

# Leaf On A Breeze

IRENE DAVIDSON

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# DEDICATION

My Dad



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks Tim





## PROLOGUE

### JACK IS BACK

*Leaflets five,  
Let them thrive!  
Leaflets three,  
Turn and flee!*

Children's rhyme, various

In the wee small hours of the morning, Jack was busy in the garden. Sleep was for pansies and weaklings and he was neither.

He stopped at the entrance to the orchard and took a moment to glance down at his hands, marvelling at his rejuvenated appearance. Having grown accustomed to his changed state these past years, he found this new self so much better than his previous form. It was a convenient bonus that his body required little rest as he felt that he did his best work under cover of darkness and while others were abed.

Where once he had been flesh and blood, in outward looks if not innermost attitude much like all the other folk in the woods, since his reincarnation, he was more plant than man. Should he cut himself now, green sap would run from his veins and instead of skin, he was covered with a tightly woven thatch of vines and leaves.

He did not mind the constant wakefulness, believing that it set him apart as someone special, someone different from the others -particularly that useless sleeping sylph, Liana. She who had frittered away lifetime after lifetime, dozing when she should have been establishing her kingdom. Well, he was better than she was. Much better. More exalted and of greater

importance than any of the beings that dwelt either in the woods or beyond its fringes. As an added advantage, while Liana and the woodland folk dreamed, he could get up to all sorts of mischief unnoticed.

This was precisely what he was doing.

He had been looking forward to an opportunity to show off his skills - and tonight was his night to perform a little trick that he had been practicing and perfecting for weeks.

Laying a hand on a branch of one of the most venerable of the orchard's roses, he concentrated all his energy on encouraging the growth of the vine, willing the poison ivy that made up much of his torso and limbs to creep along and around the barbed stalk of the old rose. The thorns did not bother him at all and as the tendrils twined round each successive twiglet, he could feel his grip on the rambler growing, slowly choking life out of the stem. He applied greater pressure, squeezing incrementally until the one shoot was all but severed from the rest of the bush.

He took a deep breath, enjoying the moment. It was an undeniably heady feeling, extinguishing life, even at this level. Not that this was the first time he had taken a life, but that had been many, many years ago when he'd had an altogether different form. Watching the healthy green leaves of the rosebush turn to sickly yellow he felt a spasm akin to something exquisitely orgasmic, the waves of unadulterated pleasure increasing in amplitude as the silky petals from the flowering blooms dropped lifelessly to the ground.

Jack was well pleased ...he reluctantly acknowledged that he could not yet kill the entire plant but his abilities were growing. Slower than he'd like but nevertheless improving with each passing day. The time was growing nearer, he was sure, when he could usurp control from Liana and take up the mantle as Master over the Garden.

Much like a certain serpent in Eden, he was intent on spreading his particular brand of evil and malice with whatever authority he could obtain, sure that once he held sway in the stead of Liana and her cohorts that he would be able to move beyond the garden's boundaries to bloom to his full deadly potential.

His thirst to hurt and harm quenched, Green Jack unconcernedly strode away from the sickly plant. He allowed himself the remainder of the night to indulge in his favourite activity of sneaking around and spying on others as they dozed. Then spent the day happily hidden in his lair - a huge old behemoth of an oak that grew on the western periphery of the garden's borders, close by a field that had once been set aside for travelling folk. These days it was a spot seldom visited by humans or the woodland fey and since his reawakening, he had made it his own. That the once-healthy tree was dying by degrees from his constant ministrations was of little consequence to Jack. To him it was nothing more than a convenient place to perch and practice his sinister skills.



Venturing out the next evening, he was distraught when he returned to the moonlit orchard - intent on gloating over his small victory- to find to his extreme displeasure that Liana must have passed by during the daylight hours. It had to be her ...she was the only being in the garden with the power to undo his work. It appeared that the interfering sylph had healed the ancient bush, putting to rights his hard-won display of prowess and the old rose now stood whole and healthy once more.

Aggravated, Jack kicked the thorny bush with his ivy-bound foot, doing little damage to either, before he turned and stalked off into the shadows of the trees that edged the orchard. Knowing that he had greater power towards the margins of the garden's domain than here in the centre he thought that perhaps he would head to the nursery on the far fringes of the woods where he could do harm that might stand a chance of remaining beyond the morrow. The nursery was a later addition that had been cultivated within the confines of the garden's old walls during the years he had been ...indisposed. It was the one place, besides the church and White Briars cottage that he could venture. He was still unable to cross beyond the old walls. His last attempt to scale the stone barrier that marked the garden's boundary had ended with the usual embarrassing sight of him catapulting back into the garden.

He refused to think about that. He shrugged, causing the leaves across his shoulders to rustle. He liked the sound so much that he shook his head a few times, creating a rippling effect in the green mantle that made up his head and torso.

Instead, he decided, he would have some fun and continue practising out of Liana's sight. No point wasting his precious efforts working here in the heart of the garden if there was the likelihood that she would stumble upon his little displays. He had thought her too busy with that little brat she had borne to the human to notice his handiwork but it appeared she was still maintaining a level of vigilance in the garden spaces closest to the cottage.

Smiling meanly, he decided that this small reversal was of little import, he had plenty with which to keep himself occupied.

Whistling impatiently for his lieutenants to follow, he disappeared into the shadows of the woods.

The pair of foxes that were his most constant companions slunk along, obediently if not overly happily, in his wake.

# ONE

## ON THE ROAD AGAIN

As she panted her way along the quiet lane, Sara was pleased to see the hawthorn was in full-flower and hear the rhythmic song of a yellowhammer trilling its familiar ‘*a little bit of bread with no cheeese*’ call. The warm spring morning had brought out all manner of birds, butterflies and flying insects to flit among the hedgerow blooms. Turning her head in the direction of the bursts of sound, she spotted the bright feathers of the songster perched in the top branches of the bushes as she ambled by.

Although the lane was edged with trees in full leaf, they were doing little to alleviate the heat reflecting off the black asphalt surface of the roadway. Feeling both the warmth and the effects of every single day that she had put off jogging for the past three weeks, Sara unzipped her long-sleeved top, pulled it off and tied it around her waist. Barely breaking stride, she puffed her way up the bends of the quiet lane that twisted its way out of the village up towards White Briars’ main entranceway. Having run this way countless times over the years the route was as familiar to her as her own back yard, but familiarity, she thought wryly, did nothing to alleviate the symptoms of weeks without regular exercise. She felt sure that some malign deity had visited the hill in her absence and made the gradient steeper. It certainly felt that way.

As she approached the final and steepest bend of the incline, she could feel her lungs burning and her energy levels sapping. Only fierce determination and iron willpower were keeping her from slowing to a walk.

Following her usual self-motivational routine she had started at the base of hill with “I know I can, I know I can.” This chant normally got her all the way up to the final bend but today, at no more than a third of the way,

the words had changed into "...I think I can, I think I can," altering around half-way to a breathless "...I hope I can, I hope I can," which had taken her to the final third. Now the hopeful words of 'The Little Engine That Could' became slower and more laboured with each passing footfall. She could barely get the short syllables out at all now, "I'm gonna die, I'm. Gonna. Die," she uttered the words in rasping gasps as her breathing became increasingly ragged.

Head drooping tiredly, she spied the recognisable slight hump in the cracked asphalt that signified her torture was nearing an end. Heartened by the sight, she put on a last brave spurt to arrive triumphantly at the grassy knoll of the top of the rise, like a long-distance runner crossing the final tape ...before collapsing in an untidy heap upon the fragrant primrose-strewn grass growing outside the gateway to what Thornden villagers had always referred to as the gypsy encampment. Growing up and living nearby most of her life, Sara had yet to see any gypsies 'encamped' in the space, but the field still retained the title as a remnant from some bygone era when she supposed people were less attached to their homes and mortgages, roaming the countryside more freely. A nice romantic notion, she'd thought, but not for real people like her.

The light changed abruptly. The sun must have gone behind a cloud – without its heat, she felt instantly cooler. Breathing hard and semi-alert, Sara opened her eyes to narrow slits, wiping sweat away from her brow using the hem of her sports top before shielding her eyes with the back of one hand. It was not a cloud that had blocked the sun; instead, long faded blue jeans-clad legs and sturdy boots that obviously belonged to the male of the species now obstructed her view.

Oh yay, she thought sourly, always good to have an audience at moments like this. Adding to her mortification, especially when she had just bared her stomach and her brightly coloured sports bra to whoever was standing over her. "Oh please let that be Hamish or someone I know and not some total stranger," she moaned quietly between gasps, her chest heaving in efforts to regain a tolerable level of oxygen.

"Sorry to disappoint," the low, amused tones of the male voice that responded did not sound at all like that of her next-door-neighbour. "I heard you coming up the lane. Couldn't help but, with the almighty din you were making." The voice stopped -Sara wished he would have the decency to leave but moments later he continued, "So, what are you then? 'The little engine that ran out of steam?'"

"Oh, *verry* funny," she said between gasps, thinking, trust me to find the joker in the pack in my wakened state. "No, I'm the infrequent jogger that's dying here," she wheezed. "So. Kindly. Go. Away. ...and let me croak in peace." She managed the last on one breath, before another deeply indrawn gulp of air. Her lungs still not filling with sufficient oxygen to make any

headway.

“That bad, aye? Well, it’s like this ...sorry for the inconvenience but I was here first so if anyone’s leaving, it should be you.” He looked her over, liking what he saw. Her petite body was clad in little more than brief form-fitting shorts and a tiny tank. A light-weight, long-sleeved top she’d obviously jettisoned that was now tied low on her hips and a neon green sports bra -which she’d given him a good eyeful of when she had pulled up the thin-strapped cotton tank to mop her brow. The entire outfit, obviously intended for exercise, had the additional benefit, in his humble opinion, of leaving exposed lithe limbs lightly tanned from the unseasonal sun.

He completed his perusal as she opened her eyes. “You don’t look in *that* bad a shape to me but if you’re really dying, as you say you are, perhaps I should offer you your final rites before you go.” From the rattling sounds he’d heard coming up the rise, he’d been a smidgeon concerned that she might have suffered from asthma but it seemed his concern wasn’t warranted. She was merely, although quite badly, out of breath. He was considerably relieved.

“Gee thanks,” she responded dryly. Recovering a little, chest still heaving (he noted appreciatively) she sat up and leaned back on her outstretched arms. Even through half-closed lashes, she’d seen him brazenly checking her out and now openly returned the gesture.

Not too shabby, she thought. Bit over average height. Late twenties, early thirties tops. Built. Buff. That much was abundantly obvious even at first glance. He must have removed his shirt in the heat, as he was bare from the waist up. Now, faded jeans rode low on narrow hips exposing very respectable abs. He was holding what looked a lot like a horse brush in one hand. She briefly wondered why until, belatedly, she noticed a sturdy piebald-coloured horse tethered and cropping on the roadside grass behind him.

Her eyes travelled upwards, continuing her inspection. Untidy ash-blond hair that could stand trim, sunglasses pushed up over his brow, perched among his tousled locks. Despite the bright light haloing his head he didn’t look particularly ecclesiastical to her and she couldn’t make out his eyes or any other facial details that might have given her a feel for whether he might be a danger to her or not. Still, other than using the horse-brush as a potential weapon, he appeared harmless enough so she made an uncharacteristically spontaneous decision to play along with his offer. It certainly made for an interesting change in pick-up lines, assuming that’s what he’d intended.

“Might not be such a bad idea, the way I feel right now,” she replied, matching his lightly flippant tone and adopting a cringingly bad Irish accent. “Okay, here goes nuttin’ ...Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It’s been way too many weeks since me last run and I’m terribly worried I’m about to

expire right here, unpardoned for not exercising regularly.”

He couldn't help but laugh, as he made the sign of the cross with his right hand. “I'm sure your sins are forgiven, my child. Go ...and jog in peace.” Absolution complete, he stood there, contemplating her still-prone form, “There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Now, are you heading towards the light?” he questioned drolly.

“No, but if you'd move out of my sunlight, I might improve my tan,” her tart reply was accompanied by a wave of her hand as she signalled for him to step aside. “And I'm fairly sure that the sign of the cross is not given with two fingers making the peace sign,” she added drolly.

He shrugged. “That's what you get worshipping at the Church of the Winded Hippy.”

She groaned and fell back.

He laughed again.

It was a nice sound, she thought. Not that she was planning to tell him that anytime soon.

“How about I give you a hand up instead,” he held out the hand holding the brush, “oops, forgot I was grooming Cara when you came along doing your Puffing Billy impression,” he dropped the hand and proffered his other.

Taking affront, Sara ignored his offer and heaved herself to her feet. “I *did not* sound like Puffing Billy. ...whoever he is,” she declared hotly.

“Alright then ...perhaps it's Panting Patty? Gasping Gertie? Winded Wilma?” he retorted, abruptly turning his back on her, as he picked up where he'd left off when she come huffing and puffing into view. “Take your pick. I don't mind whichever you choose.” He unconcernedly continued brushing the horse's back in long strokes from withers to tail. “When we heard you coming up the hill, Cara and me were thinking we'd have to throw you over her back and get you to the closest emergency room and an oxygen mask.” From his comment, Sara assumed Cara must have been the mare's name. She could see Cara's soft black ears twitching back and forth, seemingly listening in on the conversation as she grazed contentedly.

Sara was in two minds whether to walk away, –she would have run, but her legs didn't feel quite up to it yet and she didn't need the added embarrassment of an incipient case of rubber-legs-, or accept the down-thrown gauntlet of this stranger's insults. So much for thinking he might be a danger to her and she'd have to fight him off, she thought sourly, though somewhere among those self-same thoughts was the acknowledgement that he had a very nicely toned back to go with those ripped abs. Not that she was looking, much.

She strolled over and laid a hand on the horse's neck, patting her smooth, warm coat before finger combing the long strands of mane. “It's



none of those. I'm short-of-breath Sara, if you must know. And you?" she tilted her head to one side, as if considering, "Belligerent Bertie? Grumpy Greg? Insulting Ivan?"

"Ha, ha. Good return. You should be on centre court at Wimbledon." He stopped brushing and looked over the mare's wide back at her, "You're surprisingly close. Though I'd watch the adjectives if I were you. I'd much prefer *Gypsy* Greg to grumpy, if you don't mind." His tone altered to one of gentle remonstrance, "And, for your information, if you must know, I wasn't so much 'grumpy' as I was a tad worried you might have been having an asthma attack or something similar. I have a sister who almost died once when she left her inhaler at home and we were out in the middle of nowhere, trekking in the Kimberleys a few years ago. So the grumpy was more relief that you were merely out of breath and nothing worse."

"Okay," she nodded in understanding. If she was feeling a mite sorry she'd taken umbrage she wasn't letting on. Instead, she picked up on his earlier statement. "Gypsy Greg?"

"Horse," he spoke succinctly, indicating the solid mare he'd been brushing. "Caravan," he twisted slightly and pointed across to far side of the field where a brightly painted barrel-topped wagon was nestled in the shade under a huge old oak abutting the woodland margin, "Me," he tapped his chest, "equals gypsy. Well, for this summer at least. I'm sort of trying the lifestyle on for size to see how well it fits."

Sara had turned in the direction of his outstretched hand, taking in the sight of the wagon. At long last there was a bona vide gypsy wagon in the gypsy camp.

"Wow," she muttered. She wasn't too sure whether she was impressed or not and could think of nothing better to say.

So he was 'trying on' the gypsy lifestyle. Nice work if you could get it, she supposed.

There had been a time in her life, years ago, when she would have liked nothing more than taking off from what she had thought of as her humdrum existence and living free, travelling the road and flitting wherever whimsy might take her. But that time was long gone and nothing more than a dim distant memory. These days, she was a responsible mother and a successful businesswoman, with multiple demands on her time and a gypsy life was the stuff of daydreams. Still not entirely sure how to respond, she decided to steer the conversation into smoother waters, "You said something about the Kimberleys. That's in Australia isn't it? Way out west, so to speak? So are you from there? Australia? You don't sound particularly Australian, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Don't mind at all. I've spent a number of years in Asia and Europe so the accent has worn off some around the edges. But I can do '*strine*' when I want to, mate." He added a strongly nasal twang and a high rising terminal

to the last words as if to prove his point.

She flinched, rubbing one ear. "Ouch. That's okay. I believe you. You're Australian."

"Yep, Aussie through and through, mate, but thrilled to bits that a bonzer sheila like you believes me," he laid it on thick, but his wide grin took the sting off the words.

"So what made you leave home and come half way round the world to ye olde southern England?" She was curious. It seemed these days that a substantial portion of the population of the British Isles was keen to fly in the opposite direction, drawn by the promise of long hot summers and intent on re-creating their version of Summer Bay or Ramsay Street.

His reply showed her that he was aware of the British penchant for Aussie soaps. "Well, it's like this. I got turned down for lead roles in *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and I was a mite tired of checking for Redbacks on the toilet seat." At her taken-aback expression, he snorted with laughter, causing Cara to raise her head and flick her ears in response. He laid a hand on the mare's neck to calm her and she went back to grazing. "Nah, not really. Can't stand soapy dramas and I was brought up in suburban Perth where you're more likely to be in danger from someone driving their big-ass SUV through your front garden than you are from the local wildlife." He shrugged nonchalantly, "I guess I left home and ventured over here to earn my fame and fortune as a musician. Haven't quite managed either yet, but I'm enjoying the journey and the scenery on my way."

He did not add just how much he had enjoyed the scenery of her lounging on the grass at his front gate. Instead, he quit brushing to inspect a hoof, running his hand down the mare's feathered leg and clicking his tongue to signal that he wanted Cara to pick up her foot. He tugged a hoof pick out of his back pocket and cleaned the underside with practised skill. Once done, he replaced the hoof on the ground to pick up and clean the next.

Sara admired the speed and ease with which he accomplished this. As someone with considerably more affinity with plants than animals, she had always admired those who had expertise with the animal kingdom. Generally, she drew the line at the pigeons she bred for sale at the nursery but having acquainted herself with Liana and Hamish's greyhound, Doug these past two years, she and her son, Matthew had been discussing choosing a dog for themselves. So far, they'd not progressed beyond debating breed and gender. They were still undecided but had plans to visit the local rescue kennels in the coming fortnight to check out likely candidates.

Greg patted the horse's wide rump. He pulled a metal tether peg from the ground and started making for the open field gate. "Don't suppose you

want to come over and see the place for yourself?” he asked, nodding in the direction of the wagon.



“Ahh,” Sara prevaricated, “rain check ...perhaps another time,” she glanced at her watch, “I have to be back at work in half an hour and I’m barely going to make it as it is.” She knew she would have to forego a post-run shower until later in the evening and make do with a hurried wash if she wanted to be back behind the counter in time to let her newest staff member take a lunch break.

“Working for the man,” Greg commiserated.

Sara didn’t bother to enlighten him that being self-employed; the only ‘man’ she worked for was herself. However, in the words of the song, and leaning more towards Tina Turner than Roy Orbison, she acknowledged that she laboured every daylight hour that was available to her and often long into the night. This was the reason that she’d gone so many weeks without running. There just weren’t enough hours in a day for exercise when an infinite number of things were constantly vying for her finite time and attention.

She sighed, “Yeah, something like that.” Reluctantly, she turned back to the road.

“Perhaps I’ll see you around,” Greg said by way of farewell, his tone hopeful.

“Guess it depends how long you stay.” Gypsies, by nature, she thought did not remain in any one place for long. She was prepared to be unsurprised should the field be empty the next time she ran past its gate, whenever that might be.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not just yet, anyway.” He smiled, showing a nice set of deep dimples either side of his lips, as he slipped the sunglasses down over eyes, which she had noticed on closer inspection were a shade of what she had instantly christened ‘wolf grey’. The effect was emphasised even more by tiny flecks of gold glinting around the irises. His nose, she’d also noted looked as if it had been broken at some earlier time and set rather badly; it had a slight kink along the bridge that gave him a devil-may-

care appearance. Not a bad thing on that face, she had decided. Excessive perfection got a bit stale after a while and he might have been too pretty without the added fault.

“I have some gigs nearby so might be around a week or two, or more. Depends how things work out.”

He seemed unconcerned that his life was not planned any more than two weeks in advance. Sara couldn't imagine how that might feel. Her planning calendar was packed full to the brim from now until mid-autumn, when things might, or might not quieten down a little before the Christmas rush.

“Oh well, it was nice to meet you, gypsy Greg. But I've really gotta go,” there seemed little point in continuing the conversation. It was unlikely their world's would collide again unless she ran this way in the coming fortnight and the way things were at the nursery she doubted there would another hour free in that time to allow her to get away for exercise. She was also so late now that she would have to clamber over the wall at White Briars main gate and take the shorter woodland route back to work instead of the longer way around the lanes. She turned back to the road.

He watched as she trotted off down the gently sloping asphalt, set between high hedgerows, half wishing he'd asked for her phone number. She had a smooth running style, he noted, with long strides for such a petite woman ...and a very watchable backside in those tiny shorts, he thought appreciatively.

Well, Cara mia, what do you think? She wasn't too ugly, girl, aye what? But no worries babe, you're still my first love,” he chatted amiably to the horse, his arm looped comfortably over her neck as they ambled back in the direction of the van.

## PUB MUSIC

The musician dipped his head in acknowledgement of the crowd's applause before setting aside his mandolin and reaching to pick up the water glass that Seamus, the Thornden Arms' portly publican had kindly placed beside him. He took a long drink, easing his parched throat. It was dry work, singing and playing for an hour and a half at a stretch and he was overdue a rest, but the crowd had been enthusiastic in their response to his music and he hadn't liked to stop.



He sat the glass down on the tiny stage, “Last one before the break,” he announced, to a chorus of disappointed catcalls. Settling himself on a stool before a mid-sized harp, he fingered a few experimental glissandos as he

added, “this is a number you may have heard played by Breton master-harper Alan Stivell, a renowned Celtic-harpist and a profound influence on my music.” There were nods from a few heads at the mention of the name. From this and the response he’d had to his playing, Greg had already surmised he had a knowledgeable audience. He continued the introduction, “It’s something of a musical journey across the Gaelic lands of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. Since I first heard it in a pub on the Isle of Skye, it seems entirely appropriate to play it here for you this evening in this auspicious establishment. He waved a hand to indicate the pub before positioning his hands either side of the harps’ strings, plucking the first notes. “I hope you’ll like it.”

More than a few of the pub’s patrons were obviously familiar with the music; -at the opening bars there was a considerable smattering of applause and the whoops and catcalls returned to an encouragingly enthusiastic level. Smiling briefly, Greg concentrated on his fingering, aware that the Celtic harp was a tricky beast to play and would require his undivided attention.

The piece was long and he was into the final bars when the inner door to the bar opened to admit a face he recognised. It was Sara, dressed this evening in considerably more items of clothing than on their first encounter two days before. Greg tried not to feel disappointed; jogging attire was hardly suitable for a night out at the local watering hole but a man couldn’t be chastised for wishing otherwise, he reasoned. Not that she had exactly glammed-up for a Friday night outing at the Thornden Arms pub. She was wearing black skinny jeans, a hoodie and bright pink Doc Martens. With her spikey blond, lime-green tipped hair she could have been easily mistaken for a teenager. The look suited her, he decided, as his eyes followed her lissom form.

Focused on finding her friends, Sara hadn’t turned her head in his direction and appeared not to have noticed who was providing the music, although she nodded her head in time with his playing as she walked. Mindful of the composition, he kept half an eye on her and half on his harping as she wended her way carefully and with studied concentration through the crowded room to a table in the far corner. There, a group of people who obviously knew her well, stood and greeted her with the close but casual familiarity of hugs and kisses before shuffling chairs this way and that to make room. She sat with her back half-turned away from him. It appeared as if she had been expected as a large glass of orange juice had already been placed on the table before her. After a moment she lifted the full glass to her lips.

The song ended just as she replaced her glass on the tabletop and was reaching to snag a chip from a basketful in the centre of the table. Claps, whoops and stomping feet erupted from the other patrons in appreciation. One hand steadying the harp, Greg stood and sketched a quick bow as Sara

turned her head to see who all the fuss was about. He noted the moue of surprise on her elfin features as she recognised him and the widening of those bright lavender-blue eyes. Belatedly, she stuffed the chip into her mouth, put her hands together and clapped politely along with the rest of the audience. Greg shot her a smile, quirking an eyebrow at her underwhelming gesture and she responded with a guilty grin, raising her hands to clap louder, swallowing the chip and adding her whoops to the rest. He laughed and stretched out his hands to give another bow, before taking a step backwards and retreating towards the bar. To the chorus of disgruntled sounds, he called cheerily, "Have a heart! The muso needs a beer! I'll be back in twenty minutes if you can stay around that long." The crowd yahooped their approval and the din died to more normal level as they returned to their own drinks and conversations.

After a bit of back-slapping and polite conversation from an appreciative fan who insisted upon buying him a beer, Greg turned to survey the pub clientele. It had been a while since he'd played a pub but he liked doing these gigs- it kept the music real.

Inevitably, his gaze was drawn to the corner table. Sara was staring in his direction and as their eyes made contact she waved a hand to indicate that he should come on over.

Protecting his still-full glass from stray elbows with his free hand, Greg arrowed his way through the press of patrons closest to the bar then did a sort of slow slalom through the crowds of those seated at tables, arriving with most of his drink intact at the far corner.

"Hello again," he greeted Sara.

"Hi," she replied. "My friends would like to meet you."

'My friends', he noticed, not 'me'. He couldn't help the tiny twinge of disappointment at the words -he'd thought he had made a little progress with her at their first meet but now was not so sure.

Greg glanced around the crowded table. A startlingly beautiful Titian-haired woman who was the goddess to Sara's pixie sat on the banquette seat cuddling a pretty dark-haired infant on her lap. Beside her, with one arm stretched along the backrest in a manner that denoted both love and protection was a man who had to be the child's father, the resemblance was so strong. Next to him sat a white-haired elderly gentleman. Greg noted gnarled old hands, blue veined and sun-spotted, with enlarged knuckles that suggested osteoarthritis resting on his knees. But the eyes that surveyed him from under shocking white brows were piercing and evaluating, giving him a studied once-over. Not sure why, Greg smiled pleasantly back before continuing his cursory perusal of the table's occupants. Another couple with two children: a girl of nine or ten and a boy who might have been somewhere between five and seven, also snuggling on his mother's lap, made up the remainder of the group.

Sara began introductions, “Greg, this is Liana and Betony McAllister.” The goddess spoke a greeting in a beautifully musical voice and little girl smiled shyly, gazing up at Greg with gorgeous lavender-blue eyes that were, he thought, interestingly, the exact shade as Sara’s. It was not difficult to foresee that when she grew up this child was going to be a looker like her mother, Greg predicted. “...and Liana’s husband Hamish; good friends of mine.” Hamish smiled and nodded hello, holding out a hand to shake. Greg leaned across to acknowledge the greeting. “And that’s my Dad next to Hamish,”

“Arffur Blaine,” the old man held out a gnarled paw, “pleased to meet ya.” Greg shook it, wincing slightly at the firm handshake. “Damn fine music you were playin’ there son.”

“Thank you Arthur. Glad you liked it.” Greg covertly massaged his hand, hoping his fingers would recover before he played the next set.

Sara cleared her throat and continued the introductions. “Oh and here’s couple of your fellow countrymen, countrywomen, oh, whatever. Meet Steve and Linda, and their children Alison and Jamie.

“Giddy mate,” Steve rose to shake Greg’s hand across the glass-strewn table while Linda remained sitting and gave a small wave.

“Uh, hi,” Greg replied. He was never quite comfortable meeting other Australians –people tended to act as if they should know one another, not comprehending just how expansive the country was.

“So, where’re you from?” Steve queried, frowning. “I can’t place ya but you look kind of familiar.”

“Nah, you won’t know me. I’m from Perth originally, but pretty much all over the place for the last ten years or so,” Greg replied noncommittally.

“Hmm, never been there ...couldn’t see the point of going so far.” Steve turned to explain to the others, “Perth’s pretty much the most isolated city in the world. They act like they’re a separate country from the rest of us way over there,” he commented, smiling to take the sting from the words. Greg wanted to tell him that he could save himself the trouble of being polite as he was echoing his own thoughts on his home town. Instead, Greg smiled back, hopeful he wouldn’t have to go through the old ‘who do you know that I might know?’ routine.

“Linda and I are both Sydneyites but we live in London now,” Steve added.

“Jamie and me’re English, not Australian!” protested the girl.

“And *you* don’t sound very Australian,” quipped Jamie chirpily on the heels of her denial.

“James Patrick!” his mother reprimanded.

Greg thought it amusing that the little ‘Englishman’ and ‘Englishwoman’ pronounced ‘Australian’ as ‘Austrine’, proving their verbal roots were still firmly in the southern hemisphere.



“It’s okay, he’s not the first to have said that to me,” Greg smiled, staring down at Sara’s amused ‘told ya so’ expression. “Anyway, it’s nice to have made your acquaintance. I’ll leave to enjoy your drinks in peace.” He backed away and made to retreat his steps to the bar.

“Stay, don’t go.” This from Sara’s father. “Sit yerself down sonny an’ take a load off them feet.” A stool somehow materialised, passed overhand from patron to patron until it appeared next to him. Once again, everyone in the group shuffled chairs and tables to make a seat-sized space for the new addition. Bemused, Greg could do little more than sit where instructed, finding himself wedged thigh to thigh with Sara. If he’d looked up at that moment, he might have seen several self-satisfied smiles from faces among the assembly but he was busy keeping his drink from being jostled and unaware of the speculative glances.

Twenty minutes stretched into thirty as the group, in particular, Liana and Steve questioned him at length about his music. Steve, it transpired, had a rather catholic interest in diverse genres and was well-informed about Celtic, folk and world music but it was Liana who was truly conversant. It seemed to Greg that she had a deep understanding of the rhythms and history of folk music that few others he had ever met possessed. When he asked how she had acquired the knowledge, her husband suddenly joined in the conversation and adroitly changed the subject, something which Greg found a little odd since he had little to say up to that point.

“So how did you meet our Sara?” Hamish interjected in a lilting Scottish accent. Like the others, he had enjoyed the music but while curious about this stranger in their midst he had a healthy distrust of newcomers.

Greg both noted the ‘our’ and caught more than a hint of a ‘big brother’ vibe in the question. He answered, “I’m camping up by the woods and she came trotting past.” He paused as if thinking, “Well, maybe not so much trotting as gasping,” he turned his head to grin at Sara at the memory.

Responding, Sara returned his grin with a narrow-eyed stare. “It was at the top of the bendy bit of the lane and I haven’t run for ages. I was just a *little* out of breath,” she spoke defensively.

“If by ‘a little’ she means ...*argh* ...*argh* ...*argh*,” Greg wheezed a parody of someone desperate for oxygen that sounded a lot like Darth Vader.

“Ah, yes, our Sara loves to run,” Hamish chortled, “The first time I met her she was jogging as well. I don’t recall her being out of breath but it took weeks for the bruises resulting from that meeting to fade...”

“Intriguing,” Greg raised an eyebrow. “I sense a good story there?”

“Yes. And since it’s rather a long one, why don’t you come round for dinner tomorrow so we can tell you all about it,” only now it was Liana interrupting, “and Sara, you come too, in case we miss any salient details,” the invitation was accompanied by a beatific smile. “Bring Matthew, of course.”

Greg wondered who ‘Matthew’ might be but didn’t like to ask. Did Sara have a husband, partner, boyfriend who wasn’t here tonight? “I’d love to,” he replied, “but I’m sorry, I can’t do tomorrow. I’m playing an evening gig. How about the night after? Would that be alright?”

Sara shrugged, “Sunday, yeah, I can do Sunday, long as we’re not too late. It’s a school night.”

“No its not,” countered Liana with a hint of steel in her tone. “Monday is the May Day holiday. So no school. Remember?”

“Oh yeah, it is too,” Sara shrugged. “I’ve been too busy to think about it. Well, then dinner on Sunday will be okay.”

Greg wondered why this was an issue. Perhaps Sara really was as young as she looked? No, she’d said she had to get back to work that day they’d met, so she had to be older than school-age. It was just that it was so difficult to tell from her appearance. Her skin and eyes looked teenage-fresh and the short-cropped hairstyle wouldn’t have been out of place on a schoolgirl but he’d thought the slightly cynical world-worn attitude that she displayed suggested someone who’d lived more than a little. The way his thoughts had been leading him since their first meeting, he certainly hoped she was well out of her school years and had left her teens in the dust.

“Sunday then,” Liana directed a serene gaze towards Sara, “and Sara, perhaps you would be as kind as to collect Greg and bring him to the cottage?”

Sara had had two years to accustom herself to the diamond-hard will behind the softly-spoken voice and otherworldly countenance that Liana presented to the world at large. “He could walk through the woods, it’s not far,” she objected. “Or,” she turned wide eyes to Greg, “ride his horse.” She narrowed those eyes as she turned her head back to Liana, “he has a horse and a gypsy caravan, you know.”

“But he doesn’t know the way,” this from a complacently smiling Hamish, who had more than an inkling that his wife was playing match-maker to these two. The least he could do was assist her endeavours. For now anyway. He would make up his mind over dinner about this Greg character once he had more opportunity to check out his intentions towards their Sara.

“Oh, okay,” her reply expressing her reluctance, Sara had a strong sense she was being manipulated by these two and did not like it. To Greg, she sounded even more like a disgruntled teen agreeing to do something she didn’t want to under duress from her parents.

“Lovely. Sunday it is, then. We’ll see you at seven. There’s no need to bring anything.” Liana spoke brightly as she sat back, pleased with her efforts.

“Especially not flowers.” Sure that she was being manipulated, Sara couldn’t help but add the retort, her tone a little surly. This remark triggered

several concerned glances from those around the table and pursed lips from her father, but no one commented further.

Greg wondered why flowers were unwelcome. But before he could say anything the publican tapped him on his shoulder. “You rested enough yet?” Seamus asked, “cos we’re gonna have a riot here if you don’t play some more.” Greg turned around to see raised glasses and a roomful of expectant faces, shortly followed by the sound of feet thumping the floorboards.

He rose from the stool, bowing to the crowd. There were loud laughs and catcalls. “The natives are getting restless. No rest for the wicked. I’d better get back to work,” Greg grinned down at Sara’s slightly petulant child-like face. “Thanks ever so much for the offer to pick me up for our first date. I’ll see you Sunday evening then, if not before.” He had the satisfaction of seeing her shocked face before he followed Seamus’ wide back through the crowd, to his instruments. As he wended his way through the crowded room he imagined he could feel Sara’s pretty lavender eyes boring laser-precise holes in his back.

He played and sang the rest of his set with a lightness and sense of expectation in his heart that he recognised as the beginnings of a new personal adventure.

## PIPING THE BRIDE

“If we keep bumping into one another like this I’m going to think you’re following me.” Greg had timed the interruption to coincide with her date wandering away in the direction of the men’s loos.

“You’re in *my* village and I was here first, so technically, you’re the one following me,” Sara countered, replacing the dessert spoon she had picked up in readiness to eat her gooseberry and elderflower fool on the white linen tablecloth.

“Well, I’m not bothered if you’re not,” Greg smiled. Both the dessert and the woman looked good enough to eat, he thought. She had changed last night’s jeans and hoodie for a prettily feminine dress in a pale floral print. He particularly liked the way the dress played with the neckline, giving a tantalising peek at the pale mounds of her breasts. Showing off a little more flesh than the previous night’s attire was a definite improvement, he thought. There was a wrap lying over the chair back. Fortunately for him, in the warm evening air it was redundant. Dressed up, she looked less like a schoolgirl escaping from study prep and more like a woman but as he was still somewhat uncertain as to her age he did his best to keep his eyes from straying downwards. The task had not been made any easier by the sharply indrawn breath she had taken when he spoke.

Sara raised a glass of cool juice to her lips as she thought of a suitable reply -she had noted the quick flick of his eyes towards her chest and was feeling unaccountably flustered. Her fingers crept to the chair back to finger her wrap, thinking she might retrieve it but she stayed her hand. She was a grown woman, after all and could handle a little male attention. Still, nothing was coming to her conversation-wise so she drained the drink,

stalling for time, all the while ransacking her mind for a safe topic.

“So this is the ‘gig’ that you were talking about last night?” It was a bit lame, but it would have to do. When he’d said he had a ‘gig’ on Saturday night, she had not thought to ask where it was and had never imagined to see, or more correctly, hear him stridently and confidently piping the bride, - an old school friend of Sara’s- into the large airy tent where her wedding breakfast guests awaited. Once inside he’d thankfully put the noisy bagpipes aside and for the last hour had been playing softly in the background as guests ate and drank their way through a sumptuous four-course banquet.

“Yeah, I got conned into it at the last minute when the band Seamus had hired all came down with some nasty virus. At least the breaks are a tad more consistent than pub gigs. I’ve got few minutes now while they get ready for speeches and cutting the cake.” He eyed her empty glass. “Can I get you another drink?” He remembered that he had seen her drinking orange juice the previous night, “Do you drink anything other than fruit juice?” There were open bottles of champagne sitting in ice buckets as well as red and white wine on the table but he could see that the wine glass at her table setting was unused. The untouched glass did little for his confidence that she was of legal age to consume alcohol.

Sara noted the tall glass of sparkling water in his hand.

“Water’s fine,” she spoke shortly. She wasn’t sure what made her say the next words; it wasn’t something she generally shared with people who were little more than strangers. “I can’t touch alcohol. I’m a recovering alcoholic.” She watched with curiosity to see how he would respond to the news.

“How long?” he asked matter-of-factly, as if she’d just told him some minor factoid about herself.

She was surprised at his casual response. Generally, it was at this point that the majority of people she’d ever shared this information with took an involuntary step backwards, as if her condition might be contagious.

Sara didn’t even need to think to answer this one, “fourteen years, almost to the day.” She’d been five weeks pregnant with Matthew when she’d quit, cold-turkey. Between the awful morning sickness and the dry horrors, it had not been a fun start to her pregnancy.

“I’m not a big drinker myself these days. I drank more when I was young but I found it was messing with my music so I limit myself to one beer when I’m playing. Most of the time I stick to water,” he brandished the glass. “Suits my voice better -but lost a few friends when I changed my habits -they seemed to think it was very un-Australian of me.” While he was speaking, he was doing a fast re-evaluation of her age. He knew alcoholics could be as young as thirteen or even younger but fourteen years sober would surely put her in her mid-twenties at the very least. He breathed out a sigh of relief that he hadn’t been guilty of thinking somewhat

carnal thoughts about a teen.

She laughed. “Yeah, well, there’s no ‘one beer’ limit for me. It tends to be all or nothing ...so I stick with nothing.” She angled her gaze downwards; he’d sat in the empty chair next to her, vacated by a guest gone in search of the facilities. “I do like the tartan trousers. Though why not a kilt?”

“Well, technically, I’m not a Scot and I’d feel a bit of a dweeb wearing a skirt, even when I am playing the pipes. I figure this is close enough and trews have the added benefit that no one can look up my dress when I switch to playing the harp.”

She could see he was trying hard to maintain a serious face. “Huh, word to the wise,” she held up a single finger and shook it from side to side, “don’t *ever* let Hamish hear you call the kilt a skirt or a dress,” she admonished. “It’ll be *Braveheart* all over again.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” he replied glibly, seemingly not too bothered by what the Scot might think of his opinions.

“I like these flowers,” he indicated the spray of white roses and pale blue hydrangeas in the centre of the table, “I’d swipe them to take for Liana tomorrow as a hostess gift, but you said last night she doesn’t like flowers.”

“You will *not* steal the flowers!” her voice rose indignantly. “I did them myself, and what’s more, I didn’t say that Liana *dislikes* flowers, just that she has no need of anyone to take her any.”

“But I thought *all* women needed flowers!” he retorted, picturing his mother, sister and previous girlfriends, “At least, all the ones I know do.”

“Not that one. She’s more than capable of providing her own,” if her tone was a little dry, she was not in the mood to apologise. Sara was still a trifle irritated at what she was fairly certain was Liana and Hamish’s manoeuvring of her at the pub. Belatedly, aware that she was saying more than she ought, she shut her mouth.

He appeared not to have noticed her slip-up, merely asking, “So you’re a florist then?” It was more of a question than a statement, “and Liana too, since she has access to more flowers than she needs?”

“No, not exactly. Well *I* am, among other things, but Liana’s more of an herbalist, I guess you’d say, though she’s more than that.” Just how much more was something that had, over the past two years been given out on a need-to-know basis; and he didn’t *need* to know. “She makes herbal remedies for my shop and does a bit of consulting work every now and then when the occasion arises.”

“Among other things? So what else do you do?”

So, he’d caught that. He was a quick study, she thought. She was relieved his questioning had moved away from Liana. Still, she could see that she’d have to watch what she said if she didn’t want to get caught out.

“Ah well, I grow those topiary plants to hire or buy,” she indicated

several large pots of neatly clipped plants situated at the doors to the tent and at intervals along the tent walls, all decorated with twinkling fairy lights.

"They're great," his glance was admiring, "time-consuming though and a long wait for a profit. Those specimens can take years to mature."

"Yes, depending on the species," it appeared he knew something about topiary.

"Anything else ... You said 'other *things*', plural?"

Yep, he didn't miss much. "I run my own nursery, tearooms and garden retail outlet. Oh, and as if I don't have enough to do already, I breed doves for sale as a side-line." And that's all she was going to let on for now. If he made it to dinner tomorrow he'd probably find out about the rest of her 'interests', especially Matthew, without her having to add anything more.

"Whoa, no wonder you never have time to get out and exercise, you're running around like crazy already, doing all that!"

"That's only the half of it," she couldn't help but bemoan. It was his fault, she decided, for getting her started. "Right now is the silly season and I'm flat out with customers wanting to refurbish their gardens after the winter. We're open six days a week and doing online orders as well." It seemed to her that the 'silly season' was getting longer every year, and whilst it was wonderful that business was booming, soon there would be no 'off' time for her at all. She was not sure how she would cope.

"Sounds like you need more help." A nascent idea was starting to germinate.

"Yeah -much as I love having my business in the countryside, good help is hard to find round here. I have Liana occasionally and my Dad even less occasionally. Matthew helps out at weekends and I have a couple of part-timers but the schoolboy boy I did have helping in the yard has started university over in Bristol and is only available in his holidays now. We're not exactly the big smoke when it comes to finding knowledgeable and qualified personnel."

There was that 'Matthew' again, Hmmm. Greg hoped he was merely an employee but then why would he be invited to dinner if he weren't something more? "You know, the nursery business used to be big around Perth. My parents ran one north of the city and I have some experience." At Sara's bemused expression, "I was raised in a place called Wanneroo - it was all dairy farms, market gardens and nurseries before the city expanded so fast that the suburbs started to take it over all the arable land. We grew mostly Australian natives and some exotics, but the principles are the same. You plant them, water them, feed them and pot them on as necessary." He looked at Sara speculatively, "I'm not all that busy at the moment. I could give you a bit of a hand for a few weeks if you'd like. I'm a dab hand at grafting and pruning and I reckon I could trim topiary if I'd a mind to," he made a snipping scissor-like gesture with his index and forefingers.

Whatever she had thought he might say that was the last thing Sara had expected to hear.

She opened and closed her mouth several times before any sound came out. “Wow. Gosh. Um.” She shook her head, flummoxed by his offer, wanting to say an immediate ‘Yes!’ but aware there could be complications. Complications were something she had no time for, particularly those of a romantic nature. She settled for, “can I think about it?”

“Yeah, mull it over and tell me what you’ve decided tomorrow at dinner. I don’t have any big gigs coming up—a few local festivals here and there but I’ve purposely kept the summer pretty free, so if you want me to give a hand, I could maybe keep the wagon here and borrow a car to drive to the gigs. I could stick around for a month or so if that would help?”

Sara found herself playing with her napkin, thinking furiously. She desperately needed help and finding someone so unexpectedly with hands-on nursery experience was a huge bonus. Her mind went into overdrive and she was already planning how she might make it work. If he would agree to move the horse and wagon next to the nursery, or, even better, relocate himself into the flat above the shop and live on-site it would be an enormous boon. She needed time to think this through more clearly. To cover her confusion she said, “How much longer are you here tonight? Are you playing for the dancing?” The wedding dance was following directly on the heels of the dinner but Sara planned to skip that part of the evening’s revelries.

“Nah, they’ve got a band coming in for that. I get to go home soon and see my horse. She misses me when I’m gone.” He made to get up. “Well, I suppose since you don’t need me to change that water into wine I’d better leave you before your date comes back from the loo or wherever he’s disappeared to.”

He’d had plenty of opportunity to watch the pair while he played and had been trying, with frustratingly little success, to gauge the relationship between them. They had seemed close enough, chatting freely, touching and laughing often, but there had been no hand-holding, kissing or anything that could be construed as canoodling and he was curious to know the relationship status. Perhaps this was the mysterious Matthew?

Sara waggled her glass as she shook her head in denial. “Thanks for the offer but there’s more than enough magic going on round this place without you contributing any alchemy ...and FYI, he’s not my date, just an old friend filling in as a plus-one for the event,” she countered.

“Great,” he didn’t elaborate, “until tomorrow then. I look forward to being picked up and taken to dinner.” His smile was pure mischief.

“Hmpf. Watch it mate. I could still give you directions and make you walk if you’re not careful.”

“I might get lost in the woods and then you’d feel bad.” He had gleaned



from the conversation the night before that Hamish and Liana lived relatively nearby.

“Nah, not that bad,” she considered him for a brief moment, thinking about him living alone on the edge of the forest, “but I wouldn’t be wandering about in those woods on your own if I were you. Certainly not after dark,” she cautioned.

He guffawed. “I’ve seen those woods and they don’t look very scary compared to what I’m used to. What could possibly hurt me in there? Killer Teddy Bears? Big bad wolf?”

“Not quite, but there *are* a few surprises for the unwary and uninitiated.”

“Well, I’m not exactly Red Riding Hood and I’ve had some experience with things that bite. Still, if there are extra-scary things, perhaps you could go along with me for protection sometime? As my plus-one.” He grinned.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she would not commit to anything.

“Oh well, I’m sure you’ll change your mind once you get to know me better.”

She ignored that, looking over his shoulder. “Graham’s coming back. Bye now. Say hi to Cara from me and give her a pat. She’s such a sweetie.”

“She is that. I’ll be sure to pass on your love and slip her an extra carrot from you as well,” he smiled, getting to his feet. “See you when you come to collect me for our date tomorrow.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said date. It is not a date. Mate.” Sara shook her head, picked up her spoon and turned her back to eat her dessert.

Greg just smiled to himself as he walked away.

## MY CARA MIA

Sara checked her side mirror, indicated and pulled into the gateway. Turning off the engine and pocketing her keys she strode to the gate. Thinking she would simply open it and walk through, she was a trifle surprised to see the five-bar gate was securely chained and padlocked. She climbed the bars instead, swinging a jeans-clad leg over the top to jump down into the meadow on the far side.

It was a short stroll across the wildflower-sprinkled grass to her destination. She sauntered in the soft evening light, listening to the twilight chorus of birdsong from the woods surrounding the pasture. A robin chirruped loudly nearby and she scanned through the half-dusk to see if she could spot the little songster. As insectivorous birds, robins were well adapted to foraging in dim light, able to continue to feed under artificial light well into the night, being one of the earliest birds to start the dawn chorus and the last to stop singing of an evening. Spying movement, Sara spotted the bright-eyed, red-breasted fellow pecking at the base of the massive oak that Greg had parked his caravan underneath. The bird took off with an earthworm in his beak and flew up to a nest set in the forks of a branch above her head. She could hear the insistent chirping of young in the nest and hoped the parent birds were up to the task of raising their noisy demanding brood.

Cara was stretched out comfortably on the ground near the fringes of the oak, flicking her tail to ward off the occasional fly. The horse raised her head just enough to check who was approaching, then satisfied there was nothing worth getting up for lay back on the soft meadow grasses.

As she wandered nearer the oak tree the brightly, you could even say,

garishly, painted horse-drawn van under the boughs of the tree captured Sara's attention. It was a fascinating thing that looked as if it belonged to a bygone age. Noting the four heavy wagon wheels and the general bulk of it, she could understand why Cara was built so solidly -the van looked as weighty as a small lorry.

She walked up between the parallel bars of the shafts and started to climb a short flight of steps that led up to the divided front door of the van, admiring the intricate paintwork all over and around the doors and end wall of the wagon as she called out a greeting.

"Hey there, it's Sara come to collect the gypsy. Anyone home?"

"Come on up," Greg's voice emanated from inside before he popped his head out over the open top section of the door. This was split into two lace-curtained panels that had been folded outwards. "Watch the door when you open it or you'll fall backwards off the steps," he warned, adding sagely, "I know, because I have."

Mindful of his advice, Sara pulled the lower half of the door towards her and stepped around and into the van. She supposed that the exterior decoration should have given her a clue as to what she might expect inside, but the interior of the wagon had her raising her eyebrows in open-mouthed amazement -the space she had entered into looked like a cross between a round-roofed Hobbit hole and a Victorian child's doll's house. All of the fittings and fixtures followed the curvature of the barrel roofline and *every* single surface that could have been painted, decorated, carved or gilded, was.

Furthest from the door, the entire end of the wagon was taken up with a large raised bed that could be closed off with heavy red velvet curtains. These were currently roped back with thick gold tasselled chords. The bright red curtaining was repeated on sash windows above the bed and to the side. No room for understatement here at all, she thought. She smiled at the sight of a leather-topped footstool on the floorboards in front of the bed. Obviously needed for anyone shorter to gain access to the sleeping platform, it reminded her of a Victorian painting of nightgown-robed gentlefolk climbing into their high beds.

Parquetry-decorated sliding panels underneath the bed concealed storage bays and a built-in plush velvet upholstered bench seat to one side had drawers underneath. But oddly enough, instead of more built-ins to the opposite side, there was an ornate walnut bureau that wouldn't have been out of place in someone's home. Goodness, she thought, there were ceramic plates and china ornaments on shelves taking up every nook and cranny of the available wall space. Whilst Sara had never thought of her own decorating tastes as minimalist, the effusiveness of the decoration in such a small space was a bit overwhelming and she wasn't sure if it was something she could have lived with for any length of time. Still she

thought it did seem perfect within the context of this tiny space.

“So you like what I’ve done with the place? I’ve just decorated. I was going for the minimalist-look.” Greg’s tone was jovial. When he saw Sara struggling to make a polite reply he added, “Nah, just kidding. It all came this way -standard issue I’m told. Not perhaps my preference either but its growing on me.”

Greg appeared to have been washing up while he waited for her arrival. He set down a tea towel he had been using to dry the dishes; placing plates and cups away in cupboards to the side of a built-in woodstove. The space was meticulously neat and tidy, something that Sara couldn’t help but comment on.

“Yeah, not my natural state any more than the decoration,” he replied candidly. “You either learn to be organised in one of these or drown in the mess. I discovered that the hard way my first week travelling. Don’t clean up and put stuff away and in five minutes, there’s no room to move. As if to emphasise his point, he wiped the tiny bench dry, neatly folded the towel in half and hung it in on a rail above the stove.

It seemed obvious that he’d learnt that lesson well. Sara wondered if a spell of living in a caravan would encourage her teenage son to pick up after himself. She was fairly sure it would not.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“After you madam,” Greg picked up a bottle of red wine off the miniscule counter top. “I figured if flowers weren’t an appropriate gift, I’d bring a nice burgundy instead. Um, I wanted to check first ...long as that’s okay with you. It won’t bother you, will it?”

Sara shook her head. “Just ‘cos I can’t drink, doesn’t mean the rest of world can’t have the occasional glass or two.”

“You sure?” At her brief nod he shoved the bottle into a small backpack that he placed over one shoulder.

“I’m sure that Liana and Hamish will enjoy a glass,” Sara shrugged, “wine was never really my poison of choice anyway.” She twisted to scramble back down the steps.

Following, Greg closed the panelled doors and locked up. He walked across to check on Cara with Sara close in his wake. At their approach, Cara had clambered to her feet and was standing in the shade of the huge old tree. Pulling a carrot from his back jeans pocket, Greg asked Sara, “You want to give it to her? I promise you’ll be her friend for life if you do.”

“Okay,” she replied uncertainly. Sara grasped the carrot and gingerly held it out to the horse, feeling even less certain when she saw the size of the mare’s teeth. Whilst Cara seemed friendly enough, she had never had much to do with horses and was unsure how to proceed.

“No, not like that. Not unless you want to lose fingers,” Greg gently grabbed her wrist and removed the carrot from her fingers, “Stretch your

hand out like this,” he demonstrated, putting his hand out, palm up and flattened.” When she followed suit, “Yeah, that’s right,” breaking the carrot in two, he placed one piece on her open palm. Cara took the morsel with enthusiastic but gentle nips, chewing and swallowing the first with relish before coming back to find the second. Sara could see that this was something the mare had done many times as she seemed adept at removing the treats without harming the giver.

“There,” he said, “now she’s your Cara mia for all time.” They had begun walking towards the gate, the mare ambling alongside, hopeful of more hand-outs.

“Cara mia?”

“My beloved. In Italian; though this Cara isn’t Italian. She’s an Irish cob. But her name still means friend or beloved in Irish.”

“She’s huge, but she’s so calm and gentle,” Sara remarked, patting the mare’s neck. “I love her big feathery feet.”

“Yes, She’s bred as a Vanner so she’s ideal for pulling the Cara-Van,” he grinned.

“Oh, really? I hope that’s not your best pun.” Her look was disparaging.

“Don’t blame me, I didn’t name her. She came with the wagon; it was a package deal. They do say that an ideal cob should have the head of a lady and the backside of a cook.” He reached back and patted Cara’s ample rump, “I’d say Cara qualifies in both respects.”

“Don’t you listen to a word he’s saying girl. You have a beautiful backside,” Sara ran her fingers through Cara’s long mane, whispering to her, “Just because it’s more Kim Kardashian than Gwyneth Paltrow doesn’t make any difference ... there’s nothing wrong with having a bit of ‘junk in the trunk’ and everyone whose anyone knows plus sizes models are all the rage these days.”

Cara seemed to approve of the sentiment because she chose that moment to turn and push her head at Sara, whether looking for more pats or extra treats Sara was later unsure. Caught off-guard, Sara was sent tumbling. She had a moment of thinking she was about to make contact with the grass before she was caught by muscular arms from behind. “Whoa there girl,” Sara felt herself lifted under her armpits and set back on her feet but not before she had been dangled for a moment in the air like some wayward child.

“You’re so light,” he spoke wonderingly. “Certainly not Kardashian *or* Paltrow. You’re more of a Tinkerbell. You must weigh nothing, -what are you, less than a hundred pounds?”

In less time than it had taken for him to say the words, Sara saw red. Unbeknown to Greg, he had poured salt on a never-healed wound. As if it wasn’t bad enough that she wasn’t thrilled with comments about her slight frame, she absolutely *abhorred* fairy references. She’d heard them all her life,

Tinkerbell, Thumbelina, cute little pixie, elf. Annoyed and determined to prove a point, she turned; narrowing her eyes to slits as in a single fast movement she grabbed the backpack off his shoulder and pushed at his chest with little more than one finger, sending him sprawling on the ground. She then stood staring down at his recumbent form, a belligerent expression on her elfin face.

“So could Tinkerbell do *that*, do you reckon?”

Greg looked up from where he had fallen. She had set the pack down and was standing, legs set in wide fighting stance and hands fisted on hips, looking for all the world like some modern-day feminist rendition of Peter Pan. Wisely, he decided that this was a thought he would keep to himself.

“Man, you’re strong for your size,” his expression took on a new look of admiration as he struggled to his feet, brushing grass off his jeans backside, “From that little hissy fit, I figure we take umbrage at the use of fairy names then?”

“How would you feel, if every time you turned around, some Wally compared you to a tiddly widdly dinkums fairy?”

He looked at her speculatively before collecting the pack and placing over his shoulder once more. “You got my respect.”

“Huh.”

“Hey, I know a fairy reference you should approve of. Holly Short. Fits you to a tee.”

“Holly *who*?” He could see from her expression that she was getting ready to have another go at him and in the interests of self-preservation, took a step backwards then put the horse between them before he spoke again.

He talked fast across the mare’s back. “Mean, green, kick-arse fairy who shoots first and asks questions later. Totally you. See? Are you telling me that you’ve never read any Artemis Fowl books? There’s a whole series.” The look he gave her was pitying. “Where’s your inner tween, girl?”

“Working every hour that God grants me.”

“Ah yes, the workaholic thing.” Her eyes narrowed at his ‘aholic reference but he shrugged it off, continuing, “So, have you decided if you want Cara and me to mooch on over and give you a hand yet?”

“I wasn’t aware that Cara was part of the package,” the belligerent look left her face, melting as she laid a hand on Cara’s neck. “Well now, that makes your offer a lot more tantalising.”

“You’re joking. Right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” she deadpanned.

“You want help or not? You know, it’s not good business to antagonise the hired help before they’ve even signed on, don’t you? Especially not right on the heels of your Holly Short impersonation.”

“You’re lucky the ground’s soft, mate.” She eyed him again, “I might

have to check out this Holly Short character though. Unfortunate choice of surname but I kinda like the idea of a butt-kicking fairy. It's about time someone gave them a bit of attitude. Far too many pink tutus and piffly diamante-covered wands for my tastes."

"You're forgetting the sexy teenage ones, like Winx Club."

She gave him a look, "How *do* you know this stuff? You got a weird fairy-fixation or something odd like that that I should know about."

"Sister's kids," he wasn't going to tell her that he wasn't completely adverse to the odd sexy fairy himself. Not after she'd dissed them anyway. "There's one called Bloom -that could be your type, or maybe you're more Flora, the nature-girl."

"You want to end up back on your arse?" She all but ground her teeth in anticipation.

He held up hands in a peaceable gesture. "Just saying. No need to get your knickers in a bunch, Holly S."

"Do not be calling me Holly anything," she pulled a face. "And just 'cos you shortened the '*Short*' doesn't mean I don't know what it stands for."

"I dunno, it kind of suits you," she was certainly prickly enough to warrant the name, he thought, and the red tee-shirt she wore under a scarred leather jacket was exactly the colour of ripe holly berries.

"Well, anything would be better than Sara," she conceded. "It was so common when I started school that my teacher would call it out and five of us would answer. They took to adding our last initial to try and differentiate -so I ended up as Sara B. I didn't mind it when I was younger but when it kept going at High School I was less than impressed. Every teenager's dream of individuality. Not."

"Holly S it is then."

"Just remember, if I get tired of it I can 'huh' and 'hiyah' you anytime I want," she warned.

"So does that mean I've got the job Holly?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she spoke reluctantly, "due to a distinct shortage of any other applicants, it's yours. Come over tomorrow morning -as it's a holiday I'll have time to show you around the nursery." Despite her gruff tone, she was more than happy he'd offered. She had had plenty of time the night before to watch him working and liked his ethics. The dance band had been late arriving to the wedding reception and he'd kept playing with no complaints, waiting until they had set up and ready to go before he'd packed up his harp, bagpipes and fiddle and gone home. It said a lot about him and was the kind of attitude she needed at the nursery if she ever hoped to catch up on orders.

They'd arrived at the locked gate. Greg fished in his pocket for the padlock key.

"I didn't think gypsies were into this level of security," Sara commented,

putting heavy emphasis on the word *gypsies*.

“They are when they come home late at night to find the gate wide open and their horse wandering out on the lane,” he muttered crossly. “Where did I put the stupid key?” He tried his other pants pocket.

“Doesn’t matter,” she was up and over before he could protest otherwise, “come on slow poke.” She waved a hand for him to do likewise.

He followed her, hoping he wasn’t going to get splinters in unfortunate places as he hefted his leg over the top bar.

“So is that why I saw you locking up the caravan as well?” Sara had been curious. Keys weren’t something people normally needed a lot of around Thornden.

“A couple of small things went missing from inside the van. Nothing big or of much value other than sentimental. Just an old pocket watch and a silver pinkie ring of mine. Not worth alerting the authorities but I’d rather nothing else disappeared while I’m out.”

“And you’re sure you haven’t just misplaced them,” Sara questioned.

“You’ve seen my place, between the lack of space and the necessity to be a neat freak there’s not a lot of opportunity for losing things. Besides, I searched through everything anyway and I’m sure they’re gone.”

“Hmm, shiny things,” Sara had more than an inkling who might be to blame for the pilfering. After similar thefts from White Briars, Liana had made her aware of Jack and his magpie-like attraction to sparkly items, particularly those that belonged to others. She made a mental note to alert Liana to the thefts, as she had insisted that she was the only one who had any dealings with Jack. Although curious, Sara was not so sure she wanted to see him for herself.

“Maybe it’s one of those scary Teddy Bears from the woods,” Greg added jokingly.

“Never a truer word said in jest and all that,” she solemnly agreed.

Greg was about to question her further when his eye was taken with the large snarly black Harley-Davidson parked on its kickstand near the edge of the lane.

“That’s our transport for the evening? Wow! You certainly know how to show a guy a good time!” he crowed enthusiastically. “Can I drive? Can I?” his eyes turned small-boy hopeful.

“Forget it buster. I am not *showing* you any time, good or otherwise,” she growled, “and you *certainly* do not get to drive.” She took the pack from him and proffered a helmet and a leather jacket before stowing the pack. “If you ride with me you get to be the plus-one pillion passenger.

“I guess I can live with being the eye candy on the back,” he sounded only mildly disappointed, before adding in plaintive tones, “...so, maybe you’ll let me drive on the way home? Huh?”

“Huh,” she grunted, swinging her leg easily over the bike and balancing



herself on the soft leather seat, “when pigs might fly,” she waved a hand overhead. “This baby is one of the few left-over relics from my wild-child phase and I hardly ever get to ride it myself nowadays so I don’t like to share.” She did not add that her more usual transport was the staid and boringly respectable nursery van.

“Wild child? Now that sounds like a story I’d like to hear. Though I did wonder why you were wearing leather on such a warm evening. Looks good on you Holly.” While he chatted he shrugged into the jacket and put the helmet on, settling himself behind her. She felt his hands link around her waist.

“Puh-lease say that’s not the theme song from Easy Rider that I’m hearing you humming back there,” she complained as she placed her own helmet over her head.

“Just a little background music to get us in the right mood,” he laughed between hummed snatches of the song, starting to sing the lyrics in his strong tenor voice as she started the bike.

He might be on-key and loud but she could be louder. She gunned the throttle with a sense of puckish satisfaction and drowned his singing out with the guttural roar of the bike’s engine.

## LIKE RIDING A BIKE

As it transpired, the five-minute ride to White Briars took closer to twenty.

They had been approaching the entrance gateway, Sara indicating the turn, only to have Greg tap her on her arm and signal that he would prefer they should carry on. Unable to make himself heard over the noise of the bike he had circled his finger in the air to indicate a ride around the block. Shrugging her leather-clad shoulders, Sara acquiesced, continuing past the entrance and on towards the turn to the nursery. If she took the hump-backed bridge a little fast and had him hanging on for dear-life as they became airborne, well, she thought, that was his problem. Perhaps next time he would take more care in choosing what he wished for.

Greg was having a wonderful time. If she thought he was scared and hanging on tight for anything other than the fun of it, well, he thought, that was her problem. For himself, he was inclined to take whatever opportunity came his way to cuddle up to a pretty girl, especially a Harley-riding, kick-arse Holly Short kind of woman who obviously knew more than the basic rudiments of how to handle a powerful bike.

They rode past the nursery. Sara didn't stop, only slowing sufficiently to allow him a brief glimpse as they motored by. She noted, in the bike's rear vision mirror, Greg's thumbs up of approval of the thatched cottage that was her shop and tearooms, before she picked up speed and roared onwards to the intersection leading to the village. The lanes were narrow and required concentration so Sara did her best to ignore her passenger and keep her attention on manoeuvring the heavy bike round the twists and turns of the road. It was not lost on her that focusing on the job at hand was made more difficult by the sheer proximity of having him physically

plastered against her back.

Greg was loving that same physical proximity, maybe a little too much, he chided himself, easing his hips away from her just a smidgeon. The only thing that would be better than this would be himself in the driver's seat and her clinging on behind as his passenger but as the bike was hers; he wasn't exactly in a position to argue. The way she was driving, he had a perfect excuse to maintain his firm hold. As it was, any further loosening of his grip and he might find himself flung off on any one of the tight corners.

There wasn't a soul around the village green in Thornden. They tore through the quiet village and past the pub, Sara laying the bike hard over on the curves around the village pond before tearing on towards the rise leading up to the gypsy encampment. Unlike the day she'd run up the twists, there were no Puffing Billy impersonations to be seen as she slalomed around the bends; Greg canting his body in exact unison with hers as they took the S-bends at considerable speed. Mindful of frightening Cara, she eased back on the throttle going past the mare's paddock before increasing the revs once more when they had passed by. Moments later they were back at their original destination.

The gate was open and Sara rumbled on down a single-lane driveway, passing under interlinking trees that formed a shadowed tunnel before the drive widened out for a short distance. To the right was a stone-built carriage house complete with doves sitting preening and cooing at apertures set in the upper walls. They passed by and Sara carefully negotiated an even narrower gravelled drive, not much wider than a footpath that ran between the crazily rounded forms of twin hedges either side of the sinuously curved walkway. Riding almost right up to the conservatory doors of what looked to Greg to be a miniature Gothic mansion, she idled for a moment before cutting the engine and engaging the bike's kick-stand, waiting for her passenger to move before she alighted from the motorbike.

To her chagrin, it seemed that Greg wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. She felt him shifting his weight behind her and looked in the mirrors to see him calmly removing his helmet. He tucked it under his arm, placing his free hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Kudos to you Holly Short-stuff. You can take me for a ride on this beast of yours anytime you like," his tone was both respectful and impressed.

"Great," she spoke gruffly, "you plan to get off my bike anytime today?" Secretly, she was quietly satisfied at his reaction -it wasn't often that she got to show off her riding skills.

"I'll move in a minute when my heart rate drops back to normal," he laid the hand that wasn't holding the helmet over his heart. "So do you ride like that all the time, or were you out to impress me?"

"I'm a bit rusty -and I *may* have been showing off a little," she admitted

grudgingly, “but you asked for it so there’ll be no call for any pious repentance on this one,” she added, thinking back to the day they had met.

“None needed ...my child,” he couldn’t resist adding the priestly addendum.

She twisted slightly and dug him in the ribs, none too gently, “Off now, we’re probably late as it is and the others will be waiting.”

He dismounted the bike. “Speaking of ‘others’, I thought you were bringing this ‘Matthew’ person with you. But unless he’s stuffed in the pannier,” He opened it, “Nah. I don’t see him in here. I’m starting to think he is some invisible figment of your imagination.”

“Oh he’s visible alright,” she laughed, mindful of others she could mention who had the ability to be otherwise. “He wanted to walk from home. Unlike you, he knows the way and didn’t require chauffeuring. Removing her own head gear she finger-combed her brightly tinted hair, freeing it from the confines of the helmet. “That’s why I was able to ride.”

So this Matthew character co-habited at the same address as Sara. Hmmm, Greg didn’t like the sound of that one bit.

“He’s here already. Or at least he should be,” Sara added, unaware of the direction of his thoughts. It was a short walk from the nursery through the woods to White Briars and Matthew had left the nursery the same time she had. He was familiar with the route and she hadn’t thought to be concerned at him walking it alone but now, thinking back to Greg’s comments about the mischief-making of the previous evening and knowing a little of Jack’s past antics herself, she wondered if it had been such a good decision to allow Matthew to take the path on his own. She felt an overriding maternal need to get indoors and check that her son was safe.

“Let’s go inside,” she indicated the open conservatory doors.

“Nice place,” Greg would have tarried to admire the house, built of creamy-white stone and exhibiting many of the hallmarks of the Gothic style. He particularly liked that Hamish and Liana had allowed Virginia creeper to all but cover the house, with only the windows and doors peeking through the vivid green curtain of vine. He glanced around as much of the terrace that he could see to the formal garden beyond. “Any chance we could tour the gardens?”

“Later,” Sara said shortly. She pulled his hostess gift from the pannier and held it out for him, impatient to go. When Greg accepted the bottle she immediately made for the doors, gesturing for him to accompany her. He had little choice but to follow.

It appeared he wasn’t to be allowed to linger to admire the well-proportioned conservatory either. Walking through, he caught the impression of tall arched windows and comfortable white cane furniture strewn with bright cushions amid a profusion of colourfully flowering potted plants. He had mere moments to glance at the patterns of the

rustically tiled floor before Sara flung open another set of ornate double doors to enter the house proper. It seemed she was a regular guest in this house and quite at ease with arriving unannounced. Not bothering to knock or announce her presence, she bounced up a couple of steps into what appeared to be a spacious salon. His musical spidey-senses alerted, Greg briefly noted a baby grand piano to his left and a lute on a stand. His fingers twitched to try the pretty piano out but he controlled the impulse, gripping the bottle a little tighter to keep his fingers stilled.

“Matth ..,” Sara called loudly, “...Oh there you are.”

Greg caught a note of relief in the quieter tone of the second statement. Following close on her heels, he noticed her taut shoulders visibly relax. Sitting cross-legged on the mat between two large comfortable-looking sofas he saw Betony, Hamish and Liana’s little girl whom he had met at the pub. Opposite her was a boy. Well more than a boy, Greg revised, a sturdy tow-headed teenager, lounging in front of a half-built castle of Lego. Completing the relaxed scene was a large long-limbed brindle dog, asleep and taking up most of the space on one sofa. The animal flicked an ear at their approach but didn’t so much as open an eye.

“What’s up Mum?” the teen asked with equal nonchalance, lifting his face upwards to Sara.

Well, that was certainly a surprise. Whomever Greg had expected to find that Matthew was a strapping teenage son was definitely not an option he’d considered. He stood bemused at the sight for a moment before feeling a relieved grin stretch across his face. Knowing he must look like a bit of an idiot and not wanting Sara to see his evident relief, he turned to survey the bookshelves immediately to his right where several glass-fronted cabinets lined a recessed corner of the large room. A child, he mused, ...while it wasn’t outside the realms of possibility, he had not given a thought to that scenario, especially since he had only just gotten used to the idea that Sara wasn’t a school-girl herself. Even so, she must have borne him when she was very young. He continued to peruse the shelves while allowing himself surreptitious glances at mother and son.

Sara walked over and sank to the floor next to the toddler and boy. Wrapping her son in a tight hug she sighed gustily, “Just some silliness on my part, nothing to worry about. Hi Betony love.” She kissed the little girl. “Hey there Doug,” still holding her son tight she reached out a free hand to pat the dog, who responded with an enthusiastic tail-wag and rolled over on its back to with all four legs held in the air to give her better access to pat its stomach.

“Okay,” unconcerned, Matthew took her at her word, “if you’re looking for Hamish and Liana, they’re in the kitchen. “We’ve been waiting on you for ages. I hope it’s not long ‘til we eat. ‘Cos I’m...”

“...Starving!” Sara and Betony pre-empted the last word, chorusing it in

## LEAF ON A BREEZE

unison, Betty's childish tones piping alongside Sara's.

Greg smiled. It seemed that this was a familiar sentiment where Matthew was concerned and one that he well remembered from his own boyhood and teenage years. He watched Sara affectionately tousle her son's hair and climb back to her feet before he followed her, the children and the dog through another door that opened to the kitchen to greet his hosts for the evening.

## (NOT A) DINNER DATE

Greg was relieved that his hosts eschewed the grander setting of the formal dining table at one end of the living room for the more relaxed kitchen table with its bright banquette seats and comfortable chairs. As a norm, he wasn't overly fond of formality. He saw as he trailed Sara, the children and the dog through a door at one end of the long room that the cottage had a generously large high-ceilinged farmhouse-style kitchen. Handing him a soft drink, Liana directed him to sit next to Sara around a 50's retro-styled Formica table tucked into a bay surrounded with tall windows. The sash windows of the alcove were wide open to allow the light evening breeze to waft sweet floral scents from the garden indoors. With his back to the wall between the kitchen and a small adjoining study, Greg could see a little of the expansive garden outside but his attention was quickly diverted to the food and people around the table.

The conversation, over a dinner of succulent Beef Wellington, glazed carrots and steamed greens was enthusiastic, vociferous, wide-ranging and mostly inclusive of the stranger in their midst ... if occasionally Greg felt that there was some underlying in-house secret that he wasn't a party to, he let it go for the moment, preferring to enjoy the company and food. He did, however, make a note to question Sara about the undercurrents he occasionally sensed among the company at the table, something he had already noticed the night of his performance at the Thornden Arms.

Liana continued to quiz him about his music, obviously intrigued as to why someone would opt to travel the by-ways of southeast England as a troubadour rather than live in a more conventional manner. Greg explained that he had recently completed back-to-back recording sessions for two new albums as well as session-work for a well-known rock band, and after being cooped up for months had wanted to get out on the open road and among 'real' people to perform his music live. When the opportunity to take Cara and her van on the backwater lanes of Kent for the summer had presented itself -in the form of a fellow musician who had booked the van before thinking about the reality of taking on the venture- he had jumped at the chance to do something different.

During dessert -a summer fruit crumble accompanied with thick cream that had Greg, Hamish and Matthew returning for seconds- Sara mentioned Greg's missing trinkets and the open gate that had resulted in Cara's wandering onto the roadside.

"I'm sorry to hear that," there was a hint of steel in Liana's mellifluous voice. "And is Cara safe this evening? I'm sure Hamish would be happy to drive by the encampment and check on her."

"Nah, she'll be fine. I padlocked the gate with the biggest padlock I could find and a chain that would take an impressive set of bolt cutters to sever. Whoever it was, they weren't interested in stealing or hurting her so I doubt it'll happen again. It was probably just bored kids from the village up to a bit of mindless mischief." Greg remembered some of the less clever things he had done in his own youth and since no harm had been done was inclined to let it go.

Hamish was not so sure. He looked across at his wife, one eyebrow raised in question. She gave an almost imperceptible nod and he excused himself from the table on the pretext of popping upstairs to check on a sleeping Betony.

"Tea or coffee?" Liana asked. "Sara won't touch my herbal brews but perhaps you would like to try something -an infusion of sage or thyme perhaps to soothe your vocal chords? On the other hand,

raspberry perhaps? Also good.”

“I’ll give the raspberry a try,” Greg said, “My voice *has* felt a bit raspy the past day or two. Too much healthy outdoor living and fresh air, I think, after being stuck in a stuffy studio with chain-smoking rockers.”

“Coffee thanks, and strong,” Sara answered shortly. “Forget the herby things. I’ve got more work to do when I get back home and I could do with the jolt of a double shot of caffeine.”

Liana shook her head at her friend but moved across to the far side of the kitchen to prepare the drinks.

“You shouldn’t work yourself so hard, Holly S. Take a night off, why don’t you? Surely whatever it is you think you need to do can wait a few hours. And I’ll be round early tomorrow to give you a hand.” Looking more closely at her face, Greg thought she appeared pale and tired.

“No, I have orders that have to be sent tonight and fortunately the internet doesn’t sleep -so as long as I get them away before midnight they’ll get actioned tomorrow. Otherwise it’ll be another day and I’ll be even further behind on receiving stock that I need for my shop.”

“Are you coming to assist us at the nursery Greg? How lovely! Just what Sara needs,” Liana had been listening in on the conversation while pouring hot water into mugs.

“It’s a short-term thing -just ‘til Holly Short here finds some permanent help or until the end of the summer, whichever comes first,” Greg explained.

Liana carried their drinks back to the table. “Holly Short? Ah -So that’s why have you been calling Sara, Holly S all evening? I did wonder. Now I get the reference. I’ve been reading the Artemis Fowl books to Betony. She loves them. Anything with a fairy in it. You know little girls.”

“Yeah. Especially *your* little girl,” Sara couldn’t resist the slight dig.

“Better watch she doesn’t use a Mesmer spell on you,” Hamish came in the door, giving Liana another nod to indicate that everything had been in order at the gypsy paddock, before directing Sara a more stern look that suggested she watch her mouth. He had made the trip to the gypsy field and back in considerably less time than it had taken Sara and Greg to travel, but he had seen nothing of interest -the mare had been standing half-asleep under the tree and all had been peaceful but he had checked the padlocked gate and locked caravan for any signs of tampering to be on the safe side.

“You look tired, Sara,” He seconded Greg’s thoughts. “Why don’t I drive you, Matthew and Greg home after you’ve finished your drinks and you can collect the bike later in the week?”

“No thanks,” Sara shook her head. “The fresh air will help me wake up and I promised Greg he could drive back,” she hesitated a moment, “...though, on second thoughts, I would appreciate it if you would take Matthew home. I don’t want him walking through the woods after dark.” She didn’t say why but Hamish understood her concern.

“No trouble at all. You sure you don’t want to leave the bike? You’ll be coming back tomorrow afternoon for our May Day celebration anyway so you could collect it then.”

While the others had been talking Liana had been scheming. “Greg, you must come to our party too. We’re setting up a Maypole for the children to dance around and most of the village is coming. Now that you’ll be working at the nursery, you’re practically family so you must come,”

“Sure,” Greg answered, “sounds great. I love dancing.”

“If you don’t mind, we’ll head away now. Dinner was lovely but I *do* have things to do.” Sara broke in.

She had omitted to add that one of those ‘things’ was a nightly patrol of the nursery boundaries that she had recently instigated in response to finding an entire row of bagged semi-mature trees pushed over, plus other damage she had discovered to the sections of the nursery’s irrigation system that abutted the woods. Like Greg, she had put the occurrences down to youthful indiscretions -and since she’d made enough of those in her own past, she had not been inclined to make much of the damage, but now she was less sure that the perpetrator was from the village rather than from the woods.



“So you *promised* me I could drive, huh.”

Greg and Sara were standing outside the conservatory, having said ‘goodnight’ to Hamish and Liana. The air of the brick-paved terrace was tantalisingly perfumed with the evening scents of phlox and dame’s hyacinth, a tall, rather rangy member of the crucifer family. The hyacinth’s large flowers in lilac and white made it an obvious target for night-fliers attracted by the alluring perfume and several moths busily fluttered around the plants.

“It’s odd that I don’t recall you promising anything of the kind -more the opposite, in fact -but you



are gonna make good on that now you've said it, aren't you?" Greg's smile was virtuosity personified. "After all, good mothers shouldn't be liars."

"That statement shows just how *little* you know about parenting," Sara shot back. "But I suppose I have to now... though you're taking advantage -you know I just said it so I'd have a reason to take the bike. No going round the long way though -it'll be straight home and no diversions." She spoke firmly.

"Spoilsport," at the look on her face Greg quickly recanted, "Fine, straight home, zip-zap and no variations on that theme. I get the message loud and clear, Holly S."

Greg felt that he barely had time to get the bike up to any speed at all on the all-too-short journey from White Briars to his caravan but it was worth it, he decided, to have Sara pressed up against his back for those few precious minutes. Thinking that he'd very much like to prolong the contact, he was tempted to continue on down the twisty bends to the village but, resisted, knowing how exhausted she had looked across the dinner table. He parked, alighted and stashed his borrowed jacket and helmet in the big bike's pannier.

"I think I could fall in love with this bike," he stood with one hand on the handle bars as Sara slid forward into the driver's seat.

"Well don't, he's taken." She placed her own small gloved hands on the bars, giving his fingers a proprietary slap.

"He?" Greg questioned, "Since when was a bike like this 'he'? Don't you know that man-made machines are always female gender?"

"Nonsense -think of ships like the 'Titanic' and 'Ulysses', -they're hardly girls' names -and then there's Herbie and Bumblebee, and Thomas the Tank Engine, not to mention his best friend Percy," she countered, "and anyway, who's to say he wasn't built by a woman?"

"Pu-lease don't tell me you called him Percy. That would be too sad."

"Okay, I won't tell you his name," her face took on a secretive expression.

"Well, if you have named him, I hope it's something like 'the Terminator' and not some piffly-foo-foo name like Herbie. This beast of a machine deserves a strong and manly title."

"Hah -you know nothing young Skywalker. Not all girls' names are weak -think of Christine -she was a damned scary car...and Ghost rider's chopper was named 'Grace' ...when it wasn't transforming into a hell cycle, that is. And just for that, I'm keeping mum on the name," she mimed zipping her lips.

"Well, while you've got your mouth closed...," before she had time to think about what he might do, he seized the moment to lean forward and kiss her lightly on the lips.

That certainly got a reaction. Her mouth unzipped in a hurry and she spluttered, "What the *hell* did you do that for?"

"Because I've wanted to since the day we met ...and from Tuesday onwards you become my boss so it wouldn't be very professional for me to kiss you at work."

"Seriously, that's your best excuse? That's just pathetic."

He noticed the small smile forming around her lips before she got them under control and frowned.

"So you won't mind if I kiss you at work?" he smiled, "Wow, what an understanding boss. Glad we go that sorted before I start being your lowly employee."

"That is *not* what I just said and you know it!"

"Perhaps I should kiss you again to seal the deal," he moved forward.

"No. You will not." Her tone was steely with determination. "I have absolutely no time for romance in my life right now," to emphasise her point, she placed her hand on his chest and gave him a slight push backwards. Forced to take an involuntary step back, Greg was once again reminded of her Pippi Longstocking-style strength. "And though I appreciate your offer to help out, I'll have to decline if you insist on making advances to me again," her tone turned icily prim.

"Whew," he stepped away, "that's harsh, Holly-girl." He eyed her speculatively. "Very well, consider this a temporary retreat," he moved away another step. "And thank you for a delightfully interesting evening." He turned to straddle the gate and flicked her a jaunty salute. Calling back over his shoulder, "I'll see you bright and early tomorrow, Ma'am, -we've got lots to do," before jumping lightly down into the field on the other side and striding off into the dark.



As Sara rode slowly home, she thought about the kiss. However brief, it *had* been undeniably pleasant. More than pleasant, she admitted, and unquestionably sparky. But she did not want the entanglement of a workplace romance on top of everything else she had to contend with. The complications of dating her

soon-to-be-employee would be more than she could deal with given her current workload.

She thought back to her recent dating history -what there was of it. Sure, she had gone out ... infrequently, -with one or two of the local village 'lads' she had grown up with, but there had been no 'sparks' on any occasion and she had convinced herself that it was enough that she was focused on the dual jobs of running her business and raising her son.

She knew that she had absolutely no extra time or energy for romantic liaisons.

Still, her traitorous heart reminder her, nothing wrong with a nice kiss... particularly one she'd felt all the way down to her toes.