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Hippy Chick

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Extract

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HUGHIE BALLANTYNE took a quick sharp breath and raised his arms out wide. At the other end of the pool the woman was lying on her sunbed, one tanned leg bent at the knee, a lazy finger now running tantalizingly along the elastic edge of her bikini bottoms. Then, as if she'd heard him, she lifted her sunglasses high off her nose and smiled at him and he knew he'd got her. He looked up at the sky and rose to her challenge, clasping the edge of the pool with his toes, swaying slightly on the balls of his feet.

Skirting the olive trees on her way to the pool, Honey froze as she saw what he was about to do, and then she could only watch as her father launched himself into his swallow dive, his pigeon chest straining forwards so that for long seconds he hung suspended, motionless against the empty blue sky. It was only when he smacked into the water that she finally started to run, wine leaping free from the open bottle in her

hand, marking her passage in spreading splashes across the limestone tiles. '*Dad,*' she yelled, her voice cutting through the gentle chatter of the hotel guests. '*Dad!*' And she ran to the edge of the pool, kicking off her flip-flops, leaped into the water and swam towards where her father had disappeared, grabbed a breath and ducked under, reaching forwards through the sudden silence with her hands. Then, within a few seconds, she was wrapping her arms around his waist, kicking them both back to the surface, bursting through the water into the brilliant sunshine with his enormous weight in her arms.

'Sweetheart, what has he done?'

'Is he dead?'

'Oh, Jesus, look at the blood.'

'Stupid fucker. How much has he had to drink?'

She started to drag him towards the voices gathered at the edge of the pool, but suddenly his bulk burst back into life and he pushed himself to his feet, then stood waist deep, swaying in the water, staring at the line of people watching him.

But now that they could see he was all right, that this dive into the Can Falco swimming pool was just another Hughie-mishap to be logged alongside the many, many others, people were even starting to laugh.

'Nul point,' she heard someone chuckle.

'Oh, much too harsh! I thought he was rather good.'

'Come on, Hugh-boy, let's help you out.'

He staggered silently on towards the steps while Honey followed a few paces behind, watching as he tripped up the first one and then allowed himself to be hoisted from the water by his friends.

She climbed out after him, wringing out her skirt, wiping her face with her hand.

'Dad?'

He turned at her touch, water streaming off him, blood dripping freely from his nose.

'Deep end good, shallow end bad.' She smiled at him, wiping the water from his face and gently smoothing back his hair. He was shuddering with shock. 'OK?' She peered closer at the shape of his nose and the smile turned to a wince. 'Are you? Can you tell if you've broken it?' He stared back at her with wild unfocused eyes. 'You know what? We might have to take you to hospital.'

Someone came forwards and dropped a heavy towel around his shoulders. A clean white *bath* towel, she couldn't help noticing, hoping he wouldn't get blood all over it.

'Let's go inside.'

She reached forwards and gently took his hand, but at her touch he suddenly cried out.

'Rachel!'

She was aware how everyone around them fell silent at the same time.

'No, Honey.' She said it quietly, trying to coax him away. 'Please, come and get dry.'

'Rachel!' This time it came out softly, full of wonder. 'Rachel! You can't be here.'

'Oh, Dad, for God's sake shut up.'

'Has Tora seen you?' He turned guiltily. 'Where's Tora?'

'She's got a class. Come on, beer-for-brains, you've hit your head. You've got concussion. You need to lie down.'

He looked back at the pool, then down at the blood-spattered stone at his feet. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry about it. It was an accident. Claudio will clear it up. Come on, nobody minds.'

'You look beautiful.'

Behind her she heard someone laugh. Hughie heard it too and in answer he took a deep sobbing breath and fell dramatically to his knees, wrapping his arms around her legs.

'Let me go,' she whispered, patting his wet head.

'But I've been waiting to tell you.'

'Shut up, Dad. Stand up.'

Concern at what he might say next made it difficult to

speak gently. Who was she, this Rachel? Ex-girlfriend, or a current one? She'd never heard any mention of her, this Rachel . . .

Her father looked up at her pleadingly, still hanging on to her soaking wet skirt. 'Don't be angry. Oh yes, be angry. But hear me now, for God's sake, please, listen to me now. I'm saying sorry, Rachel, please.'

She glanced around at the captivated faces of his friends. They were used to devil-may-care Hughie, mad and bad and sometimes even dangerous to know, exuberant and noisy, as quick to cry as he was to laugh, but this was different and they knew it. And Honey did not want to share any more of it with them.

She bent her head to his ear and said in a whisper that only he could hear, 'Come inside with me now, without saying another word, and then I'll tell you why I'm here.'

'I'm taking him in.' She stood back up. 'Find him some dry clothes and a bandage . . . and a hospital.' She touched his shoulder. 'We'll go inside. You do know where we are, Can Falco? Home, yes?' Wide-eyed incomprehension stared back at her.

She picked a towel for herself off an empty sunbed and slung it over her shoulders, then walked him carefully away. He came with her docilely, allowing himself to be threaded between the wooden sunbeds

that had been turned haphazardly by guests following the afternoon sun, muttering to himself as they moved up the gentle flights of stone steps and pathways that took them away from the pool and through the terraces, winding them on between the almond and orange trees, past his own cottage and hers too, and finally on to the main house itself.

As they arrived she saw with relief that Claudio was there ahead of them, halfway up a ladder, pinning a huge branch of purple bougainvillea back to the sugar-white wall. Twenty years old and with them at the hotel on a placement from the University of Palma, he was trustworthy, completely unflappable and right now exactly the person she needed. He turned as she came nearer and she caught his eye and went straight on, not wanting her father to break the momentum of walking, and immediately she heard Claudio rattling down the ladder behind them. She propelled her father towards the last flight of steps and then took him through a stone archway and out of the heat of the sun into a cool and shady courtyard that led them through the front door of the hotel – an arched and ancient studded door, wide open now – and then on into the front hall. She was taking a chance bringing him in here – regular guests would most likely take the sight of a raving and

bloody-nosed Hughie in their stride, but new arrivals might not . . .

'You are taking your father to the hospital?' Claudio asked as he moved smoothly on to the reception desk at the far end.

She nodded. 'But I think I should find Tora first.' She said it quietly, not wanting to upset her father. 'Keep an eye on him while I look for her?'

'Your mother has a class in the Garden of Serenity.' He was rapidly opening and shutting drawers as he spoke, pulling out bottles, boxes of plasters and mosquito repellent, until he found what he wanted.

'Now then,' he said, coming around to Hughie with a large wad of cotton wool in his hand and placing it firmly on the bridge of Hughie's nose, 'Hold on to that.' He led Hughie over to a window seat and pushed him gently down, then squatted beside him, looking relaxed and in control in his immaculate white T-shirt and baggy brown shorts, leather flip-flops on his long brown feet. 'Are you OK? You'll feel better soon, I'm sure.'

Hughie shook his head but then his familiar wide-mouthed grin slowly broke across his face.

'Never felt better than Tora.'

Claudio nodded back benignly, misunderstanding or not quite hearing what Hughie had said.

'Sixty-nine and ninety-six, on the beach, in the sea, upside down, back to front. You name it, we did it. ' Hughie produced such a brilliantly shocked look on Claudio's face that Honey couldn't help herself letting out a great snort of laughter, but then her father turned at the sound and again started in surprise at the sight of her.

'Rachel? Christ alive, it can't be you!'

This time she decided to ignore him. She put out a hand and helped Claudio to his feet. 'Don't worry. He hit his head on the bottom of the pool. He's concussed.'

Claudio smiled with obvious relief. 'Of course.'

'So don't expect him to talk any sense.'

'The doctors will bring the old Mr Ballantyne back, I'm sure.'

'I don't think I'll ever be so pleased to see him.'

She went and crouched at his side and took his shaking hand in hers.

'Honeybee, that's the name you gave me, you and your equally mad wife. It's Honeybee, look at me!' She came closer, aware of the plea in her voice. 'Do you still not know me at all?'

He shook his head, retreating into his chair, then pulled his hands free and covered his face and she found she could no longer look at him either. She was

used to seeing him weepy and sentimental. She'd seen him distraught when he'd accidentally shot Bugger, his dog, and sufficiently off his face to walk naked through a packed restaurant in Ibiza town, but even then he'd somehow retained a degree of style and self-control, had never been as hopeless as he was now.

She pushed herself back to her feet. 'It's every time he looks at me . . . I don't know what to do with him.'

Claudio nodded, then touched her shoulder sympathetically. 'We will fetch him some dry clothes and I will just pick up my car keys . . .' – he returned swiftly to the desk, opened another drawer – 'And my wallet . . .' He closed the drawer again. 'And I will take him to the hospital and you will wait for your mother to finish her class. Yes? And then you can come to the hospital later and I will be here to check in our guests. And you needn't worry, not about anything at all. And tonight, you must take time with your daddy, yes? For once you take the evening off. You must stay with your daddy if you need to.'

'Thank you,' she agreed with relief, 'that would make all the difference in the world.' She touched her father's bent head. 'I'll follow as soon as I can. I promise. Will you go with Claudio now?'

Claudio put a hand under her father's elbow and

half coaxed, half pulled him to his feet and Hughie allowed himself to be turned and then led away, only stopping once in the doorway irritably to shake himself free of Claudio's arm.

As they made their way through the hotel towards the door that led out to the car park she found herself walking slowly along behind, keeping far enough back for them not to be aware she was there. And eventually the tall rangy figure of Claudio and her grey-haired, shuffling father reached the doors and then walked back into the hot dry sunshine of a late-August afternoon, Claudio keeping his hand beneath her father's elbow to support and gently guide him forwards. And then, finally, the two of them turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

Honey came back into the hall, held her head in frustration, thought about banging it against the wall, and instead went to straighten the cushions on the window seat where her father had been sitting. Then she moved on to her desk and her chair and sat down, as if by tapping at her computer she could somehow take control of everything that had happened. Perhaps she should go back to the pool and reassure everybody, tell them how Hughie had forgotten 'Rachel' as fast as he'd conjured her up? She could laugh it all off – of course her father's hallucination would be a beautiful

woman, what else? But she didn't want to go back down there, to face the laughter or, even worse, the silence of a gang closing ranks, a gang who probably knew exactly who Rachel was but weren't going to tell her.

With her chin in her hands she watched the fine cotton curtains billow in and out, in and out, at the four-hundred-year-old windows, making dancing shadows on the polished stone floor. Out there, in the Garden of Serenity, her mother's class would be nearing its end. In her sexy rasping voice that six years of relatively clean living hadn't softened at all, Tora would be preparing her little flock to face the world once more. *Breathe in and breathe out again. Feel the joy in your veins, hear the laughter in your ears.*

But clearly there were to be no joy and laughter winging their way towards Tora. Whoever Rachel was she clearly mattered to her father and somehow Honey knew that all the undoubtedly messy, sad, private details were going to come out now. Honey remembered how everybody had drawn back when her father had shouted Rachel's name, embarrassed by the desperation in his voice. *Had* they realized who he was talking about? Did they know all those messy details? She pictured them, her father's friends, his motley crew, crumpled and creased from decades of too much sun and wild living. With insouciant style the men would sit together on the

edge of the pool at tea-time, mingling with the other guests yet completely apart, feet dangling in the water, knobbly nut-brown knees all in a line as they ate their little lemon meringue pies and ordered endless rounds of tea that they'd never dream of paying for, talking their way through the sunny afternoons. This lot shared her parents' history. They'd been in Ibiza for over thirty years. They surely knew everything about Hughie. So what was it that they'd be saying about Rachel now? Were they talking about how much he loved her? The thought sent a shaft of sadness running through her because that was perhaps the worst of it – not that there was another woman, but that she had the power to make him cry.

And, at least as powerful as the sadness, there was irritation too. No, more than irritation, a real red-blooded anger that had burst into life as she'd watched his typically flashy, typically irresponsible dive. Of course he'd choose the shallow end. Of course she'd be on hand to jump in afterwards, to fish him out and patch him up. And now he'd presented her with 'Rachel' to contend with too, and that made her angrier still, not just with Hughie but also with her mother, Tora, for letting it happen, for being so away with the fairies that reality barely figured at all. Because if Tora

had not been quite so self-obsessed, Rachel – whoever she was – would surely not have got a look-in.

So, at that moment, Honey wanted to tell her mother everything that had happened. She wanted to see the news of Rachel slap the rapt smile off Tora's face. She wanted a reaction, wanted to see her mother hurting and remorseful. Even better, she wanted to see her jealous. She wanted her taking control for once, driving to that hospital in a cloud of dust and fury, ready to fight for Hughie and prove after all these years that she did still care for her family and husband after all.

And then, perhaps, Honey would be free. Not completely, not forever, but just enough to walk out of the hotel without always having to call in someone to cover for her. Free to jump into her car on the spur of the moment, perhaps drive to a beach, somewhere small and unknown where she would strip off and spend the whole day sunbathing and swimming and rediscovering Ibiza, the island of freedom and love that for her had become an island of bills and broken boilers, bounced cheques and demanding guests, power surges that blew the electrics, water shortages, stroppy chefs and nymphomaniac waitresses. An island where, centre stage, stood her feckless, unfaithful father and her beautiful butterfly of a mother, who had left their daughter to

shoulder Can Falco all on her own while they drifted through their days on a sweet-scented breeze of marijuana and patchouli oil, just as they always had, just as they always would do, with no sense of her increasing loneliness, and absolutely no understanding of how relentless running Can Falco could be.

Honey pictured her mother as she would be now, sitting in the Garden of Serenity – her perfect rectangular garden carpeted with the softest, greenest grass, protected by high hedges of jasmine and lavender, at the far end a massive stone fountain carved in the shape of a pair of cupped hands, gently spilling water. The hands were so huge it was possible to climb up and lie back inside them, and listen to music through speakers bored into their fingertips. Her mother could spend hours lying there contemplating the world. But now, nearing the end of her class, she would be sitting cross-legged on the grass, facing her pupils, palms turned upwards as she cast a last, loving look around their rapt faces.

And standing wearily up to go and find her, Honey knew that she had been conditioned by too many years of calming and reassuring to hurt her mother now. Her role was to act as a buffer between Tora and the nasty world outside, it wasn't to make things worse. She would go and find her and she would tell her about the

accident and perhaps even mention Rachel's name, just to prepare the way in case it came up later, but in a breezy, light-hearted kind of a way so that her mother would instantly forget it. And then she would drive to the hospital and see her father and find out exactly what he'd been up to.