



## **Semi-detached a novella**

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### **Chapter One**

Ahmed had finished his breakfast and was reading the morning paper. Although now in his late 30s, he was still very much a mother's boy. He had tried many times living on his own but he missed his mother's home cooking and comforts and had always returned.

His graphic company was struggling and it was later while he was searching for a new job that his mother came into his room. She was glowering with rage. He groaned to

himself. Here we go again. I know what's coming.

*'I suppose you've done nothing about finding a place?' She said, thumping her fist on the table, her eyes glaring. Not waiting for his reply she continued,*

*'I'm sick and tired of seeing you at almost 35 still living with me. Ahmed I need my space, my privacy; you're no longer a child. What do I have to do to make you understand how I feel? I love you but enough is enough.'*

Ahmed got up, waited until her anger had subsided and walked towards her, a smile on his face. He leaned over and put his arms around her waist.

*'Mum, hold on; I agree with everything you say. I am doing something about it.'*

*'You say you agree, every time and do nothing. What is your excuse this time?'*

By chance he had seen an advert in the newspaper from Barnsdale, a local auction house and he pounced on it. Ignoring her barrage of complaints he lowered his voice.

*'It so happens that there is an advert in the newspaper about a Property auction near here. They're holding a sale of local houses on Saturday at the Doncaster Rugby Club. There are a number of houses for sale within my price range and I am going to bid for one.'*

*'Why didn't you say that before I got angry?'*

*'You didn't give me a chance, and anyway I wanted to give you a surprise.'*

*'Surprise? I don't need surprises like that.'*

She paused, lowering her voice.

*'Do you want me to come with you?'*

*'No mum; as you keep reminding me, I'm a grown man and I'm going to prove it to you.'*

## **Chapter Two**

The auction was due to begin at 10 am. Although Ahmed arrived early, he still struggled to find a space in the almost full car park. He was surprised at how many people wanted to buy houses.

At the same time and unknown to him, another car nosed its way into a space and the driver got out.

Stella Fortune, single, 31 was an independent young woman living in a small apartment. She needed to upsize and was looking for a small house in the locality.

Both Ahmed and Stella had already indicated their interest in the auctioneer and had completed the necessary documentation. The concern over money laundering had increased the requirements for auctions so that prospective buyers were now expected to produce one of the following, a current signed passport, current UK driving licence, a residence permit or a revenue tax notification.

But if that was not enough, they had to provide evidence of an address either in the form of a utility bill, bank or building society statement or a recent mortgage Statement. Ahmed felt that he was now living in a police state.

Unaware of each other, the two prospective buyers made their way into the hall and found seats, sitting on opposite sides of the room.

Promptly at 10 am the auction began. the auctioneer, a burly bearded man with a broad Yorkshire accent began testing the loud speaker

*'Testing, testing'*, before introducing the first home for sale.

Neither Ahmed nor Stella were interested in the first few properties, they were mainly one to two bedroom apartments. Then came the larger houses on the outskirts of Doncaster.

What they were both looking for was a small 2-3 bedroomed house, either detached or in a block of townhouses.

It was Ahmed's first time at an auction. He was nervous and could feel his palms sweating.

*'I wish Mum had come,'* he said to himself. I hope I don't bid for the wrong house and make a fool of myself.

Ahmed had his eye on a house in Batby close. It was on the end of a row of townhouses.

He could feel the excitement, mounting in the room. People were shifting their chairs to get a better view and to make sure the auctioneer could see their bid.

He checked the programme again. Yes, that's the one. He positioned himself so that he could see between the heads of the people in front and waited. He could feel his heart thumping in his chest.

The room went quiet. The auctioneer, a stocky man with a white beard waddled onto the platform and picked up the microphone.

*'Now Ladies and gentlemen, we come to the choice properties, residences that only the discerning buyer would appreciate.'*

*Let us start with 31 Batby close. A well maintained townhouse with four bedrooms, a small garden front and back, ideal for the first time buyer. It has been converted into two semis but could very easily be returned to its former glory,'* He said laughing at his own joke.

*'Have I a bid of 200,000 pounds?'* he suggested. He waited looking around. No hands went up,

*'Have I a bid of 200,000 pounds,'* he repeated looking around the room, his face

showing an expectant smile. There were no takers.

*'OK, someone give me 100,000 pounds to start the ball rolling.'* A hand went up.

*'Do I have 150,000 pounds?'* urged the auctioneer.

The bids then began to come thick and fast. £160,000, £180,000, £190,000, £200,000 and then they stopped. Ahmed could see the auctioneer sweating. His rather chubby face was aglow with excitement.

*'Come now Ladies and Gentlemen, I won't give it away. It's worth a lot more.'*

The bids slowly began to mount again, rising by increments of £10,000 until a figure of £230,00 was reached. Then the hall went quiet. People began to look at each other wondering who was going to bid next. Ahmed realised this was his opportunity. He took a deep breath, raised his hand and shouted out,

*'240,000 pounds,'*

He waited, his world stopped still as he silently hoped. On the other side of the hall Stella was also waiting. She knew that if she was to be successful it was now that she should make her only bid.

She saw her opportunity and called out *'250,000 pounds.'* It was her top bid, all the money she could raise with a mortgage.

The auctioneer, beads of sweat on his brow, waited. He looked around, studying the faces

for a movement; hoping for a sign that there was going to be another bid. But no one spoke; there were to be no other bids. His face showed disappointment as he checked his notes and shrugged. Looking down-hearted, he said.

*'I'm sorry Ladies and Gentlemen as there are no further bids, I must withdraw the property, the reserve price has not been reached.'*

There was a groan in the hall.

Ahmed stayed on to the end and watched as a number of other properties were sold but none interested him. Nothing came up that he wanted. Reluctantly and feeling dejected and disappointed, he made his way to the exit. Once in the open, his mood lightened as he ambled back to his car, whistling to himself.

## **Chapter Three**

He had almost reached it when he felt a tug on his sleeve. Stella had seen him leave. She had noticed that they had both been bidding for the same house.

*'Excuse me; I saw that we both wanted the same property and that it was withdrawn. Could I talk to you about it?'*

Ahmed turned to see a slim young woman in her early thirties, with dark brown hair and grey-green eyes. She was wearing a smart suit with a flowery scarf around her neck.

Surprised and a bit tongue tied, he stammered,

*'Well yes, sure, OK! There's a café over there. Let's go and talk over a coffee.'*

They walked in silence to the cafe and settled themselves in a corner seat.

There was a brief moment of silence before Ahmed spoke.

*'Um, what had you in mind?'*

*'Let me introduce myself. My name is Stella Fortune. I have the Hairdressing salon in the high street. I hope you didn't think I was a bit forward but I have seen the house that we both bid for and I like it. As you know from the brochure, it has been divided into two semis. I would be happy to live in one.'*

Blushing she gushed,

*'Would the other suit you because if it did, we could buy the property together? We could raise more money and hopefully reach the reserve price. We could do the legal things afterwards.'*

Ahmed thought for a moment. It was so unexpected but she seemed like a sensible young woman. He thought that if one of the semis suited her, it would surely suit him.

It would make his decision much easier. Casting caution to the wind and excited by her plan, he agreed.

*'Let's go back and see if the Auctioneer is still in the building?'* Stella suggested.



By chance they met him as he was coming down the stairs. He stopped, surprised by the two wanting to speak to him.

*'Excuse me Sir,' said Stella. 'Could we trouble you for a moment? You know the house in Batby Close that was withdrawn because the reserve was not met, can you tell us what the price was?'*

*'It's Ms Fortune isn't it?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'I'm sorry Miss but it is unethical for me to release the reserve price and in any way, I am really in a hurry.'*

*'Please could you then tell me what price would buy the property?'*

*'Let me see,' he said looking at his books, 'a figure of £275,000 would secure the property.'*

Stella looked at Ahmed and nodded. He nodded back.

*'Yes we'll have it,' she said, clapping her hands in glee. She turned to Ahmed and shook his hand.*

*'Congratulations partner.'*

Ahmed couldn't wait to tell his mother what had happened at the auction. She pounced on him as soon as he let himself into the house.

*'Well how did it go?' She started, even before he had time to sit down.*

*'Wait Mum, I'll tell you all but it's not what you expect. So be calm and hear me out before you start haranguing me.'*

*'Did you get it?'*

*'Well yes and no.'*

*'Ahmed, for God's sake, what does that mean exactly?'*

*'What it says.'*

Ahmed then patiently explained to his mother what had happened. As she listened he could see her mouth slowly gaping open.

Finally she couldn't contain herself anymore.

*'You mean you're going to buy a house with a complete stranger?'*

He nodded.

*'You're mad.'* Her voice rising to a crescendo.

*'I knew I should have come with you. You may be a top-notch graphic designer but you are a child as far as the world is concerned.'*

She stared at him and, then almost shouting, repeated,

*'Buying a house with a complete stranger and a woman at that.'*

Several days later Stella and Ahmed arranged to meet at the Auction house. By that time, all the documents had been drawn up. They each signed and became the joint owners of a semi-detached townhouse.

*'Let's celebrate,'* suggested Ahmed as they made their way to the local pub.

## Chapter Four

Stella was a bit concerned about Ahmed's plans to move in. He seemed very uncertain. His lack of worldliness surprised her but it brought out her motherly instincts and soon she was helping him. She could see that he was a novice as far as living on his own was concerned. He didn't know the first thing about where to start.

*"We need to decide who lives where."* she announced as they stood outside the house with the two front doors. *'Do you want to choose?'* she asked, or shall we just toss a coin.'

*'Yeah, tossing a coin sounds good,'* he said.

*'Head or tails?'* she asked as the coin rose into the air spinning from side to side.

*'Heads,'* he said watching it bounce on the ground then stop.

Stella leaned over,

*'It's heads, make your choice Ahmed,'* she said.

*'OK I'll take the left one.'*

*'That's how the decision was made,'* Ahmed told his mother. *'No sweat, just a simple choice. You see, all your worries were unnecessary. When you meet her you will see why I trusted her. She's a really nice person.'*

*'Has she got a boyfriend?'* His mother couldn't resist asking.

*'Oh mum! She has a soldier who is abroad at the moment. I can assure you our relationship is entirely platonic.'*

*'I wish it wasn't, it's about time you found a nice girl and settled down.'*  
*'Please mum not that again. When the time comes I will.'*

As Ahmed got to know Stella better he began to tell her about himself.

*'My father was born in Iraq and met my mother when she was volunteering at a local hospital. She was born in Scotland and trained as a nurse but wanted to help and volunteered to work abroad. When the uprising started she was sent home where I was born. I've lived here all my life. I have never met my father and have never been to Iraq.'*

*'Would you like to go?'*

*'I don't know, I think I would find it very difficult after all I'm British not Iraqi.'*

Ahmed stood in the hall of his new home admiring the walls and floors. The last owner had done a good job and it all looked clean and fresh.

It was a typical semi with the stairs on the right opposite the front door. Downstairs to the left was the front room and kitchen. The two bedrooms, bathroom and toilet were upstairs. It was quite bright and he felt thrilled that now at last he had his own place. He was excited and wanted to get settled.

There was a lot to do as he only had a few pieces of furniture given to him by his mother to keep as family heirlooms. He heard a sound and realised that Stella must be next

door. He knocked and she came to the front door, a broad smile spreading across her face. She was obviously pleased to see him.

*'How's it going, have you moved in yet?'*

*'Well,' he said blushing. 'Yes and no. To be honest, I don't know where to start. I don't even have any furniture. I need to go out and get fixed up.'*

Feeling rather sheepish Ahmed added,

*'I don't suppose you would have any time to help me, would you? My mother has refused. She said it's up to me now and I suppose she's right. It's about time I learned how to be independent.'*

*'Ahmed, of course I would be happy to. It wasn't such a long time ago that I felt like you.'*

Some days later Ahmed's car drew up outside the Doncaster Furniture Barn. Stella and he alighted. It was the most popular furniture shop in the neighbourhood. He stood amazed at its size. Its frontage was almost as wide as the length of a football pitch with several large windows full of tempting furniture. He couldn't believe it when Stella told him that it only sold furniture. When he got inside he felt like a little boy entering a toyshop. It was an absolute Aladdin's cave.

So much had changed since his family had last bought their furniture. There were so many items he had never seen before. He

didn't know where to start, there was so much choice. He ran his hand over the stained wooden surfaces amazed at the quality of the items.

With Stella's help he had made a list of the things he needed but the choice and price range flummoxed him.

*'Where do we begin?' he gasped. 'I feel like a fish out of water. Is it too much?'*

*'Let's go through your list,'* said Stella patiently as if leading a small child.

*'We'll start with a bed that's a pretty safe choice.'*

But when they got to the bed department, the sheer variety of bed sizes and qualities amazed him. Stella remained very calm and took him through the different styles and costs. Soon he had chosen a middle of the range double bed with a sprung mattress.

*'Why don't you test it?'* Invited the assistant. *'Lie on it and bounce about.'* Ahmed laughed as he was flung high into the air.

*'Individual spring pockets are the best,'* assured Stella, prodding the mattress.

Slowly, over the next hour or two Ahmed struggling with indecision finally had bought everything he needed.

*'That's enough for today,'* announced Stella. *"We have the worst yet to come, selecting linen and kitchen utensils. Once that's done you won't have to worry about anything for a long time I can assure you.'*

Ahmed let himself in at home and called out.

*'Mum it's me.'*

*'How did you get on?'* His mother called from the kitchen.

*'I think we're almost there. It's been a hard journey. I didn't know there were so many choices. Stella has been a great help, I couldn't have done it without her.'*

*'I hope you are not falling for her, you haven't forgotten she's got a boyfriend.'*

*'I know mum. It's OK, we're just good friends.'*

*'I've heard that before?'*

*'I mean it.'*

Ahmed was getting used to living on his own. He liked the privacy and now that the house was furnished it really felt like home. He would shut the front door and close out the world for a while. He liked the freedom of eating when and whatever he liked. The local food store made some great take-away dishes that he simply had to warm up in the Microwave.

The small rear garden soon became his hobby. He laid out a neat lawn and a vegetable patch and it wasn't long before Stella was looking over the fence admiring his handiwork.

*'Wow! Ahmed what a change you've made. It looks really professional, I wish I could do the same.'*

*'It's nothing,' he said blushing, 'I would be happy to do up your garden for you if you like?'*

Soon he was laying out her garden with a vegetable patch and a lawn. By the autumn they both had a good crop of potatoes, onions and beans. In turn she made him some apple pie, one of his favourites.

.....  
Ahmed was in the garden when an excited Stella came out to see him.

*'Jamie is coming home.'* she shouted.  
*'I'm so excited. I'm planning a housewarming party with just a few close friends. I would like you and your mother to come.'*

## **Chapter Five**

A week later, Ahmed heard Stella's guests arriving. He had collected his mother and they made their way to the party. Stella, wearing a pale blue dress cut low at the neck, received them.

Ahmed introduced his mother.

*'Hello Mrs Alsop, I've heard so much about you.'* ' '

*;Stella, I am delighted to meet you. Ahmed doesn't stop talking about you; how you helped him sort out his home,'*

Ahmed blushed.

*'Please come in and meet my friend.*

At that moment a well-built man with short-cropped hair and a small moustache, typical of the military joined her.



*'Ahmed, this is Jamie, my soldier.'*  
She smiled, linking his arm in hers. He was taller than Ahmed had expected.

*'Jamie, this is Ahmed. He lives next door. He's the guy I told you about. I hope you'll be friends.'* Ahmed smiled and put out his hand but Jamie glared at him and brushed it aside impatiently, walking away but not before he had time to say,

*'Why didn't you tell me he was an Ali Baba?'*

Ahmed was startled by Jamie's unexpected retort. It wasn't the first time he had met prejudice but he tried hard to forget about it. Happening so suddenly, it really shook him. He just couldn't understand what it was all about.

Although he was born in England and lived all his life there, he still retained a swarthy appearance due to his Middle East origins. That made him look and feel like a stranger.

People would move away from him on the bus or train. Some would actually get up and change seats. As time went by, he had almost got used to it and most of the time he didn't notice it.

But Jamie's reaction reminded him. He and Stella had become good friends and he had assumed that her boyfriend would be the same. Now he knew it would be different. He could see that Stella was upset and embarrassed by Jamie's behaviour.

*'Jamie what are you saying? Please don't use that word,'* she reacted horrified at his hostility.

*'Well he is, isn't he? Why are you friendly with him?'* He glared at her and then, *'I don't want you to see him anymore. Ask him to leave now.'*

*'Jamie! Don't be ridiculous. No I won't. He's a good friend and as it happens I like him. He's kind and helpful. Who do you think did my garden? You're not jealous of him are you?'*

Jamie ignored her last remark and glaring at them both walked away to get himself a drink. Soon he was flushed and raising his voice, talking loudly about the war in Iraq.

It was getting embarrassing and Ahmed offered to intervene.

*'No Ahmed, please '* said Stella, *'don't speak to him when he is in this mood, I can deal with it.'*

Several days later Ahmed heard shouts and cries coming from next door. He recognised Stella's raised voice. She was clearly distressed.

Without thinking he went and knocked on her front door. Jamie opened it.

*'What do you want?'* He snarled.

*'I heard Stella screaming, is she OK?'*

*'Fine no problem, she fell over but she's OK.'*

Ahmed was about to leave when he saw Stella. She was holding her face and he

could see her cheek was swollen and reddened.

She called to him,

*'It's OK Ahmed I'm fine. Go back home everything is OK.'*

Stella was worried. Jamie had changed; he wasn't the same person that she had grown to love. She remembered him as a gentle, caring and considerate person. His rejection of Ahmed was so out of character. She had never seen him so rude. He was also very rough with her. She couldn't understand what had happened to him. Perhaps he was just tired she decided and forgot about it

Ahmed knew that Stella wasn't OK and couldn't put the incident out of his mind. He could see that Jamie had hit her in the face. He wanted to go in and confront Jamie but finally accepted that it was really none of his business.

## **Chapter Six**

He tried to carry on as usual and after work on Friday he dropped into the local pub, the King's Head for a drink and to meet up with some buddies. He was beginning to relax and drink his Brown Ale when he saw Jamie at the bar. His face was flushed and he was talking loudly. He thought of greeting him but then decided not to say anything.

He had turned to speak to a friend when he suddenly heard a shout.

*'Who let that Iraqi in here?'* He recognised the voice. Jamie was leaning against the bar pointing his finger at him.

*'Get him out of here,'* he bawled, *'He's been trying to screw my girl,'*

There was a sudden silence. The regulars, embarrassed by his outcry, looked confused, and not certain what to do. Eventually someone called for the Publican and a squat man with a white goatee beard appeared from the back room. He was known affectionately as lofty.

*'What's going on here? What's the commotion about?'*

*'It's the Iraqi, get him out of here,'* Jamie repeated, raising his fists. *'If you won't do it I will.'*

The Publican was shaken by the demand.

*'Now Sir, we don't speak like that here,'* he said, trying to pacify Jamie.

But Jamie was unstoppable. He advanced towards Ahmed and swung at him. Ahmed saw the blow coming, tried to duck and stepped backwards. He lost his balance and fell heavily against a wooden armchair landing heavily on the floor.

He felt a sudden jarring pain in his back and he let out a scream. It was excruciating. He would later describe it as *a sudden intense pain across his back followed by an electric shock, which flashed down his legs leaving them numb.*

He tried to get to his feet but his legs wouldn't work, they were useless and he fell back onto the ground crying in pain.

'*Get up you coward,*' shouted Jamie advancing towards him.

'*I haven't finished with you yet.*' but Ahmed was beyond hearing. He was racked with pain across his back and around his trunk and unable to move. For a moment no one came to his assistance, they were too stunned by what had happened and didn't know what to do.

Fortunately the local doctor Dr Brown who had just come in, saw it all. He pushed his way towards Ahmed shoving Jamie aside.

'Get out of my way, this man's injured can't you see?'

'He's only pretending,' muttered Jamie, preparing to continue fighting. But two locals pulled him away and pinned his arms behind his back.

Meanwhile the doctor examined Ahmed. As he tested him, his face became grimmer.

'*Get an ambulance,*' he shouted. '*This man is badly injured. Quickly there is no time to lose.*'

Ahmed lay listening to the conversation; he still could not understand what had happened. The pain was a bit easier but why couldn't he move his legs?

In the distance he could hear the sound of an ambulance approaching and then drawing up outside the pub, the sirens slowly

fading. Then the pub doors were slammed open and two paramedics rushed in carrying their bags. They immediately rushed to him, lying helplessly on the floor.

The first man asked.

*'What happened mate?'*

*'I fell backwards against the chair.'*

*'Can you move your legs?'*

*'No they're useless.'*

*'Can you feel me touching you?'*

*'No,'* said Ahmed, becoming more frightened. Then it struck him. I'm paralysed.

It felt like a bad dream. The next twenty minutes flew by. A mobile stretcher was brought into the pub and he was carefully rolled onto it. Then it was wheeled out onto the pavement and pulled up a ramp into the back of the ambulance, the doors were shut and the vehicle set off its siren blaring.

The A&E staff was ready when the ambulance arrived and rushed Ahmed into ICU. An oxygen mask was put in place and an IV was set up. After a brief examination the A&E doctor called the Neuro Team.

Mr Thomas, the Neuro-surgeon on duty and the head of the team arrived and immediately took control. He asked Ahmed exactly what had happened. As he listened he began to recognise what the problem was. He had dealt with many spinal injuries and was very familiar with them. He quickly tested movement and sensation and

confirmed that Ahmed was unable to move his legs or feel anything.

*'We need a CT urgently,'* he said to his assistant.

Back in the pub, the atmosphere had calmed. The police had been called and Jamie was still being held by one of the regulars while awaiting their arrival. The pub had an uncomfortable silence as the regulars craned forwards waiting to see what would happen. They were excited at being present at a real life incident.

*'It's much better than TV,'* one wag whispered to his neighbour.

After about twenty minutes two armed Policemen entered the bar and took control.

*'Who's the boss here?'* One asked. Lofty stepped forwards,

*'I'm the Publican.'*

*'OK tell me what happened. Why is this man being held?'* He said pointing to Jamie.

The publican described the incident and said that the injured man had been taken to the hospital.

*'It was an accident,'* shouted Jamie. *'He just fell backwards. I didn't touch him, he was just shaming. There was nothing wrong with him.'*

At that moment the doctor stepped forwards.

*'I am Dr Brown, a local GP. I didn't see the incident but came in soon after it. I could see that the man was badly injured'*

*after examining him. I think his name was Ahmed?’*

*‘Yes,’ said the Publican, ‘his name is Ahmed Alsop. He’s one of my Friday night regulars, a quiet chap.’*

*‘I think Ahmed was paralysed,’ said the doctor. ‘It was tragic. I sent for an ambulance and he went to Doncaster Royal Infirmary.’*

## **Chapter Seven**

Ahmed’s scan was ready and the films were put up on the screen. The doctors crowded around while he waited for their verdict. As Mr Thomas scanned the shadows a deep furrow appeared on his brow. What he had seen confirmed his worst fears.

The first lumbar vertebra was crushed and was causing severe compression of the lower spinal cord. The outlook was grim. The only chance of any functional recovery was to remove the compression and stabilise the spine, a hazardous procedure. Mr Thomas knew that time was critical, the longer the compression remained the less recovery was likely.

*‘Prepare him for the theatre,’ he thundered. ‘We have no time to lose.’*

In ICU Ahmed received the news calmly. He knew that there was something seriously wrong and was not surprised that an operation was necessary. What he didn’t know was that the chances of any recovery



were slight. If he had known, he may have declined the operation but he wasn't given the choice.

Despite the account given by the doctor in the pub and the police interrogation at the station, there wasn't enough evidence to detain Jamie and he was allowed home.

He was still tight and was singing to himself when he let himself into the house. Stella asleep was woken by his footsteps and greeted him bleary-eyed at the top of the stairs.

'Is that you Jamie? It's about time. I was getting worried. Come to bed.'

## Chapter Eight

It was in the early hours that Stella heard a hammering on her front door. She shook Jamie but he just groaned and turned over. Hurriedly putting on her dressing gown she went down stairs. Confused by the flashing lights and the sounds she looked through the glass pane of the front door and saw two uniformed policemen standing outside.

She opened it slowly,

*'Sorry to disturb you, but does Corporal Jamie Burroughs live here?'* asked the taller of the Officers.

*'Yes, but he's asleep, can you come back later.'*

*'We would like to speak to him now if that is possible. Could you please wake him?'*

Stella was getting frightened. Were they real policemen? She hadn't asked them for their IDs. Then she remembered a movie,

*'Have you a warrant to speak to him?'*

Of course she knew that a warrant wasn't necessary but the ploy worked.

*'OK ask him to come to the station some time later today without fail,'* and they turned and left.

Stella watched as they walked back to the police car. She was puzzled. What did they want Jamie for she wondered? Was it anything to do with last night when he came home so late and drunk? Has he done anything stupid?

She returned to bed but was unable to sleep. During the night she woke, turned over and looked at him. His face was lit up by the moonlight. He seemed so calm and relaxed, I'm sure there was nothing to worry about and went back to sleep.

Jamie had almost finished his breakfast before Stella approached him. Innocently she asked,

*'Did you have a nice evening?'* Jamie ignored her and concentrated on eating his cereal. Why was she asking that? He wondered She doesn't normally want to know what I do when I go out.

*'Fine, I had a few drinks and met some old mates, why do you ask?'*

*'Because the Police came early this morning and wanted to talk to you.'*

*'The police! What did they want?'*

*'I don't know, I thought you would know.'*

*'What did you tell them?'*

*'That you were asleep and they left. They want you to go down to the station today and answer some questions. Did anything unusual happen last night?'* Probed Stella.

Jamie raised his voice and glared at her.

*'Shut up Stella. Stop asking stupid questions. You sound like the police. Let me finish my breakfast in peace.'*

Stella waited and a few minutes later asked.

*'Another strange thing, Ahmed didn't come home last night. It's not like him. Do you know why that might be?'*

*'Me! Why should I know about Ahmed's movements? You'll have to ask him.'*

Jamie was upstairs finishing dressing when he heard the telephone ring and Stella answering it.

A voice said,

*'Hello, is that Stella?'*

*'Yes Margaret.'* Stella immediately recognised her friend.

*'How are you?'*

*'Fine, why do you ask?'*

*'Have you heard the news about Ahmed?'*

*'Ahmed, what news?'*

*'He's in hospital. He had a terrible accident last night. They say he will be paralysed.'*

Stella's mind went blank. For a moment, she couldn't think. Then she heard the front door slam as Jamie went out without saying goodbye.

*'Where is he?'*

*'He's in the Pinderfield's Neuro Centre.'*

*'Do you know what happened?'*

*'Not exactly.'*

I must see him, Stella thought, I wonder if his mother knows? Twenty minutes later she was entering the Centre. She rushed to the reception desk.

*'Ahmed Alsop, do you know where he is?'*

*'Let me see,' said the clerk. 'Yes, he's in ICU down the corridor, first on your right, follow the signs.'*

Stella ran as fast as she could. She turned the corner and saw the sign IC unit and stopped. She didn't recognize the woman who was sitting on the bench. Her head was bowed and her hands clenched on her lap.

She must have heard Stella's footsteps because she looked up and Stella recognised her, it was Ahmed's mother, Mrs Alsop. She looked distraught.

*'Hello Mrs Alsop, it's Stella; we've met.'*

*'Oh yes dear, thank you for coming,'*  
she whispered.

## **Chapter Nine**

In the theatre, a drama was unfolding. Ahmed, deeply anaesthetised, was lying on his front. His lumbar region was exposed and had been draped.

The surgeon was preparing to begin the operation. He made a long midline incision over the lumbar spine deepening it through the skin and muscle to expose the spinal column. Immediately he could see the damage. There was severe bruising of the muscles and fragments of bone, confirming the scan findings of a crush fracture of T12 compressing the spinal cord.

Meticulously Mr Thomas removed the fragments of bone until the cord; a pale tube the thickness of man's thumb was visible. It appeared bruised and not moving.

As the last fragments were removed the cord began to pulsate slowly.

He turned to his assistant, pointing to it.

*'You can see the discolouration and contusion. It is this damage that is blocking the messages from his brain getting to his legs, resulting in the paralysis. Now we need to stabilise the vertebral column with plates and screws to stop any further movement.'*

The operation took just over four hours during which Ahmed's condition remained stable. Finally the wound was closed. A dressing was applied and Ahmed was returned to the ICU to be monitored.

Now began a race against time inside his body. The spinal nerves now no longer under pressure would begin to regrow at the rate of 1mm a day allowing the nerve impulses to pass up and down the spine to restore power and feeling.

But at the same time healing was occurring. Scar cells were multiplying in response to the injury. They would lay down scar tissue that would block the passage of the nerve fibres preventing the return of power and feeling. It was an uneven race.

Stella and Ahmed's mum heard footsteps. Mr Thomas was walking slowly towards them. He looked drawn.

They both stood up eager to hear how the operation went.

*'It went well. I managed to do what was required. Now it's a question of waiting and seeing how much recovery will occur.'*

As he talked, Mr Thomas knew that the outlook for recovery was poor but at this early stage he didn't want to discourage the family members.

Stella was relieved to hear what to her seemed good news.

*'I must go home and find Jamie,'* she said to Mrs Alsop. 'He was due to see the police and I want to find out what happened.'

## Chapter Ten

Jamie wasn't at home when Stella arrived. She wondered if he was still at the Police station and was going to phone but decided to go there instead.

The police station was deserted when she arrived. She walked up to the desk and asked to speak to the Officer who had been questioning Jamie. After a few minutes, Sergeant Collins came out of one of the rooms.

*'Hello, are you Jamie's fiancée?'*

She hesitated.

*'Yes, what's happening? Can he come home please?'*

*'No, not yet, we still have a few more questions to ask him. Do you know anything about the incident that occurred last Friday?'*

*'Last Friday, what incident? No!'*

It was the first time that an incident had been mentioned.

*'I was at home that evening. Jamie went to the pub on his own to catch up with some friends. He had just come home on leave. He has been abroad on duty in Iraq.'*

*'Yes we know, he told us all about his military service. Had he talked to you about the incident?'*

*'No, I don't know anything about it. I would like to know.'*

*'I believe you know Ahmed Alsop, he was the injured party'*

It was then that Stella suddenly put two and two together.

*'Are you questioning Jamie about the accident to Ahmed?'*

*'Yes?'*

*'I don't understand, what has one thing got to do with the other?'*

*'We think Jamie may have been directly involved in Ahmed's accident.'*

Stella went cold. Suddenly things began to fall into place. Ahmed's visit to the Pub on Friday evening and not coming home that night, Jamie coming home drunk and falling into bed without saying anything and the police wanting to speak to him the following day.

Was it all a coincidence or if not, it was too awful to contemplate? I must ask Jamie, I'm sure there must be a simple explanation. He wouldn't hurt Ahmed.

After another hour of questioning, Jamie was finally released and came out of the police Station blinking in the bright sunlight. Stella was waiting for him.

Without saying a word, he got into the passenger seat of her car and she drove home in silence. He could see that she was dying to ask him about the incident but he said nothing. If they were going to have a



shouting match he didn't want it to be while she was driving.

Stella let them into the house and took off her coat. Jamie went into the lounge and sprawled himself on the couch and switched on the TV.

*'I'm bushed,' he announced, 'I could kill a cup of tea.'*

Impatient to find out what happened, Stella decided to bide her time. She returned with a tea tray and put it down on the coffee table in front of Jamie.

While pouring the tea she began,

*'Jamie, what's going on? I need to know what happened last Friday at the pub.'*

*'Nothing! Ahmed fell over a chair. It was an accident. He'll be OK'*

*'Please Jamie, Why were the police involved? I know it wasn't as straightforward as that. You're not telling me everything.'*

*'Please don't keep secrets from me, you are making me frightened.'*

Stella realised either he was lying or he didn't know how serious the accident was.

*'Jamie,' she screamed now, almost hysterical. 'Ahmed is paralysed. He may never walk again, don't you realise that?'*

*'Paralysed! No he can't be, he was just pretending it was all a joke.'*

Stella shuddered as if a cold draft had swept into the room. She stood up shaking, trying to control her voice.

*'I have just come from the hospital. Ahmed has had a major spinal operation. The doctor is not very hopeful. Did you hear me, not very hopeful?'*

*'What really happened Jamie? You must tell me the truth I need to know. I think something terrible happened in the pub that night and you were there.'*

*'Hey just a minute, I don't know what you're implying but I was just having a drink that's all, a drink!'*

The two sat in silence. Stella was struggling to quieten her jangled nerves. Jamie was trying to stay calm, to play it cool after all it was an accident no one could have got hurt, he told himself.

Finally, speaking very slowly and calmly, Stella said,

*'OK Jamie, just tell me everything that happened, step by step, everything; no lies, no cover up.'*

*'Hey Stella, you aren't the police. I've just been through that merry go round at the station.'*

*'I know, I know, I want you to tell me every detail. I need to know how Ahmed was injured. I must know. Please help me,'* she began to cry.

## Chapter Eleven

Jamie had always bulldozed his way through problems ever since he was a small boy. He would never admit he had done anything wrong, always finding an excuse, anything to avoid accepting responsibility. Now he found himself in the same fix.

*'OK Stella, you want me to tell you again what happened? It was as I said. I got to the pub at about 6pm and offered some drinks around. Soon I had a few new friends and I was telling them about Iraq.*

*At about eight pm, Ahmed came in, you know, he's a regular. They all knew him. We nodded to each other and he went to the other end of the bar, sat on a stool and ordered a beer.*

*Suddenly I heard a yell and saw him falling backwards. He somehow got caught up with a heavy chair and fell over the arm. I thought it was all a joke and that he would get up. But he didn't, he was shouting in pain.*

*At that moment the local doctor popped in for a drink and saw Ahmed on the floor. We all thought Ahmed was still play-acting but the doctor, after examining him, said he was badly injured and called an ambulance. It arrived very quickly and Ahmed was bundled off to the hospital. That's all I know.'*

Stella was watching Jamie as he spoke. There was something in his manner that alarmed her. It was all too pat, no hesitation,

no time to think. It was as if he had rehearsed the whole story ready to retell it if need be.

Jamie could see that Stella was confused.

*'What's the problem? Don't you believe me?'*

*'Yes of course but it doesn't make sense.'*

Suddenly the telephone rang. Jamie answered it.

*'It's Mrs Alsop, she wants to speak to you'*

*'Hello Mrs Alsop, how are you? I hope you got some rest.'*

*'I'm fine. I wanted to let you know that Ahmed has had the operation and is waking up.'*

*'Ok! I'm on my way. See you soon. Is he still in the ICU?'*

*'Yes.'*

Stella turned and gave Jamie a peck on the cheek and went out to her car.

## **Chapter Twelve**

It was a short drive to the hospital. She knew her way to ICU and rushed past reception following the signs. As she entered the ward, she gasped. Ahmed was laying in bed with his mother sitting by his side, holding his hand.

He looked so weak and pale. For a moment with his eyes closed, she thought he was dead.

He must have heard her enter as he opened his eyes and saw her.

*'Hello Stella,'* he whispered, turning to look at her. His eyes were sunken with dark shadows and appeared vacant. Stella leaned over and lightly kissed his cheek, aware of a sour smell on his breath.

She pulled up a chair and sat down. Confused and hesitating, she stammered,

*'How, how are you feeling Ahmed?'*  
Holding back her tears,

*'I'm so sorry to see you like this.'*

*'Not too bad Stella, they gave me a strong painkiller and I am feeling OK; no pain really.'*

He reached for her hand.

Stella was desperate to find out what actually happened; to hear Ahmed's version but clearly this wasn't the moment. He was in no state to answer questions so she decided to bide her time.

At that moment a nurse came in,

*'Excuse me. Could you go outside for a few minutes please, I wish to attend to Ahmed.'*

Sitting together outside, Stella could see that Mrs Alsop was still very distressed. She put her arm around her.

*'He's going to be all right,' she assured her. 'He's a strong man. The first few days after an operation are always difficult. You'll see how quickly he perks up.'*

*'I know but will the paralysis recover? I can't bear the thought that he could be paralysed all his life, living in a wheel chair. I've seen pictures. It's no life.'*

*My poor boy, life isn't fair. Just when he was beginning his new life, making his own way in his own home thanks to you. Why did it happen? Why?'*

Stella said nothing. She knew that nothing that she could say would ease Mrs Alsop's pain. Glancing at her watch, she realised it was getting late. She must go home and cook supper.

.....  
Jamie heard the front door key turn as Stella let herself in. She was startled to see his haversack and hand luggage piled up in the hall.

*'What's this? Are you leaving?'*

*"Yeh, sorry; I've had a call from the camp. I've got to re-join my regiment. Apparently there is a new campaign starting. It's all hush hush, so I can't tell you much.'*

*'Do you know where you will be sent?'*

*'No, I'll find out when I get back. Sorry to leave at such short notice. By the way how's Ahmed? I hope he's on the mend.'*

*'I don't know what to say, he looked terrible but that's apparently normal after*

*major surgery. They won't know about the paralysis for many months.'*

*'Stella, I don't know what the doctors are thinking about? That man's hysterical. It's all a big sham you'll see? One day he will get up and walk.'*

Stella was speechless. Something suddenly clicked in her head.

*'Jamie, I think you'd better go and don't come back, ever.'*

## **Chapter Thirteen**

It was Friday night, two weeks later. Stella was tired. She had just finished a hard day and was at home sitting trying to relax.

Earlier in the saloon, Ahmed's accident was still on everyone's lips. They were all horrified by what had happened to him. As much as she tried, she was still unable to accept it was just an accident; something was missing. It just didn't add up.

On an impulse she made a decision. I'm going to the pub to find out for myself.

Dressed plainly in a high-necked, long sleeved blouse, loose trousers and low heels, she hoped she would not draw too much attention when she entered. She was feeling self-conscious, as she was not often seen on her own in a pub at night.

But she was pleasantly surprised by the reception she got. One by one, friends of Ahmed came over to say how sorry they were and wished him a speedy recovery. But no one seemed to be able to spread light on what had happened. They all stuck to the same story. It was an unfortunate accident.

Taking her drink, Stella went into the lounge and sat by herself in front of the open fire staring into the flames. Her mind was far away, when a roar of laughter distracted her.

Turning towards the sound, her eyes focussed on a small CCTV camera set high up in the ceiling. She studied it for a moment, confused and suddenly something clicked.

Without making a fuss, she got up and went over to speak to the Publican who was sitting on a stool at the end of the bar.

*'Shorty,' she said, 'I've noticed you have a CCTV camera. Is it working?'*

*'Oh yes, we've just had it installed; I make sure it's maintained.'*

Then with her heart in her mouth, she whispered.

*'Have you looked at it recently?'*

*'No, not yet this month, I normally look at it at the end of the month.'*

*'So you haven't seen the video taken on the night Ahmed was injured? Surely the police asked to see it?'*



*'No, as a matter of fact they didn't. I don't think they knew we had one and I didn't think to tell them, it's new you see.'*

Stella's heart missed a beat. Then very calmly she asked,

*'Perhaps I could have a look at what you have recorded so far this month. Would that be possible?'*

*'Yes, it's very easy to work. I'm a bit busy right now but if you could stay on until we close at 10, I would be very happy to show it to you.'*

Stella was on tenterhooks watching the clock as it unhurriedly moved on. She thought at one point it had stopped. But at last the hour had reached ten and the publican was shouting,

*'Time gentlemen, um time Ladies and Gentlemen please.'*

As the last person said goodbye he closed the heavy front door.

*'Come into our kitchen Stella, it's behind the bar. My wife Betty will make us a cup of tea while I set up the camera.'*

*Let's see now, it was two Fridays ago so we will start during that day and see what happened.'*

It only took a few minutes for him to set up the projector and screen.

The film started running from the Thursday. It showed a good view of the whole length of the bar.

Now it was showing Friday. Stella could see Ahmed coming in. He ordered a drink and acknowledged Jamie who was sitting at the other end of the bar.

Suddenly Jamie's voice was heard,

*'Who let that Iraqi in the bar? Get him out of here, He's been trying to screw my girl.'*

Stella sat up, startled by the anger in Jamie's voice. Then the Publican's voice was heard,

*'What's going on here? What's the commotion about?'*

Then Jamie again,

*'It's the Iraqi, get him out of here,'*

Jamie could be seen raising his fists. He went on,

*'If you won't do it I will.'*

The Publican was trying to calm him. But Jamie was totally out of control. He advanced towards Ahmed with his fists raised.

Ahmed leaned back to avoid being hit and lost his balance He fell out of the chair onto the floor, letting out a shout,'

Stella screamed.

*'Oh my God,'* She shouted, *'it's horrible. How could Jamie behave like that and deny everything?'*

*I'm so ashamed; I feel it was my fault. If Ahmed and I had never met, this wouldn't have happened and Ahmed would be unharmed. How am I going to live with this?*

She slumped over and began sobbing. Betty stopped what she was doing and came over to comfort her.

*'Stella, it's not your fault; you weren't to know it would happen. You can't control someone else's behaviour.'*

Stella gradually calmed down.

*'The police must see that film,'* she insisted. *'It's the evidence needed to show what really happened that night.'*

## **Chapter Fourteen**

At an unknown address, Jamie was back with his regiment preparing to leave for action. It was lunchtime and the camp dining room was packed. The noise of chattering voices was echoing off the ceiling when the two Military police entered.

Looking around, they spotted the Sergeant in charge and beckoned to him.

'We are looking for a Corporal Jamie Collins, Is he here?'

'Yes, he's over there at that far table,' pointing to him.

'We need to ask him some questions. Is that OK?'

'Yes please, go ahead.'

The two men made their way slowly between the tables until they reached the far side of the room. Jamie was in the middle of a story when they interrupted him.

‘Are you Corporal Jamie Collins?’

Unaware of what was about to happen, he said laughing,

‘Yes, have I been awarded the VC?’

The smile soon disappeared off his face when he heard.

‘Please come with us Corporal. We have a warrant for your arrest. We have been instructed by the police to return you to Doncaster where you will be remanded while awaiting trial.’

As they read out the warrant, Jamie became increasingly flustered and lost his calm. He began berating and abusing them.

*‘You’re making a mistake; it’s all a mistake. I did nothing. He fell off his chair.’*

They took no notice; they were used to resistance and waited for him to quieten. Then they guided him firmly from the dining room with the minimum of disturbance to the others.

A four-hour journey awaited Jamie who did as much as he could to disturb the guards. Being unaware that he was being seen by a CCTV camera in the vehicle, he was abusive and threatened them with lawsuits for wrongful arrest.

They for their part remained civil and polite, stopping for toilet breaks, light snacks and drinks. All the time Jamie remained handcuffed.

It was late evening when he arrived back at the Doncaster police station. The staff were at first surprised to see a man in military uniform, hand-cuffed and being handed over to them.

Sergeant Craddock who was on duty however recognised Jamie.

*'I know you. Aren't you the man who was accused of a fight in a pub some while ago?'*

Jamie said nothing. He was still confused by his arrest and return to Doncaster. He was then relieved of all his belongings, photographed, fingerprinted, asked to strip and provided with some prison clothes. Finally he was locked in a cell.

Immediately he began to shout.

*'This is a frame-up. What am I accused of? You can't keep me here, it's against the law.'*

Upstairs in the examination room, they were setting up to show the CCTV video the following day.

Just after 9 am the next morning, Jamie was brought into the examination room and asked to sit down.

*'What are you doing now?'* he demanded.

*'Wait and see; you'll soon know.'*

The blinds were lowered and the video commenced.

The sergeant was watching Collin's face as he saw and heard the events of that Friday night in the pub.

There was a loud gasp from him as he leaned forwards, his head in his hands. The film ended and there was silence. Collins tried to collect his thoughts. Then as if he had found a way out he shouted,

*'It's a fake; the film's a fake. It's all a lie, a damn lie.'* Then he began to shake and make a loud wailing sound like a sick animal tearing at itself.

*'What's with him?'* asked the constable.

*'He's having a fit of conscience,'* said the Sergeant.

Then he turned to the prisoner.

*'It's OK Jamie. It's all over now. We know the truth; we know what happened that night.'*

*'I lost it, when I saw Ahmed at the bar. He was in the shadows; he looked like so many of the Iraqis that we were fighting.'*

*'I just saw red, it was as if I was back on the front, it was my life or his.'*

## Chapter Fifteen

The news that Jamie was back in town and was being held at the Doncaster Police Station soon filtered back to Stella. She was in her saloon when she heard.

She was in a dilemma. One part of her never wanted to see him again but the other needed to tell him what she thought of him ; tell him what a miserable bastard he was.

She wanted the satisfaction of having found him out, of telling him what a wretched apology for a man he was. The more she thought about the way he had tried to cover up his crime the more angry she got. Eventually her indignation boiled over and against her better judgement, she arranged to see him.

Setting off confidently from home, she soon began to falter and almost turned back.

When she reached the Police Station, she calmed herself and took a deep breath, walked up the steps and entered the reception area.

The officer on duty at the desk recognized her and greeted her.

*'Good morning Miss Fortune, How are you?'* Ignoring the greeting, she said,

*'I've come to see Corporal Collins'*

He hesitated.

*'I'm sorry ma'am visitors are not permitted to see the prisoner.'* Not put off by

his refusal, Stella reached into her bag and handed him a piece of paper. On it she had written the details of the phone call she had had with the sergeant. He read it slowly.

*'Mmm,'* he said. *'Excuse me a moment,'* and he disappeared into the back. A few minutes later sergeant Craddock appeared.

*'Good Morning Miss Fortune, have you come to see Collins?'*

*'Yes please, I made an appointment a few days ago.'*

*'Yes I remember, we have a record of it. If you wait a moment I will bring him to the Visitors room where you can speak to him.'*

*Please don't touch or give him anything. Someone will be observing you through a one way mirror.'*

Stella struggled to remain relaxed. She had waited such a long time to confront Jamie. But now she hesitated. What will I say? I mustn't lose my temper. I must stay calm. But will I be able to control myself? She could already feel the anger boiling up inside her. Then the sergeant reappeared,

*'Follow me please.'*

Stella followed him down some stairs and into a small poorly lit room. It had one small window, which hadn't been cleaned for ages and there was a desk and two chairs.

*'Please sit there,'* he said pointing to a chair, *'Collins will be here shortly.'*



Stella wiped the dust off the chair with a tissue before sitting down. It rocked a bit as if some screws were loose. Settling herself she waited, uncertain what was to happen.

Then the door opened and Jamie came in. He was unshaven and hunched as he shuffled to the other chair. She noticed his hands were shaking and his lower lip trembling.

What had happened to him, he was a shadow of his former self. He had aged and looked so forlorn, so lost that in that instance all her anger fled and what she felt was sorrow. How could he have changed so much?

*'Hello Jamie,'* she said softly. *'How are you?'* He grunted. He seemed not to be there. He had a vacant look in his eyes as if he was locked inside himself, as if he had built a wall to blot out the world.

She had an unexpected impulse to hug him; he was so desolate and alone. Then she thought, was this only the effect of being imprisoned or could he be suffering from some sort of mental illness? She tried to make small talk but he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

After staying for a few minutes, she got up and left. Reluctantly she could see that there was no purpose in discussing the incident or anything else with him in his state.

*'Goodbye Jamie, I hope you will feel better soon,'* and she walked out. Sergeant Craddock was waiting for her

*'How did it go?'*

*'Not good, he looked terrible. Is there something wrong with him? Do all prisoners become so withdrawn and locked in? He looks as if he doesn't know where he is?'*

*'Yes, I agree. He has changed from the man I remember seeing after the incident.'*

*'Do you think he could be ill?'*

*'I don't know miss, I'm not a doctor.'*

## **Chapter Sixteen**

As soon as she could Stella went to see Ahmed in the hospital. She hadn't seen him for a few days and was amazed at how much he had improved.

He was now sitting out of bed, the colour had returned to his face and he was animated and talkative. His mother was by the bedside.

She and Stella had become quite close during Ahmed's hospitalisation. They greeted each other warmly. Stella was pleased to see that Mrs Collins looked much more relaxed and even smiled at Ahmed's jokes.

During the morning when Ahmed was having some attention and they were asked to wait outside, Stella cornered her and told her about her visit to see Jamie.

*'He looked ill, that's the only word; withdrawn, almost inarticulate. He had a tremor and had aged. I am worried about him. He had changed so much; it can't just be due to being locked up? I can't believe that. What do you think?'*

*'I don't know, I'm no doctor,'* she replied.

Later sitting with Ahmed, Stella's mind began to wander. Both the sergeant and Mrs Collins had said that they were not doctors. Perhaps that's what I should do, get him seen by a doctor. The more she thought about it, the more sense it made. I'm sure they wouldn't stop a doctor from seeing him?

At home she made a phone call to the Sergeant at the police Station. He said they would have no objection as long as the doctor was a properly registered Physician.

Stella racked her brains to try and remember the name of the doctor who saw Ahmed in the pub. She knew it was a colour but which one. Fortunately she had taken the phone number of the Pub's landlord and phoned him.

He remembered the incident.

*'How is he doing? Is he still paralysed?'*

*'Yes I'm afraid he is. He had a major spinal operation but so far, there has been no improvement.'*

*'Hang on, I'll get the number.'* There was a pause, and then he read it out. *'It was*

*Dr Brown 1234567. When you see Ahmed please send him our best wishes for a speedy recovery.'*

## **Chapter Seventeen**

As soon as she got home, Stella rang the Police station and asked to speak to Sergeant Craddock. He answered.

*'This is Ms Fortune; you will remember I expressed concern about the medical condition of Jamie Collins?'*

*'Just a minute Ms Fortune,'* Sergeant Craddock interrupted, *'there has been a change. Collins is no longer here; he has been transferred to Doncaster prison. He is on remand there pending a hearing at the Magistrate's court.'*

*'I see, thank you.'* she replied.

What do I do now? She wondered. It was rapidly getting out of hand. Should I just give up and walk away and let the system decide?

After a number of sleepless nights, she decided she couldn't let that happen. I need to know the answer. I know I'll ask Dr Brown to see him in the prison and at least confirm my suspicions.'

A call from Dr Brown a week later surprised her. He confirmed that Jamie was ill.

*'I am not an expert but I am convinced that Jamie is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I think he needs*

*treatment. I tried to see the Governor but was not allowed.'*

*'Aren't the prison medical staff treating him?'* asked Stella.

*'No, I don't think they have seen that he's ill. There are an awful lot of prisoners there, so it's easy for them to miss one.'*

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Stella was feeling anxious about Ahmed. In her concern about Jamie in prison she had lost touch with him. A quick call to his mother reassured her that he was making progress but there had been no improvement in his legs.

She arranged to visit the following weekend.

Ahmed looked so much better when Stella visited him in hospital that Sunday afternoon. He was in a ward of eight and as she came in wearing a summer dress, which showed off her sun-tanned legs, there were wolf whistles with shouts of 'lucky you Ahmed'.

Stella blushed, waved and smiled at them. She found him sitting in a wheel chair by the side of his bed. He had lost that sallow look and had put on some weight. As she sat down, she gave Ahmed a peck on the cheek, it just seemed the right thing to do but caused everyone to clap and Ahmed to blush.

There was an embarrassed silence between them before Stella spoke.

*'Hello Ahmed, how are you?'*

*'I'm fine. really getting on well. The boys here have been a great support.'*

*'What about the legs?'* Stella hesitated to ask.

*'Nothing yet but I'm hopeful. Everybody says you mustn't give up hope but it's not easy.'*

Changing the subject Stella said,

*'Do you fancy a trip outside in the garden? It's a lovely day?'* He nodded.

She helped him to get comfortable in his chair, wrapped a blanket around his knees and pushed him out into the Remembrance garden.

It had been laid out near a small fountain around which were beds of roses, hybrids and floribunda. They were now in bloom and their scent was attracting many varieties of butterflies. Stella stopped Ahmed's chair opposite the fountain and they sat enjoying the tranquillity and calm, listening to the falling water.

As if she wasn't there, Ahmed began to reminisce, talking quietly to himself.

*'It seems incomprehensible that not such a long time ago, I was sitting at a bar having a drink when my life changed. How could I have not been more streetwise? What a stupid thing to do, to lean back and to fall? If only I could play back my life? It all*

*happened so quickly I never believed that anything like this could happen to me.'*

Stella's heart was breaking, tears pricked her eyes as she listened to Ahmed's frantic cries.

She desperately wanted to help but was powerless. She wanted to clasp him in her arms like a baby and make it better but she knew she couldn't. She waited and slowly Ahmed returned to reality.

*'Sorry Stella, I sometimes get so angry with myself, too stuck in my head.'*

Suddenly Stella thought of Jamie and his ensuing court case.

*'Ahmed I don't know how you feel about this but Jamie is soon going on trial. Have you considered that?'*

*'Yes a lot, I'm so mixed up, one part of me wants him punished but the other says, will punishing him bring back my legs? Now that they think he is ill, maybe I should ask to have the case dropped.'*

Stella was afraid he might want that to happen so she had made some enquiries about the seriousness of Jamie's actions and was told the situation.

*'Ahmed, she said, 'I don't think you can. He's on a charge of GBH- Grievous Bodily Harm, a criminal charge. I think it's now out of your hands.'*

## Chapter Nineteen

Jamie was furious. He had been woken before dawn, ordered to dress warmly, given a cup of weak tea and a piece of dried bread and told he was going to court. If that was not enough he was packed into a police van with six others and driven at breakneck speed to the Court where he was crowded into a small dank cell beneath the court.

There he fumed as the hours ticked by. He was indignant to be stashed up with the dregs of the earth as he described them, petty thieves, drug pushers and the like.

By the time he appeared in court, he was ready to burst.

‘*Name!*’ shoutes the Court Officer.

Jamie said nothing.

‘*Your name,*’ repeated the officer.

Jamie remained silent.

To himself... *He’s going to ask me politely. I’m not just one of them; I’m a Corporal in the Queen’s army. I deserve respect.*

Meanwhile the judge, tapping his index finger on his desk, was fast losing his patience.

‘*Corporal,*’ he said sarcastically, *‘if you don’t give the court your name, I will lock you up for contempt.’*

‘*Corporal Jamie Collins Sir,*’ Jamie retorted, coming to attention.



*'Corporal Collins, you have been accused of causing Grievous Bodily Harm, how do you plead?'*

*'Not guilty Sir,'* he replied.

*'Take him away. He will appear in the Crown Court in four week's time.'*

Jamie turned smartly, clicked his heels and followed the officer out of the court.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Three months had passed since Ahmed's injury. He had waited patiently for signs of recovery. Try as he might, he couldn't get his legs to move. He stroked and pricked his skin but he also couldn't feel anything.

Reluctantly, he had to accept that there had still been no improvement in his condition .

He was however independent in his wheel chair, able to deal with his normal functions and was ready for discharge.

At the usual morning round Mr Thomas the surgeon raised the subject.

*'How do you feel about leaving us Ahmed? We think you're ready to be independent.'*

Ahmed had watched as his ward mates had one by one said goodbye and been replaced by new patients. He knew the day would come when it was his turn but he dreaded it.

He still couldn't imagine being on his own struggling *through the day*.

'*I don't know Sir,*' he choked, his voice breaking, '*I don't know if I'm ready.*'

Mr Thomas knew what was going through Ahmed's mind. He had had this conversation with paraplegic patients many times before and always got the same initial response; fear, uncertainty and the dread of loneliness.

During his work with spinal patients, he had acquired the greatest respect for these young men and women embarking on a new and unknown life.

He admired their bravery, their ability to adapt; to accept and to build a new life despite enormous challenges and restrictions. So he never tried to discharge anyone too soon. Each had to find his own strength and choose his own time.

Unknown to Ahmed, Stella had had a conversation with his social worker and together they had formulated a plan. His house was to be modified.

Together they had gone over it with a tooth-comb. A stair lift was installed together with a walk-in shower with low taps; a hoist over his bed; an automatic toilet and all switches at shoulder level. She and the physiotherapist had walked through the house checking that all was in place and working.

The subject came up during one of her visits. Ahmed, looking sad and confused, raised it.

*'Stella, Mr Thomas came yesterday and said that he thought I was ready for discharge. I was a bit surprised because I feel so unprepared for the outside world. I can't live in my house anymore. It needs a lot of changes. What do you think?'*

Stella was prepared for the question.

*'Look, let's go and look at your house tomorrow and we could make a list of what needs doing.'*

*'I think you could manage just fine once they have been installed.*

*Why don't you give it a try? You could stay overnight and gradually build up your confidence.*

The following day, Stella set off with Ahmed, with his wheelchair safely stowed in the boot of her car.

The first thing Ahmed noticed when they arrived at his house was that the front path had been altered. The steps had been removed and there was now a gentle slope up to his front door.

Opening the door, he saw the stair lift and then the wide space that allowed him to navigate the whole of the downstairs. He wheeled himself around, opening cupboards and turning switches on and off.

By this time he was incredulous. He kept on looking at Stella and saying,

*'Stella you're wonderful, when did you do all this?'*

## **Chapter Twenty-one**

Ahmed was well established in his modified home when the date for the case against Jamie Collins was announced.

Stella was in her salon when one of her customers read it in the newspaper and called her over.

She knew that it was only a matter of time before his case would be heard, but she hated the publicity she was getting. The press kept on referring to him as her ex-boyfriend.

*'Stella listen to this. Here's some news which might interest you. The Crown Court is sitting next Monday to try your ex-boy friend Jamie. It says they expect him to be sent away for at least ten years.'*

When she got home, she dropped into Ahmed next door. She usually took him his dinner or they ate together. She found him listening to the news on the radio and that he had learned that he was expected to attend as a witness.

He was still in two minds whether to. He couldn't shake from his mind, a feeling of guilt as if in some way his presence in the pub was responsible for Jamie's actions.

He mentioned it to Stella.

*'Ahmed, don't be ridiculous,' she exploded. 'How did you arrive at that fatuous conclusion? You must decide what you do but whatever you decide please get rid of the idea that you had any responsibility for Jamie's action. Remember he is an independent person with free choice. People don't act by reflex. He knew what he was doing.'*

The news of the case had even reached London. The Times ran an article headed, *'The Iraq war reaches Yorkshire.'*

Their foreign correspondent described modern Shell shock now renamed Post Traumatic Stress Disease (PTSD).

He wrote that many soldiers returning from the Iraq war were subjected to PTSD. It usually developed within months of the traumatic events and most frequently presented as flashbacks, insomnia and nightmares together with angry outbursts and depression.

## **Chapter Twenty-two**

Mr Roger Drake had been selected by the court to defend Jamie. He was a man in his sixties, a tall upright figure with a small moustache and goatee beard. He wore a dark suit, which seemed to make him tower over everyone. He was from the old school and had been a soldier himself before he took up law. He was well versed in defending army personnel.

Their first meeting didn't go well. Jamie tried to bluff his way.

When he was asked for his story he said,

'I can't understand what's all the fuss about. I didn't touch the man and in any way there's nought wrong with him so why am I on trial?'

He continued to suggest that Ahmed was shaming.

Mr Drake stopped him,

'Listen Jamie, I have spoken to the doctors. There is no doubt that Ahmed is paralysed and that it was caused by the incident in the pub when you menaced him, so let's not waste our time on your version.'

At the second meeting things had changed; Jamie had thought about his situation. The defence were now proposing that he was ill and therefore not responsible for his actions.

'What I am suggesting .' said Mr Drake, 'is that you plead guilty but with diminished responsibility due to PTSD.'

The Crown court was half empty when it convened to try Jamie Collins for Grievous Body Harm. It was not a subject that attracted the interest of the public. They didn't want to hear that soldiers committed crimes.

Promptly at 10 am. the court officer announced,

*'The Crown Court is now in session, His Lordship Judge Colin Meadows adjudicating.'*

Jamie, looking strained but defiant, was brought into the court handcuffed between two prison officers. He stood to attention before he was directed to sit next to his counsel Mr Roger Drake.

Immediately Mr Drake rose.

*'May it please your lordship, I request that my client be freed from his hand cuffs.'*  
The judge nodded and the cuffs were removed.

There was a pause as the court secretary set up her recording machine. She nodded to the Judge that she was ready.

Ms Deidre Fellows stood up, a tall slim bewigged figure dressed in black.

*'Your Honour, I am acting for the Crown in this case.'*

*'Thank you Ms Fellows, please give the court your introductory submission,'*

*'Your honour, it is the submission of the Crown that on the agreed date, the accused Corporal Jamie Collins, an active member of her Majesty's Armed Forces, while on leave, did cause Grievous Bodily Harm contrary to Section 47 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861, to Ahmed Alsop resulting in severe injury.'*

*The prosecution will show that the accused did knowingly and intentionally cause such bodily harm.'*

*'Please call your first witness.'*

*'I call Peter Broadman the Publican of the King's arms.'*

Wearing a well-worn suit and tie, he walked slowly to the stand and waited. He was clearly very uncomfortable fidgeting with his tie, an unaccustomed piece of clothing. He took the oath whispering the words.

*'Please be seated and tell the court your name and occupation.'*

*'My name is Peter Broadman and I am the landlord of the Kings Head.'*

*'Mr Broadman, please tell the court what happened at your pub on the relevant night.'*

*'Yes sir, Your Honour it was a Friday night, one of our busiest. Ahmed Alsop was sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar nursing a drink. He was one of my regulars, he always came in on Friday after the day's work.'*

*'Yes yes, Mr Broadman please continue,'*

*'I was behind the bar when the accused Jamie Collins came in. I hadn't seen him before. He ordered a drink and began talking to some of the other regulars about his army experiences. I then went into the back, into the kitchen to fetch something when I heard a commotion. I heard someone shout.'*



*'Who let that Iraqi in here? Get him out of here, he's been trying to screw my girl.' I came out to see Mr Collins leaning over Ahmed, who was then lying on the floor shouting in pain,*

*'I can't feel my legs.'*

*'Did you see Mr Collins hit Ahmed?'*

*'Eh, no not exactly.'*

*'What happened then?'*

*'Dr Brown, also a regular, came into the pub at that moment and took charge. He...'*

*'No Mr Broadman don't say anything more. I will be putting Dr Brown on the stand.'*

*Thank you Mr Broadman. No further questions. Please stay on the stand, the defence may want to question you.*

*'Mr Broadmore?'*

*'Yes! Your Honour,, just to make it clear to the jury. Did you actually see Mr Collins touch or hit Mr Alsop.'*

*'No Your Honour.'*

*'Thank you no more questions'*

Ms Fellows rose,

*'I would like to call Sergeant Craddock.'*

A burly uniformed man walked smartly to the bench and stood to attention. He took the oath.

*'My name is Sergeant Craddock. I am the Sergeant at the Doncaster Police Station.'*

*'Sergeant, please tell the court what happened on the day you learned about the CCTV tape.'*

*'Your honour about two weeks after the relevant incident, I was invited to go to the Kings' Head Pub to see and hear a CCTV tape. When I arrived I confirmed that the recording had been made on the relevant night. I sat and it was played for me.'*

*'Please confirm that the tape we are about to hear is the same one that you heard.'*

*'I confirm that it is.'*

*'Thank you Sergeant, you may sit down. I would like permission to play the tape to the court,'* requested Ms Fellows.

The judge nodded and sat back to watch.

The tape began with a hiss and then the picture appeared. It showed Collins shouting and going towards Ahmed with his fist clenched. Ahmed could be seen trying to avoid the blow and then they heard the sound of Ahmed falling backwards and his scream of pain. The tape suddenly came to an end.

There was a grim silence in the court; even the officers who were used to seeing horrifying images were stunned.

The judge tapped his gavel.

*'I think this is a good time to have a short recess.'*

## Chapter Twenty-three

The court reconvened twenty minutes later.

*'Do you have any more witnesses to hear Ms Fellows?' Asked the judge as he sat down*

*'Yes your Honour, I would like to call My Ahmed Alsop.*

Stella was sitting behind Ahmed; she leaned forwards and whispered,

*'Are you OK Ahmed?'*

She had watched his face as the CCTV tape was played. It was the first time he had seen it and was clearly very upset by it. She saw his face screw up as he leaned forwards and placed his hands on his forehead. She couldn't imagine what torture he was going through reliving the moment when his life was turned upside down.

He nodded,

*'Stella I'm OK. I knew it would be difficult but I'm glad I came. I know Ms Fellows wants me to give evidence. That's going to be tough but I want to do it, I want the court to hear what it's like being paralysed.'*

A few minutes later, Ahmed took the stand. Unable to enter the box, he wheeled his chair just in front of it and took the oath.

Ms Fellows walked slowly up to the witness box and rested her hand lightly on the back of his chair.

*'Mr Alsop,' she said, looking at the Jury.*

*'Tell the court about your life before the assault.'*

*'Objections Your Honour,'* shouted Mr Drake, *'Ms Fellows is prejudging the decision of the Jury by using the word 'assault'.*

*'Ms Fellows' the judge said. "Please choose a less provocative word.'*

*'Yes your honour, Mr Alsop please tell the court about your life before the,'* and she paused, *'the incident.'*

*'Your Honour, I was a graphic designer with my own business. I had just moved from the family home into my own house. I enjoyed many activities including squash once a week, football once a week and the occasional round of golf.'*

*'Did you have any medical condition requiring regular medication?'*

*'No your Honour I enjoyed very good health.'*

*'Please Mr Alsop,' Ms Fellows continued.*

*'I understand that this may be difficult but how has your life changed since the accident?'*

Ahmed paused. He was prepared for this question but when it came, it still caused him to hesitate. He had not yet accepted that he would always be wheelchair bound but he knew he would be.

Finally he blurted out,

*'I am now a cripple.'*

As she heard him say the word, Stella moaned and put her hands to her mouth.

*'I am confined to a wheel chair and have no control of my bladder or bowels. I cannot feel my legs. I cannot move my legs. I suffer from spasms that wake me at night.'*

The court went quiet. It was the first time that most had appreciated the actual disability of a paralysed person.

*'I know this is going to be difficult but please tell the court in your own words what happened on that fateful day,'* continued Ms Fellows.

*'I had gone to the pub on Friday as usual. I had ordered a drink and was sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar enjoying it and talking to some friends when the,'* he paused. He wanted to say 'assault' but was told to use a more neutral word, *'the incident occurred.'*

*'What do you remember of the incident?'*

*'I remember Collins shouting at me, calling me an Iraqi. He then came towards me with his fist clenched preparing to hit me.'*

*'What did you do?'*

*'I tried to get away from him and leaned backwards.'*

*'What happened then?'*

*'I lost my balance and fell heavily against the arm of a chair that was just behind me and onto the floor.'*

*'Was that when you were, um, paralysed?'*

*'Yes I fell to the ground and I felt a severe pain in my back and lost the feeling in my legs.'*

*'Thank you Mr Alsop. I have no more questions.'*

As Ms Fellows sat down, Mr Drake stood.

*'Mr Alsop, I am very conscious of how difficult this has been but I would like to ask you one more question. Did Mr Collins actually strike you?'*

*'No.'*

*'Thank you, no further questions.'*

*'Mr Alsop, you may return to your seat,'* said the judge.

*'Ms Fellows, if that is the end of your submission? Will the defence please proceed.'*

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

Mr Drake rose

*'Your Honour, I would like to call Professor Hussain Mallick.'*

A tall bearded man with silver hair, and a dark complexion walked slowly to the stand and took the oath.

*'Please tell the Court, your full name, occupation and qualifications.'*

*'I am Professor Hussain Mallick, Professor of Psychology at the University of London. I have a MBBS, PhD and DPM.'*

*'Thank you Professor, you have heard the account of the incident in the pub. You have seen the CCTV and you have examined the accused. Please give the court your opinion concerning the culpability of the accused.'*

*'Yes Your Honour, I would like to start with Mr Collin's history. He told me that he had had a difficult upbringing, being one of three children to a single mother. He never knew his father. At the age of 18 he joined the army. He said that he was the first member of his family to do so; he joined it to get away from them. He enjoyed the army and made a number of friends. He has had a distinguished career culminating in being sent to Iraq with the rank of corporal.*

*I wanted him to tell you in his own words his experience in Iraq when captured but it is still too raw in his memory.*

*So I will describe it. He told me that he was captured by an Iraqi platoon, tortured and starved. One particular Iraqi officer who spoke perfect English tormented him, humiliating him and belittled him. Eventually a platoon from his own regiment freed him.*

*He spent four weeks in hospital before being sent home. He showed me scars on his back and legs caused by the torture he sustained.'*

*Since returning to the UK, he has had flashbacks, nightmares, irritability and angry outbursts. He has been advised to seek*

*treatment but feels that he should be able to overcome his problems himself. He is a proud man.'*

*'Together these symptoms constitute what used to be called Shell shock but which as we have come to understand them better, are called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.'*

*'It is my opinion that the outburst that occurred that night in the pub that resulted in the injury to Mr Alsop was due to the severe psychological disorder of PTSD.'*

*'Thank you Professor. Ms Fellows do you have any questions for the witness?'*

*'Yes just one, Professor, are you telling the court that in your opinion, Collins was not responsible for the injury to Mr Alsop?'*

*'No, not at all; he is responsible for his actions that resulted in the injury to Mr Alsop.'*

*What I am saying is that, at the moment he saw Alsop, who with his dark complexion looked in the shadow, like an Iraqi, he suffered a sudden flashback.*

*It was as if he was back on the front in Iraq, facing the enemy whom he confused with Mr Alsop. He was blinded by rage and the wish to retaliate.'*

The judge banged his gavel.

*'I think this is a good time to have a recess. When the court reconvenes, I will call for the summing up of submissions.'*



## Chapter Twenty-five

Stella waited until most people had cleared the court before she came forwards and began to wheel Ahmed out of the courtroom and to the canteen. Both were stunned by the proceedings and needed time to collect their senses.

It was Ahmed who spoke first.

*'Stella, I didn't understand the Professor. Was he saying that Collins was not guilty?'*

*'No, I don't think so. What I understood he was saying was that Collins was guilty but not responsible.'*

*'Does that mean that he will get away with it?'*

*'I don't know, I think we will have to wait and see.'*

*'Stella, do you mind if I don't come into the court this afternoon? I've found the whole thing so upsetting; I'm really bushed and need to rest.'*

The afternoon session started promptly at two pm. The jury had filed in and settled themselves before Ms Fellows rose and faced them.

*'Ladies and Gentlemen, the case before you is one of Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH).*

*Prior to 1993, it was necessary for the accused to have touched the victim for the charge to be made but in 1993 the law was clarified and since that date the Law Lords have ruled that it is no longer necessary to*

*have touched the other person for one to be guilty of GBH.*

*If by your action, the victim suffers serious bodily harm then the charge of GBH stands.'*

*'You have heard the statements of the witnesses and have heard and seen the CCTV footage and know exactly what happened on that fateful day. It is the submission of the prosecution that by his action, Collins is guilty of GBH.*

*'The question that arises is whether he knowingly and deliberately carried out the assault or was he in such a frame of mind that he was unaware of what he was doing? The account given by Professor Mallick clearly traced the sequence of events up to and beyond the offence. He is of the opinion that Collins was suffering from the condition of PTSD at the time of the incident.*

*If you are persuaded by that argument then you must find the accused not guilty but if you have any doubts about that causation and I believe you should, then you must find the accused guilty.'*

Ms Fellows returned to her seat, and Mr Drake rose.

*'Ladies and Gentlemen, you have heard the eloquent statement by my honourable friend outlining the features of this case. She has defined the crime of GBH of which my client is accused. She has also repeated the opinion of the Professor who is clearly of the mind that the accused was*

*suffering from PTSD at the time of the incident.'*

*Let's briefly recall the sequence of events. Collins enters the pub to see a figure of possibly middle-eastern descent seated at the bar. As an Iraqi war veteran, he suffered sorely at the hands of men who looked very similar to the victim. The pub was dark and noisy, with men's voices raised. It was necessary to shout to be heard, a one-armed bandit was flashing and a fire was blazing in the hearth.'*

*'For a moment Collins thought he was back in Iraq in the war zone with loud voices, flashing lights and flames, all features of war he had been familiar with. Then he saw what he took to be an Iraqi and shouted, 'what's he doing here?' For a brief moment he had lost touch with reality and was now in his own world. He reacted as trained and attacked.'*

*'Is that the action of a mindless criminal or of a man who through his war experience had become momentarily unhinged? If you agree with this explanation then you must find the accused not guilty by virtue of insanity.'*

The jury sat back in their chairs, the strain of trying to follow the legal arguments clearly visible on their faces. No one relished the task ahead.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Later that day the jury met the Judge 'in camera'.

He began,

*'Firstly Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank you all for agreeing to determine the verdict in this case. I know it will not be easy.*

*Difficult as it is, you must disregard the severity of the injury to Alsop. You must deal with the principal. So even if he had only broken his leg and had recovered fully, the same fundamentals would have applied.*

*Basically you must decide whether Collins knew what he was doing or was he at the moment 'out of his mind'*

Two days later the jury filed back into the court. The judge asked the spokesman.

*'Have you arrived at a verdict?'*

*'Yes your honour,' he said handing a small piece of paper to the Official the judge read it nodded and said*

*'How do you determine?'*

*'Guilty but Insane.'*

A voice from the back of the court shouted,

*'Rubbish, the bastard knew what he was doing. Bang him up for life.'*

A young man with a pacifist logo on his T-shirt shouted as he was bundled out of the court.

*'The Court is adjourned until Monday when the sentence will be announced,'*

called out the Court Officer as the public filed out.

Collins was immediately handcuffed and marched off to the cell below to await his return to prison. There the verdict soon spread around. On his arrival Collins was hailed as a hero who had duped the screws. Prisoners shook their railings, banged their metal mugs and generally celebrated, shouting,

*'Good on you Jamie, we're with you.'*

## **Chapter Twenty-seven**

Stella was dreading facing Ahmed. She thought that he would take the verdict very badly but she was pleasantly surprised how well he received it.

*'It doesn't make me worse,'* he muttered philosophically, *'and it doesn't make me better.'*

What Stella wasn't aware of was that Ahmed was really anxious about his next appointment with the surgeon. It was due in a week's time after the court case had concluded.

Ahmed had had a bad night; he tossed and turned unable to get comfortable. He kept on going over in his mind the speech he was invited to give to the Court the following day.

He was of two minds, one said that it would make no difference anyway and the other

was that they should hear what it was like to be a victim of someone else's actions.

In the end, he decided to give it. but was not sure if he should write it out in full and read it or just make notes and rely on his memory to fill the gaps. Finally he fell asleep, still uncertain.

By the morning he knew what he would do. I'll just tell it as it is. I need to get it off my chest and tell them how frustrated and indignant I am, about the whole damn law.

.....  
Stella and Ahmed had breakfast together but neither spoke, both locked in their thoughts.

Later she helped him select the clothes he would wear. He wanted to look smart but not overdressed. After some tooting and froing, he chose a white open neck shirt with dark trousers and leather shoes.

He spent twenty minutes polishing his shoes. He always wore highly polished leather shoes to any important event; shoes say so much about a person he believed.

Time seemed to drag until they were ready to go to the court. It would be convening at the usual time of 10 am.

.....  
No sooner had everyone settled down than Ms. Fellows rose.

*'Your Honour, my client would like to say something to the court before the Jury gives its sentence.'*

*'Please do Mr Alsop.'*

Ahmed wheeled his chair to the front of the court and turned to face the Jury.

*'Your Honour, ladies and gentlemen, I have sat through the many days of this trial imprisoned here in my wheelchair. I have listened to the learned arguments concerning blame and responsibility and throughout I have been reassured by my belief that the punishment should fit the crime.*

*But as the facts emerged, it appeared that the verdict was being influenced by the effect of a war fought thousands of miles away from here, a war that I as an individual opposed.'*

*'Yet if it is to be believed, that war was the background to the behaviour of that man , pointing to Jamie, that led to my crippling. That war became an octopus stretching its poisoned tentacles into my life.'*

*'The bedrock of British justice was, I thought, that the punishment should fit the crime but there is no way on earth that any punishment meted out to that man can ever be equal to the crime he has committed against me.*

*He, in a moment of anger, took the essence of what it is to be human away from me. He stole my right to an independent existence, imprisoning me for the rest of my life. At the*

*pinnacle of my vitality, he committed me to a life of struggle, compromise and pain.*

*And now I hear that it wasn't his fault; that he was as much a victim as I, that the war damaged him and deranged his otherwise normal behaviour, converting him at moments of stress into a voracious animal seeking only revenge.'*

*'Ladies and gentlemen, how can you in all honesty make the punishment fit the crime?'*

The silence in the court was suddenly broken by slow hand clapping from Stella, her face drained and her mascara ruined by tears rolling down her cheeks.

Slowly one by one, the clapping spread until the whole courtroom was resounding with the sound.

The judge had never had this happen before. He was surprised by this unexpected response and did nothing to stop it.

In that moment, he realised that what he was experiencing was the outpourings of ordinary men and women acknowledging the tragedy and pain of life and saluting the man who resolutely refused to give up, a true hero.

He waited until the clapping had stopped and began his summing up.

*'I was deeply moved by Mr Alsop's statement and can as a fellow human being*



*only commiserate with him in what seems to be an unfair decision yet it is what twelve men and women have decided after due consideration.'*

*'It is my due consideration that the accused Jamie Collins should be taken from this place to a facility for the psychologically disturbed and there remain under custody for a minimum of five years, during which time he will be under the supervision of a Psychiatric team. After five years, he will be eligible for parole subject to a favourable report.'*

He banged his gavel.

*'The Court is now adjourned,'* called the Officer.

Ahmed turned to look at Stella,

*'That's it I suppose, let's go home. The next hurdle is going to be the worst. I think I know what the surgeon is going to say.'*

*'C'mon Ahmed, don't be so pessimistic, It's only six months. He said you could continue to improve for up to two years.'*

*'I know but will I?'*

## **Chapter Twenty-eight**

Ahmed and Stella arrived early for his appointment and sat in the small waiting room. It had changed since they were last there. The walls were now brightly painted.

There were fresh flowers on the table and some magazines on the rack.

*'What an improvement?'* said Stella reaching for a Woman's magazine. *Ahmed, do you want something to read?'*

*'Is there a sport's one?'*

*'Yes, here's one, it's called Marathon.'*

The cover had a photo of a man on a wheelchair. Ahmed stared at it for a moment and then opened it. He began to scan the other photos. They were from the Beijing Paralympics.

He read about Donald West who was born with paraplegia. When he was a child he remembered watching the London marathon and decided he wanted to do something like that.

At that moment, the surgery door opened,

*'Good morning Stella and Ahmed, please come in.'*

As soon as they were seated, Mr Thomas began to run through Ahmed's history.

*'It's now six months since the accident. How are you getting on?'*

*'I'm Ok, but I'm disappointed that my legs are still just as weak. I haven't had any improvement. Surely I should have had some by now if,'* and then he stopped, his face dropping.

*'Am I going to be like this all my life?'*

*'Ahmed, I wish I could be more positive but I think there is going to be very little if any change in the future, I'm sorry.'*

Ahmed was very quiet on the way home. He sat staring ahead and didn't invite Stella in but just said,

*'Thank you for taking me;'* turned and went indoors. She heard his door lock. Stella sat feeling confused and dejected.

.....  
She usually checked on Ahmed just before she went to work in the morning, by calling through their communal door. He would usually shout,

*'Fine, have a good day see you later.'*

Today he was silent. She thought he must be asleep so she decided not to disturb him; I'll speak to him later when I get home.

During the day she thought about him and felt worried remembering their last conversation. She decided that she would phone him later but forgot to because of pressure of work.

Arriving home in the evening, she knocked on his front door. She heard movements and a gruff,

*'Go away, leave me alone,'*

She felt a sudden tearing at her heart. What's going on? He sounded terrible. She called again but this time there was no answer.

Now she was really frightened. What can I do? She began to panic. I must call someone. In desperation she phoned

Ahmed's mother but there was no reply. She must be out.

Then she remembered Brian, the friend from Ahmed's ward. She searched in her bag and found her address book and dialled his number.

*'Hello.'* came the reply.

*'Is that Brian?'*

*'Yes, who is that?'*

*'My name is Stella. We met when my friend Ahmed was in the bed next to you in the hospital.'*

*'Yes I remember. Aren't you that lovely girl with the amazing legs?'*

*'I guess so,'* Stella mumbled. *'What can I do for you?'*

*'I'm very worried about Ahmed. We came home from the doctor earlier today with bad news. He has locked himself in his house and won't let me in. I'm frightened he is going to do something stupid.'*

*'OK, I'll be right over. Where do you live?'*

About twenty minutes later, Brian's car drew up outside the house. Stella greeted him as he got out and struggled onto his wheel chair.

*'Hi,'* he said, shaking her hand. *'Where is he?'*

She pointed to Ahmed's closed front door.

Brian wheeled himself up to the door knocked and called,

*'Hi Ahmed, it's Brian; how are you?'*

He didn't wait for a reply.

*'I was just passing by and thought I would pop in and see how my old buddy is doing?'*

They heard a muffled,

*'Not good, things aren't good.'*

Ahmed replied,

*'Open the door and let's say hello.'*

After a few minutes, there was a shuffling sound and then a key turning in the lock and the door opened. In the dull light Stella could see that Ahmed was slumped in his wheel chair. The air was foetid. He hadn't shaved and looked wan and thin. His hair was scraggy and unkempt; he was trembling and could hardly speak.

She was shocked at what she saw. Ahmed's condition had deteriorated enormously since she had last seen him. He was now a shell of himself. Her immediate reaction was to call the doctor but she hesitated and waited to see how he would react to Brian's visit.

Ahmed was clearly pleased to see Brian and soon they were talking freely. Slipping away, she decided to leave them and catch up with Brian later.

## **Chapter Twenty-nine**

When Stella left, Ahmed turned to Brian, his face drawn and fighting back tears.

*'I can't do this Brian. It's too difficult. I just can't live like this. I would rather be dead.'*

Brian listened; he knew exactly what Ahmed was feeling, he had been there himself. He knew that it felt as if he was in a void, alone, trapped by his helplessness. Every movement required a colossal effort, leaving him breathless and gasping for air.

Brian had been a window cleaner before he fell off his ladder. He had lived most of his day outside and was a keen athlete so being restricted was like being in prison.

He waited feeling Ahmed's pain.

*'Come on old friend, you're on a journey. You're climbing a mountain. It makes you a bit breathless so you stop, gather yourself and plod on. Try and enjoy the struggle. When you reach the top, the sun will be shining and you will see a glorious view. Let me help you, I know the way.'*

They hugged and Ahmed smiled. He hadn't had a reason to do so for a long time.

Brian's wisdom and support was miraculous. Soon Stella saw Ahmed begin to blossom. He put on weight, became talkative and began to venture out of doors. Her heart swelled when she saw how well he was doing.

As time passed, she knew more and more that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him but how to bring it up?

'*Tell him,*' she shouted at her mirror one morning. '*Tell him.*' But it was not her way.

Then circumstances fell into her lap. She received a letter postmarked HMPS. She didn't recognize the writing and in any case no one sends letters these days.

She opened it and to her absolute surprise, it was from Jamie. She had often thought about him but was so disgusted and angry at what he had done that she had decided that she never wanted to see him again.

Then the letter arrived. It was in a large round handwritten script and filled a whole page. She held it and thought about him. How fate played a part in their lives?

With her hands shaking she began to read.

Rampton Secure Hospital  
My Dear Stella,

It has taken me a long time to pluck up courage to write to you although I've wanted to do so for some time. How are you? I miss you and am sorry that we are no longer talking to each other.

How is Ahmed? I've heard on the grapevine that he hasn't improved and is going to be chair bound for the rest of his

life. I know I should write to him but I am not yet ready to do so.

Please tell him how much I regret what happened in the Pub. I know the court decided that I was ill but I make no excuses. It was me that crippled him. Whatever way I say it, that is what happened and no matter what I do now, I cannot change it. I cannot undo the damage.

Life here is not easy. Although it is an open prison, the regime is very strict and must be followed. I have had a lot of counselling and psychiatric support and I think I am now much more in control of myself although I still get the occasional temper. I am learning to recognise what brings it on and avoid it.

I hope that one day I can come and see you both. I want to face Ahmed and tell him just how sorry I am that I was responsible for hurting him so badly.

Yours as Ever,  
Jamie

PS. I would love to see you, visiting days are Tuesday and Thursday afternoon.

Stella put the letter down, tears pricking her eyes and sat thinking about it. It had taken Jamie a lot of courage to write. She knew that Ahmed would be pleased to see what he had written.

That evening after work, Stella dropped in to see Ahmed. She had the letter in her bag.



*'Ahmed, something surprising happened this morning. I received a letter from Jamie,' she began.*

He didn't move and at first she thought he hadn't heard and she began to repeat what she had said.

*'I heard you the first time,' he snapped. 'What do you want me to say?'*

*'Nothing I just thought you would be interested in what he had written?'*

*'Why should I be? As far as I'm concerned he no longer exists.'*

Stella hated it when Ahmed wallowed in self-pity. Having seen how Brian had put his life back together again, she was dismayed at Ahmed's refusal to accept what had happened and move on.

*'Ok, let's not talk about it anymore, I'll go and make some tea.'*

As she left, she deliberately dropped the letter on the floor. Later when he looked for the TV controller to watch the news, he saw it. His immediate reaction was to call her and tell her but his inquisitiveness got the better of him. He reached down and retrieved the letter. He stared at it for a while trying to imagine what it said. Then he took it out of the envelope and began reading.

When Stella brought his tea, he came clean and told her he had read the letter and how it made him feel.

She smiled,

*'You know, I dropped it on purpose. You had to read it to know what Jamie felt.'*

She came forward and hugged him. He smelt her perfume and felt her softness. It was such a long time since someone had embraced him.

*'Stella,'* he said, his pulse racing. *'I love you. I can't tell how much you mean to me.'*

She had waited so long to hear him say that.

*'I love you too. Ahmed. You have become very precious to me. I can't imagine my life without you.'*

Ahmed looked into her eyes. It was as if he was hearing a miracle, that this wonderful creature could love him.

*'I would like to visit Jamie. Would you come with me?'*

*'I don't know Stella. I don't think I am yet ready to face him but please go and thank him on my behalf for his words of regret.'*

## **Chapter Thirty**

It was Thursday afternoon visiting time when Stella arrived at the gates of Rampton Secure Hospital and presented her appointment card. She had been given a slot of one hour between 2 and 3 pm.

She was frisked and asked to sign a non-responsibility clause.

She was then shown into a waiting room where there were a number of other visitors. A woman smiled at her,

*'You're visiting your husband?'* she asked.

*'No just a friend, you?'*

*'My husband; he's been in here a long time and probably won't get out,'* she paused, *'alive.'*

*'I'm sorry,'* said Stella just as her name was called.

Jamie was already seated at a table when she came into the reception room. He stood up as she approached.

*'Hi Stella,'* he said, leaning forwards to kiss her. She hesitated then they touched cheeks.

*'You look well,'* he continued. She watched him as he spoke. He looked tanned and well shaved: dressed in a crisp white shirt, jeans and trainers.

They sat down facing each other. Neither spoke for a moment eyeing up the other Stella spoke first.

*'Thank you very much for your letter, I was surprised to get it but on reading it, I was pleased that you had decided to write.'*

*'Did you show it to Ahmed?'*

*'He's read it, yes. What's strange is that once he had read it, I felt he had in some way changed.'*

*'Changed? How do you mean?'*

*'Well, he seemed to be brighter as if your apology had let him let go of his hate for you. That you were not the ogre he believed but that you had genuinely regretted what you had done.'*

Jamie hesitated,

*'Would he come here?'*

*'I asked him that question. He said he wasn't ready yet which I think means that sometime in the future you two could meet.'*

*'I would like that. I want to complete the circle, to tell him personally how mortified I am by what I did and to do anything I can to ease his burden.'*

*'I'll tell him that.'*

*'Finally Stella, before you go I want to apologise to you. We were good pals and I screwed it up. I don't blame you for walking away from me although I will regret it forever. I can see that you and Ahmed are now an item, good luck Stella.'*

Abruptly Jamie got up, turned and walked away. He didn't want her to see the tears in his eyes.

.....

*'How did your visit go?'* Ahmed asked.

*'I think he has changed. All that bravado has gone or at least I didn't see it. He seemed like his old self.'*

*'Are you falling for him?'* Ahmed joked.

*'No dear it's you I love; he's history.'*  
They kissed.

*'Are you sure you want to do this, get yourself hooked up to a cripple like me.'*

*'Ahmed you know I hate you talking like that. You're not a cripple, you're just semi-detached like this house.'*

They both laughed.

*'By the way I want to do some alterations and restore this house to its original design; get rid of one staircase, join up the kitchens. It will be much easier for you to get about and for me to manage it,'*

## **Chapter Thirty-one**

Ahmed and Brian had been seeing a lot of each other. They started going to a gym nearby where there was a trainer called Steven Hobbs. He had worked at Stoke Mandeville, the first Spinal injuries Unit in the country. He knew all about Professor Sir Ludwig Guttmann, a Jewish Neurologist who has escaped from Nazi Germany and established the unit there in 1944.

Sir Ludwig was an ardent believer in the importance of sport in the rehabilitation of the injured and especially the paralysed.

In 1948 he set up the first Stoke Mandeville Games. Later it became known as the Paralympics. By 1952, more than 130 international competitors had entered the Stoke Mandeville Games.

Ahmed was very apprehensive when he was first introduced to Steven but was soon put at his ease.

*'Hi Ahmed, my name is Steven, welcome to the class. I see Brian has come with you; he is one of my regulars. He has told me a little about you. I was sorry to hear your story but that is all in the past; what we are here to do today is to build the future. Do you have any particular activity that interests you?'*

*'Well yes, I saw a magazine some time ago about a man who races on a bike. I think his name was Donald West.'*

*'Yes, we all know Donald West. He's a phenomenon. Have you tried riding a bike?'*

*'No but it looks fun. Could I get hold of one?'*

*'Yes, you can hire them but you need to do a lot of training before you can get on one as you must strengthen certain groups of muscles.'*

Ahmed was excited to get home and tell Stella about the sports club and bikes.

*'I met this chap called Steven at the Gym. He's a trainer specialising in Spinal injury clients.'* Brian introduced us. He seemed very switched on and I liked his open manner.'

*'Do you think a bike is safe?'*

*'Sure why not? A lot of paraplegics race them. I have never heard of anyone having an accident. I'm going to write to Donald West. I want to meet him and hear his story.'*

.....  
Donald was in his Gym when he was handed a letter. *PERSONAL* was written on the

envelope. He received a lot of fan mail so he thought it must be from a fan. He glanced through it, then realised it was not the usual letter.

There was something about the language that attracted him. It was a cry for help from someone who needed his assistance. He read it again slowly,

*Dear Donald,*

*You don't know me but I read your amazing story in a magazine, I was blown away by your achievements on a bike. You have conquered the world. I want to do the same, not to win a Gold at the Olympics that is not likely to happen. I want to learn to race on a bike.*

*I know this is cheeky but would you come to our gym and talk to us? We are four paraplegics wanting to change our lives. We think you're the man who could help us.'*

*Sincerely,  
Ahmed Alsop*

Donald stuffed the letter in his pocket and continued with his training. That evening he showed it to his wife Judy.

*'Darling, I got this letter out of the blue. What do you think I should do?'*

Judy read it to herself and looked at him, her eyes glowing.

*'It's a wonderful letter. I think you should offer to help them, don't you?'*

*'Yes, I thought the same. Do you want to come with me? It could be fun? You haven't been up north for a long time?'*

*'Why not? It would be fun and give me a break from the office.'*

Early next morning, Judy and Donald set off. Judy was driving and Donald was navigating using a Satnav. It had been some while since they had been that way so both were a little uncertain of the route.

They were making good progress travelling North on the M1. After about an hour the Moto stop at Toddington was signed. Donald checked for wheelchair facilities but there were none.

*'Shall I drive on?'* said Judy.

*'No I think we should stop, I'm sure I can manage. If the worse comes to the worse, you can bring a drink out to me in the car but let's try, you never know; these guides are often out of date.'*

Judy drove into the car park and stopped near the entrance to the building. She lifted Donald's wheel chair out of the boot and brought it around to the passenger's seat so that he could slide onto it.

They were approaching the entrance to the building when Judy noticed there wasn't a ramp. They stopped in front of the flight of stairs, uncertain what to do.



At that moment two young men passed by. One glanced briefly at Donald. Looking surprised, he whispered to his mate,

*'I think that's Donald West, you know, the Paralympic gold medallist.'*

*'Are you sure?'*

*'Not certain, let's go back and ask him.'*

*'Excuse me Sir, are you Donald West the Paralympic gold medallist?'*

Donald turned and saw the two young men.

*'Yes I am,'*

*'Wow! What amazing luck to meet you? You're our hero,'* one said, pumping Donald's hand.

*'How are you Sir, do you need any help?'*

*'Well, I could do with a lift to get me up those stairs.'*

*'Sure mate, my friend and I would be happy to help.'*

Judy watched as the two young men lifted Donald and his chair up the stairs as if he was as light as a feather.

*'Thanks guys,'* said Donald. *I really appreciate your help.*

*'No problem Sir, it's been a privilege to meet you,'* and they were gone.

The little incident did not go unnoticed. As soon as Judy wheeled Donald towards the coffee bar, people began to stop what they were doing and come over and say 'Hello'.

Within a few minutes, there was quite a crowd milling around him. Children pushed to the front to touch his chair. One man came over, grabbed his hand and said,

*'Donald, you are an inspiration to us all. After reading your story, I have never complained about anything since, thanks.'*

Judy and Donald sat in silence as they proceeded North to Doncaster. They were both visibly moved by the reception Donald had just received. It was he who broke the silence.

*'In a strange way Judy, I'm glad I was born a cripple. I think if I had been normal and lost it, I would have had a very different attitude. That is what I am going to say to the group in Doncaster, that it is easier for me because I never knew anything different.'*

As he was talking, he was beginning to formulate what he would say. He had spoken to groups many times before but this time it would be different.

## **Chapter Thirty-two**

They were waiting for him when his car pulled up at the Gym, the three men and a girl, sitting in their wheelchairs forming a guard of honour.

They watched as he slid himself onto his wheelchair and wheeled himself into towards them.

He was greeted by Ahmed.

*'Donald we are honoured to have you visit us. We all know and admire your amazing achievements. We wonder if you would give us a brief talk on how you managed it and what we need to do to become racing cyclists.'*

Then they went inside the gym and formed a circle around Donald. Judy sat on the side listening.

*'Before I begin, I would like to know a little about each of you?'*

*Let's start with you young lady.*

Dorothy blushed and wheeled herself forwards.

*'My name is Dorothy. I am twenty-seven. I was paralysed three years ago when the car I was driving lost control on a greasy road. It spun into a nearby wood and I was thrown out. I know I should have been wearing a seat belt. I have regretted that ever since. I was in hospital for six months. I guess you all know the rest of the story.'*

She wheeled herself back in line with the others.

Brian wheeled forwards.

*'My name is Brian. I am twenty-four. I was a window cleaner and fell off a ladder. I didn't secure the base, a fundamental rule and it slipped.'*

Charles spoke next,

*'I am Charlie. I am forty-four, a truck driver. Like most of you I did something stupid. I was standing on the tailboard*

*unloading when I slipped and fell to the ground.*

Ahmed then wheeled himself forwards and told his story.

Donald then swung himself round and turned to face the group. He lifted himself up to his full height and spoke, looking at each in turn.

*'All of you, whatever the reason, have had your lives compromised. You have had to find the strength to overcome challenges that most people have never faced and have no idea about.*

*All of you, by being here and wanting to extend your horizons, are heroes in the truest manner. You represent the best and I am honoured to be amongst you.'*

There was a pause and then spontaneous clapping broke out.

.....  
At that moment Stella came in and sat down next to Judy. She leaned over and whispered,

*'Hi, I'm Stella, Ahmed's girlfriend.'*

*'Hello, I'm Judy, Donald's wife. I came up with him. Is Ahmed the guy that got attacked in the Pub?'*

*'Yes.'*

*'That was a bad business, I'm so sorry.'*

*'It's all right. Ahmed is beginning to accept it but it hasn't been easy.'*

Donald was continuing.

*'I guess what you want to know is how I became an Olympic wheel cyclist?'* They nodded.

*'I suppose I had an advantage over all of you. I have never had normal legs. I have never been able to walk, I was born with a spinal deformity that paralysed my lower limbs so I have lived in one sort of chair or another all my life.*

*What I have learned is that in order to control a racing bike, you need superb trunk control which most of us don't have naturally. Your trainer is one of the best and will know that, so long before you think about racing, you have to strengthen your musculature.'*

During a pause in Donald's talk, Stella whispered to Judy.

*'Do you think I could have a private word with you?'*

Judy nodded and the two girls crept outside and sat on a seat in the garden. They could hear Donald droning on.

Stella began,

*'I don't want to pry but I would like to know how you live with Donald and how you, you know, got a baby. Is it his?'*

*'Are you and Ahmed an item?'* Judy asked.

*'Not exactly; he doesn't want to talk about it. I would marry him tomorrow but he thinks I am throwing my life away.'*

*'Donald was also very apprehensive about marrying me. He couldn't see how it would work; he being so dependent but it*

*did. We have our moments like all couples but we love each other and work them out.'*

*'About the other matter, yes she is ours. I'll give you the address of a doctor who advised us. It's much simpler that you think.'*

The two women returned to the Gym to hear Donald summing up.

*'So my friends, I wish you every success in your wheelchair racing.'*

Ahmed, speaking on behalf of the others, thanked Donald for taking time to come and speak to them.

He and Judy wished them farewell as they made their way back south. Stella and Ahmed said goodbye to the others as they all made their way home.

## **Chapter Thirty-three**

Stella was at work when a policeman appeared at the saloon door.

He knocked.

*'Excuse me, is there a Stella Fortune working here?'*

Stella heard her name and went to the door, her heart pounding.

*'Yes officer, I'm Stella Fortune, how can I help you?'*

*'I'm sorry to tell you but Ahmed Alsop has been involved in an accident and is in the A&E Department at the local hospital.'*

*'Oh my God! Is he all right?'*

*'I don't know, I have no further information.'*

Panicking, Stella dropped everything and rushed to the hospital. She dashed into Emergency.

Ahmed, looking pale and weak, was lying on a trolley.

She rushed over to him.

*'Ahmed are you all right, what happened?'*

*'Hello Stella, I'm sorry, I fell out of my wheelchair. I was racing in the park when my chair hit a dip in the path and tipped over. I lost control and hit a tree. But I'm Ok, it's just a bruise. I'll be OK, I want to go home.'*

*'Has the doctor seen you?'*

*'Yes, he wants an x-ray but I don't think it's necessary.'*

*'Ahmed, let's wait and have the x-ray.'*

*'Stella please; it doesn't hurt now so what is the x-ray going to show? Please Stella, let's go home.'*

*'OK Ahmed, have your own way. You always know better than the doctors?'*

As usual, Stella looked in on Ahmed the following morning on her way to work.

She found him still in bed.

*'Ahmed, you haven't got up?'*

*'No, I thought I would have a lie in.'*

*'OK I'll see you later. I'll ring at lunchtime to see how you are.'*

As soon as she had gone, Ahmed tried to sit up but his left leg seemed to bend where it shouldn't.

He couldn't feel any pain but when he prodded the area it was swollen. He lay back realising that he had been a fool.

There was something wrong and he was going to have to admit it to Stella. She would go mad with anger. He struggled to get up onto his chair but fell back exhausted. The leg just hung heavily and stopped him.

.....  
As usual, Stella popped it to see him before she made supper. To her surprise he was still in bed. She felt a shiver of fear; was there something seriously wrong with him?

Her look of concern made him confess.

*'Stella darling, you were right. I've been an obstinate fool. I did hurt myself badly yesterday and should have had an X-ray, I'm sorry.'*

Stella stood fuming inside.

*'Oh Ahmed, you are going to be the death of me. Please in future just humour me. If I worry, just do as I say. You know it's because I care for you and want you to recover as much as possible.'*

The X-ray showed a fracture of Ahmed's right leg below the knee. It was a simple break in a bone that was already fragile from the disuse of the paralysis.

The treatment was straightforward. A cast was applied from Ahmed's groin to his foot.



Made from one of the newer materials, it was quite lightweight and did not limit his movements very much.

When he returned to the gym with his plastered leg sticking out on a frame, the others crowded round. Soon he heard that this was a common problem. Each had his or her own story of a fall or twist.

But Stella was now much more concerned when he went out, never quite certain if he would return in one piece.

As soon as she could, she phoned Judy. The two women had kept in touch.

*'Hi Stella,' replied Judy. Good to hear from you. How's everything?'*

*'Well not good. That's why I'm ringing you. Ahmed broke his leg. I am so worried.'*

*'Oh that's nothing they all do it. Their leg bones are very fragile from disuse but they heal well. Really it's nothing to worry about. How's his cycling?'*

*'I've asked him to stop.'*

*'Oh no, you can't do that; it's a wonderful sport. Donald couldn't live without it. I worry of course but to see his face when he wins, is worth all the anxiety, you'll see.'*

## **Chapter Thirty-four**

It was a very thoughtful Stella who sat down to have dinner with Ahmed that evening. It wasn't long before Ahmed noticed her silence.

*'Stella, what is it? You look very troubled. Is it about my racing?'*

*'No dear, it's something that we haven't discussed before. I didn't want to bring it up but my clock is ticking. I want a baby?'*

Ahmed knew that someday this would arise. He had deliberately avoided talking about it.

*'I know Stella, I know, but I can't you know?'* His face screwed up.

*'Yes you can. When Judy was here with Donald, I took her aside and asked her how they got their son, thinking it was by Ai.'*

*'No', she said, 'he was theirs and then she gave me the phone number of an Obs man who does it. Darling we can have our own baby just like anyone else.'*

Ahmed smiled.

*'that's wonderful news'.*

They hugged and both began to laugh.

## **Chapter Thirty-five**

Their wedding was held in the Gymnasium. Brian was the best man. Donald and Judy were guests of honour. The three others formed a guard of honour, as Stella, wearing a long white wedding dress, walked down the central aisle between them on the arm of Ahmed's mother. She was giving her away and was so very proud.

Ahmed, seated in his wheelchair, dressed in a smart pale blue suit with a rose in his lapel, was waiting.. It was a simple ceremony.

.....  
Judy had recommended Dr Hans Petersen, the doctor whom she and Donald had consulted. He was from a Dutch family that had settled in England many years earlier. His rooms were in Harley Street.

Having arranged an appointment, Stella and Ahmed were puzzled about how to get there.

*'I think we should go by car,'* suggested Ahmed. *'It's the simplest for me.'*

*'But where would we park?'*

*'The receptionist said there was plenty of off-street parking.'*

*'Yes, but it's usually full by 9 am and very expensive,'* added Stella. *'Let's go by train. I have checked the timetable, the 10.25 am from Doncaster gets into Kings Cross just after midday. That would give us enough time to get to Harley Street by 2.30pm.'*

Descending in the station lift, Ahmed was apprehensive as he wheeled himself along the platform to the open train door.

He had arranged that a ramp would be made available and looked around, but nothing was happening.

Flummoxed, he asked Stella,

*'Can you find someone to help?'*

Where to go, she wondered and then a breathless porter appeared pushing a ramp.

*'Sorry folks, I've just come on and didn't see the message about you.'* he said to Ahmed

*'Sorry to keep you waiting.'*

The porter stood by until all the other travellers had got on and then adjusted the position of the ramp so that it was facing the open train door.

Standing behind Ahmed's wheelchair, he asked,

*'Do you need a push?'*

*'Maybe, but let me try on my own.'*

Steadying himself, Ahmed started wheeling. As he mounted the ramp, it became more difficult but he persevered and was soon safely inside the carriage.

*'That wasn't too difficult,'* he said, smiling at Stella as he locked his chair near a window.

*'I think this is going to be fun,'* he announced to all, some of whom had turned to look at him. He still hadn't got used to the stares. People didn't know whether to say Hello or ignore him as they would most others.

The rocking of the carriage soon lulled Ahmed to sleep so he was unaware that they had arrived at Kings Cross.

Stella jogged him.

*'You had a good nap, do you feel better?'*

*'Thanks, I needed it.'*

Stella tried to keep up as Ahmed alighted and wheeled himself from the platform to the taxi rank. By the time they arrived, there

was a long queue extending for some distance.

The Assistant controlling the waiting passengers saw Ahmed and immediately came over and greeted him.

He then wheeled him to the front of the queue.

*'What about them?'* Ahmed pointed to the people they passed in the queue.

*'Don't worry about them mate, they won't mind.'*

*'Thank you,'* Ahmed said as he moved to the front of the queue.

*'No trouble mate,'* many replied.

Although the traffic was heavy, the driver knew some shortcuts and they were soon at the Harley Street address. Ahmed managed with the help of Stella to navigate the steps and he was soon sitting in the waiting room.

Without asking, the nurse brought them a cup of tea.

After a short wait, they were called in before their appointment time. Someone had apparently cancelled.

Doctor Hans Petersen was younger than they had expected. Born abroad he was educated at a UK University and decided to stay. He had become an expert in Assisted Pregnancies.

*'Good afternoon, I believe Judy West recommended you to see me.'*

*'Yes, she told us that you could help us. That I had made a special study of the problems facing families like ours, in having a child.'*

*'Yes, in the past it would not have been possible but thanks to new technology, that is no longer true and your chances of a successful pregnancy are as good as anyone else's.'*

He then outlined the procedure.

It would require one more visit at which insemination would take place. This was ideally a few days before the midpoint between Stella's periods.

.....

All went well and soon Stella was feeling fullness in her breasts and her periods had ceased. In preparation, she had bought a pregnancy test and after dinner she and Ahmed set up the kit and waited.

Slowly the tube turned blue, a positive test.

They were both speechless as they watched the colour change. They looked at each other, tears in their eyes and hugged in silence. It was to be a day they would always remember.

Ahmed was ecstatic. He was soon to become a father, something that he had thought would be impossible. He told everyone he met and initially insisted on

accompanying Stella to every antenatal appointment.

On the twentieth week, she was due for a routine scan. It clashed with a training session at the gym. Kissing him goodbye in the morning she said,

*‘there is no need to come dear. It’s only a routine test. I will be in and out in a jiffy.’*

As the weeks passed Stella no longer experienced nausea. Her colour returned and she felt better than she had for years.

Ahmed commented one morning,

*‘Stella, I have never seen you looking so beautiful; pregnancy really suits you. We must do it again.’*

Stella smiled; she was beginning to fear what was ahead. The weeks had passed so quickly, and she was now only two weeks before the expected date.

She had planned a normal delivery and had a rough idea of when she would be admitted to the maternity ward.

### **Stella’s waters break**

It was early morning before the light had slithered into their bedroom that she woke up feeling apprehensive. She lay still listening to Ahmed’s gentle snoring.

Her belly felt heavy as she gently massaged it; a movement and then another and she smiled, it won't be long now she thought.

Suddenly a sharp stab of pain winded her, she gasped for breath. What was that? Then another, more severe; was it starting? She waited, suspended in doubt.

Then she felt wetness between her legs. In the half light, she could see a dark stain on the sheets. Suddenly she panicked, I'm bleeding. She jumped out of bed torn between calling an ambulance and driving to the hospital. Her movement woke Ahmed.

*'Stella, what is it?'*

*'I'm bleeding; I must get to the hospital.'*

*'I'll call an ambulance.'*

There was one patient already in the delivery room when she was rushed in. Nurse Morgan took one look and called the doctor on duty. He arrived in pyjamas. After a quick examination, he yelled,

*'She needs a Caesarean, prepare the theatre.'*

Within minutes, after the epidural took effect, Stella was placed on the operating table.

Wasting no time the surgeon was soon easing her baby out of her womb; the child was blue and not breathing.



Calmly he tied and cut the cord and handed her to the waiting nurse.

They were used to having cyanosed newborn babies and quickly slipped into resuscitation mode.

Within a few minutes, the child flushed pink and let out a cry. The theatre staff smiled at each other, relieved, as the surgeon closed the wound.

## **Chapter Thirty-six**

Jamie was out on parole. He had heard through the grapevine that Stella and Ahmed had had a baby girl. He had completed the psychiatric programme and was free to look for a job.

He now felt as if a weight had been lifted off him. He was no longer angry. He walked tall, smiling and at ease with people. The fear that he carried had gone. As he regained his old confidence, he fancied returning to the army in some capacity.

He had had a long talk with his parole officer. They were now friends.

*'You'll still need to check in with me each week and not leave the locality so it might be difficult for the army to find you a place.'*

Despite that warning, Jamie went ahead and arranged an appointment with the local Recruiting Officer.

Having completed the application, he waited to be called in for an interview. There were several others also waiting and they got into conversation. He listened as they spoke of their plans.

*'I hope they'll accept me,'* said a tall red-haired man with a slight Irish accent. *'My brother's out there and says he is having a ball.'*

He doesn't know what he's letting himself into, thought Jamie. he was tempted to speak up but the door opened and the man was called to enter.

Eventually, it was Jamie's turn. He stood up, straightened his tie and entered. He entered a small, almost claustrophobic room with a low ceiling and minimal furniture. A uniformed officer was seated at a desk in front of a window, writing something.

Without looking up, he barked,

*'Sit down.'*

Captain Oliver Wainwright came from an army family. He was the third generation and proudly wore his superiority. As he scanned Jamie's application, a scowl appeared on his face. He looked up and read aloud,

*'Mmm, PTSD, the coward's excuse.'*

Jamie cringed as he heard the words; the elation that he had felt draining away.

His feelings showed on his face.

*'What's the matter man? You know it's true. Lack of moral fibre, we used to call it.'*

Jamie leapt to his feet ready to leave.

*'Sit down! Man, don't be so stupid. You came here for a job didn't you.'*

Jamie had by now regained his composure.

*'I think Sir,' he stammered. 'I have made a mistake; this is not the place for me.'*

He saluted, turned and left the room. His mind was confused as he walked out of the building. The fresh air hit him and he took great gasps as if had just almost drowned.

*'What am I going to do?' He gasped, There is no place for me.'*

Gradually a plan formed in his mind.

Stella was fast asleep when the telephone rang. A faintly familiar voice jerked her awake, and then she recognized it, it was Jamie.

*'Stella I,' there was a pause, 'I can't do this any more. I can't live with this guilt. I just want to say I'm sorry, Goodbye.'* and the line went dead.

Now wide awake, she shook Ahmed.

*'What is it?' he said half asleep.*

*'That was Jamie. He said he'd had enough. He sounded desperate.'*

*'Where was he?'*

*'Damn! I didn't ask.'*

The two lay side by side in silence.

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