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Beautiful Day

Written by Kate Anthony

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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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Chapter One

Hi-ho, Hi-ho

My interview had been at the main social-services building in Hammersmith so I hadn't actually seen Clifton Avenue before my first day there. In my mind I had it down as the big Edwardian villa on the corner of two suburban roads. I had driven past it a hundred times. It looked light and airy with bright curtains hung in the windows and the garden was lovely. I rang the doorbell and a girl of about twenty-two opened the door. She looked smart and clean and had kind, enquiring eyes.

'Hello?'

'Hello! I'm Rachel Bidewell.' We shook hands warmly. 'I hope you're expecting me. I was told to ask for Rob.'

The girl looked puzzled and screwed her eyes up with concentration. 'I'm sorry, are you here to talk about Lily? I don't think they're due for another hour.'

We looked at each other blankly.

'No. I'm the new Residential Care Assistant. I was told just to come along today to get my bearings.' I began poking around in my bag for the letter confirming the post.

'You're not looking for Clifton Avenue Residential Home, are you?'

'Yes. Isn't this—?'

My lovely new colleague laughed. 'No, no. This is Clifton Park – we're a retirement home. You're wanting Clifton Avenue, it's about fifty yards up and on the right.'

'Good heavens. I always thought that this was . . . I'm so sorry. Up on the right, you say. Sorry.'

And so the door closed and I did an about-turn. It had begun to drizzle. There *was* a building on the right and it undoubtedly was Clifton Avenue Residential Care Home. It had obviously been purpose-built in the 1970s and now looked tired and scruffy. There was what must have once been a trendy glass wall down one side. But once the residents had moved in, it had presumably meant that they had no privacy and so a vast net curtain had been fitted which rather ruined the effect. Now the curtain was grey and coming off its tracks in places. It was all rucked up in one corner, where someone had shoved a rather nasty sort of tea trolley against the window with jigsaws and board games heaped upon it. The window was dull with years of dirt and muck from the traffic on the road. The garden was unkempt. The whole place looked unloved and sad and as the drizzle turned to proper rain, I had the urge to turn and run.

I fished around in my bag and brought out my letter again. 'Residential Care Assistant working with vulnerable adults . . . Must have the ability to liaise confidently and knowledgably with a broad range of outside agencies . . . Must develop caring, professional, sustaining relationships with a challenging, diverse client group.' Surely they weren't looking for me? Surely the only man for this job was Nelson Mandela.

The door opened and there was Denise, the manager and my new boss. She had been immaculately turned out on the day of my interview and I had assumed that she had dressed up for it. But, no, today she was equally smart. She had a little suit on and high, shiny court shoes. Her hair and make-up were perfect, with a big red slash at her mouth as if she had only applied her lipstick a second before opening the door.

'Rachel! Welcome, welcome. Come in out of the wet. Horrible, isn't it?'

'Vile,' I said, grinning and shaking her hand. It was bony and greasy from newly applied handcream.

'Now, I know you've just come for a little look about today. It's very quiet because all the residents are at the day centre or work. This is as good as it gets! I'm going to leave you with Rob, my deputy. He'll go through all the paperwork and tell you exactly how the whole place works, but first of all let me just say how happy we are to have you join us.'

'Thank you,' I said gratefully and followed her down a narrow corridor illuminated with harsh strip lighting. Her tight skirt rustled as the lining rubbed against her tights. The brown, institutional carpet was tufty and acrylic and she seemed to skate across it in her shiny, smooth shoes. The air was hot and dry. I could feel the static electricity passing up through the soles of my feet and I was worried that my hair would start standing on end as if I'd been rubbing it vigorously with a balloon.

Denise knocked on a door and we went into what looked like the general office. There were two computers,

two desks and a number of large pinboards covered with out-of-date leaflets and notices about Health and Safety and union directives. On the back of the door was a massive laminated calendar marked: !!!ROTA!!!

'Hi there, you must be Rachel, I'm Rob,' said a man sitting at a desk. He was very Scottish and friendly. We went to shake hands and a bolt of lightning shot between us. 'Occupational hazard,' he said. 'It's the carpets. If you touch the door handle in the laundry room your fillings buzz.'

When I was about eleven, my family had been friendly with a family called the McCormacks and we had holidayed together in Devon for some years. There came a time when their eldest son hit puberty, and from that day on he was ruthlessly referred to by my father and then by us all, as Bum-fluff Boy.

Looking at Rob now, I immediately recalled Bum-fluff McCormack. A patchy line of wispy stubble hovered sadly above his top lip. To add to the general lameness of his appearance, as he stood up to offer me tea and to switch on the kettle in the corner of the room, I noticed that his trousers just brushed against the tops of his ankles – and not in a youthful, boy-band way. All in all, the combination had the effect of making Rob look like one of the residents and for a moment I was wrong-footed.

'The one thing I will ask you to look at today is the rota,' said Denise. 'It's all worked out for the next month. Please, please take note of the weekends that I have put you down for. Now, a lot of the staff want to chop and change their weekends but that really does throw a spanner in the

works, so, if you could make a note and then stick to the rota, it would be very much appreciated.' She shot Rob a look that indicated that at some point he had asked for a weekend off and chaos had ensued. He grinned at me over her shoulder and slightly raised an eyebrow but I was too nervous to grin back. I obediently got out my diary and began scribbling the dates down.

Denise sashayed out cheerfully and Rob began to run through the routine of the job and what would be expected of me. I'd had a Saturday job in a similar place when I was a teenager and during the long holidays from university, so had a pretty good idea of what the job entailed. It all seemed straightforward, but the more Rob talked, the more my conviction grew that this was going to be a bad move. That I wasn't ready. I took the last swig of cold tea from the dregs of my mug, and found I had a mouthful of limescale that crunched against my teeth as I struggled to swallow it down.

As Rob talked on about the average day at Clifton Avenue, a man with Down's syndrome shot into the room like Eddie the Eagle. 'Rob! Rob! Some bastard has got my coat. Some bloody bastard has taken my coat.' He was short, with a Humpty Dumpty girth and thick glasses.

'All right, Malcolm, calm down. What coat? Where from?' asked Rob gently.

'*My* coat! Some thieving bastard has nicked it.'

'Which coat were you wearing when you arrived today?'

Malcolm shook his head, confused.

'Was it your green one? The puffy one? Is that the one? Come on, let's go and have a look around. You might have

left it somewhere else.' Rob wearily made to leave the office.

'Do you want me to look with you? I'm Rachel and I'm coming to work here.' My voice sounded strained and too eager to please.

'It's not there!'

'Let's just have one last look around, shall we?' Rob gave me a grateful nod and I followed Malcolm, who stomped out of the office to a line of coat hooks in a corridor. The only item there was a huge pair of lady's pants draped across two hooks.

'You see! Not there!' said Malcolm.

'No, but I've been looking for these everywhere.'

I grabbed the voluminous knickers and held them up to my hips. Malcolm gave me a withering look and said irritably, 'They're Theresa's,' and stalked back towards the office.'It's not *there*. Mrs Wheeler will be looking for me and my mum's going to wonder where I've got to. I'm going to tell her, Rob. I'm going to tell her that a thieving bastard from this hostel has taken it.'

'Did your mum drop you off this morning or did Mrs Wheeler bring you?' asked Rob.

'My mum.'

'If you came in the car and didn't have to wait for the minibus, maybe you just came in your sweater. Did you forget to put a coat on?'

Pause. Then a huge rueful grin spread across Malcolm's face. 'Forget my head if it wasn't screwed on, eh Rob? Forget my head. I came with my mum! I didn't *bring* a coat!'

'What are you like?' laughed Rob, cuffing the man on the arm. 'Now, official introductions: Malcolm, this is Rachel, she's going to be working here with us. Malcolm comes to us on a Wednesday and when his mum needs a bit of a rest.'

Malcolm was still laughing to himself and shaking his head in disbelief. 'Hello, sweetheart, you've gotta watch me – hasn't she, Rob?'

'She has indeed.'

'I'm trouble, I am. You've got to watch out for me, Rachel.' Malcolm's bright blue eyes twinkled as he put his chubby hand out to be shaken. 'Forget my head if it wasn't screwed on.'

Then a kindly looking middle-aged lady arrived at the door – Mrs Wheeler, I presumed. 'Hello! Is Malcolm hiding in there with you? Let's get going, gorgeous, or your mum'll think we've eloped again. I've got your coat. You left it on the bus this morning.'

Malcolm winced, smacked his hand across his forehead and looked sheepishly at Rob. 'Mrs Wheeler's got my coat.'

'So I see!' said Rob, laughing.

'Coming, my darling,' Malcolm chirruped theatrically to Mrs Wheeler and did a funny little Fred Astaire skip across the office. 'See you, Rachel. Bye, Rob. Mrs *Wheeler's* got my coat.'

Rob let out a deep sigh, turned to me and said, 'Welcome to the wonderful world of Clifton Avenue.'

It was dark by the time I left, and the light on the bus was so harsh that instead of looking out of the window, I

found myself staring at my own bedraggled reflection. I tried to make sense of my first few hours of work in more than ten years. I think it was fair to say that it hadn't been an overwhelming success. 'Early days. Early days,' I said to myself, a puny mantra that struggled to keep at bay the fear, resentment and sheer panic that threatened to scupper the whole thing.

I had planned the remainder of the evening based on the bus trip home taking roughly half an hour. I had not taken into account the fact that it was now rush hour and the bus was stationary. Would it be quicker to walk? We were miles from home and surely the traffic couldn't be like this all the way up Kilburn High Road? Could it? The anxiety in the pit of my stomach spread through my body and into my fingertips. Everyone else on the bus looked resigned and bored and I looked from one to another hoping I might catch an eye and see reflected in it the same panic I was feeling, or perhaps someone would lean over and gently say that this bit was always a nightmare but once we got past these traffic lights it was a breeze. I had exactly twelve minutes to get home. Dom had insisted that as it was my first day in my new job, he would leave work early and pick up the children from school. As a result I had given Marlene, the au pair, the evening off. Dom had said he had to be away by 6.30 and I so wanted to be calm and in control and home on time.

I found my mobile which had a little dribble of life left in it, perhaps enough juice for one call. I decided to save it and pray. And then – Jesus! – I remembered: I had forgotten to buy Alec a disposable camera for the Year 6 Outward

Bound week – five days in Swanage with the school, referred to by those in the know as 6OB. It was his first time away from home. The entire year – but Alec in particular – were beside themselves with excitement and anticipation. The camera was the one thing he hadn't got from the checklist and it had to be handed in tomorrow as it was classed as a valuable and so the teachers would take responsibility for it. They weren't allowed to take phones and Alec had never had a camera. Dom never let him within an inch of the family one, and so he'd got genuinely excited at the prospect of having his own for the week. It was yet another of the 6OB rites of passage that the children all got so heady about. I leapt off the bus and into a newsagent.

The man behind the counter resembled Colonel Gadaffi and seemed to be irritated to have been disturbed by a customer.

'Do you sell disposable cameras?' I asked, feeling as if my life depended on his answer. Not only did I have to buy the damn thing but if I couldn't get one here I had no idea where to go and whether I would ever get home.

'No. No camera,' he said, looking as if I had just asked him for a packet of poo.

'Do you have any idea where I could find one nearby?'

A long, bored pause. 'Is possible, Dixons?'

'No. I don't want a camera. Just a disposable one. You know, the ones you just throw away when you've finished with them?'

'Garage,' he said, lazily flicking his thumb in the direction of the Shell garage about half a mile away and returning to his paper.

Bloody, bloody, bloody hell. I was going to have to ring Dom. It was now 6.22, I was due home now and was miles away without a camera.

I dialled his number and he said 'Hello?' in a pompous way that suggested he had no idea who was on the end of the phone, which always irritated me, because obviously my name came up whenever I rang.

'It's me.'

'We're just on our way. Where are you?'

'Shit. Look I've got to get Alec a—' And with that the phone gave out and it was a close-run thing to say who was judging me the more incompetent, lousy parent, Dom or me.

I ran. Proper running: knees up, arms pumping. The Shell garage looked bright and welcoming in the dark, and bloody miles away. When I got there I had to make a choice between two queues of bored, grey motorists and opted for the slightly shorter one but the one that included people with shopping. I stood on tiptoes, straining towards the front of the queue like a greyhound at the starting line, as if that would somehow make it move faster. When it got to a horsey woman's turn, she suddenly realized that her carton of milk was a bit wet and she was worried that it might have a leak, so she left us all waiting in the queue and went to get another one.

'Oh dear!' she called out from the milk section, 'I wanted semi-skimmed and that must have been the last one.'

'No problem, love,' said the helpful lady behind the counter. 'We'll have some more out back. Raj? *Raaaj*? Can you bring through some semi-skimmed.'

Raj, unseen from out back: 'Semi?'

'Yes, love. Semi.'

'Milk?'

'Yes, love. Semi-skimmed.'

Dear God. I thought I was going to explode.

I was frantically scanning the back of the wall to see if there was anything that even vaguely looked like a disposable camera amongst the Anadin Extra and Marlboro Lights. Finally, when I got to the front of the queue I asked, 'Do you sell disposable cameras?' like an addict enquiring after heroine.

'Do you know . . .' said the lady, slowly and thoughtfully, 'we used to . . . I think we might still have a few. Have you looked over near the maps there?'

I ran and began darting wildly down the aisles. 'Where? Here?'

'No, just to your left, love. Can you see any?'

'No, here?' Spinning stupidly with my hands outstretched. 'Here?'

She ducked under the counter and came to help. It was now my turn to feel the eyes of the rest of the queue burn into me with a mixture of exasperation and loathing.

'There we are. We've stopped doing them so it's your lucky night, isn't it?'

There were two rather sad disposable cameras left on a shelf.

'Oh thank you. Thank you so much. You have saved my life.'

They were obviously left over from some sort of Disney promotion because they were pink and plastic with a

princess on the side. But hell, I was beyond caring. 'Thank you. Thank you so much.' And I followed the lady back to the counter and forked out £7.99 for my prize.

I ran into the street and thankfully a black cab was coming towards me. I threw myself into the back and allowed myself to breathe normally. I didn't care about the cost, I just wanted to get home. Please God, don't let Dom be there before me. Please God, don't let him be there.

As my taxi drew into the dark street, I saw Dom's car outside the house. I scrambled to pay the cab and find my keys and try and pull myself together. My hands were shaking as I put my key into the lock and went in. I put my head around the door of the sitting room and there were the kids, watching TV and looking bored.

'Hi guys.' Three little heads looked up and smiled.

'Hi, Mum.'

'How was it?' asked Alec.

'Early days,' I said, trying to look enthusiastic.

I pushed on to the kitchen and there stood Dom, padding back and forth in his socks and clutching a mug of tea as if he'd never left. As if the last six months had never happened.

'I'm so sorry, Dom. Teething problems. I've got to get my timings sorted—'

'It's fine. Not a problem. I will have to rush now though. I thought you'd make an effort to get away in good time—'

'I did, I did. But I had to get Alec a dis—'

'Well, you're here now. I'm afraid I haven't fed them yet.

I don't know what you were planning to give them. Do you want a hand? I can stay for five minutes.'

There was next to nothing in the house – the Tesco delivery wasn't due until the next morning – and it was going to have to be scrapings from the back of the freezer. I was anxious for Dom to leave before this became evident. But no, having the moral high ground for the first time in months was a rare treat for him and he was making the most of it.

He looked in the fridge, then a cupboard, then returned to the fridge and squatted down on his haunches to survey its darker regions as if miraculously since last he'd looked a roast chicken or possibly a steak and kidney pie had appeared. We'd had to have a horrible row to stop him letting himself into the house willy-nilly when he first left and now here I was, standing contrite in the corner while he rummaged in my kitchen cupboards and peered into my bread bin. The old Dom would have been bloody furious but now he was being patient and kind and that was far worse.

'Look, you get off,' I said apologetically. 'I can get them something, I was just going to do a snack anyway.'

'They're really hungry, Rach. They're going to need more than a snack. You should have said and we could have fed them.'

Oh *we* could, could we, I thought.

'I know you don't want to hear this,' he went on, 'but we can help. I know things are really tough for you at the moment and I wish they weren't. But you don't have to do everything on your own. Besides, it isn't fair on the kids not to call on us if you need help.'

Fair? I wanted to hiss in a demented whisper that had become familiar of late. *Fair*? It's not *fair* that they have a father living halfway across London with God knows who. It's not *fair* that I'm having to take some stupid job just to make ends meet . . .

Instead, I took a huge breath in and said, 'Look, this is a one-off. I'll have Marlene now anyway, once we get into a routine. I'm really sorry but you can get off now.' It was concealed rage and shame that made my voice crack and my chin wobble. 'It was my first day—'

Dom opted for world-weary. 'OK, OK. Look, I've got to go. Deborah's sitting in the car because Alec was worried you'd be upset if she came in.'

'Yes, well, he was right.'

And that was the most mortifying part of the whole day, to know that while I was clambering out of the cab, dropping my purse, running to the house like a demented donkey, Deborah had been sitting in her warm car, probably listening to the radio and watching me. And now Dom was going to get into that car and tell her what a useless, hopeless idiot I was who couldn't get home on time and didn't even have food in my fridge. Deborah would probably feel an intense jolt of love for him because he was so wise and so great with his kids.

I knew what the children needed. I knew that chaos and a hysterical mother were not healthy. I knew that and all I could do was try harder and harder and hope that in some distant, far-off time I would be OK and so would they.

Chapter Two

No, I Can't Stand the Heat, But I Am Prevented from Leaving the Kitchen

I was out cold at about 3 o'clock the following morning when Jessie crawled into my bed. I made no move to repel her because I didn't want to fully wake up, so instead I folded her warm little body into mine and nuzzled the back of her head. It was only then that I realized that she had a very soggy bottom. I leapt up and ejected her from the bed.

'Have you done a wee?' I said.

'No,' she whimpered, 'but my bed's all wet and I can't get back to sleep.'

'Come on, we'll get you into a clean nightie.' I tried to sound matter-of-fact but my voice was croaky and I was still sufficiently sleepy to have trouble focusing. I got up and switched the light on and it felt as if someone was hammering nails into my eyes.

'I haven't done a wee. I'm five! I don't do wees any more. Not in my bed!' In Jess's case it wasn't that anxiety had set in and she was now a bed-wetter. She had never stopped being a bed-wetter in the first place. She slept so deeply and happily, we'd never really ever got her out of nappies. This week had been a no-nappy trial but apparently not a very successful one.