could maybe spare £10 a week," said Anne, "but that won't get us far."

"All I've got is my busking money," I said, unwilling to put my emergency money on the line. After all, the insurance wouldn't replace my sax if it got run over by a truck a month after the gig. "And I wouldn't think I'm going to make two thou over the weekend."

"Actually, none of us are liable," said Anne, "since none of us have actually taken out a policy. Whoever takes out the policy will be liable so we just make sure we don't."

"Actually it's not as simple as that," said Cyril. "We're the organisers so we're liable if there are any injuries or deaths or anything like that. The insurance is actually to cover us against claims from the public. If we don't have insurance we could be up for millions if something happens."

"Is it too late to get my name taken off the plan?" I asked.

"Fraid so," said Cyril. "I'll talk to Maureen. Find out what the council intends before we start to panic. I wonder if anyone will lend us the money?"

"You could always ask Lucy," I said. "After all, this was all her idea."

"Maybe," he said, "but I'd rather find out what the council intends first. Lucy isn't well off either."

"You know, I don't think it's going to be that big a problem," I said. "If

we let it run from say midday to 11 and give them half an hour or so each that's 22 buskers and I really don't see that many turning up to play jazz."

"But what if a lot turn up not wanting to play jazz?" asked Cyril, finishing his beer.

"Then they go out on the esplanade," I said. "That's the plan and it's a pretty big esplanade."

"Let's hope so," he said. "If fifty turn up we've got big problems. Anyway, I've got to go. I'll call you if I find out anything before Tuesday. What's your number?"

"I don't have a phone," I said.

"I thought you were getting one," he said.

"Couldn't be bothered," I said. "Phones are just a hassle."

"Oh well," he said, "you will be here on Tuesday?"

"Sure," I said. "Enjoy your pot roast."

"You're very quiet," I said to Anne after Cyril had gone.

"Just thinking," she said. "Do you think we'll get as many as fifty performers?"

"God, no," I said. "Even the ones who've said they're coming probably won't when they have to actually get out of bed early. I'm more worried about no one turning up and leaving it all to me."

"Maybe," she said. "Still I need to be prepared. Fancy another drink?"

"No boyfriend tonight?" I asked.

"We've split up," she said.

"How come?" I asked, wondering if, when it came down to it, I could

be bothered to exploit the situation.

“When I told him I had an interview with a London company he said he wouldn't allow me to move to London if I got the job,” said Anne absent-mindedly.

“Brave man,” I thought to myself. I didn't think I would have the courage to forbid Anne from doing something she wanted to do.

“That's not very nice,” I said. “Wouldn't he consider going to London with you?”

“He's a farmer,” she said with a touch of contempt. “Can't think outside his cowsheds. Good riddance to him.”

“Well you've got to do what's right for you,” I said “and I think you'll do very well in London. You'll probably end up in New York or Paris or somewhere like that.”

“That would be just awesome,” she said shutting her note book and looking at me. “About that drink?”

“I'd better be getting home,” I said, “but thanks anyway.”

I had the funny feeling that now she didn't have a boyfriend she was coming on to me and, attractive though she was, I really wasn't up to it. Anne would simply be too much like hard work just to even keep up with.

“Oh, OK then,” she said in surprise. I was probably the first guy who'd ever turned her down. “I don't suppose you'd write me a reference?”

“Me?” I said, astonished. “A reference? What on earth for?”

“Explaining my role in this project,” she said. “It isn't clear in the official plan.”

“Cyril's the one for that,” I said. “I just play the sax.”

“You’re the project team leader,” said Anne, “look, it says so right here.”

She pointed to my name at the top of the organisational chart on page three of the plan. Sure enough my name was there, inside a box with lines coming out to other boxes underneath it which had Cyril and Anne’s names in.

“Oh, right,” I said, feeling very uncomfortable. My personality is not that of a leader or even a follower. I’m one of those people who hangs around on the edge, never actually fitting in with anything.

“So, umm, what do I say?” I said, “and, umm, will it be OK if it’s handwritten? I haven’t got a computer or anything.”

“That’s OK,” said Anne. “If I write it will you sign it?”

Seemed fair to me so I promised I would. What the hell, it was no skin off my nose.

Chapter Thirty Four

Oh man, did that final week drag by!

I worked out that I'd been in Fairchester for 8 weeks, which was fast approaching an eternity as I'd only intended to be there three days, maybe four tops. I was beginning to feel I was becoming fixture on the pier.

Anne came to the pier on Saturday. Considering her part in organising the gig it was a little strange that this was the first time she'd heard me play but then I guess there's no need for an event organiser to be interested in the actual event.

"What kind of music do you like?" I asked her when I saw her standing there.

"Electronic dance music," she said, which kind of killed that conversational thread. "Could you sign my reference?"

She handed me a large envelope with three sheets of neatly printed paper in it and I signed the last, just above where it said 'Ben Webster, Jazz Under The Portico, Executive Director', without bothering to read it. I probably wouldn't have understood it anyway.

"Where would I find Samson?" she asked.

"He's not here on weekends," I said. "What do you want him for?"

"I need to brief him on the plan and discuss the security and traffic arrangements," she said. "I'm assuming that's part of my role of managing the performers."

"Great," I said, giving her a thumbs up. Yes, it really was time I moved on. Life was getting complicated. "We're lucky to have you. He'll be here on Monday."

She gave me an uncertain smile, probably because she thought I was pulling her leg.

“OK,” she said. “My interview’s on Monday so I’ll pop over during my lunch break on Tuesday.”

She did too. She sat for over half an hour with Samson, talking intently while he nodded and smiled. I stayed well away once I’d introduced them. I’d have played them some motivational tunes about traffic flow if I’d known any but I didn’t so I played Steppenwolf’s ‘Born To Be Wild’ instead ... *getcha motor runnin’, head out on the highway* ... and it seemed to help since they were still on speaking terms when she went.

* * *

“We’ve got the approval,” said Cyril happily on Tuesday evening, holding up a thick bundle of papers.

“Cool,” I said. The pub had just introduced a new bar snack which seemed to be small balls of some sort of salami. I’d got some for Alfie as an alternative to pork scratchings but he wasn’t impressed so I was trying to invent a table game using them which involved flicking a salami ball and trying to bounce it off a beer mug into the ashtray but it wasn’t turning out very successfully since they weren’t particularly spherical. It would probably be a lot more fun when half drunk, like most pub games.

“Can I see?” asked Anne so Cyril handed her the wad.

“This is basically just repeating our plan,” she said flicking through it, “only the sections are in a different order.”

“Yes,” said Cyril, “although they have said on page 17 exactly where they want the toilets put.”

“Will you be supervising that or do you want me to?” asked Anne.

“I’ll do it,” he said, “since I spoke to them and the hire is in my name. They’re coming Friday afternoon so you’ll probably be at work, anyway.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, having managed to get a salami ball into the

ashtray, although it happened to bounce off Cyril's glass not mine. They both ignored me.

"Have you decided how you're going to manage the performers?" asked Cyril.

"Yes," said Anne. "Since we have no real idea who's turning up I'm setting up a Registration Desk at the entrance to the pier and I'm going to have some leaflets telling people to come to the Registration Desk to find out where they'll be. My dad and my brother will give them out to anyone who turns up at the bus and railway stations looking like they're carrying an instrument and we'll just have to manage as best we can. Those doing jazz on the pier will get their performing time on a first come first served basis although Ben will be the opening and closing act and I'll probably get him to do a few slots during the day as well. I'll also tell the public what's happening as far as I can if anyone asks."

"Is that all right with you Ben?" asked Cyril.

"Sure, whatever," I said wondering if you should get more or less points for bouncing off someone else's glass, "just tell me where and when."

"Have you decided what you're going to play?" asked Anne.

"Nope," I said. It seemed to me that you should get more points from someone else's glass since it would probably be further way.

"Don't you think you ought to?" she asked.

"I go by the mood of the audience," I said, looking up. "No point in planning anything. Not my style anyway, I always wing it."

"If you say so," she said. "Cyril, it says here that there's £50 million of public liability insurance cover through AXA Business Insurance and gives the policy number but doesn't say who is paying the premium. Do you know anything about this?"

"All I know is that it's all arranged and no one has asked me for any

money,” said Cyril. “Maureen didn’t know anything about it either.”

* * *

Wednesday was as dull as ditch water. Thursday wasn’t much better although a group of elderly Americans walked along the pier saying how ‘cute’ and ‘old world’ everything was. I don’t know if they’d come for the gig or if they were just there by coincidence but they didn’t get a preview since I was sitting with Cyril and Lucy, whiling the time away. None of us really had anything to say since there wasn’t really anything to do until Saturday and I guess we were all just waiting, marking time. Not a lot happened on Friday either although there seemed to be a tension building, like the build-up of static before a thunderstorm.

“So, this is our last meeting,” I said happily, “This time tomorrow it’ll all be over.”

We were passing the time until Anne arrived, although there was only one item on Cyril’s agenda.

“No, we’ll probably need at least another two meetings,” said Cyril. “We’ll need to debrief and identify areas in which we could have prepared better.”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “How likely is that going to be?”

I was back to pork scratchings and Alfie was happier. Cyril scratched his head and looked as if he was going to insist on more meetings then decided against it.

“Sorry I’m late,” called Anne, rushing over. “Hey, you’ll never guess!”

“Give us a clue,” said Cyril while I was still trying to think of something absurd to put forward as a guess, like ‘Elvis has arrived’ or something equally daft.

“You know that job I went for the interview for, that one in London, well I got it!” Anne couldn’t sit down she was so excited. “They phoned me this afternoon and I’ll get the contract and stuff next

week. Isn't that just so awesome!"

"Aww sweet as," I said, jumping up to shake her hand. She gave me a big hug.

"It was your reference," she said, twirling me round a little. "Clive said they'd investigated Jazz Under The Portico after I'd talked about it at the interview and given them your reference and he said they were very impressed by what we'd achieved with no funding. I start a week on Monday. Isn't it just so awesome!"

Cyril stood up to shake her hand as well and got a hug and a kiss which miffed me slightly then she turned back to me and gave me a kiss as well so I cheered up. Cyril must have been having some private tuition from Lucy since he only went pale pink rather than bright red, or maybe he just saw Anne as a co-worker rather than a girl.

"So when do you finish at the Art Gallery?" he asked.

"I already have," she said. "That's why I'm late, I had to finish off a few things. As soon as the concert's over I'm off to London to find somewhere to live."

"Good luck with that," I said, knowing how hard it is to find affordable accommodation in London. I'd have given her the addresses of a couple of communes I knew that would probably take her in but she didn't seem the type for that kind of lifestyle.

"So have we got anything to discuss?" said Anne, finally sitting down although she was fidgeting a lot and making Alfie nervous. "Only I've got things to do."

"I've only one item on the agenda," said Cyril, "which is to report that the portable toilets were delivered and have been set up and tested."

"How do they test them?" I asked since I could only think of one way to test a toilet and wondered if they needed to drink a lot of tea to do it.

"They flushed them," he said.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “There’s that as well.”

“Are we done?” asked Anne.

“Unless you have anything?” he asked.

“Nope,” she said.

“Ben?” asked Cyril. “Have you anything to update us on or shall we bring this meeting to a close?”

“I think I’m coming down with the flu,” I said.

They both stared at me, looks of horror slowly appearing on their faces. I slowly counted to ten, trying to look ill.

“Only joking,” I said, happily.

“You bastard,” said Anne, frostily. “Don’t forget, you’re opening this thing at midday sharp so you’d better bloody well be there.”

“No problem,” I said, breezily. “Umm, how will I know when it’s midday? I don’t have a watch.”

“Oh for god’s sake,” she said. “I’ll phone you at eleven, OK?”

“Umm, I don’t have a phone,” I said.

“Take mine,” said Cyril, sliding it over.

“Just a minute,” said Anne. “He’s only got that funny bike thing, what if he gets a puncture or something? I’ll probably get the sack before I even start the job if they find out the star turn couldn’t make it because he had a flat tyre. Umm, what to do, what to do? I can’t come and get you because I’ll be coordinating things on the pier. I suppose we could send a taxi but there may not be any if we get a lot of visitors. Cyril, do you think you could ...? You know where Ben lives as well.”

“Sure,” said Cyril. “I’ll come round at eleven and get you, OK?”

“OK,” I said. “Hey, this is going to be pretty cool, a chauffeur driven limo to my own gig, awesome!”

“It’s only a Skoda,” said Cyril, “not a fancy limo.”

“Whatever,” I said. “It’s still awesome!”

“Are we done?” asked Anne and got up without bothering to wait for a reply. “See you tomorrow.”

Cyril and I stayed for another drink. It was his treat since he had, at long last, got his first social security payment through.

“Bet you’re pleased,” I said when he told me.

“Yes and no,” he said. “I’ve been called in next Thursday at 9.30 in the morning to explain the details of my living arrangements. They seem a little concerned that I’m apparently living with a woman with an income but not in a relationship with her and not paying rent.”

“They have dirty minds,” I said.

“I really need to get a job,” he said. “It’s just so degrading being on benefits. Did you know that if I miss that appointment I’ll lose benefits for two weeks?”

“Oh it’s worse than that,” I said. “If you don’t convince them they’ll have people spying on you trying to find evidence of co-habiting.”

“Are you serious?” he said, looking horrified.

“Sure,” I said. “DWP do it all the time to anyone who they remotely suspect of cheating the system, which is basically everyone since their attitude is that if you’re claiming benefits you must be a cheat. By the way, don’t piss off your neighbours.”

“I try not to anyway,” he said, “but why?”

“If they know you’re on benefits and you piss them off they might report you to DWP and make up something and they’ll be believed.

Happened to a mate of mine in London.”

Actually, the mate had been cheating the system as he ‘borrowed’ three children from another friend of his whenever he needed to prove he had three children to support but that wasn’t the point. The point was that he’d annoyed a neighbour who’d reported him and there was no reason an annoyed neighbour couldn’t say Cyril and Lucy were sharing the same bed. After all, how do you prove you are *not* sleeping with someone? When it came to suspected benefits fraud, the KGB and the SS were sympathetic and compassionate compared with the DWP.

“Oh isn’t that just wonderful,” he said. “You’ve really cheered me up now.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Hey, why not have a word with Anne? She might be able to get you something at that Event Management Company she’s just got a job with. And there’s a vacancy at the Art Gallery now too.”

“Oh yes,” he said. “You can see me trying to sell works of art, can you? I don’t think so.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ve got a picture or two of waterfalls or rivers,” I said. “You could explain to customers how to dam it to produce hydroelectric power for their houses.”

He stared at me as though I was a baboon with three heads or something.

“I wish I was more like you,” he said. “Nothing ever seems to get to you, does it.”

“Not really,” I said. “Life’s too short, although I was upset when Alfie went missing the other day and I do worry about my sax being damaged or stolen.”

“Well, that’s something, I suppose,” he said. “Aren’t you nervous about tomorrow? There could be a lot of people on the pier.”

“God no,” I said. “I’ve been busking for years and anyway, I’ve played

to much bigger crowds than we're going to squeeze onto the pier. Like one time I played to around 15,000 people."

"Now that is impressive," he said. "Were you supporting a big rock star or something?"

"No," I said. "I was busking in Trafalgar Square on New Year's Eve a couple of year's ago. There must have been 15,000 people there, easily, although I don't think more than twenty or so were paying any attention to me, but that's still a lot of people. I think the Queen might have been there too. After all, it was just down the road from her place."

He laughed and shook his head. "You're mad," he said. "Completely mad."

"Thank you," I said, taking it as a compliment. After all, it's easier to take things as compliments than it is to get offended. If you're offended you usually have to do something about it and buskers get a lot of comments that are usually best taken as compliments.

"Well, I'd best be getting back," he said. "I've got to do some shopping for Lucy on the way."

"Me too," I said, although it didn't really make a lot of difference when I got home. "Come on, Alfie."

We finished our drinks and went outside. There seemed to be a lot more traffic on the esplanade than usual and quite a few pedestrians.

"Lord, look at them," said Cyril. "Getting quite busy, isn't it."

"Do you suppose they're here for the gig?" I asked.

"I hope so," he said. "Be a shame if they've all come for something else that's on over the weekend. They look like tourists, don't they, not locals."

This was probably because they were looking round at things and walking fairly slowly whereas locals tended to walk fast and stare at

the ground. The people also looked smarter. Even though most were wearing casual clothes they were clean and neat whereas locals tended to look as though they'd just arrived from cleaning out the pig sties or something, unless they were going to a restaurant then they looked like they were dressed as 19th century politicians.

"Oh well," said Cyril, "don't forget I'm picking you up at eleven. Make sure you're ready."

"You're picking me up because I won't know what the time is," I said, quite reasonably I thought, "so how will I know what time to be ready for?"

"Just be ready," he said, "whatever time I get there."

"OK, boss," I said, giving him a mock salute. "Although I'm ready any time. All I need to do is pick up my sax. Which reminds me, where the hell is my sax?"

"It's in your hand," he said. "I'm not falling for that again."

"You're just no fun," I said. "See you tomorrow."

He went off to the car park to find his car and I put my sax in the basket on the back of my trike. It was chained to a tree a little bit down from the pub. Alfie obligingly jumped in on top of the sax. He'd put on a lot of weight since we'd first met but most of that was muscle and he'd developed a nifty technique. He'd back up two or three steps then run forward and launch himself upwards so his front paws reached the back rim of the basket. Then, using his momentum to pivot him he'd get his back legs up to the rim just as his front paws had to shoot forward so he didn't land on his head or overshoot and fall out the other side. It was quite impressive.

What was also impressive was that he'd learnt very quickly not to jump out of the basket while the trike was moving. He did it once when another dog barked some insult or other that needed retribution and he'd never done it since.

We headed off up the esplanade and I noticed a few people grouped

near the entrance to the pier, under one of the street lights, and a fair number wandering up and down the pier itself and peering over the railings at the beach and the waves below. Idly curious about what the group was looking at, I pulled over and joined them.

“Hey cool,” I said. “Good thinking.”

Someone, probably Anne, had stuck one of the gig posters to a large piece of cardboard and tied it to the lamp post a few feet off the ground. Anne, or whoever, had also written, in large fluorescent pink letters across the poster ...

“BEN WEBSTER HIMSELF
IS OPENING THE
SHOW AT NOON”

“Hot damn,” I said. “Bring it on!”

A plump lady standing next to an even plumper man standing next to me glanced at me then at the picture on the poster than back at me.

“Heck, Randall” she said in a pronounced mid-American accent, “he’s the man!”

“Well hell, Tammy,” he said looking at me then at Tammy, “yew just styand raght theyer with him and I’ll get yew a dayamed picher!”

Tammy needed no urging and grabbed me tightly and beamed at Randall who took several pictures on his phone.

“Thank yew kindly, sern,” he said when he was done. “We surely are alurkin forwerd to hearin yew play some.”

“Great,” I said, for some reason sounding more than usually English. “Umm, it’s going to be fun!”

Chapter Thirty Five

A car horn hooted out the back so I figured my limo had arrived. I grabbed my sax, whistled to Alfie and went out. Sure enough Cyril was there.

“Hey,” I said, opening the back door so Alfie could jump in.

“Morning,” he said. “All ready for the big day?”

“Sure,” I said, getting in the front. “So what’s with the red paper thingy?”

There was a half sheet of red paper stuck to the passenger side of the windscreen. It had OEV 3 printed on it in large black letters.

“That’s Samson’s idea,” he said sourly, reversing out of the alley. “It’s so all the security people know this is an Official Event Vehicle.”

“Oh cool,” I said. “So whose car is 1?”

“Anne’s,” he said. “Samson’s is 2.”

I laughed, it was so Anne even though it was supposedly Samson’s idea.

“So what’s happening in town? Many people there yet? Any buskers?”

“You’ll see,” he said.

“That bad, huh.” I said.

“Oh it’s not bad,” he said. “It’s just getting a bit busy.”

“Have any of the buskers turned up, though?”

“Yes, a few,” he said. “Four or five had already started when I left.”

“Oh great,” I said. “Who are they?”

"I haven't got a clue," he said, "but Anne sent them out along the esplanade."

"OK," I said. "So is Lucy working today?"

"No, she didn't think anyone would be interested in a reading so she's taking the day off," he said. "She wants to enjoy the experience and is planning on taking lots of photographs. She's been muttering something about an exhibition on how the town was rejuvenated."

"Well, good for her," I said. "Let's hope it all works out the way she wants it."

There were a lot of parked cars in the streets and when Cyril turned right onto the esplanade I could see a lot of people milling around and several large clusters. There was a lot of traffic on the esplanade as well, moving slowly.

"Hey," I said, as he crawled up the esplanade towards the pier. "I know him!"

I did know the busker but for the life of me I couldn't remember his name. Ricky, Billy, something 'y anyway. He was playing an acoustic guitar and singing with a decent audience.

"Ohh and there's King Rat!" I said, pointing. His old bus was parked across the road and it looked like he'd brought a few friends as well as his wives. They were playing some calypso dance music and some of his audience were dancing on the beach.

"It's looking good," I said, as we approached the pier. I could see some more buskers further along, although the pier itself seemed to be very crowded.

An exceptionally large man with a shaved head, the beginnings of cauliflower ears and an orange dayglo jacket was directing traffic and making sure no one actually stopped at the pier. He must have been one of Samson's rugby buddies. Cyril tooted his horn and the man turned, saw the red paper thing and waved us in to the edge of the road.

“Could you tell Samson Ben is here?” he called to the man.

The man held up his thumb and briefly spoke into a walkie talkie while continuing to wave the other traffic on. He listened for a moment then turned back to Cyril.

“He’s on his way, mate,” he said. “Be a couple of minutes, like. Move your car up in front of that one, please.”

He gestured to a new looking green Ford Mondeo and Cyril backed up so he was neatly parked in front of it.

“Hey,” I said, getting out and noticing it had a red sign saying OEV 1, “is that Anne’s car?”

“It’s her father’s,” said Cyril. “Anne’s over there.”

I looked where he was pointing and through a momentary gap in the people spotted a table so I sauntered over, sax case in hand and Alfie dogging my heels. I wondered briefly if that’s where the expression comes from since that’s what dogs do. Well, some of the time anyway.

Anne was sitting on a plastic chair behind the table with a large pale pink bed sheet that had REGISTRATION hand painted on it. The sheet was tied between a lamppost and a ladder. On top of the ladder were two loudspeakers that were wired to two car batteries underneath the ladder. She had a microphone on her desk, what looked to be a large scale map of the sea front sellotaped to the desk and several clipboards. She looked terrifyingly efficient.

She was talking to a woman who had a guitar slung over her shoulder so I, not wanting to be shouted at for being disorderly, queued up behind her. Anne wrote something down on one of her clipboards then studied her map. She wrote something on the map in red and made a note of that on the clipboard then explained to the woman where the mark on the map actually was on the ground.

“It’s the fourth lamppost, that way,” she said, pointing further down the esplanade.

“How long can I have it for?” asked the woman.

“As long as you want, up until 11pm,” said Anne. “If you decide to go could you let me know so someone else can have the spot?”

“No probs,” said the woman. “Where’s the lavvies?”

“There’s a toilet about two hundred yards further along,” said Anne. “Have a nice day.”

The woman moved away, fortunately in the right direction and I stepped up to the table.

“Jazz or other?” said Anne, looking under the table as she scratched her leg

“Jazz,” I said.

She picked up a different clipboard and reached for a different coloured pen.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Ben Webster,” I said.

She started to write that on her clipboard then froze and glanced at me.

“Are you playing silly buggers?” she asked, crossing off my name from her list.

“Sorry,” I said. “I thought I had to register. What’s with the speakers?”

“That’s for when I need to call people to the pier,” she said. “It’s my friend Julie’s karaoke system, She’s lent it to me for the day.”

“Way cool,” I said. “Have we got any players for the jazz?”

“Five, so far,” she said, “plus you. You’re up first then Zeki, then Kenny, then Shea, then someone called Jimmy who isn’t on your list

but he reckons he's a great jazz guitarist and then Brianne. I'm putting you down for another half hour at 2.30 and if no one else turns up I'll put the others back on again."

"Hey, that's pretty good," I said. "How many others have turned up?"

"Ummm," she said, picking up another clipboard, "eleven so far. I'm expecting more later since this was originally an evening thing and a lot of people won't know different. So far I'm spreading them out along the esplanade but depending on numbers I'll put some on the beach as well later and maybe on the other side of the road."

"I saw King Rat and his family," I said. "Who else is here?"

She handed me the clipboard but I didn't know any of the other names.

"Anya?" I said, seeing one I recognised. "Wasn't that the chick coming over from Holland with a glockenspiel?"

"Yes," said Anne, "she's down there, second lamppost."

"I thought she was going to play jazz?" I said. "Shouldn't she be on the pier?"

"Her glockenspiel's attached to her bike," said Anne, "and Samson won't let her ride her bike on the pier so I put her on the esplanade. It's twenty to twelve, you ought to be getting ready."

"Oh plenty of time," I said. "I just want to have a chat with Anya. I've never heard jazz on a glockenspiel."

"Later," said Anne. "You're the first act and if you're late it'll put all the timings out. Oh, there's Samson."

She waved him over. Another very large gentleman in a dayglo jacket came with him.

"Make sure Ben goes straight to the theatre," she said. "He's liable to get lost."

Samson laughed.

“But it’s only just up the pier,” I said. “Two minutes away.”

“Not today it isn’t,” said Samson. “The pier’s packed. It’s going to take us a while to get you through.”

“Packed?” I said, looking at the pier. There did seem to be a lot of people there. “How many people are there?”

“It’s not too bad down this end,” he said, “but up at the theatre there’s barely room to move. I’ve got the duty uniformed on crowd control to keep a space clear for you lot.”

“Uniformed?” I said. “You mean police?”

“Yes,” he said. “Uniformed police are superb for maintaining order. Guys in dayglo jackets tend to get ignored. Don’t worry, the Chief Inspector rostered on extra police and the police in Hastings and Eastbourne are on standby in case they are needed.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I said. “Well, we’d better go then.”

“Are you wanting your dog with you?” asked Samson.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m guessing some of the crowd want to see him too since he was in the videos.”

“He’s liable to get trampled,” said Samson, picking him up. “Here, Brian, you carry him.”

Samson passed Alfie to the large gentleman and Alfie growled at him.

“Be quiet,” Brian growled back and Alfie looked at me in hurt surprise so I patted his head and he relaxed a tiny bit.

“Right, let’s go,” said Samson. “Follow me.”

He plunged into the melee and I fell in behind him with Brian and Alfie close behind me.

“Make way, make way,” Samson kept repeating as a path slowly opened in front of him. “Musician coming through, make way.” There were some cat calls and muted applause as people twisted round to look to see who I was.

The further up the pier we went the denser the crowd became until suddenly we burst into a clearing maybe twenty five feet wide and backed by the doors of the theatre. Two uniformed police were standing in the clearing staring beady eyed at the people on the edge, defying them to step forward. One was a policewoman and she looked even scarier than the policeman.

There was some applause as I appeared and a few ‘that’s him’ type comments. Brian put Alfie down and I clearly heard a woman’s voice call out “oooh isn’t he sweet!”

“Thank you,” I called back instinctively. “The dog’s nice too, isn’t he,” and there was widespread laughter.

“We’ll bring the next act up and take you back then,” Samson quietly said to me. “Have fun.”

He had a quiet word with the two uniformeds then he and Brian departed like Moses through a sea of bodies.

I stood there for a few moments and looked at the crowd. They looked back at me.

“Hello,” I said. “Nice day isn’t it.”

No one said a thing so I squatted down and got out my sax and started to assemble it.

“Only be a couple of minutes,” I said and popped my reed in my mouth to wet it. I probably should have done this earlier but what the hell. The silent people watching me were a tiny bit oppressive so I wandered over to the railing and peered over. There were a lot of people on the beach around the pier as well.

I fitted the reed to the mouthpiece and slipped the mouthpiece on the

neck of the sax.

“I hear some of you are Americans,” I said conversationally.

There were some cheers and some of those strange howling sounds that American audiences like to give.

“Oh well, you can’t help being American, I suppose,” I said. “No one’s perfect after all.”

A fair number of the audience gave me dirty looks and quite a few others laughed. My two uniformed companions glanced at each other, no doubt wondering what they were going to do if the Americans in the crowd turned nasty. I smiled happily and tried to blow a few notes. The sax sounded shitty.

I took the mouthpiece off and checked the reed and, sure enough, it was slightly off centre so I adjusted it and replaced the mouthpiece.

“Oh that’s better,” I said, as the notes came out rich and resonant. “So you’re expecting some jazz then?”

There were a few yeses and a couple of ‘get on with it’ remarks from the crowd which was a distinct improvement so I played the opening bars from The Teddy Bears’ Picnic as a joke but it didn’t go down too well. Considering most of these people had travelled a long way to come and see me they didn’t seem overly enthusiastic. Maybe they were jet lagged.

“Apparently there’s a video of me on YouTube,” I said, wandering round the clearing and making eye contact with as many people as I could, which was basically only the first couple of rows. “Anyone seen it?”

There were a lot of yeses and someone fired off one of those air horns.

“That’s cool,” I said. “And since it didn’t put you off I’ll play it again,” and launched into Sonny Rollins’ Theme from Alfie which they seemed to like and applauded when I’d finished.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m Ben Webster, by the way,” then launched immediately into the real Ben Webster’s tune ‘For Heaven’s Sake’ and followed up with another ballad of his called ‘Willow Weep For Me’ and did a fair amount of my own improvising.

It occurred to me that some of them, particularly those at this end of the pier had probably been waiting for quite a while so I changed tempo after that and moved on to a couple of Coleman Hawkings tunes and a swing number of Glen Miller’s then back to a couple of faster Ben Webster numbers and they lapped it up. The nice thing about Americans is that they are quick to show their feelings about a performance, unlike the British who will listen stoically looking as though they are hating every moment when in fact they’re having the time of their lives. Anyway, by the time Samson and Brian reappeared, with Zeki sandwiched between them, the American part of the crowd was getting pretty enthusiastic.

“Looks like my half hour is up,” I said, taking off my sax.

Several people started to chant ‘more, more’ which, I have to admit, puffed up my ego no end.

“I’m coming back later,” I said, “although I’ve forgotten what time but we’ve got some other great musicians here for you. Let’s hear it for Zeki and his accordion!”

Unfortunately accordions don’t have a reputation as a jazz instrument so the applause was a touch muted but Zeki didn’t seem to mind.

“I Hungarian!” he shouted fiercely. “I play Gábor Szabó! Great Hungarian jazz master!” and he started playing a fast, complex number I’d never heard before.

“Wow,” I said to myself as Brian picked up Alfie and we started heading back down the pier, “he’s pretty bloody good!”

The crowd seemed to think so too and applauded and cat-called appreciatively.

“You seem unusually happy,” I said to Samson when we got to the

relatively uncrowded entrance to the pier. “I would have thought all this work when you’re supposed to be off duty would be a drag.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said.

“He’s just been promoted,” said a pretty blonde woman coming over.

“This is my wife, Adele,” he said. “Adele, this is Ben, the saxophonist.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, “what’s all this about promotion?”

“He’s been made sergeant,” she said, “and they’re putting him in charge of the Community Liaison Section, thanks to you.”

“Me?” I said in surprise. “What did I do?”

“The last Community Liaison Officer didn’t do too good a job,” she said, glancing at Samson proudly, “and the Chief Inspector has been impressed by the way Sam’s worked with you on this project. Tell Ben what she said, Sam.”

“She said my attitude and approach is good for the police force, the community and the town,” he said, beaming. “She said I am very community orientated.”

“Hot damn,” I said, “that’s so cool. Congratulations.”

“It won’t be for a few months yet,” he said “and I’ve still got to pass the exams for sergeant but it’s very encouraging.”

“I’ve got to go,” said Adele, “both the kids are in the Fun Run this afternoon but I wanted to meet you.”

* * *

I’ll spare you the details of the rest of the day since a written description is fairly tedious. You had to be there to soak in the atmosphere and hear all the different music coming from up and down the esplanade and a couple of side streets. I only got to play three times more since we ended up with ten or eleven performers for

the jazz and over twenty strung out along the beach and the crowds increased as the day went along.

For me the highlight was when I went for a stroll along the esplanade in the evening and came across Amelia sharing a gigantic joint with King Rat while he taught her to play the steel drums and his two wives, who were, if anything, even bigger than he was, danced under the street light. I stood and watched for a while, impressed by Amelia's natural sense of rhythm.

"Hey," I said, spotting a familiar figure, "shouldn't you be dishing out fish and chips?"

"I ran out," said Jo. "I ordered in four times what I usually get for a weekend and ran out an hour or so ago. Anton's only got dim sims left, he'll be shutting up any minute."

"That's pretty cool," I said, "good for business, huh."

"I don't know whether to be happy or angry," she said. "I'm happy about the sales but really pissed off I didn't order more. I've got nothing for tomorrow either. God damn, I could have made a fortune!"

"Maybe next time," I said.

"If there is a next time," she said.

I wanted to tell her a snippet of news I'd had earlier but couldn't since Rod, the mayor, had sworn me to secrecy. I'd bumped into him when I went to listen to Anya the glockenspielist. She was, incidentally, a character as well. She had to be in her late fifties and was dressed entirely in black leather with, incongruously, a feather boa around her neck. She had a huge Honda Gold Wing bike with a sidecar frame bolted to it with her glockenspiel mounted on the frame. It was hardly surprising Samson wouldn't allow her to ride it up the pier. It would have been like a war chariot scything its way through marauders.

Anyway, when Rod had seen me he'd come over.

“It’s going very well, don’t you think?” he said. “Tremendous event. You’ve really put Fairchester on the map.”

“Oh, it’s just a gig,” I replied. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Certainly,” he said.

“Who paid the insurance?” I asked. “We sure as hell didn’t and you said the council couldn’t afford it.”

“I did,” he said quite simply.

“You did?” I said astonished. “But it must have been a couple of grand.”

“Something like that,” he said, “but it was worth it don’t you think?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “But out of your own pocket? Why?”

He watched Anya for a while.

“I love this town,” he said, quietly. “I just couldn’t let an opportunity like this go by and not do anything to help.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I nodded thoughtfully.

“Anyway,” he said briskly. “I’m glad I ran into you. There’s something I want to discuss with you. Can I buy you a coffee or something?”

“Sure,” I said and he drove me to a cafe on the edge of town which wasn’t jam packed with visitors. His car, incidentally, had a red sign in the windscreen saying OEV 16 which made me wonder where all the other official event vehicles were and what they’d have done if I’d turned up on my trike.

“When Council was meeting to discuss your event plan,” he said when the coffees and, thankfully, muffins, arrived, “questions were raised as to the viability of future events along similar lines should this event turn out to be a success and I think you’ll agree that this has been a success.”

“Seems to be,” I said. “Certainly we have enough performers to keep going until after dark and the crowd seems to be happy.”

“Quite,” he said. “A proposal was made and an additional meeting was scheduled to consider it and at that meeting a consensus was formed.”

“Oh yes,” I said.

He picked up a muffin and put it on his plate and stared thoughtfully at it.

“The proposal is to reopen the theatre and extend its scope to include the entire pier for outdoor events,” he said.

“I thought it needed repairs,” I said, tucking into the muffin I’d taken.

“It does but we believe that there are sufficient opportunities now to warrant the expense of repairs,” he said. “Indeed, with the success of this event it is very likely that we will be considering repeating it and holding similar events. It could be most productive for Fairchester to become known for live music events, amongst other things.”

“Well, I suppose,” I said, thinking that Lucy would be pleased. After all, this was the sort of thing she’d forecast all along.

“However, the repairs are just one side of the equation,” continued Rod. “To be viable the theatre would need a manager, one with vision and the dynamicism to bring that vision to reality.”

“OK,” I said, wondering where this was going, “I can see that would be useful.”

“We were wondering if you would be willing to become the theatre manager,” said Rod, watching me intently.

“No freaking way!” I said instantly, panic rising inside me. He looked disappointed.

“That was an emotional response,” he said. “Perhaps you need some

time to consider the proposal more fully?”

“Hey,” I said, “I am so not the person for this. I’m just a second rate busker.”

“Well, you have organised an excellent event today,” he said. “Admittedly it has a few rough edges but given your budgetary and other constraints ...”

“It wasn’t me,” I said. “I didn’t organise a damned thing. I just came up with the idea. Cyril and Anne did all the organising. Cyril’s the one to talk to, he’d make a great theatre manager. He’s an engineer and brilliant at organising things. Anne was good too but she’s just got a job in London and she doesn’t want to stay in Fairchester but Cyril was born here and wants to stay.”

“That would be Cyril Delaney?” asked Rod and I nodded.

“And there is nothing I can say that would convince you to consider the position?” he asked.

I shook my head emphatically.

“Where would I find Cyril?” he asked.

“He driving round in an old Skoda,” I said. “OEV 3 or do you want his phone number?”

“Perhaps if you could give me his phone number?” said Rod, taking out a small note book.

* * *

Around nine in the evening Anne sent me to do a final turn to close out the day and, now that it was getting dark the whole atmosphere had changed and I ended up doing well over two hours of my favourite jazz from some of the great jazz saxophonists. Not just Ben Webster but Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Stan Getz, Sidney Bechet and a few others. I had a wonderful time and hopefully the audience did too. When I finally stopped and Cyril drove me back to

the butcher's shop there were still buskers out along the esplanade and a lot of people out and about. The pubs and restaurants we passed on the way seemed to be doing lively business.

"I had a strange phone call earlier," said Cyril, "your name was mentioned."

Alfie was asleep on the back seat and I was feeling pretty tired as well. Drained but happy.

"Was it the mayor?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "He wants me to see him on Monday about a job. I didn't really follow what he was saying because there was a lot of noise going on."

I briefly told him what Rod had told me about the theatre reopening and that they needed a manager and I'd suggested him.

"But I don't know anything about theatre management," he said.

"Then don't take it," I said, leaning my head on the headrest and closing my eyes, "although it seems to me that someone clever enough to be an engineer could pick up theatre management pretty easily. Shit, you could probably design some sort of wave power generator to go under the pier to save on the electricity bills."

"Actually I was thinking about that the other day," he said. "I suspect we could probably generate half a megawatt and ..."

"Talk to Lucy," I said. "She can read your tea leaves or something. Anyway, you wanted a job and here one is. Take it and enjoy yourself."

"Hmm, I don't know," he said. "It's a pretty big responsibility."

"Bigger than providing drinking water for millions of people?" I said. "I don't think so."

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "And this would be a tremendous opportunity for me."

“And you could go back to wherever it is and get your money and your jazz collection,” I said.

“There is that too,” he said. “Today has made me realise just how much I miss my music. Oh, by the way, Lucy says you’re to come to dinner tomorrow evening to celebrate. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“I’m too tired to think about it,” I said. “I need some sleep.”

* * *

Just past Eastbourne the road to Beachy Head rises quite steeply to climb over the chalk cliffs. I got out of breath even in bottom gear and ended up pushing the trike the last couple of hundred yards. At the top I stopped for a break and a ciggie and to admire the view out over the calm blue sea.

“It’s been a funny couple of months, hasn’t it Alfie,” I said. “I found you and Cyril’s got a job, and Anne’s got a job, and Samson’s been promoted and the town’s looking like it’s coming back to life. Lucy got her wish and even old Zeki ..., Jesus, who knew he could play an accordion like that? Even Baz, making that switch from that weird abstract shit to portraits and actually managing to sell something and get some recognition. So much change and all of it pretty good. Everyone seems to have got what they wanted, which is pretty awesome. Even you, Alfie boy, even you, hey.”

I felt a twinge of guilt about packing up and leaving without any goodbyes as soon as I’d got up but, at the end of the day, and at the beginning of the day too come to that, moving on is what I do. I make no pretence of permanence and goodbyes really aren’t my scene, although I hoped Lucy wasn’t going to go to too much trouble over the dinner I wouldn’t be having. At least I’d remembered to fix the front door of the butcher’s shop.

“So who shall I be next?” I asked Alfie. “I’m sick of being Ben Webster. Hmmm.”

I tossed away my ciggie and Alfie jumped into the trike’s basket,

impatient, like me, to be off to new adventures.

“Damn, isn’t it a beautiful day,” I said as we rode off again. An old Louis Armstrong song came into my head which seemed to fit.

*I see trees of green
Red roses too
I see them bloom
For me and you*

“Hey,” I said over my shoulder to Alfie, “how about calling myself Louis Armstrong?”

*I see skies of blue
And clouds of white
The bright blessed day
The dark sacred night*

OK, I admit Louis Armstrong wasn’t a sax player but he was still pretty good and the sun was warm on my face and the countryside was green and lush. It really was a wonderful world.

“Call me Louis,” I said to Alfie, the decision made.

*And I think to myself
What a wonderful world
Yeah, I think to myself
What a wonderful world
Oh yeahhhhhh*