

Chinese Espresso

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Wilma de Ruiten

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1

Butterworth Antiques – London

On the Kensington Park road, London, a shabby pink sofa always appeared outside an antique shop during opening hours. It had become a sort of ritual; residents even began to feel slightly disorientated if this piece of furniture didn't materialize.

As Nikki Carter approached the shop, she could see Harry Butterworth, friend, landlord and proprietor, perched on one of the sofa's velvet armrests. Two female police officers were interrogating him. The conversation sounded serious.

Placing an article out on the street, especially one with stuffing protruding from it on all sides, was technically illegal. However, in this multicultural part of London, near the Portobello Road, no one took the slightest bit of notice of this pink monstrosity. A paper price tag, dangling from the back, informed the passer-by

that the sofa was an absolute bargain at four hundred and fifty pounds, a steal for such a vintage piece. This eyesore would be with them for a long time.

The two law enforcement officers were not visiting Harry on account of the sofa. That much was obvious.

Nikki had seen the backlights of the Vauxhall Corsa, the preferred mode of transport used by the London Constabulary, as soon as she approached the commercial end of the Kensington Park Road. It didn't take a genius to work out who they were interested in on this early Tuesday morning. So what had Harry been up to now?

'Mr Butterworth, what time did you leave these premises on Monday the twelfth of March, or, in other words, yesterday?' Asked the blond policewoman. With her pencil hovering above her small lined notepad, the officer waited patiently for a plausible answer.

All Harry could concentrate on, at this precise moment, was the neat blond bun peeking out from under her police cap, severe but very sexy. Maybe he could suggest making the two ladies a nice cup of builder's tea or even an espresso from his state-of-the-art, spanking-new coffee machine. Try and keep the pretty one talking for a while longer. Maybe not. The stare he was receiving was anything but friendly.

'Mr Butterworth, where were you yesterday evening?' she repeated.

Harry stroked his stubbly chin. With his long dark curly hair and impressive-looking military jacket, Harry looked more like an eighteenth-century Hungarian hussar than a forty-something London antique dealer. His blue eyes matched his coat perfectly. This fact did not go unnoticed.

Harry squinted at the officer. 'I was at home like a good little boy, officer, well not altogether being good, hey, you know how it works. Doing this, that, and the other in and around the flat upstairs.' Then, as he lit another cigarette, he laughed

seductively and winked at the flustered officer, who was desperately trying not to blush.

Harry slid off the armrest and spread out more comfortably, taking up the total length of the sofa, his eyes settling on the girl with the blond bun.

He's not doing himself any favours, Nikki thought as she quickly sidled past the group to gain entrance to the backyard. She'd known Harry Butterworth for a while now and knew exactly how he operated.

Nikki bunched up the hem of her flowery Biba dress in one hand to avoid dragging it through the muddy puddles that had accumulated during the night. Nikki's style was strictly Bohemian, whatever the weather threw at her.

Officer number two, whose looks had much to be desired, was getting very agitated. 'Now listen here, Butterworth, time is money, and the force doesn't have much of either to spare on people like you. So we need information, and we need it now. Do you understand?'

Harry didn't stir; he just smiled and said, 'sorry, can't help you. I'm afraid I was here polishing my silver, so to speak.'

The second officer turned on her heel, giving her partner a curt nod. Then like a pair of synchronized swimmers, they returned to their patrol car.

'Is the gate unlocked?' Nikki asked Harry, 'I need to clean out the food truck this morning.'

'Bloody police,' Harry growled, 'the least bit of trouble around here, and they're knocking on my door. I've got a legit business here and have had for years; it's a disgrace, that's what it is.' Harry dragged himself up out of the old sofa.

'What I need now is a good strong cup of coffee. Are you going to join me, Nikki, or are you going to be bloody boring again? Bloody police,' he muttered again and disappeared through the sliding door into his antique, stroke, curiosity shop.

The shop was typical for the area. The painted green frontage with gold lettering desperately needed a little love and

attention. But, unfortunately, the green paint seemed to be giving up the fight, losing its grip on the old wood panelling and managing to give the pavement the look of a lily pond in early spring.

Over the years, Butterworth Antiques had accumulated all sorts of furniture and curiosities. The stock ranged from authentic period pieces, colourful retro items and unsaleable rubbish. Harry always argued that visitors to his shop needed to get down and dirty. They needed to feel as if they had dug out that perfect rare antique. *I bet he didn't know he had this lying around in his shop*; clients often whispered whilst rummaging in the dark, forgotten corners. That, apparently, was half the fun of hunting for antiques and other exciting stuff. The customer would leave with the notion that they had a real find. Mentally, they were already carting said object off to the BBC Antiques Road Show only to find that they had a rare slipware owl worth thousands of pounds. Interior decorators, always good for a few bob, often frequented his shop for various eclectic items to decorate the numerous high-end luxury homes and apartments in and around the capital. Anything from a fancy desk to a stuffed cat, Harry Butterworth was your man.

Harry had one great love in life: coffee, strong coffee, preferably strong Italian espresso coffee. Having searched high and low for a decent machine, the answer to his coffee craving had come in the shape of a desperate restaurant owner named Giuseppe Bianchi. In all the excitement of opening his new Italian restaurant, Giuseppe had managed, one evening after a few too many Grappas, to order two high-tech espresso machines instead of one. Unfortunately, ordering online was not one of Giuseppe's specialities at the best of times. Add in a few drinks combined with stress and numerous late nights, and such a mistake was easily made.

Two sleek and stylish coffee machines had arrived one afternoon when Giuseppe was out on a buying trip. They were signed for and unpacked by an over-enthusiastic decorator who,

at the time, was on his tea break. The decorator, who, by the way, never cleared up after himself, had, for some unknown reason, thrown all the packaging into the skip. The superfluous espresso machine could not, therefore, be returned.

Just around the corner from Harry's antique emporium Giuseppe Bianchi was about to open his first Italian restaurant. His mother, who had come over, especially from Sardinia, was already busy in the kitchen trying out her signature dishes. All the high-quality ingredients were sourced directly from Italy. The fridge overflowed with different goodies ranging from twenty different kinds of cheese to fish, hams, vegetables and thick Italian sausage, making the smell that emanated from the kitchen deliciously tantalizing. The restaurant's décor was lush and welcoming, and Giuseppe, together with his mother and boyfriend Matteo, were nearly ready to open the doors to the great London public.

Harry, never one to miss an opportunity to sell some gear, had gone around the corner to check out the new restaurant and, of course, its owner. As he had entered, he had walked in on Giuseppe Bianchi tearing his hair out in frustration.

'What's the matter with you, mate?' Harry had immediately sensed a note of panic in the air.

'You notta belief I gotta two espresso machines, mama mia dey costa more than duemila euro each, I thot I order one but I gotta due.'

When Harry glanced towards the bar area, he saw the two impressive machines sitting side by side. Built by hand in Italy, designed in stainless steel with integrated cup rails, Harry had lost it. Other men swooned over beautiful women, not our Harry; his heart had stopped at the sight of these retro espresso machines sitting on their short metal legs. The oozing charm had made the hairs on the back of his neck move. He had to have one; he would take one of the machines off the Italian's hands; make no mistake.

Harry's international vocabulary wasn't up to much, but he had gathered that one of the shiny objects in front of his eyes was one too many for this forthcoming establishment. Duemila euro sounded like a lot of euro. So he had stretched out his hand.

'Hi, I'm Harry Butterworth, I own the antique and curiosity shop just around the corner, and you are?'

'Sorry, sorry, I'm so pleased to meete you. I am Giuseppe Bianchi from Sardegna,' he had stuck out a wet sticky hand, 'sorry, I am in kitchen workink, I am making the pasta wita my mama.'

'Giuseppe, what exactly are we talking about in pounds for one of these machines?' The Italian had then poked two fingers in the air, followed rapidly by his forefinger and thumb, forming a circle which he then stabbed into the air three times.

'Shit,' Harry had frowned, 'so you're talking two thousand quid, four Monkeys! That's a lot of money for a decent cup of coffee. What about a deal, Mr Bianchi? I'm into furniture, second-hand or new. Tell me what you need, and I'll see what I can do for you. Maybe we can swap one of your espresso machines for a few nice tables or perhaps a rug or two? Do a deal, so to speak.'

Giuseppe had indeed needed something else for his restaurant, and that something turned out to be a large crystal chandelier. It was to be hung centre stage in the restaurant and needed to be a real show stopper.

As Harry stared up at the ceiling, an idea started to form in his head. Never one to miss a trick, he told Giuseppe that he would get back to him as quickly as possible.

2

Trip to Guildford

After visiting his new friend Giuseppe Bianchi, Harry had wandered back to the shop with his little black book of contacts open in one hand and his mobile clutched in the other. The number for Charlie Hicks in Guildford already dialled.

The conversation went as follows: 'Wotcher Charlie, it's me, Harry Butterworth. A question for you, have you got a decent-looking chandelier knocking about in that salvage yard of yours by any chance? It needs to be the real McCoy, large, all crystal, and extremely sparkly. None of that new-fangled plastic muck you see around these days.'

'Hi, Harry, how're you doing? Long-time no see. Listen to me, Essex boy; if you're paying me cash in hand, I might just have a quick nose around the yard for you. What sort of thing are you looking for? What are we talking Butterworth? Versailles, Soho chic or half-decent crap?'

'More a case of the Soho chic, if possible, Charlie. I need it for a good friend of mine.' Harry had quickly slipped in the little white lie.

As it happened, Charlie Hicks did have a chandelier, and, according to him, it was an absolute stonker. Of course, it would mean a round trip out to Guildford to check it out, but what the hell? If he could do the deal and swap it for that sexy espresso machine, it would all be worth it.

'Any idea of the cost?' Harry had wanted to know.

'If you like, we'll have to have a talk when you get here, but off the top of my head, I think I could let it go for, say, six hundred quid. But, of course, you'll have to come and collect it; there's no way I'm going to ship the bloody thing up to London. Oh, and by

the way, it'll be a cash-in-hand transaction, of course, that goes without saying.'

Excellent, six hundred; knowing Charlie, he would quickly knock him down another couple of hundred. Just the ticket. It had all looked very promising.

The next day, Harry got his Ford Transit van on the road and travelled down to Guildford. Four hours after leaving London, he had pulled into Charlie's salvage yard. It had taken him roughly ninety minutes just to get out of town, and Harry had been seriously hot, bothered and bad-tempered as he got out of his van. Travelling by road was no fun anymore. Luckily he had just had the van serviced, and it was running like a dream.

Charlie, eager and waiting, had been sitting outside by his back door. Wearing a big satisfied grin with his feet placed comfortably upon a large wooden tea chest, he was basking in some early spring sunshine. Charlie had been anxious to get straight down to business.

Charlie Hicks was seventy-two years old and known to all in the trade as a crafty bugger. With his portly figure, tweed jacket and matching waistcoat, he could be considered the picture of the perfect law-abiding English gentleman who happened to dabble in the odd antique. He'd been in the business for a good sixty years, and those close to him knew him for what he was – a notorious criminal and fence. Dealing in stolen goods was Charlie's primary source of income. He was married to Shelly, a real mutton dressed up as lamb lady, and boy, did she have a mouth on her. Harry always tried to steer well clear of her when he came to visit Charlie. They didn't have any children, just a pesky little lap dog called Marshmallow.

'I take it my chandelier is in the chest?' Harry had said, giving Charlie a firm handshake.

'Yep, a nice thing that, you don't need to see it, I hope, it's well and truly packed?' had come the reply.

‘Well, if I’m shelling out such a large amount of money, it would be sort of sensible to at least have a peek at it, don’t you think?’ Harry, ready to dive in, had already taken off his jacket.

‘Go and find us a crowbar, mate. We’ll have this lid off in no time.’

Charlie had disappeared into the old barn returning with a sizeable lethal-looking instrument, and lifted the lid. A great deal of packaging, including a thick grey furniture blanket, had erupted over the rim of the box.

‘Blimey Charlie,’ Harry had taken a deep breath. ‘How am I supposed to get a good look at this thing?’ Each piece of crystal had been separately packed in tissue paper to not collide with the next one during transport. These separate tissue packages were then again tightly taped with a type of duct tape. What a nightmare!

Charlie had wanted Harry gone. ‘Tell you what,’ he’d suggested, a bright idea cropping up in his head, ‘you take the whole thing away for two hundred and fifty quid, and we’ll both be happy. If you have any problems with it when you get home, bits missing, for instance, just let me know, and I’ll deal with it.’ Harry had, of course, eagerly shaken his hand.

‘Anything else worth looking at, Charlie?’ Harry had asked as they both lifted the tea chest into the back of the van.

‘Well, now you come to mention it, I’ve got a few odd boxes outback that you can take for a fiver each if you want. It’s all a bit granny’s attic for me. I’m more into the big pieces.’ Charlie’s motto had always been - big pieces, big profit.

At first glance, the three boxes had looked quite tempting. What could one possibly lose at five quid a box? The wooden boxes themselves alone would be worth that figure. They also had an elegant look about them, certainly not your run-of-the-mill tea chest; they would recycle nicely into excellent coffee tables - another deal in the bag.

Having paid Charlie in crisp fivers, Harry had tucked the three boxes next to the large tea chest; the van was now officially full.

He had strapped everything down and driven gingerly out of the yard, trying desperately to avoid all the potholes and other obstructions.

Halfway down the motorway, however, Harry had started to get a bit twitchy. His armpits had got sweatier as each mile passed. What if the stuff was stolen? You never knew with bloody Hicks. Ah well, he thought, it was done now. There was no going back.

Harry didn't deal in stolen goods; he never had done. Maybe he wasn't altogether squeaky clean, but he drew the line at stuff that had been nicked big time. His shop was his all, it provided him with a reasonable income, and Harry loved being his own boss. He was forty-six but never admitted it to anyone, especially the girls he asked out on dates. Having been married a few times, it was the bachelor's life for him from now on. His shop and the Butterworth name would stand up in this business if it were the last thing he ever did in this life.

The moment Harry got back, he'd carried the large chest into the workshop. He would have to unpack the whole thing before presenting it to Giuseppe. No slip-ups; it had to be perfect. Eight hours, three cups of coffee, and a ham sandwich later, the job was done and dusted. Harry had then pulled the chandelier up by a thick rope linked through an iron ring attached to one of the sturdy beams crisscrossing the workshop ceiling.

To get the full effect, Harry had waited until the next evening to draw in before inviting Giuseppe Bianchi round to view the chandelier. When Giuseppe had walked in, hand in hand with his boyfriend Matteo, the crystals' full effect could be seen dripping their light all around the workshop walls. Hundreds of crystal glass drops dazzled the onlookers. It had been mesmerizingly beautiful. It was indeed a stunner. Done deal: chandelier swapped for a state-of-the-art espresso machine. Result!

'It is too much, much too much,' Matteo had not been able to hold back his tears. 'I will cook an Italian meal for you; I have to thank you from the bottom of my heart. I feel as if I've died and

gone to heaven.' He had wept on Harry's shoulder. Harry, not quite knowing how to handle a situation such as this, had carefully transferred the weeping Matteo onto Giuseppe's shoulder.

Early the following morning, Harry had called round to the restaurant and collected the coffee machine. Having already cleared a space at the back of the shop, he'd installed the appliance on his return. Its integrated cup rail was soon packed and stacked with all sorts of antique and retro cups of approximately the right size for the perfect espresso. The next step had been to score a high-quality coffee bean, preferably a dark roast. The beans did not turn out to be a great challenge as there were quite a few good tea and coffee places in and around the Notting Hill area.

As the smell of that first cup of coffee had started to drift towards him, Harry had done something he could not often afford to do. He'd looked towards the future. Life was good, trade was reasonable, and a good cup of strong coffee was finally on its way, at last.

3

A passing Australian

Harry proudly invited Nikki Carter to sit on his pink sofa and enjoy her first cup of espresso from the new machine. As they sat side by side, each cradling their morning cup of caffeine infusion, the morning sun was starting to warm the air nicely. Punters were already out and about, walking past and looking in the shop window of Butterworth Antiques and Curiosities. At the first sign of interest, Harry would scramble to his feet, all smiles, giving them the usual playful banter.

‘Nice coffee, Harry. You did well there.’

‘Had to go out of my way a bit, but it was worth it in the end.’

‘And, don’t forget, Matteo has promised you a slap-up meal around the corner at Giuseppe’s place. Well, at least you’re on a promise; I could be your significant other, couldn’t I? I love Italian.’

‘He’s that happy, Nikki; he wouldn’t even notice if five of us went round there. He’s been up on that step ladder of his for the last few days giving the bloody thing a right old shine. He looks like one of those ads you see on telly peddling a miracle glass cleaner.’

‘Looks good, though, you must admit, it just makes the place look seriously posh.’

‘I bet he sticks the prices up,’ Harry was always thinking of profit.

‘Right, enough of this. I’ve still got a food truck to clean out.’ Nikki levered herself out of the sofa, ‘I’m out again on Sunday for a one-day festival down Dorking way, and the truck looks a tip.’

Nikki Carter travelled, from festival to festival, in a powder blue food truck named Forget-Me-Not. All in all, the culinary truck

had become a bit of a hit, and Nikki made enough, selling gourmet hamburgers and fizzy drinks, to eke out a good living.

It was hard work, especially sourcing proper supplies and suppliers, which enabled her to maintain the quality needed to stand out from the competition. And there was enough competition around. Finding decent buns for her burgers had been a bit of a headache. Eventually, she found a bakery nearby in Notting Hill that could produce soft, slightly sweet buns with a dusting of flour on the top. Perfect buns, that was the secret of a delicious hamburger.

Her other hang-up about food trucks had always been the presentation of the food. No slopping the burger in an environmentally unfriendly plastic container for her. But, instead, a recyclable dish. One that kept the sauce in the bowl instead of dripping everywhere and nowhere. These luxuries cost money but paid off because, nowadays, many festival-goers are sensitive to biodegradable options.

Nikki spent any extra time during the week in the antique shop with Harry Butterworth. She had become a dab hand at selling furniture and all sorts of other bits and pieces that happened to come their way.

The two met when Nikki was looking for a parking space for her classic Citroen H food truck. She had spotted the handwritten ad in the newsagent's window by chance. It had advertised a decent-sized parking lot close to home. Nikki lost no time and had called in at the shop the next day on the off chance it was still free.

It had not required a great deal of persuasion. Harry, being short of cash, as usual, accepted Nikki's offer. He'd desperately needed the extra money the space behind his shop would generate.

It was only a short walk from her flat to the antique shop. Nikki Carter shared a flat with three other people in Notting Hill. So the trip to and from Harry's yard would amount to a matter of minutes.

Nikki had bought the truck from a stranger. One wet weekday evening, she had been leaning up against the bar of the “Queen Victoria” pub, trying to put her high-pressure IT job to bed for the day when her life was welcomingly upended. It was getting to her; after more than eight years of staring at a computer screen, Nikki Carter had started to realize that this was not the way her life should continue. She was good at her job and had built up quite a satisfying bank balance. Being good with figures and keeping her overheads low, Nikki had accumulated an impressive amount of money. But not only was she highly bored with her job, but she’d also become frustrated with the type of person involved in her line of work.

Little did she know, at that moment, that her new life would entail an old powder blue food truck parked just around the corner from her local pub.

At around nine o’clock, a long-haired roughie toughie type of guy had strolled into the pub. He’d introduced himself to the bartender as Niall. Niall wanted to stick a note of some sort on the pub noticeboard advertising the sale of his classic food truck. Said food truck was in good nick and would cost some lucky person eight thousand pounds cash, he’d added quickly.

Ted, the barkeeper, had nodded toward Nikki and said. ‘Hey Carter, that’s the sort of thing you could be getting on with, start a new career flogging burgers or making tacos; you were moaning and groaning about the fact that your job was getting you down. All that bloody screenwork was doing your head in, you said.’

‘What, a food truck?’ Nikki had replied, ‘you are joking, aren’t you? I wouldn’t even know where to start. Making a cheese sandwich is already an adventure for me.’

Roughie toughie had then sidled towards her along the length of the bar. With a booming voice, he had stuck out his right hand and said, ‘my name’s Niall Buck, I’m Australian, and with any luck, eight thousand quid and a fair wind, I’ll be back in sunny Sydney next month. The weather here in England is doing me no

good whatsoever. The damp is rotting my brain. So now, if you buy my truck, lady, as an added extra, I'll even give you a quick twirl around the little beauty and get you started in your own food truck business.' A faint waft of fried onions had made its way across the bar.

'Where is this magic vehicle of yours then?' Nikki had said. She could do with some evening entertainment. Have a bit of fun, why not?

Niall Buck, falling over his feet with excitement, had then guided Nikki out of the pub and about a hundred yards down the road. Parked on a double yellow line stood a classic powder blue Citroen food truck.

Niall had suddenly become very agitated. 'It's vintage, 1973; it has two-hundred and sixty on the clock and runs like a bloody dream. Do you want to see inside?' Niall had customized the truck specifically as a burger van. Complete kitchen layout with all the stainless steel retro fittings: American range, deep fryer, prep unit, you name it, and it was there. A one hundred pound propane gas bottle was built-in on one side opposite a thirty-five-gallon waste water tank. Twenty-five gallons of fresh water was also an option. So much information flowed out of the Australian that he had to draw breath several times.

'It all depends what sort of cuisine you're going to have on offer, of course,' Niall had said, 'but I think it more or less covers everything.'

Nikki had been gobsmacked but tried hard not to show it.

'Runs on diesel,' Niall prompted hopefully.

This opportunity could in no way be a coincidence. She had been thinking of a complete life change only a moment ago, and now this had just fallen out of thin air. It must be fate. There was no other explanation.

'You can even drive it on an ordinary driver's licence. You do have a licence, I hope?'

4

Freedom

A few weeks later, Nikki Carter had officially driven the food truck into Harry's backyard.

'Wow, that's quite a vehicle, pretty lady,' an impressed Harry had said.

He'd walked towards the truck; Harry had been more than eager to have a good look at what Nikki had bought for herself. 'I like the white hubs and trim; very classy. How much did you say you paid for it?'

'Look,' Nikki had tried to defend herself. 'I managed to get this guy down to seven thousand in the end. Still, it's a lot of money to hand over to a complete stranger. This purchase could be a huge mistake, Harry. But do you think it's me? Mrs Bohemian burger lady. Boho Burgers. Not the sort of image I would have painted for myself a couple of months ago.'

Although at this moment in time Harry hadn't known Nikki long, he could sense her excitement for this new venture. He had scratched his unshaven chin, 'yeah, yeah, it's most definitely you. But I'm sure you can come up with a far better name than Boho Burgers. It needs a bit of a clean, though. I can still see bits of the last food festival stuck to the headlights.'

'Now, don't start nit-picking, Butterworth. The last thing I need is unjustified criticism. Have you looked at that Transit thing of yours lately? It's a complete tip.' Nikki was not in the mood. She'd been feeling a bit uncertain about the whole thing, especially as she'd just had a fraught conversation with her mother. More doubt was not on the menu.

'Not my favourite hobby, cleaning modes of transport; I'm much too delicate for that sort of thing,' Harry had laughed. He

had been in the middle of descaling a rather large ornamental glass vase that would soon be on its way to a dear little old lady in Pimlico.

Harry had taken a few more steps in the direction of the van. The food truck was a French, powder blue, classic type H Citroen. The whole side lifted up and out, forming the hatch that revealed a completely kitted-out stainless-steel kitchen interior. The rolling restaurant had been beautifully restored. It was clear that a dedicated fitter had worked on this project. If the truck was mechanically sound, and Harry hoped it was, this purchase had been a good one.

All Nikki had had on her mind at the time was: no office politics, never a dull day and being her own boss. Finally, at last, the flexibility to work when and wherever she wanted. The downside she had conveniently pushed to the back of her mind – was a lot of early mornings, weekend work and late nights. Not to mention competition, regulations, and laws that had to be complied with. And, last but not least, the unpredictable British weather.

The truck had been filthy inside and out. It had taken Nikki a good week and a lot of hard work to knock it back into shape. Of course, it wasn't perfect, but at least the worst of the dirt was gone.

She'd called her boss and given him a month's notice, he had not been amused, and that was putting it lightly. IT had become a thing of the past, thank God. Well, that was the end of that. She also knew, at the time, that her mum was going to kill her. Nikki could still hear her now. "Have you gone mad? You're thirty-two, not eighteen. England is not Ibiza; you know what these festivals are like? You'll be attacked by some druggie or other, sexually assaulted even. This is the real world; you have to pay rent, buy food, pay tax, blah blah blah.....!" And on it went for at least another half hour.

It had all made perfect sense, of course, well, most of it had, but she'd just had enough of her old life, including the two failed

relationships, one of which had been seven years in so-called wedded bliss. The thought of not knowing what the next day would bring had become strangely appealing to her. A couple of days of the week on the road, preparing for the trips and festivals, buying in the burger stuff, administration, it would all keep her pretty busy.

The days in the shop with Harry Butterworth had become both relaxing and fun. They laughed a lot. Harry was a little older than Nikki but not a lot wiser. His weird sense of humour had taken some time to get used to, but, in the end, he'd become a good friend. People who knew them often said that they would make a great couple. Nikki knew that this would never happen.

A scruffy, long-haired forty-something with a big mouth, longish dark brown curly hair, and, come to that, a bit on the short side, was not her idea of a boyfriend, let alone anything else. Forget the blue eyes and the odd lopsided grin; it was not going to happen.

5

Forget-me-not burgers

On the weekend before the Dorking festival, work on the food truck had taken on a serious note and begun in earnest. All the cleaning products knocking around in the back kitchen, plus a few Nikki had never heard of before but had bought anyway, were used for scrubbing, washing, disinfecting and polishing. She had to admit that the final effect had looked very professional, indeed. Had stainless steel ever looked this good?

After Nikki had registered her food business with the local authority, an Environmental Health Officer turned up unexpectedly to inspect and certify the vehicle in line with health and hygiene regulations. Everything had, more or less, been scrutinised and found correct and in working order. However, the Health Officer suggested Nikki go on a brief food and safety training course to acquaint herself with the essential ins and outs of food hygiene. Although the thought of more education did not appeal, she'd done enough of that in her time; she went on it anyway and found it all quite fascinating. Serving up a portion of campylobacter, salmonella, or other bacteria was not an option if one ran a food truck travelling from festival to festival.

With HM Revenue and Customs sorted, Nikki Carter was officially self-employed. All that was left now was to acquire a trading licence and suitable insurance.

The whole rigmarole was finally behind her, and the food truck was at last clean and kitted out. Nikki had taken the van out to a couple of trial venues and concluded that her decision had been a good one. She could easily eke out a steady income from her new enterprise.

Now, a couple of months later, it had seemed like a good idea to have a christening ceremony to ensure a safe passage and many a grilled gourmet burger. So Harry had arranged a sacrificial bottle of Champagne and noted down a date for the naming ceremony in the diary. It was to be closing time Wednesday evening.

'We're no way going to crack that huge bottle up against the truck,' said Nikki to Harry, 'you'll damage the paintwork and make a hell of a mess while you're at it. Let's dribble some of the Champagne over the bonnet to appease the Roman God of burgers. There must be one in mythology somewhere. Otherwise, we'll have to invent one. I bet his name begins with a large yellow M.' Nikki couldn't stop smiling when she realised Harry was actually taking this seriously.

Harry flicked a few drops of the expensive Champagne over the front of the truck, letting it run over the large double V of the Citroen logo.

'I now name you "Forget-Me-Not Burgers".'

That would be because of the colour, thought Nikki, looking lovingly at the powder blue van. Harry had not mentioned the fact that he had already thought up the perfect name. She was not going to argue. It seemed to settle nicely in her brain. So perfect, Forget-Me-Not Burgers was officially born. The fact that Harry Butterworth had come up with the name was neither here nor there.

'Waste of a good bottle. We'll drink the rest. I bought two bottles, just in case the first one did shatter into shards of glass.' Harry disappeared through the back door of his shop.

'Don't start without me, will you?'

'I wouldn't dream of it. I'm just going to get on and do some tweaking here and there.'

Harry surfaced about ten minutes later, having found a couple of large bags of cheese and onion crisps and the promised second bottle of bubbly.

There was no sitting area in the food truck, so Harry sat down on the floor and stretched his legs out as far as they would go. 'Dig out the glasses then,' he said, 'and we'll make a start on this little lot.'

As the evening wore on, cushions miraculously appeared out of the shop. More snacks and nibbles were made and eaten, and they opened the second bottle. Harry started to reminisce about his past. Getting more and more maudlin, several wives came floating by in quick succession, none of them good enough to grace Mr Harry Butterworths' life. 'I could have had my pick of the women around me, but what did I do? I choose a real couple of bitches. Oops, sorry, pardon my French. They plucked me like an unsuspecting chicken. I mean cockerel. Do they pluck cockerels?'

Apparently, over the years, he'd also managed to date quite a few women. Butterworth would meet these girlfriends, up and down the Portobello Road, during his foraging trips on Saturday mornings.

This whole story of his life and personality was not painting an especially appealing picture. Nikki was becoming more and more uncomfortable as the evening wore on. The radio and the Champagne helped to keep the proceedings on an even keel.

Halfway down the second bottle, they were singing along to some of Nikki's favourite tunes and some not so favoured. It was dark by now, and Nikki desperately needed to get up and go for a pee. Stepping over Harry's legs, she stumbled over his boots and fell on top of him. He put out a hand to steady her but to no avail. When she tried to stand up for the second time, her head collided with the sharp edge of the grill plate.

Blood began to flow. Harry was not a hero on the medical front. He stood up suddenly, half sober from the shock, and wobbled out of the van.

'I'll be back in a minute with the first aid kit, don't move.'

Nikki leaned back and shut her eyes. When she opened them again, Harry had reappeared with a toilet roll tucked under his

arm and a bottle of Dettol in his right hand. This approach wasn't one she'd ever seen on an episode of Casualty, that was for sure.

'I couldn't find the first aid kit; who had it last? Bloody hell, it's dark in here. Stay where you are. Stop moving around, woman.'

'I'm here, you plonker. I could have bled to death in the time it took you to get back in here. Look at my clean floor. So much for hygiene protocol.'

Harry rolled off about two feet of toilet paper and doused it in Dettol. He knelt and pressed the wad of paper hard up against the cut on the back of her head.

'Ow! that hurts; wow, aren't you supposed to dilute that stuff.' For once in his life, a very pale Harry Butterworth was tongue-tied.

It was like a sort of a lightbulb moment; somebody had pressed the pause button. One moment he looked as if he was about to be sick; the next, he had planted his lips firmly on Nikki's mouth.

For a moment, Nikki thought he was trying mouth-to-mouth or something, but then reality hit. The bloody idiot was drunk.

She wormed her way down a little lower so that she was more or less flat on her back and wriggled away towards the back door of the van. Slipping past Harry's cowboy boots, she then straightened up and made her escape. No, No, No, this was not happening, not now, not to her.

6

A recipe for disaster

Nikki was back in her flat with an impressive-looking plaster stuck to the back of her head. She had made herself a large cheese and pickle sandwich and sat down on the three-seater couch to watch a bit of television and sober up.

Luckily all her other housemates were out and about, so she had enough quiet time to think; otherwise, they would fire all sorts of questions at her, and she was not in the mood. Her mind was going around and around in circles; she kept thinking back to a few hours ago and what Harry had gone and done. It was all her fault; she should have known it would go the way it did. Alone, with a guy like Harry Butterworth, complete with two bottles of Champagne. A recipe for disaster. So what happens now? She asked herself, well, I'll tell you what happens now. I'll ignore him. Surely, he won't remember any of this tomorrow morning. In his befuddled brain, I'll just be one more conquest.

Early the following day, Nikki tried walking casually into the backyard, complete with headache, sticky plaster and *The Mirror* newspaper tucked under her arm.

Shit, Harry was already on his precious couch, coffee ready and waiting. Nikki sat down and immediately opened the newspaper.

'Morning,' he mumbled halfway through a cream bun.

'Morning,' Nikki replied as she hastily buried herself in a lengthy article about plastic waste pollution in the world's oceans. But, blimey, this whole state of affairs could become very awkward. It was going to be a long old day.

'How's the head then?' Harry asked.

'Not too bad, actually, throbs a bit. All in all, it makes me look quite interesting. I might get some sympathy on Sunday down Dorking way. Sell a few more burgers. I'll tell anybody who asks that my husband knocked me about a bit.'

'Not funny, Carter.'

Working her way through the paper, Nikki came across a long article, on page four, about the auction of a Ming Dynasty porcelain cup. This five-hundred-year-old cup, which measured only eight centimetres or just over three inches, was purchased for twenty million pounds by an eccentric multimillionaire Shanghai art collector. Sotheby's Hong Kong must be pretty pleased, thought Nikki. Just imagine the commission alone on that one piece.

Nikki read on and discovered that only seventeen of these cups were known to exist. Four of them were still in private hands, the rest of them in museums around the world. Wow, that would be a find, wouldn't it? These fifteenth-century "Chicken Cups" take their name from their hen and cockerel decoration. She looked carefully at the chicken photo; her five-year-old niece, Betty, could have hand-painted that.

Talking about making money, Nikki thought, I'd better start stocking up the food truck for the weekend. As she struggled up out of the couch, Harry glanced up and asked, 'Need any help connecting anything, disconnecting anything, removing blood stains?'

'No, I'm fine, thank you, Harry,' she said, hurrying away in the direction of the kitchen.

Harry and Nikki had come to a long-term arrangement that she could hook up the food truck to the mains in the yard and use the shop kitchen in exchange for helping out on her days off. This deal seemed to be working out rather well.

The coming weekend Nikki was going down south to the Dorking Music Festival. The festival was a one-day charity event in Surrey. Luckily, her sister Zoey, who lived near Dorking in a village called Wotton, would join her for a much-needed extra

pair of hands. The nearest town to Wotton with any kind of shop was Westcott. Zoey being a bit isolated and out in the sticks, to put it lightly, was always in for a bit of action.

Zoey's husband, Trevor Buckle, was the silent morbid type, only emerging from his garden shed for coffee, meals, Sundays and holidays. He was the reason that Zoey Buckle was often one bored lady. So, when Nikki called her about the festival, she'd nearly crawled down the phone screaming, 'I'll come down and help. Please let me help, what time do you need me to be there, should I bring anything? Please let me come. I'll behave this time, I promise.'

Nikki had had to laugh, 'My God woman, what's the matter, Trevor, in that shed again, has he got a new project on the go or something?'

'You don't want to know,' Zoey had replied. 'I don't even know anymore what another human being looks like, Nikki, let alone feels like. He's got a new project; now you come to mention it. Build and erect your own wind turbine. Talk about saving the environment; at least a hundred trees were probably sacrificed just to print the bloody manual. Can you imagine it stuck in the back garden, scaring the shit out of everything in sight? The neighbours, who already think we're mad, are going to go ballistic.'

'Alright, alright,' Nikki had said, trying to put an end to her tirade about her husband Trevor, 'I get the general picture. You can meet me down there on Sunday; bring a bucket full of your sunny little self. I'll app you the address.'

'You are on, lady. What time?'

'It all kicks off at one o'clock, so if you can be there around ten, we can do all the prep together; that would be great, Zoey, thanks.'

In the London kitchen, Nikki was stocking the van with burgers. All the necessary ingredients were now ready and stashed away in the truck. She checked the propane bottles and filled the tank with fresh water. At one point, Nikki had even thought of making

her own burgers, but that, at this moment in time, was a bridge too far. Burgers came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, but ultimately she'd decided to go for a good, free-range burger made locally from local beef. Nikki could collect the buns early on Sunday morning.

Nikki gave Zoey a call to make sure she would be there on time. Then, my God, a miracle, Trevor answered the phone.

'Why are you not in your shed Trev?' said Nikki.

'I've got a slight problem there at the moment.'

'What's the problem?'

Trevor sounded a bit cagey, and Nikki wondered what he was up to now. She had never quite trusted Trevor.

'If you really want to know, the problem is a giant spider. It suddenly appeared last night and has decided to set up home on the top of my half-built wind turbine. I'm not good with spiders, Nikki, so I'm waiting for Zoey to get home. She'll know how to deal with the little bugger.'

Nikki decided that this was too good a chance to be missed, a bit of sport was called for.

'Don't kill it, will you, Trev? Spiders are beneficial animals. You've got to be very careful not to hurt them. Keep it nice and warm, and it will do you no end of good deeds. You'll not find a fly or gnat in that shed of yours all summer. You'll have your own private fly trap, which is very environmentally sound. You're into that sort of thing, aren't you?'

'Why don't I wait for Zoey to get home? She'll know what to do,' mumbled Trevor.

A typical man thought, Nikki, what a wimp. There's no accounting for taste, especially as far as men were concerned.

Zoey called back an hour later and spoke to her sister; they agreed to meet outside the festival gates early the following day.

'Any news on that huge spider in the shed?' Nikki asked.

'It was the size of a sultana and is now happily living in the Hydrangea by the sidewall. Don't tell Trevor; for heaven's sake,

he'll think it will pounce on him one of these days and get its revenge.'

Zoey was still laughing when she put the phone down.

Dorking Festival

Spot on six o'clock Sunday morning, Nikki drove the food truck out of its parking spot and headed out towards Dorking. Above the antique shop, all had been unusually quiet. Harry was not up and about yet. What a relief, a Harry-free day was just what the doctor ordered. It would do both of them no end of good. That kissing business had been more than a little unnerving. Although, If she was honest with herself, which she had absolutely no intention of being, it had been pretty nice. Nice, I hate the word nice, thought Nikki. Forget nice; it had given her a jolt where she didn't need a jolt at this precise moment in her life.

The weather was on her side this morning, and as the sun rose, it warmed the truck. "Forget-me-not" was ready for business and humming along nicely.

Nikki was looking forward to seeing her sister. It had been too long. When she arrived at the entrance to the festival terrain, Nikki spotted Zoey already waiting eagerly by the ticket office. Sitting on one of the fences, a large straw hat on her head, her sister was busy knitting something long and colourful.

Nikki stopped the truck and wound down the window. 'Bit early for that, isn't it? Not winter yet; we've still got the whole summer to go.'

'You never know what the weather might do,' Zoey replied, laughing. 'This is England, after all.' Zoey walked over to the truck, opened the passenger door and got in, knitting and all.

'So what's with the knitting then? I've never seen you do anything creative like that in my life,' Nikki grinned.