**41Don’t Look Now**

The meal over, Thomas was free to look at his leisure around the room at the people present, some standing and chatting, some still sitting at their tables. He had to be honest, he hated reunion dinners; well, reunions of any sort. He knew very few people here. After thirty years he couldn’t recognise anybody, at least not those he hadn’t kept in touch with and he already passed the time of day with those few souls prior to the meal.

He hadn’t wanted to go to the Weyford Grammar School Reunion for the 1978 intake. Just the thought of it had reminded him of bad times. It had been an impulse decision to come because he couldn’t think of a good enough reason not to attend.

In the soft candle light with the faint buzz of people chatting, soft background music playing and the odd chink of a glass, he was beginning to feel a little drowsy. Must be something to do with that meal he thought. They had served his favourite dish, coq au vin with rice and vegetables and he had eaten and enjoyed every morsel. Now, as he had come on his own tonight as his partner had other plans for the evening and his dinner companions had moved onto other tables, he had no one to chat to.

“Excuse me,” said a voice behind him, “Do you remember me?”

He looked around. Beside him stood a man, his wavy dark hair streaked attractively with silver hairs and a pleasant smile on his lightly tanned face.

“Thomas, it’s me,” he continued, “Paul Webber. We were friends when we were at school together.”

A chill suddenly went through him. Yes, he knew Paul. And in his mind, he was suddenly back thirty years ago and walking home from school, with Paul, his best mate.

Paul and Thomas had lived a few doors from each other in a terrace of houses in the ‘good’ part of town. Both were students at the grammar school some twenty minutes’ walk away, although in different classes. Living so close to each other, they walked to and from the school together. In the mornings, it was normally straight to school but in the afternoons, they preferred to vary their routes home, having some fun along the way.

On this particular early autumn day, they had taken their favourite walk home through the woods that ran close by their homes. It was one that they could employ their very active imaginations, delving around the bushes and sometimes climbing the beech and oak trees to look for outlaws, pirates or special agents.

As they came into the centre of the wood, Paul stopped dead and put his hand to his ear.

“Shh...,” he whispered to Thomas softly, “Can you hear that?”

Thomas was still except for his head, which he turned slowly from one side to the other trying to catch what sharp eared Paul had picked up. Then he heard it. A sound of panting and muffled voices. He looked at Paul with raised eyebrows. Nothing had ever happened like this before and he could see that Paul was as excited as he was. Something new to investigate!

“Where?” he mouthed at Paul.

Paul shrugged his shoulders and, raising a finger at Thomas to wait, he slowly moved from view between the surrounding bushes heading towards the location of the sound. Thomas stood alone, waiting. They had done this sort of thing before but they had only been pretending, until now. He admired Paul. He was really good at doing this. He had never been able to hear any rustle of bushes when Paul moved around. Thomas, well, he knew was a bit clumsy and always found himself knocking into things or standing on dry twigs when they cracked. He wasn’t quiet like Paul.

And then, without any ceremony, Paul returned, cheeks red and looking shamefaced. He stood in front of Thomas but didn’t return his gaze, looking down at his shoes.

“Let’s go, there’s nothing to see,” he muttered.

“What do you mean, nothing to see?” Thomas whispered fiercely. “You were gone long enough. Who or what was making that noise?”

With that, he started to move forward in the direction where he had seen Paul head.

“Thomas,” whispered Paul, a panicked tone in his voice, “Don’t look now…, we need to get home. We’ll be late.”

Thoroughly annoyed now at Paul having all the fun, Thomas walked slowly and carefully towards the continuing intermittent sound. Coming to a clearing, he stopped behind the nearest greenery and looked at the sight that was now exposed to him.

There on the leaf litter some distance in front of him were two figures, one on top of the other. In fascination he looked on.

Initially he wasn’t aware what he was looking at, just two bodies with pastel clothing and naked brown legs, proving that the summer weather had been bountiful this year. Then, like a picture coming together as a jigsaw, things started to click into place. He thought he knew who one of the figures writhing there was. He recognised the clothing. He had seen it only this morning. His suspicions were confirmed when one of them turned over and he could see the face. He reeled back in shock, then turned and ran oblivious to the noise he was making as with speed he made his way through the wood, the branches hitting him on his arms and leaving scratches. His face was pale with shock and he felt as though he was going to be sick.

His mum was with someone else. And it wasn’t his dad!

So caught up was he is getting out of the wood, he had not thought of going back to Paul. Paul, the one who was going to keep this from him, he thought angrily. When he walked towards his home, he started to shake. The shame of it, he thought to himself as his mind went back to who she had been with. Because he had recognised the other person as well and his mouth twisted with distaste. He never wanted to see Paul again - or his mother. The question that revolved around his head was, why? Going up to the bedroom he lay on his bed dry eyed but with a body filled with tears. He heard his mother come in and bustle around in the kitchen. All he wanted to do was die with the shame of it all.

From that day, he didn’t speak to Paul and made sure they didn’t meet by going at a different time to and from school; something that was not easy seeing they lived so near to each other. But misery made him determined. Six months later Paul’s family moved and he had seen Paul no more until tonight.

The continuing sound of music and chatter slowly brought him to the present day. Paul had remained beside him with a sad smile playing on his lips and concern for his erstwhile friend in his eyes.

“You remember then?” he asked gently.

Thomas forced a smile.

“Couldn’t really forget, could I?” he said gruffly.

“How are things… with your family?” Paul asked. “It must be getting on for twenty-eight years since we talked.”

“Well…,” began Thomas, “Not long after you left, Mum decided to leave home and moved in with Anne, another neighbour down the street. Apparently, they had been seeing each other for some time.”

He raised his head to meet Paul’s gaze.

“But there again, we knew that didn’t we?”

Paul slowly nodded.

“I wish I had listened to you, Paul and not gone to look,” he said haltingly. “The weeks until she left were agonising. I couldn’t tell her I’d seen her. My father….” he broke off and then he gathered himself. “I’m sorry I didn’t speak to you afterwards. I just couldn’t. I was annoyed and confused.”

Thomas looked over at the others having fun. Paul moved towards him and put his hand on his shoulder.

“We’re here now,” he said, “We can start again.”