

Sahlan Diver

**SIXTY
POSITIONS
WITH
PLEASURE**

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Disclaimer: This novel is set in the future, the year 2050. Therefore, no described politician, business, political party, place or person refers to the time of writing (2019/2021). It is a work of pure fiction, a speculation as to our shared fate.

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Prologue

I remember the summer of 2050 as the summer of heat: the heat of the last of those final glorious Irish summers before world-wide panic set in; the heat of revolution as a town went out of control; the heat of religious fervour gone insane; and the heat of the chase in the affair of the mysterious death of Lucas Meyers. But, above all, I remember the heat of Ilse's body, as together we explored those sixty ritual positions.

PART 1

TIME, PLACE, DEATH

Chapter 1

The Town on the Lake

Until global warming, the Irish inland town of Kilgarney amounted to little. True, an unusual place, worth a day-trip, though getting there was never easy, a long way from Dublin and the other Irish cities. The mountainous location could bring on wild weather too, so, having made the effort to travel to the town, you might find your day washed out by a ferocious rainstorm.

Everything changed with climate change. By the year 2050, Kilgarney, with the cooling waters of its crystal-clear mountain lake, had become the go-to location for southern Europeans seeking respite from the now intolerable heat-waves that blighted their summers. The warming climate had been kind to Kilgarney, giving it a reputation for near perfect conditions, not too hot, not too cold, with day after day of sunshine from April through August.

A century earlier, a far-sighted Irish government passed a law permitting the construction of a hydro-electric dam, creating a reservoir two kilometres wide and five kilometres long, with the intended purpose of delivering both water and electricity to Dublin. "Kilgarney Lake", as it became known, soon established itself as a venue for water sports: boating, fishing, water-skiing, though only for the hardiest of persons, owing to the formerly harsh and unpredictable climate.

As the world warmed, driving away the Irish grey weather, replacing it with summers that could once have only been dreamed of, a canny Tourist Board saw their opportunity to promote the lake internationally. The town

underwent rapid expansion. The residents made a packet of money converting old cottages to profitable holiday-lets and the local farmers similarly made a killing, selling off land for new building work. Rows of topless young women sunbathed on the lake shore; formerly sleepy bars transformed into pulsating night-clubs; even the rich and famous started to be seen in the town.

Into this haven of perfect climate, unbridled sunbathing, prosperous locals, contented tourists and celebrity visitors, there arrived, in April 2050, a new employee, a young Englishman.

Chapter 2

Cunninghams

Cunninghams have provided employment to the town of Kilgarney for longer than can be remembered. It's believed they started off as an agricultural business, the mountain torrent that runs through the valley strong enough to power several mill wheels. In the nineteenth century they moved into engineering, becoming an early adopter of the industrial revolution, using their water wheels to drive the clanging hammer of a forge and the whirring leather drive belts of a machine shop. So important was their industry for the fortunes of the town that, during construction of the dam to raise the level in the lake, the engineers dug a special channel to keep the works in operation.

Approaching Kilgarney by the uphill road, your first sight will be of Cunninghams' nineteenth-century brick-built factory, still in use today. Then you pass a two-storey office block, of bland rust-stained concrete, containing the managerial suite, the administration department and, last but not least, "Computer Services", having a staff number of one: myself.

My name is Charlie Gibbs. I'm English, twenty-five years old, average height, black curly hair. One thing I can state as a matter of fact: I'm brilliant at languages. Nothing to do with my training as a computer engineer; everything to do with my subsequent work as a freelance, first in Scandinavia, then in Germany, and most recently The Netherlands.

In my latest contract, here in Ireland, I spend my working hours attempting to upgrade Cunninghams' clunky and badly configured computer network. The job is such that I'm constantly interrupted by support requests. I don't mind. The Irish in general are easy to work with: energetic, but without getting uptight, and any excuse I can muster to visit Administration and chat up Orla is to be welcomed, though it's advisable to keep your distance when sales manager, Hogan, is around. His surname means "young" in Irish, an unfortunate coincidence as he's one of those middle-aged men who imagines himself attractive to pretty girls half his age. He'll miss no opportunity to enhance his self-appointed alpha-male status by putting down any male within a six-yard radius. To give him credit, he works out daily at the gym, so he's in good shape, but none of that helps when you behave like an anus. At least we get ample warning of his comings and goings, with his vintage Aston Martin, a relic of the petrol age, revving thunderously in the car park.

Beyond Cunninghams, the road rises steeply and you see for the first time the imposing chalk-white concrete wall of the dam. At the brow of the hill, a sudden dip in the road takes you down to the town proper, with a long row of shops, pubs, restaurants and night-clubs to your right and the glistening surface of the lake to your left. Before the building of the dam, the townies would picnic in summer on the shores of a modest lough half a kilometre distant. Now, an immense body of water has been brought within fifty metres of the main street, separated from it by a beach of imported sand, giving the

place the flavour of a continental seaside resort. Up here, on a level with the reservoir, all seems benign. Downhill, along the road, it's a different matter. You wouldn't want the dam to collapse. No buildings or people in its path could survive. Cunninghams would be first in the line of fire.

Chapter 3

Lucas Meyers

Lucas Meyers and I arrived at Cunninghams at the same time. A taxi delivered me to the engineering works simultaneous to a taxi bearing their new managing director. Despite the difference in status, myself a mere minion, a temporary hired-hand charged with the maintenance of their computer system, we formed an instant bond. As soon as Meyers introduced himself, I detected his Dutch accent and talked back to him in Dutch. He laughed, saying, "*Hoe wist je dat ik Nederlands ben?*" I explained I had worked extensively in The Netherlands and that, although the Dutch in general spoke good English, the distinctive accent made it easy to pick out their nationality.

Lucas ascended the staircase to the rarefied heights of the managerial suite, while I was shown along the ground-floor corridor to the Computer Services room, part office, part laboratory, the workbench cluttered with test equipment and half-dismembered electronics. The previous incumbent had quit due to ill health and left behind for me a single document summarising the responsibilities of the job. I would be working on my own initiative but that was how I liked it, the reason they chose me, given this quality was the most emphasised on my CV, second only to my foreign language skills, which this time I knew would not be needed. How wrong were future events to prove me on the latter assumption!

I made an immediate start de-cluttering the room, clearing the work bench and investigating the contents of

the storage cabinets. An HR girl called in to take me on a tour of the works, an offer I readily accepted, though I have to admit to an aversion to Human Resources departments. They smack too much of “corporate” and I am by no means a corporate man. I could no more dedicate myself to a company than I could to a religion. I love the naked mercenary status of a paid-by-the-hour contractor: I work overtime; you pay me more; I go home early; you pay me less; fair’s fair; the contract between us extends to money for time, nothing more.

Old boss Cunningham, whom I never met, had gone into retirement, selling his family’s engineering company for a tidy sum to “Kobus Industrial”, a Dutch conglomerate headquartered in the city of Leiden, situated halfway between Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Cunninghams’ marketing department had gone into overdrive, putting out the usual bullshit, as they do on these occasions, about how great the takeover was for customers. I didn’t believe it. Frankly, things are never as good as before. The new parent just doesn’t have the interest and emotional attachment of the old. Like here. Meyers singled me out to go to lunch with him on the first day – I guess he felt more relaxed being able to converse in his own language on his leisure break – and it quickly became apparent he’d been sent over as caretaker, a finance man without much grasp of engineering, until the big boys back home decided what to do with their new acquisition.

Like so many Dutch, Meyers was tall, well over six foot. He complained to me he’d have to sleep diagonally across the tiny bed in the Irish cottage provided by the company.

After lunch I helped him locate a furniture store in the central shopping area. Their vast selection of beds surprised me, but then I remembered the tourism industry, which must have created exceptional demand. The shop even stocked extra-length beds of a type known in the USA as *California-King*. Meyers purchased one for delivery next day. At least, that's what I *thought* he did.

My first afternoon in the job, I found Cunninghams' computer network to be seriously disorganised and stayed on for an hour's overtime to get started on sorting it out. I heard the insistent ring of a telephone going on and on. Seemed I was the only one left in the building, so I picked up the call: the furniture shop, querying Meyers' address for delivery of "two California-King beds". I corrected them. "You mean *one* bed," but they insisted two had been ordered. I told them the boss had gone home and they'd need to ring back in the morning.

Strange. Meyers had not mentioned living with a friend or partner. From our conversation over lunch, I had the distinct impression he lived alone. Even if he did have a partner, wouldn't they be sharing a bed? Was he anticipating having to occasionally accommodate similarly tall Dutch guests? An expensive extra purchase if so. Next day, I told him of the shop querying the address for delivery of two beds. He made no reaction other than thanking me for taking the call.

Except for height, one would not describe Meyers as of particularly distinctive appearance. He gave out an impression of average-ness: average looks, neither good, nor bad; average amount of balding for a man of his age (which I guessed to be early-fifties); average speaking

voice; average intelligence. When he walked in, you never thought, "Watch out! The boss has arrived!" You might not even notice, as if he deliberately went out of his way to be unobtrusive. Not that he could be labelled an introvert. In a social situation, down at the pub after work, he would emerge from his shell to become the jovial raconteur, with an endless fund of stories of antics in cahoots with an army buddy, named Reuben Hendriks, when they'd been posted abroad on UN peace-keeping missions. I'd hear a repeat of those same stories, in Dutch, emanating from his office between nine and nine-thirty, during the regular twice-weekly video conference with his colleagues in Leiden. Unfortunately, his computer screen faced away from the corridor window. I would have loved to get a look to see the faces of the people I could hear on the other end of the line. Would they show amusement, polite interest or barely disguised boredom? I never got the chance. Meyers hated to be interrupted on conference; I guess he didn't like anyone to spoil the flow — he always locked his office door. By contrast, outside of the video calls, he held to an open-door policy. Literally. The door would be left open and anyone could wander in to his office at any time to raise a point.

I have described Meyers as of average intelligence but I may have assessed him unfairly. A most cautious man, he'd rarely answer a question immediately, instead replying that he'd think about it at lunch or overnight. His delayed, carefully considered answers demonstrated surprisingly good judgement from a man who on the surface seemed a little dense. Even then, long before subsequent dramatic events, it occurred to me his

ponderous subdued behaviour at the office was a put-on, a front, motivated by a desire to conceal a sharper intelligence, for fear of betraying some compromising personal secret.

Chapter 4

Orla and Her Granda'

I haven't yet described Orla. Three years' younger than me, only five-foot tall, medium build, light blue eyes, by anybody's standards extremely pretty; she wore her hair long and straight. With its deep black, almost blue-black colouration, seen from behind she gave the impression of a witch. It astonished me she didn't have a boyfriend. None of the guys at work seemed interested. Even middle-aged lecher, sales chief Hogan, spurned her.

My introduction to Orla had not been an auspicious one. She came into my office on my second day, while I was balancing precariously on top of a stepladder, holding one end of a cable I'd trailed across the room. Staff had annoyingly been coming and going all morning, using my work bench as a repository for assorted archives connected with a clear-out after the Kobus takeover. Aware in my peripheral vision of the entry of a young female, I resisted, for "health and safety" reasons, the temptation to become distracted from my work. The cable I held in my hand fell short, so I gave it a tug. Simultaneously, a woman's voice from across the room shouted, "Whoa! Back off!" I turned, to see Orla straddling the wire, which with my hard upward pull had lifted her lightweight summer skirt and rubbed up against her knickers. Skilfully extricating herself from its grasp, she turned to face me. "Sorry! I didn't notice I was standing over your cable. It felt like you'd crept up behind me and were running your hand between my legs!"

We both laughed at the quirky incident but I felt bad for her embarrassment and spent my lunchtime touring the factory to seek her out. Only mid-afternoon did I come across Orla, closer to home, in one of the offices in my own building. When I explained I had expended my entire lunch break on a fruitless mission of apology, she rewarded me with the most beautiful smile. From then on, I found excuses to visit daily at her office, though she gave no signal of wanting to take our acquaintance beyond work.

The chance to get to know Orla better came unexpectedly the following week, when she called in at Computer Services to ask whether I'd like to go visit "me granda" after work. She offered a lift, warning our destination was off-road, requiring a thirty-minute uphill walk. The old boy lived out of town on the side of a mountain overlooking the lake, a trek up more than two kilometres of rough track, known locally as "The Road of the Shrine", on account of it terminating at a cave containing a large oblong stone which early Christian pilgrims fancifully imagined to be an altar placed there by the hand of God.

Leaving Orla's car at the base of the track, we followed an upward slope signposted to the shrine. The golden evening sunshine, warm still air and spectacular view of the mountain ridge ahead, all served to enhance for me the romanticism of the occasion. And for the first time, Orla and I were able to talk freely, without the constraint of being overheard at work.

Orla's grandfather (Jimmy Murphy was the name) met us in his front garden. Bright flower borders and a twee

wooden picket fence surrounded a wide area of lawn, where he was busy clearing away a tea stall. On prescribed days of the year, a procession of worshippers would make the pilgrimage from the town's church for mass at the altar of the cave. Jimmy described himself as a lapsed Catholic, one might say aggressively lapsed. Even so, he welcomed the religious processions, a chance to make a bit of cash selling refreshments, his house no more than a hundred yards from the cave entrance. The house itself seemed out of place in this wild and holy setting, especially given its architecture, quite grand, like a miniature Edwardian hunting lodge, with a curious glass dome on the roof.

Jimmy told me he would soon be celebrating his seventieth birthday, adding with a wink that to mark the occasion he planned to "do something special". I had no idea what was being hinted at. Perhaps, a woman? Not so far-fetched, in view of his handsome appearance — obvious from which side of the family Orla had inherited her looks.

Jimmy had been a caver in his youth. An extensive network of caves from an old mineral mine riddled the mountain. Decades ago, they closed the system to the public, due to an incident where a party of explorers nearly drowned in floodwater. Jimmy confided with another wink, "But I still go there often." He'd discovered a new tunnel recently, so constricted it forced him to wriggle on his stomach like a snake. Eventually he hit a dead-end. Through a narrow gap he found himself looking down at the cave of the altar, at the altar itself and at the rock wall behind it.

We were invited into his house and taken to the attic, to see the preparations for the tourist season. This was no gloomy space under the rafters; light flooded in, on account of the roof's glass dome. Positioned directly below it, a circular wooden table of at least six feet diameter, the top painted a brilliant matt white. Jimmy threw a switch, whereupon, reminiscent of a sinister trap in an old James Bond movie, a motorised panel rolled across above our heads, blocking off the dome and causing the room to become pitch black. After our eyes had accustomed to the dark, we could see projected onto the table a remarkable silent moving image of the view from the house across the lake. I'd seen something like this before, at the *camera obscura*, in Edinburgh. Jimmy explained it worked like a pinhole camera, light passing through a periscope extending from the dome, reflected down to make the image on the table. He rotated the periscope, changing which part of town or country we were looking at, scanning up and down the five kilometres of water as far as the dam. Funny how the absence of sound gave the illusion of slow motion: the cars pressing the dusty roads, the boats dragging ripples from the surface of the lake, the pilgrims plodding uphill to the holy cave. Every summer, Jimmy put up a signpost directing walkers to this attraction. He lamented the neighbouring shrine's lack of fame. He told us, if like Lourdes, he'd be making a small fortune from refreshments and camera obscura admission fees.

After we left Jimmy's house, Orla suggested we go look at his old cottage, situated on a minor country lane running out of town. "Cunninghams are renting it from

me granda' for our new boss," she said. "The garden's beautiful in the Spring. I'll show you. We can get in via the back gate." She described the cottage as being situated on a sharp bend which passed the garden on both sides. The authorities had planned to shortcut the bend by cutting a bypass across her grandfather's land. It would have ruined his garden, so he took them to court. Luckily for him, he won the case.

I suggested to Orla we should give Lucas a call, to forewarn him of our visit. She laughed. "Charlie, what you mean is you're hoping he's *not* at home, so we don't get ambushed with more Reuben Hendriks army stories!"

We parked by a solid wooden gate set in a high brick wall running along the verge of the road. Orla made a beeline for a loose brick. She pulled it out and extracted from within a rusty iron key. We passed through the gate into a scene of tranquillity, a mass of apple trees covered in pink blossom. The trees obscured the view of the house and I assumed we couldn't be seen from the house either, so I decided to make my move. I asked, "Orla, may I kiss you?"

She replied without hesitation, "Of course!" and we kissed.

When I moved to kiss her a second time, Orla said, "Charlie, I like you very much but I already have a partner, abroad in the Irish army. Could we just be friends? I'd like it if we became close friends. I get lonely with my partner away."

Disappointing, but how could I refuse? Orla was a fun person to be with, even without a chance of a relationship.

Strange the men at work kept a distance from this lively pretty girl.

Chapter 5

Tragedy

Everything happened so fast. One day, Orla and I were discussing a mystery concerning Lucas Meyers. Next day, we were hearing of his death.

It happened in the fifth week of my employment at Cunninghams, halfway into the month of May. Administration had been trying to get a message to Meyers, a complaint from the engineering department, parts from a supplier that had failed quality control. Meyers phoned in sick earlier and now his mobile was off. A decision on the faulty parts needed to be made urgently, so Orla volunteered to drive round to the cottage to deliver the message in person. She told me how she parked outside the front door, knocked several times but received no reply. The weather had been warm and sunny but with a persistent wind. She surmised Meyers must be in the garden and that the sound of the door knocker had not carried.

Lucky they'd sent Orla, because no other employee would have known of the secret access to the cottage via the garden's rear gate. Leaving her car parked on the road, she backtracked alongside the high perimeter wall, extracted the key from behind the loose brick, unlocked the gate and walked through the apple orchard towards the house. She could hear two men talking but the trees blocked her field of vision and the noise of a metal bucket rolling in the wind obscured what was being said. Then she heard Meyers shout forcefully in English the word "town", followed by the word "house". She came into

view of him relaxing alone on a sun lounger. At that same moment, she saw, through the cottage windows, the outline of a man passing rapidly across a room.

Lucas greeted Orla without making any reference to his guest. He apologised for having let his mobile run out of charge, and for his state of undress: hairy-chest in combination with wispy red bathing trunks — fully packed, according to Orla. She offered to give him a lift to work if he still wasn't well, but he insisted he felt fine and would follow on in his own car as soon as he had got himself decently clothed.

That evening, Orla called at my flat to tell me of the incident. Clearly, Meyers was anxious the identity of his visitor should not be known. The panicked tone of his voice could be accounted for by his shock at realising an intruder had entered the garden. Surrounded by a seven-foot high wall and with a locked back gate, he would have considered it inviolable. I asked Orla to describe the man. She said she couldn't, because of partially closed venetian blinds covering the window; she saw no more than an outline of the figure moving inside. Had she imagined things? If she had, then why the second sun lounger, next to the one occupied by Meyers? It might have been there anyway, but not with a half-empty glass of drink parked next to it.

Who was this man Meyers was so anxious to hide? My first thought, remembering the purchase of a second extra-length bed, was a visitor from Holland, another tall man, whom he had obviously been expecting from the outset. I discounted that idea. In a moment of stress, a Dutchman would shout instructions at another Dutchman in Dutch,

and Orla had heard English. But, if a native English-speaker, a local, it could not be the person for whom Meyers, as a newcomer, a stranger, on the very morning of his arrival had purchased the second bed.

Why should he hide the man? A gay relationship he didn't want to come out about? Where was the man now? Meyers shouted "town house". Kilgarney's raised fortunes had incentivised the building of many smart new townhouse complexes. Presumably, the man was being ordered to get back to his own place somewhere in town. Social media pages could give a clue to the friend's identity but I remembered Lucas telling me the army discouraged former special forces personnel from publicising themselves on the Internet. Orla suggested I should angle for an excuse to lunch with the boss. "He obviously likes you and, if you're chatting away in Dutch, he might tell you about his friend."

That opportunity was to be denied. Members of the Irish police force, *An Garda Síochána*, known colloquially as "the guards", arrived at the works next morning, requesting to speak with the deputy manager. A man had been fatally struck in a hit-and-run accident outside the cottage rented by Cunninghams. From ID found on his person and from the open front door of the cottage, they concluded the dead man to be Lucas Meyers. Heavy skid marks indicated a car had mounted the pavement and struck him at speed, possibly joyriders, or a stranger passing through with no idea of the need for caution on the hairpin bend surrounding the cottage, the bend they had wanted to neutralise years ago by cutting a bypass across Jimmy Murphy's orchard.

Cunninghams' personnel department provided the guards with the photograph of Meyers sent over from Holland before his arrival. The guards solemnly declared it matched the corpse. All that remained would be for his wife to fly over to make a formal identification.

His wife! Lucas had not mentioned a wife to any of us.

Chapter 6

The Wife

The unpleasant task of collecting Anna Meyers from the airport fell on my shoulders, though it was not Cunninghams who requested my help, but the Irish guards. A post-mortem had been carried out, showing Meyers died from catastrophic internal injuries. The corpse could be released for repatriation and they expected the wife would need the assistance of an interpreter to complete those arrangements.

I stood in the Arrivals Hall of Dublin Airport, holding a cardboard placard with the wife's name written in block letters. From the baggage area, there came a tall slender blonde looking intently at the row of people holding name boards. With her similar height and age to Meyers I guessed she must be the wife and I moved to bring the placard within her line of sight. Seeing her name, she addressed me in English, "Hello. I'm Anna Meyers." She showed no reaction when I replied in Dutch — I assume they'd already told her she would be met by an interpreter. I offered my condolences before stating we would be driving to a mortuary in Dublin.

At the car, I opened the back door so she could sit on her own, more appropriate I thought, with myself as discreet chauffeur sitting up front. She said nothing the whole journey, save a brief response to my query whether she needed the air conditioning warmer or cooler. I stole the occasional glance in my rear-view mirror. A woman who might once have been attractive, could still be

attractive, difficult to assess in a face that seemed uncannily passive, not at all grief-stricken.

At the mortuary I felt relief when she asked to view her husband alone; I couldn't have coped with having to look at a smashed-up Lucas Meyers. While I waited, I spoke with a detective. He told me the body had been hit with such force the car would have sustained impact damage and they were hopeful of tracing the culprits before long. Another fact he confided was that Anna Meyers had separated from her husband some years back, after she discovered his weekend fishing trips with army buddy Reuben Hendriks were in fact assignations with an unknown woman. I suppose, in any death, even a non-suspicious one, the police have to make background checks, however intrusive to a person's privacy.

Anna showed great composure after the identification. The body released for burial, she declared her intention to organise a cremation in Dublin. I suggested, if she wanted the funeral to be in Ireland, I would have thought the company happy to pay for one in Kilgarney, where all his Irish colleagues could attend, but she seemed intent on keeping the arrangements low-key. Naturally, head office representatives would fly over from Holland and a few close Dutch friends would be expected to come. I expressed a wish to attend also but she told me she'd already emailed to invite Cunninghams' deputy manager and my presence would not be required. A little offhand, I thought, but then one has to make allowances for the situation — the sudden death of a husband, even an unfaithful one, must have come as a great shock.

During the long drive from Dublin to Kilgarney, we spoke of The Netherlands, my experiences there, and the places I might visit, should I go back. I thought it tactful to avoid the subject of her husband unless she raised it herself. She did not.

At the cottage, I respectfully remained in the car while she went inside to pack Meyers' things. Half an hour later she wheeled out a single large suitcase and we drove back to the capital. The company had booked me a room at Anna's hotel, so that I could further assist her. However, at breakfast she insisted her English was adequate for coping with the remaining formalities and that she no longer needed my help.

We shook hands to say goodbye. Anna said to me in English, "I know you think me a little cold. I have anger for Lucas because he cheated on me. I have not spoken with him since that time. But I discover yesterday inside the bedrooms that he hoped for my forgiveness, that we could be friends again. You must wonder why my husband bought two beds for the cottage. The second was waiting for me!" And from her handbag she took out a tissue to wipe a tear from her cheek.

Two days later, the deputy manager travelled to Dublin for the funeral. He returned with little to report. With the attendees speaking Dutch, he'd limited his role as Cunninghams' representative to shaking hands. After the service, a pleasant young woman in her early thirties, who spoke English, introduced herself, her name, Tess Brouwer, Meyers' accounting assistant. She described her late boss as popular in the company, well-known as a bit of a character owing to his colourful army past. She

expressed how shocked she and her colleagues had been by Meyers' split with his wife; they had seemed such a loving couple. Tess still couldn't take in the fact of Lucas being dead, having seen and spoken with him only a few days previously on his morning video call to head office.

Walking back to my flat that evening, I passed the furniture shop.

Wait a minute! Anna Meyers said to me in Dublin, "You must wonder why my husband bought two beds." How did she know I helped Lucas with the purchase? I'd not mentioned the event to anyone, not even to Orla. Only Lucas could have told Anna of my help. But Anna Meyers claimed she had not spoken with her husband since their breakup. Then I thought of someone else — the visitor Orla surprised in the garden of the cottage, the man whom Meyers shouted at to return to his townhouse. Meyers must have told *him* I knew about the beds. The visitor passed the information on to the wife. Why? What was so special about the second bed that it should be considered an important topic of conversation? And why significant that I knew about it? Furthermore, what was the relationship between the wife and the mystery visitor? Was Meyers aware of it? And why Anna's tearful charade, claiming to have realised on seeing the extra bed that her husband longed for her to visit and for them to be friends again? If mystery man had already told her of the beds, she must have known of her husband's intentions *before* I drove her to the cottage.

Perhaps there existed an innocent explanation for all this. Perhaps I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions, but I couldn't help thinking that sudden accident, hasty funeral,

mystery visitor and deliberate untruth about the bed purchase all added up to something vaguely sinister.

PART 2
WOMAN UNVEILED

Chapter 7

The Arrival of Ilse

They had an expression in the office: “Hogan’s been to the railway”. Whenever a prospective employee of the young and female variety arrived for a job interview, Hogan would take it on himself to collect her in his sports car from bus stop or railway station. You didn’t need to look out of the window to confirm a pick-up; you only needed to listen to the sound of the revs before he switched the engine off — the bigger the revs, the more rated the passenger. On this day, the revs were so over the top that from inside my computer services room I could hear the whole office laughing. Orla looked in at my door, “Hogan’s been to the railway, collecting our new Dutch boss from the airport. Must be a woman. Bet he takes her to the factory first!”

I knew exactly what Orla meant: Hogan hogging the crumpet for as long as he could. A factory tour gave the opportunity to chat up and impress, almost as if *he* were the owner of the place.

At that moment I had more important things to worry about than Hogan’s antics. Before lunchtime, I needed to complete phase one of a network upgrade, replacing Cunninghams’ antique copper-wired system with fibre-optic cable. This involved me in my least favourite job, crawling under rows of desks, unscrewing and removing old network sockets, replacing them with new. The employees who worked at the first batch of desks had been moved out to temporary office space, grumbling

about the disruption, hence the lunchtime deadline for completion.

Reclining on my back underneath a desk, fiddling about with a screwdriver and cursing the inaccessibility of the sockets, I heard the click of a woman's heels coming up the stairs and the sound of Hogan and the deputy manager talking. They entered the room and parked themselves directly in front of the desk, unaware of my presence below.

Legs! Did this woman have legs! Full, firm, and shapely. Legs that say: I'm all woman, all flesh. Dressed in the current office fashion for shortish loose-fitting one-piece dresses — trouser suits and tight skirts had gone out with the ark — from my unique perspective she offered a view tantalisingly close to going all the way. What should I do? Wait for them move on? Or, crawl out from underneath and risk suspicion of up-skirting the new boss on her first day at the office?

I chose to lie still.

They chose not to move on.

Their conversation wasn't going well. Why the Dutch had sent this lady over, I couldn't imagine. Were they really so short-staffed in Holland? Her English was terrible! Any other occasion, I'd have jumped out as a knight in shining armour to rescue her with my sword of perfect Dutch, but how could I show myself now?

Then, the worst possible happened. Hogan started calling out my name. "Gibbs! Anyone seen Gibbs?" To the lady, "We have someone who speaks Dutch." She replied, "I would like to speak with him."

Hogan shouted again, "Gibbs!"

Orla walked past, laughing and pointing. "He's there, under the desk."

I'd been rumbled. Feeling a total fool, I slid out from my hiding place and shook the lady's hand vigorously, "*Hallo, hoe gaat het met u?*" She certainly lived up to the promise of those legs: a mature woman of class with strawberry blonde hair.

The deputy manager requested I give her a tour of the office, to introduce her to the members of staff and explain in Dutch each person's role in the company. The lady exhibited a pleasant chatty manner with everyone she met but with me her responses were a little clipped. Looked like I'd already blown it with the new boss.

The next hour found the four of us ensconced in a meeting room with a mass of documents. Was I imagining things or was the lady warming to me? She even laughed at one point at a joke I made in Dutch. Then, towards the end of the meeting, to draw my attention to a report, she gently touched my hand. I felt it like a bolt of electricity.

The meeting concluded, Hogan instructed me to invite the lady to have dinner with him that evening.

I translated. "*Mijnheer Hogan nodigt u uit voor een diner vanavond, maar ik raad het u niet aan. Die man is een verschrikkelijke klootzak. Maar zou ik u mogen uitnodigen voor een diner?*"

(Mr Hogan wants to take you to dinner this evening but I don't recommend it. The man's a total arsehole. May I take you to dinner instead?)

The lady laughed. "*Dat mag u, maar we zijn niet goed geïntroduceerd. Mijn naam is Ilse Teuling.*"

(I'd love to, but we haven't been properly introduced.
My name is Ilse Teuling.)

"En ik ben Charlie Gibbs."

(And I'm Charlie Gibbs.)

"Welnu, mijnheer Gibbs, wilt u mijnheer Hogan bedanken voor zijn vriendelijke aanbod en hem vertellen dat ik al een afspraak heb voor een diner? U kunt mij om zes uur afhalen in het Lake Hotel."

(Well Mr Gibbs, would you like to thank Mr Hogan for his kind offer but tell him I already have a dinner date? Pick me up at the Lake Hotel at six!)

Hogan had been following this extended conversation with a puzzled look on his face. "What did she say?"

"She thanks you for your offer but she already has a dinner date for this evening."

Why did I hijack his date? Was it the thought of her being held captive by a total *klootzak* for two hours; was I thinking of those legs; or was it the way she so unexpectedly touched my hand during the meeting?

Mid-afternoon, Hogan sought me out in the computer services room. "*She's* a bit of a dark horse, isn't she! She's only just arrived at the airport; says she knows nobody; hardly speaks any English, and she's going out on a dinner date. Did she say who? Not someone here, I hope!"

"I don't know. She only said she had a date already."

Hogan left the room but came straight back. "It's not *you*, is it? No! It couldn't be. You're way out of her league. That class of woman appreciates maturity, someone with a bit of sophistication, not a kid."

Dead on six o'clock I arrived at the hotel and asked reception to call Ilse's room. She'd anticipated me. The lift

doors parted. Out stepped Ilse, looking stunning in a loose-fitting red skirt and cream top. I have to admit, there's something compelling about an attractive older woman who keeps her figure.

She asked, "Where are you taking me?" I told her there were several award-winning restaurants in town and suggested I give her a guided tour so she could choose for herself. She smiled. "And what does our friend, Mr Hogan, do in the evenings?"

"He goes from bar to bar, looking for women to talk to."

Ilse laughed. "Then we show the tact and eat here. We do not want to meet him in the town!" She took my arm and we entered the hotel restaurant, she taller than me in her high heels but I didn't care — I felt seven-foot tall in her company.

Although the Lake Hotel was not one of Hogan's regular haunts, to avoid a potentially awkward encounter we selected a table in a quiet corner, screened off from the rest. The intimacy of the setting would have sealed the consummate romantic date were I not all too aware the lady had accepted my invitation out of gratitude to avoid a less palatable alternative. Or maybe not. With Ilse's attention distracted struggling to make sense of the English wording of the menu, I was able to scrutinise her closely, her face scrupulously made up, her clothes and her jewellery meticulously matched. Did she always go to this amount of trouble for a casual meal with a member of staff? Nor, I thought, would she normally arrive so exquisitely perfumed.

After ordering from the menu, we talked about work. I confessed my embarrassment for hiding under the desk. Ilse assured me she understood how the situation had compromised my options. I said I hoped she didn't think I'd been looking up her skirt. She replied, "If you hadn't, you wouldn't have thought it necessary to mention it!" She asked my age, telling me she'd turned fifty in March. "It's good if a young man still enjoys to study my body."

Throughout the evening we spoke Dutch. Ilse apologised for her poor English. I tried to offer words of encouragement but hadn't the heart to say her use of the language was somewhat archaic. You know that thing foreigners do. They use phrases which are correct and polite but they overdo it, text book stuff, quite unlike the way we normally speak. Ilse came to be known as "Pleasure" around the office because, in meetings, whenever anything was agreed that resulted in an action point for her, she'd invariably confirm by saying, "I will do that for you, with pleasure."