**27 Don’t Look Now**

“Don’t look now!”

That phrase haunted me and was going to destroy me. Such a blessing that Elizabeth had passed away, I reflected, as I could never have explained to her how those few words had thrust me into a nightmare…and I was not to blame!

On Boxing Day, aching at the cruel injustice of life, I walked to where we had often strolled in the past. As I descended the snow-powdered hillside I contemplated my choice of route below: over the bridge or across the railway track. We usually took the bridge but today would be different.

Slipping and slithering down the slope, I recalled Elizabeth’s final words in the hospice when she murmured, “Do find someone else, darling, you mustn’t be alone.”

I had never imagined being alone but life was very lonely now and I was

heading for the railway crossing to end it all.

The warmth of the ward that evening a few weeks previously did not prevent a chill coursing through my body when death finally released Elizabeth from her pain. The doctor put a hand on my shoulders.

“Twenty beautiful years of marriage, all gone!” I exclaimed.

“Draw on your memories, Ben,” she replied.

When I entered my driveway later the wind whipped the fallen leaves into a macabre dance in the headlights. The hall seemed quieter than ever as I walked indoors.

I took no time off but business colleagues picked up some of my cases and sought adjournments in court where necessary. Personal phone calls were difficult to handle as many were from members of Elizabeth’s bridge circle, whom I had never met. After reading some of the letters of condolence, I cast the rest aside, on the telephone table; they were too upsetting.

At work, although normally a boisterous extrovert, I dwelled upon the pain that she had suffered and fell silent; my concentration lapsed.

“I *am* alone,” I thought, “and I must adjust to that.”

Ralph, the senior partner, broke into my reflections one morning.

“Ben, have you time for a bite of lunch across the road? I want your opinion on something.”

“Sure.”

The alluring aroma of the game pie made our selection of food easy.

“So, what’s the pressing problem?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“You’re not yourself; your verve and drive have gone.“

“Oh.”

“Output’s okay but it’s slow.”

“I didn’t know.”

“We know why and we want to help. Are you still a regular at the golf club?”

“No.”

“I thought not. Are you socialising at all, visiting friends for supper, having folk round to your place?”

“No.”

“Ben, you’re only forty-five, with a long life ahead of you. Elizabeth would have wanted you to enjoy that life.”

“She would, Ralph; she even told me to find someone else. Those were her last words.”

A pause.

“A word of warning on that matter.”

“Yes.”

“Beware the ‘predatory females’. You’d be quite a catch. They circle like piranhas, ready to strike. Beware.”

“I’ll look out for them!” I laughed.

“And do consider counselling. We can provide top people to help you.”

“Sorry, Ralph, but I value my privacy, I cannot reveal my feelings to anyone.”

“You ought to.”

We returned to our desks.

Dreading the approaching office Christmas party, at which I usually had fun, I determined that I would spend as much time at my desk as possible, ‘to recover my verve.’

On arriving that morning the jolly, warm greetings cheered me up. I did believe that I was popular and had the respect of all around me.

My compliments to the secretaries on their smart outfits went down well.

“Thank you, Mr Langley,” they chorused.

Marcia, a newly appointed assistant, beamed at me, as she had done each day for the last couple of weeks. In her mid-thirties, with shoulder length auburn hair and a playful look in her eyes, she was wearing a green dress, low cut. We held each other’s gaze for a few seconds before I nodded and passed on. She tittered.

Despite the volume of the tuneless singing later I blocked the noise out of my mind and dwelled upon Elizabeth’s preparations for Christmas in the past. I fell into a trance.

The fragrance of a powerful perfume stirred me from my meditations and suddenly two warm, moist hands covered my eyes.

“Don’t look now!” whispered a husky voice, “Guess who!”

Marcia bounced into my lap and began kissing me with passion. It was arousing but I tried to push her away. The clearing of a throat behind us made her stop.

It was Ralph.

Marcia sprang off my knee, slapped my face and fled.

Ralph handed me a file, shook his head and walked out.

The silence as I walked through the open plan next morning caused me deep unease; no greetings, no snippets of news. The director of human resources, a formidable lady, with steely grey hair and black, horn-rimmed glasses, was in my office.

“Something amiss, Janet?” I smiled as I hung up my coat.

“Mr Langley, I have a complaint of sexual assault made against you by Marcia Wells.”

As I listened to what had been alleged, namely that I had lured this woman into my office and attempted to strip her, I struggled to make sense of it. An urge to deliver a tirade in my defence gripped me but I restrained myself.

Ralph advised time off, adding that he could not discuss the allegation.

Aghast, I walked to the underground in despair. This was a devastating lie that would ruin me. At the roar of the approaching tube train I was shaking with rage and wanted to explode and curse all around me.

Thus, Boxing Day, there I was, by the railway track, ready for the final curtain. The warning siren of the 12.20 reached my ear and I opened the latch of the gate, resolving not to look at the train but just walk straight ahead. A notice, however, directly across the track, caught my eye.

“Remember! We’re on your side. Talk to us,” it read; there was a telephone number.

I hesitated; had other people done what I was intending to do? They must have done, otherwise why the notice?

As I pursued this simple logic a buzzard called overhead. Momentarily I studied its powerful, circling flight…and the express flew by*.*  A cold sweat enveloped me. I retreated, slammed the gate and turned back for home.

The day after Boxing Day Ralph rang.

“You’re okay, Ben. I had followed that little minx into your office and I told H.R. exactly what I saw. She admitted the lie and is no longer with us. For God’s sake, beware the female of the species!”

I protested at the implicit accusation regarding my conduct but the phone went dead. My body felt limp; I could not believe my release and stared at the pile of unopened letters.

I must tackle them, I thought.

Upsetting, yes, but they were uplifting, reminding me of the wonderful wife I had. The words were warm, recalling happy memories that I recognised. In my written replies I found myself recounting special times that we had shared together.

One letter stood out, from Connie, a school friend of Elizabeth, in Devon. They had kept in touch with each other and I had often laughed at how long their telephone conversations lasted.

“We’ve plenty to talk about,” Elizabeth used to say.

She spoke of Connie a lot, corresponding with her regularly. Connie lost her husband in a car crash way back.

I enjoyed Connie’s recollections of their teenage years together. Her description of Elizabeth was exactly as I chose to remember her. I rang her to thank her.

The West Country burr in her voice reminded me even more of Elizabeth.

Suddenly I was part of one of those long conversations that had amused me as an eavesdropper. Connie was telling me about how she had felt when she lost her husband and, surprising myself, I was chatting happily with her.

“Do you come up to town at all, Connie?”

“I do, to visit my son.”

“Could we meet?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps we could have lunch together?’

“I’d like that, Ben.”

We checked diaries and fixed a date, which happened to be my birthday.

Near the end of that enjoyable meal, during which we shared reminiscences, Connie dropped her voice.

“Don’t look now,” she whispered.

I froze.

“Why, Ben, what’s the matter? You’ve gone white.”

A waitress leaned over my shoulder and placed a small birthday cake in front of me.

Connie placed her hand on mine.

“Surprise!” she cooed.

Is she trying to entrap me? I wondered.

My mind was spinning.

I’m becoming paranoid, I concluded, smiled, and squeezed her hand.

“Thank you,” I said.

There may be predatory females about, I thought, but I’ll make up my own mind, without Ralph’s interference.

As I chatted on and looked into Connie’s eyes I realised that I was not alone.

**End.**