

## Liaison

Steve led the neatly-dressed man to one of the desks where kids were enrolling for summer courses.

‘Sally, this is Mr Maitland. Mr Maitland, Sally Everidge. She’s our Deputy Principal.’

Sally stood up and gave him a welcoming smile as they shook hands:

‘How nice to see you, Mr Maitland.’

A bit of a surprise, thought John Maitland: a tall, attractive woman, around thirty he guessed; she was smartly dressed in a plain white blouse with a diamond brooch in the shape of a swallow, a skirt with an attractive zigzag design, and scarlet fingernails.

‘Would you take over here, Steve,’ said Sally. ‘This young man’ – she indicated a wispy embarrassed lad sitting there – ‘wants to do everything. Can you help him choose?’

She turned to Mr Maitland: ‘We’re better in the office. Coffee?’

‘Please.’

Sally poured two cups of coffee from the office percolator, and gave one to her visitor, ‘Help yourself to milk and sugar.’

When they were settled at the table, she got down to business directly, ‘I’ve only been here for two years, but I understand that you’ve come about the lease on the playing fields.’

‘Yes, Mrs Everidge. I expect the College would like an extension to the lease.’ He added with emphasis, ‘*Mrs* Everidge is right, is it?’ She quietly nodded her agreement.

Although the Community College belonged to the Council, the playing fields they used were part of an old estate, now run by Trustees. John Maitland was the Trustees’ solicitor.

‘Well, yes,’ she replied. ‘You’ve seen some of the youngsters we look after. The playing fields are vitally important - all year round.’

‘Yes, I can understand that.’ He sighed, ‘But renewal may not be all that easy.’

‘Are there legal problems?’ she asked.

‘No, we can manage the legal side. There are two difficulties: the simplest is fixing the cost; it is thirty years since the lease was granted.’

Sally shrugged her shoulders, 'I know we must expect to pay more – although we have precious little spare income. And there's always the threat of a reduction in our Council grant. We charge as little as possible for our courses, and exempt those who cannot pay.'

Mr Maitland was nodding his understanding as she spoke, and said, 'I fully appreciate your problems, and I'll do my level best to keep the cost down.' He spoke more thoughtfully, 'But I don't decide these matters. We have a couple of new Trustees who want to develop the house as an Old Peoples Home, and they want to maximise the income from the estate.' He paused again before exploding the bombshell, 'They want us to apply for planning permission for a group of houses on your playing fields.'

Sally covered her face with her hands; she could only say, 'Oh no!'

'I'm sorry to tell you this,' and broke off, 'Can I call you Sally?'

She gave a sad smile, 'Of course.'

'This is only a suggestion from two Trustees. But we have to take it into account. By the way, I'm John.'

'John, would you get planning permission?'

'There's a fair chance we would. One of the two Trustees is a Councillor.'

'But the College is supported by the Council.'

'You're suggesting a conflict of interest?'

'I suppose I am!' she said more cheerfully. Then she realised, 'But you're the opposition!'

He couldn't help smile, 'Do I look like a Trojan Horse?'

She laughed a little, 'You don't look like any kind of horse.'

'Look,' he said, 'I have to get away now, but it's clear we've got a complicated problem to think about. Can we meet again soon? Well, as soon as I can manage; I'm pretty booked up for the next few weeks. You don't have an evening free, I suppose,' he queried. 'Husband, family and so on?'

Sally said thoughtfully, 'My husband was killed in a car accident two years ago. So I'm on my own, starting again here.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I didn't mean to quiz you.'

She shook her head, 'No problem.'

'Are you free tomorrow evening?'

'I am.'

'Then can I take you out to dinner?' He added quite seriously, 'I am also free.'

Sally, a little surprised, accepted, 'Yes, thank you very much.'

'And can I call for you, around seven-thirty?'

Sally had not really recovered from Tom's death. She not only felt deep personal grief, but also the loss of their future together. She was a fully qualified social worker, and had also studied management. She and Tom had decided that they would not have children for a few years, so that they could save for a house. Sometimes she thought, what if they had had a child - to be looked after now? She had to jerk herself away from this kind of thinking – in another life, Tom would not have been on that road at that time.

Although they had friends, mostly young and married, she had decided to move away - too many reminders their life together. She was very pleased to have landed a fairly senior job at the Community College in a different town. She was still an attractive woman, and one or two men had sought her company, without success. So why had she accepted John Maitland's invitation? It was strange, almost as though she had asked Tom's permission; somehow she felt he wouldn't mind. Perhaps she was coming out of a natural period of mourning? Perhaps she felt safe with John Maitland, a few years older than she was? And when she found herself spending a quarter of an hour choosing what to wear that evening, she had to smile: something in her was coming alive again.

John Maitland was on time, and he had booked at a quiet restaurant. They were settled into a small table at the side of the room.

'Aperatif?' he asked.

'Do you mind if I just have wine?'

'That fine by me. I'll ask for some when we order.'

When they had made their choices and had started on the wine, John asked, 'Had any thoughts about the playing fields?'

Sally had another taste from her glass, and spoke quite definitely, 'Yes, I have.'

He smiled, 'Am I allowed to share them?'

She laughed and said, 'Of course, but your two Trustees may not like them.'

'Theirs may not be the best plan. If you've a better alternative, you know I'd be glad to help.'

She picked up her glass again, and looked at him more seriously, 'I'd love to have your help, but you have a job to do for the Trustees.'

John replenished her glass and replied, 'Yes, but let's see what we can work out together.'

Just then, their entree arrived. 'First things first,' said Sally, 'I'm hungry.'

As the meal proceeded, she realised that she was happy to have her glass topped up several times, and that she had drunk far more than John: 'I'm afraid I'm hogging the wine,' she said eventually.

'I'm driving, and I'm a lawyer,' he reminded her.

She felt very relaxed, 'Poor you! So I have to help you out.' She began to realise that her normal controlled demeanour was crumbling. She was so used to being responsible for other people's lives, but now she was forgetting all that, enjoying a carefree evening. Maybe it was the few of glasses of wine, she thought – or maybe she was with someone who – well, made her feel she could be completely at ease.

When they got round to coffee she made an effort to get her mind organised, and began to explain:

'In the College, we run a good number of practical courses, including Architecture and Building Construction. The teachers are all experienced and well qualified.'

John listened, half-guessing what was to come.

She continued, 'We could put in a very competitive bid to re-design the house; the work would be done by the best students under careful supervision of our architects. Then our Building people could also put in an offer to carry out the renovations, again as an exercise for students.'

John had to smile, 'So undercutting other competitors?'

'Yes. The point about this is that it is very economical. All these students have to do some kind of practical work, and isn't it better that they do real work under skilled supervision? Then the Council's investment in the College gets repaid by the earnings.'

'So the students don't get any financial reward?'

'No payment, but they could get expenses for the materials and clothing they use. Their real reward is their qualifications and references at the end.'

'Do you have other contracts of this kind?' he queried.

'Yes, but not many substantial ones, and none so near to home.'

John sat back, 'Let me think this over. The students get their reward by qualifying, and they need the practical work to do so. So your departments can

put in a low bid for the work, which will please our Trustees. And the Council – well, most of them – should be happy that the College is making some money.’ He gave her an admiring look, ‘You’re a clever girl, conjuring something out of nothing.’

They had finished their coffee, so John broke into the discussion, ‘Anything else. Brandy?’

‘Oh cripes, after all that wine? Can we share a dilute brandy?’

‘I’m sure that can be arranged,’ and he explained to the waitress what was wanted.

Sally got back to the problem, ‘But would this save the playing fields?’

‘It pulls the ends nearer together. The Council would be happier paying an increased rental of the ground, and the Trustees may not be too Scrooge-like over the setting the new level.’

‘But will the Trustees give us a new lease?’

‘I think that they wouldn’t like the adverse publicity of taking away the Community College facilities. But they have a duty to do their best for the Estate.’

Sally made a point, ‘Is selling the land for building best in the long term? If they sell, the land and its income have gone.’ Another point occurred to her, ‘What outdoor facilities are there for old people in this home? If they had access to the playing fields for exercise, and mixing with the young people, would that be a benefit to them?’

‘Now that’s an important thought! If some of your young people could help out at the Old Peoples Home, a kind of liaison could grow up between the College and the Home.’

Sally was excited, ‘John, could we work out this “kind of liaison”? It could be a very good link between the two institutions. In the College, we could consider making public service, like helping in the Home, a desirable part of our courses – it is already an essential part for those going for Social Work of some kind.’

John sat thinking. Then he said, ‘You know, we’re thinking way ahead, about quite big changes. How are we going to sell this to the Council and the Trustees? Also, we need to have a pretty good idea of what your College can offer in the way of these services, and what the Trustees would accept.’

‘Meaning careful planning and diplomacy all round,’ she commented.

John looked at her intently, 'And you and I, Sally, would have to meet up quite often. Does that worry you?'

She smiled, 'No problem at all.' After a moment's thought she gave him a slightly provocative look and said, 'It's Thursday today. Why not come to my place for a meal on Saturday, We could talk while I get on with things – so much easier than in a restaurant.'

He took hold of her hand, 'I'd love to come and have a bit of home cooking - if it's not too much bother. I must admit that I don't often cook for myself: I usually eat out or heat up a meal from a supermarket.'

'And John, I'd love to be cooking for the two of us.' She suddenly realised how much she missed having a close companion in life. Was she wise in getting so close to John Maitland so quickly?

He could almost read her thoughts, 'Sally, we'll have to see how we go. I do find you attractive, you know.'

She smiled at him, feeling very relaxed, 'Yes, see how we go.'

When he had driven back to her flat, she said, 'Come as early as you like on Saturday; cup of tea always available. And thank you for a lovely evening, John.' The wine or something else had got hold of her. She leant over and gave him a warm sexy kiss.

*Roy Chisholm*