

Chapter 1

If you head up the Hereford Road from the Elmstree Roundabout just outside the small town of Raeburgh, you will, after half a mile, pass the Leagrove Hotel on your right. At least, you would have until recently. The building remains, a three story late Georgian edifice: central front door, two windows either side – the balance somewhat marred by the 1990s extension across the top of the large seven foot high gates connecting the first floor (second floor for American guests) to the stable block.

When the Hereford Road was *the* road from Hereford to the north, the Leagrove did very well. Passing trade, and a good reputation amongst commercial travellers, would keep it reasonably full even in the dark days of winter. I like to think I was perceived as a jovial host who was perhaps not too bothered about strict interpretation of the licensing laws, who knew how to turn a blind eye when another ‘Mr and Mrs Smith’ booked in and who knew his town well enough to recommend anything from days out to the best “retail therapy.” However, that was before the bypass. Now travellers are taken around the town on a route that adds an extra three miles to that journey, but purports to remove ten minutes of journey time. Even before my heart attack, the hotel had suffered. It was hardly a failing enterprise, but what with failing health, and no family member willing to return home to run the Leagrove, it was Peter Groves, my ex-son-in-law, who stepped in and secured the deal that allowed me to retire in comfort, and Peter, it must be said, to make money.

The trouble with retirement, even a comfortable one, is that it allows you to brood. I don’t probe too closely when Peter assures me yet again that the hotel is being run as I would wish. No it isn’t! Peter’s a different person – of course he’s going to run it differently! I know he’s changed the name, because ‘Leagrove’ isn’t in the phone book any more. I might be retired, but that doesn’t mean I’ve lost my marbles completely!

Anyway, this place is comfortable enough – at least there are people on hand to look after you, which is more than can be said for my own flesh-and-blood. Lunatics, the lot of them! Wanted what the hotel could offer, even cadged free meals, but – never mind my advancing age or my health problems – keeping the business going wasn’t important to any of them.

They turn up occasionally. Sarah's turn today – used to have a really soft spot for her when she was small. Very caring. But now she's just like the rest of them:

'What do you want us to do Dad – turn the clock back?'

'Isn't that what your dead guru is all about – making things like they were before?'

'He isn't dead, he isn't a guru, and it's about living life. Life! Don't you understand?'

I pressed the buzzer then and got the nurse to show her out. I could hear the nurse apologising all the way down the corridor, but really, if my own daughter can't talk about anything else, then she might as well not bother.

I didn't know at the time, of course, but it all started thirty years ago. It wasn't the first, or the only, time I allowed myself to be over-ruled by Amy: but this was the time I should have stood firm, and insisted that “full” meant “full.” It wasn't my fault if the *Unicorn* had lost a booking and sent them down to us. And if the “wife” was pregnant, they shouldn't have travelled in the first place. Grand family reunions are all very well, but those organising them should organise! At least they should make sure everyone has a bed for the night – and probably not organise it around the winter holidays (unless, of course, the festival is the reason for the gathering – but then, you still need to organise beds!). I'd never had any truck with religious festivals, except that they promoted travelling, and therefore people ended up needing beds for the night. I didn't mind that bit.

Improbably after Sarah left, I nodded off... *Winter holidays. Hotel packed. Hotel decorated. I would have kept the tinsel and baubles out of the private quarters, but the kids were young enough to be able to demand such triviality, so as soon as December arrived, they had to be amused as well as the guests. It was stormy that winter. Not the calm, crisp, snowy holiday of all the picture postcards, but plenty of sleet and driving rain to make you stay indoors. All the guests had arrived. I had quietly congratulated myself for ordering in the extra food, as they'd all decided to stay in for dinner – and I'd lost nothing by giving everyone a glass of wine with the meal 'to celebrate the festival.'* Half the tables had ordered bottles, and most of the rest had ordered something extra...

'Mr Matthewes? Mr Matthewes?'

It's always awkward, waking up when you didn't know you'd been asleep, but she kindly ignored my momentary confusion.

'You have a visitor, Mr Matthewes?'

It's one of the prettier nurses – and one, moreover, who's learned I don't like people one third of my age calling me by my first name. I favoured her with a smile.

'A visitor, eh?'

'Yes, doing some research about the past – you ran the Leagrove hotel, didn't you?'

I nodded.

'I'll leave the two of you together then – cup of tea?' the nurse adds brightly.

Another nod, and a 'thanks' from the visitor, and the nurse departs.

'And thanks for seeing me, John. May I?' the visitor indicates the other chair.

'Of course.'

As the visitor sits, I study him. He's tall, bronzed and, in spite of the suit and the lack of the Snowy River hat, every inch proclaimed that he came from down under. The accent was pure "Neighbours."

'I suppose I'd better introduce myself. The name's Simon Rees. You don't know me – but I'm trying to do a bit of research into the mid-70s.'

I nod, warily this time. The Australian carried on.

'You know that the school records show a lot of reception classes with a lot of girls in 1978-9; and again in 79-80?'

I shrug: 'Happens all the time.'

'No, not without help it doesn't. I'm not talking your national averages of 52 girls to 48 boys. I'm talking over 80-90% girls. That doesn't happen "all the time", mate.'

'Why should I help you? We did nothing.'

'I'm not saying you did anything.' Simon keeps his voice low as the nurse re-enters the room.

'OK, then?' she asks brightly, but was already on her way out even if I had been so sure of my apprehension to make her get rid of the visitor. Too late. But I glance to the bedside table – yes, the buzzer's within reach.

'I'm not saying you did anything,' Simon repeated, 'but a lot of boy babies disappeared! And I think I'm one of them.'

He leans back, watching to see what impact his revelation has on me. But I'm looking out of the window, wrestling with memories.

'How do you know?' I ask, eventually.

'As far as I can make out I was born in Raeburgh, given up for adoption at eighteen months – and shipped out to Australia shortly after that.'

'How did you cope?'

‘I survived.’ Simon clearly wants to talk about his childhood as much as I want to talk about the past. The silence grew. We both sip our tea.

‘Look,’ Simon says, ‘let me tell you my story, and then you tell me what you think of it. Deal?’

‘All right.’

So I heard about Simon’s early life as a farm labourer on a Queensland sheep station. How he grew up to catch the eye of the farmer’s daughter – and the farmer’s predictable reaction. How they waited for each other while he got a belated education; and how they were now over here, just looking.

After that, I opened up – after all, fair’s fair: I’d heard a story, I might as well tell one. It was thirty years ago and who’s going to worry after all this time? And besides, after thirty years, it was high time I told someone!

‘Let me see... at the time when – the time you’re interested in, the Masons had been in Raeburgh a couple of years. There was Dad, Joe: he had an up-market furniture-making business, nothing but the best: wood from managed forests and all that, but good stuff; built it up over two years – and then suddenly a Rolls pulls up and three Arabs descend on the place. Next day: shop deserted, everyone gone: Arabs, family, the lot.’

‘How does this connect with the disappearing boys?’ Unsurprisingly, Rees looked, and sounded, puzzled.

‘I’m coming to that. First day, the Arabs. Second: shop closed. Third: Police. Not just ordinary police, military police. This is – was – just a sleepy little market town on the borders of Wales. OK we have a castle and stuff, but the last trouble here was in the Civil War of the 1640s! Of course, we can’t prove that the police were after Mason, it was just – coincidence. And it wasn’t just police – there were social workers, and government officials with their clipboards...’

I collapse into silence.

‘But what happened?’

‘Oh, isn’t it obvious? The Masons weren’t who they seemed – must have been part of some Eastern religion. They must have been worried to take all those boys though – some sort of spiritualism, perhaps.’

‘You had kids?’

‘Yes, but they only wanted two year olds – or under – and only in our area. Don’t even know how many kids went missing: fifty? A Hundred? More?’

‘Didn’t the parents object?’

‘One assumes so. My wife joined the group to try to find out, but we all got sat on – figuratively, I mean!’ I added as Simon’s eyebrows went up. ‘Besides we didn’t want to lose our kids as well. Basically you got on with life as best you could – stiff upper lip, you know, old boy! We don’t talk about it... Didn’t.’

‘So?’

‘It was my wife, Amy, who joined the committees. This was at the end of the 70s – it wasn’t as if everyone was individually counselled. Just told to get on with it – have more kids if you must, but don’t make a fuss. We were fobbed off with all sorts of baloney: “genetic disorders that had to be investigated”; “severe psychological disorder” – ‘

‘Before or after the kids were taken away?’ Simon asks under his breath.

‘Or, for those who did press the case, the threat was that they’d be taken in as abusers of their own children.’

‘What happened to you?’

‘Us? Oh, Amy stopped when they said they’d take all three of ours into care. Priorities – our own family had to come first. It’s not that we didn’t care, but there was no way we could take the risk – if they’d already taken a load of kids, why wouldn’t they take some more? And we don’t talk about it: after all, you could be talking to someone who did lose a child. At the time, you just concentrated on survival. A lot of families moved away.’

‘So, you don’t know what happened to any of the kids?’

‘No – sorry. It happened, we had thought the cabinet papers would tell us something, once they were made public under the thirty-year rule, but nothing.’

‘Perhaps your wife – ?’

‘My wife isn’t here.’ I tell him shortly.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, mate, I didn’t realise.’

‘It’s not that – we’re separated, effectively. It’s my son-in-law who pays for this room. Look, I’ve told you all I know.’

‘Um, yes, fine. Thank you.’ Simon gulps down the rest of his tea as I press the buzzer. I haven’t told all I know, but it’s true that I don’t know anything more about Simon’s past – or what happened after the “visitation”.

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