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The Island Escape

Written by Kerry Fisher

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Kerry Fisher

The Island Escape

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Roberta

I was wearing the wrong bra for sitting in a police cell.

It was sod's law that I'd chosen today to try out my early Christmas present from Scott. But I hadn't dressed thinking the police would confiscate my blouse as 'evidence'. I'd dressed thinking that sexy underwear might put my husband into a more festive frame of mind.

When we arrived at the police station, the officer who'd arrested me, PC Julie Pikestaff, led me into the custody suite. I was more used to suites containing champagne and roses.

PC Pikestaff quickly explained why I'd been brought in to the custody officer behind the counter, sighing as though if it weren't for me, she'd be stretched out on a sun lounger in St Lucia. 'She'll have to take her shirt off. We need to bag it up.'

The custody officer ferreted around under the desk and handed Pikestaff a white boiler suit, saying, 'She can put this on once you've booked her in. Take her cuffs off.'

The creak in my shoulder blades as I brought my arms in front of me reminded me that I needed to go back to Pilates. The stunned disbelief that had enveloped me on the journey

to the police station was starting to evaporate. That boiler suit epitomised how low I'd sunk.

I tried to find the voice I used at parents' evenings when teachers were evading my questions, but I could only manage a croak of despair.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I can't wear that.'

People like me only came to police stations to report stolen iPads or missing Siamese cats. I was already trying to salvage any scrap of pride I had left. Rustling around in that wretched space suit might finish me off completely.

Pikestaff waved dismissively. 'Look, it's just something to cover you up while your blouse is examined for forensics. No big deal.'

Before she could say anything else, two policemen burst through the door, struggling to restrain a couple of girls in their mid-twenties. One had dyed black hair, thigh-length boots and the tiniest red miniskirt. The other was in a neon-pink body stocking. The Lycra had given up trying to contain her rolls of fat, her boobs spilling out like boxing gloves. The girls snarled and flailed as much as their handcuffs would allow, straining to get at each other in a torrent of abuse.

I glanced at Pikestaff. She looked bored rather than shocked. Another run-of-the-mill Thursday night.

Except for me.

These two women made Scott's outbursts look like tea and scones with my mother's patchwork club. The woman in Lycra spat at the policeman, saliva splattering onto his jacket. The other one was trying to stab anyone she could reach with her stiletto boots. No wonder Pikestaff was unperturbed that a middle-aged woman like me was having a wardrobe crisis.

She shuffled me over to the end of the counter, while I tried not to gawp round at the rumpus behind us. I prayed she'd keep that pair of devil women well away from me.

With my Home Counties accent and aversion to miniskirts, the only common denominator uniting us was an unfortunate choice of meeting venue. The F-word didn't trip off my tongue either, though Scott was no stranger to it.

When it was aimed at me, I felt the word land.

Pikestaff set out a sheet in front of her. I stood next to her, feeling as though I should make conversation, but what could I say? 'Do you get many middle-aged, middle-class women in here?' 'Is it always this chaotic on a Thursday night?'

I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. I took a tissue from the box on the counter, a nasty cheap affair that disintegrated, leaving me picking bits of paper off my face.

Pikestaff ignored my pathetic little sobs and started running through my details. She scribbled away, stabbing an impatient full stop onto the paper after every answer as though there was a particularly salacious murder to solve just as soon as she could wash her hands of me. 'Age?' Thirty-nine. 'Colour of eyes?' Brown. 'Distinguishing features?' None. 'Empty your pockets, please. Then I'll just need to search you.'

I looked at her to see if she was joking. There didn't seem to be anything funny about her. No wedding ring. I wondered if she had children. It was hard to imagine her soothing anyone to sleep. The disappointing contents of my pockets amounted to a Kleenex. She patted me down. Did she really think I had a knife tucked in my trousers? She rattled a plastic bag open. 'I need your belt and jewellery.'

I dropped in my belt and bangle. I hesitated over my necklace. My Australian opals. Scott had brought them for me all the way from his native Sydney, his first trip home after Alicia was born, thirteen years ago. I wrapped the necklace in a tissue and placed it in the corner.

I threw in the big diamond solitaire Scott had produced with a flourish on our fifth anniversary. 'Show that to your father,' he'd said. 'Told you we'd survive without his handouts.'

Every time I looked at it, it reminded me of my father's disapproval.

Pikestaff was still making notes. Judging by the concentration on her face, no 't' would escape uncrossed.

I slipped off my wedding band. The skin underneath was indented. Pale and shiny after fourteen years in the dark.

'You're allowed to keep your wedding ring,' she said, barely looking up.

I held it for a moment, absorbing its mixture of memories, then slowly slid it back onto my finger.

I handed her the bag and she scrawled away, listing the contents. She thrust the paper towards me. 'Sign here, please.' My hand was shaking so much I could barely form the letters of my name.

'You have the right to a solicitor. Would you like me to arrange one, or do you know someone?'

'Solicitor? No. Thank you.' I'd never even had a parking ticket before. Surely this wasn't going to escalate into a proper full-blown police investigation? I was convinced that, sooner or later, one of Pikestaff's minions would scuttle up and tell me I was free to go.

Pikestaff frowned as though I didn't have a clue. 'Do you want to tell someone you're here? You're allowed a phone call.'

Fright was taking the place of rebellion, but I declined. Scott knew I was here. That should be enough.

Surely that should be enough.

With a final flick of her papers, she picked up the boiler suit and said, 'Right. Let's take you down to a cell to get changed.'

My own incredulity, plus the shocking racket from the two women who were still taking it in turns to bellow obscenities, clouded my ability to think. Were they actually going to lock me up and make me strip?

‘Couldn’t I keep my blouse? Can’t I just sit in here until all this gets sorted out? I promise I won’t go anywhere.’

I think I was expecting her to make an exception because I wasn’t slurring my words, didn’t have any tattoos, and had had a shower in the last twenty-four hours.

She shook her head and opened a heavy grey door. ‘Your shirt’s considered evidence because it’s got blood on the cuff. There’s no point in arguing, we have to remove it. By force if necessary.’

I did that eyes-wide-open thing, trying to get my tears under control, but they were splashing down my cheeks then soaking into my blouse as I trailed along after her, just another Surrey miscreant to be dealt with before tea break.

Every cell door had a pair of shoes outside it. All too soon, it was my turn to feel the cold concrete beneath my feet. My patent boots looked out of place amongst the trainers and stilettos. Pikestaff stood back to let me enter, then followed me in. Pikestaff pushed her straggly blonde hair off her face. ‘Your shirt.’

I gave in. My pride was already at an all-time low. I wasn’t about to embark on an unseemly tussle with a policewoman, so I stripped off my blouse and thrust it at her without meeting her eye.

She put the boiler suit down on the mattress. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to wear this?’

‘Quite sure, thank you.’ I squared my shoulders, trying to ignore the fact that I was standing in front of someone I didn’t know in a bra with more lace than substance. Judging by the disdain on her face, Pikestaff was more of a walking boots and headscarf sort of woman.

‘Suit yourself.’

The silent stand-off fanned a tiny spark of rebellion inside me. She had no idea about my life, none at all. Let her pass

judgment about what sort of woman I was. Let the whole world.

Something shifted slightly in her face. I recognised the signs of a last-ditch effort. 'Come on. Put it on. You don't want to end up being interviewed in your bra. There's CCTV everywhere.'

I tried to imagine walking through the police station with a mere whisper of black lace to protect my modesty. I pictured a crowd of officers pointing at the CCTV monitor and making jokes. To my frustration, my nerve buckled. I shook out the silly boiler suit and stepped into it. As I zipped up the front, resignation overwhelmed me. I didn't look at Pikestaff in case I found smug satisfaction on her face.

As she left, the door reverberated shut like a scene from a budget police drama. I tried to distract myself by thinking about people facing a lifetime in jail for their beliefs and what it would be like to wake up in a tiny cell every day for years. Instead I became obsessed with whether I could get out of here before I needed to use the vile metal loo in the corner. I racked my brains to remember when I'd last had a drink. A glass of wine before dinner, about eight-thirty. That was three hours ago. I prayed I'd be able to hold on all night.

I perched on the mattress, trying not to touch it with my bare hands. I wondered if Alicia was asleep. I hated the thought of her going to school in the morning all strung-out and exhausted. The memory of her bewildered face as the police marched me away, that teenage bravado long gone, threatened my fragile composure. I hoped she'd heard me shout, 'Don't worry, darling, it's just a bit of a misunderstanding,' over my shoulder as I ducked into the squad car. I hoped – probably in vain – that Scott had been more interested in comforting her than making sure she understood that 'I'd driven him to it'.

He couldn't really have intended for me to be sitting here in this airless pit, though. Every time someone opened the door outside in the corridor, the smell of stale urine wafted around. I saw the occasional shadow move past the opaque window to the outside, convincing myself every time that it must be Scott coming to save me. A man was singing 'Why are we waiting?' in the cell opposite. Whoever was next to me was trying to batter the door down. I kept jumping at every crash.

After what seemed like an eternity, a fetid gust signalled the arrival of someone. The metal shutter was pulled back. Then a dark-haired policeman I hadn't seen before came in, carrying a paper cup. Another person to feel humiliated in front of. Sitting there in a garb more suitable for carrying out a crime scene investigation made normal interaction impossible. I didn't even dress up for fancy dress parties. The hairs on my arms lifted with static as I crossed them over my chest.

'Are you OK?' His voice was gentle. None of Pikestaff's hostility.

I shrugged, then nodded.

'Here.' He handed me the tea. 'Can I give you a word of advice? Don't turn down the duty solicitor.'

'Why? I shouldn't even be here.'

'I'd have one, just in case. It can be a bit weird on your own the first time. It is your first time, isn't it?'

'Yes.' I wanted to add, *Of course*.

'Get someone to help you who knows the ropes. I shouldn't tell you this, but they've taken a statement from your husband.' He bit his lip and glanced at the door. 'He's going to press charges.'

I gasped. I didn't think anything Scott did could shock me any more. I was wrong. Just a day ago I'd thought we were in a calm period. We'd discussed Scott's next trip to Australia

to check up on one of his building ventures, had a curry and watched the news. Then we'd gone upstairs and had sex, good sex.

And now he wanted to take me to court.

My God. I was actually going to *need* a solicitor. Lord. That meant rights and tapes and statements. I started shaking. Up until then, I hadn't really believed Scott would go through with this charade. I wanted to throw myself around the policeman's legs and beg him to get me out of here. I dug deep. And strangely enough, thought of my father and his favourite mantra. 'You can get anywhere with a bit of backbone, Roberta, it's what defines the Deauville family.' I don't think my father ever expected me to grow a backbone to use against *him*, but I was grateful for it now.

I swallowed and concentrated on breathing. 'Could you organise a solicitor for me, please?' My voice wobbled. 'And I think I'd better phone someone.'

He nodded. 'I'll let them know at the desk.' He put his hand on my shoulder. 'Stop shaking. You'll be OK. Who do you want to phone?'

I dithered. Who would have the *Get out of jail free* card? Scott? Beg him to come down and tell them it was all a stupid joke? That obviously wasn't part of his plan. My mother? No, she could transform serving up a Sunday roast into a national emergency – 'Oh my God, I've forgotten the horseradish. Just a minute, get started, it will all go cold, nothing worse than cold food, come on, get eating.' Me, my bra and the police cell would probably put her on Prozac for good. My father? I wasn't sure whether he'd rush to my rescue or say, 'Serve you right'.

The policeman looked down at me, waiting for an answer. I trusted him. Even his name – Joe Miller, according to his name badge – was solid. GI Joe. He looked like the sort of chap who knew how to fix a dripping tap, who could change

a tyre without swearing, who could accept there might be an opinion in the world that was different from his.

'I'd like to call my best friend, Octavia Shelton.'

He ushered me out of the cell to a side room and I told him the number to dial. I knew she'd be in bed. I imagined her spooned up to Jonathan, all fleecy nightshirt and woolly socks. I was always teasing her about her utilitarian choice of bedwear. Scott would never have put up with it. She seemed to take forever to answer. GI Joe announced himself as calling from Surrey police, quickly saying there was nothing to worry about – though that, of course, depended on your perspective. He handed the phone to me.

Relief coursed through me. Octavia would get it sorted.

She always did.

Octavia

I hated the bloody phone ringing in the middle of the night. Good news could always wait until morning. My first thought was Mum. I'd never liked her living alone in that big house after Dad died. I was awake on the first ring; it just took me a little longer to find the flaming handset under yesterday's jeans.

I was still trying to get my head around the Surrey police announcement when Roberta came on the line. She sounded strained, as though she was being forced to speak in front of a hostile audience. As soon as she said, 'Arrested', she started blubbing and couldn't get proper sentences out. I got 'Scott' and 'solicitor' and something about bringing a T-shirt. I ended up speaking slowly into the receiver, not sure whether she could even hear me.

I told her I'd be there as soon as I could, already grabbing a jumper from the end of the bed. Then the police officer came back on the phone. When I asked if I'd be able to see her, he told me that 'detainees weren't permitted visitors while in custody'. That did freak the shit out of me. Even though he said he didn't know how long it would take for Roberta to be 'processed', I decided to go down anyway.

I pulled at Jonathan's wrist, trying to read his watch in the dark. Nearly one o'clock. He shrugged in his sleep. I shook him. Then again, much harder. The whole family could be hacked to death with a machete and Jonathan would just tug the duvet a little higher. In desperation, I held his nose. I thought he might suffocate before he opened his eyes. Panic that Roberta might be in real trouble made me pinch hard.

When he did finally gasp into life, he squinted around as though he'd never woken up in our bedroom before. If the house had been on fire, I would have saved the three children, dog, hamster and been back for the giant African land snails before Jonathan had worked out where he was.

'Roberta's been arrested. I'm going to the police station,' I said, while he was still peering round, mole-like. It really hacked me off that my husband could breathe life into any ailing computer but had the slowest thought processes on the planet when it came to getting to grips with the bare bones of a midnight phone call.

'Arrested? Wha-? What's happened?' He started getting out of bed, almost knocking over his water glass. 'Is she hurt?'

I shook my head. 'I don't think so.'

'How long are you going to be?'

'I don't know, she couldn't really speak. Not sure what's happened, something to do with Scott.'

'God, bloody Roberta. She can never have a drama at a civilised hour, can she?'

'She can't help it. Let's hope she hasn't murdered Scott,' I said, tying my hair back with one of Polly's school hairbands.

'Can't see that the world would be a worse place if she had done away with that arrogant git.'

'Don't say that. Anyway, go back to sleep.' I wasn't up for a rant about how Scott thought he was the dog's bollocks with his great big banger of a house, even if it was the truth.

He snuggled down again but stuck out his hand to squeeze mine. I held it for a second. He was warm, as always. I flicked away the grain of resentment at having to turn out on a freezing December night to hoover up the shards of someone else's life. Just for once I would have liked Jonathan to come and help me de-ice the car, make sure the stupid Volvo started. I snatched up my handbag and hoped Roberta hadn't done something very silly.

Though God knows, Scott deserved it.