



Khaki Fever

A tale of lost love, lunacy and laughter

TIM HENSHALL

THE AUTHOR – TIM HENSHALL

I was born sixty years ago (1965) and have led what many would describe as a life filled with drama. Far too much drama even for my own liking, to be honest. For me, life is rarely dull. Even if at times I wished it was.

“Khaki Fever” was written over a five-year period, starting with the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020, when I suddenly found myself alone in my little cottage in Nottinghamshire. With the oft said comment. *“You should write the book of your life”* ringing in my ears, I developed the storyline for this book. I decided it would be better to write through the life of a character, Jack (named after my much-missed little feline, by the way) and not in the first person.

Worryingly, all too many of the things that are included in this book have happened to me in real life. I won’t spoil it by telling you which, but friends and family will know,all too well.

It’s probably safe to say the bits you think are completely crazy and could never happen are probably the ones that did. And I promise I haven’t embellished those tales, either.

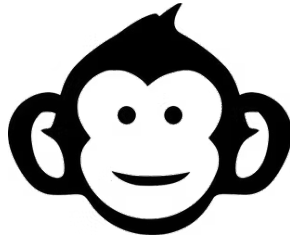
To all my friends, family and colleagues in the African tourism industry, thank you for sharing the ride. And if you read about someone who sounds a bit like yourself, it can’t be true. Honest.

Enjoy this book and be grateful that you are only reading it, rather than living it.

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Prologue

Time was dragging, just as it had every day since “*the split*”.

Jack was feeling miserable and was very much alone in his small one-bedroomed flat in Kenton, North London. It was just another dark and gloomy Thursday evening. Jack was being serenaded by the gentle pitter-patter of heavy rain, bouncing off the window ledge beside him.

He stared blankly out if the back-bedroom window that so desperately needed a “proper clean” with a spray of Mr. Muscle ‘*Platinum Window*’ Spray and a serious amount of elbow grease, not the quick wipe with an Aldi baby wipe that Jack had convinced himself would do.

Had his mind not been a thousand miles away (well, 5 miles give or take a few yards), Jack would have made out the shape of the imposing general hospital at the other side of the train tracks and the green open-space of Northwick Park. But as it was, he didn’t.

Instead, Jack was reflecting on the foolish decisions he’d made in recent months and how this was impacting on his current world.

He absentmindedly swirled his index finger around the rim of his wine glass that contained barely a mouthful of the cheeky rioja he’d bought in the Tesco

Express on the way home. The five minutes he'd spent wandering around the store, picking out the wine and a lasagne ready-meal meal for one, had probably been the highlight of his day.

The incessant high-pitched whining noise now emanating from the wine glass not only epitomized his mood, but his lack of musical talent, too.

He was so fed up, that he couldn't even bother to switch on the bedside light to illuminate his increasingly dull world. He was finally prepared to admit that the situation was all of his own making. So how had it come to this? And what was he going to do next?

Chapter 1

Nine months earlier

Jack had been dating the lovely Polly Thomas for a little over a year.

At 30, the strawberry blonde-haired beauty was two years his junior but she looked significantly younger. Her diminutive height and pixie-like frame made her look as though she was still at Uni. This inevitably led to numerous ID checks in pubs, which she always complained about, but secretly loved. Polly's youthful appearance was only accentuated by her perfect skin and dazzling green eyes which were unusually big, resembling those of a small child.

Jack particularly loved her cheeky dimples which appeared whenever she smiled (which was often) and the dozens of freckles across her cute little button nose, which he said reminded him of a sprinkling of cinnamon.

Jack, at 5' 11" protectively tucked Polly under his arm, as he towered over her. He wasn't sure she even made it to her claimed 5ft, but she insisted she was, although that didn't stop him calling her his own personal Oompa Lumpa.

They'd met exactly one year, one month and sixteen days prior. They'd clumsily backed into one another whilst silently gazing into the Slow Loris display in the Nocturnal Mammals section of London Zoo. Polly had fallen face first onto the cold floor, shrieking like a scolded cat as she fell. The horrified loris had never moved so fast, or for that matter, since.

Picking Polly gently up from the floor, Jack was midway through an apology when he too fell. But his fall wasn't to the floor, but into her enormous emerald-green eyes, causing him to lose the power of speech, even faster than the loris had exited.

Apparently, he'd repeated his apologies over and over, whilst managing to introduce himself, advise her that the *nycticebus* (the scientific name for the slow loris) was native to South East Asia.....and that she had freckles on her nose....and had lovely green eyes. Not that he could remember. But Polly had reassured him that he'd been a perfect gentleman, if a confused one at that.

Reflecting back, he couldn't even remember asking Polly to go with him for a drink, but he was very glad that he had. They'd spent that evening having what became an increasingly flirty chat over a few glasses of vino in The Albert - a bustling little pub in Primrose Hill.

That all seemed a lifetime ago now, and in *his* head everything had been "ticketyboo" (his somewhat childish response whenever asked about their relationship status).

But Jack had been a fool. He'd failed to see the increasingly obvious signs that Polly wasn't happy. Oh, she was blissfully happy with him, but he simply wasn't willing to do any of the "normal things, that normal couples do".

In Jack's opinion, the minute you acknowledged you were in a "*steady*" relationship, things started to go wrong. Ironically, *not* acknowledging it had proved to be his undoing.

To be fair to her, Polly hadn't even asked for that much when it came to a 'symbol of commitment'. It wasn't as though she wanted to get engaged, involving a highly elaborate, pre-rehearsed Instagram friendly proposal video or dragging him kicking and screaming around the alleyways of Hatton Garden to look at expensive diamond rings in the jewellers' windows.

No, instead all she'd asked for was to be described as being his official girlfriend and for him to agree to meet with her doting parents - Alan and Kamila Thomas - who'd been so keen to finally put a face to his name. After over a year was that really too much to ask?

In response, Jack always said that it was "*too soon*" and would inevitably provoke talk of wedding ceremonies, as well as questions about the timings for the pitter-patter of tiny feet especially given that he and Polly were both in their early-thirties.

And to be fair to Jack, he was right. Kamila had apparently told Polly that, *“your body clock isn’t just ticking, the alarm is going off!”*

Mother dearest had even gone as far as to take out unwanted subscriptions for ‘Your Ideal Wedding’ and ‘Practical Parenting’ magazines, delivered to Polly’s apartment each month, ever hopeful that this would spark her only daughter into action.

Serious questions had started to be asked by the Thomas’s after Jack had been dating Polly for just a few weeks, so now things had really started to intensify, a year on. It was just odd.

Worried that Polly might be suffering from some kind of mental health issue, Kamila went as far as to hire a private detective to check whether or not Jack even existed. Kamila needed to be sure that Jack wasn’t simply another figment of her daughter's over-active imagination which she insisted had first revealed itself when Polly was just nine, during her portrayal of Annie in the school’s musical play of the same name.

This had been critically acclaimed by the world’s media, according to Kamila (in reality, it was the school newsletter and on her “Housewives of N12” Facebook group) and was further fuelled by Polly’s stories written in her (supposedly) secret journal, all about her being carried away on horseback by a handsome Prince who lived in a beautiful Tiffany’s turquoise coloured castle in the middle of the Arabian desert.

But “Brendan McKay - Private Eye” - who stereotypically dressed in a scruff macintosh - had captured them both enjoying a loving embrace in a somewhat blurry digital image, taken on the rain swept doorstep to Polly’s apartment block. According to Brendan’s hand written notes, Jack had left her building at precisely 07h52 on the morning of Wednesday 23rd, backed up by data on the image.

Being fully committed to his cause, Brendan had followed Jack all the way to Baker Street and the bizarrely named Earwax, the boutique little marketing agency where Jack earned his living as an Account Manager. He continued to watch as Jack silently munched his way through a home-made chicken salad sandwich whilst sat on a bench in Regent’s Park, before secretly trailing him back home to Kenton via the Metropolitan Line tube, at just gone 7pm. Then, later that same evening, he followed him back over to Polly’s apartment in Finchley. *“I rest my case, M’lud”*.

McKay had been suitably confident that he’d tracked down his quarry and emailed Kamila the news, along with the image as conclusive proof. He also included his invoice for £236.49, which included all of his expenses : a one-day TfL Travelcard, a rather lukewarm Gregg’s Steak Bake and a rhubarb-based smoothie that had combined to cause a somewhat queasy tummy for much of the evening.

Brendan had decided to remove the cost of the Imodium, as he felt that was pushing things too far....or letting them go, perhaps?

A couple of days later, during one of her regular visits to her parents' home, Polly flicked through a 6-month old edition of *'Hello'* magazine with Amanda Holden in a all-too-revealing micro-dress emblazoned across the front cover. Out of the middle fell a thin beige cardboard file with 'Is Jack real?' scrawled on the front, in Kamila's familiar handwriting.

Having viewed the contents of McKay's report, along with Kamila's luminous Post-it™ notes attached at various points, Polly felt the red-mist descend. She was outraged - with her mother for the totally unacceptable invasion of her privacy, but also towards Jack, whose freakish and childish behaviour had started the chain reaction resulting in her mother's unfounded concern.

Kamila's sleuthing hadn't been helped by the fact that Polly's seemingly miniscule set of friends had never met with Jack either, due in part to their penchant for attending amateur theatre productions; playing highly energetic and competitive games of badminton and discussing grown-up subjects like politics and religion, all things Jack was hell-bent on avoiding.

Neither of them posted much on social media (weird, huh?) and whenever they did it the photographs never featured the other – they posted pictures of buildings they visited, or animals in far flung corners of the world that they wanted to see in real life.

Neither even used a real profile pic. Jack's was of a Jack Russell that he'd had when he was a child (in fact he suspected that he was named after the

dog, such was its popularity at home), whilst Polly's pic had been changed soon after she'd met Jack at the zoo, with a shot of a Slow Loris she'd taken on her phone that day.

So Jack and Polly either did things as a couple or with Jack's ragtag group of friends. In true style, he insisted to Polly that he'd meet up with her friends *"when the time was right, but right now just isn't it."*

Chapter 2.

Polly engineered numerous opportunities, both formal and casual for the parental introductions to take place, but Jack had proved to be as difficult to tie down as lubed-up octopus in a bathtub. He saw meeting with Polly's parents as a rite of passage to be avoided at all cost. It was a feat that he had somehow managed to swerve and he hadn't had any intention of succumbing just yet.

Her latest rouse was to tell Jack that her father, Alan, needed Jack's help to repair his leaky pipework which received an “*eeeeuuurwww, revolting*” response from Jack.

“On the guttering, you idiot!” Polly explained.

“Well, if you'd put it like that the first time, I might have been willing to help”.

Polly was staggered - was this finally it, the much-desired intro? But of course, she was celebrating way too soon.

On the afternoon that Jack was meant to be taking off work to help out, he called ten minutes before his scheduled arrival time to announce that a

last-minute pre-pitch rehearsal had been called at the office and that he'd had his time-off cancelled. It had the air of both an excuse and a real situation, but Polly called ahead to her Dad and advised him of the change of plan.

Understandably, Alan wasn't hugely impressed and told her so in no uncertain terms, which she was to pass onto "*that good for nothing boyfriend of yours....assuming he even exists!*" Polly elected not to reference Brendan McKay's handiwork and chose instead to head over to her parents' house after work to smooth things over with her Dad.

But Alan hadn't been able to settle. He'd dropped down into his favourite armchair with a half-eaten packet of Wurther's Originals and tried to lose himself in a re-run of '*Homes under the Hammer*'. This annoyed him all the more, as it was an episode from 2012, and he couldn't guess the new value of the done-up properties, due to the time-lag.

His mood didn't improve when the heavens open and the rain came lashing down, causing torrents of water to escape from the damaged guttering and across the French windows in the lounge.

Cursing both the rain and Jack under his breath, Alan pulled on his waterproof jacket and ventured outside to find that the adjoining section of the gutter was now coming away from the wall. All he'd needed Jack for was to hold the ladder steady, but he couldn't be relied on to do even that.

Being an outdated chauvinist, Alan wouldn't trust a woman with such an important job like that, so Agnes and Polly were deemed useless alternatives.

There's nothing else for it, Alan said to himself. He had to venture up the ladder on his lonesome and at least do a quick patch job on the guttering before finding a professional or someone trustworthy to hold his ladder. He scooted over to the outhouse and brought out his extending ladder.

As the rain finally started to ease off, he bounced it along the rear of the house until it sat just beneath the damaged gutter.

Having climbed first four or five rungs of the ladder, Alan had second thoughts. He was concerned that if the ladder moved with no one there to hold it, he'd come crashing down around 20 feet. He gingerly climbed back down and returned to the outhouse to find a sizeable length of rope. He'd not allow his bad mood to cause him to take risks.

Doing his finest impression of a wild west cowboy, Alan launched the rope up and over the two-storey house at the first attempt, causing him to step back and admire his own achievement. He paced round to the front of the house and carefully tied the rope to a suitably heavy object, ensuring it was secure and wouldn't come undone.

Those years of practising knots each week at his Cub Scouts pack were finally paying off, even if Mr. Jamieson, his ex-Scoutmaster, did end

up serving time at Her Majesty's Pleasure following the incident with the choirboy.

Feeling much safer now, Alan's plan was coming together. He reclinced the first few steps. He grabbed his end of the rope, slipping it through his trouser belt and tying it tightly, thereby ensuring that if the ladder did fall, he wouldn't follow it. He accepted that he might be left suspended in mid-air, but with help, he could be safely returned to terra firma. Genius, he thought.

Within just a few minutes at the top of the ladder he was already making great progress with the guttering and had patched up the first damaged area. *"I don't need that idiot boyfriend of hers, I've come up with a failsafe plan to do it all by myself"*.

It was about that very moment that Kamila Thomas arrived back home from her walk, with Ralph, the family's Highland Terrier trailing behind her. Before she'd had time to put her key in the door, she leapt out of her skin as Polly sprung out of nowhere and was coming up behind her, surprising her half to death.

"I escaped work early", she explained and said how she'd felt she should come over and apologise for Jack's failure to show up. *"It's what we all expected, dear"* came Kamila's reply, as she stepped through the doorway, calling her husband's name with an affected voice, all too reminiscent of Hyacinth Bucket.

Alan, 18ft up a ladder at the back of their sizeable house failed to hear her, so gave no reply. *“I’ll bet he’s with Ernest from next door grumbling about his pipework”* Kamila suggested, to which Polly guffawed, remembering Jack’s reaction to a similar expression.

“Anyway, you’re lucky to caught me as I’m going straight back out to buy jam for a Victoria Sponge Sandwich I’m baking for the WI jamboree tomorrow. I need to get started!” she flustered. Polly agreed to tag along, not only because she enjoyed her mother’s company but she also knew visits to Waitrose with her mother usually resulted in Kamila buying a whole series of indulgent niceties for her rather grateful daughter.

Grabbing the car keys from the security-conscious metal box (an ex-Cream cracker tin, that was way too thin to prevent cloning anyway) at the bottom of the stairs, Agnes slammed the front door behind her, causing the entire house to shudder.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Alan shouted out, feeling somewhat relieved he’d taken safety precautions. But neither Kamila nor Polly heard him. Perhaps little Ralph’s yelps at being left in the utility room had drowned Alan out?

The girls climbed into Alan’s Volvo rather than Kamila’s own little Merc SLK (“I don’t like parking at Waitrose where people might bash my car with their trolleys”) and sped off towards the supermarket.

Meanwhile, Alan felt a sudden and rather insistent tug at his belt. Initially it'd just been a bit of a jerking motion, but now Alan felt himself being ripped from the ladder and dragged skyward across the roof. Screaming for help, Alan tried desperately to cling on but he was accelerating up the steep incline. Realising what was happening, he cried out "*Kammy, nooooostop!*"

Seconds later, Kamili and Polly heard a blood curdling scream as a large, fast-moving object crashed into the laurel hedgerow behind them. They'd heard the screams despite Barry Manilow squawking "*Copacabana*" at full volume on the car radio. No more than thirty yards from her house, Kamili leapt from the car to see what had happened. But Polly threw her arms across in front of her mum to prevent her from seeing the carnage ahead of her. "*No, don't look Mummy.....it's Dad and I think it's really bad*".

Two days later, Polly was sat with her dad in the Finchley Memorial Hospital, gently stroking his one healthy-looking wrist. With a pin in his fractured hip; a broken collar-bone; six cracked ribs; a broken hand; a broken ankle, three broken fingers and eighteen stitches in his head, Alan was resplendent in his ensemble of bandages, slings and plaster of Paris.

The nurses had secretly nicknamed him "Toot" after King Tutankhamun as he looked all too much like an ancient Egyptian mummy. He'd overheard them saying it a couple of earlier, so staff were avoiding eye contact as no one was sure how well the joke had gone down.

Thankfully the garden hedge had performed miracles in cushioning his fall and prevented further damage, although his face and neck were covered in little cuts and bruises. Through one blood shot eye (with the other one swollen and black), Alan looked forlornly at his daughter. “Why won’t Mummy come to see me, it’s been two full days now?” he pleaded.

“I think she thinks you’re still furious at her, but how was she to know your car was the heavy object you’d tied yourself to?”

Chapter 3

Alan left hospital ten days later and although bed ridden for another three weeks or so, he soon felt far stronger and even started to see the funny side of the whole situation. Kamila, aided by an ever-helpful Polly, had managed to run the house perfectly whilst Alan convalesced. But still no visit from Jack.

Polly informed Jack that she'd been tasked with housesitting for a week, whilst her parents aided her father's convalescence with a visit to his sister Sian in the East Midlands. As Sian was a stickler for pet hairs on her furniture, little Ralph, the half-deaf highland terrier, was forced to stay at home. Even though Jack had never been to the house, knew that it had a nice sized garden at the back for the dog to run around in.

With Polly working during the day, she'd had to lock Ralph safely in the kitchen whilst she was out. To counter this confinement, the little terrier was left with various squeaky toys, in the shape of a donut, a duck, a hippo and a toothy grin to entertain him. Polly particularly liked the toothy grin toy and had more than a hundred pics of him with it in his chops.

Polly showed Jack dozens of other supposedly humorous video clips of Ralph in various situations "looking cutesy" – loudly snoring whilst

asleep on the sofa; eating his bowl of Pedigree Chum with his back legs in the air; and dry-humping an elderly gentleman's false leg in the village pub.

At lunchtime, a neighbourhood friend of her parents, Ernest, would pop in to take him on a brisk wander around the block. Ernest thought himself hilarious by donning a pair of dark sunglasses and pretending to be blind, frequently bumping into people or just standing at the edge of the pavement waiting to cross, until a good Samaritan came to his aid.

Over the previous couple of months, Ralph had apparently managed to “*get himself into trouble*” with the next-door neighbours - the Norton family, or more specifically, Mr. Norton. Ralph had dug under their fence a couple of times; he'd escaped the kitchen and allegedly spend the entire afternoon barking at every move the kids had made; plus, he'd leapt up, allegedly aggressively at the Norton's six-year-old boy, when he'd climbed over the fence to retrieve his stray football. Kamila knew that Ralph was a big softie, so he'd not been any kind of threat to the boy. But Mr. Norton insisted otherwise. Oh, and there was the time Ralph had been seen scooting across Mrs. Norton's clean bedsheet that had blown off the clothes line during one earlier occasion when the terrier had made it under the fence.

It was obvious that he didn't like Ralph, in fact he didn't much like any dogs. Presumably this was because when he was a teenage boy, he was bitten on the left testicle by a snappy Pekinese called Pooky-Lou. This had followed an all-too frisky encounter with the little poochie's owner on her parents'

sofa, whilst they were out one Thursday evening at Gala Bingo. Or so the woman at the laundrette said, and she was almost always right.

Anyway, Mr. Norton had warned Polly's parents that any further misdemeanours would result in Ralph being reported to the council's dog warden, which they were understandably keen to avoid. Did the council have the power to take Ralph away, or even have him put down? Nobody wanted to run the risk.

Arriving home from work that Tuesday around 2.30pm, having arranged to take the afternoon off, Polly was shocked to find Ralph loose outside. Ernest had made his daily visit earlier that morning and had obviously not realised that the dog had sneaked past him back into the garden.

Polly went out to bring Ralph back in, only to find that the little dog had a fluffy dead rabbit draped in his jaws. But not just any rabbit. It was the Norton's pet bunny, Snuggles.

Polly had been horrified but Ralph looked really pleased with himself and dropped the lifeless corpse at Polly's feet, no doubt expectant of some kind of reward. She gave Ralph a smart rap across the nose, causing him to skulk off to the bottom of the garden, tail between his legs .

The sad little rabbit looked as though Ralph had been throwing it all over the garden, as it was covered in soil and dirt.

Thankfully Polly couldn't find blood anywhere, nor did the rabbit seem to be missing any ears and all four limbs were intact.

Polly knew that if Mr. Norton found out about this, it would be big trouble for Ralph, so it called for drastic action. Polly gently carried the deceased bunny into the kitchen and ran some warm soapy water into the washing up bowl.

She carefully removed the soil from its limp and lifeless body, and gently washed the fur until it looked completely clean. She gave it a quick dry using the tea towel that Kamila had brought back from her coach trip to Bridlington, but it didn't look quite right. So, she gave it a quick blow-dry with her Mum's rather impressive Dyson Supersonic (a Christmas gift from Auntie Sian) to ensure it looked as fluffy and healthy as possible.

Checking that the coast was clear, Polly clambered over the fence between her parents' house and the Nortons. Crouching down low like a cat on the prowl, she made her way over to the rabbit run that stood at the far end of their garden. Stepping over the wire fence and into the run, Polly levered open the roof of the hutch and gently placed the dead rabbit halfway in and halfway out of the doorway.

She placed its little head with those scary looking glazed eyes on its front paws and even placed a tiny sliver of dried-up cabbage leaf close to its face as though it was eating. The little rabbit looked really peaceful, bless him.

Feeling pleased with herself, Polly made good her escape and was back in the house long before she heard the sound of Mrs. Norton arriving back from the school run. Polly winced as she heard the small boy wailing ‘*Snuggles!*’ after he’d run into his back garden. Polly felt more than a pang of guilt, but at least Ralph wouldn’t be getting the blame.

The following evening, Polly was relaxing in the garden, with a cold glass of chardonnay from the fridge with little Ralph obediently curled up asleep at her feet. Mr. Norton’s head appeared over the top of the fence beckoning Polly to come closer. Polly walked towards her parents’ neighbour who looked perplexed about something.

Guessing what might be about to come, Polly tried to look as calm as possible despite his heart beating ten to the dozen. “*Are you ok, Mr. Norton?*” she enquired. Mr. Norton went into great detail to explain how his small son was distraught at having found his pet rabbit dead in the hutch the previous evening. “*Oh, that’s terrible, Mr. Norton, I’m so sorry to hear that*”, Polly added.

“*Yes, it is sad, isn’t it? But that’s not what’s troubling me,*” Mr. Norton went on. “*No, I’m just confused because the rabbit died a week ago and we’d buried him at the bottom of our garden....*”

Chapter 4

Finally free from plaster of Paris, bandages, crutches and all other things medical, Alan seemed to be making a good recovery, only for things to take a real turn for the worse. He died, rather unexpectedly. He suffered a surprise* heart-attack whilst out on Hampstead Common, taking his daily three-mile walk with Ralph. (* Are heart attacks ever not a surprise?)

To make matters worse – if that was possible – Alan was found with a small, yet decidedly warm blue plastic bag attached to his left temple, on to which he had collapsed as the pain of the attack took hold.

Apparently, according to bystanders, the emergency medical team who had scrambled onto the Common to provide first aid had become noticeably less keen when they saw that the bag had split open, smudging its messy brown contents down Alan's increasingly grey cheek. Cute little Ralph was clearly suffering from an organ malfunction all of his own.

The Thomas household was understandably distraught by Alan's untimely departure, which was swiftly followed by little Ralph's (the vet advised that the condition was incurable and said it was '*heaven o'clock*' before rather suspiciously putting him out of his fluffy white misery, all too fast).

The following Saturday morning, rather than attend, Jack hid behind a large beech tree close to the pet crematorium where Ralph was taking his final walkies (or lie-downies, to be more accurate). Apparently, little Ralph's ashes were to be posted off to somewhere foreign and converted into a small carbonised key fob to hold Kamila's keys, as a fitting souvenir of his doggie life.

He remained far enough away to ensure he wasn't seen, but that in return meant he couldn't quite see what Polly's mum looked like either. But he could hear her wailing in distress beneath the expensive-looking silk scarf she had wrapped around her face. *"Why my Ralphie? Why me?"* she wailed as she clung on tightly to her appropriately black-clad daughter.

He'd been really tempted to pop over and say hello, but felt he'd been saved at the last minute by the sight of a lone magpie, signifying sorrow (if he'd remembered the nursery rhyme correctly). Best not to, he thought. A quick salute towards the magpie showed the necessary respect to avoid any more bad luck and he slunk away unnoticed.

There were delays preventing Alan's funeral, as they wanted to double check cause of death, with Kamila sure that the Police were going to knock on the door and accuse her of murder by Volvo EX40 (complete with optional Harman premium sound and the full-driver assist package, as Mrs T insisted on telling people). But clogging in his arteries was added to the death certificate, much to Kamila's relief. That was until she wondered whether his arteries weren't functioning properly because of the broken ribs.

After a date was finally fixed, with just two days to go, Jack, exhausted by all the talk of death (both human and canine), made yet another attempt to avoid parental contact. He announced to Polly that he was unlikely to be able to attend the funeral, due to the recurrence of an old urinary infection.

She'd always felt was something of a fake ailment. Jack had overheard the excuse working for one of his female work colleagues, so why not for him, he thought? The condition had supposedly first reared its ugly head some 6 months earlier, at almost exactly the same time as cousin Judy's first baby's christening. What a strange coincidence.

Polly had heard enough. She told him in no uncertain terms that she expected him to be at her side for one of the most difficult days of her life and that "*a bit of a stinging sensation when you take a sodding pee*" should not be allowed to prevent him from doing so. "*Could you try drinking no alcohol for twenty-four hours before the funeral?*" she asked, which Jack knew to be thickly laced with sarcasm.

But dodge the funeral, he did. Polly was beside herself. Or rather, she was beside Kamila, in their joint hour of need. Friends and family had lovingly gathered around to share their love, whilst others offered words of condolence.

Spurred on by his mother Rosemarie (Kamila's friend from Book Club), the oily and over-bearing Jeremy Stone annoyingly buzzed around Polly at

wake, keen to offer her a shoulder to cry on (and no doubt other body parts, too). Slime ball.

Kamili deemed Jeremy to be a “*dreadfully nice man*”, even if Polly thought him more the former and less of the latter. She told her mother that he was a crass opportunist, but in truth, when she thought about it, his attention hadn’t gone totally unappreciated. At least Jeremy had been willing to chat with her mother and he was wearing a reasonably well-fitting Moss Bros suit, bought in their recent sale.

Around eight that evening, Polly turned up on Jack’s doorstep, exactly one year, one months and sixteen days after they had first met. To Polly, that moment in the Nocturnal Mammals section and the evening in Primrose Hill now seemed a lifetime ago.

She’d decided enough was enough and she planned to finally put her foot down and issued a concise ultimatum, which she spat out through gritted teeth.

“It’s as simple as this, Jack. If you haven’t introduced yourself to my Mother, in person, at my place, by 9 o’clock on Saturday, then we’re through. Understood? Finito. Over. No excuses. Is that clear?”

Without waiting for an answer or response, she span on her (stilettos) heels and stormed away, simmering in silence. Jack was equally speechless.

She had stayed less than three minutes and hadn't even stepped inside the doorframe to offer him a much-needed hug.

Polly had been wearing the same slim-fitting black satin dress she'd worn to the funeral earlier in the day, which caused totally ill-timed thoughts to race through Jack's mind as he looked her up and down, trying not to give away how much he was admiring her slender figure.

He'd even found it just a tiny bit of a turn-on how she had been so forceful with him. He hadn't seen her this fired up since an annoying late-summer wasp had the audacity to drown himself in her over-priced glass of prosecco outside the Red Lion, down on the river at Fulham.

Snapping his mind back in to focus, away from the wasp incident, he realised he'd been stood there all alone on the doorstep for a good five minutes. If he was being honest, he had barely taken in the magnitude of her comments and came incredibly close to missing her designated deadline. All he could think was that she clearly didn't realise it was Thursday already.

Chapter 5

Rather than rush into anything and do something he later regretted, Jack chose to take his time and think things over. “I’m reviewing...deedle, deedle dee... the situation...” he sang quietly to himself, pretending he was Fagin from ‘Oliver!’

He thought it best to make a list of pros and cons of meeting Kamila, scribbling into the note pad with the cute kitten wearing a red and white Christmas hat on the front that he’d received it from Secret Santa at work. The truth was, he was willing to do anything, rather than actually make a decision.

Under the pros column he wrote ‘would please Kamila’ followed by ‘might get extra present for my birthday’. He chewed the end of the tiny pen someone had left on his desk at work, the type you used to get in betting shops, years ago.

In the cons. Column, things flowed more freely. ‘beginning of the end’, ‘hassle about kids/grandkids’; ‘wedding plans ???’, ‘meet Uncles and Aunts’ . Jack then added “calm down” which wasn’t a pro or a con, simply what he expected Polly would do soon.

“Yes, she’ll calm down, and realise I’ve been right about meeting my Mum, all along. Now wasn’t the right time for introductions, he thought. He couldn’t imagine her poor mother wanting to be laughing and joking with someone who was, to be honest, a relative stranger, what with all the deaths she’d had to endure of late. Surely?

Back home at the flat, Jack sat in front of his small TV watching an episode of Friends. He wondered whether was a single moment in the entire western world where you couldn’t watch an episode of that annoyingly happy-happy programme (even without the aid of catch-up or box sets). No, he decided, there probably wasn’t.

For the twentieth time, he revisited the list of thoughts that he’d scribbled out the night before, trying to reach a decision. One of the boy characters on screen (he could never remember the males’ names, other than Joey) made a big speech about living his own life and not being bullied by anyone to do something he didn’t want to do. That was it, Jack thought, I’m going to take inspiration from Rob or Joss, whatever his name was. He wasn’t going to any meeting. There, decided.

Now to get back to the more serious business of deciding which Friends actress he fancied the most...was it the dizzy blonde, the dark-haired skinny one or the sexy Greek one with the nice hairdo. Hmmmm, too much choice, he thought. Why was life filled with so many difficult decisions?

So instead of doing the sensible thing and arranging to go over to meet her mother that evening, Jack chose to spend Saturday night enjoying a couple of jars with his closest friends in The Albert. He texted them all, suggesting they met up around six.

The pub was located fairly close to Regent's Park, so he arrived for "early doors", soon after London Zoo had closed its gates to the thousands of visitors it received each day. He was soon huddled into the furthest corner of the pub, with a pint in-hand. As usual, his accomplices were his intimate gang of drinking buddies who all happened to be zoo-keepers by trade. The irresistibly likeable Marty Small had been really good friends with Jack since their school days and had introduced him to more and more of his work colleagues as time had gone on. In a weird way, Jack felt a real part of the zoo community, if only by association.

Every time they met up, Marty would provide captivating updates on the zoo's cute but ever expanding family of Meerkats. He loved his little mongoose charges and most people who knew him said that over the years he had become increasingly like one himself - he was talkative, charming and funny one day, and then quietly lost in his own thoughts the next.

Like the time when the two of them had gone into Regents Park to throw a frisbee around and Marty stood there gawping up at the aircraft flying overhead, en route to Heathrow. Jack managed to snap an epic iPhone pic of his friend looking uncannily like a Meerkat on sentry duty.

But Marty wasn't alone in having adopted the characteristics of the creatures in his care. Just one glance at Dave Morris's extended belly, ill-kempt black hair and permanently splayed legs, let alone his habit of loudly burping at the end of each pint he downed, more than hinted that he was responsible for the zoo's resident lowland gorillas. A stream of noisy farts, a stick of bamboo in his hand and the occasional chest-beating was all that was required to complete the look.

Paul Cosby, meanwhile, was part of the team that cared for the Asiatic lions and his flowing blond locks bore more than a passing resemblance to a big male lion's mane. Marty claimed he had frequently caught 'Cozz' licking the back of his hand before using it to brush his fringe back from over his face, but Cozz hotly disputed this had ever actually happened. He did, however, admit to peeing against trees in the park and liking his steak extremely rare.

But best of all was Suzy Manor, the giraffe keeper, who had legs that seemingly went on forever and as a result, elegantly glided around the place. Her bronze hair and long eye-lashes were noteworthy, but her most popular attribute with the boys, was her renowned party-trick, where she could touch the bottom of a half-pint glass with her tongue. Every week without fail, one of the boys would ask for a demonstration. And every week without fail, she would refuse, always to fits of laughter from the assembled crew around her. Marty, Dave, Cozz and Suzy – they all loved Jack in their own way and they felt that Polly was “the one” for Jack, despite his reluctance.

Normally, this ensemble would ensure that the main topics of discussion would be about failed escape attempts; unusual mating habits; impending births; bizarre dietary requirements or stomach-churning ailments. Mostly amongst the animals, of course. But not that night, not after Jack had spilt the beans about Polly's ultimatum. Instead, they repeatedly tried to convince him to make his way over to Polly's place before it was too late.

Hour after hour and drink after drink, each of the friends repeated their advice to him. They even offered to have a whip-round for an Uber. But he wasn't budging.

As each friend asked the same boring question, Jack responded with the same bored answer, "No, I'll meet Polly's mum when I am good and ready, not when Polly tells me to", adding that he was confident that she'd no follow through with her threat anyway.

As the evening progressed, the conversation finally switched. The beers went down all too easily, and nine o'clock came and went, almost unnoticed amongst those drinking in the Albert. But that wasn't the case inside Polly's smart Finchley flat.

Here, Mrs. Kamila Thomas was sit in the armchair with her daughter, Polly, watching a re-run of *'Say Yes To The Dress'*, sipping at her ice-cold Sauvignon Blanc, patiently awaiting the arrival of her daughter's supposed boyfriend, Jack.

It was close to midnight when Jack finally stumbled back into his flat in Kenton. He was merry from all of the beers and in good humour, despite his missed deadline. His phone had purposely been left on the bedside table, to avoid the inevitable calls from Polly.

Switching the phone on, it beep, beep, beeped to advise him that he had 14 missed calls. All from the same number. A number he recognised all too well (aided by the fact that it came up "Polly" on the screen, of course.)

As he held it in his hand, deciding whether to look to see if he had any messages, he leapt back as the phone sprang in to life, blasting out "Try A Little Tenderness" - the ringtone he had assigned specifically for Polly. It might well have been her favourite song, but the irony that it was performed by The Commitments really should have dawned on him before now.

*"You're an utter, utter, b*stard".* She didn't even wait for Jack to say hello on the other end. *"That's it, we're through. Goodbye, Arsehole!"* The line went dead and he sat in silence knowing that she'd call back within 30 seconds.

Right on cue, The Commitments burst in to song again.

"And don't think I don't mean it. I've been out and bought a new SIM card for my phone. After I get off this call I'm swapping them over so I'll have a new number and you won't be able to call me. Goodbye, you ape!!!!" Again, the line went dead.

Thirty seconds later, *"And if you'd even bothered to call me at any point today, you'd have known that there's water pouring through the ceiling from the flat upstairs! So I've had to move out and I'm going to stay with Mum. And that's actually perfect, because you haven't got a bloody clue where she lives, other than somewhere in Finchley, do you? You b*stard. Goodbye!!!!"*

After this final outburst, the line surprisingly stayed silent. Jack waited for the familiar ringtone but it didn't come. Jack came to his senses and tried calling her back, but he recoiled in shock as heard a blank ringtone suggesting that the line really was disconnected.

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Chapter 6

Waking up at after a little after eleven on Sunday morning, Jack mind raced back through the events of the night before. He'd expected to go straight off to sleep, particularly after all those beers, but Polly's words still rang in his ears and had kept him awake well into the early hours. And the sound of the dead line had stayed with him, too.

Even the enormous full English he polished off at the Kenton Lane Café didn't help much. Of course, if Polly had asked, he would suggest he had lost his appetite and couldn't face eating a thing, but she hadn't asked. In fact, she hadn't been in touch at all.

He spent the remainder of Sunday just staring at his mobile, willing it to ring. When Marty called for an update, Jack had thrown himself across the sofa to grab the phone and Marty could sense the disappointment in his friend's voice when he realised the identity of the caller. Jack reluctantly recounted the conversation from the night before, with Marty ooh-ing and aaah-ing at the appropriate moments. Jack had expected a tirade from his buddy, but instead Marty told him to "hang on in there, matey. Wait for her to call, then apologise like f*ck, take the grief you're going to get, and then try to move on".

But the call didn't come. Nor did it come on Monday either. This really wasn't like her, but Jack also knew she could be quite stubborn, too. Despite knowing it was futile, he had tried phoning her old number, but every time it rang through to the same flat discontinued tone.

By eight o'clock on Tuesday night with still no news, he decided he had to make a move. He Whatsapp'd his line manager and asked for the Wednesday off work, which was begrudgingly agreed to, despite the lack of notice. He did mention that at least he hadn't pulled a sickie, with his honesty appearing to sway the decision.

First thing Wednesday morning, Jack made the thirty-minute journey over to Finchley, despite feeling it was unlikely she was going to be there. He left his finger on the doorbell way too long, which caused a couple of the building's other residents to come to their doors and tell him she was not there.

It was quickly evident that most of Polly's neighbours were reluctant to help. She was hugely popular with all the residents and she'd no doubt filled them in on how terrible Jack had been. And, it was clear that they were under strict instructions not to give him any information regarding her whereabouts.

Elderly Miss Allardyce from the ground floor flat took just a little too much pleasure from keeping him in the dark. She'd never seemed to like him, resulting in Jack suggesting that *"the old bat is completely anti-men"*.

He attributed this to the gossip that she'd endured a very painful break-up with a man called Daniel Wilkinson in the mid-1980's. Apparently it was all a mix-up over a rather buxom blonde girl that worked in the local off-license. Daniel had since gone on to represent the Finchley constituency as a Conservative MP and rumour had it that Miss Allardyce had gone tee-total and voted Liberal Democrat ever since, just to spite them both.

The only information she would part with, was to complain about the plumbers who had spent the previous day "making far too much noise sorting the problems with Mrs. Lawrence's dripping waterworks". That sounded nasty. But it did confirm why Polly had chosen to leave the flat.

Jack sifted through the mail on the hallway table, some of which was addressed to Polly. "Does she need this mail forwarding on to her?" Jack enquired, hopeful that this might help reveal her new address. But Jack looked up to see Miss Allardyce giving him a hard stare from over half lowered school mistress style glasses. She'd clearly sussed his strategy and hastily gathered up Polly's mail, growling that "it's best that I keep those with me until she comes round to collect them".

Jack responded by asking, "*When will she be here?*" only to be told that Miss Allardyce was waiting for Polly to call her, so there would be no use in lying in wait for her. "*So, do you have her number?*" he enquired. "*No I don't and if I did....*"

Miss Allardyce didn't finish her sentence, she simply turned and padded off down the hallway with Polly's post clenched firmly against her rather ample bosom. Oo-er, missus.

Realising that Miss Allardyce was off the scene, old Mr. Lawrence from upstairs whispered conspiratorially into Jack's ear, informing him that Polly had apparently said that she had told her landlord she was moving out for good, with immediate effect. Apparently. the landlord had said he'd keep her deposit in lieu of notice as he appreciated her "*delicate predicament*". I bet he did, Jack thought, I bet he did.

Mr. Lawrence kept to himself the fact that Polly had not been alone when visiting the building. She was accompanied by a tall, dark-haired chap. Mr. Lawrence was sure she had referred to him as Gerald or Jeremy, or something like that. When she had become upset about leaving the flat, he had pulled her into the crook of his arm and comforted her as she gently sobbed.

The old boy had chosen to spare Jack these potentially hurtful details, as had always had a bit of a soft spot for him, especially after he had help repair Mr. Lawrence's lawnmower.

Jack had never understood why he had asked for that specific favour, as Mr. Lawrence lived on the 4th floor and had no access to the garden.

Jack thanked him for the update and opened the communal front door on to the main road, to be greeted by the sight of a muscular handyman erecting an estate agent's 'To Let / Flat 3' sign in the front garden. No need for Dr. Watson's famed sidekick to solve this particular mystery. She really had moved out and didn't mean to return.

He felt that his avenues for tracking her down were reducing by the minute, so decided to head over to where Polly worked. He leapt onto a tube to the West End, to visit the Piccadilly Hotel, where Polly had plied her trade as an Events' Manager for almost five years. It was a job she loved and she was good at it, too. She'd even managed to get him behind the scenes when there had been big music industry events or a book launch by some famous author.

Much to Jack's surprise, Winston, the ever-friendly concierge, informed him that Polly had left under a cloud just two days earlier. Jack was dumbfounded and was desperate for Winston to expand.

He was surprised to hear that she had apparently announced to the hotel's executive manager that she'd been offered a more highly-paid job doing a similar role at another prestigious London hotel. But which hotel? He'd checked with other staff who were equally in the dark. Winston explained that the hotel's senior management made a real knee jerk reaction, putting Polly on immediate 'garden leave' as they feared she'd poach events and corporate customers.

They had insisted that she leave the hotel immediately, not even giving her the chance to say goodbye to friends and work colleagues. She was quite rudely escorted off the premises by the new Head of Security and two burly members of his team.

Seeing his old friend genuinely upset by what was happening, Winston had tried to intervene on her behalf but Polly had told him that she could look after herself and he should not risk the wrath of management. Escaping the clutches of the security staff, she had leapt into a black cab that had been on the rank outside the hotel and made off into the busy rush-hour traffic. He had wondered whether she was either heading home or to the competitor hotel, but he couldn't be sure which.

Winston seemed quite taken aback to hear of the couples' split ,as he'd met with them many times and Polly had not mentioned it to him during any of their all too frequent catch ups over an American Flat and a Café Latte in the last few days prior to her leaving, although she had said something about a need for a completely fresh start.

Wilson agreed to adding Jack's mobile number into his contacts, promising to call him as soon as he knew where Polly was working. He seemed genuine enough, but six weeks later, Jack had still heard nothing. Maybe Winston still didn't know...or maybe Polly had begged him not to pass the info on, as a favour to an old friend.

Jack started to feel desperate. Despite thinking of it as an equivalent to a dingy back street dental practice on the day you need root canal surgery, Jack had even visited the Supersonic Badminton Club in Golders Rise, accompanied by his side-kick, Marty. Jack despised the place, with its pungent aroma combining Ralgex spray, sweaty bodies and floor disinfectant. But it was the clientele that he hated most. Jack thought of badminton enthusiasts as people who were either too slow for squash or too lazy for tennis. He insisted that their sweaty headbands typified their nerd status as sporting also-rans.

Whilst he thought the manager had probably sussed his ill-conceived prejudices, the charming little man in charge said they hadn't seen Polly in weeks and that she hadn't booked in for court-time since the start of the month.

Jack wished that he'd have taken more interest in Polly's friends. He couldn't even think of any of their surnames. He and Marty scoured the notice board for details of the upcoming club tournament, hopeful that names might leap out at them.

Marty became animated when he saw Polly's name highlighted on a second-round tie versus Annabel Huntley. He excitedly pointed out that her name had been half-crossed out with the words *"Bye"* etched above it. Marty looked genuinely confused when Jack explained that the tie had in fact been awarded to Annabel and it wasn't simply a farewell message from Polly.

Despite having a consolatory beer in the Albert with Marty, Jack found himself sliding into an even darker mood. Dead end after dead end. And so it was that Jack was sat in his flat. In the dark. Feeling very, very lonely.

That had now been three months ago. Three really long months.

He'd not heard from Polly since. Not even once. And he was really upset. He really did love her and felt he'd told her so, often enough.

She'd moved house, changed her job, left the badminton club, closed her Facebook account....everywhere he knew to find her, she had vanished from.

Ok, so he'd been unwilling to meet her one last remaining parent, but was that really such a make-or-break deal? Big enough to call the whole thing off and seemingly disappear off the face of the earth?

“It’s 2023 for Pete’s sake. People can’t just disappear. Should I go the Police and report her missing? Do I look her parents’ address up on the electoral register? Or would that count as stalking? Does she want to avoid me?”

Chapter 7

With each day that passed, Jack's attitude shifted just a little. At the start, he'd been happy to suggest that Polly had been subjecting him to a level of nagging that should be measured on the Richter scale, but now he'd switched to admitting that she'd actually been a very understanding woman, who given him about as much pressure as the air in a punctured old bicycle tyre.

He'd never doubted how much Polly meant to him, but he did now wonder how much he'd showed that to her. Or maybe more significantly, how much he'd showed it to people that were important to Polly. People like her mother.

It even started to creep into his mind that he'd been wrong to put up so many barriers and maybe he could have met with Polly's parents. He was a big boy, after all, and could have made it clear what he did and didn't want from his relationships. Maybe he could have shown a little more compassion when Alan had died, as well as little Ralph.

When he explained this to 'The Goalies' as he affectionately referred to his group of friends from the zoo (because they were all keepers), they chorused their cries of anguish and held their heads in their hands, trying to understand why he'd come to this conclusion so late.

They fired their own nickname straight back at him, highlighting that he'd missed out on the best 'keeper' of them all. They'd all had a real soft spot for Polly, as she'd been a popular and fun part of their social circle for what now seemed like forever.

But they all reflected that it mattered little now, because she was long gone, so it was important that they helped Jack pick himself back up and put him on the road to happiness again. It wasn't as though he hadn't had successful relationships with girls prior to Polly, it was just that none of them had seemed quite so promising, quite so right, quite so lovely.

But then Dave dropped a bombshell. Without realising it, he absentmindedly mentioned that he'd seen Polly coming out of the cinema in Leicester Square. Despite everyone sushing Dave for all they were worth, it was abundantly clear to Jack that everyone knew about this already, bar him. "Details, tell me the details."

Marty and Suzy glared at Dave, silently insisting he say nothing. But in true style, Dave completely missed the meaning of their dagger looks and proceeded to let slip that Polly had been with Jeremy Stone, coming out of the new Mission Impossible movie. Jack felt a dagger to the heart - not only had Polly had found someone else to replace him, but she'd also been to watch Tom Cruise's latest offering without him. Didn't she even respect the fact that little Tom was his favourite actor of all time?

Was it time to move on from Polly and look for someone new? If Suzy, the giraffe keeper, had been as honest with herself as she had been with other members of the group when drunk, she would have admitted she had a real thing for Jack herself. *"You need to get back into the saddle as soon as possible, Jack"* she suggested, to which Dave crudely suggested she had her own saddle in mind, earning him a punch on the arm from Suzy.

The Goalies went through an exhaustive list of other friends and family (*didn't Cozz have a sister-in-law who was quite hot? Isn't she's in HMP for stabbing her ex? Perhaps not, then*); staff at the zoo (*what about Alison in the staff canteen with one ear way lower than the other, causing her glasses to slip off every two minutes*); staff at Earwax (Jack howled at the suggestion, stating they were all way to arty farty for him); and finally the regulars at the Albert. Jack always seemed to spend more time than most chatting to barmaid 'Jolly Julie' but he insisted that was because he couldn't understand a word of her broad Geordie accent.

Didn't they have any parties coming up? Surely, they could invite some single friends or friends of friends. Sadly, the answer came back with a resounding no, which was one of the few pleasant bits of information Jack had heard all evening.

Suzy then suggested online dating which was met with equal amounts of laughter and frightened screeches. After both died down, the group agreed this was a real good option and set about convincing Jack the same.

Bowing to the ever-increasing pressure from his friends and much against his better judgement, Jack surprised all of his friends by agreeing to the idea, no doubt angered by the earlier news of Polly's cinema visit. *"Okay, okay....I'll give it a whirl. But for now, let's get back to drinking and news on when Suzy's baby giraffe is going to make an appearance"*.

Within a couple of days, they were all back in the Albert and the Goalies were keen to maintain the momentum, making sure Jack wasn't just fobbing them off. *"Come on then, let's get your profile written up"*, Marty insisted. Jack knew he'd hoisted the white flag of surrender way too easily and to prove it, Dave's iPad was fired up into life and Jack's details were being incorporated into a dodgy looking dating website, loveofyourlife.com.

The friends scrawled through their mobile libraries in search of suitable photos, before Air-dropping them to Dave, who uploaded all the 'approved' images onto the site.

There was one of Jack leaning against a zoo cage containing a stunning Hyacinth Macaw that was attempting to peck his ear and another with him grinning like a Cheshire Cat whilst clinking his pint glass against Marty's, no doubt taken in the Albert.

Suzy assured everyone that girls would go weak at the knees at a cutesy image of Jack cuddling a ten-week old French Bulldog puppy, whilst the portrait of him holding up an advertising award apparently showed his

professional side. There was a moody black and white shot from a formal looking event that Jack didn't even remember being taken, but was curiously found in the favourites folder on Suzy's phone. And finally, a pic of Jack wildly punching his fists into the air whilst wearing a Tottenham Hotspur replica shirt, taken at Marty's after he'd watched them beat 'The Arse' 2-0 on Skysports.

Pictures chosen, it was now time to write the profile. Name, age and location were all straight forward, but height and weight caused some more lively discussion. Suzy recommended honest and accurate answers, but both Paul and Dave insisted Jack should claim to be at least two inches taller than his 5'10 and to put athletic rather than average for his build. In the end, Jack had the final word, going with a slightly exaggerated 5'10 ½ and the honest average.

No one felt putting '*animal lover*' was the appropriate way to describe his passion for wildlife, just in case it gave an altogether wrong impression, whilst '*getting p*ssed at the Albert*' did not constitute an attractive sounding pastime, despite Paul's suggestion.

Suzy felt 'likes to travel', 'listening to music' and 'socialising' all sounded a bit vanilla, but Jack wouldn't be cajoled into committing to anything more adventurous. Dave issued a one-word answer in response to "*What are you ideally looking for?*" but Suzy flatly refused to type in sex. But at least Jack laughed – something he seemed to do less and less these days.

Jack opted for '*don't know yet*' rather than commit to any suggestion he was '*looking for love*' or '*long term relationship*'. His description of his ideal mate was clearly based entirely on Polly, which brought repeated groans from his mates, but within an hour or so, his profile was live and the money had flown out of his bank account giving him a three-month membership.

Three of them huddled around the phone and began trawling through the prospective dates on the site, whilst Jack just stared into his pint. Had he really agreed to all of this? To emphasise the seeming futility of it all, the boys had wildly differing tastes regarding ideal women and Jack consistently rejected any of their proposed options, with a swift and rather depressing "*nah*".

Suzy announced that she was going to take responsibility for sending various 'Likes' to suitable candidates and responding to incoming requests. "*You sound like my madam*", Jack had complained, but Suzy was determined to find him some romance, despite actually having more than a passing interest in the daft old brush herself. But they were friends and much as it pained her, she knew it was best to keep it that way.

Just two weeks later, Jack was back in The Albert with the rest of the Goalies, bringing them up to date on his '*adventures in romance*', as Marty had christened them. Despite their initial excitement at the idea, The Goalies had low expectations of any progress as Jack had showed little or no enthusiasm.

So they were genuinely shocked to hear that Jack had not only gone along with Suzy's somewhat ruthless appraisals, but had also managed to squeeze in three dates since they'd met up last. But they were less impressed when they heard the details.

First there was Sandra, a thirty-nine year-old self-confessed jigsaw addict with a confusing love of dairy farming (as she lived on the 14th floor of a tower block in Elephant & Castle and worked in Subway). Within two hours of their meeting in a pub off Shaftesbury Avenue, she had offered to *"take out her teeth"* and provide Jack with a fabulously memorable evening of who knows what (Paul thought she sounded great). Her limited-edition Wham t-shirt and liking for the music of Paul Weller could only cancel out so much. *"I'm out,"* said Jack, sounding every bit like Touker Suleyman.

That Saturday, he'd met Claire. Jack suggested an introductory walk around St. James' Park, starting at noon. Standing a few feet away proved that she possessed professional standard Photoshop skills when it came to improving profile pictures versus the rather less appealing reality.

Jack wasn't being shallow, or implying that any prospective girlfriend had to have the figure of Aphrodite. But the technical removal of at least five stone in weight, let alone around ten years of the effects of ageing were just too much for him to deal with. His description of her buttocks as having different postcodes merely hinted at her shape.

“Honesty matters, lady, honest matters”, he found himself whispering as he begrudgingly continued to feed the squirrels on the walk around the park that he was so desperate to cut short.

And finally on the Sunday, there was Lisa. Dressed all in white, her hair styled with a curious, yet strangely familiar looking bun on each side of her head. At first, she appeared to be such a quiet little thing, but once she'd had a sherbet or two inside her (which took less than 15 minutes, as she downed two double-vodka and cokes), the slightly more disturbing truth came out. Those buns really should have given her away - Lisa announced that she was hugely into Cosplay and all but demanded that whenever she and Jack *“got together”* she would expect him to dress as Darth Vader (complete with menacing sounding breathless speech) whenever he *‘took her prisoner’* in the bedroom. Jack made his escape quicker than Skywalker on a supercharged X-wing, reflecting that at least she hadn't asked for Chewbacca. Cheerio Lisa, or should that be Leah?

As a result of these three scary encounters, Jack metaphorically ticked the box marked “No thanks”, feeling that his chance for a long-standing, meaningful relationship did not lie via online dating. Forget the financial investment, he could take no more.

Meanwhile, Polly was sat cradling a steaming mug of tea in her mother's front room. She was alone in the house as Mrs. Thomas was away for a fortnight visiting an old friend who lived by the coast. Polly had popped in to ensure all the houseplants stayed healthy by giving them their weekly water, topped up with a few drops of Baby-Bio. That included 'Dumbo' – the elephant ear plant that Jack had bought for her on a day out in Camden Market, soon after they met. She hadn't wanted Dumbo to die off, but equally she hadn't wanted to see it every day, as it brought back such bitter sweet memories. So, Dumbo had been adopted by Kamila, who kept 'him' beside the magazine rack and kept his curiously shaped leaves looking at their best.

Looking around her at the pictures in shiny silver frames and mounted randomly on the wall, she saw a thousand memories gazing back at her. Polly reflected on how life had changed so dramatically - one minute she'd had a father; an adoring relationship with her boyfriend; a lovely flat and a job that she loved. Then, in what felt like the blink of an eye, everything had changed. Leaving the flat had been relatively easy as she'd been thinking of moving on from there for a while, ideally to have shared somewhere with Jack. The old job had probably run its course and the chance to move to a bigger and better role was far too tempting, even if it did mean leaving friends at the hotel behind.

So those two decisions had been easy, but parting with Jack had been far more difficult and had left its emotional mark on her. Whilst she had fumed

for weeks afterwards, all the anger had now long gone, replaced by a lingering doubt that she'd been too hasty. She now wondered whether changing her mobile number had been a childish, kneejerk reaction and having gone "off grid" to hide from Jack had been cruel, even if he had deserved it.

She'd stand by her decision to split up, which she was sure was fully justified based solely on Jack's stubborn and childish actions. Hadn't he failed to adhere to her deadlines, after all? She reminded herself that she hadn't ever wanted to impose them, she had done so out of sheer desperation.

But if Jack could be stubborn, then so could she. There was no going back on her decision, even if she wouldn't have chosen that route given her time over. Anyway, she had a new flat, new job...oh, and a new man to make her happy now. So, there was no point thinking about the past.

Chapter 8

A couple of weeks after the online fuelled dramas, a very different opportunity to meet a partner came Jack's way. It was a somewhat surprising circumstance, given Jack's negative attitude towards marriage (or at least the prospect of his own nuptials), but Marty insisted that Jack accompany him to a family wedding - usually the last place you'd expect to find him. He argued that making your presence felt as a single guy at a wedding, was completely different to attending with a girlfriend.

"But the place is going to be wall to wall totty," Marty insisted "You know what single girls are like. They get all goo-ey at weddings, so there's bound to be fun to be had with one of the sloshed-up bridesmaids or one of the bride's mates from Uni".

Whilst Jack was inclined to agree with the concept, the scenario had about as much appeal as finding a curly hair in your Chicken Jalfrezi. But again, he was worn down by the Goalie's combined efforts. Jack agreed but mainly just to simply shut them all up.

Having loaned a suit from one of Marty's older brothers, the following Saturday afternoon, dressed up to the nines, the two boys tumbled into an Uber bound for Bermondsey. Jack had said a solid 'no' to the suggestion

of going to the actual ceremony at the church, but was willing to go to the wedding reception for Marty's cousin Charlotte and her new husband, Rory.

In an attempt to whet his appetite, Marty had shown Jack a selection of Facebook pictures of Charlotte's friends taken during their reportedly outrageous hen week away in Mykonos. These included numerous photos of the bride waving a large inflatable penis above her head in the street; various drunken-looking girls holding fluffy handcuffs and wearing willy shaped sunglasses; too many images of ill-fitting, way too short mini dresses; a wobbly line of girls wearing black satin sashes bearing the words 'Hens on the Lash'; a video of the maid of honour violently throwing up into her own handbag outside a ropey looking nightclub ;and an oiled-up mediterranean-looking male stripper smearing squirty-cream all over his tanned six pack and naked todger.

In Marty's opinion this gave Jack the perfect opportunity to identify his intended target for the night, to which Jack could only reply, *"Who said that romance is dead?"*

But Marty singly failed to mention Karen, his cousin on his mother's side of the family. Or that Miss Karen Pepper was a man-eater of Siberian Tiger standards. He also somehow failed to mention that having seen Jack's profile, she had told numerous other invitees to the event that, *"He is so going to be mine, mine and all mine!"*

If being at a wedding where you only know one person (Marty) wasn't bad enough for Jack, being the intended quarry of Miss Pepper really was a living nightmare. Disregarding Charlotte's seating plan that had been months in the planning, Karen switched her name-card with Olivia Applegate, one of the bride's work colleagues, allowing her to sit on Jack's left hand side.

"Oh hello, Jack. I'm Marty's cousin, Karen. Marty has told me so much about you, but don't worry, I'm keen to hear it all for myself! Where should we start?" Jack gulped, hard.

Admittedly, most would say that Karen was a very attractive woman. Standing at around 5'10 in her way too high Jimmy Choo stilettos, she had piercing brown eyes, fiery red hair cascading down her slender back and an hourglass figure encased in a body-hugging sapphire blue dress. These all conspired to ensure she turned the head of most of the wedding's male guests. Marty watched on, failing to come to the aid of his best friend during this intense 'seduction', despite Jack flashing repeated glances across the table, silently begging for assistance.

Marty felt that Jack should enjoy some female attention for the evening... and perhaps into the night if Karen had her way.

Over a plate laden high with roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, washed down with way too much Kyle Minogue branded prosecco, Karen pressed ahead with her personal 'mission for submission'. Having sounded rather

impressed by Jack's career in advertising and his love of wildlife, she effortlessly changed the subject to herself and listed off the various Z list celebrities and wealthy businessmen that she'd dated in recent times. Married, or otherwise.

She made no secret of the fact that despite his lack of Instagram followers or obvious healthy bank balance, he was her target for the night. *"With your witty charm and dashing looks, you remind me of a more mature, sexier Tom Hardy"*, which confused Jack as he felt that in his ill-fitting suit, he looked more like Oliver Hardy.

After around an hour of torture, Karen finally headed off to the toilet, whispering into Jack's ear as she left, *"I need to go right now, otherwise I might pee my pants. Oh, silly me, I'm not wearing any"*. She laughed loudly and suggestively, blowing him a very obvious kiss from her cherry-red painted lips and seductively swinging her hips for his (supposed) delectation.

As she moved across the dance floor towards the illuminated 'Ladies' sign, Marty leaned across the table and spluttered out, *"So....How are you getting on with the Red Hot Chilli Pepper, Jack?"*, causing a number of the table's other guests to fall about in fits of laughter. It was clear that the entire table had noticed Karen's far from subtle approaches and were fully in on the joke.

Jack made a desperate plea for someone to help distract her and save him from his unbearable predicament. “Well, I’ll certainly give her a go” offered Wayne Bingham, in a Leslie Phillips like manner.

Wayne was Olivia Applegate’s plus one, but they were *“just friends, nothing more”* she insisted (a fact which surprised no one). He was a good three inches shorter than ‘Chilli Pepper’, had a belly to compare with a silverback gorilla and had hit quite a few of the thicker branches whilst falling from the ugly tree. But at least he was in the right seat, on the other side of Karen to Jack. *“Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t want ‘it’ full time or owt, but I wouldn’t mind a slice of her tonight, mate”* explained Wayne, illustrating all of his abundant charm and class.

Before Jack had even had the chance to respond, Karen was back, sliding into her seat whilst impersonating Sharon Stone’s sluttier sister in a more explicit remake of Basic Instinct. Jack regretted eyeing something he’d never be able to unsee, whilst Wayne needed to employ a hastily gathered napkin to wipe up the slobber dribbling embarrassingly from his chin.

“Have you met Wayne, Karen? He’s in charge of Wine Supply at a major retailer” explained Jack, exaggerating Wayne’s role as an overnight shelf stacker in the wine aisle at his local Asda superstore. He was relieved to see that Karen was impressed by Wayne’s ‘CV’ if not feeling the same for his looks.

An hour later, the reception meal was over and Jack was thrilled to discover that he'd been able to sidle away from the table in the general direction of the bar, escaping Karen Pepper's clutches for a few moments at least.

She remained in humorous dialogue with Wayne, but Jack's initial pleasure increased to euphoria as he saw 'Ricardo' slide into his vacated seat and throw one of his trademark smiles in Karen's direction. Richard Weston was famed for his unmatched ability to charm the ladies, earning him his South American sounding nickname. With Wayne's slobbering and Ricardo's flirting, Jack felt safe at last.

As the night progressed, the tiny dance floor was brimming with all manner of would-be John Travolta's (who danced more like John Merrick, due to the amount of alcohol they'd all consumed), as the gorgonzola standard of DJ worked his cheesy magic.

Those popular wedding classic '*Oops Upside Your Head*', '*YMCA*' and '*Come On, Eileen*' were all welcomed by hoots and cheers from the audience, although Eileen, the maid of honour was seen slapping Wayne, after he made a truly obscene suggestion during the chorus of the Dexy's classic.

Karen Pepper was seen gyrating with first one and then the other of her two new admirers, but Jack continued to feel uneasy as she kept glancing over at him and rubbing her bottom lip suggestively with her finger.

As the intro notes of 'Love is All Around' escaped from the speakers, she made a beeline for him at the bar and despite protestations, dragged him back to the dance floor and started grinding her pelvic bone against his hip and groin.

"Don't you fancy taking a bottle of champers with us up to my room - 212 - for a more intimate party?" she asked, breathing enough alcohol onto Jack's face to cause a sizeable inferno in a West Midlands-based storage unit.

"No, I'm fine" he pleaded, *"Both Wayne and Ricardo look really quite thirsty. I'm sure one of them would be more than keen to take you up on your offer"*

As she looked over to where her two back-up lovers appeared to be having some kind of territorial dispute, Jack sneaked out of her clutches and hastily moved back to the bar. He gratefully received another drink from Marty whilst making it clear that he would much prefer to bury his face in a beer glass than in Karen's breasts, *"However magnificent everyone seems to think they are"*. Marty guffawed and the two men embraced before necking yet another pint.

The music continued well into the night, as did the drinking. The glitter ball continued to revolve and Jack's head increasingly followed suit. Despite its scary start, the evening was ending reasonably well, he felt.

He didn't recall moving from the bar again that night. But did he? Did Karen come over to him and kiss him? Did he talk to anyone else? It all became very hazy as he slipped deeper and deeper into his cups.

Six pints became eight, eight became ten...he could remember little of what had happened after the delights of Wet Wet Wet. Surely one of the two lotharios would entertain Karen overnight. Surely, he was 'safe'.

Chapter 9

Jack woke with a start. His room was in complete darkness and was totally silent. Part of the deal he'd agreed to, was to take advantage of a freebie overnight stay in the hotel where the reception had been held. This had simply encouraged the boys to drink way too much.

Through heavy eyes, the dimly-lit digital clock to his left just about allowed him make out that it was 4.13am. He could remember little of the night before, not helped by the legion of tiny stone masons busy working away at the back of his head, reminding him of the copious amounts of alcohol he'd consumed. What worried him most were the hazy images that kept flashing into his mind of the amorous Karen Pepper, who had ironically offered to make it *"a night to remember"*. Ironically that was one of the few bits that he could recall.

So, he didn't dare move too much or open his eyes any further, because he discovered that he was lying completely naked on top of the bed, with the quilt cover beneath him. And he didn't yet know whether Karen was beside him or not. He listened for breathing or any other telltale signs of life, but there was nothing to ease his concern. He reached for the sidelight and as quietly as he could, he flipped the switch, but the lamp failed to light up.

Jack silently cursed before grabbed his mobile and keeping the phone well below the level of the mattress he pressed the home button to provide him with the barest amount of light to check whether he was alone in his bedroom. *"Please, please, please tell me I'm not in bed with that scary woman"*, he said to himself. Much to his delight he saw that the other half of the bed was empty and in fact the bedding was still tucked in, so no nocturnal 'bad behaviour' could possibly have occurred there.

Jack let the phone slip to the floor and rose gingerly from the bed, anxious to relieve his insistent bladder which was no doubt filled with up to a dozen or so pints of lager. He reached for the bathroom light and was again frustrated as it failed to work either. Regardless, he stepped absentmindedly into the bathroom and seeing at least this room was lit, he allowed the door to swing shut behind him.

But there wasn't a toilet bowl, bidet, shower unit or wash basin to be found. Instead, there was a bright-red fire extinguisher and a green stick man fire-exit sign that stared back at him from the wall opposite. He wasn't in the bathroom at all. No. He was in the hotel corridor and he'd just allowed his bedroom door to close.

He didn't even have chance to try the handle again, because he heard voices coming from a few feet further down the thankfully zig-zagged corridor. Jack calculated that this gave him at least a couple of seconds grace to hide his modesty.

As he turned and silently ran, he could pick out one male and one female voice, but he recognised neither.

Whilst the hotel was almost full of guests from the wedding, he had no idea which room anyone else was staying in. In fact, he didn't even remember his own room number. He was furious with himself at the thought of how drunk he'd been the night before. He made it to the first wall and hid, but the two voices continued to move closer. So, he did the same again, with exactly the same result. Why didn't the couple peel off into a room?

He carefully avoided stepping on an almost empty pizza delivery box left on a discarded room service tray outside room 243. As he did so, he noticed there was just one last stone-cold slice of pizza in the box, which he grabbed and stuffed into his mouth as he left. Pepperoni, nice.

Still the pesky voices seemed to follow him, no matter how many times he sprinted from turn to turn. Arriving at the fire-escape stairwell, Jack gently pushed open the door. The stairs were wide, with a carpeted runner covering three quarters of their width. Huge Victorian windows and fancy wooden balustrades decorated what was as grand a staircase as Jack had seen in many years.

He ran down two or was it three levels? Much to his disbelief, he was sure he heard the door to the stairs open behind him. Surely not, he thought. He crouched, stone still. The voices were muffled, he couldn't quite make out

what they were saying, but they both laughed and the door swung shut. It was now silent and he was confident they'd gone, at last.

He considered his options. The most obvious thing was to head to reception where ideally it would be a male overnight porter who would be able to provide him with a spare key. But he'd have to go down naked. But before he could make any serious decisions, another issue pushed itself to the front of the queue: He remembered why he'd come out of his room in the first place - to have a pee - and with all the drama of escaping people by running up and down corridors and staircases, that need had been upgraded from fairly urgent to a down-right emergency.

Accepting that reception wasn't a sensible option without clothing, Jack went in search of a sizeable plant pot on the staircase where he could *"water the plants"*.

Despite going up and down what felt like 5 or 6 flights, he couldn't find any plants, anywhere. *"What kind of cheapskate hotel is this, anyway?"* he thought. He rejected the option of just urinating in one corner as he'd create a huge lager lake that would stink to high heaven, so he decided on a cunning plan that seemed like such a great idea at the time.

Rather than ruin one bit of the carpet by pee-ing all over it, he would run up and down the carpeted stairs liberally sprinkling just a little bit of wee, everywhere he went. Taking hold of his own personal garden hose, he

proceeded to do just that, rapidly swinging it first this way and then that, leaving barely any noticeable wetness over those three flights of stairs. Genius, he thought. Genius.

Finally, Jack was able to calm down, relieved that he had relieved himself. He even had a bit of a chuckle about that one. Now that he'd removed the danger of wetting himself, he knew he needed to bite the bullet and to go to reception. But he was wary of doing so whilst still naked. He needed some kind of covering.

Looking around him, an idea struck. He'd unhook one of the lovely velvety curtains that adorned the beautiful Victorian windows up and down the fire escape stairs and he would enter the lobby in his makeshift toga, stride over to the reception desk looking every inch a Roman God, before demanding his replacement key. He would look so regal.

But the windows were high - over 14 ft from floor to ceiling, so actually reaching the hooks was going to be a challenge all of its own. Undeterred, Jack began to climb the velvet curtains, which admittedly felt rather nice against his naked skin.

He shuddered at the thought of the horrendous view he would be providing to anyone standing below him, but he need not have worried, as he wasn't up there for long. Seconds after starting his ascent, the seemingly solid brass curtain rail began to bow in the centre under his body weight, causing Jack

to fear that he was going to pull the entire thing down from the wall.

He jumped down and was showered with a fine powder, as plaster fell from around the screw holes that held the rail in place. Jack accepted that his seemingly fool-proof toga concept was dead in the water, as he looked at the masonry mess around him. There were half a dozen chunks of pea-sized plaster and plenty of dust on the burgundy carpet, making it obvious that mischief had occurred.

In another blinding moment of inspiration, Jack elected to literally sweep things under the carpet. He tugged at the edge of the luxurious floorcovering until it reluctantly tore away from its fastenings on the floor. Jack then scooped up the smallish terracotta pieces and slid them under the carpet before pressing it down back into place. He blew away any remaining dust and stepped back to admire his cover-up job only to realise that the pieces were too big to hide that easily and were making tell-tale lumps under the carpet's uneven surface.

In a flash - pun intended - Jack started a kind of impromptu highland jig on top of the broken pieces, using his weight to crush the plaster down. With just a few minutes the lumps were all gone. Job done, but again he was thankfully that no one had witnessed the performance. It hadn't been up to Riverdance standards, but his nudity would certainly have caused a stir at the Morris Dancing Championships.

Recalling a small section of the lewd suggestion she'd made earlier in the evening, Jack cried out, even though there was no one around to hear him, *"212, Karen said she's in room 212...she'll help me!!"*

Within a couple of minutes, he had worked out his way to the second floor and down the corridor to room 212. Allowing the excitement of ending his corridor crisis to overcome his fear of Miss Pepper, Jack rapped loudly on her door. As he waited for her response, it dawned on him that she may have company and he really didn't want to see Wayne's sweaty naked body in the background. But he needn't have worried (in that respect at least) as amazingly, Karen was alone in her room.

At first, she peeped around the doorframe, but seeing a naked Jack stood before her, she opened the door wide and displayed her own naked form in its full glory. Jack didn't know where to look (first). Seizing the initiative, Karen grabbed him firmly by the forearm, pulling him into her lair.

"Finally!" she exclaimed.

"No, no, stop, you've got the wrong idea!" Jack pleaded.

"Wrong idea, wrong idea? You've just knocked on my door at nearly five in the morning, you are naked...and I've got the wrong idea?"

Karen's eyes grew wider and wider as Jack stammered out *"I, erm, I have, er, locked myself out of my room"*.

Looking over Jack's shoulder, Karen insisted he hadn't. *"No, you haven't", "Yes I have"* - the two of them entered a panto-esque argument back and forth until Karen physically turned him towards the door on room 215 - on the other side of the corridor, where she had been looking.

"Your key's there, sticking out of the electronic slot" she clarified. Jack was mortified, *"Oh, that explains why my lights didn't work"* he added.

"Shut up Jack, no more made-up excuses. Let's just get on with it" she insisted, turning back towards her seemingly inviting bed. *"Er, no thanks, Karen, I've just remembered I've left my bath water running....."*

It was the crappiest excuse ever and he had absolutely no idea where that had come from, even allowing for the fact that red-haired Karen had matching 'collar and cuffs', but her quizzical look had given Jack just the right amount of time to lunge towards room 215, press the card into the framework and tumble headfirst into his room, with the heavy door thankfully swinging to, behind him.

Jack ignored the short-lived knocks at his door from a seemingly insistent Miss Pepper and he dived under the previously unused covers on his hotel bed, whispering out a curse, *"Wait till I get my hands on you, Marty....."*

Chapter 10

The following morning, Jack was still fearful of any kind of contact with Karen, so he decided to phone down to reception and ask for breakfast to be brought up to his room. Even when the waitress knocked and announced herself at the door, Jack insisted on double-checking who was outside his door through the small eyehole.

Once the staff member had provided what felt like her date of birth, mother's maiden name, first pet's name and a 4-digit security code, he asked her to back off allowing him to open the door just enough to slide the goody-filled silver tray inside.

By 9.45, he finally felt brave enough to sneak out of his room and was relieved to see that the maid was already busy tidying room 212, suggesting Karen Pepper was up and away. Fingers crossed, he thought. He'd skim read the note from Marty that had been pushed under his door whilst he showered. *"Reception at 9.15 and we'll hit the road. Get any HOT action last night? Cheers, Marty".*

Jack purposely arrived late to avoid having to dwell in the hotel's enormous lobby, where he might be seen. Spotting Marty waiting impatiently on the far side, he put his finger to his lips and then pointed towards the exit.

"Has she gone?" he mouthed to his friend and initially Marty pretended not to understand who he meant. Ever more animated but trying to remain as quiet as possible, Jack repeated the question. Marty held his sides to suggest they were about to split before nodding his head in agreement. Yes, The Chilli Pepper had left the building.

"You are dead meat, Marty Small", Jack hissed as they met beside the revolving door. Out on the street, they hastily made their way on foot to London Bridge tube station, with Marty laughing uncontrollably almost all of the way, as Jack shared with his (soon to be ex-) best friend, his trials of the night before.

All that afternoon and well into the evening, Jack was encouraged to recount his sorry tale over and over again at the Albert, as each friend arrived in turn. In fact, at one point, he had a crowd of well over a dozen people, most of whom he'd never met before in his life, crying with laughter as he repeated the story. On a positive note, he was rewarded for each new telling with a free pint, so by 7pm he was feeling numb to the emotional pain and actually starting to join in with the laughter at relevant points.

Jack announced to the assembled mass that he was taking his profile down from the website and would not be looking for any romance for the foreseeable future. He wanted to have something more meaningful in his life, apparently.

That inevitably meant something animal orientated. Throughout his life, Jack had been passionate about animals and he was still missing Billy, a border collie that he had baby-sat whilst friends had been overseas for 6 months. Polly had loved Billy almost as much as Jack had, but she always complained that he had "*bog breath*" and that he took up way too much of the sofa, although Billy would have said it was vice versa. It'd been three years since Billy had gone home and despite the resistance his landlord would no doubt put up to the idea, Jack started to contemplate having a dog of his own.

He mentioned this to the Goalies and alternative pets became the hot topic of conversation. "*What about a Meerkat?*" Suzy asked, but Marty was quick to emphasise that they made impossible pets, whilst chinchillas, pot-bellied pigs and tarantulas all received a positive mention.

"When I lived with that rock-chick in Hampstead, her next-door neighbour had a capybara!" Paul informed them all. *"You used to see it chilling out, with its paws resting on the edge of the swimming pool"*. The group were amused by Suzy's suggestion that it was doing that to sip her cocktail through a straw.

Each of the zoo's employees had hankered after the opportunity to bring their own respective charges home, so it was not real surprise when the subject of Jack actually working at the zoo came up. *"You should chat to Graeme, mate. He's looking for some extra hands to help him with the Giraffes"*.

Jack couldn't believe what he was hearing from Suzy - the opportunity to work at the zoo was a dream come true. He'd been waiting for a volunteering opportunity to come up there for an eternity, especially working with an African species like the Giraffe.

"When did this come up?" he asked. Suzy looked to Marty for confirmation before explaining that it was only a couple of days ago and that to the best of their knowledge, no official information had gone out as yet. The Goalies all emphasised how perfect it'd be for Jack and he readily agreed. They went as far as to admit that he probably knew as much about animals as they did, even if he didn't have the professional qualifications to back it up. *"It'd only be at weekends; it'll be a bloody early start; and it can be really cold, but you could help prepare the food and stuff"*, Suzy explained.

Dave couldn't resist but add *"Don't forget the best bit, Suze, he'll get to clean out the enclosure and shovel the sh*t"*. Sh*t or no sh*t, Jack was hooked on the idea. So much so, the following morning he rang Graeme from his desk at work and had a 20-minute chat regarding the position.

At bang on 5pm, he left his office in Baker Street and headed straight into the park towards the main entrance of the zoo. After a quick chat with old Bernie guarding the staff gate, he made his way into the administration block where he had arranged to meet with Graeme and Sian from HR. He'd been inside these buildings a few times before; that was one of the benefits of having four close friends working at the zoo and he was to be found in

visitor sections of the zoo at least a couple of times a month.

Jack was passionate about wildlife and knew his Rothschilds from his Thornicrofts when it came to Giraffes, his Grevy's from his Mountains when it came to zebras, and the difference between Black and White Rhinos (and it wasn't the colour). Graeme already knew of Jack via his frequent visits and his friendship with Suzy, but Sian seemed genuinely impressed with Jack's knowledge and his effervescent enthusiasm for the role.

"You do realise you won't actually be allowed inside the giraffe house unless they're outside in the enclosure, there's no face-to-face interaction with the animals themselves?" she asked, which Jack reluctantly acknowledged.

"If it hadn't been for my ex's fear of flying, Polly and I would have gone on safari, as that was always our dream holiday", Jack explained and went on to say that he'd had to satisfy himself with frequent visits to the zoo and having a Sky-Q box full of various documentaries starring David Attenborough, Chris Packham and Saba Douglas-Hamilton. He chose not to mention that Saba's programmes weren't included entirely for wildlife reasons, as he was taken with her 'posh' looks and lack of footwear.

His elation as he left the building an hour later holding a regulation issue ZSL green sweatshirt and staff cargo trousers under his arm was immeasurable. *"See you Saturday, 7am latest"* were Graeme's final words as Jack left through the big iron gates, with the job secured.

Graeme needn't have worried, Jack was there and ready to start by 6.15, despite it being a wet and blustery day in central London. He'd refused to go out drinking with the gang on previous night, despite it being a Friday, as he insisted on being at his best for his new job. He'd been up by five, then showered, breakfasted and dressed before taking the short walk to the tube station at Northwick Park.

Having collected his Volunteer Worker official lanyard and security badge that were issued at the staff gate by old Bernie, he threw himself into the role, much to Suzy and Graeme's delight. Before the public started to drift into the park soon after 9am, the walkways around the enclosure had been swept spotlessly clean; the educational signage was all washed down and polished; the outside enclosure tidied, with the giraffe's leafy foodstuffs tied high up on poles to replicate their natural feeding behaviours.

Jack was lifting the last of the steaming giraffe droppings into his rusty wheelbarrow when Marty, Dave and Suzy came over to check out how he was getting on. The first he heard was Dave's dulcet strains of one of Abba's all-time classics. *"You are a pooper scooper, sh*ttes are gonna blind you....."* accompanied by Suzy's infectious giggling. Jack didn't care. He thought he was in heaven.



Jack loves Polly. Polly loves Jack.

But Jack hates commitment.

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