One

Bea Abbot thought she had her life -– including her portrait painter husband Piers, her lively young ward Bernice – and her employment agency under control. She gave to charity, and even to rough sleepers, as she should. But one particular rough sleeper was about to turn her life upside down.

*Friday evening*

Bea shivered as she let herself into her mews property. The temperature was due to plummet that night but she’d forgotten to collect the post earlier and some bills were due. She kept her car on the ground floor while Piers used the upper floor as an office and studio. Whatever she did, some bills seemed to end up at the mews instead of in their family home in the next street. The wire letter basket behind the front door was tightly packed with paper, which she struggled to release. Annoyingly, most of it looked like junk mail.

She didn’t think the excuse that the dog ate the electricity bill would be accepted, particularly as she didn’t have a dog. She was more of a cat person, being the personal slave of her own long-haired black feline.

The people opposite kept a guard dog called Bruno who didn’t get enough exercise and barked every time anything moved in the mews. The owner tethered the dog on a chain in a makeshift kennel and yes, there it was, sounding off again. Bruno must have heard her arrive to collect the post. And yes, out came his owner to see who was moving in what he thought of as ‘his’ territory. Well, he did own several properties in the mews and was in the market for more.

She slit open the top of the largest, fattest envelope. Perhaps if she could get the contents out of that, it would release the log-jam of mail. Tug, tug . . . nothing shifted.

The sky was darkening. She shivered again. A cold night with temperatures below freezing was forecast. Botheration!

Was it worth putting the light on? Probably not.

A car drove into the mews and parked immediately outside. Annoying. You were not supposed to park in front of someone else’s door. Hers was almost the last of the original garage units left. Everyone else had turned theirs into bijou residences with bay trees in tubs on either side of their spanking new front doors.

Bruno was going crazy. He really didn’t like strange cars parking on his territory, did he?

The first drops of rain hit the door, hard, and she only had her light jacket with her. All right, she knew she ought to have come round to collect the mail a couple of days ago, but they’d been short-handed at the agency, and it had slipped her mind. It was only when Piers had reminded her that some bills were probably overdue that she’d promised to get the mail.

Tug, tug. Blast, and worse!

At this very moment Piers was no doubt basking in wonderful weather in Silicon Valley painting lads and lasses who were multi-millionaires even though they didn’t look old enough to have reached the age of consent.

Something banged against the garage door beside her. Someone groaned.

Someone else – a man – laughed. He had a deep voice, a voice on the rough, unpolished spectrum. ‘I didn’t sign up for this. You said he’d copped it. I’m getting extra for this, right? Who’s got the kerosene? Give it here.’

A sloshing sound.

Bea lifted her head. She thought she’d heard someone say . . . No, nonsense. She’d misheard. Anyway, it was nothing to do with her.

Glory be! She managed to tease a chunk of paper out of the biggest envelope. And – at last! – the log-jam was released. She pulled out some fliers. A letter from the tax office. Yuk! She fished in her pocket for a plastic bag to put the important stuff into.

Someone with a tenor voice outside muttered that he’d forgotten the matches. He sounded nervous.

A baritone swore. ‘Idiot! Well, how about we run him over in the car?’

Deep voice replied, ‘Not with this car you don’t!’

Bea really wasn’t listening. She was struggling . . . there was one of the bills she’d expected to see. And another. Hurray.

The garage door shuddered. Kicked from outside? Tenor said, ‘Look, why don’t we just leave him here? The cold tonight will finish him off.’

Bea froze at that. It sounded as if some poor creature had been mugged in the street and dragged into the comparative peace and quiet of the mews to be dealt with. Ought she to intervene?

Er, no. Not if there were three men out there. Three to one was not good odds. Footsteps going away? A car started up and backed out of the mews.

Bruno, the guard dog, fell silent.

Peace and quiet, except that the wind was getting up. Sleet attacked the door again. The early evening light was waning fast. She must get home. Her fifteen-year-old ward, Bernice, would be back from school for the weekend.

She told herself that if someone had been mugged, then the interfering man opposite – what was his name. . .? Mr Fischer . . .? – would have seen it and phoned the police.

Or should she . . .? No. Someone else could do it.

She stuffed the last of the mail into the plastic bag, found her keys and opened the door. Cautiously.

A heap of old clothes had been tossed against her garage door.

It stank.

A rough sleeper, who’d accosted the wrong people and got himself thrown into the mews? Maybe he was an immigrant? Oh dear. Where was the nearest refuge for such people? There were food banks and overnight places. She’d seen notices in the church about them.

She stepped outside and pulled the door closed behind her. She didn’t want to risk a rough sleeper sneaking in when her back was turned.

A squall of rain hit her again, reminding her that her jacket was far from waterproof. The man – yes, it was a man – was bearded, with matted long hair under a beanie, an ancient, dilapidated coat and sandals without socks. In this weather?

The man stirred. Tried to speak.

*What?*

‘Wa…water?’

*WHAT?*

Bea told herself to hurry away, but she hesitated. She’d expected to hear a plea for money, but not for *water.* She said, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Water? Have you . . .?’ He struggled up on one elbow and looked around. ‘Where are . . .?’

‘London. Kensington. Near the park.’

The man cleared his throat. ‘Water? Do you have . . .?’ An educated voice. Baritone. Youngish.

Bruno, on hearing voices, started up again.

Bea said, ‘You’d better move on. The residents don’t tolerate rough sleepers and will call the police.’

The man tried to stand. He groaned.

‘Or,’ said Bea, ‘an ambulance? Did those men beat you up?’

He got to his feet by numbers and balanced himself against the garage door. He ignored her question, concentrating on standing upright.

She caught a glimpse of something red around his wrist. She didn’t want to think what that might be. She hesitated. ‘There’s a list in the church office of places where you can get help. Night shelter, food bank – that sort of thing. Turn left when you leave the mews, go straight ahead to the main road, turn left at the traffic lights and the church is on the other side of the road at the bottom of the hill.’

‘Thanks.’

Bruno was going bananas. Soon his master would be out, smartphone in hand, demanding to know what was going on, ready to call the police, who would no doubt move the man on.

Bea hooked the bag of mail over her arm, drew her jacket tightly around her and set off for home. The waning light and the heavy rain – no, it was definitely turning to sleet - was making it hard to see ahead, but surely the man would be able to find his way to the church?

He’d be all right. Of course he would.

She heard slow, limping footsteps behind her. The occasional gasp of pain.

He wasn’t in good shape, was he?

*He asked for water. He didn’t ask for money. He asked for help and I refused to listen.*

She paused at the end of the mews, waiting for him to catch up. She thought she’d better see him down to the church. What a nuisance! What’s more, it was getting late and young Bernice would be looking out for her supper.

‘Shall I call the police?’ she asked, as the man leaned against the pillar at the entrance to the mews.

‘No! Please!’ He was breathing hard, holding his arm across himself. Cracked ribs? Had he been kicked?

She was angry with him for delaying her on her journey home, and with herself for not being the nice, caring person she would like to be. She pulled his right arm around her shoulder. Her jacket could go to the dry-cleaners tomorrow. She was a tall woman. He was maybe a couple of inches above her but a lightweight. His sandals flapped on the wet pavements. Sleet stung her face and hands.

‘Hospital?’ she suggested.

He shook his head. ‘I’ll live . . . for the time being.’

‘What’s your name?’ she said, distracting him. ‘Come on, one foot in front of the other.’

No reply.

She tried to remember what they used to sing as children, when they had to walk home the long way. Ah, she had it. ‘One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow. One man and his dog, went to mow a meadow. . .’

He tried to join in, matching steps in time to the tune. ‘Two men went to mow, went to mow a meadow. Two men, one man and his dog, went to mow a meadow.’ His tongue fumbled in his mouth. Ah, he needed water, didn’t he?

Steady does it. Turn into her road: cream-painted Georgian houses, terraced, porticoed, iron railings; steps up to the front door and down to what used to be servants’ quarters.

Bea, Piers and Bernice lived half way along in a big house with a basement from which Bea ran her domestic employment agency.

The man was scarecrow-thin beneath that appalling, stinking coat. But the stink was not of filth or booze. *Paraffin? What was it the man had said about matches? No, NO! He couldn’t have meant . . . Surely not!*

‘Eight men went to mow . . .’

He sagged, reaching for the nearest iron railings to hang on to. ‘Sorry . . . sorry . . . I can’t . . .’

She said, ‘Look, there’s a corner shop on the main street, open all hours. I’ll buy you a cuppa there, if you like.’ It wouldn’t delay her too much . . . only, she didn’t have any cash or a card on her. Bother!

Again, that soft laugh. ‘Milk. I dream of milk, gallons of . . . Sorry. I’m not quite. . . You’d better leave me.’

‘Not far now. Only four more houses.’

She didn’t realise till then that she’d made a decision to take him into her own house, but apparently she had.

She pulled him upright and thought he’d fall, but he just about made it. She was so wet her shoes were squelching, and she couldn’t imagine how he must feel. That filthy coat was far too large for him, and he was wearing ancient trousers which flopped around his ankles.

Home at last. The steps up to the house were not steep but they were too much for him to climb. The lights were on inside, the blinds drawn, so Bernice must have got back safely from school. Bea ought to have been there to welcome her.

If she let go of the man, he’d fall to the ground.

She felt for her smartphone with her free hand and rang Bernice, who answered straight away. ‘Where are you? For heavens’ sake! Where have you been?’ Sharply. Displeased.

‘Long story. I’m on the pavement outside propping up a man who’s been mugged. Can you let us in?’

Bernice flung open the door and exclaimed with horror. She was a month short of sixteen and wiry. White T-shirt, black jeans and trainers. Black hair cut short, flashing dark eyes. She was intelligent, impatient, and practical. And at the moment, annoyed at this hiccup in her timetable.

Bea panted, ‘Help me in with him.’

Between them, Bea and Bernice lifted and dragged the man into the hall and allowed him to subside onto the floor. A puddle formed on the tiles around him.

Bea dropped the plastic bag of letters, observing that the rain had got inside and the contents were probably ruined. She stripped off her jacket, eased off her shoes and wrung out her skirt.

Bernice put her hands on her hips. ‘What the . . .!’

The heap shifted. And collapsed.

Bea said, ‘He needs a pint of milk in a big mug. And a banana. He’s thirsty. I suspect he hasn’t eaten for some days.’

Bernice recoiled. ‘Ugh. He’s a rough sleeper.’

‘He may have been sleeping rough, but I don’t think he’s a rough sleeper.’

Bernice didn’t move so Bea padded her way into the kitchen, took a quart of milk out of the fridge, put some into a large mug, and gave it to the man.

His hands shook as he took the milk and lifted it to his mouth. He was unshaven, unkempt.

Bernice held her nose. ‘He stinks.’

‘Use your common sense. Some dirt, yes. Mostly paraffin.’ And to the man, ‘Drink slowly.’

Bernice sniffed. ‘You can’t bring a rough sleeper into the house. What would Piers say?’

‘He’d feed him and find him some dry clothes to wear. You’ll notice that what this man is wearing was intended for someone larger.’

The man lifted his head from the empty mug and said, ‘No one smoked.’

Bea gasped. A shiver ran down her back.

‘What?’ said Bernice.

Bea said, ‘Paraffin. He was dumped in the mews from a car by three men. They doused him with paraffin but didn’t finish the job because none of them smoked and they hadn’t got any matches.’

She spoke directly to the man, ‘Who were they?’

He turned eyes of turquoise blue on her from under a frizz of matted hair, and shook his head. He held out the empty mug. ‘More?’ As an afterthought, he added, ‘Please?’ He shivered convulsively. His teeth chattered. He clenched his jaw.

She’d read somewhere that if someone has been starved of food and drink, they need to eat slowly and not binge. She found him some more milk and another banana. ‘Eat slowly.’ she said. ‘Now, I must change, and so must you.’

Bernice said, ‘How? You can’t leave me alone with him while you change. I suppose we could lock him in the downstairs loo? Only problem is, the lock’s on the inside.’

The man half laughed. ‘Old houses, old windows that rattle. You’ve probably got double glazing now, but I expect you still have a wooden wedge or two lying around?’ He dragged himself almost upright and made it into the toilet.

A wedge. Of course. Bea went into the kitchen and rummaged in the end kitchen drawer to find one and brought it out into the hall. She tapped on the toilet door. ‘Throw out your clothes, please.’

The horrible coat and trousers duly arrived, with the beanie.

She said, ‘Underpants, please?’

‘I’ll wash them myself.’

‘No, you won’t. I’ll get you some clean ones to wear.’

He threw the pants out, too. They – whoever *they* were – had left him his own briefs; a good make. Expensive.

Bea gathered up his things and, after some thought, put them in a black plastic bag and hid it in a cupboard next to the fireplace in the living room. The clothes were evidence. She’d see to drying them out later on.

She put the wedge into place so that he couldn’t leave the toilet, fed Winston the cat, who’d just come in demanding sustenance, climbed the stairs to her bedroom, stripped off and get into the shower. Oh, the pleasure of donning clean undies, a warm sweater, a long tweed skirt and her favourite dark-red ankle boots!

She picked a selection of clothes from Piers’ side of the closet to take down to the man. Socks, underpants, T-shirts, a big sweater, jeans.

Shoes? A problem. The man had long narrow feet like Piers, and was about the same height but thinner. Perhaps another pair of sandals would fit the bill?

She took everything downstairs, put her own wet things into the washing-machine, removed the wedge and thrust the borrowed things into the toilet. He muttered a thank-you.

Sleet pounded the kitchen window. The temperature had dropped. She turned up the central heating and shivered, imagining what would have happened if the man had been left on the ground in the open air.

Now, what could she dish up for a meal?

Bernice followed her into the kitchen. ‘We should call the police. . .’ There was doubt in her voice.

‘Maybe we should, but he said he didn’t want the police, so we won’t.’

Bernice said, ‘He’ll knife us in our beds and make off with the silver. He must have done something wrong to have got into such a state.’

‘Or got on the wrong side of someone. More than one person. I heard the voices of three men when he was being dumped outside my garage doors. They wanted him dead. They’d brought a can of kerosene with them. The plan was to set him alight but no one had any matches with them. They discussed running him over in their car to make sure he died. It seems they didn’t quite have the nerve for that either and left him to die of hypothermia.’

‘Perhaps it was a drugs war, and he got in the middle of it? If he offended one of these gangs then he could definitely be in fear for his life and want to disappear.’

The man appeared in the doorway, dressed in Piers’ clothing, pushing back the mop of wet hair that fell over his eyes. His eyes were wide, wary. For two pins he’d make a run for it. Except, he was still weak and making an effort to stand on his own two feet. There was a badly healed ring of dried blood round one wrist, and the skin around it looked puffy.

That’s what Bea had guessed, wasn’t it? He’d been chained up or otherwise restrained.

Bernice said, ‘Well, you look a little more human now. What’s your name?

He said, ‘Some names fit, some don’t.’

Bernice was not amused. ‘Captain Nemo. Meaning “nothing”.’

‘Jules Verne? Is there any more milk? Another banana? Am I running you short?’’

Bea said, ‘You have to allow your body to recover slowly. I’m doing you some scrambled eggs.’

‘And soldiers?’ A flicker of a smile, which showed he was gradually climbing back to life. He looked a lot better than before. Some Viking ancestry? Might even have been good-looking once? He was in his late twenties, perhaps? He was broad-shouldered, his body tapering to narrow hips. He'd been something of an athlete?

Bea said, ‘How long did they keep you chained up?’

A long silence. ‘It was a stag party that went wrong.’

*Oh, yeah. Pull the other one.*

He shifted against the doorframe and winced. Bea had heard them kicking him in the mews. Where had she put the arnica cream? In her bathroom upstairs? She’d look for it in a minute.

She wondered what it was like to be stripped down to basics, to have no watch, no identity, no money, no cards, no phone. Scary!

He said, ‘You’ve been so good. I hate to ask but you couldn’t lend me a razor, could you? And a toothbrush? And perhaps a pair of scissors to cut my hair? I promise not to use it on you or myself.’

Bea looked at him and thought the accent now matched the clothes she’d lent him. Whoever this man was, he’d not been brought up in the gutter. ‘My husband’s away and has taken his electric shaver with him.’

But he’d left his old one behind, hadn’t he? Had she thrown it out? Possibly. She couldn’t remember. But if not, where might it be?

‘You’re not borrowing mine,’ said Bernice.

The man said, ‘Understood. I’m truly grateful for what you have done. I’ll return the clothes as soon as I can get some others. You said there was a church where I can get help. At the bottom of the road, is it?’

Bea looked at the clock. ‘Too late. They close the gates after evensong.’

He squinted up at the clock on the far wall. And then at a calendar that hung next to it. He was short-sighted?

Bea said, ‘How long were you kept captive?’

‘I tried to mark the days, like Robinson Crusoe. I think three weeks and six days. Is today a Friday?’

*Three weeks and six days! He survived, which means he must have been fed and given water now and then.*

As if on cue, sleet pounded on the kitchen window. The forecast was for temperatures below freezing overnight.

She said, ‘You can doss down here for the night and leave in the morning when the church office will be open.’

He relaxed. His eyes were clear, as was his skin. His eyebrows and eyelashes were thick and almost as fair as his skin. He had a high-bridged nose with fine nostrils.

Bea poured him another mug of milk, and indicated for him to sit at the central table. She gave him a teaspoon to eat his scrambled eggs with, so that he didn’t gobble them down. He gave her an old-fashioned look but, despite his desperate hunger, restrained himself enough to eat slowly. He had good table manners.

Bernice eyed him with disfavour. ‘So, were you pushing drugs? Is that what this is all about?’

‘He’s no drug addict,’ said Bea, refilling his mug of milk.

‘No soldiers?’ He tried to smile. Almost made it.

‘Not yet,’ said Bea. ‘You can have some bread tomorrow.’

He looked, narrow-eyed, at Bernice. ‘I don’t have anything to do with drugs.’

The landline rang. Bernice picked it up as she was nearest. She listened and handed it over to Bea. ‘For you. Mr Fischer. That man who thinks he owns the mews.’

Bea made herself sound welcoming. ‘Mr Fischer, what can I do for you?’

*Apart from selling you my garage, which I know is what you’re after*.

He had an incisive voice. ‘Caught sight of you when you called in at your place just now. Wanted to check you got back safely. Thing is, some men have just been here, looking for an escapee from a mental hospital. They said he’d been spotted dossing down in the mews. I told them they’d made a mistake. Not in our mews, I said. You didn’t see anyone, did you?’

‘Someone escaped from a mental institution? Oh dear. How awful. No, I didn’t see anyone like that. I suppose that’s why Bruno was barking so much. I expect he frightened the man away.’

A little light laughter on both sides, and Bea put the phone down.

‘I’d better be off,’ said the rough sleeper. ‘I assure you I haven’t escaped from a mental institution. I am no danger to anyone.’