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‘My kids call it *The Loft*. It’s like an attic bedroom and sitting room in one,’ said the lady who sat across from Nicola.

Work was over for the day. Nicola’s employer, Vicki, had closed shop but invited her friend Casey to come and tell Nicola about the room she was hoping to lease.

Nicola had been taught by her art tutor how to gauge details about people she met. She had practised until it came automatically. The light crow’s feet around Casey’s eyes and mouth were in positions that showed she smiled a lot. She was probably in her late thirties. Her hair was the colour of honey shining in the sunshine. Even before Nicola started her art lessons, her first instinct, when she met somebody with interesting features, had always been to rush off and sketch a portrait.

‘It’s a breathtaking room,’ Vicki added. ‘Take my word for it.’

‘I used to be a boarder in that same room about fifteen years ago, so it’s had a test run.’ Casey Bowman had a way of making everything she said sparkle. Nicola was uncertain if she’d be able to capture that quality on paper but she longed to try.

‘Did you end up buying the house?’ she asked.

Casey exchanged amused glances with Vicki. ‘No, even better. I married the guy who lived there. I was boarding with him.’

‘That’s a great story.’ Nicola began to understand why Casey Bowman was relaxed and cheerful. She was a Laura-type of person. Details slotted into place in their lives like puzzle pieces clicking

together. Some people seemed to be born with a propensity to be lucky.

‘We’d like a boarder because business can be slow sometimes,’ Casey said. ‘We figured that since we have the extra space, we might as well try to help somebody else too. Evening meals can be included, if you like. I already cook for a family of five so one more will be easy.’

‘Thank you.’ Nicola hadn’t expected such a generous offer.

‘I enjoy cooking and you’ll be busy working all day. It’ll be a pleasure.’

Casey was easy to like, despite reminding Nicola of Laura. She had a family of five so Nicola figured, ‘You must have three children?’

Casey dimpled and nodded. ‘Two boys and a girl.’

‘They’re all lovely kids,’ Vicki put in. ‘You’ll get along well with all of them. Laura is a little doll.’

Nicola turned cold inside. *Laura!* There had to be a Laura in there somewhere. It seemed she could not escape from them.

‘You’ll have something good for next Wednesday night, Nic,’ Vicki said. She explained to Casey, ‘Nicola has been coming to my new Gratitude Group.’

Nicola almost groaned. The group! Last Wednesday evening seemed so long ago. She hadn’t mentioned Shane’s death to anybody at work yet. She didn’t think she could without breaking down. She’d probably tell them at the group. But what could anybody possibly say?

‘What’s a Gratitude Group?’ Casey was all interest.

‘It’s an idea I found in a book. We all concentrate on finding positive things in our daily lives and help each other by offering uplifting thoughts and suggestions.’

‘Vicki, you’re one of the most innovative people I know. You’ve just given me something to be grateful for too. A perfect boarder.’ Casey stood up and slung her handbag strap over her shoulder. ‘Nicola, would you like to come and have a look tomorrow?’

She quickly nodded. ‘I was hoping the sooner the better.’

Vicki gave Nicola’s arm a squeeze. ‘You’ll love it. I can already imagine you sitting by Casey’s dormer window up there doing your painting.’

‘Painting?’ Casey’s eyes widened. ‘Are you an artist?’

Nicola always blushed when anybody asked her that. 'I like to draw and paint.'

'You *are* an artist. Wait 'til I tell my husband. I have a good feeling about this, Nicola. I think this room was meant for you. It's providential.'

Nicola didn't have to force her polite smile. She'd trained herself so well, it did it itself. She decided not to tell Casey and her family about Shane for the time being. Although Nicola agreed that the Bowman's attic room might indeed be providential, she couldn't help feeling guilty for bringing intense sadness into a happy home. Even though they'd never know about it.

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'Nicola, Casey tells me you work in a bookshop.'

'That's right.' Nicola's palms were sweating slightly. Casey's sister-in-law was making conversation but Nicola could think of nothing to say to carry it along. People's opening remarks often seemed limiting.

Earlier that evening, Casey had whispered an apology for having other guests to dinner on Nicola's first night with them.

'I never would have planned it this way. It's my husband's sister and her family. Suzanne phoned this morning. She's just come back from a holiday overseas with her husband and little girl and they have lots of photos to show us.'

'I don't mind at all.' It was true. Being surrounded by strangers with their dinner conversation helped distract Nicola's mind from thoughts of Shane. It was Wednesday, so she would have the Gratitude Group later that same evening. Nicola had prepared herself to tell the other group members about her tragedy. Keeping it crushed inside her was getting harder each day.

Vicki and Shirley would probably try to assure her, 'It wasn't your fault that he made a bad decision.' That wouldn't return Shane to his loved ones but might ease some of Nicola's intense guilt about her own part in his death.

'Well, it's good to have a steady job.' Suzanne Adams' smile was wide and gracious.

‘It certainly is,’ her husband added. He looked past Nicola across the table. ‘Jerome, now that you’ve finished school, what are you doing with yourself?’

Nicola was relieved to have the attention drawn from herself to Casey’s oldest son. Casey had introduced her three children to Nicola earlier that afternoon from youngest to oldest: Laura, Sam and Jerome. The girl and youngest boy were talkative and cheerful, just as Nicola had imagined Casey’s children would be, but their brother had been a total surprise. Casey had given Nicola no idea of what to expect. But how could Casey have known?

He was much older than his siblings—but that wasn’t it. Nicola had shaken his hand with something like shocked recognition. That boy had almost every feature she’d painted for her ‘Personal Adonis.’ The teacher, Mrs Reynolds, had set the class project last year. Her students each had to paint their own ideas of the perfect Venus and the perfect Adonis. ‘It’s always great fun to unveil all the completed paintings on the last day of term,’ Mrs Reynolds had said. ‘There are usually so many differences in people’s ultimate opinions of true beauty.’ Nicola’s class had been no exception. There were laughs and exclamations as everybody gazed at each other’s creations.

Nicola’s Adonis had been tall and lean with an arched brow, firm jaw and strong cheek bones, like Casey’s son. He’d had dark hair, just wavy enough not to be called curly, somewhere between long and short. But the Bowman boy’s wide, friendly smile was an improvement on Nicola’s Adonis, who merely gazed out of the canvas with the most intelligent expression she could give him, handsome and tight-lipped.

‘I’ve just started working at McDonald’s,’ Jerome Bowman said, responding to his uncle’s question.

‘McDonald’s? That’s a waste of your time and study. What about those Uni offers you had?’

Jerome looked down at his plate. ‘I didn’t accept any of ’em.’

‘Isn’t that a bit irresponsible after all that work?’

‘Why is it irresponsible?’ Jerome sounded polite but vaguely defiant. Nicola admired his nerve. Eric Adams reminded her of some of the more intimidating customers she’d faced in the shop.

‘Why do you think? Because so many school leavers would appreciate your opportunity but didn’t get an offer.’

‘Well, now maybe some of ’em will get one. It’d be even more irresponsible if I accepted one of those offers and kept out somebody else who really wanted to get in, don’t you think?’ Jerome’s white knuckles around his fork displayed his tenseness.

‘He can always get in later,’ said Casey’s husband, Piers. He winked at his son.

‘I’m working at McDonald’s because I’m saving up for something else, anyway.’

‘What might that be?’

Jerome nervously licked his lips. ‘I want to go to Asia or East Europe and help a mission.’

Casey and Piers sighed and glanced at each other in a way that made Nicola think they’d heard that story before.

‘What sort of mission?’

‘This guy I’ve been reading about called Gareth Edgley started a Christian mission looking after the very poorest people. They feed them and clothe them and give them medicine and books and help them learn to read and look after themselves. I’d like to find one like that.’

‘Real Mahatma Gandhi stuff,’ Casey added. ‘Bare feet, vows of poverty, the whole deal.’

Jerome glanced at his mother askance. ‘I think they’re allowed to wear shoes.’

‘Why on earth would you want to do that, Jerome?’ Suzanne looked across at Casey and Nicola with a shake of the head. ‘It’s always the good looking ones who want to do some outlandish, sacrificial thing. You should stick around instead. There’s enough of a shortage of attractive young men as it is. Do the girls a favour.’

Jerome blushed and smiled.

‘He’d only be able to do *one* girl a favour anyway, Suze.’ Piers Bowman seemed to be enjoying the conversation.

Casey added, ‘Unless he decides to be like Eric.’ Her comment drew a laugh from the adults.

Suzanne patted Eric’s knee and explained to Nicola, ‘My dear hubby

here used to have quite a reputation as a lady's man.'

'But never all at once,' he added dryly.

'And I don't know if they'd agree that he did them a favour.' It was now clear that Piers *was* enjoying himself.

'Anyway, I've had a great idea,' Suzanne announced. 'Jerome doesn't even need to go to University. There's more to life than swotting over books. We're going to need a new paper-work person soon so I can spend more time at home with Olivia. Why don't you come and work for us, Jerome?'

'Hold on!' Eric objected. 'You can't make an offer like that without consulting me!'

She sucked an impatient breath between pursed lips and drew her pencil thin brows together. 'Well, you're sitting right here.'

'And I say no! We want someone serious and responsible who'd have their heart in the job. He wouldn't do at all.'

'Thanks anyway, Auntie Suze,' Jerome put in quickly.

'*I'll do it!*' nine-year-old Laura shrilled. She had held the floor several times already. Although Casey had rebuked eleven-year-old Sam for interrupting and then for talking with his mouth full, both she and Piers seemed to smile indulgently every time Laura raised her voice and took over. Their double-standards stood out a mile to Nicola, who'd lived for many years with similar behaviour from her own pampered sister.

'You're the best option I've considered so far,' Eric told her, 'but unfortunately I can't wait another ten years until you're old enough.'

'Nicola, are you happy at your bookshop?' Suzanne asked. 'Our photo studio might make a refreshing change.'

Eric shot his wife an exasperated look. 'What did I just tell you? You can't go asking...'

'Alright, alright!'

'Nicola wouldn't be right either.' Eric glanced at the newcomer. 'I'm sorry, I know I've only just met you but I can tell. We need a people-oriented person. You're not right at all.'

'Well, I'm sure she's glad she didn't even ask.' Piers gave Nicola a sympathetic wink and she found herself smiling back. The more he said, the more she felt she was going to like Piers.

‘They hired *me* long ago,’ Casey told her. ‘Suzanne talked Eric into it and he never felt I was quite right either. That’s probably why he’s being so extra cautious now.’

‘But see the good that resulted from it,’ Suzanne beamed. ‘I got Piers and Casey together.’

‘The person I want needs to have a careless, bubbly attitude,’ Eric said, getting the conversation back on track.

‘But didn’t you say before they would need to be serious and responsible?’ Nicola asked, putting in her word without thinking.

There was a slight pause followed by a general roar of laughter. Even Suzanne and Eric’s four-year-old Olivia laughed until her brown curls bounced, though she didn’t understand the joke.

Jerome’s smile lightened the table. ‘That’s Uncle Eric for you. The person he wants has to be serious *and* bubbly.’

Eric held up his hand for silence. ‘OK, you’ve all had a laugh at my expense. Let’s just say the person I want would have to be someone like Suzanne.’

Piers spluttered around his dessert spoon even more. ‘It’ll be *impossible* to find anyone, then.’

Nicola looked at Piers’ immaculate, vivacious sister and didn’t doubt it. Suzanne Adams was the sort of person Nicola despaired of ever capturing adequately on canvas. The dark, flowing hair might be easy enough, the flash in her dark eyes would be slightly harder but her sweet cloud of perfume would have to be left to the imagination.

After dinner, Nicola dried dishes for Casey while Suzanne sat on a kitchen chair and talked.

‘Is Jerome serious about going off and being a missionary?’

‘Completely serious. But he needs to raise enough money to get anywhere so I don’t know if the idea will burn itself out before he manages.’

‘Doesn’t he remind you of somebody?’ Suzanne asked, with an arch of her eyebrows.

‘Who were you thinking of?’

Suzanne glanced toward the door before she murmured, ‘Anna, of course.’

Casey kept washing cutlery. 'I hadn't really thought about it.'

'Come on, you're joking! It hadn't occurred to you at all?'

'Maybe briefly,' Casey admitted. 'Piers mentioned it out of the blue a few days ago and I told him he was being paranoid.'

'Well, *I* think he was being wise. You and Piers need to keep your eyes on Jerome because he has that same blood coursing through his veins. Don't let him go the same way Anna did.'

Nicola found it difficult to tie the threads of the strangers' conversation together. Apart from not knowing who Anna was, she couldn't help wondering, *What's wrong with being a missionary?*

'There's not much influence we can have on him, at his age,' Casey said, 'except to tell him how we feel about things. I don't think we need to worry. He cares about the plight of the world, that's all.'

'Anna cared too!' Suzanne pronounced darkly. 'There was nothing wrong with any of *her* ideas to help, either! But look where they got her.'

Casey laughed but it sounded less mirthful than any other laugh Nicola had heard from her. 'Come on, Suzanne! You're worse than Piers! Jerome has a warm, caring heart. It's his personality.'

Her sister-in-law idly began nibbling chocolates from a bowl on the table. 'I'm not saying all this to upset you. You never met her so you don't see what I see. Every time I set eyes on Jerome after a long time, I get a shock because he reminds me more and more of her.'

'Anna died nineteen years ago. You hardly even knew her. Surely you don't remember her all that clearly.'

'I probably *wouldn't* remember her if Jerome didn't remind me of her. It's not his looks, Casey. It's that streak of fanaticism. It's obviously in his blood.'

Who was Anna, I wonder? Nicola was gripped by sadness at this hint of a family tragedy. Her nerves were so raw from own heartache, tears were always near the surface.

Casey was up to the large pans. She rolled her sleeves up higher and began scrubbing the bottom of a heavy frying pan with steel wool. 'If that's the case, then there's not much we can do about it.' She looked up and said, 'Nicola, there's no need to bother waiting around for this

one. Thanks for your help.’

Nicola hung up her damp tea towel and went upstairs to get ready for the Gratitude Group. She re-applied her lipstick, ran a brush through her hair and dug a cardigan from the bottom of her suitcase. Then she settled onto the cosy padded window seat and searched through her handbag for her mobile phone. She would have just enough time to phone her mother to let her know how she’d settled in, as she’d promised.

But Nicola hesitated with a pounding heart before she began dialling. Pam Turnbull was still staying with her mother and it was quite likely that James and Karen might be there for dinner too. Karen might answer the phone, as she sometimes did. Nicola’s own stomach responded to the thought with a lurch.

She knew that she was being cowardly but she prayed, *Please let it be Mum, or even Laura.*