

Chapter 1

A shaft of brilliant sunlight bounced off Catherine Brewer's full-length mirror, drilled through her twitching eyelids and jolted her into consciousness. She often stood in front of that mirror, admiring her thick, blond tresses and enormous, ocean-blue eyes. She felt so lucky that none of the other girls at school could match her for looks. Or brains, for that matter. And today was going to mark yet another victory for the undisputed genius of Finlay Street Junior High!

Catherine sprang out of bed and opened the top drawer of her bedside table. This would be a breeze – there was no way she was going on the school trip to the old folks' home today. All she needed to carry out her master plan had been carefully prepared last night – honey, pepper and salt. She just had to be careful to use the correct proportions of each ingredient, otherwise the deception might backfire. She lifted up the honey jar, took a crumpled piece of paper out of her dressing-gown pocket and read the recipe one final time. A generous blob of honey mixed with a teaspoon of pepper – to be shoved up the nostrils to simulate a blocked nose with occasional real sneezes – and a pinch of salt for red and inflamed eyeballs. Too easy!

But Catherine was a stickler for detail, and immediately realized that the instructions she's downloaded from the Internet were not absolutely clear. The honey-pepper combination: was it for both nostrils or just one? If she made a mistake, she would either give weak, pathetic sneezes that failed to convince, but on the other hand, doubling the dose could make her trickery seem too obvious. She finally decided it was better to use too much than too little – after all, Mom and Dad wouldn't know acting from reality anyway.

Catherine carefully arranged the honey jar and salt-and-pepper shakers on her antique mahogany dresser. Then she picked up the teaspoon and breakfast bowl she had smuggled out of

the kitchen late last night. With a grin of satisfaction she combined the honey and pepper, stirring vigorously until they were thoroughly blended. Catherine thought an eyedropper would be the best way to transfer the 'flu potion from bowl to nose, but this proved to be a misguided approach; the glunky mixture was too thick to suck up into the tube. Damn, she thought, I'll just have to sort of spoon it in!

She dipped the spoon into the bowl, gave it a twirl and raised it to her left nostril. She tilted her head back slightly and waited for the honey to trickle in. Catherine stood in this pose for what seemed like several minutes, expecting to feel some sort of sticky sensation, but nothing was happening. She knew she had to act quickly, or the game would be up. Luckily, there was a vase filled with daisies on the windowsill. She tossed the flowers out the window, added a little water to the honey and hurriedly stirred the concoction until it became runnier. This was a stroke of genius – she managed to fill both nostrils with ease. The only problem was that she had to keep her head tilted way back to stop the stuff from escaping. Never mind, she said to herself, it'll thicken up again.

Next ingredient – salt. Catherine was not at all keen on this part of the plan: she was sure the salt would hurt like mad. She took a pinch of salt and quickly sprinkled a little of the grainy white powder into each eye, shutting her eyelids tight in anticipation of the awful sting. It smarted a little, but not half as much as she thought it would.

Eyes clamped shut, Catherine stumbled her way to the mirror. Gingerly, she opened her eyes. They had turned tomato red and her nostrils certainly had that shiny, wet look you'd expect of someone with a nasty cold. Great, she thought, I'll just stash the evidence, hop back into bed and wait. Half an hour and Mom will be up to see what's wrong.

* * *

Catherine's mother wiped her hands on her apron and glanced at the kitchen clock. 'Where is that girl? She's got that trip to *Passing Winds* today. This will be a marvelous chance for her to chat with some of the nice old people at the retirement home. God knows she has enough trouble getting along with her schoolmates, and everyone else for that matter. I've made her a proper breakfast and I'd hate it to go cold on her. Maybe she's sick. Are you listening to me, Barry?'

'Sorry Margaret? Yes, I agree,' Catherine's father looked up from the newspaper he had spread over the kitchen table, 'go and see if she's all right. She seemed fine last night, but perhaps you ought to check,' he added carefully.

'I'll just pop upstairs and give her a hand getting ready for school. Be down in a minute,' said Margaret with an edge in her voice.

Catherine heard the stairs creak and knew Mom was on her way up to check on her little angel. She was a bit disappointed that Mom had taken so long to stir – not because she felt neglected, it was just that the first batch of honey she'd put in her nose was starting to congeal, threatening to set like concrete. For extra effect, Catherine had foolishly decided to pour more of the goo down her nostrils, but she overdid it this time and the stuff had run all over her face.

'Darling, are you all right?' her mother's voice echoed behind the closed door.

'Yes Bob, I'b fide,' Catherine whimpered in the most miserable voice she could muster. 'I'b just got a touch of the 'flu'.

Margaret's bird-like head appeared around the edge of the door. The warm look of sympathy on her face could have melted an iceberg, and Catherine felt half the battle was over. She also guessed what would happen next – Mom would go and get Dad, they'd have a brief consultation and quite sensibly grant her the day off.

'I'll just go and get Dad,' her mother said, as if on cue.

Perfect, thought Catherine, all going according to schedule. But that honey was getting awfully stiff. She ladled a smidgen more into her nostrils in order to look like a human mucus factory, but by now they were full to the brim and refusing to let any more in. The mixture poured out everywhere, and to make matters worse, the pepper started to take effect. Aaaachooo! The honey-water-pepper combination sprayed all over the bedspread and onto the floor. Catherine grabbed a handful of tissues from her bedside table and started to mop up the evidence. She managed to dry some of it up, but, as she wiped her dripping face, her parents, alarmed by the loud sneezing, burst into the room at full tilt.

'Cathy, darling, you really are unwell by the sound of it. You'd better stay home today,' her mother said.

'I think so, too,' her father agreed. 'And if you're no better by tomorrow, we'll make an appointment with Doctor Nettlefold.'

'Okay,' said Catherine. 'Only it's a shabe I'll biss the old polk's hobe.'

Unfortunately, her parents heard none of this, as the dozen or so tissues Catherine had used to wipe her face had become stuck fast, muffling any sounds she uttered.

'Pardon?' her parents asked in unison.

'Mmff brf grmff!' Catherine insisted.

'It's no good, honey. I can't understand a word you're saying. Not only that, I can't even see your face. Let me get those tissues,' her mother offered.

'Catherine's heart sank. She knew this wasn't her lucky day as soon as her mother had called her honey. The irony of it! *Now here she comes for a closer look.*

Margaret grasped a fistful of tissues and tugged gently. Nothing. The honey mixture had set solid, gluing the tissues to Catherine's tender face. She pulled a little harder. Still nothing.

She yanked with all her might, drawing a yelp off real pain.

'My God, Catherine Brewer!' her father bellowed. 'What on Earth is going on here? And why are my feet stuck to the carpet? There's enough honey in this room to feed the three bears for a week! You've got some explaining to do.'

Catherine had to think fast.

'Oh, Daddy! I didn't want to deceive you and Mom, really I didn't. It's just that some of the girls at school have been teasing me about my fantastic grades. Those dimwits are so jealous of me. I thought maybe I could just stay home today and try to forget about how mean they all are.' Catherine gave a little whimper intended to extract maximum sympathy. 'Maybe I could read up for the science exam,' she added, forcing half a smile.

'My darling,' her mother cooed. 'We've told you over and over: their jealousy just proves how much better than them you are.'

Don't I just know it, Catherine silently agreed.

'However, young lady, I'm afraid that sitting at home moping won't change anyone's attitude towards you. In fact, you're just letting them win, and we can't have that, can we? And besides, I've ironed your best clothes for you to wear to the retirement home. This really is an opportunity not to be missed.'

Catherine couldn't bring herself to admit the real reason she had gone to such great pains to avoid going to school. Through a stream of crocodile tears she finally conceded defeat.

'Okay, Mom,' she whimpered. 'I'll be downstairs in a couple minutes. Just one thing, though, could you drive me to school this morning? I don't feel like getting the bus today.'

'Of course, sweetheart.'

* * *

As soon as she saw her face in the mirror, Catherine got even more upset that her brilliant scheme had fallen apart. It was embarrassing enough for her own parents to discover the truth, but it was ten times worse now that she had to front up at school with her face the color of a ripe raspberry. The other kids would be merciless this time. But she knew what to do – a bit of Mom's cosmetics should do the trick!

When she'd finished getting dressed, Catherine tiptoed into her parents' bedroom and began frantically searching her mom's makeup box. Yes, there was the compact. She gently rubbed some of the dusty brown powder over her still-tender cheeks and inspected her reflection in mom's mirror, which was quite modest compared to her own – you could only see your face in this one. The result was passable; the most anyone would suspect was that she'd spent too long under a tanning lamp.

As she plodded down the stairs, Catherine felt relief that her parents were so soft. But mostly she was disappointed because she would have to visit those unbearable wrinklies after all.

'Hurry up, Cathy!' her mother urged. 'We're all going to be late if you don't get a move on.'

Catherine was in no mood for an argument this morning. She just wanted the day to be over.

'Everyone in the car. On the double! Forwaaard, march!' Barry commanded in his best military voice. Unfortunately, his spindly body, outdated brown suit and, worst of all, his wispy comb-over hair style, made his attempts at being a forceful Alpha male seem rather comical. At least Catherine thought so. Margaret, on the other hand, was always impressed by her husband's army speak. She often imagined her darling Barry as a gallant soldier on horseback, dashing through the scorching desert to rescue her from evildoers.

'Yes, sir! Right away, sir!' Margaret snapped in reply.

'Whatever...' Catherine sighed.

Chapter 2

Although the early part of the morning had been bright and sunny, the forecast was for rain. Sure enough, as Barry Brewer's big green Volvo pulled over to let Catherine off by the school gates, the gentle drizzle that had started to fall became heavier. Worse still, seconds after Catherine had slammed the door shut and waved good-bye, the rain turned into a raging torrent. Catherine reached into her backpack to get her umbrella. Not there! Raincoat? Yes! She thrust her arms into the sleeves and pulled the hood over her head. This was an improvement, but she still had to get under cover quickly before her shoes became saturated. She gathered up her bag and sprinted.

Everyone else agreed with Catherine's assessment of the situation, and soon there were dozens of children and teachers running full speed towards the main entrance. Just as Catherine was about to mount the first step of the stairway, Karl Allenby, the beefiest football player at Finlay Street, crashed heavily into her right side, launching her high into the air. As she flew on a collision course with a puddle, several thoughts raced through her head, first among them '*Why me?*'

Catherine made an inelegant, face-first landing in the brown water, and the splash would have been quite loud too, had it not been for the deafening rain. Slowly raising her bruised body from the dirty puddle, Catherine quickly checked to see that no bones had been broken. All in one piece! She then saw that everyone except her had finally made it inside the building.

Thankfully, they had all been so worried about keeping their own skins dry that nobody had witnessed her embarrassing crash. What a relief! If only that puddle had been bigger, I would have been totally soaked and they would have had to send me home. Suddenly she had another bright idea – shed the raincoat and let nature lend a hand. Just as she started to undo the plastic buttons, the principal, Mr. Kennedy, appeared at the end of the pathway.

Mr. Kennedy's portly frame loomed before Catherine like a giant battleship. 'Let me help you with those buttons,' his baritone voice boomed above the thunder. 'Actually, we're almost inside. A bit late to start putting on your raincoat, though.'

'Oh, no, Mr. Kennedy. I was just making sure the buttons were all done up. I didn't want my good clothes getting wet before the trip to *Passing Winds*,' she lied.

'Good thinking,' Mr. Kennedy agreed. 'But let's hurry inside, the bell's already gone.'

As Catherine approached her classroom, she decided to try and not let the impending excursion ruin her day. She turned the big brass handle on the door and poked her head inside. All the kids were sitting behind their desks waiting for Mr. Goldsmith to start the class.

'I see we have a latecomer. Never mind. This awful weather has made us all a little late today.'

Everyone stared in deathly silence as Catherine slowly approached her desk. Jenny Rodriguez, Catherine's worst enemy, spotted it first.

'Hey, Brewer, did you fall into a mud bath, or what?!' she yelled, focusing the full attention of the class on Catherine's bedraggled figure. Everyone immediately noticed that her face looked like a strawberry dipped in chocolate sauce. The uproarious laughter, whistling and foot stomping rattled the windows.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' Catherine replied calmly as she took her place.

‘Quiet everyone!’ Mr. Goldsmith commanded. ‘Now, let’s find out what the problem is.’

Mr. Goldsmith was famous at Finlay Street for his extremely poor eyesight. He was forever mixing up the students, and even his fellow teachers. To make matters worse, a week ago, after school, he had been casually walking to his car when a tennis ball lobbed over the perimeter fence and hit him in the back of the head, propelling his glasses under the front tires of the school bus just as it was taking off. Now he had to wait a week until his new ones would be ready. In other words he was, temporarily at least, blind as a bat.

He carefully edged his way across the room, mentally counting off the desks as he went; he knew Catherine’s should be sixth from the front.

Having reached his destination, Mr. Goldsmith bent at the knees, squinted hard and stretched out his neck as far as he could. The blurry image before him certainly bore a vague resemblance to the class genius, but he couldn’t be sure. The more he strained to look, the harder Catherine tried to back away. It wasn’t that his screwed-up eyes, stray nose-hairs and dandruff-infested bushy eyebrows were unnerving her, it was the overpowering stench of garlic on his breath. Catherine thought he must eat the stuff raw.

‘Is that you Catherine?’ And what’s happened to you? Your face looks different, somehow.’

‘Of course it’s me!’ she shouted, trying hard not to gag. ‘Who did you expect, Oprah Winfrey? Actually, it’s nothing serious, just a slight reaction to Jenny Rodriguez. She brings me out in a rash.’

‘Don’t listen to her, Mr. Goldsmith,’ interrupted Jenny’s best friend, Charlotte O’Hara. ‘Anyone can see she’s gone crazy with foundation, trying to hide her zits.’ This drew another bout of laughter from the class.

‘Enough!’ shouted Mr. Goldsmith. ‘Now Catherine, I can see something’s not quite right here. Is it make-up? You know it’s not allowed.’

‘Yes, I admit it. But I’ve got a good excuse. I wanted to make a positive impression on the old people today. I would have looked fabulous, too, if it hadn’t been for the rainstorm.’

‘Well, you’d best go to the washroom and tidy yourself up. The bus for *Passing Winds* is departing from the back entrance in thirty minutes.’

Humiliated, Catherine heaved herself out of her chair and made the long, lonely walk to the door. The guffaws from her classmates made her face redden even more under the mudslide of foundation.

Catherine was horrified by her reflection. She really has laid the make-up on a little too generously. Little ridges of the stuff had formed down her cheeks and across her forehead, giving her face the appearance of a relief map of California, complete with rivers and mountain ranges. The bits of pink showing through could have represented areas of low vegetation, perhaps deserts. *My God*, she thought, *no wonder those morons were making fun of me!*

Catherine shrugged and laughed to herself, vowing to get revenge somehow or other. She turned on the faucet, cupped her hands under the flowing water and splashed her face several times. She looked down at her hands and saw they had turned a deep brown hue. A few more splashes and the last traces of make-up were washed down the drain. Catherine was overjoyed to see that the raw redness of this morning had been replaced by a much healthier looking pink, like a pastel English rose. She gave her hair a quick brush and admired herself for a few minutes before heading back to the cauldron.

Much relieved, Catherine resumed her seat in the class. Having erased the earlier scene of humiliation from her short-term memory banks (but filed away in the archive for future

reference), she stared straight ahead at the blackboard. The other kids were fidgeting in anticipation of Mr. Goldsmith announcing the arrival of the bus, which was due any second.

Geoffrey Littlewood was gazing out the window – he wanted to be the first to see it turning into the car park.

‘It’s here!’ he announced.

The class stood as one and prepared to make a mad dash for the door. Mr. Goldsmith held up his hand like a traffic cop and everyone froze.

‘Not so fast, you lot. You all know I can’t see very well without my glasses, so one of you is going to have to act as my seeing-eye dog. Catherine, I pick you as volunteer for this job.’

Just great, thought Catherine. *The blond leading the blind!*

Chapter 3

Fighting her natural curiosity, Catherine tried to block out the noise coming from the seats behind. Each mention of her name was accompanied by cruel laughter. *Damn them all!* Her revenge would be sweet; if only she could think of something spectacular, preferably painful. For the moment, though, she was content to stare out the window and watch the world go by.

Sitting next to stinky Goldsmith wasn’t very pleasant either. His breath seemed to get fouler by the minute. Every time he spoke to Catherine, she was sure she could see little blue-green clouds of gas escaping from his mouth.

‘Would you like some gum, sir?’ she offered with sarcastic generosity, hoping like mad he’d take the whole pack and stuff all the fresh, minty pellets in his mouth at once.

‘No thanks. But you *can* give me the pack. You know that’s against school regulations.

What's the matter with you lately? You're breaking every rule in the book!'

'Just not my day.'

The rattly old bus swerved sharply to the left, signaling their arrival at *Passing Winds*. It drove through a pair of rusty wrought-iron gates that were clinging onto their hinges for dear life. At one side of the entrance stood a small, empty building that looked like a sentry box. The property itself was enclosed behind a high picket fence, behind which enormous prickly rose bushes kept guard. From the road, the view of the main building was almost entirely hidden, although some of the more elevated buildings were visible.

As they bumped their way along the potholed driveway, Catherine could see the peeling paint of the reception office. The bus began to slow down a little, and Mr. Goldsmith thought now would be a good time to stand up and give the class some last-minute instructions. Unfortunately, the journey wasn't quite over; the driver had to veer suddenly to avoid colliding with one of the residents crossing the driveway in his electric wheelchair. Mr. Goldsmith was halfway to standing up straight when the laws of physics decided he was committing a serious offence. As the bus went one way, he lurched ungracefully in the opposite direction, catching his right knee squarely against the seat in front of him. He bent down in agony, clutching at his injured leg, when the driver, for no apparent reason, decided it was time to give the brakes a solid workout. Mr. Goldsmith's body flipped up into the air, rotated ninety degrees and crashed to the floor.

The laughter died down after about fifteen seconds. When it became obvious that the short-sighted teacher wasn't getting up in a hurry, Catherine fell to his side and checked to make sure he was still breathing. No doubt about it, the garlic factory was at full production and giving off steam. Which meant he was only concussed and she wouldn't have to put herself through the

torture of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Next she turned her attention to the bus driver.

‘Where did you get your driver’s license from? A box of cereal?’ she asked sarcastically. ‘Now get inside and try to find some help for Mr. Goldsmith. It’s all your fault!’

The driver, who wasn’t far off becoming a resident of *Passing Winds* himself, was too dumbfounded to move. Catherine stood up and gave him a look that said ‘*Don’t mess with me if you know what’s good for you!*’ Realizing the situation was serious, the old man dashed out the door and up the walkway to the reception area at a speed that would put many a younger man to shame.

Catherine held Mr. Goldsmith’s wrist and looked at her watch. She didn’t really know what the correct pulse rate would be for an adult (or for a child, for that matter), but she was sure that in this pose she would command the respect of her classmates. She could feel the power that this accident had given her, she could...

‘Hey, nurse! Come and give me a check-up!’ one of the boys called from the back seats.

‘Yeah, me too! I need some tender loving care!’ chimed in another.

Catherine felt the humiliation once again. Everybody was laughing and jeering, eventually building to a rhythmic chant – NUR-SEY!... clap, clap, clap... NUR-SEY!... clap, clap, clap...

Catherine stood up as tall as she could and screamed ‘SHUT UP YOU IDIOTS! Can’t you see Mr. Goldsmith’s nearly been killed?’

The noise went on unabated – Catherine yelling and the other kids getting louder and louder, and all the while poor Mr. Goldsmith was out to the world. There was no telling what would have happened next if it hadn’t been for the bus driver turning up with the director of the retirement home.

Catherine was still bawling her lungs out when everyone else suddenly fell silent. *Great*, she thought, *I've beaten them at their own stupid game*. She rapidly regained her composure and was about to start barking instructions when she felt a tap on the shoulder. She turned around to be confronted by a refrigerator in a dress. The bus driver's bald head peered timidly from behind this massive figure, and for a moment Catherine thought this jumbo-sized woman had a flesh-colored bowling ball growing from the hip. But the round object quickly vanished and she realized this big lady wasn't a mutant after all.

'My name is Mrs. Morrison, and I'm the director of *Passing Winds*,' she announced in an official tone. 'From all the racket you lot were making, anyone would have thought there was a full-scale riot going on! Now, where's the patient?'

'Right here,' said Catherine, pointing to Mr. Goldsmith's prostrate figure.

Mrs. Morrison roughly elbowed Catherine out of the way and somehow lowered her bulky body to the floor of the bus. She grabbed Mr. Goldsmith's wrist and looked at her watch. Catherine folded her arms across her chest and turned to face the mob with a look that said, *See! I was right!* Mrs. Morrison soon caught a whiff of the victim's breath, however, and decided to stop the examination.

'Pulse normal. My diagnosis is either concussion as a result of the fall or severe garlic poisoning. Whatever the case, we've got to get him seen to by a doctor. You, young man,' she said, pointing to Kieran, the biggest boy in the class. 'You grab his legs, and I'll lift him under the armpits. The rest of you – follow us.'

* * *

Mr. Goldsmith awoke to find himself lying on crisp white sheets that smelled of moth-balls. Catherine was sitting on a chair by his bed and several elderly people were wandering

around with lost looks on their faces. It was all a blur to Mr. Goldsmith, of course, but he could smell the antiseptic odor that is characteristic of hospitals the world over. He began to look a little worried, but Catherine reassured him.

'Don't panic, sir. You had a little fall in the bus when that fool of a driver slammed on the brakes. I can look into your legal options if you like?' she said hopefully. 'We could sue the pants off the old maniac!'

'I'm sure it won't come to that, Catherine. A stern warning should be enough. Or maybe we could suggest that he retire gracefully.'

'But sir, you could have been killed. Imagine that! And think of all the trauma us kids would have gone through with a corpse on the bus. We would have been scarred for life and...'

Just as Catherine was winding up for a long speech, Mrs. Morrison loomed large at the foot of the bed in the company of a scrawny little fellow in a white coat and stethoscope. Without any form of introduction, the doctor ambled across to Mr. Goldsmith's side and went through exactly the same procedure that Catherine and the director had performed. Catherine decided on the spot that if pulse checking was all that was required, she was definitely going to become a doctor. After all, she'd done it quite admirably herself. But when the doc whipped out his tongue depressor and asked the patient to open up and say ah, she changed her mind just as quickly. *Yuk!* The rest of the examination consisted of shining a small flashlight into Mr. Goldsmith's eyes, poking about in his ears, listening to his heart and feeling for broken bones. The doctor gave his verdict.

'You'll survive. In fact, I reckon you'll be ready for duty by Monday morning. In the meantime, I recommend you take a taxi home and rest up over the weekend.'

'But what about the kids' excursion? They need supervision, believe me. I'll have to

arrange for a replacement teacher to come over. Either that or cancel the whole thing. And besides, from what Catherine tells me, that bus driver is probably shaken up, and I definitely don't want him in charge of the children in that condition.'

'No need for that, Mr. Goldsmith,' said Mrs. Morrison. 'We can easily arrange for a different bus. As for a replacement teacher, forget it. I'll look after the little devils, and they'll have a great time whether they want to or not!'

Chapter 4

Mrs. Morrison assembled the children in her office with a minimum of fuss. All the kids were crowded together behind her desk, which was piled so high with papers and ring-binders that even her generously proportioned figure was totally obscured.

'Since we lost a few hours tending to poor Mr. Goldsmith, we'll have to try and squeeze as much as we can into the short time left this afternoon. Now, I *had* arranged for each of you to spend some quality time having a nice one-on-one chat with our residents.' Mrs. Morrison rose to her feet, suddenly aware that her audience couldn't see her for the clutter. She made a grand, sweeping gesture with her right arm which sent several pounds' worth of filing and stationery crashing to the floor. 'Unfortunately, one of the old dears passed away last night, which means the numbers don't quite match up. One of you will have to pair up with a friend, so...'

'No problem there,' Catherine interrupted. 'I'm not feeling too well, actually. I could amuse myself with a magazine or something while the others do the grand tour.'

'Nonsense. The benefit you children and our guests can get from these little get-togethers is invaluable. Since you're so reluctant to join in, I'll decide who you can pair up with. What's

your name?'

'Catherine. Catherine Brewer,' she said with as much enthusiasm as a prisoner taking the final walk to the execution chamber.

The other children cast their eyes towards the floor, trying to avoid Mrs. Morrison's gaze and praying she would pick someone else to buddy with Catherine.

'You,' Mrs. Morrison said pointing a chunky index finger at Jenny Rodriguez. 'You can be Catherine's partner for today. You two will be talking to Mr. Hodges, a lovely old gentleman who'll have plenty of interesting tales to tell about his days as the first milkman in our fine town.'

'That sounds very exciting,' Catherine said, staring daggers at Jenny. 'I'm sure my partner here will be absolutely riveted by his tales of double cream and chocolate-flavored milk, considering she's such a cow!

Much to Catherine's delight, Jenny's best friend Charlotte gave a rather loud laugh, which was followed by the dull thud of clenched fist against upper arm and a squeal of pain. *Great. Two birds with one stone!*

'Okay, enough of that,' Mrs. Morrison said, regaining her authority over the group. 'I'll be keeping a close eye on you two, and everyone else for that matter. Any more of that, and I'll be filing a report to your principal. Now, here's everyone's assigned person,' she continued, handing out slips of paper with the name of one of the residents on each one.

'We shall now proceed into the library. The person you'll be talking to will be wearing a nametag, so you'll have no trouble finding who you're looking for. Any questions? No? Let's go then!'

Mrs. Morrison eased her big body from behind her fortress-desk and shepherded her

tender young flock into the narrow corridor. The kids' bodies squashed together as everybody jostled to be the first in line behind their oversized mother duck; elbows dug into unprotected rib cages and feet were trodden upon. Mrs. Morrison sensed that tempers would soon rise and strode faster to reach the end of the corridor that led into the library.

The crowd popped through the doorway like a champagne cork bursting from its bottle. Catherine emerged somewhere in the middle and was relieved to find that she could move her arms freely and turn her head without finding her nose in someone's smelly armpit. The young visitors lined up against the only spare wall in the library, giving each other equal room just as strangers in an elevator magically manage to leave *exactly* the same amount of space between themselves.

Mrs. Morrison turned to face her charges. 'All right,' she said in her best attempt at a whisper, which was nevertheless quite loud. 'I want everyone on their absolute best behavior. Remember, these folks are not as young as you, and we don't want them to get too stressed or over-excited. Some of them have weak hearts and other medical conditions. So, keep the volume down and *no* bad language. Got it?'

All the children nodded obediently.

'Now, everybody go and find the person you'll be chatting with. I'll be keeping a close eye on things from a distance and I'll let you know when time's up,' Mrs. Morrison said with only the slightest trace of anxiety. She lumbered her way into a far corner of the room and regally sat down in a soft leather armchair.

The elderly residents sat patiently in their stretch-out chairs waiting to be approached by the children. When she got close enough to make out their faces, Catherine was surprised to see the looks of happy expectation, and thought their lives must be miserable indeed if this visit by a

bunch of obnoxious brats was bringing them so much joy. There were twenty of them altogether – fourteen women and only six men. Catherine knew that females lived longer, and here was the proof. As promised, each was wearing a cardboard tag with his or her name written in block letters.

Mr. Hodges shone like a beacon among the other residents. In contrast to the other nineteen grey and indistinct-looking individuals, he sported a mass of thick, curly red hair and a matching bushy beard. His green feline eyes sparkled from underneath a pair of even bushier eyebrows. Catherine and Jenny exchanged a look of quiet apprehension.

‘C’mon,’ said Catherine. ‘I know he looks a bit spooky, but I don’t reckon he could do anything bad with all these people around. And besides, you must never judge on appearances. Otherwise, you would have been locked up ages ago.’

‘Okay, let’s go and talk to him. But I’m warning you,’ Jenny said, puffing out her chest and narrowing her eyes into slits. ‘You make me look stupid, and you’re history.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m even less keen on being here than you are. Old people give me the creeps. Let’s get this torture over and done with.’

Chapter 5

By the time Catherine and Jenny had reached the single stool next to Mr. Hodges’ chair, the other kids had already made contact with their assigned person. Snatches of conversation and the odd burst of laughter could be heard from all around the cavernous library, which was strangely lacking in reading material. The two girls nervously eyed Mr. Hodges, who motioned towards the stool with an almost imperceptible nod of his shaggy head.

'Looks like management has made another mistake. Two visitors and only one chair. Typical of this place,' he said, pulling a tattered tartan blanket up to his hairy chin.

Catherine noticed that all of the old people had the same moth-eaten blankets draped over their legs. She also realized, for the first time, how cold it was in the room. And dark. Heavy linen drapes had been drawn to block out the sunlight from outside and low-wattage globes provided only the dimmest light from above.

'Um, how long have you lived at *Passing Winds*, Mr. Hodges?' Jenny asked, saying the first thing that popped into her head. She bent down to sit on the stool, but ended up in Catherine's lap. Mr. Hodges' answer was lost in the ensuing argument.

'Ouch! What's that?!' Jenny yelped as she felt something sharp piercing her tender buttock.

'Hey, watch it dummy. I was here first!' Catherine shouted, quickly putting the safety pin back in her pocket.

'Look, it's so dark in here, I didn't notice you had sat down already. Don't blame me'

'*Don't blame me,*' said Catherine in a singsong mocking tone. 'Who else am I going to blame? Old Mr. Hodges here?'

By this stage, all other conversation had ceased. Mrs. Morrison wasted no time getting to the source of the trouble. With surprising agility, she leapt from her armchair and in a few giant strides was beside Catherine and Jenny.

'You didn't listen to a word I said, did you?' she said, giving the girls a look that could burn a hole through a small planet. 'Right. Catherine, you come with me – that's just because you're the only one whose name I know. You,' she continued, pointing an accusing finger at Jenny. 'You sit here and have a nice chat with nice Mr. Hodges. I'll get your details later and

make sure your teacher gets to hear of this outrageous behavior.'

Catherine gave Jenny a toothy grin that was like a camera flash in the dark room. She might be in trouble, but so was Jenny. And that was worth anything. With an arrogant flick of her long blond hair she fell into step behind Mrs. Morrison.

When they reached the large armchair that Mrs. Morrison had been using as an observation post, the director bent her head to be inches from Catherine's face. Her breathing was labored, but she was still very much the boss.

'Go and sit on that bench halfway down the corridor. You will sit there quietly for the next hour and not move a muscle until I come and get you. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Mrs. Morrison,' Catherine replied with her bottom lip trembling like a leaf. 'I'm awfully sorry. But it was Jenny who...'

'I don't want to hear about it,' Mrs. Morrison interrupted, not moved by the impudent girl's facial gymnastics. 'You're the one who seemed to be causing all the trouble. If the other girl was at fault, well, that's a matter for your teacher to sort out. I just want this visit to go ahead with as little disruption as possible. Now, take a seat and wait.'

'Y-y-y-e-s, Mrs. M-m-m-orrison,' Catherine sobbed with her back to the director. Striding purposefully to the punishment bench, Catherine wondered if she was the only person in the world who could blubber and smile at the same time. By the time she was seated, her eyes were dry and her grin was like a split watermelon.

Chapter 5

Catherine looked at the clock for the thirteenth time and thought it might have been better to stay

with the rest of the class after all. She was bored stiff. Besides, her backside was growing number by the minute: no amount of re-arranging her position could get rid of the pins and needles that were spreading from her hips to the tips of her toes. Before long it would start spreading in the opposite direction, possibly with fatal consequences. To make matters worse, every time she thought it might be safe to get up and stretch her legs, Mrs. Morrison's scowling face would peek from behind the door at the end of the hallway.

Some fifteen minutes had passed since Mrs. Morrison last checked, so Catherine took a risk. She had to, really, her sanity was at stake – not to mention her blood circulation. Cautiously she stood up, glanced sideways to make sure the coast was clear, and tiptoed up the corridor. She spotted a closed door near the end of the hall. As she got closer, she heard a heated argument going on.

Unfortunately, the glass in the door was the frosted kind that lets you see shadows and movement through it, but nothing in any detail. Catherine put her ear to the glass and listened as hard as she could.

'I've told you, I've already take my medication today!'

'Be a good girl now, Olga. You know if you don't take it you'll be in big trouble with Mrs. Morrison.'

'That awful woman doesn't scare me. And neither do you. Now get lost before I let out a scream that will shatter the medicine cabinet and all the bottles of poison in it!'

Catherine could stand it no longer. She loved a good argument, but this one was threatening to turn into something nasty. She flung the door open and marched in.

The ruckus stopped immediately as the young man in the white coat and the old lady in the bed turned to see Catherine beaming at them. It appeared they were the only ones in the

room, although it also contained three other hospital-style beds with plastic curtains drawn around them. A strange odor hung in the air; a blend of boiled cabbages and antiseptic. This room was as dark as the library but, unlike the library, in one corner stood an enormous bookcase jammed full of medical encyclopedias and other reference books. Catherine decided to speak first before she was ordered out.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'I'm from the school group touring your *wonderful* aged-care facility. Unfortunately, we had one too many kids, so Mrs. Morrison told me to come and have a chat with Mrs. ...'

'Pivovarov,' filled in the snowy-haired figure from under a mountain of blankets.

'Yes,' Catherine said. 'Mrs. Peevo-thingy. And she also told me that I was to let the nice young gentleman know that he should give us absolute privacy.'

The orderly looked at Catherine in utter bewilderment. Then relief spread across his youthful features, which included a bad case of acne. He thrust his hands in his deep pockets and ambled across to where Catherine stood.

'You're welcome to the old bat. I tell you, she's the most difficult patient – I mean resident – we've got,' he whispered in her ear. 'But I'd better check with Mrs. Morrison to make sure you should be here. It's a semi-restricted area, you know. Only staff and relatives.'

'I understand. Actually, I think they've finished in the library now. Mrs. Morrison said she'd be giving the kids a tour of the gardens next,' Catherine said, staring straight into the young man's eyes.

'Just don't stay too long, okay?'

'Hey, take her with you!' Mrs. Pivovarov shouted. 'I didn't ask for any visitors.'

'Sorry, Olga,' he said without any sympathy whatsoever. 'You might not be afraid of Mrs.

Morrison, but I certainly am. And if she says you're to have a visitor, then who am I to argue?'

The door closed gently behind the retreating orderly. Catherine spun on her heels and beamed another angelic smile at the reclining woman. She sat in the chair vacated by the orderly and studied Olga's face. Wrinkly. That was the first and not unexpected impression. She wasn't pretty, that was certain, and probably never had been. She had a rounded, bulbous nose and a mole shaped like a bottle on her left cheek. Her head was crowned with wispy, almost luminescent hair. Catherine thought she looked like a female version of her hero, Albert Einstein, only without the droopy mustache. But then she saw something in the old woman's eyes, which she couldn't quite explain. It was something strange, yet familiar. Olga regarded Catherine with a mixture of mistrust and curiosity.

'Hello, Olga. What shall we talk about?' Catherine asked cheerfully. 'Boy, you got a helluva last name. What was it again? Only slowly this time.'

'Pi-vo-va-rov,' she said with exaggerated slowness, as if Catherine was an idiot. 'It's a Russian name which means maker of beer.'

Catherine's mouth opened like a giant clam and refused to shut. Her eyes did the same.

'What's the matter with you?' Olga asked. 'You look like you've seen a ghost. And I don't mean me, either. I intend to live many more years, despite the poison they keep pouring down my throat.'

Catherine eventually regained her composure.

'Maker of beer? In English you're supposed to say brewer. Like you say, ah, carpenter, not "maker of wooden things". Or plumber rather than "unclogger of blocked drain pipes". It's brewer. And, guess what, Mrs. Pi-vo-va-rov? That's my surname!'

'What, your name's Pivovarov, too?' she asked in disbelief. 'Then why you can't say it

proper?'

'No, silly. Brewer. My name's Catherine Brewer.' Catherine began to laugh uncontrollably. As tears cascaded down her cheeks, she realized she hadn't laughed like this in a long time. 'This is an unbelievable coincidence, Olga. We must be related somewhere down the line, hey?'

'Don't get your hopes up, dear.' Olga reached for the top drawer of her side-table, pulled it open and took out a pack of cigarettes. 'I come from nobility,' she said, casually tapping a cigarette on the top of the pack. 'And of course I know what my name means. The original Pivovarovs were brewers to the Russian royal family. By appointment!'

'You're not going to smoke that inside, are you?' Catherine said, hoping like mad that the old woman *would* light up. They probably had extra-sensitive smoke detectors installed to catch any of the geriatrics playing up.

'Don't be ridiculous. Never smoked in my life. It's a filthy habit, don't you know? I just pretend. I like to pretend. Especially since I got put in this dump.'

Catherine looked at her watch. The other kids had probably finished their tour by now and Mrs. Morrison must have realized she was missing. Or maybe that dumb orderly had dropped her in it. She didn't care.

'Do go on, Olga. I'd love to hear all about it.'

'Hear about what, exactly? How could I be of any interest to you? And vice-versa.' The old lady's words couldn't hide the enthusiasm in her voice. She never had any visitors, and most of the human contact she had was with the rude orderly, the officious doctor and that horrible Mrs. Morrison.

'Well, leaving aside the fact that our names mean the same thing, only in different

languages, I think you and I could become good friends.' Catherine held her hand up as she saw that Olga was about to object. 'Now, I can see you don't want to be living here. Maybe I can help.'

To Catherine's surprise, Olga flung off the blankets and practically leapt to her feet. She slotted her pink feet into the pair of slippers by the side of her bed and shuffled across to the window, resting her hands upon the sill. She gazed out at the car park for nearly a minute before turning to Catherine, a teardrop glistening on her right cheek.

'You... help me? I doubt it. You don't know the first thing about me, and besides, why would you want to?'

Catherine sized Olga up momentarily before answering. 'It's true I know nothing about you. But it's also obvious you're fit and healthy and you shouldn't be stuck in this place. And besides, I like your attitude. I don't take crap from anyone, and I can see you don't either.'

'I'm not sure I like that kind of language, young lady. Now, if you'd kindly leave me in peace.'

Just as Catherine was about to continue the conversation, she heard Mrs. Morrison's voice barking in the corridor. She couldn't make out exactly what the director said, just the words "Catherine", "Olga" and "trouble". Olga heard it too.

'Quick. Under the bed,' she instructed Catherine.

Catherine's feet disappeared under the bed as Mrs. Morrison and the young orderly barged into the room.

'Okay, Olga. Where's that young girl?' Mrs. Morrison demanded to know.

'Oh, I told her to get lost. She had nothing to say to me and I sent her packing. I think I just saw her running out the front gates. I don't think you'll catch her. She's probably halfway

home by now.'

Mrs. Morrison put her hand to her forehead and sighed deeply. She glanced at her watch. 2:30 p.m. It should take the bus ten minutes to get back to the school, but it was about a thirty minute walk. Considering Catherine was running and had a head start, she should be arriving back at Finlay Street at the same time as the bus. That's if she *was* heading for the school.

'Let's hope you're right. The replacement bus has arrived to take the kids back.' She turned to the orderly. 'As for you Oswald, you'd better pray this troublesome girl has gone back to school or to her own home. If anything happens to her, I'll have your head on a plate!'

Oswald's face turned white. 'But she was so convincing. You can hardly blame *me*.'

'Oh yes I can, and I do. The only thing that will save your pathetic hide is if I call the school in an hour and find out she's either there or safely sitting on the sofa watching television in her own house.'

Olga regarded the two of them with some amusement. She gave a little cough to remind them of her presence.

'Yes?' Mrs. Morrison enquired.

'Would you mind having your conversation elsewhere? I've got a *terrible* headache, and you know I can't take too much excitement. You don't want another one of your inmates turning up their toes, do you?'

Olga's sarcasm wasn't lost on the director. 'You'll keep. The only reason I agree to let you stay with us is because your son pays extra.'

'Don't you mention him to me. God will punish all wicked people for their sins, including you and my son!' bellowed Olga, her voice rising to a crescendo.

'Calm down, you old battle-axe. We'll leave you alone now,' said Mrs. Morrison. 'Just

make sure you take your medicine like a good girl,' she added, taking Oswald by the elbow and pushing him out of the room.

Underneath the bed, Catherine counted to ten before daring to emerge. When she stood up she saw that Olga's face was crimson with rage. The previous solitary tear had become a stream.

'Listen to me, Olga,' she said. 'I'm not leaving until you give me the full story. I know you'll talk to me because you could easily have dropped me in it, but you didn't. So talk.'

Olga wearily climbed into her bed and with exaggerated care arranged the blanket around her legs. The look of resignation on her face was mixed with relief that she could finally, after two years, unload her personal burden onto a willing listener.

The old woman spoke slowly and deliberately for over an hour without a single interruption from Catherine, who sat transfixed as the story unfolded. Olga retold how, as a very young girl, she had fled the Russian civil war with her parents and older sister, traveling across the vast Russian steppes and Siberia before finding a home in the Chinese city of Harbin. The city had become a refuge for many of her compatriots fleeing the terror and anarchy raging in their homeland. Olga had been witness to scenes of utter inhumanity – villages burned to the ground and enemies of the state murdered or, if they were lucky, rounded up to serve in the Soviet Red Army.

Catherine absorbed every tiny detail. She had read history books about these Earth-shaking events, but this was a first-hand account! The way Olga told the story, Catherine could hear and see everything; at one point she even imagined she could smell and taste the gunpowder as the Reds fired at a departing train full of refugees.

Olga brightened a little as she spoke of her years in China, going to a special Russian

school, but also mixing with some of the local Chinese children. She used to speak a little Chinese but had forgotten everything now – she couldn't even count to ten.

Somehow Olga's parents had managed to secure a passage on a ship headed for the United States. Many other families did the same, with others arranging to emigrate to Australia or Canada. Olga and her family arrived in New York with very little money (most of their possessions had to be abandoned when they fled their home in Saint Petersburg), but filled with a desire to succeed in this new, welcoming land.

'Okay, Olga. So you made it to America. Great. I'm sure the time between then and now is as fascinating as the stuff about the revolution. But something tells me I'd better get out of here soon. So how about you tell me quickly why you're in here, and we'll get back to the history lesson later. I know it's got something to do with your son – I couldn't help overhearing from under the bed. Boy, he must be a real bastard!'

'What did I tell you about bad language? I will not tolerate it! Now, leave me alone. I shouldn't have told you anything,' Olga sniffed, giving Catherine a sideways glance and hoping like mad the young girl would stay. 'You cannot help me.'

Catherine knew the old lady was testing her out, but decided to play along. 'If that's the way you want it,' she said, rising from the chair and turning for the door.

'Don't! Please stay,' Olga said, almost begging. 'I not mean it. You are only visitor I have for two years.'

Catherine realized she had taken things a bit too far and that she'd better start playing by Olga's rules. The old woman's flawless English had become ragged around the edges, which meant she must be really distressed.

'Okay. I see you really do need me. I'm sorry for swearing, but really Olga, these days

words like that aren't so bad. You can hear them on television; even the President has let some bad words slip out. But if you insist, I'll tone it down. Just for you, though, coming from nobility and all.'

'Well, I lied about that, actually. My father was just an ordinary public servant. Not quite dukes and duchesses, but we were much better off than most of the poor Russian people,' Olga admitted, reaching for her never-ending pack of smokes.

'Like I said, the history lesson can wait for another time. Just tell me how you ended up here,' Catherine demanded.

'As you heard, it's because of my son. But I don't blame him for everything – it's really the fault of his awful wife. When Boris first brought that disgraceful woman home, I knew it would mean nothing but trouble, especially for me. She's the one who talked him into having me put away. She convinced him I was senile and couldn't look after myself. It was two against one.' Olga buried her face in her hands and sobbed. 'I've got no relatives except for Boris. No friends left either – they're all dead. And it's getting worse. I used to have a private room, but the place is so overcrowded, they put me in this infirmary "temporarily". That was six months ago. I'm sure it's illegal leaving me alone with these bottles of God-knows-what. To tell you the truth, I've been tempted to pour the lot of it down my throat, but for some crazy reason I just can't bring myself to do it.'

Olga stared vacantly out the window, waiting for Catherine to say something, but the young girl was deep in thought. After several seconds of intense scheming, she let the old lady in on her plan.

'Right. I've got it all figured out. I'm going to bust you out of here! How does that grab you?' said Catherine, her eyes afire with determination.

'When?'

'Right now!'

Chapter 6

Catherine's plan was simple yet brilliant. She knew that the rest of the kids had left long ago and figured that it was probably afternoon nap time for most of the residents. That meant Mrs. Morrison and her staff might be enjoying a bit of a break, too. She also reckoned that the problem of the troublesome Ms. Brewer was already a distant memory buried in the dark recesses of Mrs. Morrison's evil mind. At least she hoped so.

Catherine expounded her idea to the old woman, whose demeanor had brightened considerably since first meeting this unusual young girl.

'Olga, if we can create a diversion, we should be able to hotfoot it out the front gate before anyone realizes what's going on. By the way, can you run?'

Olga screwed up one eye and gave Catherine a look that confirmed her ability to move at the required speed. Seeing that Catherine was still a little skeptical, Olga gave a vigorous nod, causing her snowy hair to wave around like an albino sea anemone.

'Yes, I can run. At least I used to be a good runner. State champion over two-hundred yards. Mind you, that was many years ago.'

'Well, let's hope you still have some gas left in the tank,' said Catherine, rifling through the top drawer of Olga's bedside table. 'Now, I know you've got cigarettes in here. How about some matches, or a lighter?'

Olga sat back on her bed with a heavy sigh. 'I told you before. It's all pretend. Why

would I need matches if I don't intend to smoke the horrid things? Now we'll have to come up with another plan.'

Catherine would not be defeated, however, and she paced back and forth scratching her curly blond head, concentrating hard. She had to think fast now. Time was running out. After a minute of marching around like a basketball coach who has only a few seconds left on the clock to come up with the winning play, she snapped her fingers, spun around and pumped her fist in the air. Olga reacted to this enthusiastic display by almost spitting out her false teeth.

'Yes! I remembered,' said Catherine. 'There was one of those fire alarm things in the library. You just have to smash the glass to set it off. No time to lose now, Olga. Are you ready?'

'Of course not. Can't you see I'm still in my pajamas and ...'

'That doesn't matter. The main thing is to get you out.' By now Catherine was standing half-turned towards Olga, one hand on the door knob. 'Grab whatever you can, shove it in a bag, and wait for me by the door. I'll be back in no time. The most important things to bring are any papers you might have. You know, legal documents and stuff. Got it? Right – see you soon!'

Catherine opened the door and quickly checked that the coast was clear. Then she sprinted up the hallway as fast as she could, her heart pounding like a locomotive. She'd done some stupid things in her time, and she knew this stunt was going to bring its fair share of problems, but that was nothing compared to Olga's predicament. There was no way a healthy woman with all her mental faculties intact should be abandoned to vegetate in a rest home just to make her son's life easier. Well, Catherine was going to make sure his life was going to be anything *but* easy!

As she tore down the hallway, Catherine was sure her thumping feet were making enough noise to draw the attention of every living soul in the building – and maybe even some of the

dead ones. But luckily, the racket she made was confined to the wing of the building containing the library (by now empty), the laundry (run by a deaf woman) and the infirmary, where Olga stood waiting to be rescued.

Once in the library, Catherine quickly made her way to the glass-framed alarm at the back wall. She grabbed the nearest chair and swung it mightily, shattering the glass into tiny slivers. Silence ... She was about to burst into tears, when suddenly the bell started ringing so loudly she had to cover her ears, but only for a second. She knew she had to get back to Olga. This time, as she bolted down the corridor, the noise of her pumping heart and pounding feet was completely drowned out by the deafening alarm bell.

She made it back to Olga in next to no time, the adrenalin coursing through her veins even more than when Jenny Rodriguez and her gang had chased her across the football field wielding baseball bats and javelins. But Catherine had sort of deserved that; she had scribbled some nasty things about Jenny on the wall of the bus stop – and been caught in the act. This was different. This was a mercy mission!

By now Olga had changed out of her baggy pajamas into a dark blue tracksuit and was standing to attention by the side of the bed, a look of steely determination on her wrinkled face. Catherine admired the old woman's courage; after all, she was putting her life into the hands of a precocious teenager she'd never clamped eyes on until today. But there was a real bond between them, unspoken but understood.

Suddenly, the ear-splitting clanging of the alarm stopped. Seconds later the sound of running feet came echoing down the hallway, getting ever louder and closer. Catherine touched her lips with her index finger.

'Olga,' she whispered. 'I'm afraid I've overlooked something rather obvious. An escape

route. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we're going to have to jump out the window.' Despite her anxiety, Catherine gave a reassuring smile. 'Don't worry. I'll jump out first and you can climb onto my shoulders, then I'll ease you to the ground.'

Catherine flicked the window latch and, not wanting to make too much noise, tried to push the window open gently. Unfortunately, the wooden frame, flaky with old, peeling paint, didn't want to open.

'It's a little stiff,' said Olga.

'I can see that. No need to state the obvious,' Catherine said between clenched teeth.

'Here, let me give you a hand. I can usually open it myself, but it takes a few goes,' said Olga as she pressed the palms of her small hands against the bottom of the frame. 'Ready?' On the count of three. One... two... three!

The window flung outwards with a short, sharp squeak. The pair held their breath for an instant, hoping the sound hadn't been heard by anyone outside the door. Catherine was very relieved to see the drop was only about four feet. She eased both legs over the sill, gave Olga the thumbs-up like a scuba diver about to take the plunge, and flung herself onto the gravel pathway running around the building.

'Throw me your bag,' she said, holding her arms out. She deftly caught the black sports bag containing Olga's most important belongings, which the old woman threw with surprising strength. 'Now, I'll back up and...'

Before she could finish, Olga was sitting on the window ledge.

'Forget it. It'll be quicker if I jump, too,' she said, placing her palms by her sides and preparing to shove off.

Unfortunately, Olga's growing confidence was not entirely matched by her physical

capabilities. Her landing would not have scored highly in a gymnastics routine; she hit the ground awkwardly, wobbled for a split second and fell with her hands outstretched. She got to her feet shakily, and Catherine could see she'd grazed her hands on the gravel.

'Are you okay?' Catherine asked, her voice full of concern. She grabbed Olga by the wrists and pulled her arms closer for a better look. 'It doesn't seem to be life threatening, but the sooner we get out of here the better. Now,' she continued, thinking aloud. 'Which way is out?'

'If we cut through that thicket of birch trees over there,' said Olga, pointing over Catherine's right shoulder. 'We'll come out half-way down the drive leading to the main gate.'

'How do you know that? Haven't you been cooped up inside for the last two years?'

'Well, more or less. But I did manage to make one friend. Everyone avoids him because he looks so frightening.'

'Don't tell me. Mr. Hodges,' said Catherine.

'That's right. How did you know?'

'We've met.'

'Anyway,' Olga pressed on. 'He and I used to take walks around the gardens, and sometimes we'd talk about running away. He actually managed to get past the guard one day, but he was caught and brought back. So...'

'Guard? What are you talking about? Yes! Now I remember. There was that little booth by the front gates. But I'm sure it was empty when we drove in.'

'Mrs. Morrison probably removed the security so the little children wouldn't get scared. They wouldn't want you to think they were running a concentration camp here, now would they?' If we're lucky, the guard's been given the day off and we'll be able to stroll out of here. But I doubt it. It's also possible that they've put two and two together and worked out that

you've helped me escape.'

'Listen. We're wasting too much time talking,' Catherine cast an involuntary glance at her watch. 'My God! It's nearly five o'clock. And look how dark it's getting.'

'Oh, that reminds me. Put this on.' Olga unzipped her carry-bag and pulled out something small and black. 'It's a woolly hat. I knit them in my spare time; the residents need them to keep warm when Mrs. Morrison turns the heating down to save money. I've got one for me, too. Both of us have hair that stands out, so I thought they'd come in handy for our escape.'

'Good thinking, Olga. But I thought you didn't have any friends among the other residents – Hodges excepted. So why knit hats for them?'

'I can't abide them, passive creatures that they are. But I do feel sorry for them. I am human, you know.'

'Softie, more like it,' said Catherine with mock disappointment. 'Now, remember what I said about running? Race you to the trees!'

Chapter 7

Catherine and Olga leaned with their backs up against an old birch tree, their chests heaving with exhaustion. The younger of the escapees had naturally outrun her companion, but the old woman hadn't been too far behind, covering the fifty yards or so in a respectable time.

'Are you okay?' Catherine asked. 'I promise you won't ever have to sprint like that again. That's if we can get out of here undetected.'

'Thank God for that. My sporting days are definitely behind me.' Olga found that her legs were shaking from the exertion, but her heart rate was almost back to normal. 'But if I have

to do it again, don't be afraid to make me. Agreed?'

'Agreed. We've got no time to rest, though. I can see that sentry box; let's hope you were right about him getting the night off.'

At that moment a dark figure emerged from the small hut, which was marked with diagonal red stripes like a border checkpoint. Although her eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, Catherine had to refocus in order to get a good look at this new adversary. She made out a tall, powerful-looking man in an olive-green uniform. This guy wouldn't be a pushover, that was clear. Whistling softly to himself, the guard strutted back and forth, hands behind his back. Catherine thought the man must be very bored indeed – especially since the tune the poor fellow was whistling was from a television commercial for cat food – and decided it was time to add a little spark to his evening.

'Olga,' she whispered. 'We pulled off our first diversion all right. Now we're going to have to be even more cunning; this guy looks like a professional wrestler.'

The old woman broke into a broad smile, revealing a beautiful gold tooth that reflected the moonlight beginning to break through the heavy curtain of clouds.

'Hey, nice tooth! But I would have thought you'd have false teeth at your age – no offence,' said Catherine.

'I do. Only I used to have a real gold cap, and I paid a fortune to have a fake one put on my dentures. I couldn't stand to look *too* different after seeing that tooth in the mirror every day for so many years.'

Catherine shook her head in disbelief. 'You really are something else, you know that?'

'I've got another little surprise for you. I took something from the infirmary that I thought might come in handy,' said Olga, slowly drawing a long, pointy object from her carry bag.

Catherine's eyes widened as Olga held out the biggest hypodermic needle she had ever seen, including the one the veterinarian had used on her cousin Emma's pony. The thing must have been a foot long.

'What the...'

'Remember I told you about all those medicines in my room? Well, while you were wreaking havoc with the alarm, I made a quick search and found this syringe and a few ampoules of tranquilizer. Don't panic, though,' Olga continued as Catherine's eyes nearly popped out of her head. 'It's a fast-acting sedative. They may treat the residents like dirt, but I don't think they'd go as far as to murder anyone.'

'How the hell... I mean how on Earth do you know what that stuff is?'

'Because I saw the doctor use it on Mr. Hodges once when he refused to take his antidepressants. I tell you, old George put up a helluva... I mean a *really good* fight. Now you've got *me* using bad language! Anyway, the tranquilizer worked almost instantly. If we can give that guard a quick jab, he'll be out like a light in seconds!'

Olga snapped off the end of the glass ampoule and carefully drew the clear sleeping potion up into the syringe. She turned it pointy end up and gave a little squeeze on the trigger until a small amount of the liquid squirted up into the night air.

'That's how the doctor did it. I assume it's to get rid of any air bubbles. Now we're ready for him!'

Catherine watched this procedure in amazement. 'I hope you're right about all this, but I've got a horrible feeling I should have left you where you were. If this backfires and we kill the poor man...'

'Now who's getting nervous? I told you, I've seen how it's done. And besides, I've

watched countless hours of hospital soap operas on TV, and they do exactly the same thing. *Just trust me on this one!* I got that last line from the television, too. Like it?’

‘No, I don’t. And I don’t like the way this whole thing is turning out. But it seems we have little choice if we’re going to get out of here. So here’s what we’ll do...’

* * *

The guard had stopped whistling the cat food commercial and was now humming the French national anthem. Just then, high up in a giant oak tree, an owl gave a mournful hoot as small drops of rain began to fall. At the same time a gust of wind caught some of the freshly fallen birch leaves and hurled them against the guard’s legs. He may have been a beefy fellow, but the combination of the owl, the wind and the rain made his skin crawl. He pulled his coat collar up around his neck and marched back in the direction of the sentry box. His head bent down, the first thing he saw of Olga was her orthopedic shoes. The man looked up to see a frail old track-suited woman wearing a blank expression.

‘May I ask what you are doing here?’ he enquired, much relieved that the old woman wasn’t a vampire or a werewolf.

‘I’m sorry,’ she replied. ‘I seem to have lost my way. Do you think you could escort me back to my room?’

Relief. Sheer, unbridled relief. The guard remembered the last time one of the residents had wandered down this far. He’d practically had to knock the old fellow out before he could restrain him and drag him back to Mrs. Morrison’s office. *What was his name again? Hodges, that was it.* And here was one coming along quiet as you like!

The guard took Olga by the crook of the arm and led her back in the direction of the giant oak tree where Catherine was waiting. Just as they reached the tree, Olga slipped and fell to the

ground, giving a little cry of pain and clutching at her ankle.

'Give me your hand and I'll help you up,' he said, reaching down to the old woman.

'Oh, dear. I seem to have lost my wedding ring. Could you help me look for it. It means more than anything in the world to me.'

The man dropped to his knees and began feeling about in the long grass at the side of the gravel pathway. Suddenly he felt an enormous stabbing pain in the left buttock. He let out a high-pitched scream that sent several birds flying from their nests and set off a chorus of croaking from the frogs living in a nearby pond. By the time he turned around, Catherine had just managed to get herself back behind the tree.

The guard rubbed his backside furiously, trying to deaden the pain. He reached out to grab Olga, but stars were already appearing before his eyes. It was becoming harder and harder for him to maintain his balance, and within thirty seconds he lay face-up on the grass.

Hearing the thud of the man's body hitting the ground, Catherine leapt out from behind the oak tree and surveyed the scene of devastation. Two bodies on the ground – both with silly grins on their faces, but only one with its eyes open.

'Quick, Olga. No time to enjoy the spoils of war. We've got to get out of here.'

'Yes, but where are we going to go? Have you any ideas?'

Catherine nodded her head slowly. 'It's not the best plan in the world, but considering that it's dark and the rain seems to be getting heavier, I'd say our best option would be to hide you at my place until we can figure out something better. We haven't got time for anything more elaborate than that right now.'

A look of apprehension crossed Olga's face. 'Your house? Won't your parents notice an extra person hanging around?'

'Didn't you hear what I said?' I'm going to *hide* you there. We have an old garden play house that I used to have fun in when I was little. Nobody's been in it for years; it just sort of takes up space. It's actually very comfortable as far as play houses go – my uncle is a building inspector and he made sure it was waterproof and all that. So you've got absolutely nothing to worry about.'

'Funny,' said Olga, as she wiped the raindrops from her eyebrows. 'That's exactly what Boris said that fine sunny day he checked me into *Passing Winds*!'

'Now we just have to get there before it gets too late. It's just gone six o'clock. Mum and Dad don't usually get home until seven on Fridays; they play badminton of all things. If it's a late game, they might not be back until nine. But we can't rely on that happening.' Catherine paused for a few seconds, gathering her wits. 'On our way here I noticed a bus stop a hundred yards or so from the front gates. I reckon that's our best bet. We'll take the bus as far as my school and walk from there. Hitching a ride would be quicker, but...'

'Don't even think about that possibility,' Olga objected. 'I've seen stories on the news about hitch-hikers going missing... and worse.'

'I just hope a bus comes along in the next few minutes, otherwise we're up you-know-what creek without a paddle.'

'What creek is that?'

'Never mind.'

* * *

The two fugitives stood at the darkened bus stop. According to the timetable Catherine always carried with her, the next bus on this route should be the 6:05 to Central Station via Finlay Street. The trip to the school would be ten to fifteen minutes, plus a maximum half-hour

walk to the house. That meant, if her parents arrived home on schedule, they should beat them by about ten minutes – enough time to get a few things organized in the play house to make Olga comfortable.

Remembering that Olga had mentioned that she didn't have a cent to her name, Catherine quickly checked her own wallet. She had just enough money for both of them the travel as far as the school; that was if Olga had remembered her seniors card.

'Seniors card?' said Olga, her eyebrows knitting together. 'I used to have one, but I didn't need it at *Passing Winds*. Maybe I've still got it with my other papers.'

She rummaged about in her bag for a few moments and pulled out a tattered yellow card.

'Show me,' said Catherine. 'Oh, no! It's well and truly expired. But, hey. You're so old looking, nobody's going to question your age, are they?'

'Old looking, am I? Thanks a lot!'

They stood in silence for what seemed like an eternity. As the drops of rain grew heavier, Catherine really started to regret having embarked on this crusade. A crack of thunder echoed through the trees and brilliant flashes of forked lightning lit up the sky. The woolly hats she and Olga were wearing as camouflage were beginning to act like sponges, absorbing every drop of rain that fell on their heads.

'I don't care about having hair that stands out like a lamp down a coal mine! My head feels like it weighs a ton,' said Catherine as she whipped off the sodden hat and hurled it to the ground.

Olga pursed her lips. 'It took me a week to knit that! But I suppose you're right. I don't think my skinny neck can support the weight any longer either.' She followed Catherine's example, tossing her hat into the blackberry bushes by the side of the road. 'The rotten thing

would only remind me of the cold nights I spent shivering in that hell hole.'

Olga was the first to see the glow of the headlights emerging through the pouring rain.

'Do you think it's our bus?'

'It's got to be. When we get in, let me do the talking. I don't want you giving us away, okay?'

'When are you going to learn to trust me, young lady?'

The ancient city bus pulled gently into the curb and its hydraulic doors sprang open like the welcoming arms of a loved one.

'After you, Grandma!' Catherine shouted, drawing a wide-eyed stare from Olga.

'Grandma?'

'Shut up. Just get in!'

Chapter 8

Having switched off the alarm, Mrs. Morrison was eager to find out who had set off that ear-splitting racket. At first her suspicions fell on Mr. Hodges; he was easily the most capable of wielding a heavy metal chair, and his temperament certainly fitted the crime. The other residents were all too frail and placid for such nonsense. When she went to question him, he was in the television room playing bridge with three women. Unfortunately for Mrs. Morrison, they confirmed that the four of them were sitting on the terrace enjoying the view over the gardens when the incident occurred.

The director was very annoyed – her one and only suspect was off the hook. She wasn't going to waste anymore time trying to track down the culprit, but the inconvenience and expense

of replacing the fire alarm was no trifling matter. The budget this year was tight (especially with that rich old lady dying without any warning), so the heating would have to be turned down another couple of degrees. It was a good thing Olga had knitted extra woolen hats this year. Mrs. Morrison had a flash of brilliance; she'd ask her to knock out some scarves as well. Sweaters were out of the question, naturally – too much wool. But scarves! Just the thing to keep the dear old folk's blood from turning to ice.

She strode down the corridor towards the infirmary, trying to think up some kind of inducement for Olga. Perhaps an extra hour of television on Saturday nights, so that she could finally see the second half of the football.

When she saw the open window and the half-pulled out drawers which had been emptied of Olga's few meager belongings, Mrs. Morrison knew immediately that there had been an escape. She quickly figured out that it must have been Catherine Brewer who had not only hoodwinked that fool of an orderly, but herself as well. Plopping her hefty frame down on Olga's rumpled bed, the director took three deep breaths before deciding what to do next. She grabbed her cell phone and punched in the number to the guard. When he failed to answer after five rings, she knew something very serious had happened. She heaved herself up from the bed, marched purposefully out the door and into the grounds, and within a few minutes located the man lying semi-conscious in the lush grass. As she trotted towards him, he made some incoherent sounds and tried to struggle to his feet, only to fall back down with a thunderous crash. A few feet away lay the discarded syringe, the needle bent in the middle at right angles. The guard, whose normally immaculate uniform was now very maculate indeed, made another futile attempt to stand. Mrs. Morrison's experience told her that the man would eventually regain consciousness, but she had no time to wait around and interrogate him about the fugitive and her accessory.

Calling the police at this stage would be premature. It was far too late to call the school, and for the life of her she couldn't remember the name of the teacher who had brought that miserable bunch of kids here. But the name Brewer was firmly etched in her mind. She raced back to her office, opened the white pages at B and started to scan the listings: Baker, Bell, Bowman, Bradshaw... Ah! Brewer. Twelve entries. *Thank God she's not a Brown, there's hundreds of them!* Mrs. Morrison instinctively glanced at her wristwatch: ten to seven.

* * *

The bus trip to Finlay Street had been a breeze from start to finish, and Catherine was grateful for the first piece of good luck she'd had since that dreadful fiasco with the fake 'flu potion. When they got on, the bus driver politely asked what they were doing out on such a terrible night, and Catherine's story that she was escorting her deaf and dumb granny home from visiting her sister at *Passing Winds* satisfied his curiosity. Even better, there had only been one other passenger on board – a Vietnamese woman, laden with a multitude of shopping bags, who spent the entire journey staring blankly out the window at the kaleidoscope of car headlights. Olga and Catherine sat shivering in the back seats, too cold and wet to do much talking, and kept their eyes peeled for any sign that somebody might be following them. There was plenty of traffic, which was typical for a Friday night, but no flashing lights or sirens.

After the bus dropped them off near the school entrance, they set off for Catherine's house at a brisk pace, and it looked like they would get there well before the expected time of arrival. But now, Olga's age was starting to tell.

'It's no good,' puffed Olga. 'I don't think I can go on another step!'

'You've got to try! We only have to make it to the end of this street, turn right, and my house is the second one along in Swallow Avenue.'

‘All right, I’ll try,’ said Olga, mustering a weak smile.

‘Good girl.’

They rounded the corner in time to see Catherine’s father’s car pulling into the driveway. Catherine grabbed Olga by the arm and roughly pushed her behind the neighbors’ hawthorn hedge. She carefully stuck her head out to see what her dad was up to. *He shouldn’t be here yet!* She noticed that her mother wasn’t in the car. Barry Brewer got out of the Volvo, slammed the car door shut and went inside the house, not forgetting to slam the front door, too. Within seconds he came storming out carrying a giant lollipop, which he seemed to be scolding severely.

‘Looks like he forgot his badminton racket,’ Catherine explained to a dumbfounded Olga. ‘Mom must be waiting for him at the courts. That means they haven’t started their match yet! We’ll have plenty of time to settle you in.’

Barry Brewer screeched and bumped his cumbersome car out of the driveway and tore up the street. The green monster turned the corner and the tail lights disappeared. Olga was about to march towards the front door when Catherine grabbed her by the sleeve of her tracksuit top. ‘We’ve got the world’s nosiest neighbors. Look,’ she said, pointing to the windows of the house behind the hedge. ‘See that big pointy nose poking through the curtains? She’s heard Dad’s tantrum and wants to see if anything exciting is going to happen.’

They waited for the nose to retreat and the curtains to darken before tiptoeing their way to the front door. Just as they crossed the threshold, the telephone in the kitchen started to ring.

‘I’ll have to get it,’ said Catherine. ‘It could be Mom calling on her cell from the badminton center. If I don’t answer they’ll get suspicious. Dad was in such a hurry, he mustn’t have noticed I wasn’t home yet.’

The Brewers had their landline phone set up to show the number of the caller. Catherine normally didn't bother to look at the display panel, mainly because hardly anyone rang her, but for some reason this time she did. It was a number she didn't recognize. For a split second she toyed with the idea of letting the answering machine activate, but then again, it could be mom using a payphone. She decided to pick it up.

'Hello,' she said in the most neutral tone she could manage.

'Hello. My name is Brunhilde Morrison, director of the *Passing Winds* retirement home.

It was all Catherine could do to stifle a laugh when Mrs. Morrison said her first name, especially as she pronounced it in the throaty, German manner. But it also gave Catherine the idea to try and disguise her own voice. She was good at imitating accents, and could do Irish most convincingly.

'Oh, yes. Me daughter Cathy was visitin' there today, to be sure. She said she really enjoyed it.'

'You mean to say she's at home?'

'O'course she is. I picked up the little darlin' when she got off the bus with all the other little darlins. Why?'

'No reason at all, Mrs. Brewer,' sighed Mrs. Morrison. 'It's just that, well... never mind. I'm just glad to hear she's at home where she belongs. Good-bye.'

'And a good night to yourself, too,' – here Catherine couldn't resist temptation, 'Brunhilde my dear.'

When Catherine hung up the phone, Olga burst out laughing. 'That was some performance. Where did you learn to mimic accents like that?'

'Oh, it's just something I've always been able to do. I've been working on my Russian

accent, too, so votch out darlink.'

'Vot you mean? I not have accent,' said Olga, and the two of them laughed like old friends.

Catherine told Olga to wait a few minutes in the kitchen while she went to get some clean, dry clothes for both of them. While Catherine was upstairs, the old woman surveyed her surroundings and felt a twinge of nostalgia. She drank in the once familiar sights and smells of a home lived in by a real family: the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, the notes and magnets on the refrigerator, the fresh flowers on the window sill, the polished wooden floor and the faint traces of cooking hanging in the air. She compared that with the clinical antiseptic odors of the infirmary, the tatty old blankets and the moldy white tiles – everywhere tiles! She decided that the only way they'd get her back into the home would be in a strait-jacket.

Her reveries were cut short as Catherine appeared carrying an armful of clothes. 'Here, put these on,' handing Olga frilly underpants, a tee-shirt and a pair of jeans. 'I know it's not the most appropriate style for a, um... mature lady, but we're a little short on floral frocks and bloomers.' She turned her back to give Olga a chance to change.

'Now listen here,' protested Olga. 'The only reason I wear those old-fashioned clothes is because that's all they gave me. I'd love to try on a pair of jeans, actually. It all fits rather well, what do you think?'

When Catherine turned around to see how Olga looked, she let out a gasp. The jeans were much too baggy, especially in the crotch, and her feet were nowhere to be seen; the legs would have to be rolled up quite a few times. To make matters worse, her arms looked like twigs poking out of the sleeves of the black tee-shirt, which had "Metallica" emblazoned in gothic lettering across the chest.

'I think you look like an ageing, anorexic junkie. Unfortunately, most of my other clothes are in the wash, and my mom's clothes are much too big for you. But I suppose if we have to move you, the police or whoever will be looking for an old woman in old woman's clothing.'

Much pleased with her new, modern look, Olga followed Catherine into the back yard. Her joy quickly turned to disappointment, however, when she confronted her new lodgings. The timber play house was tiny, had one solitary window, and even a short-statured person such as herself had to duck to get through the door. Once inside, Catherine pointed to a small foldaway bed in the corner. 'I know it doesn't look all that inviting, but I've slept on it plenty of times. You'll find it's quite comfortable, really.'

'I suppose I shouldn't complain after all you've done for me. This will be great compared to living at *Passing Winds* – at least I won't have Mrs. Morrison and young Oswald the orderly breathing down my neck.'

Sitting behind a table more appropriate for toddlers, the two of them had a lengthy talk about what they would do next, while constantly listening out for the sound of Barry Brewer's car. Olga made it plain that all she wanted to do was get back to her own house, which, as far as she knew, was currently inhabited by her son, Boris, and Mildred, his dreadful witch of a wife. She gave Catherine the address and asked her to go and check that they were still there. It would be best if Catherine went alone, just in case the police or Mrs. Morrison were lying in wait. It was, after all, the first logical place they'd look. And even if Boris was there on his own, Olga was in no mood to confront him at this stage – she wanted everything done through legal channels, just the way he had done when having her put away. They agreed that Catherine would tell Boris – if Mrs. Morrison or the police hadn't already – that his mother had managed to escape from the retirement home. She wouldn't say how, naturally, but she would make it clear

the Olga would soon be coming back to claim rightful possession of her own house, the papers to which should still be with her solicitor. Olga admitted that she had no idea where the papers were (she had searched high and low in the infirmary, as Catherine had suggested, but found nothing) and had long forgotten the name of her lawyer. They only hoped that Boris didn't know either. It was at this stage in the conversation that, out of the blue, something struck Catherine as very strange.

'Just a minute. If your father was called Pivovarov, that would have been your maiden name, and if you have a son, you most likely had a husband at some stage. Didn't you change your name when you got married? I thought in those days women always took their husbands' names.'

A dark shadow passed over Olga's heavily lined face.

'I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone before. I was never married. Oh, I had a few boyfriends, but I never felt the urge to get tied down to a family. And as I got older, the boyfriends became fewer and fewer.' Olga rubbed a teardrop from her cheek before continuing. 'Boris is what they call a foundling. One morning, as I was heading off to work, I opened the front door and there he was in a little carrier basket, all pink and wet and sticky. I was already forty and was sure I'd never have a child of my own. But when I saw him lying there, crying his lungs out, I knew I had to keep him. Perhaps when all this is over, I'll find it in my heart to tell him the truth. It hasn't been easy keeping the facts from him; I had to think up some pretty spectacular stories when he was a little boy and full of curiosity. Lies, really. That's all he's ever known from me. But I always loved him, and I was sure he loved me.' She paused and shook her head from side to side. 'I struggled to bring up my boy the best I could, gave him all the opportunities in the world. I just can't understand why he turned on me. It must have been

Mildred who made him do it.'

The effort of making this confession robbed the old woman of her last reserves of energy. She lay down on the squeaky bed and stretched out her weary body. 'You know, dear, I'm exhausted. I think I'd better get some sleep.'

Catherine wanted to know more about how Boris was brought up and why nobody else knew the real story. She thought there must have been neighbors, or friends maybe, who would have questioned the sudden appearance of a child. But instead of asking those questions, she tucked the old lady in and kissed her wrinkly forehead. She was just about to say goodnight, when Olga sat bolt upright in the bed. 'Wait a minute! What if I need to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night?'

'Oh dear,' said Catherine. 'Another little oversight. You can hardly risk coming into the house for, you know... You'll have to go behind one of those trees I suppose. Either that or hang on till morning. Is that all right?'

'It will have to be. But, grateful as I am, we're going to have to come up with another plan.'

Catherine started to worry in earnest. 'You're right. It's obvious you can't stay here more than one night. Damn! Tomorrow's Saturday and I don't think mom and dad have plans to go anywhere. I guess we'll have to get you out first thing in the morning. I'll pack some things you might need while we try and sort out this mess with your house. You'd better turn the light out as soon as I'm gone – Mom or Dad might see it from the kitchen window when they get home. Now, go to sleep Olga. See you in the morning.'

'Goodnight, Catherine,' said Olga as she rolled over onto her side. Within seconds the little play house was reverberating to the sounds of heavy snoring.

Chapter 9

The alarm clock by the side of Catherine's bed buzzed loudly just as she was dreaming about the fire alarm going off at *Passing Winds*. Flinging her eiderdown to the floor, she slammed the off button with her open palm. 4:30 a.m. Her parents had arrived home last night much later than usual, and judging by their loud, off-key rendition of *We are the Champions*, they had clearly had a celebratory drink or two after the match. Which meant they'd be sleeping in this morning – they hardly ever drank alcohol, but when they did their hangovers were severe. Catherine was taking no chances, though. She leapt out of her warm, cozy bed and within minutes was busy in the kitchen making several days' worth of cheese sandwiches.

It was still dark when she opened the play house door. She switched on the light and was surprised to see Olga doing sit-ups in the bed. 'I'll have to be fit to keep up with you,' she puffed, 'and this seemed about the only type of exercise I could manage in this tiny box.'

'But you were totally exhausted yesterday. Where do you get the energy from?'

'I'm like a cat. I hardly do any exercise, but I can spring to life when I have to. It's just the endurance part that needs working on. I was only on my second sit-up when you came in. Actually, I think two is enough for me at this stage.'

'Don't overdo it,' said Catherine, grabbing Olga by the shoulders as the old woman wobbled slightly in the bed. 'I reckon you're as fit as a fiddle; an antique one maybe.'

Noticing the first weak rays of sunlight peeping through the window, Catherine switched off the light, plunging the play house back into semi-darkness. 'I haven't been able to think of a good place to hide you yet,' she continued, 'so we'll have to play it by ear. I've swiped fifty dollars from Mom's purse and... don't look at me like that! I'll pay it back. And I'm sure she'll

forgive me when I explain it was for a good cause. Now, follow me and keep quiet.'

The two dark figures snuck around the side of the house and across the front lawn. As they passed the nosy neighbor's house, Catherine spotted a cellophane-wrapped newspaper lying beside an upside-down skateboard in the driveway. She picked up the paper and tore off the wrapping. She looked at page one, which carried a large color picture of an old theater, and quickly scanned through the rest, searching for some mention of a granny on the loose. The story was on page six.

'Look at the photo of you!' Catherine said, shoving the newspaper under Olga's nose. 'There's hardly any resemblance at all. I reckon Brunhilde's given them the wrong picture.'

'Oh, it's me all right. Only I was quite a deal heavier when they took that mug shot. It was the day I arrived. My goodness, I was a fat old broad, wasn't I? And look. Two years ago I had dyed brunette hair. Now I'm grateful they fed me so poorly and didn't let me keep my hair that color. And with this disguise on,' she added, tugging at her oversized tee-shirt, 'they'll never find me!'

'Don't be too sure. Listen to this.' Catherine read aloud the article. 'Has anyone seen this woman? Police spokesperson, Lieutenant Max Ironmonger, yesterday called for public assistance in determining the whereabouts of senior citizen Olga Pivovarov. Olga disappeared from the *Passing Winds* retirement home yesterday evening under suspicious circumstances. Prior to her absence being detected, a fire-alarm was activated by a person or persons unknown, and police believe this may have been done to create a diversion. Two suspects have been cleared, and Olga's only relative, her son, has been informed. He is extremely anxious about the safety of his mother and would welcome any help the public can provide. Lieutenant Ironmonger stated the following: "We don't usually seek public assistance so soon after a person goes missing,

however in this instance the person we are looking for has escaped from a secure institution. Her age would suggest that she may have been helped in some way.” When asked if he meant kidnapping, Lieutenant Ironmonger said he could not rule out such a possibility. Backing up this statement, the director of *Passing Winds*, Mrs. Brunhilde Morrison, confirmed that Olga, a resident for two years, had been very happy at the retirement home and would not have left voluntarily. Finally, a security guard at *Passing Winds* was last night assaulted with a syringe, and the police believe the two incidents are linked. Anyone with information should call 555-2379.”

Catherine threw the newspaper on the ground. ‘I’ve just thought of a place to hide you for a couple of days. Well, to be honest, the newspaper gave me the idea. On page one there was a story about the North End Theater being closed for demolition, but the works don’t start for another month. We can try and sneak you in there until I get hold of Boris, at least until the heat dies down a bit.’

‘But that’s in the middle of town! How are we going to get there at this time of the morning? It’s got to be an hour’s walk from here.’

Just then Catherine had a flash of inspiration. She noticed in the driveway, a few feet from the skateboard, lay a mountain bike which belonged to the neighbors’ teenage son. ‘I’ve got an idea, but I don’t think you’re going to like it much. And another thing. The article in the paper said two suspects had been cleared. I guess I’m one, but I wonder who the other was?’

‘Mr. Hodges, I imagine,’ said Olga. ‘Since he’s got form, as they say in the police dramas. Now what’s this brilliant scheme of yours?’

* * *

As they picked up speed towards the bottom of the hill, Olga’s black tee-shirt started to

billow out like a spinnaker sail on a yacht. Her fine hair flailed around wildly in the cool morning air as they careered down the road. The force of the wind took a firm grip of her face and flattened out nearly all of the wrinkles; if a photo of Olga had been taken at this moment, makers of facial creams and lotions could have used her image as the perfect “after” shot for their youth-restoring products.

The old lady hung on grimly to Catherine’s waist. The effort of keeping her balance and concentrating on shifting her weight when the bike changed direction was making Olga sweat profusely. She hadn’t been on a bike in half a century, maybe longer. But both she and Catherine were keenly aware that they had to reach the town center as quickly as possible, preferably before the Saturday morning shopping crowds appeared.

The pair had traveled about two miles before they first encountered human life. Along the way there had been no traffic, and only one stray dog had given them any trouble. Rounding a particularly sharp corner, a shaggy German shepherd decided it would be great fun to chase after them, but the dog’s vicious barking and snarling and the sight of its snapping yellow fangs only encouraged Catherine to pedal harder. Luckily, as they were traveling downhill and their momentum had built up considerably, the fleet-footed hound had to give up the chase.

Now only a few blocks from the theater, they whooshed noiselessly past a taxi parked outside the last subway station before Central. The taxi driver looked up from the newspaper he was reading as they zoomed by his door and, much amused by what he saw, beeped his horn in greeting. Startled, Olga turned her head to find the source of this unexpected noise, but the slight twist of her neck caused her center of gravity to shift. In a desperate bid to correct her balance, she leaned too far to the left. By now Catherine sensed something was wrong as the bike started to wobble, and applied the front and rear brakes with tremendous force. This was a big mistake,

as the next thing she saw was Olga flying over her right shoulder. Olga's final vision before crashing heavily into a stand of grapes outside a fruit shop was a laughing, stubble-faced taxi driver bent over double and yelling out some comments in a foreign language. Catherine, too, was soon catapulted in the direction of the grape boxes as the bike's rear brakes were completely broken.

Alerted by the noise of the accident, the owner of the fruit shop, a chubby, middle-aged Italian in a checkered apron, ran outside to investigate. Confronted by the scene of devastation, he began to rant and gesticulate wildly at the two grape-splattered figures sprawled on the sidewalk. But his fury at the damage they had caused was tempered by concern for the health of the motionless bodies at his feet.

'Are youse all right?' he asked, bending down to check that both were still alive. As he inclined his head, which was crowned with an abundance of curly black hair, the pencil behind his ear fell pointy end down, honing in on Catherine's eye like a deadly missile. Bang! Right on target.

'Ow!' she cried, instinctively reaching for the spot where the HB had hit its mark. 'Careful with that thing. You could have blinded me!'

'So, it seems you have escaped serious injury. What about your young friend here?' he said, craning his neck to look at Olga lying face down under several pounds of squashed muscatel grapes. Catherine slowly got up from the sidewalk and extended her arm to block the storekeeper as he tried to get closer to Olga, who was groaning pathetically and trying to roll over onto her side.

'Wait a minute!' said Catherine. 'I'll check to see if she's okay. I suggest you go inside and call an ambulance.'

'Good idea. And then we can talk about compensation for my damaged fruit!'

After the storekeeper disappeared behind the beaded curtain at the front of the shop, Catherine grabbed Olga by the shoulder and shook the old woman vigorously.

'C'mon. We've got to get out of here before the fruit and veggie man comes back.'

'Don't worry, dear. I'm fine,' said Olga, wiping grape juice and seeds from her eyes.

'Help me to my feet and we'll make a run for it.'

But as Catherine pulled her to a more or less vertical position, Olga let out a cry of pain.

'Ouch! It's my knee. I think I've twisted it.'

Catherine decided then and there to give up. She was only making things worse for the old woman by forcing her to do things she was simply incapable of doing. Not that she didn't give it the old college try. She had jumped, run and ridden her way to the point where she could almost reach out and touch freedom. But it had been too much; now it was time to admit defeat. They would just sit and wait for the ambulance to arrive. And, Catherine reasoned to herself, although Olga's life at the retirement home had been devoid of all meaning and purpose, at least there she would be safe from the physical injury she risked by putting her faith in this teenage do-gooder. She was just about to tell all of this to Olga, when she sensed someone standing behind her.

She turned to see a skinny, swarthy man in a taxi driver's uniform. His grinning face was adorned with distinctive Middle-Eastern features: ebony eyes framed by jet-black, arched eyebrows, a majestically elongated nose, copious stubble and a set of gold teeth that gleamed in the early morning sunlight. He took a drag on an evil-smelling, hand-rolled cigarette and spat twice into the gutter.

'I see how you do terrible damage to Luigi's beautiful fruit stand,' he said in a raspy

voice that sounded like he had just finished gargling gravel. 'It was hilarious to watch you from across the street. At first I am concerned that you are terribly hurt, but now I see you are both okay.' He lowered his voice slightly before continuing. 'I think right now he's calling the police to come and arrest you. I know him for many years, and he's the worst miser I ever met. Counts every cent and is always in court suing someone or other for big money.'

'But I told him to call an ambulance!' said Catherine, feeling uneasy in the presence of this man.

'Oh, he will probably call an ambulance too. Don't make mistake. He's not a monster, just a penny pincher. But I will make you an offer. You give me the mountain bike, and I give you free taxi ride to wherever you like.'

'Hey, it's worth more than...' Catherine started to protest before Olga cut her off.

'It's a deal,' she said. Remember *Karen*, you are on a good behavior bond, and we can't risk having you up before the judge again this year.'

Catherine gave Olga a quizzical look and then realized what the old woman was up to. And besides, the taxi driver's offer was a gift horse into whose mouth it would be most unwise to look.

'Oh, all right. I suppose we've got no choice.'

'No you haven't', the taxi driver agreed. 'Wait here while I bring the cab over. We must hurry. I cannot have Luigi thinking it was me who helped you. Some of his cousins have a reputation for violence, if you know what I mean.'

Within seconds the driver had turned the taxi around and loaded the bike into the cavernous trunk. Catherine and Olga got in the back and held hands, terrified by the possibility of being kidnapped by this suspicious looking guy, but also thinking that being in his hands

might be safer than being left with Luigi and his cut-throat relatives. The driver gently eased the taxi out into the road and then accelerated at a great speed, rounding the corner just as Luigi emerged from his shop, waving his arms and cursing. After traveling for about two minutes, the driver broke the silence. 'Where do you want to go?'

'Gibson Street. North End Theater,' said Catherine.

'Great. That's only a few more blocks.' He tossed a grimy hand-towel to his two passengers. 'You can use this to wipe the rest of the grape juice off your faces. By the way, my name is Zouheir El-Saad. A bit of a mouthful for you, so just call me Joe. Olga I recognize for the picture in this morning's *Herald*, and you are Karen.'

Catherine and Olga exchanged a look of incomprehension. Surely the photo in the paper was sufficiently different from Olga's current appearance as to fool anyone.

'But I look nothing like that picture,' said Olga.

'This is true,' he admitted. 'But if you look carefully, you are smiling in that photo, and showing off your lovely gold tooth. As you can see, I have a mouthful of them myself, so I am sure to spot such things. Also, no offence intended, I also noticed the interesting mole on your cheek.' He drew a deep breath before continuing. 'But I see you are disgustingly thin compared to the plump beauty in that photograph. Were you not treated well in the retirement home? Were you not fed properly?' He shook his head. 'I cannot stand ill treatment of older citizens. The demand our care and respect!'

Before Olga could answer, they had arrived at the North End Theater. Catherine thought Joe was someone they could probably trust, even though he had helped himself to the bike. But they were hardly going to need it again. And besides, an ally would come in handy – it was getting harder for Catherine to manage this whole operation by herself.

'Thanks for the ride, Joe. You are a very perceptive man. You only got one thing wrong, though. My name's not Karen. It's Catherine.'

He took her extended hand and bowed his head. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Catherine. Please,' he said, reaching into the depths of his oil-stained jacket. 'Take my business card, and if you ever need my assistance, do not hesitate to give me a call.'

'We'll certainly bear that in mind, Joe,' said Catherine. 'But right now, Olga and I have to find a way inside this theater.'

Joe slid behind the wheel of his taxi and, within seconds, disappeared into the sparse early-morning traffic. As Catherine glanced at her watch to check her hunch that it was about eight o'clock, the bells of the town-hall clock a few blocks away rang their hollow chime in confirmation.

Chapter 10

Catherine and Olga stood for a few moments admiring the intricate sandstone carvings adorning the top of the century-old theater's façade; an imposing stone carving of Theodore Roosevelt in the center was flanked by crouching, smirking gargoyles who thrust out curly tongues and bared sharp fangs and claws to protect the president. Stout Roman-style columns marked the entrance to the theater, which over its lifetime had hosted thousands of performances, both good and bad, by a range of artists – from the world famous to the rank amateur. The front windows – those that hadn't already had the glass smashed out of them – were boarded up, and a sign posted on the front door announced, in such tiny writing that you had to be just inches away to read it, the building's demolition in just over three weeks.

According to the sign, the old theater was going to be replaced by a multi-storied fast food restaurant, the largest of its kind in the state. Catherine remembered the violent protests that had erupted when the city's leaders had approved the project; heritage laws should have protected the building, but somehow the developer had been able to sidestep the normal process. The press had been full of accusations of bribery and corruption, but in spite of virtually unanimous public opposition, the project was now definitely going ahead. Marveling at the architecture and craftsmanship that had gone into creating this piece of history, Catherine decided that, if there were any last-minute protests at the site, she would join in.

As if reading her thoughts, Olga commented, 'What a shame they're knocking it down. I remember bringing Boris here to watch *Puss in Boots*. But I suppose these days it's burgers before beauty.' The old woman shook her head and tut-tutted. 'I'm all in favor of progress, but some things should just be left alone.'

'I couldn't agree more, Olga. But now's not the time for political action – we have to try and get inside.'

There was still nobody on Gibson Street apart from them, but that could change at any moment. For that reason Catherine decided not to attempt entry from the front, which would definitely draw attention, but instead ushered Olga into a narrow alley that ran down the eastern side of the theater. The cobblestone laneway was bestrewn with beer cans and cigarette packs, and at the far end was evidence of a small fire having been lit some time ago. Although there was nothing to prevent access to the alley, a corrugated tin wall crowned with barbed wire had been erected down the side of the alley to the theater to keep people out of the grounds of the neighboring building – a synagogue built even earlier than the theater. The entire length of this wall was covered in spray-can graffiti.

As they approached the end of the alley, Olga spotted a padlocked wooden door. Upon closer inspection they discovered that the padlock was quite small and rusty. Catherine scanned the alley for something suitable to prize it open. There was nothing she could use as a lever, so she settled for one of the dozen or so loose bricks that someone had placed in a circle for their campfire. She grabbed one and bashed on the padlock a couple of times before it gave up the fight and fell to the ground with a clang. Catherine gently pushed on the door and cautiously poked her head inside. She immediately retracted it, however, squealing at the top of her lungs and frantically brushing at her hair to remove a mass of sticky cobwebs. Olga quickly clapped her hand around Catherine's mouth.

'Shhh! Stop yelling or we'll get caught. It's only a harmless spider web.'

'That's easy for you to say! I thought someone had grabbed me.'

'I've always hated spiders,' said Olga, pulling the arachnid adhesive from Catherine's hair and face. 'But this is *definitely* a good sign.'

'I'm sorry if I fail to see how, exactly, I mean...'

The old woman gave a sigh of exasperation. 'It's obvious. You're always going on about how clever you are, I'm amazed you don't get it. It means that nobody's been inside this cellar, or whatever it is, for ages. In other words, it should be the perfect hideout - at least for a night or two. Now let's have a proper look inside.'

'After you,' offered Catherine, bowing respectfully to her companion. 'Age before beauty.'

Olga ducked her head and disappeared inside, Catherine hot on her heels. They were confronted by a small flight of stairs with paneled walls on either side. Further than that, they could see nothing, and when Catherine closed the door everything went pitch black.

'Hey, open it a fraction,' said Olga. 'At least until our eyes get used to the dark.'

'Just a minute.' Catherine fumbled around feeling for the door, when suddenly there was an echoing click and the stairwell was bathed in a dull, yellow light. 'Great! The power hasn't been cut off yet.'

They walked slowly to the top of the stairs, Catherine tip-toeing her way and Olga still favoring one leg, wincing as she mounted each step. At the top they discovered a catwalk that ran the entire width of the building. Both sides were divided into square cells made of wire fencing material; most of these were empty, although some contained old props, stage lighting and other bits and pieces. Catherine was keen to see what sort of treasure trove they had stumbled upon. She flung open the door to one of the compartments and headed for a rectangular shadow in the far corner.

'Olga, come and have a look at this.'

'Just a minute. My knee's still a bit sore.'

The old woman hobbled into the cage marked "Costumes" and saw Catherine bent over, rifling around in an old trunk that was crammed full of brightly colored material.

'There's some great stuff in here, real handy for disguises.' When Catherine turned around, she was wearing one of those "bald" wigs, dangly fake-diamond earrings and a pair of oversized horn-rimmed glasses.

'I loved playing dress-ups when I was a girl,' said Olga, examining the contents of the trunk. 'Looks like we could have endless fun here.'

Catherine sat down wearily on the wooden floor, sending a puff of dust into the air. She unzipped her backpack and pulled out a couple of cheese sandwiches. These had been squashed out of shape as a result of the crash back at the fruit shop and now bore little resemblance to

food; in fact they looked like greasy balls of modeling clay. Luckily, the thermos of tea she'd packed at the last minute had come through unscathed. The two of them attacked the lumpy sandwiches as if they hadn't eaten for days. When they'd finished their tea, Catherine stood up and gave Olga a serious look.

'I'm going to have to leave you now. I've got to ring my parents and come up with some story about where I've gone. Then I'm going over to your old house to call Boris' bluff. I only hope you don't get too scared here on your own.'

'Don't fret, dear. I've been left unattended at *Passing Winds* for days at a stretch. Mind you, they used to sedate me with pills, so I didn't care at all. But still, it might be a bit spooky in here. You never know,' Olga lowered her voice to an almost inaudible whisper. 'I might meet the Phantom of the North End!'

'Rubbish! Anyway, I reckon you'll be okay for a while. I'll buy a new padlock for the door, too. A big solid one. I'll be back before six o'clock tonight. If you're freaking out by then, we'll get you out of here.'

Catherine grabbed her bag off the floor and headed out of the cage. At the top of the stairs she stopped, turned and ran back to the old woman. She gave her a quick hug, which was so intense Olga thought her eyes would pop out, and hurried away.

Chapter 11

'Hi, Mom. Are you still in bed? You are? Good. What do I mean by good? Oh, just that you deserve a long lie in after a hard week at work and an exhausting game of badminton. What? You won? Terrific. Anyway, I'm just calling to let you know that I'm going to be at the city

library all day working on my history assignment. What assignment?' Catherine hesitated a moment before announcing, 'Oh, it's about the North End Theater. You know the one they're going to knock down? Yeah, that one. I've got to do some research on the architect and what famous actors have played there. That kind of thing. So don't worry about me. I'll be home in time for dinner. Around seven.'

Catherine replaced the receiver of the pay phone and wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. Her mother was a bit too inquisitive sometimes. Dad wouldn't have asked what the assignment was about, but Mom would want to see evidence of what she'd learned. Notes. Pages of notes. Catherine would say she left them on the train or come up with some other explanation. She was, after all, the world champion excuse maker-upper.

On the other hand, Catherine was suddenly very glad she hadn't been allowed to have a cell phone, despite her constant pleading and nagging. She thought her parents were complete tyrants when they said no to her request for the latest phone with GPS and heaps of other snazzy features. But now, it was a total bonus not having one, meaning Mom couldn't call her whenever she felt like it.

Catherine had already bought a new padlock at a hardware store two blocks away and relocked the side door of the theater. She was tempted to go back inside to see Olga after installing the padlock, but she was concerned the old lady might be getting scared and try to convince Catherine to take her somewhere else. The only problem was, there was no "somewhere else". And besides, if Olga could just hold out there for a day or two, Catherine was sure she could sort out this whole mess. It would just take perseverance, cunning and a bit more luck. She had to sacrifice Olga's short-term comfort for the long-term gain: to get her home and rid of *Passing Winds* forever!

As the train carriage slowed down in front of her, Catherine re-checked the address Olga has written on the back of Joe the taxi driver's business card. Twenty-eight Hyde Street. She knew how to get there – it was on the way to the sports center where her parents played badminton. It wasn't *really* on the way; there was a coffee shop on Hyde Street that sold what her mom called the “coffiest coffee in town”. Catherine reckoned it tasted like coffee you could get anywhere, but who's to reason with a mother's logic? Being familiar with Hyde Street and having heard Olga's description of the house, Catherine believed she even knew which one it was. *I'll know soon enough*, she thought as she stepped into the carriage.

* * *

Catherine turned left after exiting the subway station and had walked a mere ten paces before she stopped dead in her tracks. She had to go back to make sure her eyes weren't playing tricks. And there it was – a flyer pasted to a pole beside the turnstile. Sure enough, it was a picture of Olga. Not a photograph like in the newspaper, but a lifelike pencil sketch. The text underneath the drawing explained that the photograph in the newspaper was old and now bore little resemblance to Olga today. After re-interviewing Mrs. Morrison to get a more “up-to-date” description of the elderly fugitive, the police had decided to release the portrait in a bid to track her down. Catherine's heart sank; the likeness was remarkable, almost as good as a black and white photograph. Catherine glanced over her shoulder to make sure no-one was watching her, tore the flyer off the pole and stuffed it into her jeans pocket. *That was close!* But her relief turned to disappointment when she noticed that copies had been posted in nearly every shop window along the main road. There was no way she could get to them all; they were mostly taped to the inside of the glass because of the recent wet weather. Catherine shrugged her shoulders, took a deep breath and headed for Hyde Street. She just hoped that rotten Boris was

home.

Within minutes Catherine had reached the bottom of Snake Gully Avenue, a long hilly road that wound its way up to the intersection with Hyde Street. By the time she reached the summit, perspiration was flowing from every pore in her body, her legs were aching and her throat was begging for a drink. As she staggered nearer to her mother's favorite coffee shop, she decided to go inside and reward herself with a refreshing, ice-cold lemonade. Oh, how her body craved it! But when she got to the door she almost jumped out of her sneakers – there was another one of those stupid posters of Olga, beaming like she had just won the lottery! Frustrated, tired and thirsty, she plodded ahead towards number twenty-eight.

Catherine's guess was on the money. She *did* recognize the low-set bungalow with the ridiculously long chimney. There was the picket fence with alternating green and orange palings, the weird combination of cacti, roses, corn and bamboo in the front garden, swans made of old tires. When Catherine and her parents drove past this house, they often remarked that some eccentric old fool must live there. Now she knew they'd been right all the time. In fact the only thing that made any sense in this confusion of a garden was the trio of old birch trees – a symbol of Russia. But something was different. Contrary to Olga's account, the lawn looked nothing like a golf green – more like an overgrown jungle. In some places, where the dandelions hadn't taken over, the grass was almost knee high. Strange. She said Boris was a keen gardener who mowed twice, sometimes three times a week in summer. But this lawn was showing serious signs of rebellion.

Catherine tried to push open the gate, but it refused to yield. She looked down and saw an enormous pile of advertising brochures lying on the other side. Then she noticed that the letterbox was bursting at the seams with junk mail. A quick browse through the contents proved

disappointing – no letters addressed to Boris Pivovarov. It seemed that not only had he moved out, but that nobody was living here at all. To put her mind at rest, Catherine forced open the gate and strode up to one of the front windows. Just as she suspected, the living room was completely empty. The same went for the kitchen and all the other rooms she peered into. The clincher was the Sold sticker pasted diagonally across the For Sale sign, which had been tossed around the side of the house. Catherine decided it was time to make another phone call.

Chapter 12

When she got to the phone booth outside the sports center, her legs having turned to jelly and her heart pounding like a bass drum on fast forward, Catherine cursed all vandals, their families, friends and pets. The glass had been smashed to smithereens, the coin slot was jammed with bright pink chewing gum and three-quarters of the pages in the directory had been torn out. In a way she was glad the machine was inoperable; the horrible odor wafting up to her nose told her that someone had obviously misread the word “phone” for “toilet”. She curled her lip and snarled in anger at all the people in the world that were working to make her life miserable. Something *had* to go right soon.

On the point of bursting into tears, she spotted a familiar looking vehicle dropping a young woman off at the front of the sports center. It was Joe’s taxi – she could tell by the sticker of the Lebanese flag on the back window – but it wasn’t him behind the wheel. She raced over to stop the taxi as the vacant sign lit up on the roof. Luckily the driver, a huge man whose enormous belly was wedged snugly against the steering wheel, had to give way to a few cars before exiting onto the main road. He caught sight of Catherine frantically waving her arms just

as he was about to accelerate.

'Hey, wait a minute!' she cried, pushing her worn out legs as hard as she could.

'Yeah? Where'd you like to go?' he replied. 'You look like you've run a marathon.'

Catherine put her hands on her hips, bent at the waist and sucked in several deep breaths in an effort to regain the power of speech. She wheezed, huffed and puffed for nearly a minute before the cabbie ran out of patience.

'Look, I'm a busy man, so if you'll excuse me, I've got fares to find. It ain't easy being a taxi driver. You gotta compete, you know. Dog eat dog and all that...'

'Wait,' Catherine somehow managed to spit out. 'Sorry, but I need your help. This taxi belongs to,' she double checked Joe's card to get the name right 'Zouheir El-Saad, does it not?'

'Yeah, that's right,' he answered, reaching for the can of soda sitting on the console. 'I drive the afternoon shift, but he's the owner. What's it to you?'

Catherine looked enviously as the man took a huge swig out of the can. 'I was going to call him on that pay phone over there,' she decided it might be wise to employ what she imagined to be the language of taxi drivers, 'but some assholes have broken it.'

The fat man's eyes formed large circles and his eyebrows retreated half-way to the back of his bald head. 'What sort of language is that for a young lady? I don't know how someone like you could be an acquaintance of Mr. El-Saad. A most respectable gentleman, he is.'

'Believe me. I do know Joe. And I need to reach him urgently. Is there any way you can get hold of him with your walkie-talkie or whatever you call it?'

'No there isn't. But,' he said, somehow liberating a small silver object from somewhere between his buttocks and the vinyl seat, 'I do have this cell phone. You better call him yourself. I don't want to get fired for waking him in the middle of his afternoon nap.'

Catherine punched in the number and waited. She heard a click on the other end: 'Hello, this is Joe El-Saad...'

'Hey, Joe, it's Catherine and...'

'... please leave a message at the sound of the beep.'

Catherine stared at disbelief at the silver box in her hand. Surely not another obstacle! Just as she was rehearsing in her mind what sort of message to leave, Joe himself came on the line.

'Hang on one moment. Sorry. Who is this?'

'Catherine. Catherine Brewer. Remember you picked up me and Ol... I mean old Fred,' she said, casting a quick glance at the cabbie. Fortunately, his attention was fully focused on exploring the contents of his left nostril.

'Of course I remember. How can I render assistance?'

Catherine took a few strides away from the taxi and lowered her voice, just in case the cabbie decided to eavesdrop. 'I think we'll have to meet. It's a bit complicated.'

'Yes, of course. Where are you calling from?'

'You're not going to believe this. I'm standing right next to your taxi and calling from your colleague's cell. He looks rough as hell, but he's a prude when it comes to bad language. Just like someone else I know.' She looked over at the taxi driver, who was now concentrating on plucking nose hairs with his fingernails. 'Where did you get *him* from?'

'He was Taxi Driver of the Year for a rival company, so I recruited him. Offered him a higher salary. He knows every street in the city, gets heaps of fares and makes me wealthy. And best of all, he is loyal to me.' He paused for a few seconds. 'I don't need to drive for the money anymore, I just enjoy meeting people. Like you, for instance.'

'If you're so rich,' said Catherine, her suspicion growing, 'why did you take the bike, huh?'

'Very simple. First thing this morning I get a call. Someone wants a taxi to go to the airport. I accept the fare – you meet the most interesting people going to and from airports. As she walks down the driveway, she notices that her son's beloved mountain bike is missing. She says it must be stolen. Later I see you and Olga tearing down the street and put two and two together. At lunch time I return to the house in Swallow Street,' at this point Catherine swallowed very hard indeed 'and give the boy back his bike. He was overjoyed.'

'I'm thrilled to hear it,' said Catherine. 'But I need your help now. Could you meet me outside the North End in say...'

'Fifteen minutes. Get Gerald to drop you there. Hang on, give him the phone.'

Gerald said a few yeahs, uh-huhs and okays before returning the mobile to the sweaty recesses of its former resting place and opening the passenger door for Catherine to get in. For the entire ride back to the theater neither of them uttered a single word.

Chapter 13

Heavy storm clouds were gathering. Catherine hoped this wasn't a sign of more bad times to come. She started to shiver and rub her hands together as the temperature dropped a few degrees. *Where was Joe?* Twenty minutes had passed since their phone conversation. Just then, a bright red sports car pulled up at the front of the theatre, Joe jumped out of the driver's seat and swaggered over to where Catherine stood, stunned into immobility by the transformation in his appearance. The greasy taxi driver's uniform had been replaced by an expensive-looking gray

suit and shiny black shoes. His hair was slicked back and the spiky stubble was gone. Catherine realized this bloke really *was* rich.

'I can't believe it's you!' she exclaimed. 'You're as weird as Olga.'

'That's why I took an instant liking to her.'

Catherine guided Joe down the side alley to the padlocked door, which she deftly opened with the shiny new key. When they got to the spot where Catherine had left Olga, the old woman was nowhere to be seen.

Catherine cupped her hands to her mouth. 'Olga! I'm back. And I've brought Joe with me. Where aaare yooou?'

Silence.

'Try again,' Joe murmured, although the acoustics under the theater were good enough to make his whisper almost as loud as Catherine's shouting.

'O-l-g-a!'

'Perhaps she has fallen into a deep sleep. There is very little oxygen in here, if you hadn't noticed.' Joe sniffed the air. 'The atmosphere is stale. We'd better look around.'

They checked each of the wire cages, eventually discovering Olga's shuddering figure in the very last one. Her eyes were wide with fear. Catherine rushed to her side and put her arm around the old lady's shoulders.

'What is it? Did you meet the phantom of the North End?'

As if awakening from a trance, Olga slowly shook her head from side to side and fixed a look on Catherine that could kill. She grabbed the girl by the collar and pulled her face close. The strength in those frail arms surprised Catherine more than anything Olga had done until now. Her grip was like a vice.

'Rats,' she hissed.

'Pardon?' said Catherine timidly, suddenly frightened by Olga's new found strength.

'Don't you ever leave me alone with rats again, do you understand?'

'What rats are you talking about? I don't see any rats.'

Olga's eyes were the size of saucers. 'Of course not! I left them the rest of the sandwiches and fled. I've seen what rats can do to people. I saw it when I was a child. They can eat a human in no time, especially when there's a swarm of the devils!'

Joe took Olga by the hand and gently pulled her upright. His voice was soothing, his guttural accent now silky smooth. 'Come with me, dear. Back in Lebanon I used to be a professional vermin exterminator,' he said, winking at Catherine, who was astonished by the way he calmly took control of the situation. 'If you say there were rats, then I believe you.'

'Not were. *Are!* They're still crawling around somewhere. Shhh! Can't you hear them?'

But there was no noise coming from anywhere. Catherine thought Olga must have really flipped. Maybe she should take her back to *Passing Winds*. Maybe she really did need to be locked away. As they were escorting Olga to the top of the stairs, Catherine started to think of how she could return her to Mrs. Morrison without getting into trouble, when all of a sudden she felt something run across the top of her shoe. And again. She held her breath and looked down to see rat after fat, dirty rat – each with a mouthful of cheese sandwich – scurrying out of the "Costumes" cage and along to the end of the catwalk. She emitted a piercing scream, let go of Olga's arm and sprinted down the stairs for the safety of the alleyway. When she regained her composure, she turned around to see Joe carrying an unconscious Olga. He lowered her to the ground, rolled up his jacket and placed it under her head. Then he sat down cross-legged, bowed his head and began laughing so hard he thought he was going to wet himself.

'Call them rats? They're ten times bigger than that in Beirut!'

'I don't know what you find so funny about it!' said Catherine. 'If we hadn't arrived just now, I hate to think what might have happened.'

'But we did arrive, didn't we? So there's nothing to worry about. Now, you said you needed my help. So, what exactly can I do for you? And it better not take too long – I've got an important function to go to tonight. The Taxi Drivers' Ball.'

'It's going to take more than a few hours. Probably days. But if you're too busy...'

'Stop! I have to know what I'm dealing with before I can give a decision.'

In the space of about five minutes, Catherine told Joe all about Olga's plight, concentrating on the urgency of finding Boris and convincing him to treat his mother with the dignity she deserved. If gentle persuasion failed to do the trick, Catherine wanted to try and use legal channels, but wasn't sure how to go about it. The number one priority now, though, was to find alternative accommodation for Olga, who had by now regained full consciousness.

When Catherine finished her monologue, Joe nodded his head, reached into his pocket and extracted a tattered business card.

'I'm sure you would benefit greatly from this man's expertise,' he said, handing the card to Catherine. 'He has helped me on many occasions when I've needed information. He's very expensive, but he owes me a few favors, so you won't be out of pocket in any way.'

'You've got to be joking,' said Catherine, passing the card to Olga. 'This guy sounds like something out of a cheap detective novel. Just the name's enough to put you off. Stanthorpe Mackay!'

'I agree with Catherine,' said Olga. 'This man can't be the genuine article. Listen to this drivel. *Stanthorpe Mackay PI. Services offered – pre-nuptial investigations, location of missing*

persons, debt recovery etc. Specializing in the surveillance of wayward spouses. No job too big or small. Are you sure this gentleman is a professional?’

‘You have my word on it,’ said Joe. He put his right hand across his heart and bowed slightly. ‘He is a little, how do you say, unorthodox in his behavior. But he always gets results. Remember my partner, Gerald? Mr. Mackay did a thorough background check on him.’

‘But you *hired* Gerald!’ Catherine pointed out. ‘So your Stanthorpe Mackay couldn’t have discovered anything bad, could he? Perhaps he’s not as thorough as you think?’

‘Indeed he is. One evening he follows Gerald to a casino and finds out he has a terrible gambling problem. But I decide to employ him anyway. In fact, now I make sure he goes to Gamblers Anonymous once a week!’

Olga and Catherine conferred quietly for a moment before agreeing to Joe’s suggestion.

‘Okay,’ said Catherine. ‘He’s got the job.’

‘Splendid!’ cried Joe. He gave a broad smile and rubbed his hands together. ‘I will call him and make an appointment for, say, tomorrow?’

Catherine nodded.

‘And now for your second request: somewhere to house Olga until the target is located. I think I know just the place. But first,’ Joe continued, ‘I must ask you, Olga. Do you have any religious prejudices of any kind?’

‘None whatsoever,’ Olga replied. ‘I’ve been witness to too much persecution in my life. About the only thing I won’t tolerate is intolerance. Why do you ask such a question?’

‘You will see shortly,’ said Joe as he picked up Olga’s bag and started walking back up the alley. ‘It’s time to go.’

The heavy, gray clouds overhead began to shed a few, large drops of rain, each one

making a loud splat as it struck the cobblestones. Olga opened her mouth as if to speak, but Catherine beat her to it.

‘Looks like we’ll have to go back under the theater.’

‘No way in the world am I going back in there with those horrible creatures,’ said Olga, terror gripping her voice. ‘I’d rather spend the rest of my life manacled to Mrs. Morrison!’

‘Follow me,’ said Joe, beckoning with his heavily bejeweled right hand.

Joe jogged up the alley towards where his car was parked, but to Catherine and Olga’s surprise made a left turn and headed for the iron gates of the synagogue next door. Before opening the gates, he removed a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, tied knots in each corner and arranged the makeshift hat on his head. He turned to encourage the other two to keep up, but they were right behind him.

‘Why have you got that ridiculous handkerchief on your head?’ asked Catherine, as they ran towards the solid oak doors.

‘All men have to have their heads covered before entering a synagogue,’ said Joe. ‘To do otherwise is a sign of great disrespect. I think it’s optional for women though, so you’re in luck. I just hope Rabbi Shimon is here.’

Joe knocked three times on the door, which was almost instantaneously opened by a tiny man in a black suit. Curly gray ringlets sprang out in all directions from under his skull-cap, which must have required more than the usual number of pins to hold it in place. Further down, his face was so overwhelmed by a forest of a beard that it would be impossible to describe his features with any accuracy, except to say that he had piercing blue eyes. His nose could have been long or short, his lips thin or full – the mass of hair and beard destroyed all sense of perspective.

'Do come in, Joe! And bring your friends. You'll catch pneumonia out there. I was just reading a bit of the Torah, but I got a bit bored and started staring out the window, hoping for inspiration for tonight's service.' He put the large, leather-bound book he'd been carrying on a small table beside the door. 'And what do I see, but my old friend Mr. El-Saad, fashioning a crazy yarmulke out of a handkerchief. If you'd ever set foot in here you'd know I keep spares for guests.'

'Why would a Maronite Christian from Lebanon ever want to enter a synagogue?' said Joe.

'A fair question,' replied Shimon, nodding his head in an understanding manner. 'But now you have. You've always been my favorite taxi driver, Joe, although Gerald does seem to know more short cuts than you. I trust you haven't been swindling me all these years!' He reached over, and with the speed of a conjurer, whipped the knotted handkerchief off Joe's head and replaced it with a proper yarmulke. 'I'm very pleased that you respect our customs. So tell me, what can I do for you. I wondered when you'd call in that favor. I made quite a lot of money on the stock market thanks to your tip.'

'You're right. I have come to call in that favor. It's rather a delicate matter, however. Perhaps I'll let the young lady explain,' said Joe, stepping to one side.

Rabbi Shimon beckoned them all to sit down on one of the benches at the rear of the synagogue. As they sat shivering, he walked over to a large wardrobe, pulled out some fringed shawls and handed them to Olga and Catherine.

'These are tallitot, or prayer shawls. Wrap them around your shoulders; you both look like you're about to freeze to death. Now, what seems to be the problem?'

Catherine explained the situation exactly as she had told Joe, laying heavy emphasis on

the terrible life Olga had had to endure at *Passing Winds*. Her version of the breakout drew laughter and a bout of hand clapping from Rabbi Shimon, who every now and then would say, “what a shocking state of affairs” and stroke his unruly beard. From the way Catherine described the rats in the theater next door, the Rabbi could have been forgiven for thinking they had been foaming at the mouth and armed with sub-machine guns.

When Catherine had finished, Rabbi Shimon turned his attention to Olga, who had sat through the young girl’s speech in polite silence. ‘Olga, or would you prefer Mrs. Pivovarov?’

‘Olga will be fine,’ she answered, pulling the tallit closer around her scrawny shoulders.

‘Olga. It seems to me that I have to make an important decision here. On the one hand,’ he made an extravagant and totally unnecessary gesture with his right hand, ‘if I don’t inform the police that I know where you are, I could be in serious trouble for concealing a fugitive. On the other hand,’ – identical gesture with the left – ‘my conscience would give me no peace if I returned you to that virtual prison camp. And, being Jewish, I can certainly understand your situation.’

‘Were *you* in a concentration camp, Rabbi?’ asked Catherine, her eyes wide.

‘No dear, thankfully not. But I can imagine what it’s like to be deprived of your freedom. So, after weighing up the pros and cons, I think I can help. There is a study room to the right of the bema – the alter, if you like – which is about to be renovated and won’t be used for a few days yet. You can sleep there for a night or two, Olga.’ Rabbi Shimon dramatically raised his index finger towards the ceiling, as if he had just worked out the theory of relativity. ‘Perhaps you could join in with the worshippers tonight? As a guest. In fact, I insist on it,’ the fuzzy hair around his mouth, which until now had only fluttered occasionally as his breath passed his lips, now parted momentarily to reveal a set of gleaming, white teeth.

To Olga, that smile suggested a long and tedious evening of liturgy, bowed heads and mind-splitting boredom. She only hoped the Jewish service wasn't as long as the handful of Russian Orthodox masses she'd attended in her childhood. She comforted herself with the fact that, unlike Russian churches, where the faithful are expected to stand throughout the whole service, at least there were plenty of seats in this synagogue. Olga tried to smile, but all the efforts of her facial muscles could only pull her frown into a horizontal line, ever so slightly dipping at the corners. The Rabbi sensed she was not at all keen on the idea.

'I can see you are very tired. Maybe we can spare you the ordeal tonight. But I want you to promise me that one day you will do me the great favor of attending one of our prayer meetings.'

'Rabbi,' said Olga, a smile of relief coming naturally now. 'That would be fine. And when this is all over and I get my independence back, you'll be getting a small donation as a token of my gratitude.'

'You are a wonderful woman, *spasibo*.'

'No need to thank... Hey, just a minute! You speak Russian?'

Rabbi Shimon winked. 'But of course! Doesn't everyone from Saint Petersburg?'

Chapter 14

'So, how did your studying go at the library? Mrs. Brewer asked the second Catherine stepped in the door.

'Oh, not bad. There wasn't as much information as I'd hoped. Looks like I'll have to go back and do some more research in case I missed some stuff.' Catherine's imagination was

proving as fertile as ever. 'The librarian promised to get some interesting material sent down from the government archives office, which is luckily open every third Saturday. Should be there by lunch time tomorrow.'

Margaret Brewer, however, knew her daughter well enough to be a little distrustful. 'But tomorrow's Sunday.'

'Oh, yeah. I meant to say she rang up and asked them to fax it. But they couldn't do it right away – it was going to take some time digging through the old files, so they said they would try and fax it just before closing time tonight.'

Catherine's mother seemed satisfied with that explanation. In reality, she was still a little hung over from last night's celebrations and was eager to have a light supper and go back to bed. Her father was in much worse shape. When Catherine went into her parents' bedroom to say hello, the curtains were still drawn and the pungent odor of soluble vitamin B pills hung in the air.

'Hi, Dad!' she announced cheerfully. 'Have a good win last night?'

Barry Brewer struggled to lift his leaden head from the pillow, and failed. He tried to utter a few words, but could only manage a low-pitched groan.

'Gee, Dad. I'm glad you don't win too often. It would kill you!'

Catherine closed the door quietly and crept into her room. She was relieved her parents were in no mood for conversation. An extra bonus was that Mom hadn't noticed the missing fifty dollars. She hadn't really spent much – only a few bucks on train fares – so she decided to put back forty in her mother's purse first thing in the morning. Suddenly realizing that all she'd had to eat since the morning was a cheese sandwich – a meal fit for a rat – she headed back to the kitchen to fix herself a quick snack before heading off to bed. She had to rest up and be in good

shape for tomorrow's interview with Stanthorpe Mackay, PI. During the car ride home from the synagogue, Joe reassured Catherine of the investigator's ability. But she was still skeptical.

Totally exhausted, she flopped onto her bed like a rag doll; she was asleep in exactly seven and a half seconds after her head touched the pillow.

* * *

The foul weather of the last two days had been replaced by bright sunny skies. It was still cold, though, and puffs of steam escaped from Catherine's nostrils, which were still delivering a mild honey aroma into her brain whenever she inhaled. Not that she regretted failing in her attempted deception on Friday morning. Quite the opposite; she realized fate had ordained that she and Olga should cross paths. Now, waiting for Joe at the end of Swallow Street, well out of sight of her house and, more importantly, her neighbors', she hoped that Olga's problems could be resolved quickly. She didn't want to have to go to school tomorrow with the job unfinished.

Catherine had to keep adjusting the strap of her shoulder bag, which she had packed with fresh clothes for Olga. The burden was already heavy enough, but her mother had decided to toss in a few extra items: lunch (mercifully no cheese sandwiches), a drink, an extra sweater, an umbrella, and a large notepad for her "library work". Just as she felt she would break under the load, Joe's red sports car pulled up to the curb.

'Put that bag in the trunk,' he said, waving towards the rear of the car where the trunk was already yawning in anticipation.

When she sat down, Catherine noticed that Joe had taken on yet another persona: somewhere between the scruffy cabbie she'd first encountered and the well-groomed man-about-town from last night. Today he was casually dressed in a striped rugby top, faded blue jeans and well-worn sneakers. His face wasn't as smooth as it was yesterday; stubble was just starting to

break through the skin, almost as if he were gradually easing himself into tomorrow's role of working-class man.

'Last night I rang Mr. Mackay, and we have an appointment for noon. So there are a few hours to spare. What would you like to do?'

Catherine was at a loss for words. This was the first time since last weekend that she actually had time on her hands. She didn't know what to do. Her first thoughts were naturally with Olga. 'Maybe we could go back to the synagogue and...'

'I don't think that's a good idea,' said Joe. Seeing the look of disappointment in Catherine's eyes, he quickly explained. 'I went to see her and Rabbi Shimon last night after the Taxi Drivers' Ball. It was well after the service when I arrived, and I half expected Olga to be asleep and the place locked up. But I should have realized that their being, well, compatriots I suppose, they'd have a lot to talk about. And so they did. The pair of them were still chatting away when I left them at two-thirty this morning.' He gave Catherine an apologetic look. 'You and I are young, but Olga is not, how you say, a springy chicken. I think it best we let her sleep in.'

'Yeah, I suppose you're right.'

'Well? What's it to be?'

'Just give me a minute. I'm thinking.' Catherine gave a muffled sigh. 'Oh, what the heck. Take me to the city library. May as well put the notepad to some use.'

'Beg your pardon?'

'It's just that I told Mom I spent all day yesterday researching the North End Theater for a school project, when you and I know that wasn't the case. This way, at least I've got a few hours up my sleeve to make some rough notes to show Mom. I only hope their fax machine is

broken.'

'You are really confusing me,' said Joe as he turned down the Middle-Eastern music playing on his car stereo. 'What broken fax machine?'

'Never mind.'

* * *

Catherine plopped her bag on the desk and headed for one of the library's computers. After searching under various categories, she'd found five books about the North End Theatre and some information on the Internet. Most interesting were the stories on microfiche from over fifty years ago. She spent about forty-five minutes reading and jotting down notes (which would have laid the foundation for an excellent project, had there been one) before packing her gear back in the bag and heading for the exit. It had been a boring and totally futile exercise, but at least she'd produced something to satisfy her mother's curiosity. She had taken three steps down the stairs when she suddenly turned around and headed back inside the foyer. Something so obvious dawned on her that it was painful to think about it for too long. She remembered the torn-up telephone directory at the pay phone and realized the library should be furnished with intact directories for the whole state, if not the country.

The phone directories were, sadly, about five years old. There was a B. Pivovarov listed, but that was for the address she already knew. Undeterred, she approached a rake-thin, dark-haired woman at the information counter.

'Excuse me, but would you have a more up-to-date phone directory for the city that I could have a look at?'

The woman produced a very thick and glossy directory from under the counter. 'You can look at it here. We've had a lot of trouble with these going missing, so we just leave the old ones

in the reference section. I don't understand it, because you can find all of this online anyway. Why didn't you just look on the Internet?'

'Yeah, I know. But my session had finished and I don't have enough money to pay for another. Now, can I have a look at it please?'

'Sure, just don't be too long, okay?'

Catherine began rifling through the pages until she got to the P's. When she spotted what she so eagerly sought, she yelled out "Yes!" in triumph, only to be met with what sounded like a hydraulic hose breaking in two, but was in fact about a dozen visitors to the library saying "shhh!" She took out a pen and wrote the address on the outside of her wrist. She handed the book back to the librarian, grabbed her bag and skipped down the stairs, whistling like a canary.

Joe, who had found a parking meter right outside the library, was waiting at the foot of the stairs reading an Arabic-language newspaper and shaking his head, obviously displeased about something or other. He looked up to see Catherine prancing about and grinning from ear to ear.

'What's happened? Why are you so happy?'

'Because of this,' she replied, extending her wrist like a fiancée showing off her shiny new engagement ring. 'I have just discovered the whereabouts of a certain Boris Pivovarov. So it seems we won't be needing your Mr. Mackay after all.'

Joe examined the black ink on Catherine's arm, and then gave her a challenging look. 'Are you certain this is where he lives?'

'Of course, I found it in the newest white pages.'

Tucking the newspaper under his arm, Joe opened the passenger door. 'Please get in. Now we go to see Mr. Mackay.'

Catherine began spluttering. 'What? I told you. I *know* where he lives.'

The look Joe gave her was exactly like the expression doctors give relatives of patients who didn't pull through the operation. 'I am a taxi driver who knows addresses like the back of his hand – like the back of *your* hand even. All the houses in that street were pulled down last month to make way for a new road.'

'But the telephone directory! I saw it!'

'I can't explain that. But I'm sure Mr. Mackay can.'

* * *

It seemed an eternity before the rickety old elevator finally creaked its way to the ground floor. Catherine thought Stanthorpe Mackay had certainly chosen the right area to headquarter his detective agency. The building containing his office was an off-white, Art Deco monstrosity on the outskirts of the city; a district where the rent was cheap, mainly because the dark streets and alleyways were a haven for drug dealers, prostitutes and street gangs. The bulk of the businesses comprised bars, gambling establishments and tattoo parlors, all doing a roaring trade. Oddly, there was also an abundance of appallingly bad street performers, one favoring a piano accordion and foot-activated cymbals. The discordant noise they generated protected them like a force field from the low life, who at least had enough appreciation of music to give them a wide berth. Catherine wondered how they managed to make any money at all. All in all, though, the perfect environment from which to run a sleuthing operation.

'You'll have to give me a hand,' said Joe, tugging in vain at the iron grille across the elevator's entryway. 'Seems to be stuck.'

Catherine gripped the top half of the handle and together they managed to squeeze the door open. The cabin itself was littered with all manner of objects, and they had to be careful not

to tread in a pool of what looked like blood running diagonally across the floor. Judging by the smell, Catherine had a feeling that whoever had relieved themselves in the phone booth near the badminton center must also have visited this building. They might even live here! She fixed Joe with a glare that seemed to demand he justify his faith in Stanthorpe Mackay. For a while he pretended not to notice, but as the elevator rasped to a halt at the fifth floor he reacted sharply.

'Hey, what are you staring at me like that for? You mustn't go on appearances alone. I told you he's on the level, and he is. He is only basing his agency here temporarily because the previous landlord went bankrupt and had to sell.' Joe gave a dry chuckle. 'The irony is, Mr. Mackay has only himself to blame. The landlord's *wife* hired him to follow her husband, whom she suspected of being unfaithful. Turns out he had a string of girlfriends, so the wife sued him for everything he had. Which proves that our Mr. Mackay is a true professional, don't you agree?'

'Professional? An idiot more like it. That sort of behavior is called biting the hand that feeds you.' As she went to step out of the elevator, Catherine caught the toe of her sneaker in the rivulet of maroon liquid on the floor, sending her into a rage. 'My God! Someone's probably been murdered in here. We've got to go back!'

'Nonsense,' said Joe in a soothing voice.

'Catherine would not be dissuaded. 'If he's so damned good, why doesn't he have enough money to rent a decent office down town, hey? Tell me that!'

'Because, my dear, I have just purchased this building, and I'm allowing him to work here rent-free for a while. Just until he gets back on his feet.' His eyes suddenly became watery, and Catherine thought he was about to burst into tears. 'The final insult for him was that one of his landlord's lovers was Stanthorpe's own wife. So, we have two costly divorces resulting from

one apparently routine case. He puts up a brave front, but the man is hurting, so I would ask you to treat him with some sympathy.'

'Oh, I had no idea. I mean... Oh, that's terrible,' Catherine managed to get out.

'Yes, a real tragedy. So, you will go easy on him, won't you?'

Catherine sighed and shrugged her shoulders. 'Yes.'

The sound of their footsteps echoed eerily down the cavernous hallway. Mr. Mackay's office was, for some reason, at the far end, although there seemed to be no other occupants on this floor.

'Why is he so far away from the elevator?' asked Catherine.

'That's in case any bad guys are after him, their footsteps will alert him and he'll have time to load his revolver.'

The thought of making the sign of the cross briefly entered Catherine's mind. 'Oh, brother.' She sighed in exasperation. 'Who am I dealing with here?'

'I told you. A professional.'

Joe rapped hard on the door in what Catherine thought was a contrived manner. Knock... pause... knock, knock, knock... pause... knock.

Come in Mr. El-Saad,' boomed a voice from within. 'I've been expecting you.'

When she opened the door, Catherine's first impression was that the office had been hit by a hurricane, only without the water damage. Tattered manila folders were piled high and wide on a small writing desk, upon which several wire trays of the in, out and pending variety jostled for position. Along the back wall stood a row of different-sized bookcases crammed with legal textbooks, telephone directories, street atlases and the odd comic book. The computer on his desk looked like a toy, but was in fact a supremely powerful piece of technology. Cardboard

archive boxes were spread out along the bottom of the remaining walls. One corner of the room was occupied by a gunmetal gray locker whose doors refused to shut; stray black wires poking out between the locker's doors indicated that this was where the PI kept his listening devices and other electronic equipment.

'Please, take a seat,' said the detective, pointing at two wooden stools in front of his desk.

The man himself was as disheveled as his work place; his black suit was so wrinkled Catherine thought he must have slept in it – every night for the last month. From beneath his jacket peeked a shirt that had probably been white originally, but it was hard to be sure. The stains on the shirt revealed the owner's preference for take-out Chinese food and strong, black coffee. Like a flock of startled starlings, breadcrumbs around his mouth flew in all directions as he spoke.

'Don't worry about the mess on the floor. It'll get cleaned up. Eventually. All my important papers are either here on my desk or in the boxes around the wall.'

Joe led the way, casually kicking aside a styrofoam coffee cup and several food wrappers, one of them concealing a half-eaten cheeseburger. Catherine spotted a pool of liquid, similar to the one in the elevator, gleaming under Stanthorpe's desk. She wanted to ask what it was, but thoughts of insanely jealous spouses and murderous thugs kept her silent. For the moment.

As she took her seat, Catherine's doubts came flooding back. The man took little care of himself, so why should he be concerned about someone else's problems? His blond, wavy hair had patches of grey around the sides. The reddish stubble on his cheeks wasn't ruggedly handsome like Joe's – on him it just looked untidy. Upon closer inspection, however, he possessed the most intelligent looking eyes Catherine had ever seen, including those of her uncle Jim who had won a small fortune of a television quiz show. On the whole though, and despite his

scruffy exterior, Catherine thought he was a bit of a hunk.

'Allow me to introduce myself,' she began. 'My name is...'

'I know. Catherine Brewer. Mr. El-Saad has briefed me on your situation, and has kindly offered to cover my out-of-pocket expenses, small as they are.'

Catherine raised an eyebrow. 'But Joe told me you were very expensive.'

'Well, um... Never mind about that. Please give me your version of events and any other information you might have.'

'Okay,' said Catherine, gathering her thoughts. 'As you might know already, I'm looking for a Mr. Boris Pivovarov. I went to the address given to me by his mother, but he wasn't there. In fact the house was empty. Then,' she lowered her eyes and, noticing again the mysterious fluid under the desk, quickly changed the subject. 'First you tell me about the blood on the floor. And in the elevator. I don't want to get tangled up with someone who deals with killers!'

'That's not blood,' the detective laughed. 'Some half-crazy Italian green grocer came in with an ice-cream container full of pulped red grapes and asked me to do a forensic test on the contents. I politely told him that's not my line of work, but he flew into a rage and threw a handful of the stuff at me. Luckily, he was standing by the door at the time, so it fell short of the target. I chased him down the hallway, but he got into the elevator before I could catch him. He could see me glaring at him through the grille as the elevator went down, so he tipped it all onto the floor and flipped me the finger. I would have run down the stairs to grab him at the ground floor, but the whole episode struck me as quite hilarious, so I let the poor guy go. Does that answer your question?'

It was all Catherine could do to stifle the laughter that was building up inside her chest. 'Oh yes, Mr. Mackay. It certainly does.' She cleared her throat and continued, trying to look as

serious as possible. 'Right. Back to our man Boris. I looked him up in the latest white pages, but Joe told me the address was in an area where some houses were demolished to make way for a new road. Last month.'

Joe, who had been silent the whole time, only giving a little chuckle when he heard about Luigi and the grapes, decided to contribute to the conversation. 'Of this I am sure. I have a photographic knowledge of the streets in this city.'

Stanthorpe Mackay nodded. 'I hate to tell you, Catherine, but you can't rely on phone directories being entirely up to date. Often they are quite inaccurate. He pulled open a drawer and showed Catherine a newspaper clipping. It was the article about Olga's disappearance. 'I'm sure you've seen this already, but please read it again and tell me what you think.'

Catherine scanned the article. Suddenly her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. 'The police have been in touch with him! How did I miss it before? Why don't you just call Lieutenant Ironmonger and ask him where Boris is?'

'It's not quite that simple, I'm afraid,' said Stanthorpe, shaking his head. 'Lieutenant Ironmonger and I had a terrible falling out over a client I got acquitted of a trumped-up charge. We used to co-operate closely, but now our relationship is rather frosty, I'm afraid. However I do think I know how they got hold of Boris.'

'Great! How?'

'I assume someone was paying for Olga's keep at *Passing Winds*?'

Catherine nodded. 'Of course, Boris was.'

'Well then, we just have to ask... what's her name,' he said, referring back to the newspaper clipping. 'Mrs. Morrison. I'm sure that's all the police did.'

Catherine crossed her arms and smiled at Joe. 'You were right. This man is a true

professional.'

Stanthorpe Mackay walked over to one of the bookcases, kicking aside some garbage on his way, and retrieved the yellow pages. He quickly found the entry, punched in the number and prepared to wait. The call was answered within seconds. Unfortunately, Catherine and Joe could only hear one side of the conversation.

'Hello, could I speak with Mrs. Morrison, please?' he cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, 'they're just putting me through... Hello! Mrs. Morrison? My name is Murray Darling, chief news editor for Channel 5. We're very interested in the story about the old woman who escaped... I beg your pardon?... You say she was kidnapped? Well, whatever. We would love to do an interview with you, and also with her son. The problem is, we're having a bit of trouble locating him... Sorry, I missed that? Oh, thanks, you have a lovely voice, too. Yes... uh-huh... oh, that's too bad. Okay. When will we be interviewing you? I'll be in touch. Good-bye.'

'Well?' said Catherine.

'Bit of a problem. It seems he paid by sending cash in a brown envelope with no return address. Looks like my only chance is through old Ironmonger.'

'Damn,' said Catherine.

Chapter 15

The study room at the synagogue was the most comfortable accommodation Olga had enjoyed for two years. Rabbi Shimon had supplied her with all the comforts of home: a portable color television, a small refrigerator, even a microwave oven. A cardboard box by the fridge contained

enough food to feed a regiment. Remnants of a hearty meal lay on a foldaway table by the side of Olga's sofa bed, and it was clear from the number of plates and the half-full bottle of vodka that Rabbi Shimon had dined with her. The tools, lumber and paints stashed in a corner in readiness for the up-coming renovations were but a minor inconvenience. When Catherine entered the room, the old woman was sitting bolt upright on the bed, her eyes focused intently on the football match being broadcast live on the television.

'Sit down on the edge of the bed dear,' said Olga. 'Come on refs, that's interference! Are you blind?!' she hollered, causing Catherine to jump slightly. 'Sorry about that, but there's only a few minutes to go, and the Cougars are just a few points behind. It's so exciting. I haven't seen a whole game in ages!'

Catherine couldn't believe someone could get so worked up over a bunch of grown men chasing each other trying to get hold of a ball, bashing each other senseless in their efforts to do so. But she sat in respectful silence until the end of the game. Olga, however, was far from silent, yelling her encouragement so loudly that the players could probably hear her cheering from the stadium at the other end of the country. Thankfully, one of the players from Olga's team scored a touchdown in the dying seconds. Catherine shuddered to think of the consequences had the Cougars lost.

When Olga had finally calmed down and stopped saying "Did you see that? What a play!", Catherine switched off the television and took her by the hand.

'This is going to sound corny, but I have some good news and some bad news, said Catherine.

'Give me the good news first.'

'I've met Mr. Mackay and he's for real. A little eccentric, but smart. He knows someone

who knows where Boris lives.'

'And the bad news?'

'The bad news is that he couldn't get in contact with that person. It seems Lieutenant Ironmonger has gone on vacation to Jamaica.'

'Lieutenant Ironmonger?' said Olga. 'Isn't he the policeman looking for me?'

'One of them, yes. But there must be others. You know, deputies or whatever they call them.'

'So, what's next?'

'He said he is going to explore other avenues, as they say on the cop shows.'

Catherine stood up, slung her bag over her shoulder and zipped up her coat.

'I've got to go. I was hoping to have this all fixed by today. I didn't want to be going to school worrying about you. But I think Stanthorpe Mackay will find Boris. I quite like the man, actually,' she said calmly, trying hard not to sound like she had a crush on him.

Olga dismissed Catherine's concerns with a casual wave of the arm and a smile. 'Don't worry about me. Rabbi Shimon said I could stay here for a week if I want to, as long as I stay out of the way of the workers. He's going to tell them I'm his long-lost aunt from Saint Petersburg. And we can talk Russian all the time, so they shouldn't get suspicious.' She poured herself a tiny shot of vodka and downed it in one go. 'Good luck. I really like it here, but I want you to find Boris. I do miss him.'

'What?' said Catherine incredulously. 'At one point you said you wanted God to punish him!'

'Yes, dear,' she replied, stretching out on the sofa bed like an old cat. 'But after I'm done with him, divine retribution will seem like a slap on the wrist.'

Olga's threat was the least threatening she had ever heard; by the tone of her voice, the old woman could just as easily have said she wanted to buy her son a teddy bear and give him a great big cuddle. Closing the door behind her, Catherine wondered how someone could be as forgiving as Olga, especially considering all she'd suffered. Perhaps Rabbi Shimon had said something warm and fuzzy to make her feel all maternal again. Or maybe her new, comfortable surroundings had taken the edge off her anger. One thing was certain – Olga was now looking forward to reunion, not revenge.

As she stepped onto the sidewalk, Catherine noticed with some anxiety that the street was totally deserted. The faithful wouldn't be arriving at the synagogue for a few hours yet, and it was a long, lonely walk to the subway station. Compounding her fear, a streetlight flickered for an instant, fizzed and went out with a loud pop. She thought about going back inside and asking the rabbi if she could call Joe and ask him to pick her up, but chose to make her way to the subway on foot.

Nearing her destination, Catherine thought she could hear footsteps about fifty yards behind her. She quickly turned around to look, but there was nothing. She took two small steps and, hearing the sound again, spun around, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever was following. This time she made out the shape of a long overcoat and a hat ducking into an alleyway. It was still a pretty long way to the corner, and the person following her might catch her if she tried to run. Despite her accelerated pulse and sweaty palms, she decided to be brave.

'Who's there?' Catherine shouted, only to be answered by the crash of metal garbage cans banging together. 'I'm warning you... I've got a gun!'

'I doubt that very much,' came a voice from behind the alley. 'It's only me... Stanthorpe.'

Catherine sprinted back to where he sat inelegantly on the ground surrounded by foul-smelling vegetable peelings. 'Why are you tailing me? You're supposed to be searching for Boris.'

'Ah, yes... well, you see I was on another case. They mayor asked me to stake out the North End Theater. He's been receiving letters from someone threatening to blow the place sky high, and I was hoping to catch them tonight.'

Catherine scratched her head, her pulse rate now nearly normal. 'But if the theater is going to be bulldozed anyway, wouldn't some crazy blowing it up save on the demolition costs?'

'Good point,' said Stanthorpe, brushing a potato peel from his trousers. 'But Mayor Cohen is more concerned with the damage an uncontrolled explosion may cause to the synagogue next door. Especially if it happens in the middle of a service.'

'Sorry for asking so many questions, but isn't this a job for the police?'

The private eye took off his hat and slapped it against his brown leather shoe, the end of which had been worn away to reveal a threadbare black sock. 'Normally, yes. But their resources are a bit thin, what with Ironmonger in Jamaica and so on, so I was asked to help out. I'm expecting my suspect to arrive in a half hour, so I'd appreciate it if you'd make yourself scarce.'

'Of course,' said Catherine, batting her eyelids at the untidy PI. 'Only I'm a little nervous about walking to the subway alone.'

'I would love to escort you, but there's no way I'm going to miss the bomber. I've been tracking him for months and he's due to strike tonight.' He reached into a pocket and handed Catherine a small cylindrical object. 'Here, take this personal alarm. If anything happens, pull the ring... you can hear those babies from miles away.'

'Thanks. You won't forget Boris, though, will you?'

'Not at all. I'll start snooping around police headquarters tomorrow. I've got some dirt on

a few of the senior officers, so I reckon they'll talk. But you really have to go now, otherwise you might blow the whole operation.'

Catherine held onto the alarm for dear life and strode off towards the subway station, every now and then turning her head sideways in case some maniac – with or without dynamite – leaped out from behind a parked car. A few yards from the relative safety of the brightly lit corner, something latched onto Catherine leg. Thinking at first that the mysterious mad bomber had grabbed her, Catherine tugged on the ring of the personal alarm and waited for the high-pitched wail. When the device refused to activate, she looked down to see a mangy ginger cat, which seemed to be pleading with its twinkling eyes for a scrap of food. As she kicked the feline away, Catherine reckoned the intense pain she was feeling from the animal's claws was nothing compared to the scolding she would give Stanthorpe Mackay, cute though he was. If his detecting abilities were as bad as the reliability of his cheap gadgets, they were never going to find Boris.

Chapter 16

While her mother was busy unpacking a bag of groceries, Catherine grabbed the cordless phone from its cradle and tucked it under her sweater. She was heading for the stairs when Mrs. Brewer stopped her.

'Catherine, your principal Mr. Kennedy rang me at work today. He told me you weren't on the bus when it came back from *Passing Winds* on Friday afternoon. Is that true?'

Catherine folded her arms to conceal the bulging telephone and turned slowly to face her mother. 'Ah, yes it is Mom.'

She turned to go up the stairs; she was dying to call Stanthorpe and find out if he had discovered anything since yesterday. His confidence must be up – everyone at school was talking about the famous private detective who last night single-handedly collared the extortionist and would-be bomber, the country's most wanted person.

'And?'

'And what? You only asked me one question.'

Mrs. Brewer put the last can of sliced peaches into the pantry and sat down at the kitchen table. 'He also told me that you were one of the last people to see that poor old woman who disappeared. *Please* tell me that you are not mixed up in this business. You could be in serious trouble if you are.'

Feeling the telephone start to slip, Catherine crouched on the stair, tucked her legs up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her knees, trapping the handset against her chest. She gave her mother a look of absolute innocence. She even managed a couple of tears.

'Mom, if you had met that old witch, you'd know that I couldn't have anything to do with it. She called me such horrible names, and all I did was try to be nice. Everyone at school has made up their mind I'm guilty, too. But I'm not!' She blubbered a bit more before Mrs. Brewer relented.

'Okay, I believe you. But why didn't you come home on the bus with the rest of the kids?'

'Oh. Mom. I was so upset I just ran out of that awful dump and got home the best I could. If only you and Dad had been home to comfort me a bit, but you were off playing your stupid badminton!'

'My poor darling, let me give you a hug,' said Mrs. Brewer, her eyes radiating

forgiveness.

Careful not to let the phone drop, Catherine jumped up, spun around and tore up the stairs.

'A bit late for that now!' she called over her shoulder. 'I just want to be left alone in my room for a while. I'll come down when I'm feeling better, okay?'

'Anything you want, sweetheart.'

Catherine locked the door behind her, threw the telephone on the bed and began rifling through her bag in search of Stanthorpe Mackay's business card. In her excitement she misread the number and dialed the city zoo, but her second attempt was successful.

'Hello, Catherine. Did you see my picture on the front page of the newspaper?' said Stanthorpe proudly.

'Yes, I did. And it may well have been for the wrong reason. I wanted to kill you when that alarm didn't work! I hope you've made some progress with the search for Boris.'

'Ah... sorry about the alarm. Never had one fail on me before. Actually, I've never had to use one – I've got a black belt in karate. Now, regarding the other matter, I hate to say this Catherine, but catching terrorists is turning out to be a lot easier than finding your Mr. Pivovarov. I even threatened to expose a few bent cops if they didn't give me the information, but I've dealt with these guys for years, and honestly, they know nothing. I can tell when someone's lying to me.'

Catherine tried to interrupt, but Stanthorpe cut her off.

'Believe it or not, it seems Ironmonger knows Boris personally. He made the call to tell him his mother had absconded. Unfortunately, he made the call on his cell phone, so there are no written or electronic records of the call. Only the FBI could track that information, not me.

Worse still, ironmonger isn't due back from Jamaica for a month.'

'Damn!' said Catherine. 'We can't wait a month. The rabbi's goodwill can only hold out for so long.'

'Let's not give up so easily,' Stanthorpe countered, trying to sound encouraging. 'I haven't had a failure in years. I just thought it would be so simple, I didn't bother to ask some basic questions. Did Olga ever say what Boris did for a living, for instance?'

'Yes, I think so,' said Catherine. She imagined she could hear someone breathing behind the door, so she turned up the volume on her clock radio. 'He sells life insurance. But she doesn't know who for.'

'Good, that's a start. What about hobbies and so on?'

'Um... I don't think she said. But she loves football, maybe he does too.'

Stanthorpe was sounding much more optimistic now. 'Excellent. Max Ironmonger was a college football star in his younger days. Got drafted for the Cougars, but injuries killed off any future he had in sports.'

'The Cougars?! That's Olga's favorite team. There's gotta be a link there, don't you think?'

'Maybe. I'll check the life insurance companies and the Cougars management and get back to you. Hopefully with a positive result.'

'How long will that take?' asked Catherine, aware that she'd have to return the telephone before it was discovered missing.

'Two hours, tops. The whole city knows who I am today, so I shouldn't have too much trouble finding out what we need to know. Shall I call you back on this number?'

'No! definitely not. I'll call you. Could you do me a favor, though? Please call Olga and

find out is she's all right. Thanks. Bye.'

Catherine returned the phone unnoticed while her mother was busy peeling potatoes at the sink. Her father wouldn't be home for another hour, so she thought now might be a good time to ask her mother a few questions.

'Mom?'

'Yes, Catherine?'

'I've noticed I don't look much like you or Dad? Am I adopted?'

'Of course not,' said Mrs. Brewer, dropping a large, half-peeled potato onto the floor. 'What put that crazy idea into your head?'

'What about a foundling then?'

An almighty splash of water drenched the kitchen drapes as Mrs. Brewer dropped another potato.

'Don't be ridiculous! You might not look like me or your father, but you're the spitting image of your grandmother Georgia, and your cousin Emma could pass for your sister. Sometimes these things skip a generation, you know. But you are *definitely* our daughter. I'll never forget the fifteen hours of labor you put me through!' She sat down the vegetable peeler and put her arm around Catherine's shoulder. 'Enough of these silly questions, okay? Come and lend me a hand with dinner.'

Dinner turned out to be a peaceful affair; Mr. Brewer had been overlooked for a promotion and spent the evening silently fuming, occasionally asking if someone could pass the salt. Catherine was sure the only thing holding him back in his career was his ridiculous come-over – he was, after all, a very intelligent and hard-working man. She even thought about telling him to shave his head and go for the chrome-dome look, but he was clearly too upset for

grooming tips tonight.

At the end of the news and current affairs programs, which were largely devoted to the heroic deeds of Stanthorpe Mackay, Catherine excused herself – on the pretence of catching up with some math homework – and headed for her room, telephone in hand. Luckily, her parents were eager to see the end of an interminably long and boring documentary series about some ancient Chinese emperor, so she was guaranteed a few hours of privacy. She was itching to call her favorite detective. All the publicity he'd received made him even more of a hunk in Catherine's eyes.

'Hi there Mr. Mackay. It's me again, Catherine. What's the latest?'

Silence.

'Hello...'

'Yes, Catherine. Bad news I'm afraid. I've checked the register of all currently licensed insurance agents. Zero. The Cougars don't know anything either.'

'Oh no, that's terrible,' said Catherine. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Why did you ever decide to help this pesky old woman? Surely it wasn't that bad at the retirement home.'

'I don't know. We just clicked, especially when she told me Pivovarov meant Brewer in Russian. And then when...'

'Stop! Why didn't you tell me this before?'

'I didn't think it was important.'

'Not important?' said Stanthorpe in disbelief. 'I've been a private investigator long enough to know a thing or two about aliases.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sometimes when people want to disappear or lie low for a while, they adopt an alias, often something not too different from their real name. It's a long shot, but it's just possible that Boris Pivovarov has changed his name to Brewer – a name he'd feel comfortable with. It's a bit like our friend Joe El-Saad. He obviously thought that Zouheir would be too difficult for us English-speaking types to get our tongues around, so he decided to call himself Joe. Just a second while I grab the white pages.'

Catherine sat on the edge of her bed, kicking her leg back and forth in nervous anticipation. She heard the crisp rustling of pages being flicked over.

'Bingo!' Stanthorpe cried in triumph. 'There are two B. Brewers here. What's your father's first name?'

'Barry.'

'Surely you've had people ringing your house asking to speak to someone called Boris every now and then.'

'Well, I hardly ever answer the phone at home. But now you mention it, Mom and Dad have had to tell a few people they'd dialed the wrong number.' Catherine was beginning to sniff out a bit of hope. Searching for some object upon which she could focus her nervous energy, she wished the phone she was gripping so fiercely had a cord attached to it – she would have given it a vigorous twirl. 'Actually, a couple of times Mom had a helluva job convincing the person on the other end that Dad wasn't the man they wanted.'

'The other B. Brewer might be our guy. Only he lives at Montgomery Cliffs, which is a long way out of town. I'll try that number now; spin him some line about selling aluminum cladding or something. Call me back in a couple of minutes, okay?'

'Sure.'

Catherine watched the clock like a hawk. She rightly reasoned that a couple was two, so she tried calling back when exactly two minutes had passed. Busy. Damn! She rang every two minutes for a half hour before Stanthorpe finally answered.

'You said a couple of minutes! What took you so long?'

'Target located!'

'Fantastic!' Catherine shouted so loudly she thought her parents might have heard. 'Does he suspect anything?' she added, dropping her voice a few decibels.

'I don't think so. In fact he asked me around to give him a quote on new guttering. I've also been on the phone to Mr. El-Saad and Olga. Can you meet us tomorrow afternoon at the synagogue? Say, four o'clock?'

The prospect of finally coming face to face with Boris Pivovarov was too tempting to say no, even though she'd have to lie to her mother again. But what was it some wise philosopher said about the ends justifying the means?

'No problem. See you then.'

Chapter 17

Mr. Goldsmith hadn't been able to wait any longer for his new glasses; the class was buzzing yesterday with cruel accusations being hurled at Catherine, and he needed to find out who was doing it. He was pretty sure he knew who the primary offenders were – Jenny Rodriguez and her best friend Charlotte. Another few days or so without his glasses and his sense of hearing may have grown acute enough to identify individual voices over the general hubbub. But he didn't have the luxury of time; he had to regain his authority over the class. So –

he bought himself a pair of second-hand spectacles. The only problem was that the only ones the pawnbroker had that he could actually see through had been designed for fashion-conscious women of the 1960s! The kids' laughter when he entered the classroom for the day's last period convinced him to take them off. His wife told him he looked stupid – he knew it himself – but the threat of anarchy taking hold in his classroom was becoming a distinct possibility. However being laughed at wasn't much fun either, so for now the hideous glasses rested in his shirt pocket.

Most of the lesson went smoothly, but towards three o'clock the class began to grow restless, and he heard yesterday's taunts start all over again. He caught a few snide remarks about Catherine being a wanted criminal, but without his visual aids he had no idea where it was coming from. *Damn it!* He thought as he put the ugly goggles back on his faced and slammed a ruler down upon his desk.

'Enough! I may look like a complete idiot with these hideous glasses, but I can make life very difficult for all of you.'

'Yeah, right,' someone whispered at the back of the room. Fortunately, the hush that followed Mr. Goldsmith's outburst made it easy to locate the source of the comment.

'I saw your lips moving, Geoffrey Littlewood, thanks to my new magic glasses. After school detention for you today and anyone else who feels like being disruptive.' He cleared his throat before continuing in a calmer tone. 'One thing I'd like to make clear is that, despite the awful rumors, Catherine Brewer has done nothing wrong and nothing has been proven, so...'

The bell announced the end of another school day, much to the delight of all the kids – except Geoffrey Littlewood – and especially Mr. Goldsmith. He made up his mind to purchase a set of much more conservative frames to go with his newly acquired lenses, no matter what the

cost. This class, normally so well behaved, was acting like a pack of hungry lions stalking their prey in anticipation of the kill. Well, he wasn't ready to be killed just yet.

Neither was Catherine, who raced to get her bag from the locker before a hostile crowd had time to gather. Principal Kennedy was in the area, so she felt a little safer. Realizing he was heading for the car park, she fell into step a few yards behind him. He walked like a giant duck, his broad shoulders swinging up and down in a comical rhythm and his plump backside wiggling to and fro. Every now and then his tattered briefcase would slap against his porky thigh. The sight of it almost made Catherine burst out laughing, but the sound of Jenny's voice getting closer put all thoughts of comedy out of her mind.

'Excuse me, Mr. Kennedy,' she called out. 'I think you dropped something.'

The principal instinctively turned around. 'I beg your pardon?'

She quickened her step to be right behind him in a flash. 'Oh, sorry about that, my mistake. Must have been an optical illusion. By the way, can I carry your briefcase to your car?'

'What? Oh. Yes, of course. It's a pity not all of our students are as considerate as you, Catherine.'

The big man's radiant smile gave Catherine an idea. She glanced at her watch and frowned.

'Rats! I'm going to be late. I don't think I'll make it now.'

'Late for what?'

'I've got an appointment with Rabbi Shimon in the city. I promised to help with some renovations they're doing at the synagogue. But I have to be there in thirty minutes, 'cos he's flying to New York for a, um... rabbis' convention.'

Kennedy swallowed it.

'Don't worry, I can give you a ride. I didn't think you were Jewish, though.'

'Um... I'm not, really,' Catherine replied hesitantly. 'But I'm thinking of converting.'

'Fair enough,' laughed Mr. Kennedy. 'I suppose in this multi-cultural world we live in today, anything's possible.'

'Just about, sir,' said Catherine as Mr. Kennedy stepped on the gas. 'Just about.'

When they arrived at the synagogue, the well-mannered Mr. Kennedy waited patiently for Catherine to go inside. This was extremely annoying, since he'd parked right behind Joe's taxi, which contained its owner, Stanthorpe Mackay, the rabbi and a small dark figure swathed in a thick, woolly scarf. Catherine approached the synagogue door and tried to open it, but Rabbi Shimon had evidently locked up. She turned to wave her thanks to the principal and hoped like mad he wasn't going sit there until the door opened. She stood there waving and grinning like an idiot until Mr. Kennedy finally got the message and drove away. Catherine heaved a sigh of relief and jumped into the back seat of the cab, squashing Olga into the rabbi.

'That was close. I thought he was never going to leave. So, what's the plan?' she asked, addressing the question to nobody in particular.

'The plan is quite simple,' replied Stanthorpe. 'Joe is going to drive us to Boris' house, and you, Olga and I are going to confront him. I wanted to threaten him with a charge of wrongfully imprisoning his mother, but Olga doesn't want to take it that far. Unfortunately.'

'Of course not,' said Olga, pulling down the scarf to reveal a much healthier complexion than the one she sported only a few days ago. 'He's my son after all. After being a virtual prisoner myself, I wouldn't wish jail on anyone. Well, almost anyone.'

'And you, Rabbi?' asked Catherine.

'Rabbi Shimon is coming along for moral support,' said Olga. 'Mr. Mackay thought there

were too many of us already, but I insisted. We've become great friends, haven't we Rabbi?'

The furry little man nodded enthusiastically and grinned broadly in Catherine's direction.

Joe looked in his rear-view mirror when Olga spoke, and Catherine saw a row of gleaming, golden teeth. He was clearly impressed by the improvement in Olga's appearance.

'A few more days with Rabbi Shimon, and you would have been as beautiful as a ripe pumpkin!' he said as they approached the exit for Montgomery Cliffs.

The rest of the journey was relatively uneventful, except for when a cop pulled Joe over to warn him of spilled oil further up the road. When the cop recognized the famous Stanthorpe Mackay, he practically begged the PI for an autograph. Catherine felt a surge of pride that she should be a business associate, a friend even, of such a celebrity. In fact the cop had been so overwhelmed to meet his hero that he paid no attention to the taxi's other occupants. This was a lucky break, because that pencil portrait had been published again in today's newspapers, only this time it covered nearly half a page and there was even mention of a reward being offered by *Passing Winds*. Catherine reckoned that Mrs. Morrison must be petrified that Olga would spill the beans about the disgusting conditions at the retirement home.

When they eventually managed to get away from the fanatical policeman, who thanked Stanthorpe at least nine times for the autograph, something suddenly struck Catherine as odd.

'Hey, Mr. Mackay. If you're in such demand, how come Mrs. Morrison or the authorities haven't approached *you* to find Olga?'

'That's right,' said Rabbi Shimon.

'Yes, Catherine, good question,' chimed in Olga.

'They have, actually,' said Stanthorpe, a smug grin creeping across his face. 'When I started asking questions about Boris Pivovarov, they naturally thought I knew something about

Olga, but I managed to convince them I needed him in connection with a totally unrelated personal matter. I'm not sure they bought it entirely. Anyway, when they asked me to help out in the search for Olga, I told them I was so emotionally drained after stalking the bomber for six months I desperately needed a break. And, no offence Olga, I said I don't deal with such minor matters as escaped geriatrics. Even if they are offering a big reward.'

Olga mumbled something that was fortunately lost in the screech of brakes as Joe pulled the cab around a hairpin turn. The pressure of the two bodies lurching into his side knocked the wind out of the poor rabbi, who was glad Olga hadn't had time to fatten up too much. Another corner like that could be fatal!

Soon they came to a sprawling old property set behind a wire fence in urgent need of repair. At the driveway entrance stood one of those plastic, bucket-style letterboxes common in the countryside. As they slowly drove past it, Catherine experienced a weird sensation – B. Brewer was painted on the front. She took Olga's hand and noticed it was trembling like a leaf. She wondered whether this meeting might prove too much for the old woman. Would finally coming face to face with her despicable son induce a heart attack or a stroke? Would she break down and cry or give him a hard slap? Catherine saw the trembling had spread now through Olga's entire body. She was shaking like an out of control washing machine.

'Are you sure you want to go through with this, Olga?' said Catherine. 'Perhaps it would be better if Mr. Mackay and I went to see Boris on our own. You look like you're about to...'

'I'm fine! Just a little cold, that's all.'

Soon they pulled up outside the rambling clapboard house. A striped hammock, vaguely resembling a tropical fish that had been expertly headed and tailed – but not gutted, judging by its girth – swung rhythmically to and fro on the wide front porch. Sprinkled underneath this

suspended sea creature were empty beer bottles and brightly colored boxes of potato chips. The sound of the car stopping and several doors slamming shut only caused the rocking of the hammock to increase slightly in tempo. Boris was apparently in no hurry to greet his guests. Catherine thought he must be hard of hearing, but when she saw just how many beer bottles lay under the hammock, she realized he was blind drunk.

It was hard to get a good impression of Boris from a distance – the view from the bottom of the porch steps revealed only a large belly in a blue tee shirt supporting a three-quarters finished beer; his head and the rest of his body were lost in the depths of the sagging hammock. It dawned on Catherine that she had never asked Olga what Boris looked like, neither had Olga herself volunteered a description. She could hardly wait to set her eyes on him.

When she peered into the hole containing Olga's son, Catherine couldn't restrain herself from letting out a loud gasp, causing Boris' eyelids to flicker as if he were having a bad dream. And it was those very twitching eyes that produced Catherine's startled reaction. The man lying before them was clearly of Asian extraction; in shape and facial features he bore an extraordinary resemblance to one of those figurine Buddhas, albeit one in a filthy shirt, ripped shorts and flip-flops.

Catherine cast an inquisitive glance towards Olga and said, 'Is Boris Chinese?'

'How would I know? He didn't exactly land on my doorstep with a set of instructions. But I suppose he might be. Remember I told you I had to make up stories to satisfy his curiosity? Well, because he looked so different from me, not to mention the other children at school, I told him his father was a Chinese acrobat who got caught spying and sent home to prison in Shanghai.'

'An acrobat? A Sumo wrestler more like it.'

'Huh? Wassa matter. Who are all you people?' a voice suddenly echoed from within the cavernous folds of the hammock. The slurry speech confirmed Catherine's suspicions that he had a solid day's drinking behind him.

'You must be really drunk, my boy. It's freezing out here and you're dressed for mid-summer.' Said Olga, squeezing in between Stanthorpe and Catherine. But she still wasn't close enough for Boris to see over his huge stomach.

'What? Who's that?'

Olga took two steps forward and tenderly touched her son's forehead with her wrinkly fingers.

'Don't you recognize your own Mama?'

Chapter 18

The shock of seeing his mother's smiling face peering down at him from above had caused Boris to black out. His surprise visitors had heaved and strained and somehow extracted the hefty body out of the hammock before dragging him unceremoniously into the kitchen, where a dreadful stench emanated from a mountain of unwashed dishes stacked precariously in the sink. A squadron of buzzing flies bashed insistently on the window pane, while a dozen or so cockroaches scurried in and out of an overflowing trash can.

Stanthorpe, Joe and Rabbi Shimon sat Boris upright in one of the kitchen chairs. After a few minutes he began uttering indistinct sounds, slowly awakening from his intoxicated stupor. Catherine found some relatively clean cups – all bearing the logo of the Cougars football team – and made coffee for Boris. The others sensibly declined, preferring not to risk catching some

horrible disease.

The faces staring at Boris as he shakily sipped the steaming black coffee were all unfamiliar to him. Even his mother had changed so much since he had checked her into *Passing Winds* that he was sure she was an imposter. That was until she flashed him one of her winning smiles, revealing the unique dental decoration.

'It is you, Mama!' he cried, dropping his head onto the table and beginning to sob like a baby. 'I'm so sorry you had to see me in this condition. Mildred's left me and I've lost my job selling insurance. I ...'

Olga pushed her chair back noisily on the scratched pine floor, walked around Stanthorpe Mackay to where Boris was by now weeping uncontrollably, and cuffed him hard around the back of his head. But he was still too drunk to feel any pain. Despite that, the old woman's right hook sent a thrill of admiration down Catherine's spine. She wasn't going to be pushed around after all!

'What do you mean – I this and I'm that? Think about your poor old mother for a change you selfish bast... I mean boy! Listen to me. *I'm* going to tell *you* how things are going to be from now on.'

Stanthorpe Mackay looked at the non-Pivovarovs in the room and tilted his head toward the porch, hinting that mother and son should be left alone for while. Silently they took their cue and headed outside.

'Give me thirty minutes with him, please,' said Olga to the four hastily retreating backs. 'I'm going to find out exactly what this wastrel son of mine has been up to and see if we can come up with a solution.'

Rabbi Shimon looked at Catherine and winked. 'I wouldn't want to be in Boris' shoes.'

'Me either,' Catherine agreed. 'She may be small, but she's definitely on the warpath!'

As they all sat on the wooden stairs, staring vacantly at a pair of enormous draft horses grazing in a field across the road, the sudden clatter of smashing plates caused them all to jump. Catherine leapt to her feet and peeked through the moth-eaten chintz curtains. She saw Olga gesticulating wildly and heard her yell some words which sounded a lot like swearing. Boris seemed to be enduring this tirade quite well – every now and then he would nod or shake his head, but he remained seated and kept constant eye contact with his mother. When Olga smashed the last remaining plate onto the floor, Boris hurried into another room for a few seconds and returned with an expandable filing box. He tipped the contents onto the table and systematically turned over each piece of paper until he found what he was searching for. Catherine saw Olga snatch an official looking letter from his grasp. Olga's eyes darted back and forth as she scanned the document. When she'd finished, she sat down next to Boris and began stroking his quivering hand. A huge teardrop rolled down her cheek and splattered onto the letter she's been reading. As the two of them embraced, Catherine averted her eyes, feeling like she was intruding on something private and personal.

'What's going on in there?' asked Joe. 'It's very quiet all of a sudden. Has she killed him?'

'No,' said Catherine.

'Do you think we should go in and find out if everything's okay?' asked Stanthorpe.

'Actually,' said Catherine. 'I think it would be best I go in by myself.'

* * *

During the drive back to the city, Catherine explained the situation as told to her by Olga and Boris.

About a month ago, Boris' wife Mildred convinced him to sell Olga's house, which she told him was earmarked for demolition in several years and would then become impossible to sell. Since his previous house had been knocked down to make way for a new road, Boris knew the compensation homeowners received in such cases was nowhere near the real value of the property. There was nothing stopping them from selling Olga's house because they had had her committed by reason of unsound mind and were entitled to dispose of her property as they wished. Boris had protested at the time, but he was so in love with Mildred that he was prepared to go along with anything she said.

'How did his wife know of the city's plans so far in advance?' asked Rabbi Shimon. 'We only found out about the North End Theater a couple months before hand.'

'Apparently she has a contact in the engineering department,' Catherine explained. 'But the thing is, Boris decided – much too late unfortunately – to check it out for himself. But it turns out Mildred had made it all up. The letter I saw him showing his mother was from the mayor's office, and it stated that Olga's house was definitely safe from the wrecking ball. Not only that, but Mildred's disappeared with all of the loot from the sale! Now poor Boris can only afford to rent that old dump at Montgomery Cliffs.'

'Oh, dear. What a mess!' said Joe.

'In a way, I'm glad Boris has lost everything,' said Catherine with a wry grin. 'Mrs. Morrison at *Passing Winds* reckoned she only kept Olga there because Boris paid extra. When she finds out he's broke, she'll never want to see Olga again.'

'So what are they going to do now?' asked Rabbi Shimon.

'Boris asked Olga, begged her practically, to stay with him for a while until he can find another job. The insurance company sacked him two weeks ago. He hadn't made a sale for ages; he spent all his time boozing and looking for Mildred.'

'They've got nothing to worry about,' said the supremely confident private detective. 'I'll start looking for her, and when Ironmonger gets back from Jamaica, I'm sure he'll help out, being an old pal of Boris'. That's if I haven't already tracked her down myself.'

'I'm sure you will,' said Catherine without the slightest trace of doubt. 'Just let me know when you do. I'll scratch her eyes out!'

Chapter 19

Catherine felt a rush of elation when the final bell of the semester sounded. Two weeks break! She'd be able to go and visit Olga and Boris in their new, "old" house. She knew Stanthorpe Mackay would get his woman, and he did! True, he did need the help of Lieutenant Ironmonger, but the cop hadn't actually caught Mildred, he only passed on some vital information. As usual, it was Stanthorpe who did the legwork.

It turned out that Mildred and Mrs. Morrison had been in cahoots. And now the two of them were behind bars. Catherine thought it fitting that the pair of witches were now freezing their buns off in one of the state's most notorious women's prisons, in conditions much worse than poor Olga had had to cope with at *Passing Winds*.

As she climbed up Snake Gully Avenue, Catherine remembered the last time she had made this exhausting trek, hoping like crazy to catch an unsuspecting Boris. So much had happened since then, but with all the pressure of end-of-term exams she hadn't been able to visit

Olga. She hated missing Mildred's and Mrs. Morrison's trial, but Stanthorpe assured her the courts would deliver a just verdict. Unfortunately, the press didn't think the case was interesting enough to cover in much detail anymore – just a boring domestic problem that had gotten out of hand. Nothing compared to a runaway granny. Catherine didn't mind too much; Olga had received her allotted fifteen minutes of fame. Now she deserved peace and quiet.

The racket coming from inside Olga's house, however, told Catherine that the old lady wasn't ready for the quiet life yet. There were streamers and balloons all over the front porch – tied, glued or taped to whatever was available. There was a full-scale celebration going on inside.

Catherine had to press the buzzer four times before Boris, the beaming Buddha, flung the door open to welcome her inside. She recognized all the guests except one, but she correctly guessed the tall man with the crew cut, dressed in a black turtleneck sweater and baggy trousers, was Lieutenant Ironmonger.

'Come sit beside me!' cried Olga, patting a spare cushion on a purple velvet three-seater sofa she was sharing with Rabbi Shimon. 'We were just about to pop the sparkling wine. I know you're too young, but I insist you have some anyway. I'm sure the long arm of the law here will turn a blind eye. I always allowed Boris to have a little sip when he was little, to teach him how to handle alcohol responsibly, and it didn't do him any harm whatso... oh, on second thoughts, you'd better have a soda.'

Catherine accepted a large glass of soft drink that was so gassy she could feel the tiny bubble exploding in her nose as she took a deep slug. She noticed that all the furniture in the house appeared to be brand new. Olga saw her surveying the lounge room and decided to tell everyone how grateful she was to her young friend.

'My dear, all of this is thanks to you. Everybody, I'd like to propose a toast to the most

wonderful girl in the word.' She rose a little unsteadily to her feet – the bottle of expensive Swedish vodka on the coffee table a dead giveaway that Olga had started celebrating a little earlier. And, judging by the rosy glow radiating from underneath Rabbi Shimon's luxurious beard, so had he.

'To Catherine!'

'To Catherine!' responded all the guests so loudly that the decanters in the liquor cabinet jingled.

The party progressed through the night with much mirth and thigh slapping. Around eight-thirty Catherine overheard the Rabbi telling a rather rude joke to Boris, who nearly collapsed on the floor in paroxysms of laughter. The joke must have been good, because, as far as Catherine could see, the prodigal son had been drinking coffee all night.

Stanthorpe Mackay bade his goodbyes, grabbed his hat and coat and headed for the door. Catherine saw this as the perfect opportunity to find out exactly how Mrs. Morrison and Mildred had been nabbed.

'Okay, Mr. Detective. Tell me how you did it.'

Stanthorpe quickly filled in the missing details. Having been through a messy marriage break-up himself, he easily understood Boris' predicament. And he was in no doubt that it was Mildred, not Boris, who had orchestrated Olga's incarceration in the retirement home. All his preliminary searches proved fruitless; that was until Ironmonger returned from vacation. When he showed the lieutenant a photograph of Mildred, Ironmonger nearly collapsed on the spot. It turns out they had both been staying at the same five-star resort. He remembered her especially, because she spent every evening parading around the cocktail lounge in a tiny black dress, trying to latch onto every wealthy businessman that walked by. Not having any money to go there

himself, Stanthorpe made a phone call to an acquaintance in Jamaica and asked him to get some key information from Mildred. He pretended to be one of those wealthy guys, and set up a phony date with her, with the sole aim of finding out when she was planning on returning to the U.S. So all Stanthorpe had to do was wait at the airport on that day with the police and grab her as she stepped off the airplane.

‘Okay, but what about Mrs. Morrison?’

That was the easy part. Mildred tried to put all the blame on her. But it was Mildred’s idea entirely. The extra money Boris paid for his mother to enjoy *special* care went into a secret bank account for Brunhilde and Mildred to share. It only amounted to a couple of thousand, chicken feed really, so when Mildred floated the idea of selling the house, Brunhilde couldn’t resist. Actually, there’s a rather sinister side to all of this. If you hadn’t busted Olga out when you did, I shudder to think what might have happened.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Catherine, the color draining from her face.

‘Remember that hypodermic you plunged into the security guard’s butt?’

Catherine nodded.

‘Well, stashed behind the ampoules at the front of the drawer, where Olga took hers from, were other ones, each containing a dose strong enough to kill an elephant. Chances are they were planning to bump Olga off. After all, Boris couldn’t keep up the payments – not even for the substandard care his mother was getting.’

‘But that’s... that’s attempted murder.’

‘I’m afraid that one would be very hard to prove in court. I’m just happy we nailed them for false imprisonment and fraud. It’s a great result – they won’t be getting out for a long time. And a final piece of good news. I’m hiring Boris as an insurance crime analyst. He’s had years of

experience in the field, and it will take some of the more boring work off my hands. Now I'll have more time to lurk in darkened alleys waiting to pounce on the bad guys.'

'I'd like to thank you for all you've done. I must admit I had my doubts at first, but you did a great job. If ever I need a private eye, you'll be the first to know.'

She extended her hand very formally. Stanthorpe kissed it in an old-fashioned way, causing Catherine to blush a deep shade of red.

Soon everyone else made a move to go home. It was getting near ten o'clock, and Olga was worn out by the night's festivities. The only other guest now was Joe, who was waiting to drive Catherine home.

'This will be your last free taxi ride, young lady. I have to make a living you know.'

As befits an evening of celebration, Joe was dressed to the nines – an Italian designer suit with matching crocodile-skin shoes. His tie, kept in place by an emerald-studded clip, looked like the product of an abstract painter's wild imagination.

'It looks to me like you could retire tomorrow on the proceeds of that tie-pin,' Catherine joked. 'But seriously, just give me a minute or two with Olga and we'll be on our way.'

Joe knowingly touched his index finger to his aquiline nose. 'I'll see you in the car.'

Olga sat alone on the sofa, her eyes blazing like those of an evangelist preacher. She seemed filled with a new sense of purpose.

'I've come out of this rather well, don't you think?'

'I certainly do, Olga.' She thought it best not to mention the possibility that Mrs. Morrison may have been planning to slip her a fatal injection. 'I thought you would get most of your money back, but you seem to have gotten even richer.'

'That Mr. Mackay is a marvel. He convinced the people who bought my house, in good

faith, to sell it back to me for the same price.'

Catherine was still puzzled. 'But the new furniture?'

'Easy. He also discovered that Mildred was no fool when it comes to finances. She invested the money from the sale of the house in one of these new biotech companies and doubled her stake overnight. But...', Olga burst out laughing and couldn't stop for a full minute. 'Sorry dear, it's just so funny. She had to give all the profits to me! So, I bought some new furniture, a nice new car for Boris, and made a big donation to Rabbi Shimon as I promised.'

Catherine hugged the old woman tightly, but suddenly let go when she felt Olga's ribs giving way. But the movement Catherine felt was not breaking bones, it was a book Olga had been keeping as a surprise.

'Here, I thought this might come in handy for your battles with that horrible Jenny Rodriguez you were telling me about. It's called *The World's Wickedest Practical Jokes*.

As Joe sat in his cab, impatiently drumming his manicured fingernails on the steering wheel and checking his watch, Olga's sides were aching from laughter as Catherine read out some of the pranks she's be pulling on Jenny and Charlotte next semester.

As Catherine turned to page ten of the book, a folded-up piece of paper fell out. 'That's also for you dear,' said Olga, trying to sound casual.

Catherine could not believe her eyes when she unfolded the letter and saw that it contained details of a college fund set up by Olga.

'Olga, this is too much!' Catherine complained. 'Twenty-thousand dollars! Are you completely insane?'

'Not at all. Boris will oversee the fund, so you cannot take anything out until you are ready for college. You can put extra in, of course, but no withdrawals.'

'Oh, Olga. This is just amazing!' Catherine could barely keep the tears back. 'I know it's too much to ask, but could you do me one more small favor?'

'Of course, darling.'

'Help me think up a way of explain this to my parents. I swore to them that I had nothing to do with your escape, and they still have no idea'

'Just tell them the truth, Catherine. I've found that always works the best. In fact, tell Joe to wait five more minutes, and I'll come over to your house now and help you tell the story.'

Before Catherine could raise any objections, Olga had gone to fetch her coat.