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Sue Limb

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CHAPTER 1

'What? Four hundred and fifty? Just for a caravan for a week?' Chloe's voice soared upwards in a hysterical shriek. It was the first day of the summer hols, and we were surfing the Newquay websites. We had been dreaming of this holiday for ages, but where were we going to stay? Foolishly, although we'd been fantasising about it for so long, we hadn't got around to arranging any of the practical details.

'We could share with Toby and Fergus . . .' I suggested. 'Between four, it'd only be, uh . . . a hundred and something.'

'*Only?*' wailed Chloe. 'Anyway, we can't share a caravan with Tobe and Ferg. They would, like, see us in our pants and, even worse, we would see them in *their* pants.'

'What sort of pants do you think Ferg wears?' I giggled. Toby and Fergus are our best boy mates at school and, with any luck, we would never get to see their pants for the rest of our entire lives. Tobe's very camp, and Ferg's very tiny, so they're a bit of a comedy duo, but they'd already been a lot more organised than us, getting holiday jobs and saving up loads.

'Ferg's pants . . . ?' Chloe mused. 'Hmmm . . . possibly a pattern of cute yellow mice wearing top hats?'

'Yeah.' I grinned. 'As for Toby, it's got to be pink with lace edges.'

'God, he's so outrageous!' laughed Chloe. 'Isn't it weird how some guys can be camp without being gay?'

'And vice versa,' I mused. 'But, hey! Focus, Chloe! Back to the pressing issue of our accommodation!'

'Chill out! You're such a Victorian governess!' wailed Chloe in mock torment.

'Maybe that explains it all!' I had a moment of revelation. 'Maybe in a previous existence I literally *was* your Victorian governess!'

'Maybe we should get hypnotised and do past-lives regression,' said Chloe eagerly. 'I'm sure I can remember your starchy collar and luxuriant moustache!'

I fingered my upper lip anxiously. The awful thing is, I sometimes think I *really am* getting a moustache. I once spent ten minutes in the bathroom with my dad's shaving mirror and a torch and I detected more than a peachy bloom on my upper lip: it was a *wheat field*. By the time I'm forty I'll need a combine harvester to de-fuzz myself.

'I *know* you were my governess!' giggled Chloe. 'I remember the twang of your corsets! You were still a virgin at sixty-five!'

'Well, you were a crazy Victorian nymphomaniac,' I quipped.

'That is totally unfair!' yelled Chloe hysterically. 'OK, I was a nymphomaniac, but I was so *not* crazy!'

'You had hair two metres long and mad red flashing eyes,' I told her. 'I had to manacle you to the bedpost whenever the footman was passing.'

Chloe giggled and opened a new web page from the Newquay Accommodation website.

'Oh my God!' wailed Chloe. 'Look! It says, "*Our caravans are available to families and over-eighteens only*"!' A huge wave of fatigue swept over me – and I *so* hate huge waves of all sorts.

'Forget it, then,' I said, fingering my chin. There's a spot there called Nigel and he emerges every

month along with premenstrual tension. I was feeling tense now. 'Hey, babe – maybe we should leave it till tomorrow.' I had a horrid feeling that the search for accommodation was going to end badly. We'd been feverishly longing for this trip for ages. Everybody at school was going, or said they were: it was practically compulsory to go to Newquay this year.

What if it all went pear-shaped? I slipped into one of my nightmare scenarios. I have them about six times a day.

If we ever got to Newquay, we'd have to sleep on a park bench. No, that would be way too comfy: we'd end up sleeping on the pavement. Dogs would pee on us in the night. Drunks would fall on us. We would be mugged by gangs of feral street-children.

But aside from all this hysterical fantasy stuff, there was a real problem, a huge issue that we'd been kind of ignoring. I think it's called the Elephant in the Room: a really massive thing that nobody dares mention. I knew I was going to have to be the one to broach the subject.

'Hey, wait a min!' said Chloe, still ripping through endless Newquay web pages. 'What about hostels?' She typed *Newquay hostels* into Google. 'Wow!' she breathed. 'This looks great! It says it's the fave place

for surfers! And they don't have a curfew! We could pull a couple of heavenly boys and sit out on the beach with them, all night.'

'If we're going to sit out on the beach with heavenly boys all night,' I grinned, 'why bother with a hostel at all?' Somehow, in my imagination, one of the heavenly boys was faintly familiar: tall and dark and mysterious-looking. I picked up a pen and idly wrote the name Oliver on my arm like a kind of tattoo.

'We could live on the beach!' yelled Chloe in excitement. 'We could build ourselves a house of sand! We could become mermaids!' Then, suddenly, everything changed. 'Oh, no!' Her fingers came to a halt, and all the excitement died in her voice. 'How totally unfair!'

'What?' I asked, full of dread. I was already convinced that nobody in the whole of Newquay would accept two under-eighteens on their own. We'd have to disguise ourselves as our own grandmothers.

'*They* don't accept anybody under eighteen, either,' growled Chloe. 'Tight or what? An Eighteen-and-Over hostel!'

'What kind of lifestyle do they have in these hostels?' I shook my head in disbelief. 'A life of rampant sex and violence?'

'Pornographic breakfasts?' suggested Chloe, getting into it. 'Two fried eggs and a sausage?'

'Served by gothic wenches in bondage gear?' I added. 'A severed head on the mantelpiece – of a guest who hasn't paid his bill?'

'En suite torture chambers!' giggled Chloe. 'Oh look!' She was still racing through the web pages at the speed of light. 'This one says, "*Guests aged between sixteen and eighteen will be accepted only if accompanied by a letter of consent from their parents*"!'

Chloe turned to me, alarm flickering in her green eyes. This was the Elephant in the Room: we hadn't told our parents.

'We're going to have to tell them some time,' I said. 'Why not now?'

Right on cue, we heard Chloe's mum's key in the lock.

CHAPTER 2

Chloe went pale. Her mum, Fran, is totally lovely, an old hippie who believes in peace and love and the tarot. She works in a shop where they sell wind chimes and organic cereal and stuff. But all the same, Chloe went pale. Neither of us had been on a holiday by ourselves before, not counting the horrendous school trip to Gorget-St-Marie, where Chloe's French pen pal forgot to show her where the loo was (outside – in a shed covered with ivy).

But Chloe's French loo crisis was nothing compared to what was looming now.

'Let's tell your mum!' I whispered. 'Get her on our side! Then she can help to persuade my mum!' My mum was going to be an even bigger challenge.

'Don't say anything!' hissed Chloe. 'Leave it to

me! It depends on her mood!'

A large dog shot into the room and jumped into Chloe's arms. She staggered backwards. I've sometimes thought Chloe's dog, Geraint, could be a dress rehearsal for a certain sort of boyfriend. A pervy one. He once did something quite unrepeatable to my mum's leg – and I don't mean weeing on it, either. Being weed on would be a picnic compared to what Geraint did.

'Hi, darlings!' called Fran. She bustled in, carrying a basket full of some kind of green leafy vegetable. She was wearing a skirt covered with mirrors, a gilet embroidered with red camels, and earrings the shape of small tigers. A powerful pong of jasmine had entered the room with her. Just looking at her was like going on a trip to India without having to endure a long-haul flight. 'You haven't been sitting at that wretched computer all day, I hope!' cried Fran.

'No! No!' insisted Chloe, scrambling off the computer chair and joining her mum in the kitchen. She gave her a hug. 'We've been looking for work.'

'Of course you ought to spend some of the hols earning money if you can,' said Fran, swiftly unpacking her shopping bag and putting the kettle on. 'But really, I hope you'll find time to relax as well.'

'We are!' I blurted. 'We're going to . . .'

'We're going to chill out in the park every afternoon!' Chloe interrupted me with a warning glare. It was her job to tell her mum about Newquay, not mine, so I reluctantly bit my lip.

'Oh, the park, how lovely!' said Fran. 'Just make me a cup of tea, would you, Chloe? I'm going to be late for my yoga . . .' She ran upstairs to change.

'You missed the perfect opportunity, then!' I whispered. 'It was handed to us on a plate!'

'She's stressed out!' hissed Chloe. 'It's the wrong moment! She could go ballistic just like that!' I've never seen Fran go ballistic, and really, compared with my mum's tantrums, I was sure it would be a storm in a teacup. When my mum goes ballistic, the sky goes black, the oceans boil, and mountains in South America rumble ominously.

'Let's soften her up by telling her all about the job we're going to get!' I suggested. There was the sound of the shower being turned on upstairs.

'Quick! Quick! Let's find some jobs on the Internet!' Chloe raced back to the PC. 'We should have done that before looking for the accommodation in Newquay! We're such morons!'

We found an employment agency-type website

which began with a form to fill in. '*REGISTER TODAY,*' it demanded. Chloe raced through this. The password we chose was YAUQWEN – Newquay backwards. It sounded like the ancient Aztec god of unhappy cats.

Once the registration was completed, we moved to the next stage of the form. It said, '*Please choose four sectors in which you have experience or qualifications.*' Then there was a long list of horrid things, including words like Logistics and Defence and Management and Executive.

'It says Media!' cried Chloe. 'Let's choose that!' Evidently she was hoping to get a holiday job directing films or something.

'We can't choose that!' I giggled. 'We haven't got either experience or qualifications in Media, you muppet! In fact we haven't got experience or qualifications in any of these sectors. This website is for adults who are already launched in their careers! It's a non-starter!'

'Yeah,' Chloe agreed. 'We're totally wasting our time here.'

'Let's ring the supermarkets and ask if they've got any work,' I suggested. 'I saw Fred Parsons working in the fish department last Sunday – wearing a stylish

white trilby hat and flanked by a pair of gorgeous pouting haddocks.'

'Now that's what I call a lifestyle!' grinned Chloe. 'You ring them. You know I'm useless on the phone. Tell them we're friends of Fred's. Tell them I want to work in Cheese.'

'Why do I always have to do the phoning?' I grumbled, heading for the phone. 'I reckon you've got a phone phobia or something.' I grabbed the Yellow Pages.

'Well, you've got a phobia about slugs,' Chloe pointed out. 'And if you give me any more lip I'm gonna drop a couple of biggies down the back of your dress!'

I did a sort of screaming laugh and grabbed the phone. While Chloe made us a cup of spiced chai (our favourite tipple – kind of milky tea with cinnamon) and some ordinary tea for her mum, I rang all three of the local supermarkets and discovered that all the holiday jobs for people our age had been filled way back at Easter or something. There were no vacancies 'at this late stage' as one woman put it. Chloe and I had clearly failed to grasp the most basic principles of getting a job: be there at dawn, three months early.

There was a local paper on one of the kitchen worktops: smeared with ketchup but still readable. I grabbed it and looked for the Jobs section. Then I read out a few extracts in a silly posh voice. '"*Do you have sufficient breadth of experience to be our Hydrogen Product Manager?*"'

'We must have some experience of hydrogen,' said Chloe. 'It's a gas, right?'

'Passing swiftly on,' I continued, '"*Early morning cleaners required for retail store.*"'

'Early morning?' cried Chloe in alarm. 'Oh no! It's bad enough having to get up early to go to school. Let's find a nice afternoon job so we can have some lovely lie-ins.'

'"*Brightwell House Nursery: part-time staff. . .*"'

'No! I can't cope with little kids! They scare me!' I share Chloe's fear and loathing of small children. In fact, I've babysat for the toddlers from hell – the Norman twins. Call me prejudiced if you like, but I do prefer to spend quality time with people who won't pee over me from a great height or wake me up by thrashing me with a rubber snake – two of the *least* offensive things the Norman twins have done. If I ever have children they're going to have to be born as teenagers.

At this point we heard Fran coming downstairs.

'Go for it!' I hissed. Chloe shook her head and flapped her hands, about to indicate that if I were to be so rash as to mention Newquay, she would have a terrible revenge, possibly involving slugs or even – more horrifying still – small children.

Fran's yoga kit consists of wide-legged trousers in a tropical print and a kind of canvas tent top with sleeves. The tiger earrings had been replaced with a couple of pine trees – presumably because they were more yogic than tigers.

'I'm late! I'm late! Where's that tea? Oh, bless you!' Fran stood and slurped her tea.

'We were thinking of getting a job for a month or so,' I said.

'Good idea!' said Fran, looking as if she was hoping I wouldn't say anything else. 'Brilliant! Try that employment agency in the high street.'

'We're going there in a minute,' I lied. 'And if we do find a job, we're going to follow your advice . . .' (this was cunning) 'and leave the last week of the hols free to relax and chill out in New . . .' Chloe kicked me, 'in new chic ways,' I concluded.

'Great! Wonderful! Where's my bag? I must go – see you later!'

And she whirled out with a slam of the door and a *tinkle, tinkle* of the wind chimes in the hall (supplied at a discount by her shop).

'Zoe! How dare you nearly mention Newquay when I'd specifically told you not to!' snapped Chloe. 'It was so the wrong moment. You must let me ask her in my own time! My mum can be unexpectedly weird about stuff – she still hasn't given me my sex talk yet!'

'You're the lucky one.' I grinned. 'My mum gave me my first sex talk when I was five, and I've had to sit through one every year since. Anyway, once Fran knows we're heading for Newquay I think you'll find the sex talk will swiftly follow.'

'I hope it never comes!' shrieked Chloe. 'I couldn't bear the thought of my mum even using the words!'

'It would be better if the words were different,' I pondered. 'How about: the man puts his blancmange into the woman's apple crumble?'

'No! Not food! Food is gross!' screeched Chloe, placing our mugs of chai on a tin tray decorated with the god Vishnu. 'How about: the man puts his Piccadilly into the woman's Swindon?'

'Or animals? The man puts his aardvark into the woman's Chihuahua?' Laughing helplessly we carried

the tray out into Chloe's back garden. It's like a cute little fragment of rainforest. Her mum has carved out a kind of arbour among the trees, and installed some garden furniture. It's old garden furniture, obviously. Fran's idea of chic is decidedly shabby.

I placed the tray on the rickety old table and plonked myself down in one of the ancient wicker chairs. There was a ripping sound of old sticks giving way as my arse tore straight through the chair seat and went on plummeting towards the earth twenty-five centimetres below.

'Jesus!' I yelled as my bot struck terra firma. Chloe cracked up. She laughed so much, she half fell on to the rickety table and spilled most of the chai. I struggled to my feet, but the wicker chair was kind of fastened round my bum like a cartoon out of *The Dandy*. 'Pull it off! Pull it off!' I gasped, hysterical. Eventually Chloe stopped weeping with laughter and held on to the chair while I tugged myself out of it.

'If only we'd videoed that!' said Chloe, groaning at the comic perfection of the moment. 'We could have used it as a show reel and got jobs as TV comedians!'

Once we'd got the chair off my bum, the laughter died. The chair looked terrible: kind of sad and trashed. It had been a dear old chair and I was sure it

was Fran's favourite. Maybe it could be mended by a lovable old guy with a silvery moustache, a leather apron and a willow plantation behind his cute thatched cottage.

We had to find that man, even though the bill for repairs would probably cost more than a week in Newquay. The need for cash was more urgent than ever.

'Look,' I said, 'let's go to that employment office your mum mentioned. You know, just up from the station. What's it called? – Mercury. At least let's just go there in person and ask. It can't do any harm.'