

Rosie

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Tour de Malakoff

*Vivid magenta flowers flushed deep purple and fading
to lilac grey.*

‘It’s your grandmother.’
‘Yes!’

‘She’s been arrested.’

This is not a conversation that many people expect to have. We know that grannies are not what they were, but even allowing for the fact that many are proficient on the Internet, lunatic behind the wheel and capable of doing full justice to the drinks cabinet, the discovery that our own had been detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure would, if we are honest, come as a bit of a shock. A shock likely to provoke either disbelief or outrage.

As the policeman at the other end of the line delivered the grave news, in the particularly self-righteous manner that only someone wearing a uniform can, Nick Robertson found himself in the former camp. ‘She’s been what?’

'Arrested, sir. Well, detained, actually.'

'But what for?'

'Disturbing the peace.'

'Where?'

'In London, sir. She's at Bow Street police station. If you could come and collect her? We don't want to release her on her own and . . . well, I'd rather not say any more over the phone, if you don't mind. We'll fill you in when you get here.'

'But why me?'

'Yours was the name and number she gave us, sir.'

There were many things Nick wanted to say, the first being 'But I live on the Isle of Wight.' Instead he settled for 'Right. It will take me a couple of hours to get there.'

'No problem, sir. We'll keep her comfortable.'

'She's all right, isn't she? I mean, she's not hurt?'

'Oh, no, sir. She's absolutely fine. Keeping my officers well entertained.'

'She would. I'll be there as soon as I can.' And that was it. No more information.

What had she done? And why hadn't she called his mother? She was nearer. But the answer to that was obvious: his mother would have given her mother-in-law what-for. Or his father – her son? No again. Nick's dad would be at the races – or at some surreptitious meeting for his next money-making wheeze. Not much chance of finding him at the end of a telephone: his mobile number changed almost weekly.

Which was why, on a bright May morning, when birds were carolling from the tops of tall chestnut trees, and when he should have been enjoying the maudlin pleasure of staring out of the window and moping about the end of

a three-year relationship with a girl now sitting on a British Airways flight to New York, he found himself rattling into Waterloo Station on the eleven fifteen from Southampton. Briefly he pictured his grandmother sitting in a cell, huddled in a corner, cowed and tearful but, if he was honest with himself, he knew that was unlikely.

He wasn't wrong: he found her at the front desk of the police station, regaling a wide-eyed trio of uniformed officers with the reasons behind her forecast for a Chelsea victory over Manchester United the following day. She looked round as he came in and smiled at him. 'Hello, love! Come to take me home?'

He nodded.

The desk sergeant broke away from the group, looking sheepish, negotiated the narrow opening to one side of the counter with some difficulty and beckoned Nick towards the room opposite. 'Would you mind, sir? As the door closed behind them he heaved a sigh. 'Quite a character, your granny.'

'Yes.'

'I should think she takes a bit of looking after.' The lumbering policeman, whose unnaturally long arms gave him an ape-like appearance, was doing his best not to smirk.

'Well, most of the time she's fine.'

'Lives on her own, I gather.'

'Yes. She's not helpless,' Nick said defensively.

'Oh, I can see that. But it might be worth keeping an eye on her.'

'I do, when I can, but I live—'

'I know, sir. It must be difficult—'

Nick interrupted. 'What's she done? Nothing serious, surely?'

'Well, not serious. Just silly. We're letting her off with a caution. There'll be no charges. I think the embassy was surprised more than anything. It's normally students who chain themselves to their railings. And dissidents. Not that we get many of them nowadays.' Then: 'We don't get many grannies either.'

'No. I suppose not,' Nick said, thoughtfully. Disbelief had been augmented by irritation. There were so many things he could have asked, but in the event he only managed, 'I mean . . . why did she do it?'

'Some sort of protest. Mind you, her equipment wasn't up to much. One of those bicycle safety chains. The sort with a combination lock. We just snipped it off.'

'I see.' He thought about it. It would have been his grandfather's. She wouldn't have sent it to a jumble sale yet or a charity shop.

'The worry is that I think she rather enjoyed the attention. We'd prefer it if she didn't do it again. We've enough on without coping with protesting pensioners.'

'I'm sorry. I'll try to make sure she stays out of trouble.'

'If you would.'

'Can I take her home then?'

'Yes, of course.' He hesitated. 'Can I just ask you, sir . . .?'

'Yes?'

'What your granny was saying. I suppose it's just her funny way, isn't it? I mean . . .' He brought one of the long arms up to tug at his left ear, then looked at Nick sideways. 'She's not really related to the Russian royal family is she?'

'What?' It was one of those defining moments: the sort that make all sounds subside, all movement grind to a halt, and the world seems to take a deep breath. The moment when your granny, whom you've always perceived as

adorable and ever-so-slightly . . . *individual*, might have turned a corner that you'd hoped would never appear on the horizon. The policeman must have misheard her. Sounds emerged once more from the corridor. There was movement, too.

Nick shook his head. 'No. I think you misunderstood. Her family *was* Russian. Gran left when there was all that bother with the royal family when she was a baby. She's lived in Britain ever since. Always felt bitter about the revolution, though. I think her mum was caught up in it.'

The policeman stared at Nick for a moment. 'Well, the embassy were very good about it. They had a particularly reasonable attaché on duty today. I suggested to him that your granny was just a bit — well, doo-lally.'

Nick's eyes widened. 'Not within her earshot, I hope.'

'Er, no. I thought it best not to.'

'Wise man.' He smiled ruefully.

'So, if you could just make sure she gets home safely. And maybe keep her away from bicycle chains for a while.' He pointed to the old safety cable lying in a corner, and as the limb revealed its full extent it occurred to Nick that this really was the long arm of the law.

'Yes. Yes, of course. It won't happen again,' he said, and added, under his breath, 'I hope.'

She was standing by the front door of the police station, smiling, silver-grey hair in its familiar soft curls, sensible shoes polished and tweed skirt pressed. Thanks to the morning's excitement, her pale blue eyes sparkled, and she pushed her hands deep into the pockets of the red, woolly jacket.

Nick's greeting came as a bit of a let down.

'Come on, Granny.' Nick's tone was impatient.

She frowned. 'There's no need for that.'

'All right, then — Rosie.'

'Better.'

He sighed. 'Tea?'

'Ooh! Yes, please. Best thing anybody's said all day.'

'I thought police stations were famous for their tea.'

'Yes. But they don't do Earl Grey. Terrible stuff, theirs. Colour of oxtail soup.'

'There's a café across the road. Come on, they'll probably do a range of designer teas.'

She stood quite still and shook her head.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm not having tea there, designer range or no.'

'Where, then?'

'The Ritz.'

'What?'

'As a celebration.'

'A celebration of what?'

'Mission accomplished.'

'What sort of mission? You've just been arrested.'

'I achieved what I set out to do.'

'Which was?'

She pulled up the fake-fur collar of her coat and held it with a leather-gloved hand. 'To draw attention to my life in exile.'

'Oh, Rosie!'

She fixed him with flashing pale blue eyes. 'I mean it.' The stern expression subsided and she grinned. 'Oh, go on, take me for tea at the Ritz. You look as though you could do with a bit of fun.'

He shook his head. 'What are you like?'

She put her head on one side. 'A duchess!'

He felt the same stab of unease that had shot through him when the policeman had mentioned the Russian royal family. He thought it best to shrug it off. Right now an attention-seeking grandmother was not an enticing prospect. 'Just don't push it. We'll go to Brown's, not the Ritz.'

'Cheapskate.'