

The Artist's Girl



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To Carol – beautiful, patient and loving

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Prologue

*This story is told from the viewpoints
of its two main characters using the
following typefaces –*

Carrie Darling
John Drakes

Most people who come to know me say I am unlike other Americans they've encountered, especially those of teen age. I guess this comes from my nomadic childhood where I followed my parents as they pursued diplomatic careers in Rome, Paris and London. Perhaps it gave me the chance to absorb favourable characteristics from those nationalities and to a degree, replaced the loud, garish and over-confident traits I was uncomfortable with in many of my American school friends. Living in London also meant that I'd developed something of a mid-Atlantic accent, and I'd been told by friends that I was increasingly guilty of using British expressions in my everyday speech. I was slightly surprised and more than a little amused to hear such comments.

It wouldn't be common for an 18-year-old girl to welcome a car touring holiday with her parents, especially when it meant leaving friends in London so soon before the family was to return full-time to its American roots. However, as another example of my unusual inclinations, I have never refused the chance to travel, to see new countryside, fresh views, meet new people, gain a broader experience of the world - even if this particular trip was so out of kilter with accepted teenage thinking. I was actually entirely content to accompany my mother and father on their final British tour around England's beautiful West Country.

Of course, had I known what adventures and challenges the trip would trigger then perhaps I should have stayed in London. But, then again, I've learned more in these last few months of my young life than I could have ever imagined.

I am a reluctant storyteller. I suppose I am reticent by nature, believing in being outgoing only when I am stimulated or required to be so. For other times I am a quiet and somewhat private, man.

I have probably led an unspectacular life. It has been happy, modestly rewarding, but without extremes or controversies. My first 55 years chiefly featured a calm, controlled world that was only ended by a single chance meeting.

How you will view me after hearing my story I can never know. I believe myself to have been an honourable man who was subsequently drawn into a trap, however

unintentionally it may have been laid. Despite my perceived worldliness, I was not prepared for it and after the first pages of this story I was never the same man again.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter One

I had become an adopted Cornishman when I sold my business in London for a sum that enabled early retirement and gave me the chance to return to my favourite hobby of painting, and to begin a new life in this part of England that I'd long admired.

Years before, I'd surprised myself and friends by joining my father's estate agency after graduating from university; most, including me, thought my happy pursuit of anything artistic and hatred of that which suggested order and formality foretold a life of some chaotic Bohemian persuasion. It was, after all, not so far from the Nineteen-Sixties that this young man in his early twenties might be understood if he by-passed business or academia to follow his artistic bent instead; it was entirely in keeping with the times. I'd enjoyed the classic university arts environment with its cavalier freedom and dismissive attitude towards exactly the world I then chose to enter.

I suppose I felt my father needed me. With my mother having died before I got to higher education and her husband of many years being so distraught at her loss, I would have had to disregard much of the compassion that came naturally to me if I'd chosen to stay away from the family home and set out for the vicarious world of art that many felt was pre-ordained.

As it turned out, I perplexed myself and my father by the relish with which I took to business life. Within months I was effectively running the little company in Maida Vale, West London, and urging expansion on my cautious parent. It may, I imagine, have been this energy that caused him to slow, then vegetate, then quietly die before I'd been three years in the business. Such was my drive and enthusiasm that this setback proved temporary and I was soon opening branches in Hampstead and Stanmore before, within five years, setting up against the big boys in London's Mayfair. For 24 years the business grew and the gregarious student became a hard-working company owner whose life was too full for much leisure or high life save for some parachuting that I'd begun in my late teens, regular theatre and art exhibition visits and the occasional but consistent return to the easel for some therapeutic painting. Apart from one significant instance and some lesser dalliances, there seemed no time for women either, and I remained a bachelor.

The arrival of the finance companies and their fat cheque-books, eager to buy into the booming estate agency trade brought a sudden change of attitude. Such was the largesse these 'suits' were prepared to share around that I was presented with the opportunity to look after my loyal staff and make a bolt for freedom on my terms, and the prospect reawakened within me the long lost desire for a life of leisure and painting. I had, as they say, kept my hand in, but I knew I could now paint well, without pressure, and tackle only the work I wanted to do.

Having spent the occasional holiday break in North Cornwall it was to this charming part of Britain I ran. I knew Britain well and had travelled extensively in Europe and the U.S. but it had to be the Atlantic Coast for me and, through my contacts in the business I was leaving, I managed to buy a modest, but superbly-sited, bungalow on low cliffs above the sea.

I was welcomed to the area by the 'locals' and quickly became part of this quieter, reserved but friendlier scene. My painting talents were enlivened by my new life and I quickly became well-known for the coastal and countryside scenes I gave to local charities for resale. Soon I found myself being commissioned by local businesses and wealthy property owners and I began to return to portraiture, which had been my first love, and my ability to undertake quick sketches of the human face also became noticed. It was this latter skill that caused me to be asked to take a stall at the local Summer Fayre and it was during my third attendance at this event that my world was changed for ever.

I was suffering mixed emotions about the impending return of the family to the U.S. My father's tour of duty at the London Embassy was nearing its end and, with his typically careful management of his career, he had secured a home posting to run through to his retirement. As had been the case throughout my life and, no doubt, before my arrival, it appeared to be his ambitions in the world of diplomacy that had dictated where the family was based. I had seldom spent more than a few years in any country, family house or school; it was a point that had not truly bothered me until the last year or so when college relationships had come to mean something and I had reached an age where I was able to explore my own environment independently. I liked London, and I quite liked Londoners, though it was more often those older than my own group that attracted me.

The deed was done, however, and I was to return to the family home on the East Coast of America, and to university. That this was presented to me as a *fait accompli* had irked me to the degree that I was in a quandary when the Cornish trip was announced. To be fair, I think my parents would have understood if I had chosen to stay in London as I am sure they had long since sensed my disappointment at leaving the UK. When I decided to join the trip they appeared to be very pleased and we had a good time touring the quaint villages and spectacular coastline of South Devon and Cornwall, but I cannot tell you to this day why I chose to join the 'Darling Tour' - I guess it was part loyalty, part new experiences and part not wanting to ward off those lads at school eager to leave their mark on Carrie Darling without the possible consequences.

We were well into the second week of the tour and had reached the north-west Cornish hills and beaches when a fine English summer day had drawn us onto the low grassy hill beside a charming, picturesque town. The area was awash with small stalls of local produce and amusements as part of the town's carnival week and my father could not pass such a colourful event without stopping. As he and my mother hovered around tables of local crafts and the like, I made my own way among the crowds. I seemed to attract many admiring glances from young males, with various sleazy remarks coming from those I took to be holidaymakers and therefore free to make comments they might have shied away from if made on their home patch. The day was warm and the sky blue so I was wearing a little tank-top and shorts and must admit that I was well aware of the impact I could have when dressed in such a manner.

I increasingly by-passed the shows of local produce and strange little competitions. I even sacrificed the chance to win an oversized cuddly toy, knowing that it would follow many of my other possessions to nearby charity shops before we flew back home. I was studying some local wood carving when I noticed a silver-haired man at the next stall. He was sat in front of an easel sketching an old woman positioned in front of him. I was immediately taken both by the pace at which the artist was working but also by the drab appearance of his subject and the man standing beside her, who I took to be her husband.

I moved closer. Not only was the woman utterly miserable but also quite ugly too; her face had not worn well and was beset by warts and sagging wrinkles. I positioned myself so that I could see the artist working. As his hand raced across the white cartridge he compiled an image that was incredibly lifelike but, and this intrigued me, not entirely accurate. It was not that this man was making mistakes - not at all, he was actually deliberately omitting, or reducing the impact of, the worst features of the face. The outcome, finished in just a few frenetic yet controlled minutes, was a superb likeness that certainly flattered the woman, but her reaction was outrageous.

As the man, who seemed charming and gracious from where I stood, turned the image towards his subject he got no thanks, no smile, not even an acknowledgement of his skill but a morose grunted complaint towards her husband. 'E's given me a damn great wart.' The remark, made quietly but severely towards the husband who bore all the signs of a long-suffering spouse who had seen such behaviour before, but did not alter the demeanour of the artist. He smiled tolerantly and, unnoticed by all but me I suspect, surreptitiously grazed a thumb across the offending portion of the sketch to lessen its impact.

'But you've got a wart, several of them, you know you have.' The husband's words were whispered and tired....I guessed he had been this way before. With more grunting and without even shaking the artist's hand, the woman got up and walked away, leaving her husband to make the due payment. As his customers left, the artist stood tall, stretched his long back and then bent back down to collect his pencils together.

The fayre had been busy this year. Early morning clouds had given way to blue sky and a light breeze, the organisers had got together a better collection of attractions than in previous years and business had been good. I had completed over twenty sketched portraits and had just finished a testing one of the wife of a down-trodden northern fellow whom I reckoned was accompanying her on a coach tour. She was a sour-faced soul who had the temerity to grumble when I included a wart on her cheek that I reproduced in a kinder light than the real one that she must have grown used to looking past. I'd not drawn many of the other warts and similar blemishes and had used my modest talents to find the strength and character in a face that held no natural beauty but had probably been harshly dealt with by what had surely been a very tough life.

Fortunately her husband, a long-suffering saint if ever I saw one, quietly assured her that the sketch was excellent and well worth the seven pounds he duly paid me. I got the clear impression, however, that the portrait had not given him as long a peace as he'd hoped for and that the rest of his day was going to be as much a trial as the previous thirty or forty years. What was certain was that Peggy Worrell on the adjacent cake stall would have nothing worthy of the sad old soul who was now making steady progress towards her display, her husband in valiant but doleful pursuit.

I was not someone to tout for business on these occasions. Provided the crowds were big enough there was usually an audience watching me and the next customer usually came from this source. On this occasion there was a short respite and the next approach was not one I expected. For a start the accent was clearly American.

'Jeez, what a sour old bat!' The speaker was a teenage girl with long blonde hair. It was difficult to see her features as they were in shadow from the sun. 'I mean, how could she be so ungrateful! That was a marvellous portrait of one so ugly.'

I was intrigued. This was an interjection of someone confident enough to voice their opinion and yet was not brash. The voice was sophisticated and educated despite making its point so strongly. I moved my position so I could see more of the girl.

'I think it is unfair, unjust if you like, to call anyone ugly,' I responded calmly.

'Are you saying she was beautiful?'

'No, but it was a face full of character. I'm sure the woman has led a very hard life, probably doing tough work for little reward and unable to benefit from the education and luxuries enjoyed by others.' I regretted these words even as I spoke them but the girl responded before I could correct myself.

'Wow, that was some put down. Don't I feel stupid now? You've put me firmly in my place, haven't you!' I made to apologise but she beat me to it. 'I'm sorry. I

spoke out of turn. It's not for me to give my opinion without it being asked for. But you are some kind of saint to put up with complaints like that.'

I found myself instantly charmed by the girl. She was a very attractive child but her natural beauty was slower to dawn on me than her happy manner and delightful voice.

'Oh, I'm no saint,' I responded, 'and you are perfectly entitled to your opinion. It is more of a challenge to sketch a face that has, shall we say, some blemishes than it is to recreate perfect skin and ideal features. No artist, not even an amateur like me, wants to paint by numbers and a 'lived-in' face is more of a challenge.'

I'd been speaking from the seated position on my small chair but now stood. My height rather dwarfed the girl but it gave me a better view of her spectacularly animated face and sparkling eyes. She was actually a stunning child, of that there was no doubt.

I still cannot say what caused me to talk to the artist. Certainly I felt no intimidation because he gave every impression of being very approachable. When I challenged him about the wretchedness of the old woman he quickly but quietly admonished me. I felt very small and very wrong to have made any comment at all but immediately felt at ease when his attitude was so kind and understanding. He was a handsome man, perhaps in his mid-fifties but improved by a fine tan against his silver hair. His elegant casual clothes were not what one might have expected of an artist, but entirely right for a man of such grace and attractiveness - talents I had also quickly noted. He was tall, and when he stood to continue our conversation, his warm blue eyes smiled down at me.

'You're wrong to describe yourself as an amateur,' I told him. 'If you can make an ug...an older woman like that look as good as you did there, then you are surely a master of your art, whatever you say.' I felt rather foolish in speaking this way but I have always loved talking with adults and this man seemed so ready to listen. 'You're right, of course. One shouldn't imagine that artists only want to draw beauty.'

He replied that he saw a whole life in a face and was as fascinated by trying to read character and experience from looking at a person as he was in planning to replicate their image on paper. 'After all,' he said, 'if you can assess a person from their face then you need not wait for their own opinion of themselves.'

'That's rather philosophical for me,' I said. 'I think I'd rather describe myself to people than have them interpret my character from looking at me.'

This man had the loveliest smile. He grinned as he reminded me that we all assessed those we met by looking at them. 'We do it sub-consciously,' he said, 'though artists may become more in tune with its value because of the work they do.'

‘Well, by looking at you,’ I replied, ‘I can see you are a fine artist and a very polite man. I mustn’t hold you up. I’m Caroline Darling...Carrie. I’m pleased to have met you.... oh!.... and I’ve heard all the jokes about my surname.’

He shook my hand. It was a firm grip but not hard. His skin was warm and his hands surprisingly big for an artist. ‘I’m sure you have, I’m sure you have,’ he said, with that wonderful smile again. ‘I’m John Drakes and I thank you for stopping by and having the good sense to offer your opinion. Don’t ever lose that confidence, Carrie, or those lovely smiling eyes.’

I shivered. It was not the detestation that sometimes stirred that emotion when some acne-ridden lout attempted a chat-up line in a London club, but the impact of such a line being used, so naturally, so meaningfully, without any condescension or flattery. There was nothing left but for me to give him my best smile and walk away up the hill..... but I didn’t want to leave. I would have happily stayed talking to the man for the rest of the day. It was nice to be told I had smiling eyes; when would an unduly confident, immature college boy use such a description so naturally?

The girl eventually introduced herself as Carrie Darling, and purposely made it clear she had little tolerance with those who teased her about her surname. I found her so very different from the many teenagers I had come to know through my occasional work at a nearby art college. She was well-spoken and did not have the brash ‘whine’ to her voice that afflicted so many American women, including good friends of mine.

It was not just that she appeared more mature; she was a woman, yet surely no more than eighteen. Not to put too fine a point on it, I found her to have an aura and, however grand or sentimental that it might sound, the day certainly lost something of its appeal when she moved away off up the hill with a happy smile and brief wave. It was good that the next customer was ready for me because I felt very strange about this child, and I am not comfortable when my emotions are not in check.

The next clients were a husband and wife with a young baby. The man asked if I would draw the child that, since it was well protected from the sea breeze, consisted of a featureless round face with eyes firmly shut. I persuaded the babe’s equally uninspiring mother to be included at no extra cost – the child carried no artistic challenge and could have been completed in moments –and the work began, so enabling me to absorb my thoughts in a fresh portrait rather than dwell on the young American.

A short while later, as the afternoon drew towards its close and I began to think of packing my kit away, I was embarrassed to find thoughts of Carrie Darling could not be easily discarded. I found myself wishing I had not allowed her to leave so quickly and felt even more foolish when I found myself looking across the slopes

of the down in case I could catch sight of her and then feeling my old heart miss several beats when I heard her voice call my name 'Mr... Drakes!' from another direction.

From between a throng of visitors further down the hill the girl emerged walking quickly and then breaking into a run to reach my position. Even as she approached I recognised my feelings of elation were already mixed with warnings about being over-zealous in my welcome.

I had made my way around the quaint little collection of stalls and sideshows, then stood on the sea-side of the hill to watch the Atlantic Ocean for a while, realising I would soon be high above it as I jetted home. I met up with my parents a couple of times but soon left them to make their own way around, saying that I would see them at our hotel for dinner. I was faintly annoyed that I could not find a suitable means of occupying my mind in a way that would expunge thoughts of John Drakes and my chance meeting with him. It was both disconcerting and yet, at the same time, warming.

As the afternoon drew towards its close I became more and more certain that I must have the man sketch my portrait before I left the fayre but with each positive thought about this came an inner warning about the motives that were driving me. I was nervous; I couldn't explain why the emotion was so strong. I had passed pavement artists in London and other cities a hundred times, so why was I so drawn to have my image sketched on this day; moreover, by a middle-aged man, in a quaint little Cornish town. Eventually, I gave way to the voice inside me and made my way back to Mr... Drakes' pitch and was foolishly thrilled when I first caught sight of him again. I was disconcerted when I found myself calling out his name when I was still yards from him.

'Thank goodness you are still here,' I remember myself saying as he stood to welcome me. His reaction was restrained, polite and friendly but more formal than I had hoped for - or perhaps wanted. I immediately re-gathered my composure and tried to match his demeanour.

'Ah, my friend from the East Coast of America,' he said. 'How good to see you again. I must remember not to make any jokes about the surname.'

'I didn't tell you where I was from.'

He beckoned me to sit on the little chair opposite the one he'd been using. He apologised, saying he was just putting on his 'Professor Higgins' act, but when I encouraged him to continue, he loosened up a little and told me he reckoned he was quite good at locating accents and thought he'd got a good fix on mine. I remember wondering why I found this fascinating rather than tiresome.

'Okay,' I recall saying, 'let's see how good you are.' If truth be told I only did this to prolong the discussion but, yet again, this man was to amaze me.

‘Well, it’s certainly East Coast but identification is made more difficult by the fact that it is obvious you have been educated outside the U.S. It’s not New York or Boston nor so very far south, so I would place it in the Washington conurbation, perhaps a little to the south but not far into Virginia.’

I must have shrieked with amazement because I recall looking around me to see the reaction of passers-by. He asked me if he was close.

‘Close! Close! Jeez, that’s uncanny....I mean...how...how the hell did you know?’

‘So I *am* close.’

‘I was born in Washington and brought up, well, we still live just outside DC, to the east.’

‘Near Annapolis, on Chesapeake Bay?’

‘Hey, c’mon, this is not funny. Yes, we live just five miles from Annapolis. But how..?’

Mr... Drakes told me that he felt he could identify the accent, could be sure it wasn’t New York but thereafter was guessing that if I was in this country it was probably with parents and that they may have connections with the administration or armed forces, hence Washington. He added that he’d once had friends in Washington and had visited Annapolis some twenty years before.

‘And what else do you know about me, or shouldn’t I ask?’

If this question had a taste of flirtation in it, the reply I got shook me to the quick. The man looked straight at me, eyes piercing but his mouth in a warm smile, and said, ‘I know you are an intelligent, strong-willed, confident and absolutely charming young lady.’

I melted....almost drooled. Was it any wonder I had always been drawn to people from older age groups and found most of the boys of my own age group to be boring and childish? This was an adult exchange, and I relished it. But should I have been offended by the man’s comments? At the time my reaction was just the opposite - the words did not come from some grubby reprobate or lecher. I felt no threat from this man, yet there was a signal from inside my head to react calmly. Even so, I found myself saying, ‘Well, you are a perfect gentleman, especially since you have no way of knowing that I have those qualities.’

‘A gentleman? Really? Old gentleman, perhaps. Some people would call me that, but few would consider me perfect, least of all myself. Anyway, it is good to see you again. I guess you are touring the area.’

I told him I was with my parents on a final tour around this part of England. He queried the word 'final' and I had to lower my own spirits by mentioning our imminent return to the U.S. He seemed a little taken aback by this but wished me well. Then I realised I had almost forgotten the reason for my returning to his pitch and was concerned that, when I asked him if he was closing up, he might say he had indeed completed his work for the day.

'Why do you ask?'

I became very nervous. 'Because I was.....I was hoping....well, hoping you'd have time to do my portrait.' I could barely get the words out. I was shaking with nerves, which was most unlike me.

But I noticed he too seemed uncertain, reticent. I took it that he wanted to get home but he assured me time was not a problem. He made some comment about having heard me criticising his clients so he wasn't sure how I would respond to my portrait being sketched. When I teased him that I would be on my best behaviour he became more sombre, saying that I was a very lovely girl and he was not sure he could do a good enough job in just a few minutes. I felt the urge to tell him I had as much time as he thought he should take, but resisted this and instead, pleaded with him again. I was both thrilled and wary when he finally agreed, but I did not realise then that an already strange day was going to become even more incredible.

My measured and controlled life was lived with few extremes. Nothing of great moment happened that caused major changes of emotion; mild contentment was a constant friend. Having put my business life behind me there were minimal dramas and little to jolt me from this even lifestyle. But when I heard Carrie's voice for the second time on that remarkable day, I can truthfully say that my heart nearly let me down, such was its sudden thudding. I did nothing to arrest the warning signs flashing in my head save for trying to tone down my natural elation as the girl approached.

I could not possibly hide all my feelings but her chance reaction to my identifying her accent as East Coast enabled me to lurch into my tedious 'dialect expert' act and, in the process, calm myself down.

The tranquillity was short lived. When she asked if I had time to sketch her portrait, and in so doing, fulfilled every ambition in my head at that time, I was torn between utter joy and awful dread. Before me was the most perfect face I'd ever seen, but I was suddenly as fearful of my being seduced by the girl's beauty and knowing that a quick-fire pencil sketch would never be able to do justice to the girl. In a make-believe world - the type I never entertained - I would try to replicate this beauty in colour after many sittings, and it would be a masterpiece the world would marvel at. A sketch seemed as cheap and frivolous as the girl was beautiful and genuine.

I had time. The day remained warm and bright and people were still milling around the stalls in search for late bargains. But I had doubts, doubts that I could not easily interpret and I came close to saying 'No' before I heard myself saying, 'Very well,' and found I was preparing new paper and my pencils. What followed had very little to do with artistic ability but did see something quite wonderful created.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Two

There'd been times at school and college when I took the stance of the shy adolescent child not wanting to have her school photograph taken; I had never had my portrait drawn and had no idea how I might find the experience. What I did know for sure, was that just at this moment I was the happiest girl alive.

I deliberately struck a pose that I thought would be ideal for the artist and was alarmed to find it did not receive his approval.

'Oh....no....no, don't sit like that.' It was a bad start. My unsteady nerves came close to being shattered and his stern words shocked me.

'I'm sorry....what....how....how should I sit?'

'Just relax.....you're too tense. Don't look at me....no, not at me....look at...look at the church spire over my shoulder there. You are still too formal...relax!'

The man's words were short and tense if not actually fierce. I became flustered and the artist was no longer smiling. He had appeared to switch from a friendly old uncle to a tough businessman. I prattled rabidly. 'I'm not sure what to do....sorry! I've not had a portrait done before. What do you want, something like this?'

His mood cheered a little. 'No, not unless I'm sketching for a funeral mask. I'm sorry. I'm not being fair. Look at the church, bring your shoulders back a little, and smile, yes, smile -that's better. Now we need your hair back a little on this near side.'

I ran my fingers across my hair; they were shaking, they felt numb. 'No,' the man complained, 'back behind your ear, tuck it behind your ear.' I tried to obey but my fingers fumbled out of control. 'No,' he said again, 'that's half and half....looks straggly.'

I heard myself say, 'well, you do it then.' It sounded churlish, petulant, but John

Drakes leaned forward from his stool and reached out his left hand. It brushed my cheek as it collected the stray strands of my hair and eased them gently back behind my ear. The contact was ridiculously exhilarating and wretchedly brief. I quickly realised it was something he must have done a thousand times with hundreds of women, but just now he was doing it for me. My goose bumps had just become mountain peaks.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘the church....and think of your favourite actor.....Cruise, de Caprio, whoever.’

I briefly glanced at the man. He was not looking at me but busily preparing his pencils. I found I was disappointed. I turned back to the church in the distance and thought only of the handsome man whose eyes now became entirely and utterly focused on me. I felt as if their steel blue colour was burning me like a laser. I was enveloped by the thrill I was experiencing; I was entirely his for this moment and got a quite scary buzz from knowing that.

I had drawn or painted many portraits in my time. Some had taken minutes, as this one would, others had been sketched at sittings then painted in oils over a period of months. Portrait painting should never become a chore for if it does you are surely bored by the subject or by the act of creating an image. Either way you will produce a sub-standard representation and would be well advised to stop immediately. Because I believe myself to be a semi-professional observer of life and a student of visual character, I have never become so disenchanted with a face or figure that boredom has set in; though I suppose I should admit there have been times when I've hurried to complete an image that had lost some of its promise. I am always relaxed in front of an easel; it calms me, separates me from other thoughts, but when Caroline Darling sat in front of me on that warm, clear afternoon, I was tense and concerned. And for reasons I couldn't fathom.

She sat stoically positioned as if she were a statue. It is a common fault with those sitting for quick sketches. So I had my tried and tested methods of calming the sitter and getting the pose I need. I cannot say why I couldn't bring myself to use that technique with Carrie, but I was angry with myself for feeling so tense and for speaking so abruptly to her. Then, no sooner had I got her set that she couldn't follow my directions for keeping her hair back from her face. I heard myself snapping at her again and then her telling me curtly to do the job myself. When I hastily reached forward to sweep the golden strands back behind her ear, my clumsy hand brushed across her face as if it were confirming its texture was as pure as it appeared. The hand that then reached for a pencil was damp with sweat yet as rigid as stone. At that instance I felt there was no way I could begin the sketch.

I felt close to panic. I looked at the plain paper in front of me and then up at the girl. My brain was going through the motions of preparation but was refusing to send the necessary signals to my stricken hand. My glance at the girl seemed to help as I became focused on its faultless sculpture, storing in my mind its countless

attributes that I must feature. I managed to position a pencil in my hand, but felt that if I lifted it to the virgin sheet of paper the result would be uncontrolled and hopeless. But there was no option.

I sensed myself edge forwards and my hand reach out. I did not watch it touch the paper and, as a rule, it was not imperative that I should but, half a minute later I realised I was still staring at the young girl sat at an arm's reach in front of me and I dragged my eyes back to the sheet of scrawl in front of me. But it wasn't the aimless scribble I expected. It was the perfect outline of the face and the neck, the shape of the hair, the eyebrows and even the sweep of the nose. I had completed the work to this point in less than half the time it would normally take me, even for a quick sketch and I hadn't looked at the sheet while doing so. My hand, now forcibly withdrawn from the paper, began to seize up and sweat again. I looked at the paper again, in disbelief.

The drawing to this point was already as near to perfect as it could possibly be, and yet I felt it had not been me that had created it. I looked back at the girl, who had remained motionless, and then back at my hand. The pencil was held as it should be but, having been withdrawn from the paper, seemed locked where it was. I considered telling the girl that I couldn't continue; my hand did indeed look as though it had cramped up, yet I felt no pain. I looked up at the American again just as she squinted to look at me without changing her pose. 'Okay?' she whispered through pursed lips.

I meant to say 'No... this is a terrible mistake...my hand feels tired...' but, instead, I muttered something 'Yes...er, yes.....first stage completed.'

Uninvited, my hand reached back to the paper. This time I watched the pencil as it raced across the white paper, fixing the basic shape, introducing items of detail, moving from one part of the face to the shape of the hair, to the neck, to the eyebrows. I saw I was holding it but it seemed the pencil had a will of its own. I could see I was controlling it yet knew I wasn't. The pace it was working at was far faster than I was capable of.....it was working at the speed of a quick cartoonist yet the image being built was one of considerable detail and already a faultless replication of the girl.

One or two visitors walked past the two of us as Mr. Drakes sketched away. I could gauge their reaction as they glanced at his work, and it was clearly complimentary. He seemed to be working terribly fast and yet was calm; it seemed that after establishing the basic shape of my head he was now concentrating on every stroke of his pencils.

Though I was still in a mood of mild euphoria, I was feeling strange sensations that I couldn't explain. It was as if, and this sounds stupid I know, the man was physically taking away parts of me to construct the picture. It was a peculiar feeling, as though I was slowly becoming a silhouette as he removed features from my face. It was unnerving and so untypical of me to feel inexplicable emotions of

any kind.

I wanted to see how the work was proceeding but didn't want to change my position and upset the man.

'You've stopped smiling.' His sudden words made me jump to attention, then turn to face him. 'Oh, and now you've moved'

'Damn!.....sorry, sorry' I tried to regain my original pose. 'Is this where I was...I'm looking at the church.'

'That's near enough, but smile. Think of something that amuses you.' John's words were short without being especially severe. The next moment he was a little kinder. 'If young film stars don't bring a smile, how about your favourite London club, your most recent night out with your friends, your boyfriend?'

'If you start me thinking of boyfriends you'll give me lines all over my face. How about a cold glass of beer?'

'That would work for me but aren't you youngsters into cocktails?'

'No, not really, well not this one anyway. How about a long cool drink at a beachfront bar on a Caribbean island?'

'That would suit me too, but it might make me pack up early here.'

I urged him not to - though it was clear he was teasing me, and he was quickly back working with his pencil. I was certainly smiling.

Carrie had to be reminded to keep smiling a couple of times but I had come to think that this was the sum total of my input into what was quickly, too quickly, becoming a very good sketch. Subconsciously I had moved to change pencils on a couple of occasions and each new point had been exactly the right choice, without any forethought at all, enabling me to add substance or detail to a particular element of the picture. As I looked at the paper I was now adding to the detail of the eyes at a furious speed that was surely beyond my normal ability. I tried to slow myself but I couldn't. The eyes were crucial in any form of portraiture. I must not rush...and yet these were perfect, alive, full of precisely the character I had set out to achieve. Once or twice I found myself using a pencil for a piece of detail that I would never have normally chosen, but the result was just as I'd intended.

The picture was two-thirds done and yet I'd surely only been working for two or three minutes. I sensed the girl was fidgeting again so I looked at her more deliberately. 'Are you okay?' She assured me she was but I told her there was no problem in her taking a stretch if she needed to, though privately I was concerned about breaking this unprecedented rhythm I found myself in. She accepted my

second invitation.

'It's not easy sitting in one position, is it?' I said as the girl stretched her arms high above her head and shook her hair. It was an entirely natural move and one that any red-blooded man would have found impulsive viewing. I tried to control my thoughts and it fleetingly registered with me that one of the reasons the American might have had such an impact on me was that her clothes were somewhat traditional for a child of her age. Her white shorts were just that - short, and not of the more modern design that tended to be longer and often in dull colours. Her yellow top was as bright as her personality and, again, brief and tight-fitting, but free of the almost compulsory slogans or maker's logo. She was a visual delight.

'How is it going' I heard her say. I answered quietly that it was going well and we would not need much longer.

'I guess I don't get a look yet,' she teased, shaping to look around the edge of the easel. I must have glared at her as I told her she was quite right and that she wouldn't see it at all if she tried to sneak a glance. *'Okay...okay!'* She pouted cheekily.

She happily tried to regain her original position but had to be asked to turn her head further to the right. She was still not right, so sub-consciously I reached forward and with my forefinger, eased her jaw to a better angle. She squinted out the corner of her eye as my hand approached but smiled rather than move away, and allowed the gentle touch.

'Your hair has gone back in front of your ear,' I said. She tried once to remedy the situation but then gave up.

'You do it,' she said. Again, I edged nervously forward and purposefully brushed the golden strands to where I wanted them.

John Drakes touched me twice. It was a strange and exhilarating sensation and one I could not recall having felt before. I'd been excited when meeting guys of my age and had enjoyed the thrill of first kisses and other explorations, but this was different. Inexplicably different.

During the sketching process it had felt as if he was somehow removing pieces of me – by now I certainly felt as though I was almost completely without features from the shoulders up, with all the detail missing – but this man's mild manner made me feel secure. His gentle touches were incredibly exciting. I felt foolish and elated at the same time.

As he continued, John mentioned there was no reason for me not to talk while he was drawing, provided I didn't move too much. I grabbed the opportunity.

‘You will make light of my imperfections, won’t you?’

He replied in a voice that was at first quite downbeat. ‘I’ve not found any yet.’ Then more mischievously. ‘Well, none that my awesome skill cannot dilute.’

‘If you’ve found faults then I guess I’d like them removed completely - not diluted.’

‘That sounds like an ageing actress undergoing a face-lift. Don’t worry. There’s no major surgery required here.’

I bit on the bullet. ‘John,’ it was the first time I’d used only his first name. ‘I’m getting really weird sensations as you are working.’

‘How do you mean?’ He was still working at feverish pace and didn’t seem to be very interested in what I said.

‘I don’t really know how to explain it. It is as if you are taking pieces of me to make the picture. It’s crazy, I know. It’s an odd feeling, it really is. Jeez, I feel stupid.’

Now he stopped suddenly, but didn’t look at me. He was quiet for a moment, looking at the drawing and then at the ground; he had lapsed into deep thought. Then he looked up and straight at me.

‘Well, I guess that is what I am doing, in a manner of speaking.’ It was not really the answer I wanted. ‘I suppose I am metaphorically taking pieces of you to create this image on paper. Not ever having had my portrait drawn I can’t know how it feels but don’t worry, you are still fully intact.’ There was a brief smile and a quick upward glance to check on a point of detail, and then he was back with the breakneck drawing speed and deep intensity. Then another look, followed by more feverish activity.

This work was proving a particularly strange experience. I still felt out of control, and hated it, but I was somehow creating a perfect image of the lovely girl sat in front of me, and that filled me with excitement. I didn’t really need her to be as still as she was in order to complete the drawing and I felt a sudden pang of regret that once I had completed the sketch she would be gone again. I invited her to talk if she wanted to, but soon wished I hadn’t.

She teased me about ignoring imperfections I noticed in her as I worked and then came out with a chilling comment that shook me to the core. She said she felt as though I was removing pieces of her to construct her image on paper. It was an incredibly observant and challenging remark and showed the occasion was proving as strange for her as it was for me. Her comment surprised me by its

directness and caused my pencil to freeze again in my hand. I desperately sought for a response that was calm and correct, though heaven knows I was far from relaxed.

I quickly dreamt up some reply that she was a novice at the game and that I was, in a way, doing exactly what she felt. I was taking features from her to replicate them on the paper. This seemed to satisfy her and I was grateful it did for it was not a topic I wanted to pursue. Why just one of many portraits in the day should bring out such emotions, rare emotions, in me I just couldn't fathom, and here was the girl saying she too was somewhat unnerved; it was an altogether peculiar moment.

By now my mind was moving ahead to what would happen when I completed my work. Had this been an attractive and unattached middle-aged woman sat in front of me I would have known exactly what to do and say, but this was a child...she actually could have been my grandchild. I chilled at these thoughts and determined I should do or say nothing and simply treat the meeting as I had all the previous ones I'd had that day.

I was within a few strokes of completing the picture when a couple detached themselves from the people walking past my pitch on their way from the fayre. Their animated speech held the same distinguishing tones as the girl, so my attention was drawn to them. The man was of medium build, balding and probably of similar age to me. The woman was slightly taller with smart short blonde hair. Both were well dressed in quality casual clothes. My heart sank as I quickly realised my private time with the girl was about to be broken.

'Hey, sweetheart, there you are. We thought you might have gone down into the town.' The man had spoken and, in doing so, surprised the girl into moving out of position.

Carrie had turned her head and smiled a welcome to the couple who were obviously her parents. Her mother then spoke.

'Honey, you're having your portrait done. What a great idea'

And what an obvious comment I briefly thought to myself, feeling offended that someone should have disturbed my time with Carrie. It was a foolishly possessive thought.

Carrie introduced the couple as her parents, Jim and Betty. I stood to shake hands and introduce myself, still aggrieved at the interruption.

'I hope Carrie is proving a good subject.' Her father's handshake was business-like and sociable. *'If she doesn't do as she is told just send her away with a flea in her ear.'* The man laughed. Carrie got close to pouting and I smiled weakly. The mother had edged around the easel and suddenly let out a mild

scream.

'Oh my God! Jim, Jim, take a look at this.' The man craned his neck then the couple moved around beside me. *'Isn't that just, well, isn't that just amazing.'* The mother's voice was 'all-American' in comparison with the more settled drawl of her husband.

'Good Lord yes, that is, well, it is astonishing. Mr. Drakes, you are a master of your art.' He had quickly chosen good words. He noticed Carrie edging off her stool. *'Now, young lady, you just stay right where you are. You move only when Mr. Drakes says you can. That's right isn't it,'* he added, turning to me.

'Well, yes. I'm nearly through.' I suddenly hated my using this mid-Atlantic expression. *'And it's John, please.'*

'Well, sir, I commend you,' continued Carrie's father, ignoring my request. *'This is something you should treasure, honey,'* he assured his daughter. His wife leaned forward to whisper something in his ear. It stimulated a move from the man to withdraw a wallet from his back pocket and looking at the small sign adjacent to my chair. *'Is that what you are charging, my friend? Just seven pounds.'* I must have nodded. *'Hon, I'm going to get this for you.'* Carrie uttered some brief protest but her father waved her comments away. *'No, I'll get it. It's a wonderful memento of a great trip.'* He handed me a ten-pound note and assured me he wanted no change; I mumbled something about the day being in aid of a good charity.

The mother was still staring at the portrait and pointing to particular features. With real, genuine emotion she whispered, as if to herself..... *'I think this is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.....really!'* She turned to me. *'You really are very good.....very, very good.'*

She took a step back, made another nod of approval and held out her hand to lure her husband away. He too was lingering over the image of his beautiful daughter and seemed reluctant to leave. *'That is a great talent, sir, a wonderful skill.'* I thought his voice showed a brief emotion before he turned again to his daughter. *'Shall we'll see you back at the hotel, hon?'*

'Sure, Dad, see you later. Dinner at eight?' Her father smiled and nodded and then offered me his hand once more before walking off with his wife, the two of them in avid conversation. The mother took one glance back to Carrie who waved another farewell.

I turned back to the American who was looking sheepish. She spoke. *'Hell, I'm sorry about that, but that's parents for you. All sincerity, no timing!'*

I sought to defend the older generation. *'They seemed charming people. They are clearly very fond of you.'*

'Sure, they are great people, don't get me wrong. So, am I back in the right position?' I confirmed it was good enough to complete the job. 'But what must you think of me, at my age, on holiday with my parents? It's a bit pathetic, isn't it?'

'You give every impression of being an independent type, I'm sure you wouldn't be with them if you didn't want to be, and they didn't give the impression of forcing you to be with them.'

'Well, you're right, as you seem to make a habit of being. I didn't have to come with them but I wanted to. It's been good fun - in the main. Especially today!' The girl turned very deliberately and smiled broadly at me. She was enchanting, captivating. I issued a silent warning to myself.

When my parents noticed me with John it was so embarrassing, and not what I wanted at all. The fact that they both seemed absolutely thrilled with John's drawing only frustrated me more because they'd seen it before I had. I was angry that John was surely left with an impression of me I didn't want him to have – a poor innocent child on holiday with her parents, even incapable of paying for her own amusement. Apart from desperately wanting to see the portrait, my main ambition at this time was trying to find a reason to stay longer with this man who had awoken such strange emotions in me.

He was clearly close to completing the portrait but wouldn't let me move. I tried charming him and then played the pouting, offended child, but neither plan worked. He did, however, seem more buoyant now, less fretful than when he'd began the drawing. 'Don't you move until you are told you can, young lady,' he demanded, with mock severity.

'But I want to see it, John.' It already seemed so natural to use his first name even though we had only just met. I was embarrassed as I spoke it but reassured that he showed no offence.

I gave some thought to asking if he knew somewhere in the town where I could get it framed, but considered he would, at best, only direct me there. I wondered whether he would let me buy him a tea or a coffee if this was his last work of the day. I wanted the picture to be completed but was fearful that would signal the end of my time with him. Even this thought, so out of character, made me worry about my current feelings. I immediately thrust them as far back in my mind as I could.

Suddenly he was saying, 'There, I think that's about it... Yes, although I say it myself, that is quite good. Here.' He beckoned me forward and I was there in an instant, crouching beside him, then kneeling, then I heard myself squeal.

'Oh my God! Oh my God!!!' I was too loud, passers-by must have been staring. It was so unlike me to sound so juvenile. I quietened without losing my excitement. 'Oh, John, it's, it's, well, it's just amazing. It's me, isn't it? It's really me!'

The man was looking intently at an image of almost photographic quality. He smiled and nodded his head. 'Well, I thought that was the intention but, yes, it is a good likeness.' His words were calm, there was no special self-satisfaction - more a simple expression of contentment.

I didn't know what to do though I desperately wanted to throw my arms around the man. I turned to face him knowing my eyes were moist enough to shed a tear or more of joy. I noticed for the first time the smoothness of his tanned face with the creases around his smiling eyes, the richness and depth of his silver-grey hair, and the elegant hands at the end of strong, brown arms. He was a better subject than me for a portrait of this quality. I smiled as innocently but as meaningfully as I could and then looked back at my image that had been created in such a short time. Before me on the easel was more than a photograph, certainly more than a painting. It was a character, my character; it hid nothing, carried no artificiality, and, for me, was a perfect representation of Caroline Darling. I noticed now, however, that it was not a sketch of a girl, a teenager, but an image of a fresh, attractive woman. I was now choking with emotion, unable to speak.

'So you like it,' John said quietly with, I thought, some emotion of his own. His words brought a gentler response from me.

'It's quite wonderful,' I managed, hearing my own voice crack as if tears were about to appear. I rested my hand on his broad forearm in a natural, unplanned movement. 'You are a genius. You should be painting the rich and famous, not some crazy kid from Chesapeake Bay.'

'Ah, I'm sure the rich and famous would not stimulate me as you have.'

Damn it, this man always seemed to say the right words. I was closer still to tears....but exceedingly happy. 'So you are pleased with it too?' I asked, searching his face for signs of insincerity. 'Really pleased?'

'Yes, young lady, I am reasonably pleased with it but, then, if the customer is happy, that is enough for me.'

I wished he'd used my name. 'I don't want it to be enough, John. I want this to be as special for you as it is for me....but that's stupid....sorry! You've already done many such portraits already today. Well, this customer is more than happy. She is excited, flattered and more than a little emotional. It's been a strange and wonderful experience. Thank you.' I made the last words sound as sincere as I could make them but was again frustrated that the artist did not seem to respond. He was making miniscule additions with a fine pencil.

'I'll roll it up for you,' he said suddenly and, within a moment, had unclipped the sheet, rolled it gently into a tight tube and slide a rubber band around it. He passed it to me. 'There,' he said cheerfully, looking deeply into my eyes, 'and I do not seem to have harmed the original.'

‘What?’ I heard myself say brusquely.

‘You said as I was working that you felt I was taking pieces of you to make the drawing. I wasn’t, you are fully intact.’

I managed a smile. But this closure was all too sudden and it had become quite wretched. I looked to prolong my time with the man. I had barely touched him, but I wanted to embrace him as a new friend, as a wonderfully handsome man. I felt myself gently rest my hand on his shoulder.

‘You’ve made my day, you really have.’ I took my hand away because I knew I must, though I hated doing so. My mood dulled as John got to his feet. Alongside me he was so tall, almost distant and impersonal, especially now that he held the rolled sketch out towards me. I could have been buying a newspaper.

The end of the session came all too quickly for me. It had been a special but worrying few minutes. When I allowed Carrie to see the picture I felt unbelievably emotional, with a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball - then to have her come and crouch alongside me, to see her natural yet excited reactions made me worse. I couldn’t even make sensible conversation. I found myself referring back to her comment about her feelings as the sketch was being drawn, about me taking pieces of her to construct the image. I was perplexed, fascinated, scared. We had both experienced something neither of us could explain. She so young and I so experienced at such work, yet we both knew I had produced something special, but were each too nervous or tongue-tied to explain it.

The American had taken the paper roll. I expected her to turn and run off after her parents, but she didn’t. I was at a loss as to how to end the session. For a moment, when she reached out a delicate hand to touch my arm and stared, smiling but somehow questioning, straight at me, I had to draw back from embracing her. Deep within me something was reminding me of my responsibilities. I was an intelligent, senior man; she was a child with high emotions. If I made the wrong move now I could ruin the moment. It was worse when I found myself looking at her body, beautifully proportioned, gloriously tanned and with the delicate freshness of youth - she was very dangerous. I held this thought.

I allowed a short impasse. I could not bring myself to send her away but neither did I want to encourage her to stay. It seemed like minutes but was surely only a few seconds before I grunted something about having to pack my things away and turned to collect my paper and pencils together. As I turned away from the girl it felt as though a light had gone out, like the sun had passed behind a cloud. I had missed her radiance in a trice. I heard her asking if she could do anything to help and subconsciously urged myself to decline the offer.

‘You can carry these,’ I heard myself saying as I handed her the pads of paper and wrapped wallet of pencils and pastels and turned to fold up the two chairs.

Bent down and with my face briefly hidden from her, I was able to concentrate on my private thoughts for a moment. I heard myself thinking, 'Don't get carried away, just walk her to the organisers tent and then let her leave. That's courtesy. But no more, don't let her get to you. She's just a kid. Perhaps a decent one, but a kid all the same'.

When I had the two chairs safely folded and held under one arm I turned back to Carrie and saw her staring straight at me. Initially she wasn't smiling. Indeed her expression was quite stern, perhaps worried. But then she lit up her face again with that wonderful smile. She was so, so beautiful, as a child but, it had certainly occurred to me, as a woman too.

'I just have to hand my takings to the organiser. You can walk with me if you like.' It was a stupid, juvenile remark but she didn't seem to notice. Instead she fell in step beside me as I tried to walk casually down the forty yards or so to Bill and Harriet's little tent, past other stallholders who were closing for the day. Many greeted my acknowledgement of them with cheery remarks or farewells and I found myself more than content that I had the charming American at my side. When we approached Bill he was already attending to a short queue of my friends ahead of me. I saw this as a chance to politely separate myself from Carrie.

'Well,' I heard myself saying, 'It looks like I might be here for a few minutes so...'

I was pleased with this remark but now needed Carrie to recognise my signal. She did.

'Sure, well, here you are.' She held out the paper and wallet. 'Once again, thank you so much for this.' She clutched the rolled portrait to her. 'I'll treasure it for ever. You really are a very fine artist. I am so very pleased I met you.'

There were a good number of people around so I was thankful she had read the signs but, at the same time, appalled that one so young could have handled the situation so much better than I had. Her words suggested some emotion but she seemed calm, almost mature. It was as though she was reading from a script provided by her finishing school for such occasions, and I suppose this disappointed me. In an instant I was equally annoyed with my own ineptitude and tried to remedy the situation.

'Well, Carrie Darling.' I made sure the emphasis was in the right place. 'You have been a very lovely end to the day. It was a great pleasure to meet you and to be able to sketch your portrait. Promise me that, before you are as old as I am, you'll have a proper portrait painted - your loveliness deserves it.' I found myself resting my hand on her bare, tanned shoulder as I spoke but imagined it a sufficiently harmless thing to do. I was not, however, ready for her final act.

Walking past the other people on the down I felt like a queen, a celebrity. John

was so obviously a popular man and I was very content to be alongside him as he responded to various friendly greetings. I briefly wondered what his friends were thinking of me as I walked with him, but quickly appreciated it was quite obvious I was just a passer-by helping him with his kit. I didn't much like the idea of being a 'passer-by' and resolved that I must do something that would make an impact on this wonderful man before we parted.

Once we reached the organiser's tent I could see that John was amongst his good friends and that this was not the place for me. John turned to me and started making excuses about how long he would be with the organiser - I was ready for this. I was not ready, though, for him putting his arm on my shoulder and talking about my 'loveliness' and how I should have my portrait painted properly. I was surely visibly shaking but was still capable of putting my plan into action. After he'd taken his kit from me and had his hands full I stood on the tips of my toes and reached up to kiss him. I had resolved I would kiss him on the cheek, turn and hurry away, but my lips reached his mouth and that is where I kissed him. I let my mouth wait a moment on his before easing away. I then smiled the best smile I could, blew him another kiss, turned away, and then stood back and quietly said, 'Thanks again, so much.' With that I turned my back and trotted away towards the path from the hill that led to the town.

Initially I was pleased with myself, satisfied that I had concocted a departure that must have had an impact on the man, but before I had gone ten yards, I was wanting to look back to see John's reaction to what I had done. I slowed to a walk and almost looked around a couple of times but I was soon at the exit. 'Look around, you know you want to,' I was saying inwardly. I did turn around but shouldn't have done so; John was nowhere to be seen, presumably inside the tent, handing in his money and forgetting about that crazy kid from the States.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Three

'Another satisfied customer?' The smirk on Bill Cummings face was a picture. 'You're getting young ladies to pay you in kind now I see.' Bill was a good friend and a longstanding organiser of the summer event. He knew I would not take exception to his comment.

'I'm afraid it reduces your takings, though,' I teased. 'I give a fifty per cent discount if I get a kiss.'

'At your age I'd have thought that offer would send the clients packing,' was Bill's worthy response.

As I handed my money over and received the statutory thanks for my efforts, I found myself relishing the girl's kiss but feeling a pang of disappointment that she'd left the way she did. I had to admit that I would have been more flattered if she'd tried to hang around a little longer, but then my sanity returned along with my realisation that, however amazing the last half hour had been, what I had experienced was no more than an old man being flattered by the attentions of someone so young.

I stayed talking with various local friends for what seemed like a few moments but was probably closer to an hour. When I made my final farewells I turned to walk back up the hill to where the cliff top walk would take me back to my bungalow on the hill above the town. Whatever my mood, and even in inclement weather, this walk brought great comfort and wonderful inspiration. It was a steady climb and nowadays I seldom hurried - indeed I would often sit on one of the benches and stare out into the mass of the Atlantic Ocean for a few minutes, not especially to rest but more to get full value for living in such a location. On this evening the sun was still high and not yet reddening, the mild breeze was still war, the sea calm and there was every chance of a special Cornish sunset. I stopped more than once, not to sit but to stand and gaze out to sea.

I couldn't expunge the thoughts or vision of the American from my brain. When you are an artist you become able to 'fix' a face into your head as if it were a large photograph straight in front of you; in this way you can think of what you need to

do when you return to your easel. Though I would never get to work on a painting of the girl, I had just such a picture in my mind, and it was not a still photographic image but a moving filmstrip of her emotive face with its stunning beauty and vivacity. No silent staring out across the ocean could remove it, and, believe me, I did try.

It became one of my slower walks home. Sometimes I took the route out of the town along the main road north and then up the minor roads to my cliff-top cul-de-sac but the tranquillity of the evening, after the busy day of drawing, was there to calm me, to repair the ravages of the day and prepare me for a gentle supper as I watched the setting sun. But it was a plan that had little chance of success, thanks to Caroline Darling.

Eventually, I made it through to the road of whitewashed bungalows ranged along the edge of the low hill. There were some twenty-five such houses of which mine was the tenth. On such an evening as this there would be many other folk from the town and beyond walking or sitting on the grass-covered cliff-top across the road from the properties. I recognised one or two and gave them the relevant greeting, but now I was glad to be home. I crossed the road from the grassy slopes and headed for my gate but, just as I reached it, a quiet but distinctive call brought me to a sudden halt.

'John.....John.'

Have you ever felt the inner sensation of euphoria and dread in the same moment? It was what I felt in this instant. The voice was unmistakably Carrie's and, though she was partially silhouetted against the bright sky and sun, I could see her standing, somewhat hesitantly across the road from my gate.

'Carrie?.....What?.....' The girl now hurried across the road towards me. She was not actually smiling and her eyes were notably less sparkling than an hour before.

'John,' she said, as she came towards me, 'I'm so sorry to disturb you, really I am.....it's just that.' She clasped a hand to her head as if her thoughts were painful. *'It's.....well, it's the portrait.'*

Only now did I notice she was holding it. 'What's happened..... have you damaged it?'

'No.' Her face briefly brightened, *'No, I'd never do that. It's, well, you know..... it's just that, well.....,'* she gave all the signs of someone with a limited vocabulary searching for the right word and then finding it. *'You.....you didn't sign it. I saw you sign other ones.'* She had become nervous. She was now standing straight in front of me, a light jumper now wrapped around her tanned shoulders.

'Oh.....right, yes, of course. I'm sorry, my fault. Of course...yes, here, let

me...’ I fumbled for a pencil while questioning if I was grateful this was the sum total of her reasons for tracing where I lived. I heard her asking me to be careful as I unrolled the sheet. Then I heard myself tell her that it would be better to do it inside the house and another voice that warned against such a stupid idea. These were both distant voices and in a moment I was opening my gate and leading the girl to my front door. All the time I seemed in a mesmeric state, unable to exert my usual control on things.

I unlocked the door, led the girl inside and walked on into my lounge. There I unrolled the paper onto a table. ‘Front or back,’ I heard myself saying. The girl said I should sign the front but I could write on the back too, if I wanted to. I held a pencil at the point where I normally scribbled my name and the date. I found myself making the words look clearer, more decipherable than normal. Then I turned the sheet over, still feeling as if I was in a semi-conscious state. I saw myself writing ‘To my friend from Chesapeake Bay’ and initialling it again.

The girl was at my side, watching me as I wrote. I had not been so conscious of this until I felt her closeness as I stood to my full height again. ‘Oh, John, that’s just right. Just right. Thank you.’ I saw her take the paper, roll it again and place the tight band around it. She turned to look at me; she was very close. Through the muzzy feeling in my head I heard warning messages but I couldn’t act on them. I was asking the girl if she would like a drink, a cold juice or coffee, and saw her mouth ask for fruit juice. Still in a daze I left her in the lounge and walked to my kitchen where I was free to shake my head, then douse my face in cold water. ‘What the hell is wrong with you, John Drakes.’

I so nearly blew it. Having noticed John’s address on the folder of pencils I carried for him, I could track the road he lived in by means a short look at the town map by the harbour. I rushed off along the road to our hotel to grab a jumper then re-traced my steps a little before turning right and climbing up the hill towards the last road before the cliff edge. I believed I must have reached the house before the artist could have done so, but then, as I’d already reminded myself more than once, I’d no way of knowing whether he even planned to return there from the fayre. By the time I was across the road from his house I’d convinced myself that, although I’d noticed John wore no rings, he probably had at least one lady friend and might well be meeting with her or other friends in town. I was becoming sure I’d wasted my time.

When I saw him walking quietly towards his house some thirty minutes after I’d arrived there, my heart skipped several beats and I walked quickly to the edge of the cliff to sit on the grass so as to hide my presence from the man. Having looked at the sketch a dozen times on the walk up the hill, I’d noticed John hadn’t signed it, so I resolved to have him remedy the situation after I’d talked to him again. Even so, this was the last item on my agenda where the main need was to speak to him some more about my emotions during his work, and....well, to just spend more time with him. Perhaps later, as a parting gesture, I could get him to sign the portrait.

I felt no nerves as I called to him when he reached his gate, but encountered many as I jogged across the road to him. He showed no pleasure at seeing me and the initial exchange was tense. He seemed in no mood to talk about childish sensitivities, so I changed the order of my plan and mentioned the absence of a signature on the drawing. I was, for an instant, proud of the initiative I was showing because this seemed to calm him and, although he briefly tried to attend to my request outside, he soon recognised it would be best tackled indoors.

Success.....I was being invited into his house!

Before I left the kitchen I was able to clear my thoughts. So.....I shouldn't have let the child into my house, but I had. Her request was innocent enough and I was now being courteous in the manner of a friendly uncle. But the moment she'd had her drink she must leave. I should remain polite but enforce my seniority and have her go as soon as possible. When I returned with two glasses she was stood at the window overlooking the sea.

'What a wonderful view for an artist.' She didn't turn around until I'd crossed the room then, after accepting the glass and taking a sip, she started to talk again, hesitantly. 'Look, John..... Mr... Drakes, I must apologise for my behaviour. You must wonder who the hell I think I am just turning up like this. I'm afraid I noticed your address from the label on your artist's wallet, found where it was on the town map and, well, we are staying just down the road. I'm sorry..... for being a pest.'

I said it wasn't a problem but tried to do so in a way that suggested it actually was. I was thinking more clearly now and, at this point, was set on moving towards the girl's departure. I felt callous and uncaring but it was for the best. She sipped her drink and looked back towards the ocean. I was nervous about my next move and it made me slow; the girl was sharper.

'Thanks for the drink,' she said, half turning towards me. 'This really is a lovely place. Is this where you paint?'

I responded as plainly as I could. 'No...no, I built an extension on the back of the garage.....I paint there. I can't see the sea from there but it has a pleasant enough view out over the town and the distant hills, and it's very private.'

I regretted those last words the moment I spoke them, but fortunately the girl didn't pick up on them, though soon I was wishing she had for she now turned to look straight at me. I saw those stunning blue eyes, wonderful complexion and delightful, elegant neck in the instant before she spoke. 'John, about this afternoon.....forgive me, but it was a very strange sensation for me...to have my portrait done. Were the strange feelings I had, I mean... do other people get them. You are very good at what you do.....have you had other people feel like me?'

Those eyes seemed to burn into me; I had to look beyond her, out to sea. This was agony, absolute heartbreak; she was only a sweet girl seeking help, some

understanding, but I dare not lead her on any further than I already had. I told her that we'd already covered the subject and, as I spoke the words, felt sick at myself for being so unsympathetic, so callous. After all, I'd had embarrassing feelings about the sketch too.

But she battled on. 'Well, I told you I felt strange when you were drawing the picture,' her eyes betrayed an urgency, 'well,..... did you, I mean, you seemed to be affected in the same way..... you seemed, well, strained.. and you drew so fast.'

Huge peals of alarm bells started to go off in my head, and for more than one reason. Here was this stunningly attractive teenager who had found out where I lived and followed me home after a very brief meeting and, I believed, with no encouragement from me. Then there was the plaintive, worried look on her face, as though she really was genuinely seeking answers from me. Also of concern was that this child had read me perfectly, remarkably..... I had been deeply affected by the physical act of drawing her portrait, and I knew it, though I'd forced the idea from my head while she'd sought to question such emotions. Who was teaching who here?

'Let's talk about it,' I heard myself saying. 'Have a seat.' As I spoke the words I tried to stop myself. I looked behind the girl, out to the road and the cliff walk...had someone seen me bring the girl into the house? They could certainly have seen the two of us at the large window if they chose too. But now the girl, seeming to match my thoughts yet again, turned and walked into the middle of the room, then turned, waiting for me to invite her to sit. This was a worrying development, but when she sat on my large Chesterfield couch it left either of the matching armchairs free for me. How should I begin this?

I needn't have bothered; the girl was ahead of me. 'My parents have always encouraged me to question things and that includes my emotions. This was a crazy experience for me this afternoon. Can you help explain it for me?'

I was frozen with wonderment for this kid, for that is what she was. Here, talking to a complete stranger, she had shown the personal character to question a deep inner sensation she couldn't explain, when I, a worldly adult who had lived a full life, had been trying to remove such inexplicable emotions from my mind. She deserved great credit.....she deserved an answer.

'Carrie,' I heard myself saying, 'your parents are entirely right. We should always explore your feelings and should not be put off trying to explain them.' I hated myself for my shallowness but laboured on. 'As I said this afternoon, having your portrait done was a new experience for you. Some people actually find the situation quite traumatic, perhaps because they are fearful of what the end result might show, though heaven knows, that should not be your problem!' The girl managed a weak smile. 'I suppose it is quite a personal exchange – when one person draws a likeness of another - though I have always felt such a comment makes it all sound a bit precious, pretentious if you like. It is, I suppose, as you said earlier..... like the artist is taking pieces of you and using them to construct a

matching image.'

The girl had hardly been looking at me to this point but now those vivid blue eyes were focused directly on mine. 'Have other people who have sat for you felt like I did?' There was little friendship in her voice, though no great severity either. In truth, it was a simple question, which I found myself dodging around.

'Well, no.....no, I can't recall anyone being specific about it, but...' I was really struggling to find a satisfactory response, 'but then you saw that old soul this afternoon, the one with the down-trodden husband..... she had a reaction, it was just not the same as yours.'

It was a wretched response and deserved to be ridiculed. 'She was just a bi.....just a sour-mouthed old.....old thing. I hope you are not classing me with her!'

'No, of course not, Carrie, but not everyone has your questioning mind. You had a new experience, it seems to have affected you, but I'm sure it's not terminal..... a full recovery is expected.' As I spoke the words, with the silly quip at the end, I regretted their flippancy; the girl merited better. *'Carrie, talk to your parents. You may find your mother had some sort of emotion when she saw my drawing; she certainly seemed excited by it. Perhaps she felt a little chill down the spine when she saw her lovely daughter portrayed like that.'*

This didn't seem to lift the girl's spirits. I offered to refill her glass and went off to the kitchen trying to prepare a script that would end this meeting and see the girl leave my house. She was a wonderful child but she should not be on my property.

The excitement I got from being inside the artist's house was soon calmed by his formal and distant attitude. He did sign the portrait and added a sweet message on the reverse but I had the impression this was a temporary kindness and even the offer of a drink was spoken with a darkness that had not been in his voice earlier.

When I finally got around to asking him more about my inexplicable feelings of the afternoon, I sensed he was nervous about the topic, though I trusted my feelings and believed that he had felt something too. His first answers were glib and meaningless to me and it must have showed because he invited me to sit on his huge leather sofa to talk some more, as if in compensation for my disappointment. Frustratingly he walked past me and positioned himself in a separate chair.

'Carrie, you are a lovely, lovely girl and it was a great end to the day to have someone so..... so charming to work with. Rest assured that despite what I said earlier, it is more fun to draw a beautiful face than an ugly one, though perhaps the challenges are different. I felt only good vibes when I was drawing your portrait and am happy with the result.'

I interjected, 'But nothing special, no special feelings. You seemed to work very fast, like *very* fast. Do you normally work that quickly?'

Again he hesitated before answering. I felt sure he was finding a reply that suited him rather than admitting the truth.

'Perhaps I hurried a bit because it was the end of the day.' He realised his error. 'Not to say I rushed it.....we are both happy with it, aren't we?' I nodded agreement and was close to giving up.

'Well, I guess I misread the signs then. You must understand I was not looking for you to say I was something special, that you got a special buzz out of drawing my portrait, it was just that....well, I guess I was being just too naïve. I am not used to seeing such skill produced so effortlessly...and on my behalf.' But I wasn't done yet. I stood and walked to the window to look out at the reddening sky. I'd already discarded the jumper that I'd wrapped around my shoulders; I was dressed just as he had seen me earlier in the day. I let my head fall so my eyes were looking at the floor, and tried to imagine how this looked to him. I listened for his movements, but there was no sound. I lifted my head.

'Could you do justice to that?' I asked, looking out at the palette of the natural blues, reds and yellows of the evening sky and the grey-blue sea picking up the reflections. 'Silly question....of course you could. You are a skilled artist, an especially-skilled artist, and tomorrow you'll have something new to paint.' I listened again. This time he did move towards me, but he did not come close.

'Tomorrow I have to decide which of three projects I should work on,' he said quietly, 'all unfinished and each one near to its deadline date for completion. I'm afraid none of them are especially inspiring.'

'Back to normality then,' I interjected; seizing on what I thought was the beginning of an admission that this day had been special.

'In that I can be a proper painter, yes. Though these unfinished pieces have to be done, they do not have to be completed in a few minutes. It will be a little more relaxed. I do not paint full time. I'm only an amateur dabbler. I'm just a prematurely-retired old gentleman who has lots of friends and interests locally, and I paint a bit.'

He had won.....and I had to accept it. He had refused to be drawn on his strange demeanour during his sketching of me that afternoon. I just knew something had been different...for him as well as for me, but I was not going to be able to get him to admit it. I turned to look at him; he had come halfway across the room towards me but, I had, I believe, stayed far enough away to suit him.

'Carrie,' I heard him say, 'don't get all concerned about this.'

Had I'd been foolish to allow the young American into my house that evening? Yes, probably. Now she stood in my lounge, looking out to sea and dressed so provocatively. The warning signals flashing to my brain were bright neon and, at this point, sufficient to restrain me though, heavens knows, I was constantly wanting to comfort her in a more meaningful way. As she spoke, clearly pressing me to admit to my emotions of the afternoon, I determined to keep to my scripted lines and to the plan of action etched firmly in my mind. When she turned to face me, however, I nearly broke. Her beautiful eyes were moist, her face dispirited and her shoulders drooped. Would it really do so much damage if I were honest with her? I held out.

I told her not to be too worried about her feelings, but quickly moved on to what I knew I had to say. 'You have a nice sketch of yourself as a memento of your trip to Cornwall, though whether you take it back to the U.S. with you or throw it in the garbage, I leave to you.' She went to speak but I kept going. 'I hope you will go home with good memories of our strange but beautiful country.'

She said she would. Her sad face lifted a touch and a light smile appeared. She sipped at her glass then gulped the rest of the drink as if bringing an end to her visit. Did I want her to go...no, I damn well did not, and I hated myself both for that thought and for the contrary concern that I was being unkind. I took a gamble.

I took some steps forward reached out for her glass and gently rested my other hand on her warm, smooth, tanned shoulder.

'Carrie, I don't want you to leave this house sad. I want you to know that I will remember you and your portrait for a long, long time. I am rather pleased with it, I have to say, and, well, now you know where I live, perhaps I might expect a postcard when you get back home.' She looked up at me, those wonderful eyes almost burning in to me, and smiled weakly.

Her reply was beautiful. 'If you think you are going to get away with one postcard Mister John Drakes then you haven't read me at all well. I'll be pestering you with news and gossip.....if I may? I'll be your American correspondent, if you'll have me.'

Her maturity and grace had returned. She had a truly masterful control of what she said. 'I'd love that.....I really would.' I momentarily squeezed her shoulder then removed my hand.

'Well, I must get back to the hotel. Dinner will be cold.' She was now in control, or so it seemed, and it calmed me to see it. I ushered her forward to the door into the hallway and then to the front door. She looked around her as she walked. *'You have a lovely house.....I'm very envious.'*

'And I'm envious of you going back to that lovely part of the States. Give my love to DC, and Chesapeake Bay.' I was opening the door and letting the child step

out onto the drive. I wanted to wrap a protective arm around her shoulder but was now conscious we would soon be back in the public gaze. She had draped her jumper around her shoulders but now pulled it over her head and down to her waist as protection against the falling temperature. She turned to me as I ushered her towards the gate. It was another fleeting kiss, this time on the cheek. I responded in kind as a grandfather would to his grandchild. It was pleasingly innocuous.

As we reached the gate I sought to keep the final exchange as formal as possible, for my sake as well as the girl's. 'So you are back off to London tomorrow.' I made the comment a statement of fact rather than a question, and was surprised by her response.

'No, we have one more day here, well, not here, not during the day. We are going up to Exmoor then back here tomorrow night. Then we go back to London via Salisbury.'

So many new thoughts were suddenly in my head and I was stumbling for words. I knew what I wanted to say but must not. 'That's.....that's good.....where on Exmoor are you going to, Lynton and Lynmouth?' I was thankful I had found innocent words.

Carrie wasn't entirely sure of the route but admitted to becoming a little weary of motoring around. 'I'd rather stop here and explore this gorgeous little place.' More warning bells sounded.

'Ah, but you will like Exmoor,' I countered hurriedly as we both walked out onto the pavement. 'If you get to Lynmouth, see if you have time to walk to Watersmeet.....I think you would like it. It would only take an hour there and back and you can get food there.'

'Thanks, I'll mention it to daddy. Watersmeet..... Lynmouth.....got it.'

She then held her hand out as a farewell gesture. I took it. She smiled, beautifully, memorably. 'Thank you.....thank you so very much. I have so enjoyed talking with you, and I just adore my portrait.' The girl's adult attitude shocked and shamed me again for I was shaking and sweating, and struggling to find any worthwhile words.

'Carrie, it has been a great pleasure.' It was a modest, bland comment as I shook her hand. The thought flashed dangerously through my mind that no-one had ever had such an effect on me.....no-one! Not ever!

Fighting every inner feeling, I pulled my hand from hers with insulting haste, but she had one surprise left for me. Again she lifted her vivacious smiling face towards mine and pressed warm lips into my cheek and moved back. It happened in a trice but was something I truly wanted to last forever. I must have frozen for a

moment because the girl briefly giggled at my stoic state.

'Sorry about that,' she laughed. 'I should have asked if I could kiss you out herebut you'd have said no. Remember me, John Drakes, remember me!' Her voice croaked as she spoke those last words, but she was still trying to retain her smile. Then she was gone, turning away and running, quite fast, away towards the town. I gulped back my emotions, already silently urging the girl to at least turn for one last time. 'Damn it, girl, one last wave, surely.' I heard myself mutter. 'Come on, you owe me that.'

But she didn't look back. She reached the turning and was soon gone from sight. Like a fool I stood there for some minutes as though I expected her to come back. I sensed a rustling of curtains at number eleven and saw Dorothy Evans retreat out of view. This was good cause to hurry back to the sad sanctuary of my home; Dorothy, though sweet enough, was one you did not need to give cause to gossip - she needed no assistance at all.

Though the evening had not ended as I had wished, I still returned to the hotel and my waiting parents with the belief I had achieved something by going to John's house. I was mature and sophisticated enough to know when I was making an impression on people and I at least left John thinking well of me. Had I pressed for the result I'd wanted – his admittance that he had somehow been affected by sketching my portrait – then the evening could have ended badly and there would have been no chance of further contact. Now we had parted as friends. I had already resolved to call him when I returned to London, not to wait until I was back home in the States.

And, as for the look on his face when I kissed him a second time, I knew I'd given him something to remember me by. I may have lacked some of life's experiences but I'd had to turn boys off as much as encourage them, and even a quick kiss on the cheek can have as much or as little meaning as you need it to.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Four

Have you ever woken up with a very distinct thought, even a plan, already in your mind, as though someone has sent you a complete message during the night without you knowing? The morning after I'd visited John Drakes I woke in such a condition - my first thought was not of him as such but a complete scheme for the day that would, I hoped, have us meeting again, and for a longer period. By the time I was dressed and had joined my parents for breakfast I had advanced the idea even further.

'Would you be too bothered if I didn't join you for dinner tonight?'

My parents glanced at each other and my father, as ever in such situations, spoke first. 'I guess not, sweetheart. What do you have in mind?'

'Oh, nothing much really. This is just such a sweet little place and the hotel is, well, a hotel. I thought I might take a stroll around, see more of the town.'

Mum and dad again exchanged glances. 'Sure, hon,' was my father's response, 'I said at the outset that you should feel free to do your own thing. We don't expect you to be with us all the time and you haven't been have you?'

'No, and I've really enjoyed the trip. So, when will we be back.....six o'clock?'

My father confirmed this was so and made some remark about me taking care of myself and not being out too late, especially in a strange town.

Soon after we had started the drive north I checked on our itinerary. My father explained we would first stop at a noted garden in the morning and the North Devon coast in the early afternoon. I mentioned that John Drakes had spoken of Lynmouth and Watersmeet, though I didn't admit to this having been during a meeting of which my parents knew nothing.

'We'll be in the area, hon, so let's check it out,' was my father's relaxed

response as I sat back in the car feeling content to have been able to simply mention the man's name in conversation. It gave me a warm, confident feeling, as though he was already a formal part of my life.....and of my plans for the day. Now I had to get the second part of my plan in order.

After an hour's driving we arrived at the special garden that my parents seemed confident was worth walking around. To their credit, so it proved to be, with beautiful rose gardens, shrubs, lawns and streams. It was warm; the air was full of inspiring scents and I was entirely happy to relax with my thoughts and feelings. At a suitable point in our visit I separated myself from my folks and made off onto a different path that took me away from the other visitors too. Once I had established I had some privacy, I tugged my phone from my bag and excitedly tapped in numbers I had written down the day before.

'Now, all you have to do is answer,' I muttered. The tone rang for too long, it seemed the plan was not going to work. Then, wonderfully, there was a voice.

'John Drakes.'

I took a deep breath and spoke my lines. 'John, this is Carrie.' There was a silence. I tried to imagine how he was responding to the shock. He spoke.

'Carrie.....from America, well this is a...a surprise. Aren't you supposed to be on Exmoor?'

It was hardly an inspiring reaction. 'I am, I am.' I tried to sound relaxed, but I wasn't. 'We are just walking around a garden... ..Rosemoor?' John confirmed I had the right name and made some comment about it being very beautiful, but I was busy preparing my next line. 'John, I was wondering, well, would it be possible.....' I began to flounder. 'Um, well, like I'll be back in town tonight.....I was hoping, I know you may be busy but, well, you know, could we meet again before I go back to London...just a walk around the town, or a drink, just a drink?' I wanted his answer but was nervous it would be negative. 'I so enjoyed meeting you, talking with you. I told you I like the company of adults.....are you busy, could we meet.' I despaired at my ineptitude. I must have sounded like some desperate groupie or worse, a lovelorn child. There was a silence, a long silence.

'Well, Carrie, I am rather busy. I'm painting at the moment and....'

'Oh, John, I'm sorry....are you able to talk? I shouldn't have phoned in the middle of the morning.'

'Ah, well we artists don't work standard hours, not like office types, you know. I've been painting since 6.30.' His voice sounded more willing, lighter. 'As it happens I was just about to make a sandwich so you are not really disturbing me.'

‘Good...good.’ He still hadn’t responded to my question. ‘What’s the painting?’ I didn’t really want to know.

‘A cottage, a little old fisherman’s cottage, from just along the coast. It’s one of a pair I am painting for the fellow who hires the buildings out to the tourists as holiday accommodation.’

He stopped, still not answering the question. ‘John... tonight? Can I buy you a drink somewhere? Is there a favourite pub in the town? I just want to talk.’

The man’s next comment was formal again, like a parent might ask. ‘About what, Carrie, what do you want to talk about? You shouldn’t be out with an old man like me.’

He had called my bluff, and had sounded all too definite in doing so - but I persisted. ‘I told you, I like spending time with adults, I enjoy conversation...you seemed to understand that. I just want to know more about the town, about the area, you know, just talk.’

‘And do you suppose I could avoid ridicule and ostracism if I was to be seen drinking with a lovely young American lady in one of my favourite drinking places?’

Was this a sign of his mellowing, of agreeing to my request? This time he certainly sounded milder and these words were not so severe. I risked all and jumped in with both feet. ‘And how do you think my reputation will suffer, John? I just want to talk, John.’

‘I guess you do, I guess you do. You are a remarkable girl, Carrie Darling.’

‘Is that a ‘yes’ because I can’t see if you have got a ‘pissed-off’ look on your face. Shall I just go away.....leave you to your painting?’

‘Carrie... don’t....no, okay, I’ll have a drink with you. Can you walk into town, meet me there?’

I very nearly said I’d walk to the ends of the earth if he told me to, but calmed sufficiently to say I would, and then to ask him where and when.

‘The harbour. You can find your way there, I’m sure. There’s a trio of small white-washed buildings of the far side, the south side, just before you reach the jetty. They look like residential properties from a distance but it is a pub. Go in through the last door, it’s painted blue I think. It’s very small; you’ll see me. Is seven o’clock too early?’

Trying to control my excitement I assured him it wasn’t and that I’d see him there. I offered to give him my telephone number but he declined, saying quite

sternly that since I obviously had his number I could phone him if anything went wrong, and that he'd be in all afternoon. I thanked him too enthusiastically and ended the call. Though the sun had gone behind a few small clouds, I was so deliciously warm I could have been stood in front a log fire. I seemed to be floating - to be quite impervious to anything around me. It occurred to me that what I was feeling here was not akin to the sensation of my first kiss, or first meetings I'd arranged with boys of my own age. I stood still, waiting for the feeling of levitation to stop. When it did I strolled off in search of my parents. I would enjoy this garden and would remain calm for the rest of the journey...no, not a chance. I was already shaking with anticipation.

It had been a wretched night. After the American had gone I'd heated up some food rather than prepare the salad I had intended, and sat morose and dispirited in the lounge for probably three hours. Summer sunsets seldom failed to inspire me, relax me, but I'd hardly noticed this one since the girl had skipped away out of my life. Once in bed I was unable to sleep for more than an hour at a time. While I was not dreaming of Carrie as such, the subjects I did dream of appeared to be related to our meeting and were sufficiently worrying to wake me up. Now, this morning, I'd got up early, forgone breakfast, strolled down to my orchard and picked a couple of apples. I walked back indoors and then across to the cliff edge before returning to the house to brew some coffee - all this before 7.00am. In an attempt to regain some equilibrium I'd turned to painting, but switched between half-completed canvasses in a manner I would seldom do, and would never do without good artistic cause.

I thought more than once that I should drive into town, buy my groceries a day early, just to get back to normal, but had turned back to the first painting of the morning and begun to add detail to the stonework of the cottage in the scene. I was not happy with the brushwork but looked to persevere. Then the phone rang.

The telephone is the enemy of the artist for obvious reasons and I would often leave it on answerphone to avoid interruption. When it rang on that morning my heart foolishly skipped a beat, reminding me that I was not thinking about art at all, but about the girl. For some reason I had no doubt it was the American. I wasn't surprised to hear her voice, but neither was I actually prepared for it.

Carrie's voice was all I remembered. Vital, polite, vivacious. Although she sounded nervous, and with good reason, since she was calling to ask for another meeting before she left for home. I tried to be strong. I meant to take notice of the warning signals, but I couldn't.....I just could not turn the girl down. I agreed to see her at Jim and Karen's little pub and restaurant on the harbour. I was known and trusted there and would not look so out of place as I might in some of the tourist pubs in the town. As we spoke I was thinking that one drink there would do no harm and could be a means to extending a 'friendship at a distance' when the girl left for the U.S.

Having said all that, and finding myself able to defend giving in to the girl's

fervent request, it did not improve my state of mind. Although I initially returned to my painting, I was in no better condition for work than before. Indeed, whereas before I couldn't get thoughts of the girl out of my mind, it was now visions of her, of us sat together later, of us talking at leisure that filled my head. It was hopeless. I was in danger of ruining a perfectly good painting if I continued work on the cottage scene.

I took myself down my long back garden to the bench beneath the trees of the orchard. This was my place of meditation, even more so than the sea view from the front of my house. Here I could sit almost entirely hidden from view. I had solved many a problem while sat here. In the warm dappled sunshine I pondered the issues her call had raised: Was I likely to be creating a new problem by agreeing to meet the girl? Had she got the agreement of her parents? If not, did it matter, for she was one of the most mature teenagers I had ever met. How must I behave? How would she behave? What were her motives, and, come to that, what were mine? I became increasingly convinced that no harm could be done, but it took me until early afternoon to truly calm myself.

What initially controlled my emotions was the decision to move away from the half-finished paintings and begin to prepare a fresh image of Carrie - for myself. Any suggestions about the wisdom of this that came to my mind, I quickly brushed away. I told myself that there could be no better way to keep the lovely girl in my memory than if I were to paint her portrait. I had painted young female images before, from London debutants to local bridesmaids, and enjoyed it, though to paint an image that would justify Carrie's loveliness it would have been preferable to have some formal sittings. But, possessively, this picture would be for me and no-one could know of it - not even Carrie.

During a two-hour spell in the afternoon I started three simple sketches of Carrie's head and shoulders. The first was good enough, and replicated the sketch of the day before but not yet with the detail, the second and third were marginally different; one a more side-on pose, the other carried a more formal, less effervescent, aspect to the face. I was pleased with all three, though still yearned to have the girl herself sat in front of me. I had to accept, I told myself, that this would never happen and it had been better to draw these images before my memory of her faded, not that I could believe it ever would.

As the evening arrived my thoughts returned more completely to the hours ahead. I shaved and took a shower oblivious to the problem that was just about to arrive. I strolled back to my bedroom, naked as I often tended to be in the privacy of my home, and opened my wardrobe. It was now that panic set in for no sooner had I brought out a pair of beige slacks, a pale blue shirt and the second-best of my three blazers than I started to see how stupid I would look if I dressed like this to meet a teenage girl. These clothes were thrust back into storage and my only pair of denim jeans was located and laid on the bed alongside a white tee-shirt. 'You old fool,' I heard myself muttering, 'you are not some old rocker.' I noticed small flecks of paint on the knee of the jeans that reminded me I had last worn them when teaching an art class at a college a few miles to the south and I immediately decided that Carrie deserved better.

My discomfort was never entirely resolved. In the end I selected a pair of black slacks and a black and white check sports jacket, though the choice of a dark grey open-necked shirt to go with it was the fourth or fifth combination I tried. It was all rather sad, I came to consider, as uncertainty about the whole evening crept into my head. Studying myself in the mirror I felt I looked reasonably good for someone of my age, and again appreciated that my thick white hair served good purpose on such occasions, but then I quickly realised I was looking at myself though my eyes, not those of a teenage girl. I resolved she would have to take me as I was.

But what was I? Why had I not turned off the advances of this girl from the moment I drew her portrait? I now had to take my reactions to the drawing of her picture into account. What were those feelings I had? How could I have drawn so fast? Was it an illusion; was I in fact working at my normal pace? No, the girl noticed it as well, and remarked on it? So why? Why this reaction? Perhaps it was the sun; perhaps I had suffered some momentary form of sun-stroke? I was, after all, concentrating, very hard, in one position, and had been doing so throughout the day. But the girl had appeared to be affected by the artwork too. She had spoken of the sensation of pieces of her being taken away to complete the picture. It was all too fanciful and not the sort of emotions I had any truck with as a rule. It was an ordinary sketch of a lovely girl and the emotional stuff I must and, I assured myself, could ignore.

This was all very well but, as I made to leave my home that evening, I was like a child being offered a visit to a new toy shop or, yes, an artist knowing he was about to be introduced to the perfect subject. As I walked along the cliff-top road towards the distant town, it was as much as I could do not to skip, to run, to bring the moment forward when I would see Carrie again.

We did visit the steep valley John had suggested and it was as spectacular as he had promised. For me however, it simply served the primary purpose of keeping the man in my mind. My parents regularly commented on how fortunate we were that the artist had been thoughtful enough to recommend the place, and each time I had to stop myself saying that I would pass on their thanks to him when we met that evening. I delighted in my deviousness again.

Once we got back to the hotel I had just long enough to shower and make myself look the way I wanted to. I had two problems that increased my tense mood and my nervousness. Firstly, I was travelling light, of course, and had brought only one smart top and a trouser suit that it worked quite well with. The rest of my clothes were for sitting in cars, lazing on beaches, climbing hills and swimming in pools. My second problem was that I felt I didn't know how I should look for John. He was as old as my father, surely not used to being with girls of my age and probably frowned on some of the make-up styles I normally favoured. But I couldn't dress down because it didn't suit my purpose....I had to go for impact and to hell with the results.

I walked out of the hotel and across its gravel drive to the gates. My hair fell perfectly, reacting to my movement, resting on my shoulders. My shoes, not as high-heeled as I might have chosen had I been at home, enabled me to walk with grace and sophistication. The blue satin shirt contrasted well with the black suit and just one of its buttons was left unfastened.....for the moment!

I felt very pleased with myself as I walked the two hundred yards to where the shops of the town began and the holiday crowds still milled around. I was well aware of the looks I was getting from these people in their holiday fashions. I must have looked very peculiar, but I wasn't dressed for them, or for shopping in a quaint English holiday town. Having said that I arrived at the harbour far too early so I did have to start 'window shopping' just to take up the time.

Indeed, I got myself too warm even strolling leisurely along the main run of shops and then up along a back street where the retailers were less gaudy and not so tourist-orientated. There was a jewellery shop that took my eye but when I looked closer it was, in truth, an old-fashioned and dusty antique place with sundry isolated items of silver and gold, glass and metal. It was the only window that truly captured my attention and I was soon back by the harbour, checking my watch, and considering whether I could make for the meeting place yet. It was then that I saw John; unmistakably tall, smartly dressed and strolling contentedly amongst the other folk on the harbour edge across the road and a little ahead of me. I almost called out but thought better of it....this was not the time to embarrass him or me. Instead, I stayed on my side of the road and tracked the artist as he weaved between the throng of evening visitors.

I allowed him to get sixty or more yards ahead of me as he moved on around the south side of the harbour and approached the buildings he had described to me. As he reached the door he stopped to look in my direction but he was quickly inside without noticing me. I moved on, wanting to run, to give myself as much time as I could with him, but I calmed myself and tried to walk like a catwalk queen.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Five

As I stepped through the tiny door of Jim and Karen Tremanning's little pub and restaurant, and established Carrie wasn't there, I wanted to turn and bolt for it. All my reticence returned. I shouldn't be here. I was bound to see someone I knew - this was all a big mistake. What on earth was I expecting to achieve? I was loudly wrenched from my thoughts by a cheery greeting from behind the small bar.

'Good Lord, if it isn't our artist in residence, Mr. John Drakes. We thought you were dead -or drinking in some other establishment.'

Jim Tremanning was a rotund and constantly merry man. He was just about the perfect landlord, and astute enough to welcome his regulars when he saw them. Visitors, especially young tourists, were treated civilly but not exactly encouraged to stay for long. His ruddy beaming face grinned out from behind racks of gleaming glasses hanging above his domain; a miniscule old wooden bar, with the serried ranks of spirits and liqueur bottles as a backdrop.

'Ah, if it's not the master of watered-down beer and stale cheese sandwiches.' My response was what Jim expected and he'd have been disappointed had I not risen to his bait. His beer was excellent and his food outstanding, though the latter was Karen's domain. 'You know how it is Jim, when you're busy painting beautiful scenes and lovely people, one doesn't want to ruin the enjoyment by coming here.'

'You old bugger, it's good to see you.' A large hand was stretched towards me. 'Has been a while, though John...been busy?'

'I was here the week before last, you absent-minded old fool, but you probably didn't notice because I was upstairs with Karen.'

'Ah, that'll explain the restaurant takings being down that night. I told her if that happened again she'd have to charge for all the services we offer, if you get my drift.' Jim's raucous chuckle drew the momentary attention of others around us.

I briefly acknowledged a couple of other drinkers I knew, and then took up the

conversation again. The small room seemed crowded but there were only half a dozen people there. 'And how is the lovely lady?'

'She's fine, John, thanks, as lovely as ever and cooking up a treat for you if you're interested.'

I was about to say I was meeting someone and that I didn't expect to be eating when Jim spoke again, to someone behind me. 'Yes, love, can I help you.' He had put on his broadest Cornish accent for the person. I knew who it was before I turned around.

Carrie was indicating that it was me she was here to see and her finger was a few inches from me as I turned to face her. I took her hand in mine and muttered something about it being good to see her and stating the obvious about her having found the building. I came to my senses.

'Jim, this is Carrie.' I just stopped myself from mentioning the surname. 'Carrie is from the U.S. and touring the area with her parents. She's back to London tomorrow.' I felt I had covered everything in this brief introduction.

'Carrie. It is a delight to meet you, my love, even though you have chosen such dreadful company from amongst all of us handsome types around here.' The remark was full of warmth and humour and I was pleased to see Carrie react cheerfully, with sophistication and caustic humour.

'Jim.' She shook the offered hand. 'You have a lovely place here. Of course I wouldn't normally be out with someone like Mr. Drakes but my parents reminded me I was falling behind on my work with seniors in the community.'

There was a roar of laughter from the publican which filled the tiny room. 'Oh, John, that's put you in your place, hasn't it old feller? Carrie, you are clearly a woman of outstanding wit and intelligence, not to say beauty, and you are very welcome. What can I get you.'

Carrie quickly glanced at me and then back at Jim. 'I'll take a gin and tonic, no ice, just lemon.'

'Goodness, John,' roared the barman, 'she's beautiful and she likes her spirits. Gin and tonic for the lady, and you, you old rake?'

'A half of your lukewarm, muddy local and we'll take it next door if we may, if only to get a break from your banter.'

Jim grinned broadly and assured us he would deliver the drinks personally. That meant I could now concentrate on the girl beside me who was smiling happily and looking at me with great confidence and assurance. Without saying anything I gently led her around the other drinkers to the next of the rooms that made up this

quayside building. It was of similar size to the first with a couple of tables with chairs and a bay window with bench seating.

'You must excuse Jim,' I said as we exited the hubbub of the bar area, 'He is a typical publican but, actually, a very good one. This place is preferred by many of the locals to the plastic pubs elsewhere in town and, as you saw, hardly promotes itself to passers-by. Few of the trippers get round this side of the harbour.' We stood in the centre of the room. The girl looked quite stunning, her blonde hair draped across her shoulders and contrasting starkly with her black jacket. Her blouse was a rich blue and silky in texture; two buttons were unfastened to show more of her elegant neck. I was shaken by the transformation from twenty-four hours before.

She walked ahead of me towards the window, speaking as she went. 'I think Jim is wonderful, I think this place is just.....just great, you couldn't have chosen better, and just look at this view.' I followed her across the room. She moved gracefully, unhurriedly; she carried herself tall, though she was a good few inches shorter than me.

Since she'd moved to the window I asked her if she was happy to sit there. She quickly did so and seemed to want me to join her. I thought about bringing a chair from a nearby table but chose to join her on the seat, making sure I was not so close as to send out the wrong message. This start to the evening was even better than I had imagined and I cursed myself for my previous worried state. I was with a splendid young lady who was clearly bright, inquisitive and reassuringly adult in her manner. I felt as much at home with her as I would have done with a similarly graceful woman of my own age.

'Allow me to say that you do look lovely - not at all what I expected. Well, expected you to wear, I mean, well, you were dressed... ..well, you were in holiday mode yesterday, I guess.' I stopped floundering. Carrie said I was lucky that she had brought this one half-decent outfit with her and tugged at the jacket buttons so that it opened up to reveal more of her shirt. I must have sat there absolutely, and dangerously, transfixed because I was aware I should have been speaking but was not. The arrival of our drinks brought me back to earth.

Jim was now quieter and altogether more restrained. 'Here we are now.' He managed to pull a small table closer to where we sat and stood the glasses on it. *'You just give me a shout if you want a refill.'* I thanked him and he was gone. I was left to look at Carrie, and find some sensible conversation.

It had not crossed my mind during the day or in my preparation for the evening that there was anything dangerous about what I was doing. Sure, I was doubtful about how John would view the evening, how we would manage to find enough to talk about, but it had not occurred to me that I should have been more wary or cautious about the man. Amidst the throng of the people around the harbour and because of one or two comments called from some laddish holidaymakers, there

was a small concern, but now I felt remarkably calm when I walked through the door of the tiny cottage that I had seen John enter a minute or so before.

The artist was busy talking with the barman whose attention I managed to catch so as to have John notice my arrival too. After a cheery welcome from the owner, John led me through to an adjacent room that was completely empty of drinkers and had just a few seats and tables. This was certainly not the evening scene I was used to in the bars of London. We had left our fellow drinkers behind and were, for the moment, alone; I was nervous but excited. I walked ahead of John to the window and tugged an extra button open on my shirt when I thought he wasn't looking. Then, more publicly, also undid my jacket. It was 'so far so good' as John joined me on the semi-circular window seat and our drinks arrived.

He seemed prepared for me to start the talking. At this point it had to be modest and not controversial. 'How did your painting go today?'

He responded simply that he'd got a decent amount completed but made some joke about having taken an age to get ready for this meeting, saying that he knew he would still look like an old fool alongside me. He was clearly fishing for a compliment and did not impress me with this poor first effort, but I played along.

'I'm just grateful you agreed to meet me again. It is good of you.....and I *do* appreciate it.'

He said the pleasure was his and that he hoped my drink would be okay; I took a sip. It was. John drank from his glass and seemed to relish the chance to avoid talking for a moment.

I briefly described the events of my day, mentioning Watersmeet and other parts of the trip but this was not the theme I wanted to cover, so I quickly led back to the portrait. 'My parents are still excited about the sketch you did. They've mentioned little else all day.' John asked if I was still happy with it. 'Of course,' I said, 'it is already a treasured possession. I keep thinking of what it would look like in colour, as a properly painted portrait. When I'm wealthy I'm going to have you come over to the U.S. and paint a proper portrait, how about that?'

John didn't rise to the bait with any enthusiasm but made some comment about usually travelling business class but being prepared to sit with the tourists if the trip meant being able to undertake such a painting. To this I responded by saying he didn't realise how serious I was and that the commission might come sooner than he expected. We both smiled, each knowing the idea was utterly fanciful.

'How long have you had a stall at the fayre?' was my next question, trying to get on to a more sensible theme. He told me it was his fifth year and I asked whether it was a chore or a pleasure.

'Oh, a pleasure, I guess, especially when the weather is as good as it was

yesterday. It is good to do something to help the local charities. I was made very welcome here when I came down from London; I'll always be grateful for that. I cannot say I actually look forward to the day from an artistic point of view - it can all be a bit hectic and if someone leaves my stall dissatisfied then it could reflect on the whole event in their eyes.'

'And just how many people leave with one of your sketches that they are not happy with?' I wasn't buying this self-deprecation.

'How do I know,' the man replied, 'but you saw one yesterday...the old woman.'

'That wasn't reasonable though, she was just a sour old thing. I don't suppose she found anything to be pleased about in the whole day.'

'I guess you're right. Let's hope she won the bingo last night.' We both smiled. The woman was precisely the type who would sit morosely studying a bingo card for three hours and call it entertainment.

I leaned back on the seat and lifted my right arm to rest it along the top of the bench on the opposite side to John. I knew the precise effect this movement would have, and noticed John's eyes follow the move to confirm it had worked. 'Have you done any major portraits recently?

He said he had done one or two head and shoulder pieces but that the largest such painting was a full size work of a woman who ran a restaurant in the country some fifteen miles from where we now sat. It was 'major' in size, though not necessarily in quality. She was a good friend and had been 'given' the portrait as a birthday present by her husband who had a shipping company in Bristol. He spoke very warmly of Jenny Pope of the Valley Inn at Avoncombe, though less so of her husband Michael. I had to change the subject again.

'When you draw a portrait you obviously start with the shape of the head and then the style of the hair, but what comes next, the eyes, the forehead, the mouth.....is there a formula?' This energised him more.

'For a quick portrait the shape is an immediate thing. As an artist you are used to seeing the shape of the head and face, the neck, and the basic proportions, in an instant. Thereafter you have to decide on a fundamental characteristic that will drive the image. With a longer term painting there are other intermediate steps that you tackle one at a time, building up the total image piece by piece.' He had played in to my hands.

'And what was the fundamental characteristic you saw in me?' I stared at him. He seemed to notice my intensity and briefly looked away to consider his answer. When he looked back it was his eyes that burnt into mine; I was mesmerised, utterly transfixed.

‘It was your remarkable sophistication for one so young and so casually dressed. You somehow managed to look graceful, quite grand, and yet you had not come to the hill to sit for a portrait. You have wonderful poise....quite wonderful.’

I shivered, then swooned, then gulped, then luxuriated in the compliment. ‘Wow!’ was all that I could say. The man’s words appeared to come naturally....I found myself neither worried nor offended by them. ‘You know how to say the right thing, don’t you?’

For a while, as we sipped our drinks and settled ourselves on the seat, I began to think the meeting was going to be an anti-climax. The conversation was stilted, though, to be fair, I was letting the girl lead. I was still nervous, both of what I was doing and where it would all lead. As the girl settled she relaxed into her seat, stretching her arm along the top of the bench, a move I guessed was to call attention to the tightening effect it would have on the material of her shirt. A message flashed to my brain that this was no novice I was accompanying here.

Her first leading question was on the matter of creating a portrait - what the basic principles were. I mentioned the first things that came into my mind, using my experience of teaching the subject to those of similar age to Carrie, but when she deliberately made it personal to her I decided to call her bluff, or that was how I saw it when I chose my words. I told her I had been seeking to portray her ‘remarkable sophistication’ in the quick sketch I did of her. It was a glib remark with only an element of truth; for while I’d certainly been impressed by that quality in her, I’d not had those specific thoughts in my head when I started drawing. My comments backfired on me however, for they simply reminded me of my own sensations when sketching the girl, my own inexplicable reactions, and it brought back the cold sweat and accompanying nervousness I’d felt the previous day.

Carrie was clearly shaken by my words. She had suddenly cupped her right hand to her mouth and credited me with knowing just the right words to use. I was not sure now that they had been so right, and I sipped at my drink again to ensure a pause.

The American started saying that she’d not been dressed the day before in a manner that she would have expected to justify the description I had used. ‘Well, perhaps that’s just the artist in me,’ I replied. She was not complaining - she said, and remarked that when she looked at the sketch that was what she saw. ‘There you are then,’ I interjected, ‘They say the camera doesn’t lie, but neither should the artist. What I saw is what I drew. I saw a sophisticated young woman.’

‘There you go again,’ she said, brushing her hair back across her shoulder in a rare moment of embarrassment. To help her I launched in to an explanation of the art of portrait painting, while repeating that I was hardly a qualified expert. She seemed absorbed by my words and listened intently as I held forth. It was good to have an avid listener, but disconcerting for it to be such a beautiful one.

My flow was interrupted by Jim Tremanning as he walked through from the bar to his small restaurant, and, on the return trip, asked if we wanted more drinks. It was only now that I noticed the girl had emptied most of her glass while I had barely started mine. Jim's remark when he saw the difference - that I had clearly been doing too much talking and not enough drinking - was embarrassing and I started apologising to the girl in front of him. She laughed it off but then suggested that perhaps she should try some of the same ale I was drinking, and was back looking at me as if for my opinion. I made some humourless joke about never knowing when you'd finish some of Jim's local brew because you couldn't see the bottom of the glass for sediment, but then asked Jim to bring two glasses of the stuff - adding that Carrie might need another gin to wash away the taste of his beer.

I could hardly complain that the 'one drink' meeting was stretching to two, since the first minutes had gone especially well and I saw no threat to its status as an innocent, friendly evening.

I apologised to Carrie for talking too much, but she protested that it was just this type of exchange that she had wanted this evening. I was just about to invite her to contribute to the chat when Karen walked past for the first time that evening. I introduced the women to each other - vastly different in appearance and age yet both vivacious characters with captivating smiles. After exchanging some pleasantries, Karen asked if we were eating; this created another turning point of the evening. One I hadn't planned for.

Carrie said nothing, but I sensed her looking at me. 'We don't really have long,' I heard myself muttering without checking with the girl. The evening was still warm and light but it wouldn't be if we stayed for a meal and left after ten.

'I've got some fine salmon...could do you those spiced salmon steaks you like. We've got the simple stuff too, of course.'

I looked at Carrie and had my answer in an instant. Her blue eyes were saying 'yes, please,' her smile was reassuring, her whole demeanour one of a grown woman wanting to be entertained. 'It's your time,' I said lamely. 'What time did you want to get back?' I was grateful I avoided using the words 'have to be back' and so suggest the girl was not master of her own time.

The American clasped her hands in front of her chin. She was stunningly beautiful and every move she made was appealing. 'I'm all y...', she started, then stopped before adding, 'If you have the time, John, the salmon does sound great.'

My heart skipped a few beats as I felt myself grin stupidly at the young American. Without taking my eyes off her I replied to Karen that 'I think we would like two of your salmon steaks, perhaps after small portions of your homemade pate. How soon will you want us?' I heard the woman say 'just a few minutes' so asked if she could cancel the drinks order we had just given her husband and replace it with a bottle of my favourite white. I glanced up at her for confirmation

but looked quickly back at the girl as Karen hurried away.

'Are you sure about this?' I asked her, not wanting a change of mind at any cost. 'You have to travel tomorrow and perhaps your parents...'

Carrie touched my arm to stop me. 'John, please don't remind me that I have to travel home tomorrow, and certainly don't worry about time on my behalf. I'm a big girl. I'm not under curfew.'

I blurted out an apology. It sounded pathetic, I sounded pathetic, and probably looked it too. Carrie smiled directly at me with those mesmerising eyes again. 'I couldn't be happier.....I don't want to keep you out, but I'll stay as long as you'll have me.'

Now this was a telling remark, a serious one; it caused me to take notice and gather my mixed thoughts together. 'It was you who said 'one drink' as I recall.' I made the comment as formally as I could without being too stern. 'I still feel you should be up in the town with boys of your own age.'

'I'm sorry.' Carrie's eyes dropped and there was the slightest pout on her beautiful lips. 'I hadn't appreciated I had been acting like a teenager. I don't feel like one but I can understand you seeing me as one.'

I swallowed, adjusted my position on the seat so I was facing the girl more directly, and gathered my thoughts. 'Carrie, you've been acting like the young lady you undoubtedly are. I apologise for suggesting differently. Let us stop over-reacting to each other and have a nice meal.'

Her head came back up to look at me with those incredible eyes sparkling again; the pout had gone from the pale lips and the natural vivacity was wonderfully apparent. The thought went through my mind that I could and should spend the next two hours in this lovely girl's company and aim to complete an innocent and harmless evening in the manner she deserved.

It seemed almost by accident that Karen, the pub owner's wife, appeared and asked if we planned to eat with her that evening. Perhaps John had always known the question would be asked, but even so he didn't seem ready for it and, for all my encouragement, seemed reluctant to agree to stay for a meal. But the fact that he agreed to it meant I had the man for longer. I aimed to make the most of it. From this point I was more relaxed about the evening and felt that if I could persuade the artist he was entertaining a grown woman, it could be an occasion I would remember for a very long time.

Within moments of placing our order, Karen walked back into the room inviting us to follow. I was quickly to my feet, imagining that sat at a table for two in a restaurant would be a better location than this peculiar bench seat in the bay

window of a plain little room. John was quickly by my side, motioning to lead me by the arm but actually not touching me as we followed the woman. The restaurant was not much bigger than the room we had left, though an extension at the back of it enabled total seating of some twenty people at seven tables. The floor was bare but the tables and chairs smart and the décor an attractive cream and white.

There were only two other tables occupied. Karen, intentionally or not, led us to one towards the back of the room, well away from those being used. John now pushed ahead to pull back the chair that would leave me facing the back of the room, and he the window and the remainder of the room. I briefly considered his reasons for this but was quickly diverted by his warm smile as he offered to take my jacket. The room was warm so I was happy to discard it and content to notice him take a longer look at my satin shirt.

As we settled into our seats I came to wonder why I was finding this a romantic evening, rather than one with someone of similar age to my parents. On all but one of the previous evenings of the trip, I had sat with them in either the restaurant of the hotel or a nearby eatery and felt as though I was a junior interloper on a senior event. It was not that my parents kept the dinners formal - they were friendly and often funny, but I was always conscious of being young with old. Here, with John, a man of similar age to my father, I felt I was on equal terms; an adult in adult company. I smiled when I wondered what the last thirty-two hours would have been like if John had been married, or perhaps had a girlfriend in his house when I went there. He obviously noticed a smile cross my lips.

‘Something amusing you?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing. I am so enjoying myself. You are so kind to have met me this evening.’ I got on to practicalities. ‘And just in case you thought otherwise, I am paying my share of this.’

The man’s contentment disappeared instantly and he frowned, making as if to stand. ‘Then this evening is over, Carrie. If an old man cannot buy a small meal for a friendly, charming American lady then he would rather abandon the whole evening.’ He laid his large tanned hands on the edge of the table to lever himself up but I reached across to plant my tiny hands on his.

‘Okay.....okay, jeez, I only wanted to pay my way.’ I wasn’t surprised by his move, but it had been rather abrupt. ‘You’re very kind.... too kind.’

Further conversation was stopped by Karen delivering the wine, pouring two glasses and standing back to allow her young assistant to deliver two small plates of a coarse pate with toast and some salad leaves. Once she had left, John raised his glass and waited until I did likewise. ‘Here’s to the future. May we remember our encounter. May you have the happiest of lives and a successful career and may I grow old disgracefully, picking up holidaying teenagers and buying them meals.’

The last comment was clearly humorous but still surprised me. ‘So you do this

more regularly than you are letting on,' I said, part teasingly, part inquisitively.

'No.....no, certainly not. You are the first to have been foolish enough to suggest an after-hours meeting. I guess the nearest I get to socialising with young women is the Christmas party held by the art college I teach at occasionally. I suppose some of the girls there humour me, flirt a bit, it's all very harmless and only one evening in a year.' He smiled and surprised me by offering a hand stretched across the table. 'Do you like the wine? it's from the Loire Valley, particularly nice when lightly chilled like this rather than damn near frozen like it would be in some places around here. For all his rough edges, Jim is very knowledgeable.

I told him I did like the wine and that I often had wine rather than a fancy cocktail. His hand left mine all too quickly and we each began to eat. After a couple of mouthfuls, the artist asked me what I expected to study at university; it was not a subject I especially wanted to talk about, but it made a change to speak of it to someone other than parents, tutors and school friends.

I said that my preferred subjects at school and college had been history and literature, and that I also liked sports, especially tennis. 'Ah but you cannot play much tennis,' John remarked, interrupting my flow. He quickly added that my hand was far too soft to have had a racquet in it very often. I looked at my right palm as I answered.

'Huh, and you call yourself a detective. I'm left-handed!' I sat back grinning with pride at my invention.

'And unusual too!' was his surprising response, and he waited as my face must have betrayed that I was waiting for more. 'You wave right-handed.....most sporting types who throw or hit left-handed find it most natural to wave with the hand they use for those purposes.'

Rather than admit he was right and that I had added the comment about tennis hoping for some comment about my athletic body, I changed the subject. 'This pate is delicious.....obviously not from a tin.'

The man smiled, allowing the new line of conversation. 'No, I doubt Karen has many cans in her kitchen. Certainly all her vegetables and fruit are fresh and I believe she often makes her own ice cream. As long as you are enjoying it.....'

I confirmed that I was but I wanted to get back to art and the artist. 'Did you study art at university?' John explained that he was actually surprised to find himself at university at all because he was never much of a scholar nor especially studious. He added that a couple of his high school tutors seemed to have had sufficient faith in him to help and guide him through a special term when qualification for university was at stake. 'I was something of a rebel at school,' he commented with apparent pride. 'I hated wearing a uniform around the town and wasn't comfortable with the regimentation and discipline. I suppose I was quite

bright but I didn't apply myself as well as I could, and should, have.' He was at ease now as he spoke about himself; he seemed more comfortable with me than before. He went on to confirm that he had shown artistic promise at school but it was not encouraged as university qualification approached.

'While they wanted me to swot up for the traditional subjects I preferred to draw pictures for everyone, especially caricatures of the teachers - they got me into trouble more than once.' His eyes sparkled mischievously. 'I think I sneaked into Cambridge on the basis of acceptable exam results and the recommendations of my headmaster. A man who, despite our occasional run-ins, appreciated my art skills to the extent that he once had me draw pictures of the school and locations around it as part of some punishment. He then sold them at the school open day. They were so popular that I was given a few spells of free time each winter term to produce a new batch.

'So you continued the art at uni.' I said, as it seemed he must have done. But he replied that this was not the case and he took as history degree. 'But,' I said, 'you kept up your painting?'

He explained that I should remember that this was the 1960s and most days at university were spent playing music or listening to it, drinking, partying and smoking all manner of mixtures other than tobacco. 'I was no junky, I want you to know, but I was very happy bumming around, doing just enough to keep ahead of the inquisitors and assessors looking for academic results and certain behavioural standards. I tended to befriend tutors who were more relaxed, less regimented. I did very little serious painting other than material for the magazines, parties and raffles, but I did get on some good trips around Europe to visit art galleries and artist workshops. My degree was on Renaissance Europe and it took me most of my time at Cambridge to learn to spell 'renaissance.'

I was so content; the evening was turning out just as I had wished. I felt like a woman, perhaps more so than on any other occasion in my life.

The meal was pleasingly calm and correct. The girl avoided further mischievous questions in the main and was, indeed, a glamorous and sophisticated companion. The conversation was easy and relaxed, and uncontroversial; Carrie seemed to have forgotten her desire to talk of the emotions of the previous day....which was a great relief!

More than once I became dangerously focused on her natural beauty. She wore little make-up but her high cheekbones, well maintained flowing blonde hair and the rich blue shirt were intoxicating enough. Her ready smile, bright white teeth – a truly American trait – and graceful demeanour all added to the fact that she was already a woman at a very young age, and I loved it! I loved the fact that she was confident without being precocious, intelligent without being showy, and capable of looking beautiful without, as far as I could gauge, working at it. I loved it, and I loved her, though all the while appreciating that this was nothing more than a

temporary liaison.

The meal was as excellent as ever and here again was pleasure in the fact that Carrie savoured it, understood it, and yet was surely of an age more accustomed to fast food in all its wretchedness. She sipped at the wine but, again, appeared to relish it. I was entertaining a very charming and dangerously attractive young lady.

We talked more about her family, her knowledge of Britain, my visits back to the U.S. and our choices in music, travel and food. It was all very natural. I never had to search for a topic and neither, it seemed, did she. We ate the main course slowly, and I for one, had not noticed that by the time Karen came to collect our plates we were the only customers left in the room.

I desperately did not want to be seen to look at my watch but was conscious it must be close to ten o'clock. The girl showed no sign of impatience and even gave thought to selecting a desert before settling for coffee. When Karen disappeared again, I reluctantly sought to start bringing the evening to a sensible, uncomplicated completion.

'Carrie, you have been the most wonderful dinner guest an old man could ever hope for. I don't know whether this.....' I stopped myself from talking myself into a dangerous position. 'I hope this might be another reason for remembering Cornwall.'

The girl became momentarily girlish! 'Oh, John, you just don't know how special this has been for me.' It looked sincere but sounded scripted. 'I really was expecting just a quiet drink with you.'

I didn't take this as criticism or as a move on her part to hasten the end of the evening, but I saw it as a chance to keep things formal. 'And I have kept you out too late as a result. When do you need to be back at the hotel?' I was not sure how I wanted her to answer.

'Time is not an issue,' she said, almost severely. 'There is no rush on this side of the table.' She had cleverly put the onus back on me and made me sound petty and dull again. I took the arrival of the coffee to collect my thoughts. I asked Karen to bring the bill and sought to regain the initiative.

'So what is next for you now? You have just a few weeks left so I guess it is masses of farewell parties and a bit of packing.'

This topic did remove the vitality from the American's face for just a moment. 'I expect it to be the other way round actually,' she grumbled, 'I will certainly have a drink or two with my friends who are staying in the UK, but I'm sure my parents will be expecting me to do a good deal of the packing – I believe the boxes are coming next week – and we have a list of things we have to do to ensure the house

is right for the next occupants. It's an official house, you see, so there will be another Embassy family in it within a month or so. But don't let's talk about that, it will make me miserable.'

Mention of this housing situation persuaded me to ask what her father did for a living. Carrie replied that both her parents worked at the American Embassy in London, her father on visa matters and her mother as a clerk of some sort.

I apologised for being inquisitive and quickly moved on to make some ridiculous comment about America being pleased to get her back and being sure she would enjoy it once she was there. Her response surprised me in its coldness.

'You're right, I guess. You seem to make a habit of being right.' Before I could respond, she apologised. *'I'm sorry.....that was uncalled for. I am sure I'll settle back into the American way of life easily enough but, John, I'd rather not talk about it this evening.'*

We exchanged smiles as we had been doing all evening. I was thinking of ways to lighten the conversation again when she chose the topic. 'Did you say you get to London now sometimes?'

I confirmed that I did make occasional visits, mostly because of the consultancy I still held with the company who had bought my business those years before. I told her that it was probably their way of keeping me supportive of what they were doing with my old company and its staff, but added that they did seem to value my input on design aspects of the whole company, from letterheads to office and shop design. I guessed she didn't want to know this detail but I was concerned about the reason for her question. My fears were realised by her next question.

'So when is your next visit?' The American had barely missed a trick all evening. There was undoubtedly an element of her that appeared forceful, possessive, but if she was now pushing new boundaries then she was even more astute, perhaps more dangerous, than I had imagined. From the point where I had wanted to say that I would be sure to make it before she left for home - that we could have another meal, have still more time together, I now knew I should not lose the control I felt I had kept on the evening.

'Oh, I doubt I'll be in town for months. There is a formal meeting three times a year that I normally attend but there is not one of those due for a couple of months.' The girl was finishing her coffee.

'Then I'll try to engineer another reason for you to come up. I'll get daddy to commission you to paint a portrait of mom before we go home.' It was a nonsensical comment and she knew it, laughing as she said it, before shrugging her shoulders as though it was the best idea she could come up with. My counter was delayed by Karen arriving with the offer of more coffee, which we rejected, and the bill that was laid calmly to one side.

'Or I could always say I need someone to sell my paintings to the galleries and shops around Cornwall.' It was intended to sound trite however much I would have liked it to be a possibility.

'Don't tempt me, John.....please! That sounds like an attractive job to me.'

'But not better than the rich experience of an American university and a whole bunch of new friends.' I moved to collect the bill, study it and lay it back on the plate with a credit card. What was to happen after we left this building was now in my mind. I wondered what Carrie was expecting.

I had so enjoyed the general conversation we'd been having that I had quite forgotten my basic intention of getting to know the artist better - allowing him to do likewise with me and, according my script, break down some of the reserve he'd shown with me. Now we were about to leave the restaurant and I couldn't be sure if the evening would end now, or if I still might have another few minutes with this man.

For a moment the conversation had lapsed, and for once, I relied on John to start it again.

'Shall I walk you back towards the hotel? It's a safe enough little town but I guess there could be a few groups of lads milling around.'

I thanked him and accepted his offer with relief. Within moments we were back outside the pub, on the harbour wall and taking new breaths of the fresh evening air.

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Six

Carrie might have thought my suggestion that I should accompany her back towards her hotel as something provocative on my part but, for me, it seemed the natural thing to do. In any event, she accepted the idea and we were soon walking slowly along the southern wall of the harbour towards the better-lit main road.

She spoke animatedly about the restaurant, Jim and Karen, the wine and the food. A couple of times we looked at each other but in the main we were watching our step along the cobbled path. I casually thrust one hand into a trouser pocket and immediately felt the girl's arm snake up into the loop I had created. It brought another exchange of smiles as I began to talk of America.

'To repeat myself,' I said, 'it has been a great pleasure to have met you and I hope we may come to exchange the occasional postcard or, I suppose, e-mail. But, as you are likely to be a good deal busier than me, I'll wait until I hear from you. If you do make contact, let me have your U.S. address and the like then.' This felt a very clumsy but formal way of passing the buck, but Carrie seemed unconcerned. *She said she had picked up my e-mail address as well as the postal details from my bag the previous day and would certainly get back in touch. She added, to my surprise, that she still communicated with a tutor she'd had in Paris and the elder brother of a college friend who she'd met when she first came to London, but was now at university in Tokyo. I couldn't gauge whether this remark was impromptu or if it was designed to keep me cautious.*

Wanting to keep the conversation away from the subject of the sketch, I started Carrie on the subject of the school she'd been attending in London. It turned out, quite logically, that she'd been to the American School that was quite close to a branch of my estate agency company. This gave us another topic of conversation as we compared our knowledge of the 'villages' of inner north-west London and of what had changed in the middle of the city since she'd been in the UK.

Soon we approached the turning that I would normally take back up the hill to my house. I was pleased to note that Carrie seemed to sense this was the end to her evening, though she then surprised me again.

'Would you just walk with me to the hotel gates?' The request was natural

enough and free of any apparent innuendo. I happily agreed, but I should have realised I'd given the girl the chance to return to her regular theme.

'John,' she said quietly, looking up at me as the beams from succeeding streetlights ebbed and flowed across her features, 'I want to finally put it on the record that I know you felt something different when you were drawing my portrait yesterday, and I certainly had the strangest sensations. I am not going to say anything more, except that I believe you did create something quite wonderful in those few minutes and I am absolutely thrilled that I was the subject of it. I am so grateful for this evening, and I hope I have shown that I am not some crazed, irresponsible kid. Thank you so very much.'

She looked to the ground but squeezed my arm more tightly. I'd had to turn to look at her as she spoke.....she deserved that. She'd fortunately mentioned several matters in her little speech and I could now choose to avoid the ones I needed to.

'Carrie, it is no wonder you are plagued by comments about your surname because it suits you so. You are a delightful girl and I am thrilled you like the portrait.....and I will be very pleased if we keep in contact albeit at great distance.'

She quickly replied. 'And do you think we might meet again some day?'

I discouraged her. 'I cannot see how, but let's say it might happen. Perhaps you'll holiday in Cornwall when you have a family of your own, and maybe I'll still be around then.' It seemed a suitably trite thought and certainly appeared to dull the smile of the girl.

We were close to the entrance to the hotel and Carrie stopped before I expected her to - a few yards short of the gates. She drew her arm from mine and managed to locate my hands, which she clasped in hers. Her earnest face looked up at mine. It was an adult, knowing face and it was not smiling now; her eyes were glistening with either sadness or determination, I couldn't make out which.

'John Drakes,' she whispered, 'don't you dare ever forget me or that wonderful drawing. You've drawn more beautiful women than me, and you will again. You'll spend months on paintings while you finished my sketch in minutes. But you'll never create anything that is more appreciated nor will you ever have a greater effect on any other person you meet. Now.....please don't stop me.'

While I was thinking of the immense courage and maturity that it had taken to say these words, and thinking how I could possibly find a worthy response, the girl's arms had reached up behind my neck and my head was being pulled towards her mouth that stretched up to mine. I resisted for just a moment, and noticed the briefest flicker of threat in the girl's eyes. Then I eased forward, our mouths met and stayed together. We had both kept our eyes open but Carrie's now closed and a tear dribbled towards her cheekbone.

Now she pulled away, thrust an angry finger at the offending tear, smiled as cheerfully as she could, and turned, ran to the entrance, turned again to look back at me, blew a kiss with her hand, and was gone.

Helpless and frozen to the spot, I forced myself forwards to a point where I could see the doors of the hotel, but the girl was away, gone, already inside, and lost to me.

I felt a vast flood of emotions as I left John that evening and ran off into the hotel, then trudged through its quiet corridors to my room. I had enjoyed one of the most rewarding evenings of my young life, but what had it achieved? I had embarrassed myself and a very fine man by leading all the way in a brief liaison that had no future.....but wait, I knew I'd had a remarkable impact on a man I'd only met a day before, had engineered a beautiful, harmless evening in his sophisticated and charming company, and that wasn't bad for some American kid in a foreign land. Then, as I threw my clothes into an irresponsible heap and collapsed dispiritedly on to my bed, I lurched into regret again as I failed to explain a worthwhile reason behind the whole escapade. 'You've got a new friend.....wow! And what good has that done for you? You've promised to write to him... how sad is that? You sound like a stamp collector! You've been travelling with your parents for too long. It's time to get back to London and meet up with Gareth again; he's not so bad, apart from his acne and his reluctance to talk about anything other than his latest computer game. You found parts of him that you quite enjoyed when his parents were away last month.'

As I laid back planning to think of Gareth, London and the return to the U.S. I thought only of John Drakes, and then John Drakes again. I couldn't get the man out of my mind until tiredness finally took over; feeling the warmth of his kiss and the pleasure of having been close to him, I drifted into sleep.

The day after my meal with the American dawned dull and quite cold, the first such weather for a while. As my last thought of the previous day had been of the girl, so she was first into my head the following day. As I padded about my home, preparing breakfast and thinking of the day ahead. I found myself foolishly thinking that I could justify being close by the girl's hotel as the Darling family left the building. I discounted the idea, of course, but it demonstrated my pitiful, hopeless state. I kept telling myself it was not infatuation, that it had simply been a wonderfully entertaining interlude that wouldn't be repeated. I did resolve to work more on a proper painting of Carrie while the girl was so fresh in my mind and gave scant consideration to the delay it would have on my still to be completed commissioned paintings.

If this plan kept me sane and focused for the first hour of the day, it fell apart when I set up to start the portrait. Choosing a slightly sideways position for the image I could not get past the first stroke of the bare outline, for whereas on the hill at the fayre my pencil had sped across the virgin paper at bewildering pace, it

now squirmed clumsily in my hand to produce inaccurate, actually inept, scrawls that were a foundation for nothing but ordinariness. Several sheets of paper were ruined and discarded as I struggled to start the work. It was work I knew I wanted to do but now, even in her absence, Carrie was still having a strange effect on me. Coming to the decision that my mood was so pathetic that fresh air and starting another task was the only solution, I scribbled a few notes to myself while standing in front of my kitchen cupboards and then made for the garage to prepare my car for the drive to my nearest supermarket.

The drive of just over a mile was complicated by my chaotic mind that was in no way ready for even a short drive. Somehow I managed to park the car safely and began to make my way to the shop entrance, only to find my addled mind assaulted by the piercing scream of a female.

'John, sweetheart!..... John!'

The voice of Grace Marchant was easily confused with the harbour foghorn and the movement of her large frame was akin to a cumbersome galleon about to be shipwrecked! Grace was the local organiser of everything and everyone, and once you were in her clutches there was little chance of escape. She hove into view from behind her tiny saloon car that had ground to a halt across two parking bays some thirty yards away. Her deafening shriek had caused several others shoppers to look in her direction and others to knowingly move off in another. I was not in a position to escape.

'Dear man, dear man, just who I needed to see.' There was every chance she would have failed to stop had I not reluctantly raised my hands to assist, though in truth this was done to prevent any form of embrace from the woman's flowered summer dress that boasted the dimensions of a family tent.

My greeting was dangerously mild but I knew the woman to be impervious to insult, be it spoken or suggested. 'Grace, my dear..... is there something I have forgotten to do for you?

'No, no, lovely man, you are always reliable, unlike others we could name.' A chubby elbow thrust itself forward to nudge my ribs. Fearing permanent damage, I stepped back. 'No, it's the drama club. We're doing a Coward.....Brief Lives....so we need a poster and those lovely pupils of yours did such a great job with the Rattigan. I was hoping.....what are the chances...?'

I, like many others, was annoyed by Miss Marchant's inability to ask the full question but, like those many others, was left in no doubt what she wanted.

'Well, Grace, I'm not sure I shall be teaching at the college next term and, as you know, I only run a couple of courses any way. It isn't really for me to say. I don't set the syllabus.'

'But you do have tremendous clout there, I know, and it's only one little poster for us to reproduce.'

'Leave it with me; I'll see what I can do. I'll call you in a couple of weeks.'

'You're an angel. An absolute angel. You must come to my little party at the end of the month.' The woman launched towards me again with another attempt at what she would call a nudge and others consider a knockout punch. I pulled away from the contact, tried a smile and headed away to the store with mouthed apologies but no true remorse for my discourtesy.

In the cool of the shop I got to wondering why I hadn't heard from Alwyn Davies, the Principal of the Central Cornwall Art and Design College some miles to the south. He had recruited me for the past twelve terms to fill in when the college lost one of their staff and were not allowed to replace them. I'd enjoyed guiding new young talent in the traditional ways of representational art, as they called it. It basically meant landscape and portraits, though I was allowed a wider range than that. I knew my work was admired by the staff and pupils, so guessed it was simply that Davies was his usual disorganised self and the call would come with just a few days to spare.

As I moved around the shelves I got to thinking of Tricia Coles, a student in my first year at the school, who had sought me out as a reference when deciding to try for a first job at a London art gallery a year or so ago; she had been a delightful child and one who I imagined had done well, though she had not kept in touch as she had promised. My mind flitted back to Carrie for the first time in several minutes. Perhaps she would be another who would not keep her word. But then maybe it was me who misread these signs because there was also Melanie Hall, who I actually went through some names and addresses of London art businesses with when she too was thinking of moving to London last summer. She was another who had spoken of telling me how she fared in the metropolis.

Once I had fresh stocks and returned home, I chose to return to the painting of the fisherman's cottage - I thought it better to delay my painting of Carrie until I was back on an even keel emotionally.

My journey back to London was much like the rest of the trip with my parents. Although there was more talk of the family preparations for the return home than of the glories of Salisbury Cathedral, denoting that the holiday had ended and normal duties must resume.

Once back in my bedroom in the family home at Stanmore, on the outskirts of London, I stole regular looks at John's portrait of me. I chose to keep it rolled up in a protective tube I'd found for it, rather than to display it for such a short time. I'd thought of John Drakes a great deal. I felt more heartache at the prospect of not seeing him again than I'd ever felt about anyone before. I briefly entertained thoughts of trying to see him again before I flew home, but discounted the idea as

fanciful.

I was grateful for the unexpected arrival of a college friend, Katie Russell, who stopped by when she saw the family was home. After brief acknowledgement to my parents she followed me upstairs to my room where the full story of the holiday was retold from the first day.

‘Well, you surprise me, kid,’ confirmed Katie, when she’d heard my story that had mentioned John but not his age or the detail of the portrait, and certainly not the kiss. ‘You told me it wouldn’t stop you searching out some good British lads just because your folks were around. It seems I was right and you were wrong. Don’t get this wrong but it does all sound a bit boring to me.’

‘No, it was good, really good.....but I haven’t told you the best bit.’

‘Ah, I knew it. Was he a DJ, a barman.....what, what...not a waiter! I know, he was a surfer, I should have guessed.’

We giggled as I reached for my cardboard tube. ‘Actually it wasn’t a boy at all. Take a look at this.’ I gently eased the rolled paper from the tube, pulled it open and held it up for my friend to see. Katie gasped and held her hands to her face.

‘Oh!.... MY.... GOD!’ I motioned for her to be quieter. Katie reached out to lightly touch the pencil work. ‘Is it real...I mean, is this a portrait...did someone do this for you?’ I only had time to nod a confirmation. ‘I mean it’s ...it’s just unreal...unbelievable. I mean...it’s more like you...than you! It makes you look, well, just gorgeous, just drop dead gorgeous.....and don’t get me wrong, you are beautiful.....but this, well, it’s.....it’s ...’

‘Magical?’

‘Yes, I guess.....yes, it is pretty magical. It must have taken ages.’

‘That’s the point. It was supposed to have taken about seven minutes but took no more than three, perhaps four.’

‘You’re kidding me! Someone drew this, from scratch?’

‘In three or four minutes, with me just sat there in front of him.’

‘Must have cost a fortune.’

I explained how my parents had seen it being done and my father paid ten pounds for it.

‘But it looks.....I don’t know.....it’s better than a photograph, that’s what it

is. It is absolutely you and yet it has something else. You said ‘him’.....marry him, have his babies, he is bound to be a millionaire by the time he’s thirty.’

‘Ah, well, he’s almost twice that already.’

Katie made a face of distaste. ‘Oh, shit! That’s a bummer. Has he got money?’

Now I told the whole story, from the chance meeting to the harbour-side meal. Katie interjected several times with, ‘into his house, you went into his house!’ and ‘kissed him, you kissed him!’

‘The point is,’ I continued, ‘you can see what a wonderful skill he has, you can understand what an impact something like this can have and....well, he is just a wonderful man.’

‘I’m sure he is as handsome as you say, and I believe he didn’t lay a finger on you.....that he has great conversation! You realise that is pure Caroline Darling....great conversation!!!? But he could be your father, even your grandfather, and you can see how creepy that is. Yuk! How can you be so level-headed one minute and crazy the next? What can you do about it anyway? He’s not going to chase you to the U.S. and you’re not going to stay here to befriend him are you?’

‘Who’s to say?’ I responded cheerfully, but with playful secrecy. ‘I might stay, you never know.’

‘I can just see your dad’s response to that.’

The Artist's Girl



Chapter Seven

Having been the subject of my thoughts the day before, it was a telephone call from Alwyn Davies that disturbed my painting the following morning. I had continued the painting of the fisherman's cottage and could see it being completed in the next couple of the days if I could truly expunge the young American girl from my thoughts and concentrate on the job in hand. The moment the phone rang I not only noticed my brush jump in surprise, but also that my immediate thought was it might be Carrie.

'John.... Alwyn here, from the college. Sorry I'm late in calling you about the new term. Taking a bit of organising, as I'm sure you'll understand. We'll certainly need you, as before, one morning a week for the term if that is possible, but can I call you back with our preferred days?'

My initial reaction was why had the man bothered to phone at all if he did not have his plans finalised, but I satisfied myself with a brief, 'Yes Alwyn, that will be fine; call me when you have it sorted. I'm reasonably clear.'

'Good, very good, excellent,' came the Welsh drawl in response. 'Actually, it was on another matter that I was calling. I've had the parents of Tricia Coles on to me.....you'll remember Trish, sweet little thing, quite talented, wanted to work in London.'

'Yes..... yes, I remember her, but I'm not sure I knew she wanted to work in London.'

'Her parents are worried because they haven't heard from her and she appears to have moved from her last address. They mentioned she got some job leads from you. There's nothing you can think of that might help trace her is there?'

I gulped as the worst of thoughts crashed into my head. I shivered. 'Alwyn, I might have mentioned some names of galleries I knew had commercial arms, you know..... the type that might have starter jobs, but that's all. She hasn't been in contact with me since she left the college. I don't think I knew she had actually gone up to London. I've had no contact with her, no contact at all.'

'No thoughts of accommodation she might have gone for, things like that?'

'Good Lord, no! As I say, it was just a five minute conversation one day at the college. I may have given her some names, just some names.'

'OK, don't worry, I'm sure it's just a lack of consideration on the girl's part. I'm sure it will get sorted out.'

'I hope so, I do hope so. I'll wait on your call on the classes.'

'Yes.....yes, give me another week.'

The phone went dead. I wandered into the kitchen, using this break from painting to brew some coffee. A shiver coursed through me again. Tricia Coles.....not a picturesque girl but she had a face that was always alight with a happy smile, but also someone with a fierce ambition to break away from her roots in Cornwall. I recalled her complaining about the fact that her farming parents barely ever left the county, had never been to London or travelled abroad, and couldn't understand why she should want to. I'd advised her to stay in the area for a few years, perhaps work at one of the seaside galleries in the region, but she was determined to get away. I recalled a cheeky exchange with the girl when she had joked that we could each make a fortune if I would paint her nude. It had been a one-off interplay that was quickly forgotten by both parties.....and now she had been back in my mind twice in a few hours.

I wandered back to my studio and got to work on the painting of the cottage and it was only now that I realised I had not thought of Carrie for the past fifteen minutes.

Katie and I spent an hour or more discussing how and why I might get to see John again before I left for home. Katie was not the brightest of my pals but she had been the most loyal. She was more transparently gregarious than me. Once I'd talked so meaningfully about the encounter with the artist, it was she who began to encourage me to consider whether it was possible to see the man again. We spoke of the chance of the man coming to London, of me making a mad dash back to Cornwall, and of perhaps trying to track down our old school friend, Sue Mallon, who had stayed in London after her education and now, we believed, worked in an art gallery.

'I've not seen or heard of Sue for months,' I said, as if defending the fact that I'd not called her. 'She was rather full of herself, wasn't she. Could be a real bitch when she wanted to.'

Katie agreed with the description but reminded me that we had one thing in common. 'She was adamant she was going to be a globetrotter. Always on about how

she'd find a rich old man who would supply her with money and clothes.'

'Yeah.....so why on earth should you compare me with her? Oh, I get it, older man, an artist.....that's disgusting, and not what I'd want at all. It's just that, well, look at this.' I held up the portrait once more and we both sat and stared at it again. 'He is a genius, Katie, and just a lovely man, just a lovely man!'

'And you are besotted.....yes, you are.... besotted, and the only way you can solve problems like this is to either push him to the back of your mind or grasp the moment.'

'And how do I do that? He's 300 miles away.'

'You've got those two choices...you can take the first one if you want to.'

'Push him out of my life as quickly as he came into it, you mean? I guess so, but he's not an easy man to forget. I know it sounds like infatuation ...perhaps that is what it is, I don't know any more. We just got on so well.'

'But how could you kiss him, Carrie. I mean, he was how old?'

'Same age as my dad, I reckon, but really smart and handsome.'

'But you said he had white hair.'

'He does, lots of it, wavy, beautiful. He's tall. He's a gentleman, that's what he is.'

'But he could be a common lecher; he could have been setting you up. He may be sitting by the phone waiting for you to call him. He's probably.....I mean, you don't know how many other girls he has had in his house.'

'You didn't meet him, you don't know him. He's just not like that. He was very open, he told me a lot about himself.'

'He probably told you what you wanted to hear.'

'Maybe, but he was a perfect gentleman and I felt incredibly safe with him, incredibly at home, natural....'

'Like you'd be with grandparents!'

I gave Katie a playful push. 'You are being no help at all.'

'I don't know what to say, do I. If I say call him, just to let him know you are

back home safely, you'll baulk at that; if I say forget him, you'll just start drooling over that sketch again....not that I can blame you for that. It's for you to sort out, kid, no-one else.'

'I know, I know.'

I saw Katie out of the house and returned to my room with my mind still tangled.

I got to thinking about the character of the man who filled my thoughts and found that I was, for the first time, trying to find faults in him. I went back through our meetings and conversations, his behaviour and what he had actually told me about himself. Could I have misread him? Was he perhaps not the paragon of virtue I believed him to be? Hard though I analysed it – to the point where my brain ached with stress – I just could not come up with anything so wrong in the man that it reduced my desire to be with him again. I was convinced I had gauged him right. He *was* a gentleman, a harmless older man who was entirely genuine in his treatment of me. I would call him – yes, I would call him.

I had managed to put Carrie behind me to some degree, had progressed with the painting of the fisherman's cottage and was marginally more at ease with myself. I felt I had put the trauma of the girl and then the call from Alwyn Davies to one side as I added some additional touches to a painting that, while hardly a ground-breaking piece of art, had tested elements of my brushwork skills and was closing in on being completed satisfactorily. I would now leave it for a couple of weeks, view it afresh, look for any shortcomings, correct them if I found any, and then deliver it.

With the canvas carefully stored for the day I padded into the kitchen and set about preparing a meal. I suppose I was in many respects a typical older bachelor for I was set in my ways, had routines that would perplex many, was content with my own company and especially with the pace of my life. I enjoyed excellent health and diverse interests outside painting. I dismissed the claims I knew could be laid against me – that I was too private, that I led a rather boring, methodical life, that I was probably too content with my own company. This evening I would prepare a salad to accompany some sliced beef I'd cut myself from a large joint I'd bought from the butcher some days before and had gradually used in a variety of dishes. I visited the supermarket only for the standard supplies of breakfast cereals, fruit juices, coffee and tea, and the like. For fresh meat, fish and for any fruit and vegetables I could not grow myself, I used local suppliers. Cheese and milk came from local farms.

I poured a glass of white wine, donned a thin jumper against the chill of the breeze off the sea, and walked with my food down to the far end of my garden where I could sit beneath the orchard trees and gain the full effect of the weak sun. For the moment I was more relaxed.

As I went to sit on the bench I carelessly spilled some of the wine onto my

dinner plate and mumbled a curse against my own hopelessness. If there was one thing I was not going to enjoy it was the years ahead when my alertness, fitness and general well-being began to desert me. As I laid the tray to one side on the seat and picked up the wine glass I cursed the fact that such a small instance could bring back the tension.

I was not yet at the stage where I spoke to myself but there were times when clear words went through my head and gave me the impression that I was actually speaking. 'This is a treasured spot, you lucky bastard. You really have got it made..... but what will it be like ten years from now, fifteen years, twenty.....are you still going to be living by yourself? Will you be capable of living by yourself? Who do you have that you can call on when you need a hand?' I foolishly ran through the names of some of my very good friends in the town of whom the vast majority would happily do anything for me. But would they feel the same when I was older, more reliant, less good company?

It was unlike me to be so mawkish, especially on such a day when I was feeling fit and had all but finished my latest painting. I placed the tray on my lap and started on my food so perhaps it was this that brought the American back into my mind. I imagined she was home by now, perhaps unpacking, maybe looking at the portrait again. I was remembering her smile, my first view of her, her natural vivacity and confidence, her stunning sophistication when we met in the town, and her beautiful eyes, pleading eyes, sad eyes when we said our 'good-byes.' I found myself recalling the kiss, and then her body, and then the clothes she wore on that first afternoon, and the blue shirt she wore for the evening meeting.

I had to shake myself out of this daze. 'Put it to the back of your mind.' But I couldn't. How could I even think the word 'it' as if this wonderful encounter was simply an event logged in a diary.....I hated myself for this. Carrie was a beautiful girl...a woman....and I owed it to her to keep her memory fresh; perhaps I should return to the easel to attempt a proper portrait of her.

As I continued with my meal there were more thoughts entering my addled head. Had I been utterly fooled by this girl and had the whole episode simply betrayed the fact that I'd been too long on my own, that the few women of my own age who I could count on as friends were pleasant enough, but did not excite me. Carrie excited me, brought back my love of feminine beauty, of poise, of grace. Jenny Pope, out in the country at Avoncombe, was a lovely lady, a married lady, married to an oaf who didn't know how to do anything other than make money on the backs of other people's efforts - including his wife. Most of the other women I knew were my age...they would flirt with me and I with them, but none had ever brought thoughts of a stronger friendship, well none of those who were spinsters or widows anyway.

What would complete the process of expunging Carrie from my mind? Perhaps I needed a break.....a trip to my beloved Paris perhaps? No, that wouldn't be enough, not at the moment. Maybe I should call Helen Collins, offer her a visit to my little house, perhaps cook her a meal. She was a little younger than me and also unattached.....at least everyone assumed so since she had lived by herself since

starting up a smart dress shop in the centre of town. Helen was physically and mentally sharp; we'd had a couple of interesting conversations, and surely shared some interests, but she was heavily involved with the Grace Merchant circuit, which was unfortunate.

Perhaps Carrie was the one who would remove herself from my mind. When she didn't call from London, failed to e-mail or send postcards from the U.S. and didn't even remember me at Christmas, then she would fade from my thoughts.....in time.....but only in time!

The family dinner on the evening of the return from the West Country was a hasty affair in that my parents were both due to be behind their desks at the American Embassy the following morning and were unable to spend time cooking or talking. It was the latter I wanted to engineer.

'It was a good holiday. I'm glad I tagged along.' I wanted to hold the conversation on matters of the recent past rather than the future.

'Well, we are pleased you did, sweetheart. I'm glad you enjoyed it.' My mother could sound sincere when you knew she was not entirely concentrating on what you were saying.

'What was your highlight? I directed my question to my father.

'Oh, honey, it was all very nice. The weather was good... that was a bonus. I guess it was the scenery in general that I was so impressed with. The villages, the countryside. It was great, wasn't it?'

'I thought Watersmeet was stunning.' I made my play.

'It was, it was. You're right. And we have to thank that artist fellow for that tip, don't we.' Daddy didn't mention the man's name. I was infuriated, but hid it.

'John Drakes....yes, it was he who mentioned it. Katie loved the portrait, by the way.'

'I'm not surprised, hon, it's beautiful.'

'I thought I might give Mr. Drakes a call before we leave London. I did say I'd write when I got home.'

'No harm in that, I guess.' My father was distant - my mother less so.

'Don't pester the man, sweetheart. He was just a man who drew your portrait.'

I answered this comment silently, from inside my head. ‘Yes, but he also entertained me privately, beautifully, and I kissed him, we walked and talked together.’ And then out loud. ‘Sure thing, I know how to behave properly.’ The remark was spoken gently, without rancour, but now I couldn’t wait to get back to my room.

Once we had separated and I’d hurried back to my private place, I feverishly tapped John’s number into my phone, but as my finger struck the last digit I quickly cancelled the call. No, no, I said to myself, not yet...wait until the morning. Don’t let him think you are some out-of-control teen freak who doesn’t know how to conduct herself. I looked at the phone in my hand. He was so close. I only wanted to hear that silky voice, imagine those beautiful eyes, the broad smile, the sophistication. I stopped and looked at my watch. I would tackle John Drakes in the morning.

End of Sample



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