



# A Season of Happiness

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## Waiting For Michael

by

**Kathy Sampson**

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The circumstances are right, the opportunity has presented itself. Now, all she needs is a plan and she can be free of the humiliation, the abuse, and of him. She simply has to play the dutiful wife and tread softly - very softly - because Michael is not a forgiving man.

But there are things Estelle doesn't know, not yet. They will come to her soon, a piece at a time. And as they do, the night will grow darker, the fear greater and her determination will crumble. She will want to stop it, to go back to the way things were, only it is far too late.

Suddenly, she finds herself alone, terrified and running in fear! And waiting for Michael has become a matter of life and death!

The following preview of Kathy Sampson's **Waiting For Michael** has been extended to the **first three chapters**. This way you will be able to get a good feel for the book before you buy.

**Kathy Sampson's**  
**WAITING FOR MICHAEL**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Waiting alone in the empty lecture room was an unnerving experience, one not to be repeated out of choice. It was eerie in the gloom, the only light being that filtering through the glass windows high on the wall which ran alongside the corridor. Close to the corner was the entrance, a single door. There was no other way of getting in, no alternative means of escape should it be required. Not that it would be. At least, it hadn't seemed necessary when she'd first entered. Now, Estelle wasn't so sure.

There were a few people about. Echoing footsteps could be heard accompanied by the odd murmur of conversation, students there to attend night classes most likely. Occasionally a door would open or close. These sounds were inconsequential – they were ordinary, quite comforting in a way. The noises to worry about were the ones that *couldn't* be heard, because tell-tale sounds were avoided at all cost by those individuals who were up to no good – and there were bound to be some of these characters hovering in the shadows. It was in the genes.

She tried to find something to concentrate on which would take her mind off the imagined dangers of stalking rapists and perverts, returning to the problem which had haunted her for most of the day – the woman on Jason's phone. Though much later in the day, the memory of that voice and what it might mean continued to torment: *"I'm afraid he isn't here. May I ask who's calling?"*

She had never phoned Jason before and had rehearsed her opening lines carefully, including a brief message in the event of confrontation by one of those intimidating answering machines. But when the woman answered, Estelle found herself dumbstruck and had lapsed into temporary emotional shock. Hollow might have been a better way to describe her feelings as she hung up the receiver without saying another word. The heavy silence which followed consumed all but the thud of a pounding heart, evidence that the dream had been dashed by unexpected reality. Later, she just felt misused.

How could he have done such a thing? How could he have deceived her? Six months ago he had appeared to her as a saviour, or at the very least a lone spark of decency and sanity in her otherwise turbulent world. It had been a belief to cling to, a first positive step up from the depths of depression towards a promising light which rekindled hopes presumed long gone. Now it seemed, all of her aspirations had suddenly been laid waste by the tones of a woman's voice which *he* might regard as dulcet, but which continued to grate in *her* memory as the most vulgar sound she had ever heard. So much for men, was the eventual conclusion. They were all as bad as one another!

This shock to her emotional system had occurred nine hours previously. Now that a semblance of composure had returned and there had been time to think, she had to admit that assumption had, perhaps, clouded judgement somewhat, but she could hardly be blamed for that. He had said so little about himself, just that he was a widower, and the rest had been left to guess-work. He might, at least, have *told* her! He could have said there was another woman in his life! Wouldn't that have been the decent thing to do, instead of leading her on?

She had left home early, intending to catch him before he started tonight's class. Disappointment and bitterness had been the motivator, courage not an issue. Even if his explanation turned out to be devastating as expected, she needed to hear it and was prepared for the worst. But the wait had been too long and the main fear had transcended from an agony session with Jason to the imaginary, yet very real dread of an impending attack by person or persons unknown.

*Pull yourself together*, she chided, *You're twenty-eight, a grown woman, and you've got a self-defence course under your belt!* But the advice went unheeded because she had picked up on and was listening to heavy footsteps coming closer. Both the tightening knot in her stomach and the habitual chewing of her lower lip underlined a grave possibility: could it be that some rapists didn't care if their victims heard them coming?

Instinct dictated a need to hide, but that wouldn't do. Any self-respecting attacker would take it as a sign of weakness. Worse still, if it was actually Jason, she could imagine the kind of impression she might create when he found her grovelling on the floor under one of the desks! No – she must somehow project an air of calmness and composure. Above all, she must remain seated, in control. As the footsteps paused outside the room and the door began to open, despite the fervent resolution, she knew she had started to rise, but was unable to stop herself.

Captive breath escaped in a whisper of quiet relief as a hand reached in and groped for the light switches. Even as a mere silhouette, it was undoubtedly his, recognisable anywhere – strong, slender fingers; perfect, manicured nails. The aristocratic hand stroked down the painted wall. Her heart fluttered briefly, quelled in an instant by that cruel memory and the pain of denial. He could touch the

wall; he could touch the woman on the phone; but Estelle might never know the passion and tenderness of that simple intimacy.

He found the switches. There were two soft clicks, then buzzing. White light began to pulse from above as the fluorescents came to life and she was suddenly squinting through a dazzling haze, seeing only his shadowy image as it glided into the room.

"Estelle!" he said in surprise. "What are you doing, sitting in the dark?"

Jason's voice! It was, as always, a warm sun melting the grey of a Winter's sky, a whispered promise, an intoxicating elixir. She had steeled herself for this moment, knowing the golden timbre of his voice would weaken resolve, knowing it had both bewitched and betrayed, and that its siren call must be resisted at all cost; but the spell fate had cast when it had brought the two of them together would not be easily broken. It would take more than a voice on a phone line, more than her own jealous supposition before she would relinquish her claim on him.

It would take Jason himself to say it, to declare in his deep, satin, captivating way that he had given his heart to another, that there was no longer – and never had been – any hope for Estelle who was, after all, just another of his students. If he actually spoke the words, then, and only then, would she accept it was over.

A puzzled frown had crept across his brow. "Are you okay? You look a little shaken."

Thoughts were hastily gathered and she returned a curt nod. "Yes, I'm fine." A tremor in the voice was all-too evident and she attempted to bring it under control. "I was a bit pre-occupied. I didn't hear you come in. You startled me, that's all."

Jason produced his inimitable comforting smile. "This is *me* you're talking to, Estelle, not your husband."

*No, damn it, not my husband*, she thought. *I only wish to God you were!*

"What's wrong? He prompted.

Did she tell him? *Could* she? Estelle swallowed. "I – I just... needed to... see you...." She was stumbling, making a complete mess of it. "I phoned this morning...." It had almost come out, what needed saying, but there was no *good* way to do it.

"Yes," he said. It seemed he had understood the omission perfectly. His head turned as the door behind opened and a young couple entered. He waved *that* hand and extended the new arrivals *that* smile. "Hi," his golden voice called across the room as he pushed reluctantly off the desk against which he had been leaning.

More footsteps. Talking. More students. The room was filling with people. Estelle experienced them as a black cloud choking intentions, smothering her dying hopes. She hated the intrusion. Then a flash of brilliant blue was piercing her dark thoughts and Jason was looking at her.

"My Sister told me someone had called. I thought it might have been you." The smile was natural, casual, and he seemed blissfully unaware of the total relief the words had generated. "We'll talk in the break." He started out for the rostrum at the front of the room, then paused and turned. "By the way, I've got that information for you." A blue eye winked, comforted. "See you later."

After that, Estelle recalled settling behind one of the desks, but little else. The sound of his voice drifted in and around the strange void of her heady, dream-like state, but the spoken words were interpreted as those she wished to hear and for her alone: "*Yes, Estelle, I have a Sister – not a lover, not a mistress who keeps house for me and takes my phone messages, nor even a step-cousin three times removed who lives with me – just a Sister.*"

When the class took a break, it was as if mere moments had simply slipped by, yet it must have been at least half an hour since he had put her ghost to rest. He came to meet her, nodding to a corner of the room which had been deserted by the students in favour of the drink-vending machine in the hallway. She recalled him saying: "Let's go over there." It was a gentle, coaxing suggestion. But as they walked and he asked: "Did I come across okay tonight?" the question seemed incongruous with the healing and compassion she had been anticipating.

Estelle was suddenly back-tracking. "I'm sorry?"

"The topic – Aboriginal influences on localised ecology – is my lecture making sense?" He searched her eyes for understanding, but could find only those delightful hazel gems flecked with silver, and a deal of preoccupied bewilderment. "I guess not," he decided eventually. "You're bored to tears, aren't you?" The disappointment was genuine and apologetic.

"Oh, it's not your fault." The response was too spontaneous and condescending, the tone apathetic. Not surprising, really – *hers* was the only ecology that mattered, and *his* the major influence on it. He couldn't know this, of course, because she hadn't told him. Could she now? How would he take an

admission that she was in love with the man, not a lecturer in Natural History who taught the class she attended two nights a week? Would he forgive her for being distracted by passion and accept, nay welcome, the promise that it wouldn't happen again as long as he never ever left her? Then a burst of laughter from the corridor shattered resolve and she offered meekly: "I've had a lot on my mind lately. I'm sure your lecture is wonderfully informative – they all are. I'm just finding it hard to concentrate."

They were still standing and she had to look up at him. At five foot seven, Estelle wasn't exactly short, but Jason was easily over six foot, not too tall, just nice. Everything about Jason was *nice*. Each time she saw him, another aspect of his personality or appearance emerged as irresistibly likeable. First it had been the athletic physique and broad shoulders, then his flaxen hair and, of course, those magnetic blue eyes. Their very first handshake had sent a magical tingle coursing up her arm, and the true meaning of *nice* had arrived.

From that moment on she had amassed quite a collection of nice things which were Jason, almost to the point of creating a shrine for him in her memory; but it was growing tiresome to merely worship his image and the ground he walked upon. She could do without Jason the Saint, as long as she had Jason, the man.

"It's Michael, isn't it?" he offered tentatively, very aware of the pain the subject of her husband would undoubtedly cause.

*No, Jason, she wanted to say, it's YOU, you're my problem because I can't have you. I've already got a husband, as you well know, and he's a Bastard!* "Yes," was the eventual reply because it was easier to focus on a disastrous marriage and the ramifications of recent developments. Unlike romantic fiction, this was her reality – plain, unvarnished and inescapable. "He's up to something. I know it. Something big this time and I don't think I can handle it. I don't think I even want to know what it is."

"For fear of becoming involved?" Jason watched her. She remained tight-lipped and replied with a timid, anxious nod. He was aware that he was staring and how uncomfortable this made her, but he couldn't help himself. Estelle really was the most attractive, beautiful, and probably the most vulnerable woman he had ever met. It was a crime that she was married at all, let alone to a pig like Michael Ventura.

He had never met the man personally, had really only seen the effect of a relationship turned sour, a situation advising a very wide berth by an outsider. That was the way it started, but Estelle had advanced beyond being a refreshing new face in the classroom with a few issues at home. She had grown into the kind of friend any considerate person would want to know more about, would want to help.

When he had offered – in his capacity as a gentleman, naturally – there had been reluctance at first, but she was gradually coming out of her shell. The more insight he gleaned, the harder it was to offer mere platitudes while an insidious husband continued to destroy someone he was coming to care a great deal for. Yet, he had kept his distance. Recently, however, all of that had changed. When she had confided the nature of her latest dilemma, Jason had thrown caution to the wind and seized the opportunity to ease her suffering in a practical way.

That had been the intention, anyway – to put her mind at rest – but it hadn't quite turned out as anticipated. Far from it: Estelle's suspicions were looking less like the emotional paranoia of woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and more reminiscent of a B-grade spy mystery. His sigh was an admission of genuine concern. "I'd like to be able to tell you not to worry, but I believe you were right about Michael being up to something."

Her eyes widened and the hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle. "You've found out about the false passport, then?"

"Jeffrey's ninety-nine percent sure that it's the real thing."

Estelle's trepidation was obvious. "Jeffrey? I'm not happy bringing strangers into this."

"Don't worry – Jeffrey's completely trustworthy. And he just happens to be in Immigration. He feels inclined to believe that it's genuine, that Michael somehow invented a new identity – George William Truscott – and applied for a passport back in 1987. Everything checks out: name, address, even the photograph."

The frown became a scowl. "Do you mean to tell me that for the past two years I've been married to not one, but *two* bastards, both at the same time?"

Jason glanced to the window which overlooked the street, but didn't attempt to see through the glass, preferring instead the reflection of the two of them standing side by side. They seemed right together. "There's more," he said, and watched her reflected expression change from anger to apprehension. "The visa is also genuine: it was issued last week by the US consulate, before Michael left for Bangkok."

“Is that significant?”

He dragged his eyes away from his dream to concentrate on reality. “I did some digging myself and found out that George Truscott is booked on a Qantas flight to Los Angeles via Sydney on Saturday afternoon.”

“*This Saturday?*” His discrete nod increased concern. “But that’s only the day after Michael arrives back from Bangkok! What’s he scheming now?”

A row of perfect nails scratched absently at his chin. “I think he’s planning to skip out.”

Estelle’s eyes were suddenly alive with fresh hope. “On me, you mean?” The excitement soon waned and her head shook. “I couldn’t be that lucky.” Jason didn’t respond the way she expected. “What’s wrong? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“It’s just a feeling,” was the grim admission. “Obviously, I can’t know what Michael has in mind. It could be any number of things. Look, Estelle,” he said, the inflection of warning unmistakable. “I don’t think you ought to go back to the house.”

“Why ever not?”

“I have to admit I was a little sceptical about your claims that he was using his Import business as a cover for some other shady dealings, but this passport affair started me wondering. I know what I’m about to say will sound a bit cloak-and-daggerish, but Michael hasn’t gone to all this trouble for a few cheap imitation artefacts. Please don’t ask me to expand on that, because I’m only guessing, but I’d rather you were out of the way until this is over. He’s a dangerous man, Estelle. You said so yourself. And you also maintained you didn’t like or trust his business partner, Keith.... what was his name?”

“Dunbar. Keith Dunbar,” she added. “No I don’t. He doesn’t know anything about Eastern Art and I’m pretty sure he carries a gun.”

“There you are, then – it’s too risky.” A noisy murmur rolled in from the corridor as the class began returning after the break. Jason checked his watch and seemed irritated that they had run out of time. He caught Estelle’s arm and squeezed it gently. “Please wait for me afterwards.” He noticed she was chewing her lip and seemed unable to make up her mind. Someone called his name and he waved a hand to acknowledge, but never turned his eyes from Estelle. “Please, Estelle. Promise me you’ll wait.”

*Wasn’t it typical – there had to be a crisis before he would say those words, and the meaning behind them wasn’t anywhere near as romantic as it had been in her dreams. Still, at least he’d said them, and it was the first real chance to make something better from not much at all.* She smiled and nodded. “I promise.”

When the lesson finally concluded, her smile lingered, as did most of the class, armed with a barrage of questions relating to the mid-year field trip which was due to begin at the weekend. Not being a part of it, Estelle had given it no thought until that moment. Perhaps Jason wouldn’t be delayed for too long. A glance in his direction as she was skirting the mob was met by raised eyebrows, a plea for her to honour their agreement. The best reply she could convey was less than convincing and words were out of the question, so she just headed for the door.

Although heart said run after her, the head nagged about responsibility to not just one, but all. And, it seemed, the majority ruled. “Well, are they, Professor?”

The milling heads were scanned until a neatly-permed grey one was located. “Sorry, Mrs Teasdale?”

The old lady’s eyes shifted almost imperceptibly towards Estelle’s receding back before returning to Jason with a knowing twinkle. “I was asking about pets.” The connotation, though not malicious, was there all the same. “Are we allowed to take them? Only, Mitzi-Poo doesn’t like it in kennels because she tends to fret. We’re very close, you see.”

The apparent naivety of the old lady was both a tonic and a sham. He knew it, and she knew he knew. The fact that she had deduced what no-one else in the group had seemed to, made their little secret most special. If only there were more discrete, canny old ladies and less criminal husbands, the world would be a better place.

Unconcerned for the world in general, Estelle continued to pace her small part of it and was ready to scream. Much of her exasperation was directed towards a series of particularly drab abstracts hanging along the corridor wall, merely accentuating both the gloom in her thoughts and the austerity of the surroundings. Then a buzz of excitement heralded the departure of the class as it spilled from the lecture room and hurried towards the exits. Hearing her name a couple of times, she flapped a vague hand of farewell while her eyes remained glued to the open door.

When Jason eventually came out he looked frazzled. He was taking his time, stuffing papers into a brief case as he walked, and on entering the hallway he glanced at the backs of the departing students

to ensure none of them were watching, then rolled his eyes up into their sockets. "It's turning into a nightmare," he whispered conspiratorially. "I'm beginning to dread these trips."

She extended him a sympathetic smile. "It's your own fault – you radiate too much confidence. You're like a Guru to them."

Jason tutted. "I think you're right. I'm sure they see me as some Antipodean Indiana Jones and they're convinced I'm going to lead them to discover the fossilised bones of a dinosaur that will make them all famous."

"Or maybe they expect to get chased by a tribe of long-lost Aboriginals protecting the secret of the Dreamtime." They proceeded towards the exit and Estelle was beginning to feel less agitated, safer too. "I'm sure it will turn out fine. It will probably be fun."

Jason paused. She stopped and looked at him. He held her gaze. "I wish you'd reconsider, Estelle. Especially in the light of these latest problems. I meant what I said earlier. It could be dangerous for you if you stay here. Why don't you come on the trip? If this affair blows up in Michael's face, you'll be out of the way. If not and we're making mountains out of molehills, there's no harm done. Your husband knows you take this evening class and the field trip is an official part of the course, so I don't see how he can object."

"You don't know Michael."

"No, but I'm starting to, and the more I learn of his character, the less I like you being around him." Jason realised he was over-stepping the bounds of propriety and lapsed into an embarrassed, contemplative silence as he started walking again. Turning at the end of the corridor, he said: "At least let me buy you that coffee. Maybe I can get you to change your mind."

Estelle was smiling to herself. "You obviously chose the right vocation. You never give up, do you? Always patient and persistent – the mark of a good archaeologist."

"And don't forget optimism," he reminded her. "When you know you're probably going to have to dig half-way to China with a dessert spoon, you have to believe there's at least a couple of bones or the odd chipped teacup to be found."

"One without a handle, of course." She was warm inside. *He* was doing that to her, dissolving her troubles with his wonderful aura. Just being close to him made her want to laugh and dance. He was a breath of fresh Spring air gusting into her dank prison of a thousand years. She wouldn't over-react, though, for fear of driving him away.

"Of course," he replied and the smile on his face broadened considerably. "Anything but a handle."

They drove down the hill into town, Estelle leading in her shiny, metallic-blue Laser with Jason rattling along behind in his battered Land Cruiser which had seen better days and would doubtless see a good many more. Fremantle was quiet, but then it usually was in the back streets away from the West End, and it was still only Wednesday.

Although nowhere near as busy as it would be on a weekend, Market Street clung doggedly to that Mediterranean air of gaiety and *je ne sais quoi* for which Fremantle as a whole and this area of the City in particular was famous. Despite the chill Winter wind and the promise of rain, a few ardent, outdoor types sat beneath flapping umbrellas and leaned on the tops of side-walk tables, warming themselves over the steam rising from their cappuccinos. Far outnumbered by those who preferred the interior warmth of the trattorias, they ignored the insinuations of the glances tossed at them through the windows, confident that they were proving a point, even if they were so cold that they couldn't remember what it was.

Estelle found a parking spot large enough to accommodate both vehicles. They began the trudge back to the main street and as they were walking past the Norfolk Arms the pleasant sounds of light conversation and chinking glasses drifted out on a heavily supportive aroma of hops and malt. Jason nodded at the limestone-walled beer garden and said: "Would you prefer something stronger?"

Estelle's head shook. "Just a very hot coffee – I'm freezing." It was the truth. She hadn't been thinking clearly when dressing that morning – not surprisingly – and it had been reasonably warm then. It was only by sheer chance that there happened to be a light cotton jacket on the back seat of the car and, although better than nothing, it imparted little in the way of protection. A brief, sideways glance found Jason's arm to be invitingly close. Could she slip her own through without compromising the position of either of them? It was doubtful. Pulling the front panels of the jacket together, she fumbled with the zipper.

The wind hit as they turned onto Market Street. They pushed into it with their heads down, then the rain came. Before she knew what was happening, Jason's hand had enveloped her own. "We'd better

run for it," he said, almost having to shout to make himself heard above the whistling squall. "Do you think you can?"

*Did my heart just stop? Isn't it now beating nineteen to the dozen?* "Yes, I think so." *I know so.*

There was a break in the traffic and they raced across the road, not waiting for the lights to change. "Where do you want to go?" called Jason.

"I don't care. Anywhere."

Had he known the recklessness with which she had become temporarily infected, he would have dashed back to the car and driven her straight to that mystery destination '*Anywhere*'; but being ignorant of both this and her deep feelings towards him, he guided her to Miss Maude's instead.

Considering the inclement weather, it was surprisingly busy. Despite this, it didn't have the atmosphere Jason would have preferred. From his point of view, the place had become impersonal since it had ceased to be Pappa Luigi's, but that, he supposed, was progress. Anyway, it was the closest cafe and *had* saved them from drowning, so it was deserving of a little loyalty.

They took a table next to the window and while waiting for their order to be brought over, Jason tried once more to change Estelle's mind about the trip. It was strange, but now that they were out of the wind and rain and he had released her hand, the old fears began to return and she felt as if she was standing apart from the rest of the world, being watched by it. A sigh of disappointment said far more than the words that followed. "Honestly, Jason, I can't. I'd love to come, but Michael's expecting me to pick him up from the airport on Friday evening. He'll throw a fit if I'm not there to meet him."

"If he is planning to skip the country on Saturday," Jason reminded her, "He won't have time to come and look for you – he'll be so busy fitting together the pieces of his dirty little puzzle. The field trip lasts a week. In that time, your sleazy husband will be long gone."

"And pigs might fly," she mumbled disconsolately. Conversation died when a young waitress approached with the coffees. The uncomfortable silence lingered a few seconds until she had walked out of earshot. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound cynical, but nothing good's happened to me for the past two years and I can't imagine my luck suddenly changing."

"Not unless you make it."

*Doesn't he think I want to? Jason must know how I feel about him! Not until you tell him, silly,* she reminded herself. "I don't see I have a choice. I simply *have* to meet Michael's plane, even if he is going to run out on me – *especially* if he is."

Jason was sipping at his cup as he listened. He paused and looked across at her. "I don't understand. Why *especially*?"

A centimetre of froth had attached itself to his upper lip. She resisted the urge to smile. "Because my being there is part of his plan. If I don't show up it might cause a chain reaction which could upset everything. He may not have time to put on his George Truscott hat." *Or a false moustache...?* Jason must have picked up on her thoughts, because a napkin rose and wiped away the distraction. That was a relief. Cute, though. Now, back to being serious. "What if he misses the LA flight? You said earlier there was every chance this could blow up in his face. To be perfectly honest, I hope it does, and that has nothing to do with revenge – I don't want to be seen as the one lighting the fuse, not prematurely, not at any time. Michael's fate has to be entirely his own doing."

His blue eyes were watching her intently, capturing each movement of her hands, every nervous twitch, but he remained silent. Estelle was glad, because there was more to say. "I've just this minute decided – I will come to Kalbarri, but only *after* Michael has gone. I don't love him, Jason – I don't believe I ever did – but *he* has to leave *me*. If he does, I'll be free of him for good. If *I* walk out on *him*, especially now, I can expect to be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. You do see that, don't you?"

An odd sensation was taking hold of Jason, one which heated blood and left a rosy glow tingling on nerve endings. At first he fancied it might be a simple re-emergence of that special love he had known, the once-in-a-lifetime happening thought to be lost and buried along with Helen; but this, surprisingly, was deeper. The only other emotion it could be equated to was pride, and the level was so great that it transcended worldly admiration. This could be compared to the adoration of Saints and Martyrs. She was afraid – no doubt of it – but her courage far outweighed fear and he loved her all the more because of it.

The buzz of tingling energy which had been slowly building inside began to swim through his system, reached his hands and accumulated there, preparing them to slide across the table and join with hers. A simple touch might be all that was needed to unite two lonely souls in a wonderful, newfound togetherness. A few centimetres was all it would take. A little courage to cross the void. One of his fingers twitched. It was the false start he didn't need. The coward in him returned ringing alarms. The



erstwhile energy cooled and beat a hasty retreat behind the skirts of commonsense. He slumped inwardly. Maybe he did love Estelle – dare he say as much as, if not more than Helen? – but at this point in time she was a married woman. No matter how strong, no matter that she felt the same, it was a love forbidden both by convention and conscience. *It could not be!*

“Jason?” she urged softly. “Are you okay? You’ve gone funny.” Her hand moved over the table top and rested on his.

The touch sparked a resurgence of excitement, causing him to feel exposed and embarrassed. Cheeks glowed hot, and ears began to burn. “Er – yes, I’m good, really I am. I didn’t mean to be rude. I was listening. I was trying to find an argument stronger than yours, but you seem to have covered all the obvious moves.” *In particular the one with your hand,* he thought.

Withdrawing his own from beneath hers, he dipped into a pocket for a handkerchief to mop at the droplets of rain on his brow. It was a poor excuse for breaking contact, but uncertainty precluded the invention of anything better. Then something leapt to mind and the hand dived inside his jacket and came out with a wallet.

Removing a business card, he turned it over, slid a pen from his top pocket and began scribbling. He heard Estelle ask him what he was doing. Instead of replying, he simply raised a hand begging continued patience, then wrote faster. Once finished, he glanced over the card briefly before passing it to her. “Those are numbers where I can be contacted in Kalbarri. The first one is the caravan park where we’re staying, and this -,” the ball-point indicated the second number, “Is the Ranger’s residence. He’ll know where we are on any given day – I always notify him when I take a party into the gorges, just in case.”

Sitting back, he leaned heavily into the chair, methodically replacing his wallet and pen to their respective pockets. It was a way of returning to business as usual, disappointing in many respects, but all he could handle at the moment. “I’m setting off early tomorrow morning, but I’ll ring you first and again as soon as I arrive at Kalbarri. After that, you won’t hear from me until Saturday night. All being well, Michael Ventura alias George Truscott should be out of your life by then. I’ll be expecting you to tell me what time you’re leaving Sunday morning.”

“Leaving?” She sounded bewildered. “Where am I going?”

“To join us in Kalbarri,” he stated positively. “You said you would and I’m holding you to that.” He sat forward again. “If I get no reply, or Michael answers, or you sound the slightest bit anxious, then I’ll be straight in the car and heading South before you even get a chance to hang up.”

“That’s silly. I’ll be okay\_\_”

“I’m sorry, Estelle, but I want your word on this. If anything goes wrong, anything at all, phone me – day or night, it doesn’t matter. I need to know that you’re alright. Will you do that for me?”

“Well...” Her head rocked from side to side as if calculating the odds. Not that she needed to. Finally she said: “If it means that much to you.”

“It does.” *You do.*

She nodded. “If anything happens, I’ll call.” She waved the business card at him.

“And I’ll ring you as arranged.”

“I’ll be expecting you.” *I’ll be sitting right by the phone.*

~0~0~0~0~

She let herself in through the side door from the garage as usual and went straight to the kitchen. Although she had been unable to eat a thing all day, there was nothing appealing in the fridge, so she carried on into the lounge and switched on the television. A minute later she got straight up and switched it off.

She wandered, stopping occasionally, abruptly, to dart the odd glance, or listen attentively. What was to see, to hear – nothing, surely? So, why the jumping nerves? This ought to have been a time to savour – no Michael, home alone, nothing to fear. Or was there?

The coffee table looked unusually large, bare. Why was that? Memory clicked in – there was no mail cluttering the glass top because she had omitted to clear the box. It had completely slipped her mind.

She walked directly to the front door without thinking, not realising until her hand was on the knob and turning it that she would have to go back and find the key in order to undo the dead-lock. Letting the knob spring back, she was about to turn away when her eyes happened to stray to the gap between the door and the frame, that part where both locking bolts could be seen silver and glinting in the light. There were two bolts – one for the ordinary door latch, and one above which was the dead-lock.

Only one was visible. *The top bolt had been unlocked!*

Her pulse was suddenly racing and breath was coming in short, sharp pants. She was positive she'd locked it before going out. It was habit born of dire necessity because Michael had a phobia about burglars, and to ignore any 'royal' command was a punishable offence. A hasty re-cap of the morning's events brought back Estelle's anxiety over the woman's voice on Jason's phone. That must have been it – reason enough for forgetting to lock up properly.

Temporarily convinced of it, she opened the door and started out onto the porch. The rain had eased and was now little more than a light shower. She jogged down the path to the mailbox, took out the small bundle of envelopes and advertising circulars, then trotted back.

In the process of closing the door, she managed to drop the mail. Sinking to one knee, she began to gather it up, then froze. Rising just enough, she was able to see a large wet patch on her jeans. A hand went to the area of carpet beneath. It was sodden. Surely not her doing? A hand went to the sole of a shoe – barely moist. A glance up at the ceiling detected no evidence of a leak from the roof. How, then?

There seemed only one explanation: someone had come in earlier when it was raining hard. Estelle hadn't forgotten to lock the door. Someone had unlocked it after she'd left! Muscles were tightening, hands trembling. Who? Who had been in the house? Who might still be inside?

Unlikely though it was, there seemed to be only one possible answer and she spoke the name as a hoarse, bewildered gasp:

*"MICHAEL?!!"*

## CHAPTER TWO

When a woman is at home alone and suspects an intruder is on the premises, there are a number of options open to her: she can beat a hasty retreat to seek help from a neighbour; she can call the Police, always assuming there is a telephone handy; she can pick up the closest weapon and parade around the house shouting, "I know you're there and if you don't leave right now, you'll be sorry!" - or she can freeze.

Immediate problem solved, Estelle froze. Calling the Police only remained an option because it was a conditioned reflex and was instantly dismissed as inadvisable, perhaps dangerous. An investigation at this time could draw attention to Michael, maybe hinder his getaway. If, however, the intruder was Michael, it required little imagination to guess how he would react after the Police had apologised to him and left. He would be less than understanding.

But it *couldn't* be Michael, could it? He was in Bangkok and not due to return until Friday evening. Why would he change his plans and not say anything?

On second thoughts, he might do just that. Michael, it seemed, was going out on his own, leaving his wife, his country, skipping out on his business partner, maybe even the syndicate he worked for or with, assuming that such an organisation did exist which was more than a possibility. Knowing Michael, he was probably hopping off with a good slice of their loot. If all of this, or even a part of it, was true, he wouldn't be able to trust anyone but himself. No wonder the need for a false identity!

Estelle knew she was only guessing, but these things had to be considered. She wanted him out of her life, quickly, painlessly. Any action of hers which jeopardised that ambition was tantamount to suicide. So, no Police. No outsiders.

Neither did she see herself as the local Neighbourhood Watch Champion - aerobics with Jane Fonda might be good for the waistline, but this was real life and she knew from past experience that it tended to hit back, generally very hard.

In need of reassurance, a previous wishful thought was some comfort: what if the intruder had already left? Maybe it was Michael, maybe not, but if the house was now empty, she was getting herself into a stew over nothing. A lengthy pause to listen confirmed all seemed quiet. The only obvious sounds were from traffic on the nearby highway and her own restricted breathing. Apart from that, the house was as silent as the grave.

*Smart choice of words, Estelle!* She began to rise, slowly, cautiously, the mail still clutched tightly in a clenched fist. Then she was slipping off her shoes and tip-toeing along the hall towards the lounge. *Why don't you just leave?* pleaded an astonished inner voice. "I can't," she whispered aloud, "I have to know." A few more steps and she was hissing: "Oh, God, Jason. If only you were here!"

She'd made it to the phone and paused. *He's just a seven-digit number away*, nudged memory, then added his words: "... *anything at all, phone me - day or night...*" This was the kind of 'anything' he had meant.

She placed the mail on the small table, began reaching for the receiver, then hesitated. To do, or not to do? Unable to decide, she made a tight fist to reset the nerves, opened her fingers and tried again. The hand refused to go any lower as if there was a string attached to it from the ceiling. Was this the puppeteer on high trying to keep her from making what might be a huge mistake? Or was it something closer to home? There was an undeniable need to involve Jason in her life, make him a part of it. Above all, a longing to hear his voice, right at that moment. But if her fears proved to be imaginary, far better that she convince herself of it than drag Jason over on a wild goose chase.

Leaving the phone, she went into the lounge. There was a great deal to be said for open plan - very few doors to creak as they were opened and it was possible to see into rooms without actually entering them, and be able to dash through from one to the next without delay if need be. Conversely, doors were quite handy barriers to shut behind a person if they were being pursued. It was too late to worry now: the house was built, she was in it, and so too was her prospective attacker - *maybe*.

The lounge was as she had left it - comfortably empty. So, too, were both the dining room and the kitchen. Each of these discoveries generated a little more confidence until she was on the verge of feeling normal again - at least, as normal as could be expected under the circumstances.

She continued to search the rest of the house, finally arriving at the very satisfactory conclusion that she was definitely alone. All that lingered was that unnerving, nauseous feeling whenever privacy has been invaded. Whether by her own husband or another, she didn't know, but it was, nevertheless, unsettling.

Taking her nervous disposition to the point of becoming a phobia, she went around the house checking locks and latches, and even went so far as to pluck some hairs from her head, licked them, then stuck them across the gaps between all of the outside doors and their frames. Maybe it would work, maybe not, but they did it in the movies.

During the next half hour, a continuous routine was established - checking rooms, windows, doors, locks, and hairs, paying special attention to this last device. Far from easing tension, the frequent patrols exacerbated it. A slight detour to the cocktail bar seemed a desirable cure. Taking the glass into the kitchen, the next intended port of call, she drowned the splash of vodka with orange juice. A sip or two later, she was padding along the hall to examine the security of the front door when the phone rang - right behind her!

Estelle gasped. Her heart stopped. She jolted. A third of the drink slopped out of the glass. Some splashed the wallpaper, but most of it ended up on the carpet. Unaware of this, she stood trembling, mildly alcoholic juice dripping from her hand, eyes wide and staring at the phone which continued to herald an incoming call, daring her to answer.

*It's a phone*, she told herself. *What harm can a phone do you? It can blow up*, was the condescending reply. *It happens all the time. Maybe the phantom intruder planted a bomb!*

The imagined threat was terrifying - ridiculous, but terrifying. Despite the self-reassurance, she bent to peer under the resonating instrument, not really knowing what to look for, expecting there might be some sign of tampering. It appeared quite innocuous, just like any other phone. Finally, the warbling stopped.

Estelle caught her breath. She listened, hoping to hear nothing, praying there would be no ticking. Then it dawned that some bombs were designed to stop ticking just *before* they went off! A nervous glance in the direction of the front door confirmed it was probably too far to reach in time. Plus, it was latched, dead-locked, and *haired!*

The phone started up again. After two warbles and when no explosion had rocked the house, she reproached herself for being stupid. The third and fourth warbles provided the opportunity for a determined swig of the drink, then her hand was swooping for the receiver and had gathered it up before the fifth had finished.

No bang. No blinding flash.

"Yes?" she hissed testily, and waited.

"Estelle," said a man's voice. "What's wrong? It's me - Jason."

She let out a huge, relieved sigh. "Oh, *Jason*\_\_!" It almost came out - *Darling* - but she managed to stifle herself just in time. "\_\_\_It's you." Had that expressed too much relief? Another quick sip of the drink and she tried again. "Nothing's wrong."

"It doesn't sound that way. I knew I shouldn't have let you go home alone. I'm coming over."

"No!" *Calm down, Estelle.* "Honestly, Jason, there's nothing the matter. It was a nice surprise. I wasn't expecting to hear from you until tomorrow."

"I wanted to catch you before you went to bed," he explained. "I don't suppose you'd consider changing your mind about leaving now before Michael gets back?"

*It might be too late for that,* she thought. *He could already be here.* "I can't, Jason. I told you why. I want this over with. A couple of days and it will be. I realise it must be hard for you, having to take a back seat, but it will be worth it. I promise you." Oh, no! That sounded like a promiscuous come-on and brought an embarrassed flush to her face.

Jason hadn't picked the double-meaning and the assurance brought no comfort. "Okay, if you're sure. But it's going to be a hell-of-a wait."

"Just think of all those chipped teacups," she said, adding a chuckle.

"I'm thinking," he said. There was a long pause. "I had an idea after I left you tonight. It's about the field trip. Is there any reason that you know of why you shouldn't pack for it now?"

"My clothes and stuff, you mean?"

"Clothes and whatever else ladies cart around with them when they go on holiday."

"You're beginning to sound like a chauvinist."

"I'm serious, Estelle," he insisted. "If you packed now, tonight, would that be a problem?"

"No, but I don't see why\_\_"

"Will you do it, then? Please. For me? Maybe I'm being an old woman, but if your bags are packed and you have to leave quickly for any reason..."

"I can't see why I'd need to," she lied, glancing towards the front door, trying to see if the hair was still attached or whether it had fallen off, "But I'll do it - for you. And I'll put it in the car, ready."

"What about Michael's luggage when you collect him from the airport? Won't he get suspicious if he sees your case in the car?"

"No way," Estelle retorted with certainty. "Lord and Mighty Emilio Michael Ventura wouldn't dream of putting his custom-made, genuine Italian leather suitcase in the boot - might scratch the rolled-gold monogram!"

"Did you say *Emilio*?"

"Michael's first name. He doesn't particularly like it - says it sounds too ethnic - so he only uses it when officialdom dictates."

Jason snorted derisively. "Except when he goes under the name of George Truscott."

"Yes," said Estelle quietly as the thought brought her back down to earth, "Except then."

There was a voice in the background, female, then the phone went quiet as the mouthpiece was muffled. In a second or two, he was back. "Sorry, Estelle - visitors. Fran says it's someone wanting to join the field trip."

"Fran?" Estelle's jealousy stirred unpleasantly.

"My Sister."

"Oh, yes, of course." Kicking herself inwardly, she relaxed again.

"I'm sorry, Estelle," he repeated apologetically, "But I'll have to go. You're sure you'll be alright?"

"I'm going straight off to pack," she assured him, "Then I'll put the case in the boot of the car, and after that I'll probably go to bed." *Alone,* she thought dismally. Still, at least it wouldn't be with Michael.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, then." The disappointment was plainly obvious.

"Look forward to it. 'Bye, Jason." She waited for his farewell and for the line to click before adding softly: "Darling." Then she hung up.

One last circuit confirmed that there was not a hair out of place which, in turn, suggested that defences had not been breached, not since she'd locked up, anyway. This was cold comfort since the mystery intruder had a key, maybe even a set of them, and could come and go as he pleased.

It could be a *she*, Estelle reminded herself. It seemed unlikely, probably because she was still convinced that Michael had, for some reason, returned home early from Bangkok. But until this could be confirmed absolutely, and to preserve a sense of fairness which the bastard in no way deserved, she decided to think of him, or her, as *the spectre*.

If it existed at all, it had been very careful. Nothing in the place, with the exception of the front door lock, had been disturbed. Not that could be seen, anyway, and this posed another problem - what had it been doing there? The burning question was finally answered in the bedroom.

She went there to pack. Her case was in the back of the walk-in robe where it usually was - where it had been since their honeymoon two years previously, because that was the last time she'd been further than Serpentine Falls where Michael had taken her on their first wedding anniversary in a moment of

weakness. The valise was tan, Italian leather like his, but had no monogram, presumably for the same reason that it was smaller - a spouse ought not to be encouraged to have ideas above her station. There was just a chance that he might have been considerate of the weight-factor, but it was unlikely. Not that it mattered at that point in time because it was empty.

Having taken it out, the back of the wardrobe looked conspicuously bare. It took a moment or two of puzzled gazing to realise why. Then she remembered Michael's second case. He'd bought it six months previously and his explanation that he wanted it so that he could save having to use his good one all the time seemed logical. Since that day, however, it had sat alongside hers, unused. Now it had gone!

*I'm sure it was there the other day, she thought, I know it was because it fell over against my leg while I was trying to get my dress disentangled from the hanger. When was that exactly - last week before Michael left? No, Estelle, she warned and the spectre was suddenly a very real threat once more. It was YESTERDAY. It fell on you yesterday, AFTER Michael had gone. His spare, plastic, K-Mart case which he DIDN'T TAKE WITH HIM when he left for Bangkok was here this morning, but now it's GONE!*

There was something else. Pushing it upright, it had felt heavy as if full of clothes. At the time, the discovery hadn't been regarded as significant and she'd been in too much of a rush to worry about it, but now it all seemed to tie in with Michael's plan to become George Truscott and effect a moonlight flit. George wouldn't want to draw attention to himself, certainly not carrying expensive leather luggage bearing the initials E.M.V. He'd use a cheap plastic case, just like the one that was no longer in the back of Estelle's robe!

She stumbled out, pulling her empty case with her. It was looking more and more like Jason was right - staying in the house alone wasn't a good idea. But there was little choice. She had to turn a blind eye to whatever was going on, the way she had always conveniently passed off all of Michael's strange goings-on. She couldn't afford to concern herself with any of this. It was *his* game. She was just a pawn and, with this in mind, resolved to stay very quiet, particularly docile, doing everything expected of her and nothing more for the next two days.

Except for packing. That she *would* do, if for no other reason than to please Jason. About to put the suitcase on the bed, the spectre reared its invisible head again. The bed cover had been disturbed! There were wrinkles around a slight depression where someone might have sat, or maybe placed a heavy object - like a cheap plastic, K-Mart suitcase!

She shivered and turned slowly, inspecting the order of things in the room, trying to ascertain whether anything else had been moved or displaced. A triangle of white linen hanging from a closed drawer caught her eye. The drawer was the bottom one of the small chest on Michael's side of the bed. Stepping up to it, she knelt and pulled out the drawer.

The material was the corner of a handkerchief. That same morning it had been laid neatly on top of the other items - she'd made sure of it herself because she didn't want Michael to know she had been nosing around in his belongings. Because under the neatly-folded handkerchiefs and vests, right in the bottom beneath the paper liner was the passport in the name of George William Truscott.

Holding up the pile of material with one hand, she slid the other down the inside of the drawer, hooked up the paper with her nails, and felt beneath. Despite knowing what to expect, she still caught her breath. The passport was no longer there!

Estelle sank back on her heels. Her heart was pounding once more and beads of moisture were forming on her brow. Her glazed stare saw nothing material, just the spectre growing clearer, taking on the shape of a man she knew only too well. It *had* to be Michael! It simply *had* to be. Who else would have come for George Truscott's suitcase and passport? Apart from Estelle, Jason and the department of immigration, Michael was the only one likely to know such a person even existed!

The packing didn't take long. It was certainly not attended to with her usual care, but then, she was hardly herself at the time. She was a stubborn, independent woman who should have listened to the only man she loved, and ought to be, at that very moment, sitting in his lounge on the sofa with his Sister, talking about the forthcoming trip. Well, that was a stupid mistake which was being rectified. Then, she would be leaving!

Once out of the bedroom and lugging her suitcase, Estelle was into damage control. Lights were left burning, doors ajar. There was no last-minute check of personal appearance. Not intending to be seen, not wishing to be, it was irrelevant. Even the precautionary hair guarding the side exit to the garage was ignored when the door was unlocked. Haste was everything. Oversights could be rued later.

The light was still on in the garage, probably from when she came home. A bit extra on Michael's power bill - good! By the time she had unlocked the boot, tossed in the case and closed it again, she was breathless and her head was swimming. Now she paused for a quick re-think. Was there

something that had been missed? Did it matter if there was? She decided not and was heading for the driver's door when the overhead light died. The garage should have been in darkness, but it wasn't. There was still a glow coming from the street-lamps. Ergo, the roller-door was open.

Goose bumps erupted. She spun, stared at the partially-open door, pulse quickening. This time it couldn't be her fault. An automatic device activated the motor somehow – another example of Michael's foibles. So, the door had shut itself, after she'd parked the car. Since then, someone must have opened the door manually, just enough for a person on foot to enter... or leave! A man carrying a cheap plastic suitcase and a passport!

That seemed to confirm it - Michael had definitely been and gone. He had returned secretly when he knew Estelle would be attending her night class. He had let himself in, taken the suitcase and the passport and ducked out through the garage... Why would he bother to do that? Why not just leave the same way he'd entered – through the front door? Maybe that had been his original intention, which was why he'd left it unlocked.

But - a shiver ran down her spine - what if he was running late and she'd arrived home while he was still in the house? In order to remain unseen, he'd have to wait his chance to sneak out through the garage. Logic was a wonderful thing, except when the conclusions reached made one sick to the stomach.

All the time she was performing her paranoid-spy routine, Michael must have been there, inside, watching, waiting, desperate to keep his early return to the country a secret. One he might even have been prepared to kill to protect!

The mere thought caused her to feel weak in the knees and she had to lean against the car to prevent herself from falling. She sagged there for a few seconds, bringing her breathing under control. A sharp object was pressing into the palm of her hand – the car keys – a reminder of her intended dash for freedom. Until then it was the only sensible option. Now this – the open roller-door. The spectre had left the building. All evidence pointed to it. There was no longer a need for rush and panic. Was there?

Plagued by indecision, she hammered a fist on a thigh hard enough to cause pain. That was reality, a physical assault on the senses. This... this other airy-fairy clap-trap was all in her head, the product of pure assumption. What were the facts, just those pertinent to the current situation? There was an unlocked door, rain on the carpet. The case and passport were missing. Most importantly, the garage door had been left open. Someone other than her had been there, but now they'd gone, which was all that mattered.

The plan, paranoid or not, was still on. Whether the mystery visitor was Michael was irrelevant. Indeed, had it been him, it was even more essential that she play the innocent so that he didn't know she suspected. Estelle must keep her nerve and continue to go through the motions as if nothing more than a few strange, yet inconsequential things had happened.

It was decided, then. A deep breath was almost convincing until it was exhaled with a shudder. Moving to the wall beside the car, her fingers pushed a button. A motor started up. The roller door closed. There was a moment of panic as she found herself in darkness.

Less than a minute later, Estelle was back inside, trembling somewhat as she locked the side door and replaced the hair on the frame with a fresh one. Finally, after switching out the lights, she went to bed.

### CHAPTER THREE

Estelle slept soundly that night, less surprising than might have been expected because, when the body and mind are subjected to excessive trauma and excitement, internal chemistry has a way of producing its own sedative. Unfortunately, although the new day awoke bearing promise, within minutes a former paranoia was also stirring from slumber to corrupt optimism with its own unnerving agenda.

Rooms were entered warily. The smallest of sounds made her jump. Each time they were in view, exit doors were regarded with suspicion and although she tried to kid herself that the preoccupation was a hang-over from last evening and unlikely to bear fruit, sweet or otherwise, it was becoming obsessive. It was plainly obvious that reassurance was the only cure, so she did the rounds. The hairs were still attached. Nobody had entered the house while she had been asleep.

This encouraging discovery raised spirits and needed something to top it off. There seemed no better way of celebrating than with a good breakfast, so Estelle made a bee-line for the kitchen. Choices of fare were plentiful, the mere thought of most nauseous. The coffee machine provided a temporary

remedy and while waiting for it to perform its noisy procedure, she revived the positives by anticipating the end of all her troubles when she finally went to meet Jason in Kalbarri.

Hopes and dreams took centre stage and lingered through the pouring of the first coffee. Actions necessary to perform the various functions were easy, tried and tested, nothing to worry about. They'd been done before, a thousand times. But Kalbarri....? She wasn't even sure where it was, could barely remember what Jason had told her – only that it was a long drive. Could she make it on her own? Was she crazy to try? Wouldn't it be better to bail out right now and join Jason's convoy? He said he'd phone before leaving, so the option was still open.

A glance at the wall clock brought a frown. He'd said he wanted to make an early start, but it was hardly that. Maybe something had gone wrong. He could have had problems and forgotten to phone. Surely not?

By the time she was on her third cup of coffee and he still hadn't called, Estelle was worrying fit to burst. When the phone eventually burred into life, she snatched it up in near-panic, pulse racing, breathing constricted. "Are you alright?" she asked hurriedly, not even attempting to mask her concern. "I was starting to think you'd forgotten."

"How could I do that, Estelle?" He sounded hurt and extremely weary. "I'm sorry it's so late, but things haven't gone quite according to plan. It's like the start of the gold rush out there," he grumbled, full of misgivings. "I was under the impression most of them were making their own way, but I was wrong. There are six cars blocking driveways up and down the street, and seventeen people, all milling about, making enough racket to wake the dead. Old Mrs. Teasdale's driving a Morris Major that doesn't look as if it will make it past Midland. She's brought her budgie along! Can you believe that? I need you *with* me, Estelle. If you don't come I can't vouch for my sanity."

She knew he didn't mean to make her feel bad, but the effect was the same. "Keep thinking of Sunday, Jason. By then it will all be over."

"That's four days!" he moaned. "A lot can happen in that time."

"It won't," she stated categorically. "I won't let it. I'll be fine, Michael will have gone, and you won't have to weave baskets - I promise. Take your wagon train and have a good time. How far is it, by the way?"

"Almost seven hundred kilometres. It's a very long drive on your own."

"You won't *be* on your own - you'll have lots of company, including Mrs. Teasdale, *and* her budgie."

"I was thinking about *you*." Jason had gone very quiet.

Here was the option, perhaps the last chance to exercise it. Yes, or no? She took a deep breath and glanced around the kitchen at the normality, the tedium it suggested, a reminder of those patterns in life so often ignored because they never change. Not unless someone interferes with them. Only then do they become a conscious issue. Although disagreeable, the path she must continue to tread was clear – make no waves, no changes. "Don't worry about me. I intend to take it very easy. Just make sure the tent you said I could use is set up and waiting. I've never been camping before and I'd hate to make a fool of myself."

"You could never do that, Estelle," he said gently and typically Jason, being nice again.

The rest of the day dragged terribly with only the memory of his words to carry her through until he eventually called at eleven that night. She had been watching the phone like a hawk since early evening, worrying that it was getting so late, but then she remembered the delayed start and the distance to be covered. No doubt Mrs. Teasdale and a few of the others would want to stop at every available ladies room on the way. Jason confirmed as much, this and the utter shambles which had ensued when they were forced to make camp after dark with only the courtesy lights of the caravan park and a few strategically-placed car headlamps to guide them.

Once he'd hung up, Estelle sat alone, brooding. If only she could have been there to share in the confusion and experience the excitement of his nearness, even in the midst of bedlam. But her time would come.

Friday was the longest day imaginable. She spoke to Jason for ten minutes in the morning - another surprise call - and was decidedly miserable after he'd hung up because she wasn't sure when she would next hear his voice. It could be as early as that same evening, assuming Michael failed to show up at the airport.

That being the case, she would ring Jason at the caravan park to give him the 'good' news and confirm that she would be leaving for Kalbarri on Sunday. He would argue, of course, saying that there was no reason for her to stay, not with Michael as-good-as gone. But Estelle had decided something. It was necessary to actually see him leave. She had to be at Perth Domestic, watching from the safety of the

crowd as George Truscott boarded the Sydney flight, taking the misery which was Michael with him. It was the only certain way of ending the nightmare.

But that was 'if'. For now, it had to be played by the original rules, the same way it always was when Michael flew in from overseas – even though he already had. Estelle was ready to leave for the airport in good time and, although still very nervous, she had managed to summon a sense of anticipation. Then she heard the phone. The initial thought was to let it ring, but, unlikely though it was, it could be Jason with a few words of much needed comfort and support. She snatched up the receiver.

The voice wasn't Jason's. Immediate disappointment regressed to disquiet as she recognised the caller. It was Keith Dunbar, Michael's business partner. The man was a creep of the first order, self-opinionated and insincere with a voice to match. He was to be regarded as dangerous, perhaps more so than Michael because much about him was unknown. He was certainly the last person she needed to talk to. As it happened, he just wanted to know if Michael was still arriving on the scheduled flight. There seemed no harm in telling him. In fact, there was a possibility that his call was instigated by Michael to check up on her. So, she feigned pleasantness and was in the midst of explaining that she was about to leave for the airport when the phone went dead - not so much as a 'thank you', or 'sorry to have troubled you!' Estelle was then forced to sit for a while to rid herself of the shakes.

She left the house late, tense at first, becoming calmer into the drive, feeding on the reassurance that Michael wouldn't be there. This was merely going through the motions, a charade for the benefit of whoever might be watching, a parting gift for Michael to ensure his master-plan went off without a hitch. By the time she reached the airport, the con-job was complete and a girlish anticipation was taking hold.

She parked, then walked casually into the terminal, playing the part as rehearsed by gazing wide-eyed at the TV flight monitor, displaying a look of eagerness tempered with that brand of anxiety which any loving wife who mistrusted aircraft would show.

Once the plane had landed, she moved to the appropriate arrival gate, knowing full well that at least ten minutes would elapse before the first of the passengers cleared customs and began to filter through. She eased her way to the front, every so often standing on tip-toe to get a better look at the new arrivals.

It would be necessary to wait until the last had disappeared into the night before painting the finishing touches of the concerned, dutiful-wife portrait. First would come the anxious enquiries regarding a husband who had failed to arrive as scheduled. To this would be added growing distress with a dab of anger for moral support. The situation might even call for a tear or two during the perplexed shuffle to the car. Underlying this, and hopefully undetected by anyone, would be a bubbling euphoria waiting for the right moment to burst free. It would be such an amazing experience, a\_\_\_!

"Oh, My God! *Michael!!!*" she heard herself whispering.

He was lumbering through the gate towards her, weaving a somewhat unsteady line with his trolley which was as much a means of transporting his Italian leather suitcase and bag of duty-free's, as it was support for his sad personage. Michael was undeniably home, and drunk as usual.

Estelle felt faint. This wasn't possible! He *couldn't* be on his original flight - he was already *here!* Michael seemed as unaware of this fact as he was oblivious of most of his surroundings. He did, however, spot Estelle and acknowledged her presence with a nod of his head and a scowl which said: "*Good, you're here. Just as well.*"

She extended a limp wave and a smile which quivered at the extremities. Everything was going wrong. The wonder cure had failed and the disease survived unabated. There was nothing left but to go with the flow and, maybe later, something might occur which would help to salvage the ruins of what had been a good plan. Although unknown to him, the treachery she continued to foster brought on a wave of irrational guilt. In a rather hasty act of penance, she attempted to push his trolley for him, only to be repulsed by an irritated shove and a sour grunt.

They continued the trudge across the parking area, a funeral march in slow, moody silence. If nothing else, it confirmed he was tired, a small bonus. That might help to mask his awareness of her dismay and if he slept all the way home as he generally did, it would give her time to digest the indigestible.

At the car, Estelle unlocked first the passenger door, then the rear door on the same side and swung it open. Michael glared. "Why'd you do that? Do you want me to sit in the back, for Christ's sake?" Although his speech was slurred, his indignation was clear enough and it was very obvious that he was primed for an argument.

A cloud of spirit-laden breath wafted over her and she tried not to recoil visibly. "No, Michael. It's for your case."

"What's the matter with the boot, then?"



*Wasn't it typical? Any other time...!* "Nothing, Michael. It's just that you always put your case on the back seat."

"Well, a man can change his mind, can't he?"

Her heart was beating its way up into her throat. "Of course you can." *If he sees my case, he'll start asking questions. Then he'll probably go berserk. My only chance is to do it myself.* She stepped up to him and bent to take his case.

"What d'you think you're doing?"

"Putting your case in the boot where you said you wanted it. You must be tired\_\_"

"Don't you mean pissed? That's what you mean, isn't it?" He slapped her hand away, picked up the case, heaved it effortlessly onto the back seat and slammed the door. "Bloody woman!" he snarled as he flung himself onto the front passenger seat. "Just get in and drive!"

Dazed and confused, Estelle was unable to think clearly and drove automatically, drawing on the experience of frequent trips, mostly the same as this one. Michael seemed unaware of her pre-occupation as he continued to berate and insult her. She tried to respond in ways that wouldn't aggravate him further because she was already in enough trouble. God only knew what would befall her when he discovered his suitcase and passport were missing!

It would be comforting to believe that he expected them to have already been collected as arranged – by Keith Dunbar, probably. If so, he might just check to make sure, then collapse on the bed and sleep until morning, knowing that everything was set for him to assume the identity of George Truscott when he was good and ready. This extremely flimsy hope was based on the premise that many of her former assumptions had been wrong. And it was foreseeably too convenient with more holes than last month's pantihose.

As if reading her thoughts, he asked whether anyone had called. She gave him a brief run-down of messages people had left, purposely omitting the last call taken. His next question was laced with accusation. "So, Keith didn't get in touch, not once?"

Estelle's heart skipped a beat. He would find out anyway, so she had to tell him about Dunbar's call without making it seem that she'd tried to keep it from him. "Yes, sorry. I forgot. He caught me as I was leaving."

Anger became tangible and built as he took in the details of the brief telephone conversation. He appeared stunned. Estelle hadn't been looking at him, hadn't dared, but the prolonged silence was so unexpected that she had to check to see if Michael hadn't, perhaps, passed out - it was too much to ask that he'd had a heart attack and died! He was, unfortunately, very much alive and staring through the windshield with his mouth open. Then his head snapped around and he was glaring at her, eyes wide and glistening. "Nothing else? That was all he asked?"

"He didn't say any more, just hung up."

Michael went quiet again, then hissed: "Bastard!"

*My sentiments entirely,* thought Estelle, but she was fairly certain that their mutual dislike of Michael's business partner was for very different reasons. Silence filled the car once more, as oppressive as the one between warbles while waiting for the imaginary bomb to explode in the phone. Finally, he broke it with an order. "Pull in there!"

There was no need to ask: "Where?" His arm came across to indicate a tavern on the right. She braked hard and signalled, then had to wait in the centre of the road until the traffic cleared, a delay which Michael blamed entirely on her lack of road sense. Finally, she was able to drive into the car park.

Michael had the door open before they were stationary. He unclipped his seat belt and leered at her. "I only need to go to the dunny, so don't go giving me that puritanical, temperance look!" Climbing out, he added: "I'll be five minutes. Keep the car running!"

The slam of the car door still ringing in her ears, she watched him stagger across the bitumen and in through the door of the public bar. It seemed to confirm that he merely needed to use the toilet – under any other circumstances, Michael wouldn't dream of rubbing shoulders with the hoi-polloi. She pulled into a marked bay and waited.

He was out in ten minutes, not five, but Estelle had no intention of arguing the point. As he approached, he looked strange and she couldn't think why, then she noticed his waistcoat. There was a bulge of material on the right-hand panel, as if he had missed a button-hole when doing it up. As he came closer, the initial observation proved to be correct. This was puzzling because his dress was relatively neat when he'd arrived at the airport. If he just wanted to go to the loo, why the need to undo his waistcoat? It didn't make sense. So, what was new?

They drove out of the pub car park. Michael said: "Move it!" So she did. Deciding it was time for a cigarette, he fumbled the pack out of his pocket, but managed to drop it on the floor. Only too used to his short fuse, Estelle offered to pull over and pick them up for him. "I can manage!" he snapped, far more aggressively than might have been expected, even for an obnoxious drunk. "You're here to drive, so bloody do it! And keep your flaming eyes on the road! You nearly killed us back there!"

*Did not*, she thought, but remained silent, keeping a furtive eye on him as she drove. Seemingly far less capable than he had claimed, he rummaged around on the floor for a considerable time, then rose, wheezing and breathless. Instead of lighting a cigarette, he returned the pack to his pocket, then leaned his head against the window and went to sleep. Funny, she thought. *Don't knock it, Estelle: asleep is better than abusive.*

He was still snoring when they arrived home. Estelle had to nudge him and he awoke with a start. No sooner had he gathered those few senses remaining to him, than he was out of the car and heading for the side door of the house, searching his jacket for keys as he went. He was in so much of a rush that he not only forgot to take his suitcase, but also his duty-free bag. For Michael, to forsake what in the past had been almost a ritual, was tantamount to sacrilege. Drunk, or very drunk, he *never* forgot his duty-free's, *never!* "Bugger!" Now he'd dropped his keys.

With Michael becoming more irritated by the second, Estelle's continuing safety was fragile. The soft light from the street was welcoming. Should she embrace it now while he was grovelling on the floor, run before all hell broke loose? But that would only alert him to something very wrong that he didn't know about yet. And how far could she get on foot? The decision would have to be made quickly - the roller door would close by itself in less than a minute. Another warning bell rang in Estelle's head. If she didn't go now, she would need to soon enough. The door had to remain open to preserve any chance of escape. And it would come to that, no doubt of it. Judging by his reaction to Keith Dunbar's phone call, he still expected his case and passport to be there. And when he found they weren't...?

"Put the light on damn it!" he snarled. "I can't see a bloody thing!"

The sudden bark made her jump. Her hand dived for the light switch, flicked it, but nothing happened. She'd forgotten about the dead bulb, something else he'd blame her for. But it did give her an idea. Fingers skipped to the door power switch, flicked it off. Then they were back to the one that operated the light - on, off, on, off... "It doesn't seem to work," she started, then was adding: "Maybe it's the fuse."

Michael had somehow managed to retrieve the keys and had worked one into the lock. Ignoring his wife's words, he jerked the door open and lumbered into the house. "I'll bring your things, shall I?" she called after him. No reply. A quick glance at the open roller door seemed to impart a sense of pending freedom, confirmation that her decision to disable it was wise. At least one part of her plan was in place. Much of the rest hadn't been formulated yet. It all depended on Michael.

She was going for his suitcase and the duty-free's when he bellowed. "Estelle! Bloody get in here!"

The voice was easily loud enough to hear, but there was little doubt that it was from deep within the house. Her hands were outstretched in the direction of the car and had frozen in mid-air as if casting a spell. "ESTELLE!!!" Obviously it wasn't working. *Forget the case and booze - just look after yourself!* The street looked even more appealing now. *Not yet.* Then she was darting into the house.

It was all perfectly scripted, this film noir, too predictably sinister. Where else was there to go but the bedroom? She arrived on cue, breathless, heart pounding and hovered nervously in the doorway. The heavy silence waited for effect. When he finally spoke, it was in a voice which was unexpectedly quiet, knowing. "Where is it, Estelle?" He was beside the walk-in robe, fists clenched at his sides, rage fettered but seething. "Where the bloody hell's my case?"

Lips flapped and eyes blinked rapidly as she played for time. "Oh, sorry, Michael. It's still in the car." Worth a try, maybe, if it gave her the second or two she needed. "I'll go and fetch it for you." She had psyched herself up to make a dash for it, but he beckoned her with a finger, a demeaning gesture warning of dire consequences if it was ignored. Despite being the worst thing she could do, she felt herself moving into the room towards him.

He was leering, self-satisfied with his power over her. "Quit screwing around with me, Estelle. You know the one I'm talking about. It was in back of the wardrobe next to yours. Now they're both gone. What d'you think you're playing at?"

"I... I d-don't know what you..."

His face shocked her into silence. The smugness had vanished. For a moment it appeared as if he was going to explode. Then a vagueness descended as if something had just occurred to him which was far more important than the loss of his precious suitcase. His arm shot out and an extended finger

pointed at her. "Don't you move!" Turning, he blundered to the cabinet beside the bed and stooped to grab the bottom drawer.

Estelle couldn't breathe. Neither could she make herself run. This part had to be witnessed, despite knowing how it would end, perhaps in the hopes that divine intervention might produce a quiet miracle. Maybe George Truscott's passport would re-appear in the bottom of the drawer and Michael wouldn't murder her.

His hand plunged beneath the pile of material. With a bestial growl, he dragged the contents out savagely and turned the drawer upside down. When he didn't find what he was looking for, he pulled out the next two drawers, tipped them out, then tossed them aside. With the final one in his hand, he stood up, emptied it, then threw it across the room. It hit the wall with a splintering crash and flew apart. So much for miracles.

"You sneaky, interfering bitch!" He had begun to advance on Estelle, slowly at first. "You couldn't leave it alone, could you? Had to poke your silly little nose in. Well, you've done it this time."

Estelle's every move as she backed up was being tracked and duplicated by Michael. His hands were claws at his side, and the fingers were flexing continually, exercising, preparing for action. "Michael, I..." The time for displays of innocence and naivety were past. The situation had been grossly underestimated. There was a price to be paid and he intended to claim every last cent. "Don't, Michael. Please!"

He backed her along the hallway and into the dining room, eyes glinting with insane pleasure as she stumbled against the table. She felt her way round it, panic barely restrained, never daring to turn away from him. He reached the first of the chairs and flung it sideways into the front of the china cabinet. Estelle flinched and gasped at the sound of smashing glass. Michael enjoyed that. "You're going to tell me what you've done with my things, Estelle," he warned smugly. "I guarantee it."

"I d-don't know w-where they are, Michael."

"Then I suggest you try to remember. Otherwise you can look forward to a long, painful night!"

"Honestly, Michael—!"

"Are you DEAF?" he roared as he dived for her.

Estelle almost made it clear, but he managed to catch hold of the back of her dress, spinning her off course and into the door frame. He stumbled against her, hands groping and clawing. Terrified, she brought a knee up into his groin. He doubled over and started to gag. She snatched the opportunity and surged into the lounge.

Barking a shin on the coffee table, she continued to hop her way through to the entrance hall and limped hurriedly to the front door, whimpering and sobbing. It was locked! Damn! Damn! The side door would have been a better option, the sensible one. But who was thinking? Then it didn't matter because he was there, blocking her escape.

He too was limping, stooping slightly, eyes bloodshot, voice a series of panting growls issuing from lips moist and dripping like those of a rabid dog. He coughed. "Last chance," he rasped as he continued to lumber towards her. "Where are my things?" A metre away, he began to straighten. A hand reached out.

"Michael! No, Michael! For God's sake—!"

"Too late for him - and you," he snarled as he lunged for her.

His hand glanced off her cheek, making head and senses reel. Another blow sent her toppling to the floor. A warm void rolled in, whispering promises of everlasting safety and comfort. Consciousness began to fade and with it any good reason to survive. A small inconsistency crept in to mar the perfection, a sensation of growing pain which incited dissension and panic. Her own voice broke the spell, a howl to pierce the deepest slumber. Her hand went to her scalp, could feel his clenched fist - he was pulling her along by her hair! "Bastard!"

"Believe it!" he snarled. "You'll be calling me a lot worse before I've finished. You're a stupid, lying Bitch, Estelle, and very soon you're going to wish you'd never been born!"

He meant it, every word of it. Nothing was more obvious, and it was probably this thought which gave Estelle the courage and strength to do what she did next. As he was dragging her past the telephone table, she grabbed for it and pulled with all her might. The table swung around and toppled. There was a yelp from Michael. The hand grasping her hair had suddenly gone. A second later there was a heavy thump followed by a howl.

Estelle rolled and stood, all in a single movement. There was no time to think, just run - and she chose the wrong way, right past where Michael was lying. A hand shot out and clamped around her ankle. Air

burst from her lungs as she landed flat on her face. Michael released his grip and began clawing his way up her legs, making it impossible to drag herself free.

Flesh was pinched and bruised as he turned her over, then he was straddling her stomach. "I want my stuff, Estelle." A swinging backhand smacked across her cheek. "And you are now going to tell me where it is." He sat, rocked sideways to fumble in a trouser pocket and withdrew a cigarette lighter. "In fact..." Fingers gathered in the open panel of her dress and tore it down. The lighter flicked on. It was the kind that gave off a blue flame and roared like a blow-torch, taunting, threatening. "...you'll be begging to tell me." Nails raked flesh as he hooked up the bra strap.

If the memory of pain was insufficient motivation, the dread of a higher level not yet experienced was overpowering. There was an object in her hand - the telephone receiver. Her grip tightened on it. The bra strap slipped off her shoulder and was being dragged down. The lighter flame ignited again and moved closer. Gritting her teeth, she lashed out with every single ounce of strength she could muster. If there was a sound, it was secondary to a stabbing pain as the force of impact transferred to her wrist, jarring it, knocking the plastic receiver from her grasp.

She rolled, wriggled and heaved herself from beneath Michael who had become a ton weight. Not *dead* weight, surely? Please God, not that! Freedom might have been won, but it meant nothing if one prison had merely been exchanged for another. She had to see, had to know.

Michael was laying face down on the hall carpet, blood trickling from a gash on his temple, soaking into the light-coloured pile. He *looked* dead! But it wasn't a heavy blow, not as heavy as some he'd inflicted on her. Then again, he had always used his hands, never a blunt instrument. That particular object had broken in two and only half of it remained visible. She must have struck him harder than she thought!

Estelle advanced cautiously, ready to dart away if he should even twitch. He continued to lay still. Kneeling, she extended a trembling hand towards him, not wanting to touch him, stifling a whimper as fingers contacted flesh clammy and lifeless. There was no pulse. The fingers walked and pressed, walked and pushed harder. Was the procedure just like the hairs across doors, a Hollywood lie? Then she could feel a tickling on the back of her hand, warm breath fanning soundlessly, yet unmistakably from his nostrils.

Releasing the breath she had been holding, Estelle pulled the hand away and rose quickly. "Thank God," she was whispering on her way through to the kitchen. Snatching her handbag from the table, she swept on to the side door and out into the garage. The open roller-door yawned, a sight both welcoming and heavy with foreboding. What had just been endured might be nothing compared to the unknown that awaited. Teeth sank into a lip as her eyes darted one last time at the entrance to the house. A long blink later, she was throwing herself onto the driver's seat.

The key turned, the engine fired. She sat for a moment, foot pressed hard on the brake pedal, eyes closed tightly in prayer. "Please be there, Jason," she murmured softly. Then Estelle's little blue car was creeping tentatively into the night.

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