

The wind of change.

By Loopylin

Steve sat in the garden of Rose Cottage reading his post. Most were circulars or bills but one looked-and smelled rather interesting. The perfume was the floral scent that Dora favoured.

'Mr.and Mrs. Michael Reagen request the pleasure of Mr. Steve Ross at the marriage of their daughter Amanda Laura to Mr. Richard Robert Young at St. Anne's Church, Whistledown 2.30pm Saturday September 14th and afterwards at Follyfoot Long Barn. R.S.V.P by July 31st please. So his god-daughter was getting married at the same church as her parents- Steve had been invited to that one too and he let his mind drift back over the years to the time he had still been at Follyfoot when the wind of change had come sweeping through and altered everything.

He and Ron had been doing some repairs to the roof of the storage barn when Slugger had called him to the phone. 'It's yer mum, Steve.'

'Aye aye mate- trouble I bet!' said Ron. Steve shinned down the ladder and ran inside. There was a delicious smell of steak and kidney pie coming from the stove, Hazel had been busy.

'Hello mum, what is it?'

'It's Milly luv, she's in hospital, she's had a stroke.'

'How bad?'

'I dunno, they only called today. She'd only then been able to tell them my phone number. Bert's gonna run me over there today then I'll let you know in the morning how things are.'

Steve put the phone down and sat down heavily on a chair.

'What's up son?' asked Slugger. Steve told him.

'Get away, she's not that old is she?'

'She was 64 in September. She's several years older than my mother. It would happen when Dora's away in London.'

'She'll be back at the weekend, she phoned this morning.'

When Dora did return it was to find Steve packing. 'Slugger's just told me about Milly, Steve. I'm so sorry.'

'I'm going to stay at Milly's cottage for the weekend Dora. I need to see for myself how she is.'

'Of course, we'll manage.'

Milly had slowly progressed and regained her speech fully but in spite of several months spent in a rehabilitation centre in Leeds her mobility was restricted and Steve was told she could not live by herself. Kathy had said

quite bluntly that there was no way she could look after her sister and Milly had tearfully suggested selling her cottage and finding her accommodation in an 'old folks home' . 'Not if I can help it.' Steve promised. So five years after returning to Follyfoot from Liverpool Steve once again said farewell to a very emotional Dora. This time he had no idea if he would come back. 'There'll always be a home here for you if you need it' she said.

'I'll come and visit you' maybe bring Milly . You've got my phone number and address if you need me.' Need him! Of course she did but Dora knew that Milly needed him more. Over the last few years they'd become closer and for a while Dora had still hoped for his love but Steve had insisted that their different background and upbringing would not allow them to be more than best friends .However, on that day when he left her once more standing in tears alone at the gate as he drove away in his battered old Austin A40 car he realised that he did indeed care more deeply than he would if she was just his best friend. He was going to care full time for Milly for as long as she needed it. Finances would be a problem but he was used to that and Bert had promised to help out. Over the years he had turned his hand to lots of odd jobs and he intended to put a note in the local post office window to advertise his services as a handyman. The cottage garden was large and would need a lot of attention but Milly would be able to supervise him and he was hoping to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers and sell any surplus. He would give himself a few days to settle in before picking his aunt up from the convalescent home she'd been staying in since her release from hospital two weeks ago. When he'd told her of his decision she'd said 'Are you quite sure luv- a young man like you shouldn't have to spend his time looking after me. '

'I'm sure.' Steve was approaching 30 and had almost given up the idea of having a family of his own but on the day when he took Milly home he knew his life had changed and wondered about what the future held. He spoke to someone at Follyfoot at least once a week for the first few months and learned that Dora's parents, now permanently back in London, were once again worried about Geoffrey Maddocks health and were spending most weekends with him. They were also busy matchmaking for Dora and she, characteristically was resisting furiously. Just before Christmas Steve took Milly to Leeds to do some Christmas shopping, he had to push her round in her wheelchair. Then another day, they drove to Follyfoot to leave presents. Milly was able to manage using her walking frame. Hazel cooked them lunch and Steve spent some time with Ron and had a short ride out

on his beloved Alex. Dora had said he could take him with him but he had been unable so far to find a suitable place for him and he said that anyway it would be unfair to move him as he was now getting on in years. 'Will you pop and see uncle while you're here Steve?' she asked. Milly will be okay here with us. 'Are your parents there?' 'Not this weekend, no.' 'That's okay then.' Steve was shocked at the colonel's appearance, he had really gone downhill in the few short months that Steve had been gone. His face lit up when Steve walked in. 'I've missed our little chats Steve. Prudence and Arthur do fuss so, it's beginning to get me down. I'm stuck here all the time. Slugger doesn't seem to have much time to drive over and fetch me.' 'Would you like to come and see the cottage one day? I could bring Auntie and fetch you, she likes a run in the car and I like to get out sometimes.' 'I'd love it Steve, only can you arrange it through Dora and preferably for a weekday when I don't have company.'

'We have to go back shortly but I could take you to Follyfoot now, I'm sure Dora wouldn't mind bringing you back.'

'I'm a little tired right now but thanks for the offer.'

Back at the farm Steve told Dora about his offer to take the colonel to Rose Cottage.' The change of air might do him good.'

'Thanks Steve.' 'You just let me know when I should come- probably in the spring eh?'

'April maybe?' suggested Dora. Steve said nothing although the significance of the remark was not lost on him.

The visit did not take place, the colonel died a few weeks after Christmas so the next visit Steve made was for the funeral. Milly had been given a place at a day centre twice a week where she could have a shower and see to other personal things like footcare. The funeral was on one of these days. Dora was distraught and leaned on Slugger who was really upset too. Although Steve knew a lot of people there he felt very much the outsider. Arthur was quite friendly but Prudence looked down her nose at him even though he was wearing his best suit. Ron asked him to go for a drink with him at lunchtime but Steve had to be back mid afternoon for Milly's return so he refused but promised to visit again soon. To his surprise the colonel left him £2000 in his will which came in very handy. Arthur was now the owner of the colonel's house and he and Prudence decided to keep it on as a weekend retreat telling Dora it would all be hers one day.

In July Dora decided to hold a fete at Follyfoot. The colonel had been generous to his friends and former staff. Dora had received a personal legacy of £5000 which her parents insisted she should invest and not

'squander away' on the upkeep of the farm. The residue of the estate after payment of everything else was to be for this purpose but it did not amount to a vast sum so Dora was planning several fundraising events. She rang Steve 'Please come and bring Milly ,Steve. You can run a stall for me.'"Okay- we might even be able to bring you some of our garden produce. We've a glut of strawberries and gooseberries- Milly wants to show me how to make jam but I'm not keen on the idea.!' The day of the fete dawned bright and clear and Steve and Milly arrived around 10 o'clock with large bowls of fruit. 'We'll sell the strawberries with cream' announced Dora indicating plastic bowls. 'Hazel's made loads of cakes, I'm giving pony rides, mother and father are in charge of the tombola, Mrs Porter is going to take care of refreshments and Ron's on the darts stall.'

'What would you like me to do?' asked Steve.

'Can you run the white elephant stall please?'

'Sure, what's Slugger doing?' Dora pointed to a tent which was advertising 'Fortune telling' He's sorting out the fortune teller.'

'Is it one of Tina's family?'

'I don't know, he's being very mysterious about it!' Anna and Callie arrived shortly afterwards, they were in charge of the craft stall. 'We open at 2pm so we'll have a snack with our morning tea and then get everything ready.'

'I can sit at the side of the stall and help' said Milly.

'What no book stall?' said Steve.

'Oh yes- but somebody has asked particularly if they can run it. He'll be here soon- I hope you don't mind Steve!'

'Why on earth should I- but bags I first look at the merchandise!'

When all was set out ready Steve made his way over to the book stall.'Joe Rimmington! so you're the mystery book seller. '

'Well yes- I've just written my autobiography and I've donated a few books to Dora to sell- I'm going to sign them- there's other books too of course.'

'How much is your book Joe?'

'Don't worry- I'll give you a copy. I've some spares in the car. I always carry some around with me. ' Steve purchased several paperbacks before making his way back to his stall where Milly sat arrayed in a pretty floral sun hat. Dora walked over with a man Steve didn't recognise.

'Steve- meet Michael Reagen. He's bought Lockwoods old place and Hammonds Hotel. The other man shook hands. 'I've heard a lot about you Steve.'

'Michael's going to open the fete for me and draw the raffle. We've got some lovely prizes, can I sell you some tickets?'

'Go on then!' said Steve.

'I'll have some too' said Milly. As the fete was about to start Steve observed someone approaching the fortune telling tent dressed in gypsy garb. There was something familiar about the walk. 'Good grief, 'he said It's Slugger. '

'Sssh- keep yer mauth shut- you'll ruin everything!' Steve went laughing to his post. The afternoon stayed fine and when it closed Steve wheeled Milly into the farmhouse while he helped clear up. Michael was helping too.

'Can I ask you something Steve?'

'Sure- fire away.'

'I understand Dora used to have feelings for you.'

'She thought she loved me but we're from two different worlds and I told her it would never work for us.'

'So you don't love her then?'

'Of course I love her as my dearest friend. I'd do anything for her.'

'Except marry her?'

'I can't keep her in the manner her parents would want her to be kept and besides I have my aunt to look after now.'

'So you wouldn't mind if I asked her out?'

'Go for it mate. You would obviously get her parents stamp of approval.'

'And yours?'

'You seem a decent enough bloke.'

'You're welcome at my place any time you want to visit. I'm living at Hammonds-soon to be Reagens. Bring your aunt for a couple of days visit if you like.I'll let you have a couple of ground floor rooms on the house.'

Steve and Milly did visit Michael, just to look around. It was almost Christmas again and they were on their way to Follyfoot. 'I'll be there too later' said Michael. 'I'm invited for lunch.'

Hazel had excelled herself and produced roast chicken with all the trimmings with sherry trifle for dessert. 'This is just like a Christmas dinner' said Milly. 'We've all been invited to the hotel for Christmas this year. Mummy and daddy too' announced Dora. 'We're near enough to pop back and do the essential chores and Ron's going to stay over.'

'I'd very much like it if you and your aunt would join us for Christmas day. As I've said before you're welcome to stay over.' said Michael. 'Ee- I've never stopped at a real hotel before. Boarding house in Brid's the closest I've come.'

'Would you like to then auntie?' 'I would luv- it'd give you a break from the chores.' 'Well thankyou then Michael, we accept.' said Steve.

'Come on Christmas Eve and stay till the new year if you like- I know Dora won't stay away from her beloved Follyfoot for all that time.'

As they were leaving Steve took Dora aside 'What on earth can I give him for Christmas?'

'He's a bookworm like you and he loves beating me at Scrabble. I did notice that the dictionary he uses is falling to pieces through over-use probably- perhaps he'd like a new one.'

'Does he smoke?'

'Hamlets, occasionally.'

'Thanks Dora.' said Steve giving her a brotherly hug. Milly thoroughly enjoyed her Christmas but to Steve everything seemed over the top. The Christmas tree was huge, drink flowed freely, the gifts Michael gave everyone were lavish and outdid even the offerings from Prudence and Arthur. The meals were fantastic he had to admit and it was a joy not to have to wash up. When Dora and Hazel went over to help Ron with the horses Steve went too leaving Milly to chat to Slugger. The weather forecast for the end of December was bad so Steve decided to leave the day after Boxing Day. Dora had already gone back to Follyfoot, when everything was packed Steve left Milly in the kitchen having tea with the hotel cook while he went to say goodbye to Dora and the others. It was then Dora sprung her surprise. 'Michael has asked me to marry him- and I've said yes.'

'Do you love him Dora?'

'He loves me and I'm very fond of him.'

'So where will you live?'

'Here- Michael is having extra rooms built on for us plus he's putting plans in to build a new bungalow for Slugger. ' 'You're not wearing an engagement ring.'

'I'm having Michael's mother's engagement and wedding rings, they're being made smaller.'

'Have you set the date?'

1st Saturday in June next year.'

'Are you sure about this Dora? Michael's several years older than you isn't he?'

'Yes, but daddy and mummy like him , he doesn't want to change the way I do things here and he's willing to let Slugger and Hazel stay even though we'll be having a housekeeper.'

'Well- so long as you're happy.' Dora nodded. When Steve got back to the hotel and went to find Michael to say his thanks Michael surprised him by

asking him to be his best man. 'I have no family, Steve- nor friends to speak of- please say you'll do it- for Dora if not for me.'

'Okay.' The two shook hands. Over the next few months they met up a few times and became good friends. As Dora walked down the aisle on her father's arm he caught his breath. She looked beautiful. Their eyes met and he smiled.

'You're a bloody fool Steve Ross' he told himself and when the vicar asked if anyone knew of any reason why she and Michael should not be lawfully joined together it was all he could do to stop himself from saying 'she's my girl!'

After the wedding he didn't visit again until Christmas when he was alone as Milly had had another stroke which had resulted in her losing the ability to walk unaided and Steve had to take the step of allowing her to go into a nursing home. He knew he would have to sell the cottage to pay for her fees. Michael bought it and said he could live there for a small weekly rent for as long as he needed to. He had found a job at a nearby riding stables and earned enough to pay the bills supplementing his wages by doing odd jobs for people. Over the next few years he only visited for special occasions- after the birth of Dora's children Phillip and Amanda, for their christenings, for dear old Slugger's funeral and for Hazel and Callie's weddings. They both moved away and Michael hired more staff for Follyfoot. Milly died when she was 75 years old. Steve had dated several local women but all the relationships had folded and at 40 years old he seemed to lose interest in going on dates. There had been some money left from the house sale after Milly died and Michael urged him to take a holiday but Steve refused. Phillip Reagen married when he was 21 and emigrated to Australia almost immediately. It hit Dora hard and now Amanda was getting married and moving to Scotland, to cap it all Michael had not been well. Dora enclosed a letter with Steve's invitation saying that they had plenty of room if he would like to stay for a few days before and after the wedding. He had recently given up his job so there was no reason why he shouldn't. He replied saying he would arrive a week before the wedding if that was alright. Follyfoot was drawing him strongly and it puzzled him why this should be after all these years. He arrived on a sunny Saturday morning. Amanda had just returned from a ride and handed her horse over to one of the stable hands as she recognised Steve's car. 'Uncle Steve! ' she cried and ran to hug him as soon as he got out.

'Hi Amanda, how's the blushing bride to be?'

'I'm okay- it's mum, she's in a right flap, says there's still too much to do

before the wedding and Dad's still poorly. '

'Well, I'll see what I can do to help. Where is your mum?'

She's schooling a new horse. There's plenty of staff to do that sort of thing now but mum still likes to do a bit of training as well as looking after the old crumbles. ' Steve laughed-

'Has uncle Ron been talking to you?'

'No- he's not been here for a while. He's coming to the wedding though with his latest wife.

'Number 3 isn't it? '

'I think so- Simone's her name. She's a real looker uncle Steve. Dad said he wants to see you when you arrive. He's in his study. It had been late November when Steve had last been at the farm and Michael had seemed in good health then so it was a shock to hear him coughing hard when Steve went in search of him. 'Mike, mate, are you still not over that chill?' 'Sit down Steve. I need to ask you a favour and tell you something before Dora comes in for morning tea. Doubtless Amanda has gone to tell her you're here. '

'Fire ahead- if you need me to help Dora out with the wedding arrangements I will. You just concentrate on getting yourself fit for the big day.' Michael was seized with another fit of coughing.

'That's not a possibility Steve. I've already told Amanda I won't be fit enough to give her away and asked Philip to do it. He was coming over next week for the wedding but as you know his wife is 7 months pregnant and there've been complications- she wasn't coming anyway but now understandably Phillip won't leave her. As you're Amanda's godfather, will you do the honours?'

'Well if you're sure and provided everyone else is happy then of course I will.'

'Thanks Steve- I'm not sure that I'll even be able to make the wedding. I have good days and bad days and the bad ones are really bad. Dora doesn't know how bad things are but the fact is Steve- I'm dying.'

'Is it cancer?' 'Yes, it's too far gone for them to do anything. Do you smoke Steve?'

'Only occasionally.'

'Well take my advice and give it up. My cancer started in the pancreas- it's one of the most aggressive forms- it's in my lungs and liver now. It wasn't caused by smoking but it's not helped. '

'Surely Dora must suspect. '

'If she does she's saying nothing. After the wedding I'll have to tell her the

thing is Steve...' He was interrupted by Dora shouting

'You two still in the study.'

'Yes love .' replied Michael. Steve got up to take the tea tray from her. He searched her face but could read nothing there. 'You okay girl?'

'Fine thanks Steve. Amanda says you've offered to help me.'

'Sure -feel free to be my boss again for a few days- and I promise not to argue!'

'She'll keep you on your toes Steve, mark my words!' Michael lost no time in telling Dora and Amanda that Steve would be giving the bride away.

'Are you happy with that Amanda' asked Steve.

'You're like one of the family.' she said. 'If dad and Phil are unable to do it there's no-one else I'd rather have. During the next few days Steve made himself indispensable to Dora never complaining when she asked him to do something then changed her mind a few minutes later. The staff kept out of her way and looked to Steve for advice. Steve spent some time with Michael every day and he felt Dora must realise that her husband was fading before her eyes. 'Steve' said Michael. I have another really big favour to ask you. Amanda is moving immediately after the honeymoon, Rick has a really good job in Scotland and I don't want to hold her back. When I die Dora will have no-one. I want you to move back here, live in the bungalow I had built for Slugger. I'll arrange to have Rose Cottage put on the market. You can say no if you want to Steve- I'd never turn you out. '

'Michael- I need to know when you're going to tell Dora, she does need to know. '

'You're right of course. Dora and I have a weekend away booked in 3 weeks time. I'm hoping I'll be able to make it. I'll tell her when we get back. Will you come and stay here while we're gone- keep an eye on the place and be here for Dora after I've told her. I'd like you to come and live here as soon as possible, I don't want Dora to be alone when the end comes.'

'It's a big ask Mike.'

'You'll do it for her though won't you. You always said you'd do anything for her. I'd love to be able to tell her that you're coming back.'

'Don't you think that Amanda and Phil ought to know too?'

'Phil has enough to worry about with Naomi at the moment and I don't want to spoil Amanda's happiness until it's absolutely necessary. As far as I know I have a few months left, maybe more. '

'I don't feel ready to give you my decision yet. Will after the wedding be okay- it's only a couple more days.'

'That will be perfect. The next day Steve and Rick went to pick up the suits that had been hired for the wedding. Rick, his best man and Michael had already tried theirs on but they had had to phone Steve's measurements through and the firm had to contact other branches to see if any of them had a matching suit in Steve's size because there was none in their local shop. They had telephoned to say they had managed to locate one but it needed fitting. On the way there Rick asked Steve to level with him about Michael's illness. He had asked both Dora and Amanda but they both said it was a severe chest infection that was taking longer than expected to clear up which was what Michael had told them. 'We'll go for a coffee when we've got the suits and we'll have a chat.' said Steve. The trousers of his suit needed shortening which they said could be done in an hour so this gave Rick and Steve the time they wanted. 'I know it's not just an infection Steve. I watched my uncle die of cancer, Michael has the same look about him. If you tell me I promise I'll keep it to myself for the time being. ' Steve decided to tell Rick what he knew and what Michael had asked of him.

'It's as I thought. Dora and Amanda are with Michael every day and the changes are so gradual they maybe don't notice but I can go several days without seeing him and that makes all the difference.' Rick said.

'I was really shocked as I haven't seen him for months.' Steve replied.

'What should I do Steve? Amanda should be told. How can I let her come blithely to Scotland with me when her father could have only a short time left.'

'He's adamant he doesn't want her told yet- he's not telling Dora for another three weeks.'

'Are you going to do as he asked and come and live here Steve?'

'There's nothing to keep me at Rose cottage now-hasn't been for years if I'm honest. I know I could have come back before but there's enough staff here to cope with help from Dora and Michael but without Michael Dora will find it hard to run three businesses while dealing with grief.'

'So, if I agree to keep Amanda in the dark will you promise to let me know if you think it's near the end for Michael?'

'Okay, but what Dora will want to do when she knows is anyone's guess.'

The wedding day was hot and sultry with thunderstorms forecast. Michael went to the church in the car with Dora who was already dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief. Steve felt very proud as he walked his god-daughter down the aisle to her groom. Michael stayed in his seat while the register was signed so it was Steve who partnered Richard's mother on the

walk back behind Dora and Richard's father. Michael's doctor was also a family friend and he it was who walked out of the church with him and drove him back to the farm where he administered the second pain killing injection of the day.

Steve had confessed to Michael that he had told Richard and Michael actually seemed relieved. Steve asked permission to tell Ron in case anything happened while he was back at Rose cottage and Michael agreed. Ron gladly agreed to meet Steve for a drink the next evening. As well as telling Ron about the state of Michael's health he told him about moving back to the farm having told Michael earlier in the day that he was prepared to come as soon as it could be arranged. When Dora was told she was very pleased and she showed him round the bungalow which was already tastefully furnished. 'What will you do with your aunt's furniture' 'Give it to charity I expect. There's a few things I 'd like to keep but I reckon I'll only need a small removal van. '

'You don't need that expense. We've got several horse boxes now. You can borrow one, Ron can drive it.' Things moved swiftly and in less than two weeks Steve and Ron were loading his possessions into the borrowed horsebox, One key had already been delivered to the estate agent and as they left Steve deposited all the rest through the letter box.

'Well, mate- it'll be good to 'ave you around again' said Ron as he helped Steve unload his possessions into the bungalow later. 'Dora tells me you haven't been to visit much while I've been away. I hope that's going to change. I'm not looking forward to the next few weeks- particularly when Dora finds out about Michael. '

'I'll try Steve but Simone's a bit on the possessive side. I don't want annuver failed relationship mate- can't afford it for a start. You're a lucky bloke, Steve. No family to worry about.'

' I would have liked kids.' he said a little wistfully.

'You've been out wiv a few ladies over the years Steve- 'ow come yer've never settled down- nice little cottage, roses round the door. '

'Never found the right one, Ron, that's all.'

'Huh- found her and lost her if you ask me mate.' Steve said nothing but looked towards the farm where Dora stood talking to one of the staff. Seeing him she walked over. 'Do you two want to come over for lunch, we've got plenty of crusty rolls and ham?'

'Cor wouldn't say no' said Ron. 'Simone's gone out for the day.' Steve nodded. 'Right I'll tell Mrs. Briggs.' Michael had his lunch in his room.

'The doctor's coming this afternoon and we don't know what time so he

said he'd be there ready.' said Dora. 'Will you pop up and see him Steve, let him know you're here safely?' Steve nodded.

'You looking forward to your weekend away girl?' asked Ron.

'Yes, I need a break and so does Michael.' Later as Steve sat with him Michael said that it would depend on the doctor's verdict whether he could go on the proposed trip. He was in a large double bed and there was a single bed in the room too. 'Dora's had her own room for several years now, she said my snores kept her awake. She sleeps in here if I'm having a bad night, we're having two single rooms with a connecting door when we go away.' He looked as if he might say more but Steve interrupted him by saying 'Anything you need me to do for you Mike?'

'Well, since you ask- I'm happy that Reagens hotel is running smoothly- I've got a good manager there but I'm a bit concerned about 'Pinetrees- you know Lockwood's old place. Will you go over and cast your expert eye over the place Steve. I've got my doubts about it. I know there's good stock over there but it doesn't seem to be doing as well as it has done previously. Get Dora to take you over- this afternoon.'

'But your doctor's coming this afternoon.' 'Exactly-I asked if he could leave it till after 3 o'clock so I need her away from here by then- and I don't want her back in a hurry, I don't want her trying to be in on the consultation. '

'She might take some persuading.'

'Leave her to me, ask her to come up please Steve.'

Dora and Steve drove away from the farm just after 2.30pm.' 'Do you remember the last time we came over here together?' she asked.

'Oh yes- the start of the "Barney" saga- boy did we have some arguments over him!Do you come over here much Dora?' he said as they got out of the landrover.'No- I still don't like the idea of selling horses to people who don't know what keeping a horse entails.'

'Surely Michael deals fairly with people.'

'Michael did when he was in on the day to day running of things but now he's reliant on Harold Baxter and his son. I'm not so sure about them. They seem to know what they're doing but sales have gone down.' Jerry Baxter hurried over. 'Why Mrs. Reagen- how nice to see you. How's your husband doing?'

'He's still not too well. This is a friend of mine, Steve, we used to work together years ago. Michael asked me to show him round. ' 'Of course- my father's with a customer at the moment and I'm tied up as well but if you like to wait for a few minutes I'm sure dad'll be happy to take you round.'

'It's okay.' said Dora. 'We can manage by ourselves.' As they went round the stables it was clear that the stock was indeed of high quality.' 'Shouldn't be any trouble selling fine animals like this. Let's just pretend I'm in the market for a horse and see what happens. ' Harold Baxter had just shaken hands on a sale and the new owner was loading a horse into his box. Another empty horsebox stood nearby. 'My friend Steve is interested in buying a horse Mr. Baxter'

'But I think maybe the ones you have here would be too expensive for me.' added Steve.

'Ah yes well they are all good horses but I'm sure for a friend of Mrs. Reagen we could offer a good price.'

'Oh I couldn't ask for that- but you know that horse you've just sold looked like it may have been more in my price range- you don't happen to have any more hidden away do you?' said Steve looking around.

'Sorry no- but I'll keep my eyes open.'

'I'm staying at the bungalow at Follyfoot so you can reach me there- oh and here's my mobile phone number.' Steve looked at his watch- 4.30pm and they were only 15 minutes away by car, he wondered if the doctor's visit was over. 'Dora, is that lovely little ice cream parlour still in Tockwith High Street?'

'Yes- why?.'

'I could just go a rum and raisin- how about I treat you- still choc chip is it?' 'Go on then.' They were soon sitting at an outside table eating ice cream and talking about their visit to 'Pinetrees.'

'What do you reckon's going on Steve, they acted a bit shifty don't you think?'

' If I were to hazard a guess I'd say they've got their own business on the side. I reckon that horse they sold was brought in from somewhere else in the horsebox earlier on. I don't know exactly how they're working things but probably if someone comes along and can't afford Pinetrees prices they'll offer to find them something cheaper, now if they do it for me obviously any sale would go through the books and I reckon because we were there today's sale will too. Strictly speaking if they're using their own funds to buy cheaper horses there's nothing illegal , it's just very unfair on Michael. It's going to be really hard to prove anything and we'll have to tread carefully.'

'Let's not worry Michael with it Steve.'

'He's bound to ask how we found the place girl. '

'Well- we'll just say we didn't find anything wrong,' When they got back to

the farm Michael was sitting in the lounge.

'Rex says I'm okay for the weekend Dora so it's all systems go. '

'That's wonderful, must mean he thinks you're getting better.'

'Make us a cup of tea love will you?' Dora left to do as he asked.

'What did the doctor really say mate?'

' He did say to go and have some time away together as it could be my last chance. He's given me a pain killing injection and he's said I can have one on Friday before we go. If I make some excuse to go into town will you drive me Steve?'

'Of course.'

'Dora's getting her hair done on Thursday afternoon and my solicitor is coming to see me. Don't tell her please- I need to make some alterations to my will. ' On Thursday morning Steve was enjoying a leisurely breakfast in the bungalow when his mobile phone rang and Dora sounding panicky asked him to go over to the farmhouse. 'Steve- I 've just had a garbled message from one of the stablehands at Pinetrees. Something's wrong, can you go over? I want to do some shopping for our holiday and I've got the hairdressers this afternoon. '

'Okay but I'd better speak to Michael first.'

'He says he trusts you. He's having a lie in but there's a phone by his bed if you want to get in touch from Pinetrees. I've told them there that you'll be coming on our behalf. Speak to Ralph Burns, he's in charge of the hands.' When Steve got there an angry man was shouting and gesticulating at one of the hands. Steve introduced himself and found out that Ralph was the one on the receiving end of the tirade. 'Okay, leave this to me. Now sir, can I help you?'

'I demand to see the owner- Reagen isn't it?'

'I'm afraid he's indisposed. Tell me what the problem is.'

'Well I came to see the manager the other day about buying one of the horses here- the grey.'

'Yes, I know the one, a fine animal.'

'There wasn't a problem with the price, I can afford it but he said he might be able to get me one considerably cheaper. Now he's done this once before- nothing wrong with the one I bought but I really took a fancy to this grey and said I'd come back today with the money- cash. Here I am but there's no sign of Baxter. This bloke doesn't know where he is. '

'Right, Ralph- get the grey out please and Mr er?'

'Grassington, Frank Grassington.'

'Come into the office and I'll see if I can dig out the necessary documents. '

Fortunately there was a filing cabinet in which details of each horse, passport, selling price etc and, after speaking to Michael about what he needed to do, Steve got them out ready to close the deal when the horse had passed inspection by the prospective owner. ' Mr. Grassington can you tell me approximately when you bought the other horse from here?'

'July 4th, my wife's American so it's easy to remember. '

'Thanks.' With the deal completed Steve enquired when the Baxters had last been seen. 'Yesterday afternoon sir,' said Ralph.

'Notice anything unusual?'

'Well- they had a bonfire before they left, put a whole load of papers on it.'

'I see, thanks. Well let me know if they turn up and ring me tomorrow before ten so I know everything's in order. Here's my mobile number because Mr and Mrs Reagen will be going away for the weekend. ' He went into the office and searched the filing cabinets but could not find what he was looking for. There was a wall safe but obviously he didn't know the combination. He put the cash from the sale safely into his inside pocket and returned to the farm. Michael was in the study and Steve went straight to him.' Mike- have you got the accounts for Pinetrees?'

'Well I've got August but earlier ones are at the premises.'

'Are they in the safe?'

'Yes.'

'And presumably the Baxters know the combination.'

'Yes of course, they had to, why?'

'They burned some papers yesterday. Could have been the accounts.'

'That's okay because I always take photocopies and they're filed at my accountants.'

' Good.- that's a relief. I think they've done a runner Mike. There were dodgy dealings going on and when Dora and I called the other day I think they thought we might be on to them. Anyway, here's the proceeds from the sale I made today.'

'That's great Steve- thanks. If they have gone it's no bad thing. Do you think you can look after things there while we're away?'

'I'd love to.'

' Right, store this safe combination in your mobile phone memory. Now all this talk has made me hungry. Let's see what's for lunch- I insist you eat with me.'

'You seem a lot better today Mike.'

'Well the injection Rex gave me yesterday meant I had a good night's sleep which helped a lot and also knowing you're keeping an eye on Pinetrees

has taken a load off my mind. '

'Do you mind if I go for a ride this afternoon?'

'That's a good idea- exercise one of Dora's charges for her. Ask Frank, he'll find you a mount. ' Steve hadn't ridden for several months and enjoyed re-acquainting himself with one of the old routes he used to ride with Dora. He treated himself to some scones and cream cakes at the bakery stowing them carefully in his saddle bag to have for his tea. When he arrived back Frank hurried over to take charge of 'Barnacle ' I'll see to him if you like' offered Steve. 'No Mr. Ross, sir, that's my job.'

'Please- call me Steve- I'm not one of your bosses you know.' Dora drove into the yard a few minutes later her hair had been cut short and she waved to him as she went indoors.

The solicitor had been and gone and Michael was asleep. Dora felt in need of company so she went to Steve's door calling 'Steve, can I come in?' as she had done so many times before when he had lived in the loft room. Steve had put the scones and cream cakes on a plate and had the kettle on. Dora looked longingly at the cream cakes. 'You're not going to eat all those yourself are you?'

'Well, I did wonder if I'd find someone to share them with me. There's enough for Michael as well'

' He doesn't eat cream cakes, I'll have his, they look scrummy.'

'You'll spoil your dinner if you eat two!.'

'Me- never.' Steve smiled, she still had a good figure !'Dora licked her fingers having demolished her first cake when the housekeeper called her on the mobile phone. 'You need to ring your son Mrs. Reagen. I couldn't find you when the call came so I said you'd ring him back. '

'Oh heavens' she said as she quickly ran her hands under the tap. 'I hope it's not bad news. Be a pet and save the cream doughnut for me.'

'You've got a cheek Dora, you know it's my favourite but okay, come back and tell me about Phil's call.' He poured himself another cup of tea and ate a chocolate éclair. Dora didn't come back for quite some time and when she did she was smiling.' I'm a grandmother Steve! Naomi's had a little girl and they're both doing fine!'

'That's great news, Dora.' he said giving her a hug. After she'd gone he chewed his lip. He'd never know the pleasure of grandchildren. Later that evening Dora rang him and asked him to take the doughnut over. 'Michael has opened a bottle of champagne, come and have a glass.'

Steve had a busy weekend. As he had suspected the Baxter's had gone. He thought perhaps they had suspected his interest in buying a horse was not

genuine and were worried in case he was spying for Michael which of course he was. He opened the safe and was relieved to find there was money there to pay the staff wages. There were other documents too but no accounts records. He made sure the stablehands were getting on with their normal duties and asked that he should be notified if anyone wished to make a sale. Before returning to the farm he toured the stables once more and spent time with each of the horses. There was one there which reminded him very much of Alex. He looked at the asking price and whistled giving the horse a special pat. He had horse nuts in his pocket and held some out for it to eat which it did rather quickly. 'Oi- leave my fingers.' he laughed. He bought fish and chips for his tea and walked down to the lake to eat them.

Dora and Michael returned after lunch on Monday. Steve was at Pinetrees showing a horse to a potential customer and didn't see them until it was time for the evening meal. Dora had phoned and invited him. After they had eaten Steve rose to go as he said Michael looked tired. 'Could you help me upstairs before you leave please Steve. ' Once Michael was in his room he said 'I'm telling Dora tomorrow. She's been on a high all weekend talking about us flying to Australia to see the baby when I'm better. I hate to have to burst her bubble but I know it's got to be done. Can you be around please?'

'Well I should be over at Pinetrees.'

'Ralph'll manage. Let him know in the morning that if anyone wants to buy he can show them the horses and make an appointment for you to see them later in the week. I think maybe we should consider promoting Ralph to manager. He's been really loyal to me over the years and I'm sure he'd be up to the job. There's no-one else there ready to step up so if we promote Ralph we'll need a new assistant manager and a new stablehand. Ask Ralph to come and see me will you- that is unless you want a full time job as manager. ' 'Not really, I'm happy to help out as and when needed so if you want to send someone from here. '

'That's not a bad idea but I'll have to speak to Dora- can't poach her staff. I'd better do that today. Who knows what state she'll be in after tomorrow. Will you come over late morning? I'll have told her by then.' Steve slept badly and got up early taking a walk down to the lake before having breakfast. Afterwards he phoned Ralph to see what he felt about possible promotion and it was no surprise when the younger man was really interested so Steve arranged for him to see Michael the next day saying he would let him know what time. After that he was unable to concentrate on

anything. Once again he walked down to the lake sometimes turning to look back at the farmhouse. It was there that Dora found him. 'Hi Steve.' 'Hi' he replied. 'You okay?'

'What you really mean Steve is has Michael told me- and the answer is he has.'

'I'm sorry, girl. I don't know what to say.' He expected her to start to cry and steeled himself to deal with the tears without showing her his own emotions. He was totally unprepared for what came next. 'You knew, Steve, she shouted. How long have you known?'

'Since Amanda's wedding.' She stepped closer to him and began to pummel his chest with her fists. 'Why the hell didn't you say something?'

'Believe me girl I thought you should know.' he said capturing her hands to stop their attack. 'It was Michael's place to tell you- not mine and he didn't want to spoil the wedding or your weekend away for you. '

'What am I going to do about all his businesses? I know nothing about hotels and you know what I think about horse sales and there's loads of other things he's involved in too. He's got loads of property scattered around- done deals for a lot of people like he did for you at the cottage.'

'Now look, Michael's a great bloke. He's got a good team at the hotel and we'll sort out Pinetrees too. '

'Huh- that can go for a start- I don't want anything to do with it! '

'Dora- stop, Michael hopes to have months left yet. If he hasn't already sorted out his other ventures he will- and as for Pinetrees- don't forget your children may want a say in things.'

'They're in the dark too, although I believe you told Richard- told my son in law and not me!'

'He guessed part of the truth, I didn't want to lie to him.'

'Yet you were happy to keep the truth from me!.' He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her face.' No Dora, I've never been happy about that. I have to say girl that you may have been hiding from the truth yourself. Did you really think Michael was getting better? Did you really think he only had a bad chest infection? '

'He wouldn't let me go to any of his hospital or doctor's appointments with him. Michael's a very private person really so it didn't surprise me and we've been living rather independent lives .We've not slept in the same bed for over ten years.'

'Because he snores.'

'Well that was the excuse I made but we hadn't been intimate for years before that. '

'Dora this isn't my business girl, it's between the two of you.' he realised that it had been years since he'd seen them exchange kisses or show signs of real affection.

'Then why are you here, Steve? If Michael's affairs are in order then why did he ask you to come back- it was Michael's idea wasn't it?'

'Yes, he knows I still look on this place as my home and he knows you'll need help to get you through. Ron's tied up and I'm your oldest friend. Please Dora- rant at me all you like I'm used to it after all but don't let Michael see you so angry- grief he'll expect and he can deal with but not this!'

'I'm not ready to grieve at the moment, I'm still too angry.'

'Well- I'm here if you need me.' She walked away from him.

'What are you going to do now?'

'I'm going for a ride.'

'Want some company?'

'No- I'd rather be alone.'

'Steve went to her and once again put his hands on her shoulders turning her to face him.' Dora- please take care. Have you got your mobile?'

In reply she took it from the pocket of her jacket and showed it to him. 'I'm going to see Michael' he said as they parted at the entrance to the stables. Michael was sitting in the lounge with his head in his hands. He looked up as he heard Steve call his name. 'That must have been very hard for you Mike. '

'She didn't react the way I thought she would Steve- she's gone off in a bit of a huff. The poor door got a hard slam. I hope she's okay. '

'She saw me down by the lake and came and gave me a right ear bashing, she's gone for a ride. I offered to go with her but she was having none of it. I made sure she had her mobile and if she's gone too long I'll call her.'

'I'm sorry, Steve. Dora in full rant is formidable!'

'It's ok mate. I'm used to it although I have to admit it's been some years since I felt the full weight of her anger. By the way I've spoken to Ralph. If you're up to it he'll come over in the morning, I just need to let him know the time.'

'Around 11 should be fine. I spoke to Dora last night and she reckons Charlie Jackson might welcome a change and is probably good enough to train as an assistant manager so we'll just need a couple of stable hands. Will you stay for lunch Steve? Dora won't be back in time.'

'Okay but it's becoming a bit of a habit, I don't want to impose.'

'You're not, you're doing me a favour. ' The housekeeper came in with

coffee. 'Oh I'm sorry Mr. Ross, I'll fetch another cup.'

'Mr Ross will be staying for lunch- I'm not sure whether or not Mrs. Reagen will be back. '

'Oh, I'll soon fix her a sandwich if she does come. I'm doing a Ploughman's lunch today.'

Dora had not returned by 4pm. Michael had gone for a rest and Steve was getting worried so he called her mobile. She was a while answering and told Steve where she was when he asked. 'What, but that's miles away. It'll take you a good hour to get back and you don't want to keep Mrs Briggs waiting with your evening meal.'

'Don't fuss, Steve. I'll start back now and be there in plenty of time. There's no need to phone again. Goodbye!'

Steve didn't get to find out what happened that evening but the next day he phoned Ralph and told him what time to arrive then went up to the house.

Dora was out with the horses. 'I phoned Phillip yesterday and told him.' said Michael.' He was all for ringing Amanda but I said she didn't know yet so not to do it till I tell him it's okay. Then last night while Dora was in the shower I spoke to Richard- you'll never believe it but Amanda is pregnant now. We don't think the shock will be good for her so Richard's going to leave it for a while so I've let Phil know but I don't know whether to tell Dora Amanda's news or not. '

'You have to Mike. You can't keep news like this from her- you'll just have to say that Richard can't tell Amanda yet. How did Phil take it?'

'He was dumbstruck.'

They couldn't discuss things any further because Ralph arrived. 'You're familiar with the procedure for buying horses and how I work out the selling price Ralph?'

'Yes sir.'

'As for the V.A.T. Returns I always get one of the accounts staff at Reagens to look after that. I always got in a muddle. Mr Ross will be keeping an eye on things for me. '

'Begging your pardon sir but when are you hoping to come back. '

'Ah- that's the problem- Steve do you think you can find Charlie for me then ask Dora to get the staff together in the tack room in about half an hour. I need to speak to them all, then this afternoon I want you to take me to the hotel and Pinetrees please.'

When he had finished telling the staff at Follyfoot about his illness there was an air of gloom and dispondency over the place. Steve went to try and cheer things up a bit and told Dora to go and see Michael. It was after

being told that Amanda was pregnant and that the news about her father was being kept until she was further along, that Dora shed her first tears. She did not do it in front of Michael but went up to her room. When the initial flood was over she washed her face and went out to the stables. This time she didn't want to ride alone and asked Steve to go with her. 'I need to take Michael out this afternoon so I can't be too long.'

'That's okay, we'll be back for lunch.'

'I'm taking my own horse, Amber. If you want to keep up you'd best have Michael's, Flame. He can be tricky but you'll be okay on him I think. He definitely needs a run.' On the back of the magnificent animal Steve felt young again and when they were in the open they let the two horses have their heads. When they finally brought them to a halt they were breathless and laughing. 'That felt good.' said Dora. 'I've missed our rides, Michael really didn't have the time to come regularly, I think Flame appreciated that.' The ride back was at a more leisurely pace and they arrived back with time to shower before lunch. Frank and Charlie led the two horses away. 'I'm getting thoroughly lazy where rubbing down's concerned' said Dora. 'I can see I'll have to take you in hand.' Steve replied forgetting for the moment that now he was her guest and not her employee. 'Are you coming in for lunch?'

'No thanks, I'm just going to have an omelette. Thought I'd treat myself to a pub meal tonight.'

'Lucky you- it's ages since I had a meal out.' 'You get all your meals prepared for you except when it's the housekeeper's day off!'

'I know- but it's all wholesome food- sometimes I feel like- oh I don't know.'

'Tell you what, the day off's tomorrow, why don't I treat us all to Fish and Chips.'

'Oh Steve- yes please!'

The staff at Pinetrees and Reagens were as upset as those at Follyfoot when they learned about Michael's illness. He spent quite a long time with the hotel manager who asked. 'Can nothing be done for you?'

'I'm afraid any treatment is palliative. Now I've told the Ralph, who's the new manager at Pinetrees that the accountant here will see to VAT returns and any financial queries he may have so perhaps you'll pass the message on.'

'Certainly sir.'

'Well Peter, I'll take my leave of you now, carry on the good work, I know I can rely on you and your team.'

Christmas approached and Amanda and Richard were coming for a visit staying at Reagens. Much as he would have liked to keep the seriousness of her father's illness from her Richard knew she would need to be told because it was now obvious to everyone that Michael was extremely ill. Phillip and Naomi had decided to come home with baby Jade so that Michael could see his first grandchild so in order that Mrs. Briggs could have time off they too would stay at Reagen's and Dora and Michael would join them. Steve was invited for lunch on Christmas day and Boxing day. He protested that it should be a family time but his protests fell on deaf ears. Amanda sought him out as soon as she and Richard had spent some time with Michael. ' Oh uncle Steve, this is going to be a really horrible Christmas.'

'Your dad doesn't want it to be Amanda. We all need to make a big effort for him- it'll be good to see Phil again won't it?'

'Of course and I can talk babies with Naomi but at the moment all I want to do is cry.' Tears began to trickle down her face.

'Ey lass, you're yer mother's daughter' said Steve and he gathered Amanda to him in the hug he'd been longing to offer Dora ever since he'd returned but out of loyalty to Michael had not done. Phillip and Naomi arrived on December 23rd and said they would stay for two weeks. They went to see the vicar who'd married them and arranged for Jade to be christened on January 2nd. Michael made it a special Christmas for everyone by giving them all gifts he knew they wanted, most had been ordered on the internet and a couple of members of staff had been delegated to wrap and label them. All staff members received a cash bonus and hampers to share with their family. Dora's gift was a white imitation fur coat with matching hat which hung in her bedroom on Christmas morning. When everyone was opening their gifts after lunch Michael called Steve aside and gave him an envelope and said it was his Christmas present. Inside was a picture of the Alex look a like at Pinetrees together with all the necessary documents to transfer the ownership of the pictured animal to him. 'Michael, this is too generous mate.'

'Nonsense- you've been really helpful to me these past few weeks. I hope you enjoy riding him and think of me when you do..' Next Michael called his son over and told him that there was no need to come over again for his funeral.' But dad, it's my place to be here.'

'No son- your place is with your family and you can't expect Naomi to bring Jade.'

Michael managed to attend the christening, Richard and Amanda were

leaving the next day and said they hoped to come back at Easter. The parting with his children was really sad for Michael. Dora too was very emotional. Steve drove Phillip and his family to the airport and shook hands as they prepared to enter the departure lounge at Leeds airport. 'Take care of mum for me Uncle Steve.'

'Of course- and you take care of theses two lovely ladies 'he said kissing Naomi's cheek and stroking Jade's head gently. He watched them disappear into the crowd then walked back to the car. January was bitterly cold and Michael spent most of his days either in bed or sitting by a double glazed window in the old part of the farmhouse wrapped cosily in a blanket. As the month ended he found it was getting harder and harder to get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. It was then that Dora engaged the services of a live-in nurse.

On Valentine's day a dozen deep pink roses were delivered to Dora. There was no card. Michael insisted they were not from him and Steve also denied all knowledge so the sender was a mystery. That night when she went to bed she found a note which read 'The roses did come from me Dora but I wanted to keep you guessing, give you a little bit of the romance which has been sadly lacking in our marriage for so long. The Pink roses show deep affection, I hope that the next person to send you flowers will send you red roses of love as I did on the day we were married. Michael.'

When the nurse went in to Michael's room next morning he was clearly in a lot of pain. She immediately alerted Dora and called the doctor. At 7 o'clock as he was finishing his breakfast Steve's mobile rang and Dora asked him to go over to the farmhouse. The doctor's car was parked outside. Steve found Dora outside Michael's room. 'Rex has given him an injection, he was in such pain.' 'The door opened and the doctor came out. 'I'm sorry, Dora but I think Michael is nearing the end of his life. I have another call to make so I'm afraid I can't stay. I'll call back later but ring me if anything happens.'

'Thanks, doctor- I'll be here ' said Steve. He had been with Milly when she died and Dora had been with Slugger so this scenario wasn't new to either of them. They sat by the bedside talking softly to each other and to Michael. Once during the morning he opened his eyes, looked at them and held up his hands as if in blessing, shortly afterwards he breathed his last. Steve rang the doctor and within half an hour he had returned and issued the death certificate. The nurse performed her last duties and the housekeeper made strong tea for them all. Rex gave Dora some tablets to

help her through the day and night. Mrs Briggs was sent to summon Frank while Steve rang Richard's mobile then Australia. The undertaker came and bore Michael away. 'Go have a lie down' Steve told the dry eyed Dora. 'I'm okay, will you take me to register the death this afternoon?'

'You don't need to do that today.'

'Yes I do, so that I can start making arrangements for the funeral tomorrow. ' Dora told Frank the news and asked him to pass it on to his staff. Steve rang Reagens and Pinetrees.

News soon spread round the neighbourhood and the phone rang constantly, so many friends and business associates expressed their sadness. At first Dora insisted on speaking to every caller personally but it began to upset her so Steve took over and when they went to the registrars he recorded a message for the ansaphone. Neither of them had much of an appetite and Mrs. Briggs fussed over them offering tea and sandwiches. Amanda rang and Dora went to the study to speak to her. When she returned she asked Steve if he would stay in the house overnight and he agreed knowing that a guest room was always made up.

The days until the funeral passed in a blur. Michael had already purchased a burial plot because he did not want to be cremated, he had also said he wanted family flowers only with donations for Cancer research. Amanda and Richard arrived the day before the funeral and intended to stay for a week. Steve slept in his bungalow for the first time since Michael's death. Unexpectedly Phillip turned up by himself on the same day as Amanda, he desperately wanted to deliver the eulogy and spent some time closeted with the vicar. It was still bitterly cold and Dora wore the coat and hat Michael had bought her for Christmas and leant heavily on Phillip's arm as they followed the coffin into the church. Steve made to sit in the pew behind the family but Amanda drew him in beside her. The church was packed and after the burial everyone was invited to Reagen's hotel . The vicar added a few kind words of his own to Phillip's eulogy. Michael had attended church only occasionally but he gave generously towards the upkeep of the building and supported fund raising events.

At the end of a very tiring emotional day leaving Dora in the safe hands of her family Steve walked down to the lake and stood on the jetty gazing down into the water. It was calm and peaceful but rather too cold for comfort. As he got up and turned to leave he saw Amanda walking towards him.

'You okay love?'

'Yes- I just had to get out of the house for a while. You are going to stick

around aren't you Uncle Steve?'

'Of course, I promised your dad I'd keep an eye on things and be there for your mum when she needs me. Now go on indoors, it's too cold for you out here. You need to take care of yourself and the little one.'

'Are you sad that you haven't got any children uncle Steve.'

'I'm not sure I'd have made a very good father, Amanda. My upbringing wasn't the best.'

'Well I reckon you would have made a smashing dad and I'm glad you'll be here for *me* and my baby. Now that my dad is no longer here I have my godfather instead.' She gave Steve a hug and hurried indoors.

Steve was surprised when Dora told him he was needed when the contents of Michael's will were made known by the solicitor. He was further surprised to learn that Michael had not only left him the bungalow he was living in but Pinetrees too. He shook his head in disbelief. 'I don't understand- surely the family are more entitled than me to Pinetrees.'

'There's a letter for you too' said the solicitor. 'I'm sure it will explain everything.' Steve stuffed the letter in his inside pocket. Dora and the others had all arrived at the solicitors in one car, Steve drove back to the farm alone. His mobile rang as he pulled up outside the bungalow. 'Steve- we're all going over to Reagen's for lunch' said Richard. 'Will you join us' Steve was tempted to say no but he knew he had to face them all again some time and the young ones would be off back home at the end of the week so it might as well be now. 'Okay, what time?'

'We're going now.' Steve followed Richard's car to the hotel. He wasn't feeling particularly hungry but dutifully took the proffered menu. He had been seated between Amanda and Dora and was aware that Dora had spoken to him. 'Er sorry girl, what did you say?'

'I asked what you were having.'

'Oh um Chicken supreme I think.' When everyone had ordered he said 'Er look, Dora. I don't know what Michael was thinking of leaving Pinetrees to me. It was very generous of him to leave me even the bungalow. I'll sign Pinetrees over to you or one of the children.'

'Steve Ross- you'll do no such thing. Were you not listening when all Michael's assets were listed. We've all been left quite enough and that's on top of the shares and trust funds Michael gave us when he was alive. He knew darned well I wouldn't want a bar of Pinetrees. It's going to be bad enough looking after the hotel as well as Follyfoot. Amanda and Phillip will get a lot of money once all the duty is paid off and you can leave Pinetrees to them in your will- they'll probably sell it- I would. I know

Michael left you a letter too, we all had one. Have you read yours?

'No I'm waiting for a quiet moment. '

'My husband was a wise man as well as a wealthy one, when you read your letter I'm sure everything will become clear.'

'I hope you're right' Steve replied, lunch had arrived and he began to eat without enthusiasm.

Several days later when Dora's family had left she knocked on the door of the bungalow and Steve told her to go in. 'Have you been avoiding me Steve?'

'Why the heck should I do that. I've been busy at Pinetrees making sure Ralph and Charlie have settled down to a routine. I was just going to go over there now as a matter of fact.'

'Will you come over for dinner tonight. I hate eating by myself.'

'Okay.'

When they were enjoying coffee after their meal Dora asked him if he had read Michael's letter and when he replied that he had she asked him whether he felt happier about owning Pinetrees.

'Do you know what the letter said Dora?'

'I know what mine said – I'll tell you if you like. There was a lot of personal stuff of course but he did mention you too.'

Steve said nothing so she went on.'He knew that you always thought of yourself as being unable to get seriously involved with me because I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth whereas you were covered in coal dust. He wanted to give us a chance of happiness together by giving you the wherewithal to make something of yourself- something you really deserve. He knew I was not happy in our marriage and he said he wants me to move on. It seems though that you don't want to be more than my best friend in which case you will have enough to offer any other woman you choose.' At last Steve found his voice.

'Michael said that it was he that sent you the pink roses on Valentine's day and why he did it. He said I was to swallow my pride and follow my heart. His greatest wish was for both of us to be happy.'

'So?'

'I don't want to lose my best friend or the special relationship I have with my godchildren.'

'I promise you'll never lose that Steve but don't we deserve a chance?'

'It's too soon Dora. You're still grieving whatever you say about your relationship with Michael you were still good friends , he was my friend and I'm grieving too. You're well loved and respected in the community,

what would people think if suddenly I took Michael's place. What would Amanda, Richard, Phillip and Naomi think? '

'They have their own lives to lead. I don't interfere in their lives, why should they in ours? I need to know whether there's hope for us Steve, if there is then I'll accept that I must wait, if not then I must find another way to move on. I need to be loved.'

'I've not had a serious relationship with a woman in years, those I have had never developed beyond friendship. Everyone I got involved with fell short of what my ideal woman is. Only one person would do and I lost her on the day she married another man. I came so close to stopping that wedding.'

'Maybe you should have done. You are talking about my wedding aren't you?'

'Yes but I couldn't deny you the chance to have the future of Follyfoot secured for life. Life with me would have been a continual struggle and you wouldn't have had your two beautiful children'

'We could have had our own beautiful children.' Steve shook his head but said nothing. 'Okay, look, we used to fight like cats and dogs when we were living close to each other years ago, who's to say that wouldn't be the same now?'

'We fought because you wanted us to make a profit and that was never going to happen. We fought because when all was said and done I had the last word and you resented the fact that I didn't consult you enough and I didn't listen to your ideas. Now you have your own responsibilities and I have mine. You just confessed that I used to be your idea of the ideal woman- so what's changed?'

'Nothing- I'd still be jealous as hell if you looked at another man. If we're to make a go of things I need to court you properly. '

'Does that mean there is hope for us?' 'I guess it does, yes. ' 'In that case, I'll wait, but not for too long.' 'I'd better be going, it's getting late.' He took both her hands in his and squeezed them gently then brushed her cheek in the softest of kisses. 'Goodnight love.' After he'd gone Dora put her hand up to the spot he'd kissed. It wasn't the first time he'd kissed her, there had been lots of times, kisses of greeting and farewell but she felt that this time it had been a kiss of promise.

Ron was surprised to receive a telephone call from Steve asking him to go over to the bungalow for a drink.' Will Dora be there?'

'No she's got some committee meeting or other tonight. '

'Well I can't be too late or I'll get it in the neck from Simone but okay, I'll

be there.'

Steve had opened a bottle of whisky, he rarely drank spirits and pulled a face at the taste. He offered a glass to Ron who shook his head 'Blimey mate- why are you hitting the hardstuff, you and Dora not getting on? Driving you to drink is she?'

'We're getting along just fine Ron. I'm in a quandry though. She doesn't know about my operation.'

'Well mate, if you and her are going to make a go of it yer'll 'ave to tell her. She's bound to notice you're a couple of things short!'

'It's not just that, it's the whole cancer thing. She's just lost her husband to the disease after all.'

'Yes but you've been clear for years mate.' Ron helped himself to a beer.

'You were an idiot to lose her the first time, if you love her for Pete's sake don't lose her again. She's a smashing looking bird still with loads of lovely readies. She wouldn't have any trouble finding herself a man.'

'She deserves the best.'

'And that's you. Believe me Steve. It's not going ter make the slightest difference to her.'

'I don't know if I can find the right words .'

'Maybe you should write it all down in a letter. Now there's no point in talking about it any further Steve. You know what you have to do. Now I'd best be off, I won't have any more beer or Simone'll complain she can smell it on me bref and she'll banish me ter the spare room' Ron put three Polo mints in his mouth, slapped Steve on the back and said 'Good luck me ole mate- but yer won't need it.'

Amanda was in the last few weeks of her pregnancy and Richard phoned to ask if he could bring her down for a while. He had to go to Germany on business and did not want her to be on her own. Steve put off telling Dora about his cancer when he knew about the visit. Michael had been dead for three months and he thought that they could start having the occasional evening out. Dora got in first. 'Steve, the ladies guild I belong to is holding a midsummer ball in a couple of weeks. Michael and I always supported it as it's for the local hospital funds, will you come with me?'

'Is it a posh do?'

'No of course not, it's just a bit of fun, no-one dresses too formally, you won't feel out of place I promise.'

Okay- but what about Amanda?'

'She should have gone home by then, if not I'll ask Jenny from the stables to stay with her. I've got a meeting about it tonight so I'll get us a couple of

tickets. Will you keep Amanda company for a while. She'll probably go to bed fairly early.

'Sure.'

Amanda brought her wedding album for Steve to see.' Look how slim I was' she exclaimed.

'You look right bonny now, but you'll soon get your figure back if you take after your mum in that as well as the other ways.'

'Are you looking forward to the midsummer ball uncle Steve?'

'Yes love, I think I am.'

'Will you take mum out again afterwards?'

'I might.'

'Good- it's about time you two got on with what dad asked.'

'Did your mother tell you?'

'No- it was in my letter from Dad. He said he hoped I wouldn't mind if mum and you got together. Oh uncle Steve, I wouldn't mind honestly. I'd love it.' She yawned. 'I'm off to bed now, see you in the morning. I had a phone call from Richard earlier, he's picking me up on Saturday.'

Steve looked at his best suit. He'd worn it for Michael's funeral and lots of family occasions before then so he decided to buy a new suit and accessories. Dora had hired a taxi to take them to and from The Queen's Hotel where the ball was being held. When Steve was ready he went to wait for her in the farmhouse. She was wearing the simplest of black dresses knee length with a shawl collar. Apart from her wedding ring she wore long dangly diamond earrings and the beautiful Cartiere watch which had been a Christmas present from Michael. As she came down the stairs Steve let out his breath. 'You look fantastic girl.'

'So do you, I'm glad you don't dye your hair, the grey flecks suit you.'

Steve helped her on with her coat.'I hope you don't expect me to dance.'

'I thought we might manage a smooch, no-one'll turn a hair you know.'

'We'll see.' Dora was steered around the floor by several of the local dignitaries. Steve politely refused whenever he was asked to partner a lady. Slow numbers saw couples who were not married draped round each other and for the last waltz Dora managed to persuade Steve onto the floor, they moved in time to the music and when it ended he kissed her forehead. On the way home he felt in his inside pocket- yes the letter was there. She asked him in for a nightcap and as they entered the hallway the telephone rang. 'Will you answer that please Steve?'

He did so and minutes later he called her over- speak to Richard please.'

'Hi Dora- congratulations on the arrival of your second grand-daughter,

Michaela.' When she came off the phone tears began to stream down her face. Steve took the pristine white handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her holding out his arms. She went into them gladly and he held her against him until the flood stilled. Then, for the first time ever he kissed her full on the lips. 'Dora, there's something about me you don't know. It's hard for me to talk about it so I've written it down. I want you to read it after I've gone and we'll talk in the morning.' Steve spent a very restless night. Seeing Dora in the arms of other men had made him jealous although he knew none of them meant anything to her. He was now absolutely certain what he wanted and he just hoped she would not be put off when she read about the treatment he'd had all those years ago. He'd just come out of the shower when the doorbell rang, hastily he put on his underclothes and dressing gown. The door was unlocked and Dora was already indoors with a plate of hot croissants and home made strawberry jam on the table and the kettle on. She went towards him her arms wide open and accepting the unspoken invitation Steve folded her into an embrace and held on as if he would never let her go. She inhaled deeply, he smelt of a spicy shower gel. He had not yet shaved and she felt his hair roughened cheek against her smooth skin. 'Now I understand' she whispered as she placed a kiss in the hollow of his neck. 'Let's have breakfast and then we'll talk.'

Steve explained that his cancer had been picked up at a well man clinic. His surgeon had erred on the side of caution and carried out a total orchidectomy. It had happened soon after Milly he'd moved into Milly's cottage and went to register with a new doctor. They had just started the 'Well Man' clinic and he'd been encouraged to attend. When he went into hospital Milly went into respite care for 2 weeks then he had to cope with treatment and caring for her on his own. It was several months before he visited Follyfoot and his hair was really short. He told everyone he'd had it shaved for charity and it was in the early stages of re-growth- only Ron had known the truth and been sworn to secrecy. 'Is that why you didn't feel able to get into a close relationship?'

'That was part of it yes and also part of the reason I didn't take Michael up on his offer of accommodation and work if I returned to Follyfoot when Milly went into the care home. The years immediately following the treatment I had to have regular check ups but thankfully there's been no recurrence. Of course I'm still as likely to get it as the next man but I do as much as I can to prevent it.'

'I could get it, anyone can.' she said. 'We have to grab the opportunity of

happiness while it's here Steve, live for today and not worry about tomorrow or yesterday. I so enjoyed being with you last night at the ball, no-one made any adverse comments so I think now we can go out as a couple.'

'Yes I was thinking the same thing. '

Their days were taken up with work but evening became a time for enjoying each other's company. Dinner at the hotel, drives in the country, visits to the theatre, charity functions and on Sundays horse rides to little country pubs, relaxed and happy. One night when they were watching a classic comedy Dvds Dora said 'You don't really have to go home you know, stay with me.'

'Not tonight but I have a surprise for you. I've arranged cover for both of us so that we can have a long weekend in Scotland, visit Amanda and Richard and see Michaela. There's a hotel in Musselburgh I've been to before, it's really good food and I've booked us a double room for 4 nights starting Friday.'

'Oh Steve, that's only 4 days away. I need to go shopping. Does Amanda know? I need to take some presents for the baby.'

'Steady on girl. Of course I checked with Amanda first. It's only half an hour's drive from the hotel so we can see them every day and still have time for some sightseeing.'

They set off early on Friday morning, Steve drove because Dora was too excited. They arrived at Amanda's mid afternoon stopping only for a sandwich snack as they were booked in for an early dinner at Scott's Hotel. Dora exclaimed over her granddaughter who delighted her by producing a smile. When Amanda went to make tea Steve followed her into the kitchen. 'You okay love, it's not too much for you being here with just Michaela for company while Richard's at work. '

'No uncle Steve. There's lots of young mums on this estate. We see each other at clinic, go to a young mums group twice a week and have coffee in each others houses.'

What about you and mum, are you happy?' 'Yes we are, very.'

Richard arrived home earlier than usual and they all spent time together before Dora and Steve left for the hotel. 'We're going out for the day tomorrow so we'll see you in the evening after dinner. If we can arrange it would you like to come to the hotel for lunch on Sunday?'

'Yes, provided they don't mind the baby.'

Dinner was smoked salmon to start with followed by pork steaks with mustard sauce and vegetables with lemon meringue pie for dessert.

'Gosh, I'm really full.' complained Dora. 'Shall we have a brandy after this coffee?' asked Steve.

'No, nothing else for me, you have one if you like.'

'No, I'm fine. Let's go to our room. I think I need a shower.' He went straight to the bathroom and began to undress. As he stepped under the running water Dora joined him and wordlessly began applying shower gel to his body then paused to let him do the same for her. 'You are so beautiful.' he whispered turning off the spray and holding her close against him. They dried each other gently taking in every detail of the other's bodies. 'Do I look odd?' he said. 'Not really, just different.' Later Steve lay awake while Dora slept in his arms. At last they belonged to each other and content he finally let sleep claim him. He was woken next morning by Dora walking her fingers from his navel up his chest to his lips then back down again and lower trailing kisses in their wake. 'Shall we have breakfast sent up?'

'Mmmn good idea girl. Are you happy?'

'What do you think?' she said. He rolled her over, gently biting her ear and posed a question. 'Yes, Oh Yes please.' she said.

When they turned up at Amanda's the next evening they were both bubbling over with happiness. 'You are allowed to come for lunch tomorrow' said Dora. 'It's a special celebration.' She held out her left hand on which sparkled a ruby engagement ring. 'Steve and I have known each other for 40 years and so this seemed an appropriate stone to choose.' There followed a time of hugs, kisses and tears and little Michaela woke up and added her hungry little cries to the celebration.

Three months later in the little village kirk where Amanda attended the young mums club Michaela Louise Young and her cousin Jade Eleanor Reagen were baptised by Rev. Angus McCleod. This accomplished he said 'I now have pleasure in asking Dora and Steve to step forward as we sing the hymn Praise my Soul the King of Heaven.' They had become Mr and Mrs Rosshad two days before in Leeds register office with Phillip, Naomi, Jade, Ron, Simone and members of their staff present. They had had a small reception at Reagen's hotel- the name retained in honour of Michael. On Saturday Steve and Dora once again drove to Scott's hotel for their honeymoon and on Sunday Angus McCleod blessed the marriage. Steve had been deeply touched when Phillip, Amanda and their spouses told him firmly he was no longer uncle Steve but Dad although he insisted he did not want to take Michael's place in their affections. The young Reagen's stayed with Amanda and Richard for a few days and then returned to

Follyfoot to greet the newlyweds on their return. Dora received a dozen red roses from Steve the day afterwards. Her wedding bouquet had been of deep pink blooms and these she had placed on Michael's grave on their way up to Scotland. She had added a little card which read 'with deep affection Dora and Steve.'

Before they returned to Australia Phillip and Naomi shared the news that they were expecting their second child in 7 months time and Amanda too had just had her second pregnancy confirmed.

When the Rosses celebrated their first wedding anniversary the family were all gathered at Follyfoot. Steve took his role as grandfather very seriously and sat on the floor with two little girls clambering over his legs. Dora sat on the chair behind him caressing his hair with Phillip's son Mitch on her knee. Little Rob sat with Amanda. Richard handed round glasses of champagne to celebrate his recent promotion. After they had drunk to his success and the health of everyone Steve disentangled himself from Michaela and Jade and stood with his glass raised. 'And lastly a toast to someone dear to us who is sadly no longer with us- to Michael!' Everyone echoed the name. Outside the wind freshened and seemed to bear the name through the trees and the neighbouring countryside and into the cemetery where fresh flowers adorned Michael's grave. As Dora listened to the childrens giggles and the adults laughter she was sure she could hear his gentle chuckle joining in and she smilingly looked around at everyone and felt blessed indeed. At last her dream- and Steve's had come true.

The End