Second Time Around

NEIL BOSS



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To Clive Anderson (deceased)

'Highly articulate and with considerable insight.
He would make a very good writer.'

This comment was made by my English teacher in my end of year report. At the time, I took it with a pinch of salt. Mr. Anderson was prone to exaggeration but he inspired me to write. I hope I have fulfilled the potential he saw in a skinny fifteen year old with a vivid imagination and a love of words. I think he might like this book.

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Chapter 1
Breaking News

The mice had been having a field day. Marcus Barlow looked at the chewed arms of his dead mother's recliner chair which had sat in the garage at Twin Gates for two years. It was now a permanent fixture alongside patio heaters, a ride-on lawnmower and several boxes of easy listening LPs, part of his father's personal effects. Hidden somewhere in the garage, heavy with the smell of fresh grass cuttings and petrol, families of mice were enjoying the rodent equivalent of a long stay at The Savoy. Lockdown and the pandemic meant nothing to mice. They carried on sleeping, chewing and shagging regardless.

It was 8.00 in the morning and he was wearing his dressing gown and slippers. M&S navy blue suede moccasins, size 11. The same Christmas present from his mother every year. Following her death, his stock had dwindled and he was down to his last pair. Project Garage, the never ending task of sorting and disposing of the contents of his parents' house was on hold. Lockdown had slammed on the brakes. The charity shops of Weybridge and the nicest towns in Surrey would have to wait for their next batch of Val Doonican and Petula Clark records. He breathed in deeply, exhaling through his nostrils. He pinched the end of his nose and felt a couple of protruding hairs. It would have to be a job for his electric nose and ear trimmer. Marcus was a recent convert to manscaping, having spent the majority of his adult life sporting a chest rug like Tom Selleck in Magnum P.I. A body shaving kit had been a birthday present from his best friend, Gavin, who lived in the flat opposite in London. Gavin was his personal consultant on all aspects of male grooming. Maintaining a hairless torso required an investment of time but Marcus felt the results justified the effort on grounds of hygiene alone. His thoughts wandered, remembering the night when Alice, his wife, discovered his new love of smoothness. In a moment of passion, she had slid her hand into his sleep shorts only to withdraw it rapidly,

'Jesus, Marcus, what have you done to your balls?' The bedside light went on, the duvet thrown back and his pants pulled down to reveal his recently depilated genitals. 'What's happened to your pubes?'

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'Gavin bought me a manscaping kit for my birthday. He's been doing it for years, he says it's more hygienic. What's wrong? Don't you like it?'

'It's not a case of liking or disliking it, Marcus. It's a shock, that's all. For a second, I thought I was making love with a ten year old.'

Marcus wondered if David Gandy, the chiselled style icon, whose poster for Wellman vitamins he admired on a daily basis from the platform at Bank underground station, had ever been similarly humiliated by his partner. He lashed out, defensively.

'Well, for someone who spends a fortune having her vagina lasered every couple of weeks, I didn't expect you to react like this.'

He pulled up his shorts and turned away, pulling the duvet over his shoulders.

'Don't be childish, Marcus. I didn't say I didn't like it. Now roll over.'

Alice turned off the lamp and, in the darkness, slid her body down the bed towards his newly smooth zone.

His thoughts were disturbed by the side door to the garage opening. Alice entered carrying a mug of coffee and his phone. Her long brown hair was already brushed and looked elegant in her silk Missoni bathrobe.

'Oh, here you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. I've brought you a coffee. Your phone has been ringing. I think Gavin is trying to get hold of you? How long have you been up?'

'Since just after six. I didn't sleep well.'

'That's hardly surprising, is it? What made you come in here? It stinks.'

It wasn't the right time to point out the garage's thriving mouse population and he hoped one didn't make an appearance, frightening Alice into tipping scalding hot coffee into his lap.

'I don't know. Guess I wanted to find a quiet place. I'm still in shock after what's happened. Are the children up?'

'Yes, they're in the kitchen having breakfast. Do you want anything?'

'No, thanks. I'll make myself some toast after I've called Gavin. How do they seem?'

'They seem happy, distracted by breakfast. I don't think it's sunk in yet. I don't know how long it takes for the death of a mother to sink in when you're only three. I was forty one when my mother died. We'll just have to take it one step at a time, keep things as normal as possible.'

'Keep things as normal as possible.' He wondered what that meant. What was he meant to say to them? *'Kids, I know your Mum's just died but don't worry, Teletubbies will be on in a minute.'*

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' he said with little conviction.

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For a man whose life for the past thirty years had been based on being in control, he felt completely out of control. He was now the primary carer for two small children he had known for little more than two months. Two days earlier, their mother had died at the age of twenty five from a virus that was sweeping the planet. The night before he had resigned from his job at The Firm, turning his back on a lucrative career that had sustained his family for over twenty years. As if this wasn't enough, the entire country was now in lockdown and people were going mad.

'I'll be in in a minute, Al. If Gavin's been trying to call me this early, it's probably urgent. I'd better call him back.'

Alice brushed her hand across his stubbled cheek. He caught the waft of her Crème de la Mer moisturiser.

'Don't be too long. I'll get the children washed and dressed.'

* * *

Gavin Douglas returned from walking the dogs on his family's 30,000 acre estate in Perthshire. He pulled up a chair to the large oak table in the centre of the kitchen and removed a small plastic packet from the inside pocket of his shooting jacket. It was empty. He looked down at the two dogs, curled up in their beds next to the ageing Aga which warmed the kitchen. It was the only room in the house guaranteed not to have frost on the inside of the windows in winter.

He split the bag at the seam, licked his index finger, wiped it on the inside of the bag and rubbed the powdery residue on his gums. He felt the instant tingle and numbness but the effect was short-lived. The last two lines of cocaine bought from Fat Robbie the previous day had been consumed earlier that morning in the beaters hut on the edge of the forest. Another trip to Robbie's decaying, grey maisonette in Dundee would be needed. The black labrador looked up at him dolefully, silently signalling his disapproval.

'And you can stop looking at me like that, Wallace. You don't understand. It's complicated being a human.'

Gavin envied Wallace and his simple life. A long walk in the woods every day, chasing the odd squirrel, plenty of stroking and free food. In the shooting season, he might have to do some gundog work but he would never know poverty, depression, hunger, loneliness. Wallace had never suffered the death of a loved one. His phone rang.

'Good morning, Gavin. It's Marcus here. How are you? You tried to call me earlier?'

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His friend's old-fashioned habit of formally announcing himself was one of the things Gavin liked about him.

'Hi Marcus. Yes, I'm okay, given the circumstances. I rang to see how things are? How are Kyle and Alexa?'

'They're both well. In the kitchen having breakfast with Alice. They slept right through, which is good, I suppose? More than I did.'

'Me too. Kept thinking about Claire. I can't believe what's happened, and so quickly. Things were going so well for her. At least the children are safe with you and Alice but we have to agree what happens next.'

'Meaning what exactly?' said Marcus, abruptly.

Gavin held his breath. He knew confronting Marcus with reality wouldn't be easy. Marcus only had one view of reality, his own.

'I've been lying to work about the children. I said they were staying with their grandparents when Claire was admitted to hospital?'

'Yes, I know that. We *both* agreed at the time it was the best option. It's what she would have wanted.'

Marcus' definition of 'agreed' was to abscond with the children leaving Gavin no other option than to go along with his plan. The only alternative was to inform the police who would have charged Marcus with abduction.

'I know that, Marcus, but the lie was told on the assumption Claire would go into hospital, recover and be back in her flat before social services asked any questions. I wouldn't have agreed to your plan if I'd known she was going to die.'

Marcus paused.

'No, I guess not. Unfortunately, that was a flawed assumption and you know what they say about assumptions, don't you?'

'What do *they* say, Marcus?'

'Assumption is the mother of all fuck ups. Never assume anything. Especially if there's a risk of something going wrong.'

Gavin wasn't in the mood for Marcus' pithy aphorisms.

'Can you stop being an arse, just for a second, Marcus? Of course neither of us thought she was going to die. But this situation can't go on. I can't get away with lying to work for much longer. I'm probably already breaking the law. I need to tell the truth and soon. I'll be lucky if I don't lose my job over this.'

'Well, that's two of us out of work then,' said Marcus flippantly.

'What do you mean by that?'

'I've resigned from The Firm. Did it last night. Sent an email to Kelvin telling him I'm done. Finished. Leaving with immediate effect.'

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'Bloody hell! I know you haven't been happy but what's brought this decision on?'

'Claire's death, mortality, being fifty five and feeling time is more important than money. All the shit we've talked about before. Claire was the catalyst. I had to do it.'

'And what does Alice think about it?'

There was a pause.

'I haven't told her yet. She's got a lot on her plate right now. Claire's death has hit her pretty hard too. Anyway, everyone's working from home so it isn't as if I need to go into the office. I can make something up until I find the right moment.'

It was a familiar pattern of events. Marcus wasn't a liar, he just had difficulty telling people the truth at the right time.

'Oh, for goodness sake, Marcus! Don't make the same mistake you did before. Alice doesn't react well to your little 'surprises', does she? Remember having to isolate at the flat because you lied about having Covid?'

He remembered it like it was yesterday. Less than a month had passed and the memory was like a persistent cold sore. Spending his 55th birthday on his own with only a Zoom call with his family for a celebration.

'How could I forget? Spending my birthday on my own with only a Zoom call to my family. Not much to celebrate, was it? I'll tell her.' Marcus changed the subject. 'So, what are you going to tell work?'

'I don't know, I've got loads to do. Tell Claire's parents, her husband, work. Not exactly easy conversations. Plus, I could end up getting fired. On top of all that, things up here aren't great either. Yesterday, Mum put a packet of custard creams in the Aga and they caught fire. Filled the kitchen with smoke and set all the alarms off.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that. Her Alzheimer's is getting worse then? What about your brother? Can't he do more to help?'

'I spoke to Rory yesterday but he's got his own family to think of. He can't just drop everything to pop in on Mum and Dad with lockdown going on.'

'Can't social services up there do anything?'

It was an odd question to ask a social worker. They both recognised the irony.

'Nice one, Marcus. No, everything in social care up here has ground to a halt. Home visits only in exceptional circumstances, where there is an emergency or a risk to life. Don't worry, I'll work something out with Rory. I'd better get on, those calls aren't going to make themselves. Give Kyle and Alexa a big hug from me. I'll call you later.'

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Marcus returned to the house. He pictured his friend in his flat in Bayswater, standing at the island in his Poggenpohl kitchen, lilac cashmere V-neck sweater, black Armani jeans and Tods, skilfully tossing tagliatelle in an arrabbiata sauce. He missed their meals together. He took a gulp of lukewarm coffee and opened Outlook. He expected his inbox to be flooded with emails from his colleagues at The Firm. Kelvin McBride, his boss, would have received his resignation and sent an email to the global partnership informing them of the sudden loss of Marcus' talents. The news would have gone viral. People would have sent effusive messages of good luck for his retirement. He scrolled down his inbox. Not a sausage. It was possible Kelvin had passed out on Easter Monday after his third bottle of Chassagne Montrachet? It was also possible he hadn't read his resignation letter yet. The third possibility was he had read it and was delighted to see the back of him.

If his inbox didn't contain any messages he wanted to see, it contained plenty he didn't. Fifteen emails from Laila Saetang, the ambitious and celibate Director, concerning the latest status of Project Medusa. It was obvious Laila had worked all of the Easter weekend. The Golden Carrot of being made a partner was close. She wasn't going to fall at the last hurdle due to a perceived lack of commitment to The Firm. Two notifications from Risk & Compliance informed him he had failed to complete the mandatory online training course *'Harnessing the Power of Generative AI in Compliance'* by the target date. A sanction would now be appearing on his training record.

'Oh, piss off!' he muttered.

AI meant nothing to him. The only time he had encountered AI was watching Helen Skelton attempting to collect semen from a prize Charolais bull on *Countryfile.* The bull had been anything but compliant. Helen had encountered some difficulty manoeuvring the artificial bovine vagina on to the aroused bull's penis.

Global lockdown and the extended bank holiday hadn't stopped The Firm from publishing more guff. Six new 'thought pieces' had gestated and were spawned on a commercial world hungry for more of The Firm's 'insights'. Marcus suspected nobody ever read them. One piece of 'insight' caught his eye, the Quarterly CFO Optimism & Happiness Index. He opened the link and read the headline.

'CFO confidence has declined dramatically in the previous quarter to a record low. 85% of CFOs feel prospects for their business will be significantly worse in 2020 than in 2019.'

With the majority of the planet in lockdown, people dying in their thousands and economies plummeting through the floor, it would be hard for any CFO to find a cloud with a silver lining.

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'No shit, Sherlock', thought Marcus.

Olivia, his daughter, was alone in the kitchen lying on a bench seat at the table when he entered through the utility room. She was scrolling through social media on her phone.

'Oh, hi Dad. Where have you been?'

'In the garage. I wanted a bit of space, got a few things to think through. Just spoken to Gavin, poor guy. He's breaking the news about Claire to her parents today. I don't envy him that one bit.'

'Gavin? Your gay neighbour at the flat in London? The social worker?'

'Yes, except he isn't gay, at least I don't think so. I think he's probably asexual or celibate. He's never mentioned relationships, a boyfriend, or a girlfriend for that matter. It's not something I've wanted to pry into. People live quite happily without sex, you know? Stephen Fry was celibate for years.'

'Who's Stephen Fry?' said Olivia dismissively.

'Nearest thing to a modern polymath. Very talented guy, actor, comedian, writer, broadcaster. He's a national treasure, apparently.'

'Never heard of him.'

'Well, you wouldn't if you spend all day looking at Instagram and Tik Tok. From what I've seen, it's just videos of people having accidents or popping their spots.'

'They're called 'fails', Dad. And I don't watch videos of spots either. That's just gross.'

'So what do you watch? You're always looking at your phone.'

'I message my friends, share Ted Talks with my network, keep up to date with news. You should get into it Dad, you might learn a lot.'

'Social media? Sod that. I've got much better things to do with my time, thank you.'

Marcus had an aversion to social media. He was one of the few people in The Firm who hadn't posted their profile on LinkedIn, the business networking platform.

'Exactly what is your problem with LinkedIn?' asked Kelvin, irritated by receiving another reminder from Marketing. 'All they're asking you to do is post a short profile to maintain your network with clients. Maybe post an insight or thought piece occasionally?'

'Oh really? And how many thought pieces have you posted recently, Kelvin?' asked Marcus, rhetorically.

'Well, none actually. But I do a lot of 'liking', especially anything posted by The Duke and the other top bods. And there's always promotions to congratulate as well.'

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The Duke was David Ellington, The Firm's senior partner. Kelvin was a 'top bod' too. Liking his boss's posts on LinkedIn was one of the things which made him a top bod. It was a subtle form of arse-kissing and Marcus hated it.

'What, saying 'congratulations' to people you don't know or haven't spoken to in years? Forget it, Kelvin.'

'Marcus, it will only take fifteen minutes…'

'There's much better ways to spend my time, Kelvin.'

Since his resignation twelve hours earlier, Marcus now had access to the one thing missing from his life for the past three decades. Time. And loads of it too.

'Where's your Mum? Upstairs?' he asked Olivia.

'Yeah, she's getting Kyle and Alexa washed and dressed.'

'What about your brother, is he up yet?'

Olivia shrugged and continued scrolling.

The door to the ensuite opened to a crack. It startled him. Marcus was standing naked in front of the mirror, building a soapy lather with his brush and George Trumper almond soft shaving cream. Another present from Gavin. He turned to his right and looked for Alice's face but the intruder only came as high as the door handle.

'Hi, Kyle. How are you?' The little boy looked up as Marcus spread the white foam around his face in a circular motion.

'What are you doing?'

'Shaving.'

'Why are you shaving?'

'Because if I didn't, I would get lots of hair on my face, like James, and it would grow into a big beard.'

'Don't you want a beard?'

Marcus had grown a beard once in his life, in his early twenties, straight after university. He thought it complemented his new found affectation for smoking a pipe. An unfortunate drinking game accident with a flaming Drambuie had set his face on fire and needed extinguishing with a handy pint of Guinness. The scorched beard and the pipe were consigned to history.

'No, it makes my face itchy if I don't shave.'

'Will I have to shave when I grow up?'

Marcus looked down at the little boy. He was probably too young to remember his father shaving. Jack had walked out on his family when Kyle was three. It was one of the few things Claire couldn't do for her son, showing him how to shave.

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'Would you like to watch me?'

He picked the little boy up and sat him on the laundry box next to the wash basin. Kyle watched with curiosity as Marcus went about his routine. Lather, shave down the face and up the neck. Rinse. Lather, shave up the face and down the neck. The same routine for thirty five years. It was a scene reminiscent of his own childhood, sitting on the side of the bath watching his father. Razors were less sophisticated in the 1970's. One blade was sufficient to cut his father's bristly chin to ribbons as a young Marcus marvelled at his tolerance of blood. Fortunately, razor technology had made giant leaps for mankind. His Gillette Mach 3 Turbo hadn't left a scratch and spared Kyle the gore fest. Marcus rinsed his face.

'Would you like me to shave you?'

Kyle nodded as Marcus daubed big blobs of foam on his nose and cheeks. He pretended to shave the little boy, authentically rinsing the razor in the basin. He was about to wipe Kyle's face with a towel when the bathroom door opened wider. The visitor was greeted by a pair of buttocks.

'Marcus… what are you doing?' It was Alice.

'Showing Kyle how to shave. He wanted to learn, didn't you, Kyle?' said Marcus, standing upright and rinsing the razor under the tap. The little boy nodded.

'Might be a good idea to put some clothes on, don't you think? It's not very appropriate, is it?' said Alice.

'What isn't appropriate?'

Alice adopted the eyes wide open, half-whisper tactic that parents use when they don't want their children to hear. Except they always can.

'Being naked in front of small children. It's not right.'

'Don't be ridiculous. It's perfectly natural,' he said. 'What are you doing now?'

'I'm taking the children downstairs. I thought we might do some baking. What are you doing? How was Gavin?'

'Not great. I'll have a quick shower and be down soon.'

* * *

The telephone on the small table in the hall of 18 Tulip Crescent, rang. It was on the adjacent stool that a teenage Claire Carter would chat to her friends until her father, Arthur, would bring their giggly conversations to a premature end. A Saturday job in Shoe Zone in Walsall city centre had earned her enough money for her first mobile phone contract. Putting up with sweaty feet and irritable children was a small price to pay for her independence.

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Irene Carter walked along the hall from the tiny galley kitchen where she was drying cutlery with a tea towel.

'298321.'

It was an old fashioned way to answer, a habit ingrained by having the same number for thirty years. Irene always answered the telephone even though most of the calls weren't for her.

'Mrs. Carter?'

'Speaking.'

'My name is Gavin Douglas, I'm Claire's social worker. I'm sorry we've haven't spoken before, she's told me a lot about you. Claire has been my client for about two years. Pretty much since her husband left.'

'Oh yes? She isn't in any trouble, is she?' said Irene.

'No, Mrs. Carter, she's not in any trouble but I'm afraid I have some very bad news.' His voice faltered. It was as if someone had put three tampons in his mouth. He tried to get some spit. 'Claire was admitted as an emergency to St. Mary's Hospital in Paddington just over a week ago. She was diagnosed with the virus, Covid-19. Unfortunately, her condition and breathing continued to worsen and she was transferred to ICU at the end of last week but she continued to deteriorate. In the early hours of yesterday morning, she suffered a heart attack and died. From what I understand, the virus was attacking most of her internal organs. The doctors and nurses did their best to save her but they couldn't. I'm so sorry to be the bearer of such awful news.'

Irene slumped down on the stool, resting her head against the scuffed woodchip wallpaper, grease-stained from her husband's Brylcreem. Her hands started to tremble. She did what came naturally to her, she called out to her husband.

'Arthur! There's a social worker on the phone, he says our Claire's died in London. You'd better come and speak to him.'

Arthur Carter was eating a bacon sandwich with HP sauce and emerged from the living room licking butter from his fingers.

'There's a bloke saying what?' he said irritably. 'It's probably one of those bloody ambulance chasers asking if I've had an accident in the past five years?'

Claire had described her father to Gavin on numerous occasions. She had never been very flattering.

'I can think of only two things in my life to thank my Dad for. Frank Sinatra and brown sauce. That's about it. He was a pretty shit father and a bigot too. Never told me that he loved me or was proud of me. Even when I got into St. Martin's.'

'This is Arthur Carter speaking.'

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Gavin matched the voice, thick with a Black Country accent, to the man. Gavin repeated the story, almost word for word. It didn't get any easier the second time. Arthur Carter fell against the front door, slid to the floor and began to cry. Gavin waited for their grief to subside before passing on the limited information he knew.

'She always suffered with asthma as a kid,' said Arthur. 'Always having to use her inhaler,' as if this explained the tragedy.

'What about the children? Where are Kyle and Alexa? Who's looking after them?' asked Irene.

It wasn't the time to set any alarm bells ringing about their grandchildren's care arrangements with a total stranger. Gavin took a leaf out of Marcus' book and avoided the truth

'They're with a very good foster family, Mrs. Carter. They've been there since Claire was taken into hospital. They are being very well looked after and I checked on them today. They are both well and happy.'

'Do they know about Claire?'

'They have been told but they are only five and three. They are still babies and I'm not sure they fully appreciate what's happened.'

Gavin was feeling out of his depth. Social housing, drug and alcohol addiction, Universal Credit, physical and mental abuse, were more his sweet spots. He tried to buy some time.

'What happens next is really a question for Children's Services. I'm speaking to my colleague, Julie Miller, who works in this area, later this morning. I will ask her to call you. I understand your concerns but, please be assured, Kyle and Alexa are being very well looked after. I know this news has come as a massive shock to both of you, as it has for all of us who knew Claire, but please don't worry about the children, they are safe and well.'

'As long as that bastard, Jack, doesn't get anywhere near them. After what he did to our Claire. Bastard!'

Arthur spat the word out like he'd eaten something rotten.

Their conversation shifted to Claire's funeral. Things needed to get done. Gavin offered to deal with all the paperwork, registering her death and obtaining the necessary certificates. Arthur agreed to organise the funeral.

'We won't be able to pay for anything too fancy,' he said.

'I'm sure Claire wouldn't have wanted that either, Mr. Carter. Let me give you my email address,' said Gavin. 'We can keep in touch over the coming days regarding arrangements.'

'I don't have a computer. Never needed one,' said Arthur, brusquely.

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'Oh, right. Not a problem. Let me give you my mobile number and you can call me at any time. I'll call you later in the week to catch up. In the meantime, would you like me to inform Mr. Halford of Claire's death? They are still technically married and, as her next of kin, he needs to be informed. Or would you prefer to tell him?'

'Jack? I've got no time for him. Arrogant little tosser. Walking out on his family with two babies, to shag around with some old slapper and then pissing off to the other side of the world. Irene can give you his number. I'll speak to you later in the week. Thank you for calling, Mr…?'

'Douglas. Gavin Douglas.'

'I take it Claire's father and husband don't get on?' said Gavin to Irene, who was leafing through a tatty address book.

'He hates him. Not just because of what he did to Claire and the children. Arthur always thought he was a posh boy, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Had nothing in common with people like us.' She gave him the number. 'Thank you for calling, Mr. Douglas.'

'Call me Gavin, Mrs. Carter. I'll be in touch soon. Once again, I'm truly sorry for your loss.'

* * *

Jack Halford was sitting on a wooden chair in the garden of his parents' house in Sevenoaks, smoking a cigarette, when his phone rang. It was a number he didn't recognise.

'Hi, this is Jack,' he said cautiously.

Gavin gave the same speech he had made thirty minutes earlier. The silence was shorter and grief harder to detect. Jack came to the point quickly.

'So, where are my kids? Are they with her bloody parents in Shitsville?'

There was a coldness in his voice, a lack of compassion.

'Kyle and Alexa are with foster parents in Surrey, Mr. Halford. They are being very well looked after. You have nothing to worry about on that score.'

'The kids should be with me. I'm their father, blood being thicker than water and all that.'

'Yes, of course. I understand. And where are you currently living, Mr. Halford?'

'I'm staying with my parents in Sevenoaks. I only got back from Australia a few weeks ago. It's only temporary until I get myself sorted. Bit hard to do in lockdown.'

'Yes, it's tough for all of us right now, Mr. Halford.'

Gavin remembered the conversations he and Claire had about her husband.

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Meeting at college, the public schoolboy who had whisked her off her feet, taken her to Covent Garden to see *Madame Butterfly*. The unplanned pregnancy with Kyle. Jack wanted a termination. She didn't, happy to sacrifice her studies and career for their baby. Jack's affair with a promiscuous cougar at work which accelerated his walking out when Alexa was one leaving Claire with nothing but an STI and two babies. Jack had recently filed for divorce.

'I'm speaking to a colleague in Children's Services later today. Her name is Julie Miller. She will call and advise you on the correct procedure in these circumstances. Of course, lockdown isn't making things any easier. I'll see what can be done to arrange a Zoom call with the foster parents so you can speak to Kyle and Alexa. I know that's not ideal.'

'A Zoom call? Are you taking the piss? I want my kids here with me now, not a poxy Zoom call!'

Gavin heard a fist banging a table and sensed the sudden change of mood.

'As I said, Mr. Halford, Julie will be in touch very shortly to discuss next steps. In the meantime, perhaps you may want to contact your in-laws? They're making the funeral arrangements. I'm sure they would appreciate your help?'

'Me? Help Arthur Carter? That miserable old git hates my guts. Always has done.'

'I can't possibly think why that would be?' thought Gavin.

'Goodbye, Mr. Halford, and I'm sorry for your loss. Claire was a wonderful person, we will all miss her terribly.'

'Yeah, thanks.'

* * *

Two down and one to go. Gavin opened the kitchen door at Inverlochan and stepped outside for some fresh air. It had been a tough morning and he was craving another line. He looked across the yard to the stables which once housed a herd of trekking ponies. They were empty now, only used for gralloching deer and hanging pheasants, shot by businessmen from London on a corporate jolly. He was missing the tranquillity of his flat in Bayswater and his piano. He returned to the kitchen where his mother was attempting to cut a slice of ham with a wooden spoon.

'Let me do that for you, Mum,' he said softly. 'Go and sit down in the drawing room. I'll bring your sandwich through.'

Lady Douglas shuffled off followed by the dogs. She was walking awkwardly. Her slippers were on the wrong feet.

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It was almost 12.30 by the time Gavin spoke to Julie Miller, a team leader in The Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea's Children's Services department.

'Oh my God, Gavin. What a colossal cock up! This could get you into serious trouble. I should never have taken your word about the children staying with her parents. With all this shit going on in lockdown, I trusted you.'

'I know, I know. I'm sorry. I panicked. Things were happening so fast. I did what I thought was best at the time. Marcus was right about Claire hating the children going into foster care or to her parents. I spoke to her estranged husband earlier this morning and it wasn't a pleasant experience. He's a pretty nasty character. What other option did I have?'

'I get it, Gavin, but we can't have children in our care being placed with random strangers. Tell me about these people again?'

'Marcus lives across the hall from me in Bayswater. We have dinner together once a week. We're both very keen cooks and…'

'Gavin, I couldn't care less if he's Gordon bloody Ramsay! That doesn't give him the right to run off with two small children.'

'I'm sorry. I'll start again. He's a big shot in the City, earns an absolute fortune. Well, he did. Up until yesterday. He's just resigned from his job.'

'Come again? Are you telling me he's now unemployed?

'Technically, yes. But he's not exactly on the streets either. He's loaded. Has a massive house in Surrey, two grown up children, privately educated, lovely wife, Alice. The children couldn't be in better care, honestly, Julie. This isn't a safeguarding risk or anything like that.'

'Well, I'll be the judge of that, shall I? What is absolutely certain is I need to see the children myself, meet Marcus and his family, and quickly! I need to make sure the children aren't in any immediate danger.'

'Oh, come on, Julie. I would never…'

'Don't *'oh come on Julie'* me, Gavin. If something bad happens to those kids while they're with your friend, can you imagine the ton of shit that will land on us? I'm going to have to escalate this. I'm not taking this all on my shoulders. Text me Marcus' number and I'll call him immediately. You'd better give me the father's number too.'

'Sure. I understand,' he said meekly.

He didn't blame her. Julie was only doing her job. It reminded him of the advice Marcus had given him over one of their dinners.

'If the shit's gonna hit the fan, always make sure there's someone else's face in front of yours.'

'Once I get a grip on things Gavin, then we can start to work out a more

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permanent solution. As it stands, the husband has full legal entitlement to the children. He could get a Court Order and take the children away tomorrow.'

'Even if he's been a total bastard and hasn't been a parent to the children for two years?'

'I get that, Gavin, I really do, but it's irrelevant. Being an absentee parent with anger management issues aren't grounds for him not to be granted parental responsibility. Not unless there are exceptional circumstances involved. I'll let you know how I get on. Where are you locking down by the way? In Bayswater?'

'No. I'm in Perthshire. At my parents.'

'Oh nice. Will be in touch.'

* * *

After the traumatic events at the weekend, it had been a calmer day in Twin Gates. Marcus checked his email for news from The Firm confirming his retirement. Not a single word. Not even from HR. He thought it was odd. Thrown into turmoil by his spontaneous decision, he wondered if Kelvin and the other 'top bods' were putting together a lucrative retention package as an inducement for him to stay? He joined three Zoom calls with Laila Saetang to discuss Project Medusa. His departure would leave a partner vacancy and early delivery of The Golden Carrot. She would definitely have mentioned it if she had heard. She seemed much more interested in the relationship between the two joint CEOs from Yeast Feast, an artisan bakery business. They had joined the update call together from Mykonos looking very relaxed.

'Do you think Daniel and Joe are a couple?' asked Laila curiously. 'You know, outside work?'

'I suspect so,' said Marcus. 'I don't think they're in Mykonos doing due diligence on a new pitta bread supplier.'

'Mmm… interesting. If that is the case, I'll need to update my stakeholder matrix,' she said earnestly.

Later that evening, Marcus and Alice were alone in the living room watching television. The virus had decimated the schedules, there wasn't much on.

'So what are we watching?' said Marcus, impatiently.

'Not much on, I'm afraid. It's either *Holby City*, *Midsomer Murders* repeats or a programme with Gregg Wallace going around a pots and pans factory in France,' said Alice.

'I bloody hate Gregg Wallace and his gormless grin. I bet he can't even make a decent omelette.'

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'Why would he need to?' said Alice. 'If you can get Marcus Wareing or Monica Galetti to knock you one up when you feel a bit peckish?'

'And why would anyone want to live in Midsomer, the most dangerous place in Britain? As for hospital dramas, I think we've had enough of that over the past week, don't you? What's on Netflix? Maybe we could do "Netflix and chill",' he said.

'What are you going on about, Marcus? Netflix and chill?'

'It's a euphemism.'

'For what?'

'Snuggling up on the sofa, binge watching a box set and then having smoochy sex.'

'And who told you that?'

'Olivia. Apparently, it's a common phrase on online dating sites. Bit like "friends with benefits" and all that. More subtle than asking if you fancy a shag…'

'What a load of bollocks,' said Alice. 'We'll watch *Midsomer Murders*.'

Thirty minutes in to the programme and Alice was getting irritated. The constant rustling of the newspaper along with Marcus' frequent interruptions was spoiling her viewing.

'It's the postmistress. Definitely. She looks a bit shifty. I bet she's in a love triangle with the pub landlord and she's killed his wife to get her out of the way,' he said, peering over the top of the *Daily Mail*. 'She probably smeared poison on the back of some stamps and the wife licked them.'

'Oh, will you shut up? Don't be pathetic, Marcus. She was nowhere near the crime scene. The wife was killed with a blunt object anyway. A blow to the head.'

'Could have been one of those things they use in a post office to stamp things? They're pretty heavy.'

After his fourth interruption, Alice switched off the television and threw the remote control across the sofa. It slammed into the newspaper which startled him.'

'Whoa, what did you do that for?'

'Because you're ruining the programme. Why do you keep interrupting when you're not even watching it?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be irritating. I'm finding it hard to concentrate with everything that's happened.' Alice swivelled on the sofa to face him.

'So what did Gavin have to say? You didn't tell me.' He gave Alice a precis version. 'Poor Gavin. That can't have been easy. Must have been a terrible shock for her parents, even if they weren't close.'

'Gavin said they sounded pretty distraught. No parent should outlive their children. That's not the natural order of things. He's sorting out the death

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certificate and registering the death. Her parents are organising the funeral. I imagine it will be in Walsall, where she comes from. Slightly ironic she's going back to a place she did everything to get away from.'

'The husband sounds a bit of monster. It's only natural he will want to be with his children. He is their father, after all.'

Marcus didn't reply immediately.

'Shame he didn't feel like being a father when he walked out on them and pissed off to Australia. Gavin said he was pretty aggressive, he wanted to come over here and take them away.'

'Did he? It's getting a bit late now. It's almost ten o'clock.'

'Gavin told him the children are safe with foster parents until Children's Services have decided on the best immediate option. He told me to expect a call from a woman who wants to assess how the children are being cared for. Make sure they're not in any immediate danger.'

'Danger? What possible danger could they be in?'

'I know, Al. But you're a lawyer, you know how these things work? Procedures have to be followed. Gavin's worried he might get fired for telling a lie and not following the right procedures. I've put him in a difficult position. At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing, what Claire would have wanted.'

'We both did, Marcus. And it *was* the right thing to do, otherwise I wouldn't have gone along with it. Those children couldn't be any safer if they were placed under armed guard in The Tower of London.'

Marcus imagined the scene. Kyle and Alexa in ermine fringed robes, sitting on little thrones, flanked by a group of Yeoman Warders guarding them with pikes.

'So when is this woman from social services coming? Will they do that in lockdown?'

'Thursday, probably. Gavin said they will, in exceptional circumstances.'

'Right. Well, let's face that one when it comes. I'll let James and Olivia know what's happening. Looks like we'll all need to be on our best behaviour?'

'Good idea. Probably helpful if James isn't playing *Grand Theft Auto* with Kyle.'

Alice turned the television back on. *The Ten O'Clock News* had just started. The headline story was the emerging crisis of Covid deaths in care homes. The government was reported to have massively understated the numbers.

'That's quite a difference,' said Marcus sarcastically. 'Over 4,000 likely deaths so far versus 237 reported by the government. Covid is gonna rip through those places like a wildfire. I wouldn't want to have a relative in a care home right now.'

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Being interviewed, the Secretary of State for Work & Pensions, Thérèse Coffey, said,

'The daily figure given by the government was based on actual hospital deaths because it's accurate and quick.'

'Except it's massively wrong, which means she's probably lying. That's what politicians do, especially Tory ones.' Marcus levered himself out of the sofa and folded the newspaper. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' he said.

It was Tuesday, 14th April 2020.

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