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A Seaside Affair

Written by Fern Britton

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Fern Britton

A SEASIDE AFFAIR



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Part One

1

'You should've woken me, silly.' Ryan Hearst ambled into the sunny kitchen, scratching himself somewhere inside his rumpled boxer shorts.

His girlfriend, Jess Tate, glanced up from reading the paper at the kitchen table and allowed her eyebrows to wrinkle briefly in distaste.

Ryan bent down and gave her a kiss on her freckled nose. A small gesture he was prone to, which always managed to irritate her.

'What's for breakfast?' He stretched out his muscular arms, then straightened up and yawned. His armpits gave off an unpleasant odour.

Jess pushed up her reading specs, sweeping her loose brown curls off her face, and gave him what she hoped was a relaxed smile. 'If your fans could see you now . . .'

'Yeah, don't tell them. Anyway, baby, I'm all yours.' He placed his hands either side of her head and thrust his hips and crotch towards her, mimicking a male stripper. She pulled a face and turned away. 'You pong. Go and have a shower and I'll make something to eat.'

'You love me, baby, you know you do.' He scratched his chest and yawned again. 'I've missed you, Jess. I really have.'

She looked into his dark, almond-shaped eyes, even more sexy with the tanned creases of crow's feet at their edges.

'Yes, and I've missed you,' she murmured, closing her eyes and forming her full lips into a shape for kissing – but he was already on his way to the bathroom.

With a sigh she got up and made her way to the fridge. There were plenty of eggs, a slab of cheese and some mushrooms. Ryan hadn't touched a carbohydrate since the third person in their relationship, Cosmo Venini, had entered their lives.

'Will an omelette do you?' she called. But he couldn't hear her over the sound of the shower.

Two pairs of beady eyes popped up over the dog basket next to the dishwasher.

Jess bent down to tickle a brace of plump tummies. 'Daddy's home, girls.'

Elsie and Ethel were miniature dachshund sisters. Ryan had brought them home nine months ago, the day he had landed the title role in *Venini*, a TV series about the exploits of a globe-trotting classical conductor who moonlights as an MI5 agent. The show had been an overnight success and as a result the tabloids had given Ryan the dubious honour of dubbing him 'the thinking woman's brioche'.

Jess recalled that cold January afternoon when he'd poked his head round the living room door, the smell of frosty air clinging to him. She was huddled on the sofa in front of the TV, swaddled from head to toe in their duvet to combat the lack of heating, watching *Deal or No Deal* and wondering whether she should apply to be a contestant in the hope of bringing home some prize money. One look at Ryan's face told her his audition had been successful.

'Oh my God! You got the job?' The icy temperature forgotten, she'd thrown off the duvet and leapt up from the sofa.

'Yep. Call me Cosmo!' He pushed the door wide open and stood in front of her, smiling self-deprecatingly, still wearing the huge misshapen tweed overcoat that he'd bought in the charity shop the previous winter.

For a moment Jess could only jump up and down on the spot, beside herself with happiness, then she ran across the room, hugged him tightly and kissed him. 'I'm so happy for you! This is *it*, Ryan! This is your big break – oh my God, oh my God – we can pay the gas bill!'

'I think perhaps we can!' he laughed, pulling her closer to him. 'Oh . . .' He loosened his grip on her and created a little space between them, 'Almost forgot – I've bought you a present to celebrate.'

She smiled, wide-eyed with excitement, thinking of the silver earrings she'd pointed out to him the previous weekend. 'You mustn't, Ryan. We don't have any money yet.'

He opened his coat and rummaged in the deep poacher's pockets within.

'Ta-dah!' His hands emerged clutching two long bodies with impossibly short legs.

'What the hell . . . ?' These were not earrings. 'Who are they for?'

'You.'

'Why?'

'Present.'

'I don't need a present. My present is you getting this great job.' In spite of herself she reached out and tickled a pair of silken ears. 'When does shooting start?'

'In a couple of days.'

'Gosh, that's quick. Where?' Jess asked.

'Northumberland.'

'A bit of a schlep from Willesden.'

'Yeah . . . Then Milan, New York and Hong Kong.'

She stopped the tickling and looked at Ryan.

'For how long?'

'Six months.' His eyes dropped to the two warm, wriggling pups.

Jess pushed her hair behind her ears, suddenly feeling all of her pleasure at the news drain away. 'Six months? But you will be coming home, won't you? Backwards and forwards?'

Ryan shook his head, 'Probably not.'

'Oh,' said Jess, suddenly deflated.

He held the puppies up and spoke to them: 'So that's where you two come in. You're going to look after Mummy while Daddy's gone.'

Now she got it. The dogs were her consolation prize. A way of keeping her occupied while Ryan was away having the time of his life.

'So you get to swan off and I'm left holding the fort here, on my own? And it isn't only that, Ryan – pets are such a tie.' She was aware of the whining note that had crept into her voice. 'Suppose I get a job that means *I* have to go away? Who'll look after them then?'

He set the dogs down and she heard their little tappy claws on the tiles as he put his arms around her. She clung to him and inhaled the distinctive smell of his coat, burying herself in his neck.

'Don't be like that, Jess. I'm really trying here. Don't spoil it for me.'

*

Ryan ran the soap over his body and revelled in his newly honed physique. His personal trainer, insisted upon by the production company, had worked him hard but it was

definitely worth it. Biceps, triceps, abs, quads, arse. Not bad for a forty-two-year-old. There was no doubt about it: men were luckier than women. The older they got the better they looked. George Clooney, Richard Gere – even Sean Connery in his eighties. For women it was tougher, and everyone in the business knew it. Helen Mirren and Meryl Streep were the exceptions. Poor Jess; she would struggle to find work now, unless it was playing a worn-down mum, or a character role.

Ryan got out of the shower and wrapped a large bath sheet around his waist. He checked himself out in the mirror then pulled the towel a little lower to show off the muscled definition of his hips, stomach and groin. Donning his 'Cosmo' face he gave his reflection a seductive grin and growled, 'Down, boy! It's only me, silly.'

*

Ryan loved going out in public. He always wore his film-star-in-disguise sunglasses and a baseball cap. The thrill of being recognised hadn't left him yet. Today, walking the dogs on a busy Hampstead Heath, he felt as if he owned the world. *Venini* was top of the ratings, his face was on the cover of *Esquire* magazine, he had just been voted the Sexiest Man in Britain and it looked as if the Best Actor BAFTA was sure to have his name on it. Beside him, Jess was recounting what he thought was a rather tedious and seemingly interminable story about her agent and a part in a commercial she'd been put up for the previous week.

'. . . I wouldn't have cared if she'd told me they were looking for actresses ten years older than me. I would have dressed the part. But then to go and be told that I

looked *too* middle-aged, without even trying, it was just so humiliating . . . Ethel, come away from the ducks! I mean, do I really look middle-aged? My CV says thirty-eight! Where do these advertising execs, fresh out of junior school, think middle age begins? Twenty-five? . . . Elsie, come away from the Labrador, he's too big for you! Honestly, Ryan, maybe I should start thinking about a bit of Botox or getting my hair cut or dyed. What do you think?'

But before Ryan had a chance to respond they were interrupted by something that was becoming an ever-more regular occurrence.

'Cosmo! Cosmo Venini! It is you, isn't it?'

An over-made-up woman in her fifties was power-walking towards Ryan, who had stopped and was taking off his sunglasses, wrinkling his beautiful eyes into a smile. He held his hands out in a gesture of surrender.

She arrived, puffing slightly, and all but elbowed Jess out of the way in her eagerness to accost Ryan.

'I knew it was you! What's your real name again, I've forgotten?'

Only Jess knew the slight tightness at the corner of Ryan's lips signalled annoyance.

'George Clooney,' he replied, oozing charm. The woman laughed hysterically as if this was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. He held his hand out to her. 'It's Ryan, Ryan Hearst. And you are . . . ?'

'Gilly. Gilly Lomax. I live over there –' She pointed to a pretty pink house just outside the railings of the park. 'You're always welcome to pop in.'

'I'm afraid he's very busy.' Jess stepped in. 'I'm his partner.'

'The kettle's always on . . .' Gilly continued talking to

Ryan. 'I think you're marvellous, and all those gorgeous locations you film in. Venice is my favourite. I've been to the Teatro La Fenice, it's so romantic!'

'Ryan, we must go, the dogs are getting tired.' Jess tugged at his jacket sleeve. Not some old charity-shop jacket, but a Prada summer collection number that had cost thousands.

'Sorry, darling.' He smiled at Jess and draped his arm across her shoulders in a show of ownership.

'Oh.' The woman swept a look over Jess, from to top bottom, then returned to Ryan. 'Perhaps your friend wouldn't mind taking a photo of us both on my phone.' She pulled it from her pocket and pushed it into Jess's hand. 'Take a few. Close up.'

'Of course.' Jess watched grimly as the woman cosied up to a willing Ryan, and then proceeded to take a series of photos where she knew the woman either had her eyes shut or her mouth at an unflattering angle. Just for good measure, she made sure the last couple of snaps were out of focus.

'Oh, they're perfect!' she announced, quickly turning the phone off and handing it back before the ghastly Gilly could look at them. 'Lovely to meet you. Come on, Ryan.'

*

They arrived at the park café during a lull between waves of pushchairs, toddlers and exhausted-looking parents. Having bought their coffees they steered their way through the plastic tables until they found a relatively unsticky one in the sunshine. Jess tied Elsie and Ethel's leads to her chair and sat down gratefully.

Ryan took a sip of the scalding and bitter cappuccino

then reached over and squeezed Jess's hand. 'That poor woman. I can't believe you could be so mean. You'll have ruined her day.'

'Well, it made mine. Rude cow. I'm invisible to your fans. They push past me and tread on my toes to get to you. No wonder casting agents reject me – I'm invisible.'

Ryan had heard this lament often enough to know where it was going. He tried to head it off at the pass.

'Not to me you're not.'

'Really?'

'You're my girl.'

'Am I?'

'You sure are.' He took her other hand and gazed soulfully into her eyes, hoping it would have the desired effect.

'Even when you're away with all those gorgeous actresses?' Jess peered at him intently. 'You can tell me the truth, you know. Are you sure you're not tempted?'

'No,' he lied. 'You know me better than that,' he protested, as if wounded by the accusation.

'I thought I knew you,' she said, her voice wavering, 'but that was before . . .'

Oh, not this again, thought Ryan. He pulled one hand away from hers and swept it through the floppy long hair he'd been cultivating for Cosmo.

'Darling, that was five years ago. We are over that, aren't we? I can't believe I was such a fool and nearly lost you. Besides, can you imagine the bad press if I did that now and someone found out?'

This time it was Jess who pulled her hand away.

'That's nice. You're more concerned about the damage to your image than the hurt it would cause me.'

'That's not what I meant,' Ryan sighed, tired of Jess's insecurities. 'What you need is a job. A good job. One

that will give you back your confidence. You're a great actress – the best. You're beautiful and clever and—'

'Unemployable.'

Knowing he would have to choose his words carefully or else this would escalate into a full-blown row, Ryan tried to buy himself some thinking time by picking up his cup and taking two large mouthfuls of coffee. Clearly in no mood to let him off the hook, Jess fixed him with a flinty glare and allowed the uncomfortable silence to drag on, broken only by the tap-tap-tap of her foot against the chair leg.

A sudden inspiration came to Ryan's rescue: 'Look, I've got two weeks off before we start filming the second series of *Venini*. Suppose you and I take a break . . . ?'

'Where?'

'How about Thailand? Stay in one of those wonderful spas. Beauty treatments, exercise classes, sunshine . . . We could rent a little hut perched on stilts over the sea, just the two of us, no distractions.'

'I can't afford it.'

'My treat.'

'But I hate living off you.'

Ryan sighed in exasperation, 'Can't I treat you?'

'We'll have to put the girls in kennels, and that's expensive.'

'Oh for God's sake, Jess! The two of us are going on a bloody holiday and you'll bloody well like it – OK?'

2

A balmy breeze was drifting in off the sea, ruffling the hair of the two friends perched on Trevay's old harbour wall. Helen Merrifield and Penny Leighton sat in companionable silence for a moment, luxuriating in the late afternoon sunshine. Cornwall had endured a rotten summer, endless days of cold and wet. Holidaymakers had remained admirably stoic, but the sun waited until late September when the last people-carrier crammed with pale-skinned tourists in soggy anoraks had left the county before putting in an appearance.

Penny stretched her long, tanned legs out in front of her.

'I'd forgotten how good a real tan looks,' she said.

'You look marvellous, Mrs Canter, as always,' Helen replied admiringly.

'I keep telling you: less of the Canter, if you don't mind. No matter what the fuddy-duddies in the parish might think, I'm determined to stick with Miz Penny Leighton – running a successful production company in my own name is my one excuse for not getting sucked into the duties of a vicar's wife!'

Helen found it hard to imagine anyone brave enough to shoehorn Penny into the stereotypical vicar's wife mould. The two of them had met when they were in their early twenties, both working for the BBC; Helen had never progressed beyond secretarial level, having

fallen in love and fallen pregnant in short order, but Penny had worked her way up the ladder to director, making her name with a historical drama that became a hit both in the UK and America. Capitalising on her success, she'd set up Penny Leighton Productions and her drive and energy had ensured that even the recession could not prevent the company going from strength to strength. On the romantic front, however, she'd been a disaster, lurching from one unsuitable man to the next. Until she met Simon. The shy, gentle, decent vicar had seemed an unlikely soul mate for Penny, and initially Helen had harboured misgivings about the relationship, but she was delighted to have been proved wrong. The couple had just returned from a holiday to celebrate their first anniversary, both of them positively glowing with happiness.

'Simon was so sweet on the cruise – so romantic. This time yesterday we were just flying out of Venice,' sighed Penny.

'Lucky you. Piran and I could do with a holiday, but he's so busy. All the holidays with Gray seem to have blended into one. I remember usually being the one managing the children while he was off ogling all of the young bathing beauties!'

'Ah, Gray – how is that ex-husband of yours? Any news?'

'According to the kids, Dahlia Dahling is still giving him the runaround. A glamorous grand dame of stage and screen is an entirely different proposition to good old reliable me. I gather it's come as quite a shock to him, being in a relationship with a woman who's accustomed to having her own way.'

'Quite!' Penny smiled at the thought. 'And what have you been up to while I've been gone?'

'You're going to be very impressed with me. Remember what I said about trying my hand at a few articles for the local press? Well, after I'd submitted a bunch of homes and gardens pieces, the *Cornish Guardian* turned round and offered me a weekly column! They want me to write about what's on locally: arts and crafts, shopping, eating out . . . The pay's not great, but it's a start.'

'Oh, bravo you! That'll suit you down to the ground – you've always had a genius for finding the best little cafés and galleries and boutiques, and spotting what's going to be the next big thing.'

'Well, I'd like to think I haven't completely lost my London cool,' Helen returned with mock modesty.

'Better not let the locals hear you say that – they'll hang you out to dry!' They both laughed, but then Penny asked, 'Speaking of locals, how are things with Piran? Still the embodiment of brooding male?'

'Yep.'

'Things are OK, though?'

'Yeah. I know he loves me and I know that if we lived in each other's pockets, or under the same roof, we'd drive each other mad . . .' It struck Helen that she was trying to convince herself as much as her friend. She let out a small sigh and admitted, 'All the same, I wouldn't mind a bit of romance every now and again.'

'I thought he was your dream man – Marco Pierre White and Heathcliffe rolled into one. All broody moody and drop-dead gorgeous with it?'

'He is gorgeous, and my heart still flutters and all those things, but he's just so . . .'

Penny chimed in on the final word: '. . . Piran.' They both grinned.

'He wouldn't be seen dead on a Mediterranean cruise,' said Helen.

'Hardly surprising. One look at Piran and the crew would have him swinging from the yardarm!'

'True, true,' Helen laughed. 'He hasn't had a haircut all summer and he's starting to look even more like Bluebeard than Bluebeard himself!'

'I've got you a present, by the way.' Penny rummaged in her voluminous handbag. 'Here –' She passed over a duty-free carrier bag.

'Ooh, a treat!' Helen pulled out a bottle of her favourite perfume: Cristalle by Chanel. 'Oh, Pen, thank you.' She threw her arm round her friend's tanned shoulders and hugged her. 'I'm going over to Piran's tonight. I'll splash plenty of this on.'

'Who's cooking?'

'Piran. Dinner will be whatever he catches this afternoon.' Helen tucked the bottle of perfume safely into her straw shopping basket before asking, 'By the way, where's Simon?'

'Back at the vicarage. He's going through all his post and emails, and then he's got his sermon to write for Sunday. I thought it better to leave him to it.'

'Did he wear his dog collar on holiday?'

'It took some persuading, but no – thank God. It seems being a vicar is a bit like being a doctor: the minute people find out your profession, particularly in a confined space like a boat, they start coming to you with their problems. He'd have had everyone asking him to marry them, or cast out demons or whatever.'

Helen couldn't suppress a snigger at the thought of Simon casting out demons on a cruise liner. She shook her head in mock reproach. 'Penny, you're an awful vicar's wife.'

'Tell me about it! I keep reminding him that I married him for who he is, not because of his job. The Worst Vicar's Wife in Britain – that's me. Hey, that's a great idea for a programme, let me write it down.' Penny pulled out her iPhone and spent a few moments typing. When she'd finished, she couldn't resist checking her emails. Thanks to the huge success of *Mr Tibbs*, a series based on Mavis Carew's popular crime novels – filmed locally and starring Dahlia Dahling – she was being fêted by TV executives worldwide, eager to get their hands on a second series. She was also being inundated with screenplays and requests from writers and their agents, convinced that Penny Leighton Productions had the Midas touch.

As she checked her emails, the phone rang and she answered it.

'Hello, Simon. I'm in Trevay with Helen . . . No, I haven't seen the paper . . . The local one? . . . OK . . . I'll get it now . . . Why? . . . Oh! What do they expect you to do? . . . Me? . . . Let me look at it and then we can talk later . . . Love you too, bye.'

'What was that about?' asked Helen.

'Something about saving the Pavilions. Let's get a paper and I'll buy you a coffee . . . maybe even a glass of vino.'

*

Piran Ambrose was in his office at the Trevay Museum, hurrying to finish the day's tasks so that he could get out in his boat and catch the tide for a spot of mackerel fishing. He swore under his breath when the phone on his desk rang, his hand hovering over the receiver indecisively before picking up.

'Yes.'

'Piran? It's me, Simon.'

Piran breathed a sigh of relief. He and the vicar had been friends for many years, supporting each other through some difficult times.

'Simon! Welcome home, how was the holiday with your maid?'

'Simply wonderful. Marriage is to be recommended, Piran.'

Piran decided to ignore the obvious implications in this comment. 'How can I help you, Simon?'

'It's the Pavilions – there's a report in the paper that the council are about to sell the place to a coffee chain. Possibly Café Au Lait.'

'Good idea. The building is falling apart. It needs money spending on it, or knocking down.'

Simon was shocked. 'You can't mean that? You're our local historian – surely you of all people want to save the old place?'

Piran put one leg up on his desk and tipped his chair back, glancing at the clock on the wall. If he didn't get a move on he'd miss the tide. 'It's an eyesore, Simon. We're not talking about some Frank Matcham theatre of distinction here. The Pavilions is a fifties, flat-roof, jerry-built dinosaur that hasn't made any money in decades.'

'But the Sea Scouts and the WI and . . . the Trevay Players . . .'

Piran sniffed with disdain at the mention of the local amateur dramatic company.

'. . . and the Arts and Crafts Show, and . . . er . . .'

'Exactly. It's not exactly a top-drawer venue, is it?'

'Piran, please. I've already had emails from all sorts of

people asking me to be on the board of an action committee. I thought you might want to lend us your support, maybe dig out some facts of historical importance.'

Piran scratched his beard and pulled on the gold hoop in his ear. 'OK. Let me think about it.'

'I knew you'd help.'

'Hang on, I haven't said I'd help. I've said I'll think about it.'

The men rang off, each hoping the other would see sense. Swinging his leg off the desk and springing to his feet, Piran hurried out of his office before the phone had a chance to ring again.

Down in the lobby, Janet, the museum receptionist, was so engrossed in her newspaper that she didn't look up until he called, 'Bye, Janet. I'm finished for the day. See you tomorrow.'

'Piran, sorry I didn't hear you. I was reading this –' She held up the front page so he could read the headline:

THE END FOR THE PAVILIONS?

'I'd be ever so sad to see the old place go. My parents used to take me there every summer to see the big shows. Remember when Morecambe and Wise had a season here? Sold out every night. They were on the same bill as . . . oh what were they called . . . The Bachelors, that's it! Lovely boys, they were. Great music.'

'Not exactly The Beatles, were they?' sniffed Piran, unimpressed. 'Not my thing, Janet, see you tomorrow.'

Janet persisted, 'But it's heartbreaking. There'll be a lot of people with a lot of memories.'

'It's a white elephant and an architectural mess.'

Leaving Janet shaking her head in disbelief he stamped

out of the door with Jack, his devoted Jack Russell, scampering behind him.

*

Out on the balcony of the Sail Loft, the new wine bar overlooking the inner harbour, Penny was reading the paper too, with Helen squinting over her shoulder at the photos.

'It's rather a sweet building, isn't it?' she said.

'If you like the garish fifties Festival of Britain look,' snorted Penny.

'That was a great era,' protested Helen. 'The war was over. Rationing was coming to an end. Women could wear full skirts and feminine clothes again.'

'And Trevay built the Pavilions.' Penny began to read aloud. 'It says here, "*The opening summer season in 1954 ran for twelve weeks. Local man, Walter Irvine, was the first theatre manager. He called in favours from stars he'd worked with before the war, including top comedian Max Miller. Miller, best known for his risqué jokes, topped the bill and made the theatre one of the most successful entertainment venues of its day. It's hard to imagine that now. The building is succumbing to half a century of Atlantic gales battering it from all sides on its prominent position on the Trevay headland. It is thought that the new owners may be Café Au Lait, the coffee chain well known for buying up buildings of interest and investing multimillions in redevelopment. Could they be the Pavilions' saviour? Have your say: email your thoughts to* . . . blah blah blah."' Penny closed the paper and picked up her glass of wine. 'Another lost cause for Simon to get involved with.'

Helen chinked her glass with Penny's. 'Welcome home!'

They sat without speaking, enjoying their own thoughts and easy in each other's company. Helen's eyes wandered up to the headland and the familiar outline of the Pavilions. From this distance it looked rather grand. Onion domes either side of the grand entrance, silvered central cupola above the auditorium and the tall fly tower behind. The building was still painted in its sugared-almond colours of pale blue, pink and yellow, albeit now cracked and faded. It was in a good location, away from the ancient narrow streets of Trevay, with the spectacular backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean behind it. With all that open space it had the benefit of a large car park (now used for car boot sales) and no neighbours to complain about noisy late-night exoduses.

Helen sipped on her chilled glass of wine and shifted her focus back to the harbour. The tide was high but on its way out. She looked along the floating pontoons to the spot where Piran kept his boat tied up. It was still there. He'd better hurry if he was going to catch supper and get back before low tide. Then she saw him; his familiar gait, slightly bow-legged in his faded, shabby jeans, but very attractive. His arms hung loosely by his sides, the wind ruffling his long dark curls, lifting them to reveal the grey at his temples. His hands, nut brown, were pulled from the pockets of his salt-stained fisherman's smock in order to pick up little Jack and help him into the boat. Helen smiled as Jack went straight to the bow and put his paws up on the ledge, almost like a living figurehead.

'Look, there's Piran,' said Penny.

'Mmm, I saw him. I wonder what he'll say about this Pavilions business?'

'He'll be all for saving the place, I should think. As the local historian, he's bound to be part of this action

committee Simon was talking about. I've a sinking feeling that this campaign is going to be the bane of both our lives if we're not careful.'

*

'Hi, honey, I'm hoooome!' sang Penny as she shut the front door of the vicarage behind her.

'I'm in the kitchen, Pen.'

'I hope the kettle's on.' Penny walked into her kitchen and had the wind taken out of her sails when she found several familiar, if not entirely welcome, faces round her table.

Penny furrowed her brow slightly at the sight of Audrey Tipton's determined features peering at her sternly over a teacup.

'Audrey, Geoff, what an unexpected pleasure!' Penny oozed, with as much sincerity as she could muster, only to be greeted by a tight-lipped nod from Audrey.

'Pen, Queenie, Geoff, Audrey and I are debating what, if anything, we can do to save the Pavilions.'

Penny dropped a few teabags into the pot. 'I guessed as much.' She nodded her head slowly. A woman of indeterminable age (somewhere between fifty-five and seventy-five was Penny's best guess) and indomitable disposition, Audrey Tipton was a powerhouse in tweed. She was chairwoman of the Pendruggan village Women's Institute, the church flower committee and the Village in Bloom committee. Her husband, Geoff, was widely referred to behind his back as Mr Audrey Tipton, due to his total subservience to his wife.

Next to Geoff sat Queenie, owner of the only shop in the village and a gold-medal gossip who couldn't bear to

be left out of anything, which explained her presence at the table.

'Hello, Queenie!' Penny stooped to give the friendliest of the faces a kiss, and got a damp whiskery one in return.

''Ello, me duck. Coo, you look like you've caught the sun. 'Ow was yer second 'oneymoon?' She gave one of her crackly tobacco-induced laughs and nudged Simon's elbow. 'She looks like you gave 'er a proper good time, an' no mistake!'

Simon turned a deep shade of pink at this, but Penny merely grinned and set about filling the kettle. 'Don't you go embarrassing my husband, Queenie. You are a very naughty woman.'

Desperate to steer the conversation away from his personal life and back to the matter in hand, Simon cleared his throat. 'As I was saying, we're having a meeting about what can be done to save the Pavilions.'

Audrey Tipton fixed Penny with a challenging stare. 'You got here at just the right moment. We've decided that you are critical to our campaign.'

'Oh?' replied Penny coolly.

Audrey was not to be intimidated. 'Yes. As you move in the world of "celebrities"' – this was accompanied by an unpleasant little smirk, which her husband dutifully mirrored – 'you can organise a troupe of actors to come down and put on some sort of event to raise the profile of the campaign.'

'Ah, I see. Would you like me to phone Judi Dench and David Attenborough now, or shall I wait until tomorrow?' Penny gave a sweet smile and plonked a plate of HobNobs on the table.

'This is no laughing matter, Mrs Canter. May I remind

you that without the co-operation of this village, your *Mr Tibbs Mysteries* series would never have got off the ground.' She turned to her husband and commanded: 'Geoffrey, pour me a cup of tea.' Then her icy gaze returned to Penny. 'If you weren't the vicar's wife, the whole exercise would have been doomed to fail.'

Penny gritted her teeth and reminded herself that as the vicar's wife she had a duty to be civil to parishioners, no matter how trying they might be. 'Audrey, the series was conceived long before I became the vicar's wife. There's more to a successful series than—'

'That may well be the case,' Audrey cut her off huffily. 'But without the goodwill and co-operation of the villagers, you would find it very difficult indeed to do your shooting. I do have some influence, you know,' she added ominously.

Penny felt anger rise in her. She was vaguely conscious of Simon and Geoff holding their breath, and Queenie leaning forward as if she was hoping Penny would give in to temptation and crown Audrey with the teapot. Instead she set the teapot carefully on the table and enquired in a calm, cool voice, 'Are you blackmailing me, Mrs Tipton?'

'Not at all, not at all!' trilled Mrs Tipton, pushing back her chair and standing up. 'I'm just stating the facts, that's all. Come along, Geoffrey, it's time for your dinner.'

As Audrey swept out regally, her submissive husband trailing in her wake, Penny turned to Simon and threw her hands in the air, 'Oh the life of a vicar's wife!'

'For better or for worse, darling,' Simon reminded her.

'Don't push your luck, sunshine!' growled Penny.