

## New job

'Come down and live with me for a while, dear,' her Aunty Eva had urged, on hearing she had broken up with her long-time boyfriend. Jenny had gratefully accepted.

From the beginning it had been wonderful. The adventure of moving away from Burnley and the sense of freedom from finally breaking with Ned. At 26, one year older than her, he wanted to marry her, but she had held off. Friendly uncomplicated unambitious, his world limited to the pub, the TV and the football club. He would find someone else.

Aunty Eva had spent all her life in publishing and had early on introduced her favourite niece to a love of books. It was therefore no coincidence that Jenny's first job was at Belfort Press. In an old country house surrounded by a park it was only 40 minutes tube and bus ride from her temporary new home with Aunty Eva at the very edge of London.

First met at Belfort was Daphne Moorham-Jones who was everything that Jenny found intimidating about the South of England. About 30, she was tall, blond and cool. Wearing an oatmeal coloured woolen dress with a brown and yellow silk scarf at her throat, Daphne had looked down her patrician nose at the small neatly dressed temp from Office Services with her slight northern accent. She had merely shown her to a desk in the corner of the office and given her some orders to type out. Jenny had ripped them off rapidly and returned them to the languidly surprised Daphne.

It was not until the third day that Jenny met the man who Daphne worked for. She knew he was coming because of the way Daphne straightened her dress, combed her hair and reapplied make-up. A deep pleasant voice at the door and a man in his mid thirties entered like a gust of wind. Alan Belfort, the son of the proprietor, was tall and slim with black hair and a pale aristocratic face. He wore a brown corduroy jacket, a soft checked shirt and elegant jeans and was carrying a holdall with airline ticket stubs hanging from the handle. He thumped it down on the floor with a sigh of relief and greeted Daphne.

Sitting at her corner desk Jenny was thrilled to hear them casually talking of the glamorous international authors he had been visiting in America. In a pause in the conversation he noticed her.

'And who is this?' he enquired.

'Jennifer Howe,' said Jenny standing up straight. He looked down surprised at her outstretched hand and shook it gravely. A firm warm hand, so different from Ned's moist palm. Close up Alan was really very good-looking, masculine yet somehow gentle, with clear grey eyes under straight black eyebrows and regular white teeth. Her heart thumped and she just couldn't help herself from smiling at him. A faint grin quirked at the corner of his mouth for a moment as he looked into her level water-clear brown eyes and then it was as though a shutter had come down. He dropped his hand, turned away and entered his office. Jenny blushed with shame; she'd done it again! Her Aunty Eva was always telling her not to stare into people's eyes.

In the days that followed Jenny saw Alan frequently, but learnt nothing more except that he worked hard and received lots of private calls from various females. She knew because she had to sometimes take them in his absence. 'I suppose a handsome rich man like that must be just surrounded by beautiful girls,' she said to herself philosophically.

As she packed up her things to go home in the evening she sometimes saw him still at his desk reading manuscripts or telephoning. He didn't smile often and

once she saw him wearily running a hand over his face. Her heart went out and she longed to comfort him.

She knew she was beginning to fall in love with Alan, but could do nothing about it. Her Aunty Eva had once said she was pretty, 'a pre-Raphaelite'. Jenny had gone to the local museum and looked at a picture by a painter called Rossetti but couldn't see any likeness to herself in the rather drooping girl - although the colours were nice. But compared to the goddesses she imagined behind the cut-glass accents that called...

Jenny was a lively girl and soon attracted the attention of other men in the small publishing company, but the image of Alan's tired face always prevented any development. She was furious with herself. She had foolishly allowed herself to fall in love with a man eight years older than her, a man who obviously just thought of her as another pretty empty-headed popsy.

And there was strong local competition too. Jenny watched with contempt the way Daphne fawned over Alan, hanging on to his words, making him coffee, bringing him special biscuits, squirming in front of him like a little puppy. 'Has she no pride?' she fumed to herself, banging files back onto their shelves.

Jenny was a reluctant witness to the crisis in the relationship when she returned unexpectedly to the office during the lunch interval and saw them embracing. Or to be exact, Alan had a cup of coffee in his hand and Daphne was embracing him. But Alan was obviously more concerned at not spilling the coffee than in returning her embrace.

'Oh, Daphne!' she heard his impatient voice, as face burning with embarrassment she tiptoed away.

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When she returned Alan was alone. Face closed he told her Daphne was not feeling well and had taken the rest of the day off. He brusquely handed her a file of invoices to enter in the computer and retired into his room.

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The next morning Daphne was back at work as usual, and on the surface it appeared as though everything was as before. But now and then Jenny caught her looking expressionlessly at Alan.

And it was from this time that things started to go wrong for Belfort. The first copies of a new book were delivered late so they could not be reviewed in time for a book fair. There was a dispute over commissions with their West Country salesman and he quit. Two of their best-seller authors were offered more money than Belfort could afford from Folter Verlag, a publishing company in Munich, and they reluctantly changed. Sales fell and Jenny saw Alan working late almost every night.

Until one evening when the phone rang in Alan's office. Jenny was alone. Daphne had only come in for an hour in the morning and had then left, as her mother was ill. Alan had left just after lunch, saying he was visiting a printer in Swindon and would not be returning to the office that day.

Greatly daring, Jenny walked into Alan's office and picked up the phone. An English voice with a slight American accent asked for Alan Belfort. Jenny told him that Mr Belfort was not in and there was an annoyed silence.

'I'm calling to confirm our meeting at the Heathrow Hilton tonight,' said the voice.

'I'm not Mr Belfort's secretary,' said Jenny, 'but I'm sure he'll be there to meet you.' Oh dear, that was silly. 'Can I ask who is calling and when you are supposed to be meeting? I could check that Mr Belfort will be there.'

'You do that,' said the voice coldly. 'My name is John Grenaue. I got in two hours ago, expecting to find a note confirming our meeting here at six PM. If Mr Belfort can't make it, I can take an earlier flight out.' Jenny's heart jumped. John Grenaue, the author!

There was a click followed by the dialing tone. He had rung off. Jenny stood there, still holding the phone, her pulse racing. Alan's small brass desk clock showed it was just past five PM and Jenny knew immediately something was wrong. She had heard nothing about John Grenaue coming to England. Alan had gone off to Swindon and she was sure he knew nothing either! When important people made mistakes and got angry her first impulse was to duck. But she had answered now. 'Jenny, show some gumption! You can't just leave it at that,' she said to herself.

The first thing was clear enough. She must call Alan over his mobile phone. What was the number? Daphne and the Belfort receptionist would know but they had both left.

Then she had an idea! Feeling terribly guilty she sat in Alan's chair and nervously pulled open the centre drawer. Yes, there they were! A small box of his business cards. "Alan N. Belfort, Chief Editor". And in one corner the long mobile-phone number.

Jenny dialed it, only to hear a woman's voice saying the number called was "temporarily unreachable for technical reasons but if you would care to leave a message at the end of the beeps..."

'Beep.' Five past five on the desk clock! What should she say? 'Beep.' Did he really know about the meeting and would he be annoyed at her for making an expensive call? 'Beep'. A hissing silence. She took a deep breath and spoke.

'It's Jenny,' she said. 'John Grenaue called ten minutes ago to confirm that you would be meeting him at the Heathrow Hilton at six PM tonight. I just thought...' Stop, that was enough. 'It's ten minutes past five now,' she finished, and hung up.

Breathing deeply and heart thumping, Jenny stood there. She knew she was mixed up in something big. She really wasn't an employee of Belfort; she'd done everything that could be expected of her. But Alan would never get to Heathrow by six PM. He was going to miss John and that couldn't be good for Belfort Press. She felt she had to do something more. But what?

Suddenly it struck her. There was something else she could do! Feeling dizzy with excitement she took a last look at the clock. There was a bus in two minutes; if she ran she would just catch it. Pausing only to switch the phone answering machine on, she tugged her coat off the hanger behind the door and thrust her arms into the sleeves. She dashed down the stairs, past Fred the porter now sitting in reception reading a newspaper and out into the dark rainy night. Then along the gravel drive, seeing the lights of an approaching bus through the trees. She waved frantically and the driver just caught sight of her light coloured coat in time and pulled in to the stop. He grinned at her gasped thanks and she collapsed panting into the front seat of the almost empty bus.

Ten minutes later the bus pulled up outside the tube station. A train must have arrived as people were flowing out of the entrance and making for the car park. And a cab was drawing up to the Taxi sign where an elderly woman was standing, holding an umbrella. Jenny almost fell out of the bus and coat flapping ran over to the cab, making it brake abruptly, still a few yards away from the stand. She pulled open the door. The young driver looked up at her in surprise.

'Excuse me miss, but that lady waved at me first.'

'I must get to Heathrow Airport,' said Jenny, climbing in the back. 'It's an emergency.' The driver hesitated only a moment. A long profitable drive with a pretty young passenger.

'In that case then.' He switched off the 'for hire' light, slipped into gear and looking over his shoulder pulled out into the evening traffic, driving past the lady with the umbrella. She stooped down to furiously shout something, but the driver shouted back 'Emergency!' out of the window and wound it up.

'How long to the airport?' asked Jenny. The driver held out his hand and rocked it.

'This time of night, raining ... say an hour.'

'It's the Hilton I want really,' said Jenny, looking surreptitiously in her purse. Two five pound notes and some change. Nothing like enough. She had her chequebook but there was a notice by the side of the meter saying 'No cheques'.

As they rolled through the dark rainy night she sat on the edge of the seat and watched with apprehension as the counter advanced by leaps and bounds, almost in time with the labouring windshield wipers. Ten pounds already! She longed to ask how much it was going to cost but something told her she would have to trust the meter and just brazen it out on the Hilton steps.

The driver stretched up to look at his pretty passenger in the rear-view mirror and tried to chat her up, but Jenny just replied in monosyllables. Finally he gave up. The counter mounted and mounted - twenty-two pounds!

After rather less than an hour lights gleamed outside and there was a muted roar as a jet slid slowly overhead.

'Here we are,' said the driver, turning into the entrance to the Hilton and reaching forwards pressed a knob on the counter.

'Thirty-five pounds fifty,' he said. A uniformed doorman opened the taxi door for her.

'I'll have to give you a cheque,' said Jenny, spreading the book out on the back of the seat in front of her and clicking her Biro.

'I'm sorry, miss. No cheques,' said the driver, pointing to the sign on the dash.

'This is an emergency; it's all I've got,' said Jenny, suddenly impatient. She wanted to get into the hotel. The driver began to protest but the uniformed doorman requested him not too politely to move on as his cab was blocking the driveway. So ungraciously the driver snatched the cheque and revving up his engine drove off noisily. Jenny tossed her head and walked through the rotating glass doors.

She had hardly ever been in a big hotel before and felt awed as she stepped into the vast warm scented reception lobby of the Hilton. Chandeliers hanging from the high-domed ceiling, seeming acres of thick fawn-coloured carpet underfoot, small groups of red arm-chairs where well-dressed people sat speaking in foreign languages. Smiling white-coated waiters carrying drinks on silver trays. Soft background music.

It was a moment before she could locate the reception desk. Holding her wet coat over her arm she determinedly walked up to it and attracted the attention of a smart blue-uniformed Indian girl.

'I have an appointment with John Grenaue,' she said glancing at the clock. Twenty past six! The receptionist clicked on hidden computer keys, picked up a phone and spoke a few words.

'Who shall I say is calling?' she asked.

'Belfort Press,' answered Jenny, fingers crossed, and the receptionist repeated this. There was a rather long pause and she put the phone down.

'He said to go up. Room 426.'

Jenny stepped out of the lift and almost ran down the corridor looking at numbers on the doors. Here it was! She pressed the buzzer and it was almost immediately opened by a tall grey-haired man of about fifty wearing a dark suit.

John Grenaue! Aunty Eva's favourite author. The grey hair made him look older than the rather retouched picture on the cover of 'Rook's Progress', but she thought it made him more distinguished.

John Grenaue found himself looking into the steady brown eyes of a small woman staring up at him with undisguised interest.

'Yes?' he said.

'I'm Jennifer Howe from Belfort Press,' said Jenny. Nervousness caused her northern accent to strengthen. 'Mr Belfort has been delayed and has sent me to apologise.' She comforted herself by thinking that that was surely what he would say. John frowned, hesitated a moment then with restrained annoyance stood aside.

'Very well,' he said. 'You'd better come in for a moment.' She entered the luxurious suite and looked around curiously. On a polished wooden rack by the door was an expensive suitcase, closed and obviously ready to be picked up by the hotel porter. Draped over it was a white mackintosh. On the table were his leather brief case and a book.

'Can I get you something?' he asked with conventional politeness, gesturing to some chairs around a glass-topped table.

'A fruit juice, if you have one,' she replied sitting down and leaning forwards picked up the book. It was his latest - 'Cries of Perfidy'. Jenny had just finished reading it in manuscript form - no reviews had appeared yet in England.

He turned round from the small fridge with her drink in his hand. She put the book back on the table.

'You have read it?'

'Yes,' she said. He put the drink down, glass clicking on glass.

'I preferred your last one: "Jonathan's Wake",' she continued, unasked. She looked into the distance. 'I liked Sara though, and it was in character for her to challenge her uncle's will. But I think she would have used Gregson and Gregson as lawyers and not gone to the New York company. I think you made that bit too complicated: I had to go back and read it again.'

'Did you indeed,' said John, in something approaching exasperation. His wife had said the same thing.

'But of course if she had, she wouldn't have seen that Peruvian drug importer in the waiting room and the book would have ended at chapter six.'

She looked across the table at him and he returned her gaze in a strange mood. John Grenaue, cultivated man of letters and twice married, found himself in an odd and annoyingly undefined position. As a writer he was automatically examining his own feelings and to his irritation he couldn't put a name to them. He didn't know whether to smile condescendingly at this little dark-haired self-possessed woman or to well, dammit, sit down and take notes.

'And my Aunty Eva and I both think you should stick to the "I" form,' she added.

'Do you indeed,' was all he could manage. He was aware that he was repeating himself and if he were writing, this would have to be edited out.

'It's more personal and makes your pro ... er ... your chief character really come alive.'

'Protagonist,' he said absently. 'And I prefer it too, but Carl Goldberg, that's my American editor, says the public these days expect more complicated plots.'

'The American public perhaps. But 62% of the sales of "Jonathan's Wake" were in England and Australia.' It was sheer luck that Jenny had that day been typing up a list of best sellers.

He watched her composedly sipping her orange juice. He had immediately recognised her down-to-earth accent as that of his hometown. Had he grown too far from his roots, become too cosmopolitan?

'But my Auntie Eva, who reads a lot, thinks your descriptions of characters and backgrounds in "Cries" were very good,' she continued, smiling at him. He felt an irrational glow of gratitude to the unknown Auntie.

At this point there was a soft buzz from the door. With a feeling akin to relief, John got up from the table and crossing the suite opened the door.

'I'm terribly late and it was quite unpardonable,' said Alan's voice from the corridor. 'I'm so grateful you waited.'

They shook hands formally and Alan entered quickly. He pulled up short at the sight of Jenny sitting at the table, a half empty glass of orange juice in front of her.

Jenny's eye jumped to the bedside clock. A quarter to seven! Oh dear, she had been chatting away again. John, she thought of him as John, had been very tolerant and friendly and Auntie Eva would be green with envy. She blushed a bit, thinking back over what she had said: she's spoken to him like he was just an ordinary person.

The two men looked uncertainly at Jenny, but she knew when to go. Alan could take over now. She rose.

'Well, I'll better be off,' she said briskly, unfolding her coat from the back of the chair. To her surprise John stepped forwards and helped her on with it. They both seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

'It was a pleasure to meet you Jenny,' said John, extending his hand. 'I'm sure we'll meet again.'

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Jenny was at work as usual the next morning. The door to Alan's office was open and she could hear him phoning.

A few minutes later Daphne arrived too, unusually early for her. Something was wrong. There was a tension in the air that you could cut with a knife. Daphne hung up her coat then sitting down returned Jenny's friendly inquiry about her mother's health with such a stare that Jenny shivered as though in a cold shower. Daphne seemed about to say something when Alan rang off and came to his office door.

'Jenny, replay the calls we received over yesterday night.'

Jenny was the only one who really knew how to use the new telephone answering machine. She switched it on and carefully pressed 'Reset'. Daphne sat stiffly at her desk, pencil in hand, looking down at the incoming mail. It was very quiet in the room as the machine whirred softly, rewinding to the beginning of the tape and stopped with a click. Jenny pressed 'Play'. There were the usual hisses and beeps and a voice Jenny recognised as a paper supplier talking about his invoice. Then another recorded voice about a modification of phone charges. After strange sounding beeps an American woman announced that John Grenaue was making a surprise visit to Europe and would be at the Heathrow Hilton at 6pm on the 14th (yesterday). He would like to meet Alan Belfort about the publishing rights of his latest novel. Would Alan please confirm. Alan signaled to Jenny and she pressed 'Stop'. The counter showed the call had come in 1:12am yesterday morning.

'How could you have forgotten it?' he said bitterly to Daphne. 'If it hadn't been for Jenny here, I wouldn't have met him and the publishing rights would have gone to Germany.'

'I'm sorry Alan,' said Daphne contritely. 'But my mother's illness drove everything else out of my mind.' Alan just stood there, tapping his fingers against the doorsill. Jenny saw he was angry but couldn't do anything about it. He went back into his office and Jenny looked down at the machine. She knew the tape had to be emptied before it could be switched off so she pressed 'Play' again and immediately the room was filled with a woman's affected voice.

'Daphne dear. It's Mummy. I seem to have missed you. I know it's rather short notice, but we've been invited to the Debray's tomorrow evening and I said you would come. Do call me back.' The door to the office was burst open and Alan reappeared.

'What was the time of that call?' he snapped to Jenny. Daphne moved convulsively, arm outstretched to the machine, but Alan reached it first.

'Five-fifteen PM,' he read from the counter. He looked at Daphne grimly. 'So much for your sick mother.' The call must have come in just after Jenny had left for the Hilton.

Daphne's face went a bright brick red. In the dead silence there was a sharp click as the pencil in her hand snapped.

Alan continued looking at her.

'This explains a lot of things,' he began slowly. 'The flight that John Grenaue had booked to Munich but cancelled after my talk with him. The calls that have been made to Munich from this office.' He picked up the phone on Daphne's desk and dialed. 'Could you come here a moment, Fred,' he said. Daphne stood up, face frozen.

'Alan, you're jumping to wrong conclusions. My mother called because ...'

The door opened to reveal Fred's bulky form.

'Fred, Miss Moorham-Jones is leaving,' interrupted Alan, unhooking Daphne's coat from behind the door and handing it to him.

'I just don't believe this,' flared Daphne, her face working in furious incredulity. 'You can't throw me out. I'll sue you ... there are personal things in my desk ... I'm going to call the police.'

'Anything not belonging to Belfort's will be returned to you,' said Alan, stony faced. 'And we may well be calling in the police ourselves.' He nodded to Fred.

'How dare you! Let me go!' she cried, struggling against Fred's hand on her elbow.

'Come along now, miss,' he said, her coat over his arm. With something like pity in her eyes Jenny watched the door close on her muffled cries.

In a barren silence, Alan entered his office and closed the door. She heard him telephoning.

Wide-eyed, trembling and shocked Jenny felt like crying but took a deep breath and returned to her typing. She had only the slightest idea of what was going on, but she hated scenes.

A few minutes later an elderly hard-faced woman from Personnel entered and opening all the drawers of Daphne's desk, carried their contents into Alan's office.

And about half an hour later the office door opened and Alan came out. He walked across the room and sat on the corner of Jenny's desk. She looked at him nervously but he was quite calm.

'Jenny,' he began, 'I'm sorry you saw all that. It's never happened before and I hope it never will again. We're really a small friendly family company.' Jenny nodded dumbly.

'Jenny,' he continued, 'I would like to ask you two things. First, will you please not say anything about what you just saw?'

'Yes, of course,' she answered, making a mental reservation for Aunty Eva.

'And the second is ...' he paused. 'I have no secretary now. If you could arrange it with Office Services, I would like to offer you the position.'

Jenny looked stunned into his clear grey eyes. The sun was shining, a choir was singing, with the wind in her hair she was effortlessly running down a meadow towards a shining lake. She knew this to be one of the turning points in her young life.

She felt her face flushing, she swallowed and her eyes filled with hot tears.

'Oh Jenny,' he said in a gentle tone she hadn't heard before, 'I didn't mean to make you cry.' His hand was warm on her shoulder,

'I'm fine,' she said blindly feeling in a drawer for tissues. 'It's just that I'm surprised.'

'Then it's "yes"?' he said. She snuffled into the tissue and looked up at him.

'I think it should be possible,' she said, prosaically, and had to dab her eyes again.

'Great,' he smiled. He looked at the clock over her shoulder. 'There's one other thing. We're having a little party at the Queen's Hotel in half an hour. It's to celebrate the fact that John Grenau is going to sign us exclusive rights. I'd like you to come.' He had another thought. 'Yes, and at the same time I can introduce you as my new secretary.'

The Queen's Hotel! In a very feminine gesture her hand flew to her hair.

"You haven't a thing to wear",' said Alan, a mocking glint in his eyes. 'You'll do fine. Literary people don't dress.'

'Yes, of course,' she said, and then it struck her. She would be standing by Alan's side as his new secretary!

'Good, because John said he would only come if "that lass" was there,' finished Alan, standing up. 'And I think he was only half joking.'

THE END

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