

TOBIN GOES CUCKOO

by

STANLEY MORGAN

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Chapter One

Emily Ponsfford-Blink is a truly lovely girl, but while making love does make noises reminiscent of someone with a mouthful of red-hot ovenchips walking barefoot over several yards of very sharp carpet tacks, sort of: 'ooh...aah...phew...oops...wow...aaagh!' And she was at it now, perched above me like a jockey on a Derby winner, a vision of bronze silk-skin pulchritude, her hair a cascade of gold, tickling my chest.

Fearing a heart attack – hers not mine, I was feeling just fine – I enquired, 'You all right, love?'

'Oh yes!' she panted. 'Oh, Reg, you're the greatest...'

Eh?

'Reg?'

'Sorry, Ron...oh, my God, that is incredible...*incredible!*'

'**RON?** Emily – it's me down here! Russ! Russ Tobin!'

She wasn't listening. She was well into the last furlong, out in front by a neck, coming up to the post fast. I didn't get any sense out of her until she had collapsed beside me, curled under my arm, emanating fragrant heat, as edible as marshmallow.

Nevertheless, I was miffed. We fellas are always hearing about how women suffer hurt feelings when the guy mutters the wrong name while making love – and understandably – but it works the other way, too. Right then I was consumed with visions of this duo, Reg and Ron, as a brace of gladiators with muscles in their codpieces, doing to Emily what I'd just done, only more so. And I was contemplating bringing the subject up when she beat me to it with a diversionary tactic.

'Russ' she wheedled, cuddling closer and drawing lazy circles around my stomach with her educated fingers. 'Would you do me a big favour?'

'Another one?' I grinned. 'So soon?'

'Would you lend me some money?'

Whoops.

And then – bewilderment.

You see, Emily – according to Emily – is the daughter of the Bolivian billionaire Baron Klaus Ponsfford-Blink who made his vast fortune by inventing the bully beef tin key. Now that's clever. Any fool can come up with corned beef, or even the tin to put it in, but the genius lies in the key. Have you ever tried opening a square tin without the key?

'Erm,' I said, 'correct me if I'm mistaken, but didn't you tell me that daddy...'

'I lied,' she whispered contritely.

'Ah. Then he...'

'No, he isn't. He didn't. He wasn't. He hasn't.'

'So what does he do?'

'Time, mostly. He's doing four-to-six in Brixton right now for GBH.'

'You poor kid. And I take it his name, and therefore yours, is not Ponsfford-Blink?'

'George Cattlegrid.'

'You're Geo...'

She giggled and grabbed Herc affectionately. 'No, silly. My real name's Philander Cattlegrid.'

'You poor, *poor* kid. Stick to Ponsfford-Blink.'

'So, Russ, will you?' The wheedle was back in her tone. Give Emily - Philander - one thing, she can really wheedle, especially to the accompaniment of the educated digits.

'Of course,' I said, beginning to respond dutifully.

'No! Not that. Will you lend me some money?'

'How much is some?'

'Only five hundred pounds.'

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. I was expecting her to say ten...twenty quid, and I'd have been pushed to scrape up that much.

'Five hun...Emily, right now, I'm flatter than a roadkill. If tap water was tuppence a gallon, I'd be dead of thirst by teatime. I'm busted! I'm going to look for a job this afternoon.'

She rose on her elbow and gave me that disgusted, disbelieving, disillusioned, 'you've taken advantage of me' look that all women appear to have been endowed with at birth.

'But this apartment! Last night you said it was your place!'

'No - I said 'your place or mine? Figure of speech.'

'Then who's is it?'

'Belongs to my tennis-playing pal Buzz Malone. He's up at Wimbledon, practicing for the tournament. Look, Emily, I didn't mean to dazzle you into bed with pretense of wealth. If you'd asked me last night, I'd have told you it was Buzz's pad, but 'I smirked, 'we somehow didn't get around talking about real estate.'

She relented with a wickedly wanton grin. 'You didn't dazzle me.' Those fingers again. 'He did.' She heaved a pretend sigh. 'Okay, Tobin, you owe me.'

'How much?'

'Oh...' She was back in the paddock now, getting ready to climb into the saddle again, '...about five hundred pounds. This could take all day.'

Alas, it could not, I mused. At three o'clock I had an assignation with another devoted task mistress. Mimsie Hardwater. At the Job Centre. But, by heck, until then...

'You want to give me a hand here, Tobin, or are you just going lie there and let me do all the work?'

For a girl who gets my name right, nothing is too much trouble.

CHAPTER TWO

For a young, handsome, modest, single fellow with oats to sew, Brighton in the summer is one heck of a place to be. The pebble beach might be crap, but, oh boy, the near-naked pulchritude that pervades the pier, the prom and the pretty passageways of town would prime the pulse of a peckerless pensioner.

For once in his life my pal Buzz Malone had done a smart thing by investing in real estate here. He used the apartment as a base from which to sortie to umpteen tournaments a year around the world, earning a good living without achieving much fame. Neither of us expected him to get beyond the second round at Wimbledon, which is why I had to find a job and accommodation pretty smartly. Buzz would be back any day now, accompanied (you can bet your granny's hat on this) by at least one representative of the afore-mentioned pulchritude, and I'd be damned if I'd lie awake on the living-room sofa listening to Buzz serve aces all night.

Returning recently from the States, I'd been very lucky to find Buzz out of town for the Northern Lawns tournament, and therefore his apartment at my disposal. In that past month I'd made a serious attempt to find work that would give me the kind of income I needed to continue living in pricey Brighton, which is how I'd come to be acquainted with Mimsie Hardwater of the JobCentre. Acquainted? We were practically engaged.

As for the Centre itself, I could recite by heart the details of every job available on display from Acrobat to Zookeeper, and had made friends with every layabout that regularly set foot in there, looking for a soft touch and a free handout.

At ten minutes to three that afternoon I repeated the routine, little realizing how very different this visit would be from all the others...

They were there in force, Flash, Hengist, Stutz and Wacker, clustered around the 'Other Jobs' display as though about to draw straws for such rich pickings as 'dishwasher' and 'lavatory attendant'. Nice lads, but without exception they lent a new meaning to the term 'Brain Drain'. You could see the seeping cerebellum cells lying on their shoulders like dandruff. Okay, it might have been dandruff, but I wouldn't put money on it.

As I entered from the street, a sardonic cheer went up. 'Hi, Russ!'

'Wacha, lads! Anything good come in?'

'Who the 'ell's looking?' muttered Flash Gordon, whose real name is Bernard. Flash is an ardent student of horseracing. Flash has an unbeatable system. You bet on a horse, and if it loses, you double your bet on the next race. And if that loses, you double again, and keep on doubling until all your money has gone, then you wait for your next giro cheque and start all over again. Flash is a lovely guy, but if he was any more stupid, he'd have to be watered twice a week.

Flash had his nose buried in the racing form now. 'Fancy anythin' today, Russ?'

'Yes, Trouser Zipper in the three o'clock - it'll fly home.'

A curious honking noise began emanating from behind a curtain of coconut matting covering the face of Hengist Hoddle, real name Henry, but known among the lads, for obvious reasons, as Hengist the Horrible. Hengist is a troglodyte, lives in a cave somewhere off the M23, and the hairiest human being, male or female, I've ever encountered. Not only does the stuff completely conceal his features, it sprouts from every hole, crack, nook and cranny of his being, curling out of collar and cuffs, and thrusting out of buttonholes with the irresistible determination of pavement weeds. The only job he could possibly be looking for in here was as a pull-through for a siege cannon.

I said, 'Hi, Hengist, that you in there?' To the others, with a wink: 'Has anyone ever actually seen his face?'

Wacker grimaced. 'I did wunce - on the pier in a high wind. Not a pretty sight. He had people jumpin' into the sea.' Wacker is a black Liverpudlian with a Scouse accent thicker than a Mersey oil slick. If he ever gets to sit down for a job interview, he'll need a translator.

Hengist was honking again, a noise uncannily like an old consumptive Paris taxi. Now, *there* was another job he could do - strap him to the bonnet...

'Hey, Russ - here's a g...g...g...good one f...f...for you.' This was Stutz, real name Arthur, a diminutive redhead with huge ears. In a stiff sea breeze he had to wear a cap or he could take off and end up in Eastbourne. Stutz, to nobody's surprise, stutters, but only now and then. I think he does it for

effect, to hold your attention. He certainly has you hanging on for his next word. He was pretending to study the Jobs board.

'I'm all e...I'm listening,' I said.

Wacker chuckled and Hengist got stuck in traffic again.

'Bar...Bar...'

'Black sheep?' muttered Flash. 'Of the family? Right up your street, Russ.'

'Thanks, Flash. I'll be right up your street in a minute.'

Stutz gave us all his pissed-off look. He does not like to be interrupted.

'B...B...Bar...Bar...'

'Barber!' declared Wacker. 'I wus a barber wunce - in a fruit shop in Liverpool. Used to shave the 'airs off gooseberries and sell 'em as grapes.'

Hengist was now log-jammed in Hyde Park Corner, making more noise than eighteen famished sea lions at fish time.

'Bar...Bar...Bloody Shut Up!' wailed Stutz. '...and l...l...let me get it out!

A shocked, collective intake of breath.

'Stutz! Not in here, mate,' protested Flash. 'We don't want Mimsie Hardwater running amok. Russ is going to have enough trouble with her without you stoking her furnace.'

I checked my watch; it was almost three. 'Gotta go, fellas. Don't think it hasn't been uplifting. Hey - Stutz, there's the very job for you...right there!'

He fell for it. 'W...What is it?'

'Sports commentator for the hundred metre dash.'

Even he had to grin. 'Very f...f...f...humorous.'

'Before I go' I motioned them into a huddle. 'I must tell you true, very sad story about a young lad who was similarly afflicted as Stutz, and whose Dad had one leg shorter than the other. And one day the kid said, "Dad, I've been th...th...thinking about your d...d...disability. When you w...w...walk to work, why don't you w...w...walk with your sh...short leg on the pavement and your l...l...long leg in the gutter, to even it up?" His Dad thought this was a brilliant idea, so next day he does just that. Half-way to work, he's going along fine when a car comes round the corner and hits him for six. He ends up in hospital with thirty-two broken bones and a badly sprained sense of humour.'

'This is *true*?' queries Wacker.

'On my life. Anyway, some weeks later the lad goes to visit his Dad who is encased in plaster like an Egyptian mummy, except for holes for his eyes and mouth. The lad tells his Dad how sorry he is about the accident and Dad beckons him to come closer. "Son" he whispers, "while I've been lying here all these weeks I've given a lot of thought to *your* disability...and I think I've come up with a cure.' Overjoyed, the lad asks, "W...What is it, Dad?" And his Dad shouts into his ear, "KEEP YOUR **!!++** MOUTH SHUT!'

Mimsie was there in all her three-hundred-pound glory, dressed to impress in a flame red creation that could've been seen from Mars.

As my Employment Service Adviser she has been employment service advising me for almost a month, and in that time I'd grown to like her very much. She is Sweetface personified, a gorgeous, helpful, homely soul inside of whom is a slender, romantic sexpot, desperate to get out.

As I approached her desk, her beautiful green eyes told me she was delighted to see me, and her long dark lashes batted so hard the breeze blew my coat open.

'Hi, Russ! Glad you came in.'

'Me, too. Mimsie, I've decided never to work again if it means separation from you.'

As I took a seat, she peered round me at the lads I'd just left. Hengist was still in full honk at the joke.

Mimsie shook her head in mock despair. 'I've advised them all and I don't think they're going to make it. Their wheels are turning, but their hamsters are dead. I think they only come in here to get out of the sun, rain, wind, cold, snow...'

'Mimsie...you know darned well they only come in to see you. Hengist thinks you're wonderful.'

'You mean the stand-in for Chewbacca? You sure he's a fella?'

'A very smart fella. I hear that when his I.Q. reaches forty-five he's going to sell.'

She laughed. 'Okay, enough of them, let's talk about you.' She looked very directly at me, her eyes taking on a sparkly mischief, as though she was withholding arcane surprise. 'Your circumstances unchanged since you were here last?'

'Yup.'

'Still need a job, accommodation?'

'Buzz will be back any day now, and the piggy bank wouldn't buy a pork sausage.'

'Okay.' She leaned forward conspiratorially, lowering her voice and inadvertently, perhaps, offering me a view of what, from satellite altitude, might have been analysed as an ICBM silo. 'I'm going to give you two words that just might give you everything you need right now...*and* change the future course of your life for the better.'

I gulped. If one of those words was 'me', I was going to be out of the door faster than that ICBM out of its silo. 'Oh?'

'Cuckoo...Court,' she all but whispered.

'Mm?'

'Cuckoo...*Court.*'

'What?'

She frowned. 'What what?'

'What did it catch?'

'Not 'caught' ...'court!' C-o-u-r-t.'

'Oh. Ah.'

She peered at me as at one who had never heard of Muffin the Mule. 'You haven't seen the ads?'

'No, where?'

'All over. Big hoardings. Cuckoo Court - a Whole New Dimension in Retirement Living.'

Enlightenment. 'Ah. Retirement Living. Not a subject that would instantly capture my attention.'

'It should. Maybe.' She seemed deadly serious.

'Oh? Why?'

'They're looking for an Assistant Manager.'

There was an extended pause. 'And?' I said.

'And...I think you'd be perfect for it.'

I laughed. 'Me? I couldn't manage an egg-and-spoon race! I've never managed anything in my life. I've sold sewing machines, collected debts...'

Mimsie tapped my file that lay before us on the desk. 'I *know* what you've done, Russ, it's all in there. And one thing you *have* done that makes me think you can do this job is you've traveled...met people. As much as any other qualification, this job requires an understanding of human nature. *Retired* human nature. Which, as a one-time courier, you will know has special needs.'

My memory did a back-flip to the lovely Elsie Harbottle, Doris Turtle, and Mr and Mrs Randall, some of my elderly charges during my stint as courier for Ardmont Holidays in Majorca. With the odd respite for younger company and romantic interlude, I didn't stop laughing all summer. Come to think of it, the interludes were pretty hilarious, too.

I began to thaw to the idea. 'Okay, so I'm qualified. What's the deal?'

Mimsie opened another file and produced paper. 'Job description, starting salary, accommodation. Read it and tell me you don't worship the ground I walk upon.'

I read. I looked up at her, wide-eyed. I read some more. I looked up again, even wider-eyed. 'What's the catch?'

'Can't find any. Mind you, this has only *just* come in, and I mean in the past hour, so nobody has been for an interview yet. But I have spoken to the Manager of Cuckoo Court, an American named Pete O'Shea, to confirm the

details and requirements, just in case they'd typed too many noughts on the salary by mistake.'

'Jesus. What did he sound like?'

'Youngish. Loudish. Niceish. You want an interview, Tobin?'

She was reaching for the phone before I could nod. It must have rung but once before it was answered.

Mimsie winced as a voice announced, loud enough for me to hear: 'GoodafternoonCuckooCourtPetespeakinghowcanIhelpyou?'

I grinned at her. 'Dime to a dollar he's from the Bronx.'

She asked, 'Are you from the Bronx, Pete?'

'Westchester, how in hell d'you know? Who is this?'

'Mimsie...at the JobCentre.'

'Oh, hi, Mimsie! How in hell d'you know?'

'I didn't. I've got a candidate for you, Russ Tobin, he said you were from the Bronx.'

'Tell him he's a smartass - and to get it over here right now.'

'Don't you want to know something about him?'

'Hell, no. I *need* him. I've been dying for a pee for two hours.'

Laughing, she hung up. 'You heard the man.'

'I think,' I said, standing, 'that this could be ve-e-ry een-teresting. Mimsie, I worship the very ground you walk upon.'

'I told you you would. Let me know how it goes.'

I blew her a kiss and made my way out past the four lads who were still pretending to look for jobs.

'How d'it go, Russ?' asked Wacker.

'Ah, fellas, it appears that at last I am about to break free from the shackles of inherited working-class impoverishment, set my foot firmly on the ascending ladder of socio-economic progression, and hobnob with the power-mongering, wealth-manipulating movers and shakers of our time. I think that about covers it. Oh, and all the tea and coffee I can drink.'

'You're gonna be a window cleaner?'

I could still hear Hengist honking when I reached the street.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Bloody...ell’.

That was me, muttering to myself.

I was standing on the pavement, where the bus had just dropped me, staring up at the façade of Cuckoo Court.

It was e-normous!

A modern structure, all yellow brick, hanging tile, and acres of glass, it soared upwards for three storeys above ground floor, and along in both directions for an eternity.

The main entrance, glass doors protected by a weather-proof canopy, was a good fifty yards from the road, and both wings of the building ran back at angles from the canopy, leaving increasing depths of what eventually would be landscaped gardens separating the building from the road. *Eventually*. At the moment the court was fronted by a small tarmac-ed car park and by a moonscape of churned, baked mud, with intestinal-looking, multi-coloured pipes and cables poking through, desperate for connection. Distantly, from somewhere behind the building, I could hear the sound of labouring earth-moving machinery, and a tarry aroma hung in the air. Cuckoo Court was brand, spanking new and wouldn't be finished for weeks.

A low brick wall, broken by a pillar-flanked driveway, bordered the property. The tarmac drive ran in from the road and took a circuitous route around an unplanted flowerbed which as yet sprouted but two tall flagpoles, one flying the Union Flag, the other the Stars and Stripes. Interesting. Nothing in the details Mimsie had given me indicated it was an American company, though the fact that Pete O'Shea was American was a strong indicator.

Just inside the property, to the right of the driveway, a tall advertising hoarding was planted in the concretion. It sported the mandatory, glamourised artist's impression of the finished place, with delicate shade trees, luxuriant gardens, and several unbelievably contented retirees strolling amid the splendour, grinning their good fortune at living here.

The message on the board ran thus:

CUCKOO COURT

A CASTELLA RETIREMENT APARTMENT PROJECT

100 LUXURY STUDIO, 1-BED AND 2-BED APARTMENTS

AND A LIFESTYLE OF YOUR DREAMS!

Ask inside for details of our

TOTALLY NEW CONCEPT OF LUXURIOUS RETIREMENT LIVING

My gaze drifted from the hoarding to the long line of picture windows that ran the entire length of the ground floor of the right wing of the building. Though the reflection of the street obscured most of the room beyond, I could see dining tables positioned close to the windows, and human movement as uniformed staff set up the tables for the next meal. So – a dining room. Was this what constituted the ‘new concept of luxurious retirement living’? Not just a block of flats, but total hotel-style living?

I took a step back and another close look at the place.

Holy *Nora*, it was huge.

Suddenly not only the size of the building but of the job itself overwhelmed me. Could I see myself managing this lot? A virtual *hotel*? Hiring and firing dining room staff...housekeepers... kitchen staff?

Abso-lutely not!

Sorry, Mimsie. Enticing though the deal – and desperate my situation – was, I’d rather sleep on the beach than make a total idiot of myself. I just didn’t have the experience.

I was about to turn and leg it back to town when a Fedex van came speeding down the road, turned into the Court driveway, swirled round the flowerless flowerbed, and screeched to a halt beneath the canopy. The driver, a Jack-the-Lad, all of eighteen years old, headphones glued to his ears, jumped down and headed for the brass button plate on the wall beside the glass doors.

Whistling, he aimed a fore-finger at a button and stabbed it to death. There was a flash of sparks, a crackle I could hear from the street, and with a howl they could’ve heard in Bournemouth Jack flew backwards, smashed into the opposite wall, and slumped down on his bum. And didn’t move.

That did it.

As a courier, learning First Aid was obligatory. I ran down the drive and crouched beside him. He was breathing, but his eyes were closed.

I shook his arm. ‘Speak to me. Hey, SPEAK TO ME!’

I was now aware that one of the glass doors behind me had opened. A tough American voice I recognised said, ‘Take his freakin’ headphones off, the asshole can’t hear you.’

I turned and looked up. Pete O’Shea, in white shirt, striped Brooks Brothers tie, and navy pants, was tall, athletically-built, good-looking, with the Irish colouring of dark hair and green eyes I’d seen so often when I worked in Dublin. These eyes expressed mischievous, cynical, good humour. They’d seen a lot of life. I sensed affinity and liked him instantly.

‘This *asshole*,’ I protested, ‘ has just received one hell of an electric shock from your button panel.’

'Yeh, the Tradesmen button. I've been meaning to get that fixed. You a doctor?'

'No. I'm Russ Tobin. I'm here for an interview.'

He beamed a grin of genuine delight. 'No kidding! Hey, that's great, come on in!'

I grimaced. 'But what about him?'

Pete came fully through the door, leaned down, pulled a headphone away from the lad's ear and yelled, 'Get up, Alfie, it ain't gonna work!'

Alfie opened one eye and muttered petulantly, 'Yeh, well, I'm getting fed up getting a shock from that thing. I'm goin' to sue'

'And I'm getting fed up telling you to quit jabbing at it like Sir frigging Lancelot at a joust.'

With a wink at me, Pete pulled the kid to his feet, unlocked the doors with his key, and led us into the foyer.

'I'm still goin' to sue,' grumbled Alfie.

'Your momma,' muttered Pete.

Ten minutes later, Alfie had departed with a package of papers for the States and ten pounds in his pocket from Petty Cash to deflect legal action, and Pete and I were sitting in the spacious main office, adjacent to the front door, whose windows looked out at the flagpoles. The office contained a large wooden desk, filing cabinets, a water cooler, and a huge cuckoo clock on the wall behind the desk. Surprised at the time it was showing, I checked it against my watch. It was thirty-seven minutes fast.

An internal door led to a smaller office which, I could see, also had a desk and filing cabinets, and a second glass-paneled door which led out into what I later learned was the atrium, the heart of the building.

Pete was sprawled in his chair, one elegantly shod foot propped on the desk. Pete wore very good clothes. 'So, Tobin, tell me...no, hey, let me get you a coffee...' He was on his feet in a blur of movement. This behaviour I soon came to realize was typical of him - very generous, very impulsive. It was to get us into considerable trouble down the line.

'No, I'm fine, thanks.'

'Tea?'

'No, really.'

'Beer, gin, scotch, vodka? You do drink, don't you?'

I laughed. 'Sure - vodka, usually.'

'Thank Christ for that. Okay, you've got the job, when can you start?'

So help me, I wasn't sure if he was joking.

I said, 'D'you think I could get to know just a *teensy* bit more about it? Frankly, right now the prospect of managing this place scares the daylights out of me.'

'Nah, nothing to it. I'll teach you all you need to know in a week. What the company is looking for is *attitude*- towards the residents -what they call the Castella Caress. Stroke 'em right, they'll stay the night. You've got it naturally, you don't even have to try. Saw the way you rushed over to help that sonofabitch Alfie. That's all you need for this job, The Caress, the rest is technical.'

His glance suddenly went out through the adjoining office's glass-paneled door and into the atrium. He did a double-take, said, "Scuse me, gotta speak to the maintenance man about that button panel. Answer the phone if it rings.' And was gone.

Answer the phone if it rings!

For twenty seconds nothing happened. For another twenty I *prayed* nothing would continue to happen. My prayers were ignored. I heard a faint shuffling behind me, from the doorway that was open to the foyer. Then the voice...the voice I was come to dread...the voice of Victorian Raj India...peremptory...instinctively demanding...a female voice that had never done a sodding day's work in its life.

'Ah, there you are, Peter, I was hoping to find you here. I wonder if you could...oh, you're not Peter. Oh, what a nuisance.'

I turned, and stood to face her. She was a puffy woman, constructed of dough, ill-kempt, dressed like a bag of washing, bulges everywhere. She was pushing a wheeled walker laden with empty plastic containers of various sizes. She peered at me myopically, as though awaiting an explanation of my presence.

I said, 'Hello. Peter's just popped out, I'm sure he won't be long.'

From her reaction I might have said 'Your husband's just shot himself and the Fuzzy Wuzzies are climbing the gates.'

'Oh, dear oh dear, how very unfortunate, and all I wanted was a firm banana.'

'Pardon?'

'A banana. Peter always provides me with a nice *small* firm banana at this time. I really don't like big ones.'

'That's unusual.'

She frowned. 'Is it? I've always preferred small ones.'

And how *is* the Colonel? crossed my mind.

'And how does Peter do that?' I asked instead.

'Do what?'

'Provide you with a small firm one.'

'Ah. Well, he goes to the kitchen, of course. Who are you?'

'I'm...Russ Tobin.'

'Do you work here?'

'Not yet. I'm here for an interview.'

Her Pilsbury features radiated sudden cunning. 'Oh, how wonderful! Peter *desperately* needs help he works such very long hours and I'm sure you'll fit in beautifully. I wonder, Mister Turpin...'

'Tobin.'

'...if you could just pop down to the kitchen and find me a small firm banana? And perhaps two raspberry yogurts. Only the raspberry, mind, I cannot abide the peach or...'

'I'm awfully sorry, Mrs...'

'Templar-Smith.'

'...Mrs Templar-Smith. I'd be delighted to help you but I don't even know where the kitchen is. And even if I did, I doubt they'd hand food over to a complete stranger.'

Her face took on the miffed grimace that must have been observed around the world when Britain was obliged to hand back its empire.

'Oh but *surely*...I mean, if you told them it was for *me*...'

'Well, if you'll point me towards the kitchen I'll certainly give it a try...'

At that moment, miraculously, Pete O'Shea appeared from the atrium carrying a small, very firm-looking banana, and a couple of raspberry yogurts. 'There you go, Mrs Templar-Smith, saw you heading this way and guessed you wanted the usual.'

'Oh, Peter, you *are* an angel. I was just about to explain to Mister Turban, here, that I don't usually come down for supper and I've had such *pain* today and such a *busy* day sorting through my papers and I simply *can't* miss Coronation Street so I'll go and lie down now for a while and he very kindly offered to help and I *do* think he'd be a great asset here once he finds his way to the kitchen and I *do* hope Dan doesn't forget to turn my mattress in the morning but *before* the housekeepers come to do my room there's no earthly use him coming after the girls have made my bed so if you'd just make *certain* that it is written and *underlined* on his work board I'd be very grateful goodbye Mister...it was *so* nice meeting you...'

At least half of this diatribe was uttered as she exited the office with her shopper and disappeared around the corner into the foyer.

I stared at Peter. 'You did that on purpose.'

'What?'

'You saw her coming, skipped out, left me to handle her.'

He grinned diabolically. 'You sure got the old Castella Caress, boy, stroked her with the old mink glove. She really likes you.'

'Gosh, I'm so relieved.'

'You want the job?'

'Christ, no. How many Templar-Smiths you got here?'

'About thirty, so far. Well, no, they're not *all* like her.'

I stuck out my hand. 'Pete, it's been really nice.'

'Think of the money.'

'It's not enough.'

'Think of the apartment! Great apartment!'

'Not enough.'

'Think of the food! You eat free, save all your salary!'

'Still not enough.'

'Think of the nurses! All those nurses!'

The bastard. 'What nurses?'

'Oh, didn't they tell you - we've got a nursing care wing next door. The residents can't look after themselves here, they move there.'

'What nurses?'

He roared with laughter. 'Tell you what, Tobin, I'll give you a complete tour of the place - including the nursing home. Then you'll have supper, try the food, and then you can go home and think about it, sleep on it. If you still don't want the job, give me a call in the morning, that's it, finito. Deal?'

What could I lose?

I really must stop asking myself that question.

The answer always turns out the same.

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