

Q U I E T L Y
waiting

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Tanya 1.1

TANYA CHECKED HER watch for the hundredth time, then for the thousandth time that day, she thought of him. *Where was he? Was he alright? What was he doing?* She clutched a tissue in her right hand, intermittently dabbing at her eyes. Tears had become a constant companion. She was expecting a phone call, that was now well overdue. *There must be an unexpected delay,* she thought.

‘He’ll call soon,’ she reassured herself. ‘Delays were nothing to worry about,’ she kept reminding herself. ‘Focus on the positives,’ she repeated to herself.

This had become her mantra. It helped to keep the scarier thoughts at bay. This was no normal situation they were in; it wasn’t as if he had missed the bus or just caught a later train home from the office. She was an emotional wreck.

It hadn’t always been this way; she had not always been so easily aroused to this level of anxiety. Her surroundings didn’t help. She was all alone in a wing of an enormous country house, a place she knew well but only as a visitor and only recently as a place to call home. It had been in her family for more than 120 years and was currently under the custodianship of her aunt, who had taken it over from her grandparents. She had been lured there with the offer of a job. Her

aunt had approached her at a very vulnerable time, she suspected the involvement of her mother.

The job was to research, then write the biography of one of her relatives. It seemed plausible; however, her cynical side suspected its sole purpose was to keep her occupied while her husband was away. The house's vast empty spaces exacerbated her anxiety, there were too many ghosts lurking in the shadows. Haunting pictures stared down from the walls; secrets were hidden everywhere. The servants, of which there were many, kept a discreet distance. Perhaps they had been instructed to do so at the direction of her aunt, under the false assumption that she wanted privacy. The loneliness weighed heavily on her. At these times, her work was the only thing that could distract her, but in this moment of uncertainty, she couldn't concentrate for long enough to immerse herself in it. All she could do was be patient, think of him, pray that he was safe and wait for the phone to ring.

Tanya 1.2

MEEETING HER SOUL mate had not been in her plans. As her aunt would later tell her, it only ever seemed to happen when you least expected, or even wanted, it to. Her brother was to blame. He was passing out from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, where he had been training to become an officer in the British Army. It was a family event, one that she was unable to get out of.

She had never envisaged her brother as a soldier; she still wondered at his decision to become one. Well, the truth was, it wasn't all his decision. He was guided, no, perhaps pushed was the correct word, in that direction by their mother who, after consulting friends, was convinced it was just the thing to end his listlessness. With her father gone and her aunt her only other close relative, travelling abroad, it would be just her and her mother making up the party to celebrate her brother's great achievement.

She had tried to come up with an excuse to avoid it, started to think of one, then memories of her father had surfaced, memories of a promise made on his death bed, that she would look after her mother when he was gone. It was a powerful memory, a solemn commitment. It was enough to guilt her into accepting the invitation, regardless of how precious her weekends were.

Tanya was coming to the end of the university phase of her life, as she deemed to term it. These were the final opportunities to spend time with her friends, fellow students and teachers, to live the life she had come to enjoy so much. Yes, of course, they would see each other again over the years to come, probably many times for some of them, but it would never be the same. They would change, she would change. What they were experiencing together would not come again. She cherished it. It was sentimental, still it was hers, something she had earned. So that was that, out of feelings of guilt, love and family togetherness, she had agreed to go.

Boys. What do you do with boys? Especially, what do you do with restless, directionless, rich boys? Send them into the military, of course! Just as in days of old, the tried-and-true method, give them a place to burn away all that excess energy. Give them something worthy to focus on, then before you know it, they will be back home, ready to direct their energies into the family business or a decent respectable career. Tanya found the idea repulsive.

So, it had been arranged for her brother Harry, even though it was not supposed to be possible in this modern equal opportunity age. At the orchestration of her mother, emails had been sent, petitions made, a word or two in the right ear from distinguished family friends and eventually, a place had been offered. Wealth and privilege were still, it seemed, able to provide their own avenues to success.

Tanya had been forced to admit, though, that her brother seemed to be excelling in the army. Monitoring his progress closely, from what she could see, he was relishing the lifestyle, rising successfully to the many challenges. It needed to be remembered that it was only training. However, it unlocked something in him and now, forty-four weeks later, he was passing out as an officer, with a career ahead of him. An amazing transformation.

Tanya, busy focusing on completing her studies, had allowed the event to creep up on her. She found herself late on the Friday night, prior to the ceremony, alone in her flat, packing. A frantic unscheduled call

to her mother revealed that the expected dress code was conservative, garden party wear. She wasn't completely sure she knew what that was.

In the end, she packed the only two outfits she owned, that she thought might match this description, hoping for the best. They were having dinner with a friend of Harry's back at the hotel in the evening after, so Tanya packed a black dress for what would probably be for her, a boring affair. She would travel in jeans and a t-shirt. *No use in going over the top for riding in a car*, she thought. To that end, she decided to leave her jewellery case at home. *Why make the effort?*

The alarm drew her out of a deep sleep at 6:30am on the following morning, Saturday. She stepped straight into the shower, the water helping to wake her up. Making little effort beyond brushing her teeth and drying her hair, she ate a simple breakfast consisting of two rounds of toast with strawberry jam and a hot mug of tea. When she finished, she was fully awake, feeling ready to conquer the world, or at least deal with her mother. As an afterthought she decided to pack a pair of fancy, black high heel shoes for the dinner. She pulled on her jeans and t-shirt and was ready to leave with twenty minutes to spare. As soon as she walked out of her building, she spotted the big silver car parked waiting, the driver standing ready.

As soon as he saw her, walking across the courtyard with her suitcase, handbag, and backpack, he came running across to help. *Was she that helpless?* she asked herself. At that moment, a female acquaintance, emerged with a similar amount of luggage, a child in a pram and another holding her one free hand and headed for the bus stop. There was nobody to help her!

Sheepishly, she half-heartedly waved at the woman who stared at her, as the uniformed driver relieved her of all but her handbag, carrying them apologetically to where the large Bentley waited. The older she got, the more her family's wealth embarrassed her. *Well, I have given people something to gossip about over their coffees*, she thought. The driver held the door for her as she climbed into the back seat and smiled, thanking him. He nodded in return. Her mother was in the car,

half asleep and barely acknowledged her. Tanya leant across, kissing her on the cheek, then reached into her bag retrieving a book. They travelled in silence as the world around them came alive. Immersed in her reading, Tanya saw none of it.

Tanya 1.3

SITTING ALONE IN her room, the memories of that day were so clear. She re-lived, not just the imagery, but the emotions that all came flooding back, leading to sensory overload. Tanya tried to distract herself, picked up a book then put it straight back down, checked her phone, her watch, took some tissues from the ever present box. Though it had not begun that way, it was now remembered as one of the happiest days of her life. The memories were comforting; they remained fresh, allowing her to retreat into them whenever she wanted. She sat back down in an armchair closed her eyes and let them wash over her.

Tanya 1.4

THE JOURNEY WAS uneventful. They only stopped once at a service centre so the driver could stretch his legs; the two women never left the car. It was only when the car turned into the long drive that led to the hotel where they were staying, that Tanya looked up from her book. The hotel was built upon the ruins of a former stately home, the grounds still showed signs of the estate's former glory. It interested her.

They drove past high garden walls and immaculately trimmed hedges, an enormous fountain lay defunct but, in its day, would have been very impressive. The main house was newly renovated, after being left vacant and derelict for many years. She had read an article about it; the building had been completely gutted before being rebuilt. She wondered if this fate awaited any of her family's properties. As it came into view, she was impressed, even more so on entering the foyer.

On the outside, it looked old, the historical sandstone façade had been restored. Inside, it was completely modern, with only a few traces of the past remaining. The foyer was topped by a large glass dome that filled it with light; the walls were lined with Scandinavian oak panels; a white marble staircase stretched to the floors above, an opulent relic from the distant past.

To the left of the foyer was the restaurant. The wood panelling in there was darker, giving it a more intimate feel. Each table was cleverly screened from the others, providing individual spaces and privacy. It had a French bistro feel that reminded Tanya of somewhere she had eaten in Paris, though she couldn't remember the exact location. There were four private dining rooms, one of these had been reserved their dinner party later that evening.

They were met in the foyer by the manager, who personally welcomed them. He led them past the assembled staff, who were lined up to welcome them, causing Tanya more embarrassment, then personally showing them to their suites on the top floor. There was no check in. They passed the marble staircase in a glass lift. Up close it made for an elegant sight.

The graduation parade was scheduled to begin at 3pm. Tanya had already decided to forgo lunch as there would be refreshments after the ceremony. With two hours until they had to leave, she slipped off her jeans, set the alarm on her phone, then laid down on the king size bed with her book to rest.

It was while lying there, the thought occurred to her, that perhaps she was a little jealous of her brother. Harry had done well; he would pass out of the officer training school, then after three weeks leave, join his regiment ready to begin his new career. A clear path laid before him. The next few years were mapped out, a lot of hard work lay ahead, but there were rewards, fulfilment. It could take him anywhere; he was off and running. In comparison, she had no idea where to begin. Finishing a degree was one thing, but what next? She had been avoiding these thoughts. The clock was ticking though and soon she would need to confront them.

Tanya had taken a two, that had turned into three-year, break from study after leaving school. During that time, she had travelled, searching for something to become passionate about, trying to find somewhere she could make a difference, adding some value to the world. Then her father had died unexpectedly after a short illness. The shock of this

event led her to go wandering around blindly for another year, before deciding that it was time to study.

Study was an escape, but one with a purpose. She immersed herself in the things she loved: literature, art, journalism, all the while earning a degree. Now that stage of her life was coming to an end.

Tanya dreaded the thought of becoming lost once again. Of retreating within herself, living a life with no real purpose, trying to find ways to fill her days as she slowly slipped into insanity, dealing with the endless boredom. There were practical things to consider, like, where would she live? She had been avoiding that question for months. Moving back in with her mother was not something she could bear contemplating; she loved the house where she had grown up, but it was different now that her father was gone. She just didn't get along with her mother. Their bond was strong, but they just couldn't live together.

She had learnt to restrict her interactions to the things they enjoyed doing together, to avoid, at all costs, the things that triggered conflict. She knew she needed to work harder at making it work; she was determined to do so, but it was hard. Realising that she had been focusing on the negative aspects of the day ahead, she shifted her focus. Here, she reasoned was an opportunity to spend time celebrating her brother's achievements, enjoying time with her family, creating memories. With those more positive thoughts, she drifted off to sleep.

The alarm was brutal. She moved quickly to turn it off, then went straight into the bathroom. As she flicked the light switch, an exhaust fan sprang into life, followed by what seemed like a hundred lights that illuminated the room, battering her senses. She took her time getting ready, choosing carefully from the clothes she had packed, regretting the decision to leave her jewel case at home. Admiring her work in the mirror, she liked how the navy-blue suit hung on her.

When they met in the hotel foyer, she could feel her mother's eyes give her the once over and was not convinced the smile she offered was approval. Her mother, excited by the occasion more than her, was now

more awake and wanted to talk. This was difficult for Tanya, who had no interest in how her mother spent her days, no interest in the small talk of who, where and what was happening. The criticism of her outfit was subtle and came early.

‘Did you forget to bring a skirt, or do you not own a suitable one?’

The suit she was wearing had cost a fortune, yet the way her mother spoke, you would have thought she found it in a ditch by the side of the road. Tanya didn’t bite, returning her mother’s smile.

‘Did you bring a gift for Harry?’ her mother asked, searching for another thing to criticise. Tanya was ready.

‘Yes, some cuff links and a tie.’

Tanya had made a special effort researching, then buying from, the Army and Navy store. The conversation continued in this style as they drove the final leg of their journey. Tanya showed great restraint, allowing her mother a great deal of latitude. As they arrived at the academy, the advantages of a chauffeur driven car were obvious. It gave Tanya more cause to cringe. They were directed to a VIP area where they were met by a General Sebring. When they asked him if he was the course director he said, ‘Good heavens, no.’

He was, however, a mentor to the cadets. Yes, he knew Harry, knew him well, outstanding young man, he would host their party, as well as appearing as the Queen’s representative.

Her mother seemed to know this man, though he had introduced himself as if he were a stranger. Her mother was more comfortable with the VIP treatment than Tanya, who could only wonder who greeted the parents of the cadets from less affluent backgrounds. The British Army was an institution, rooted in hundreds of years of tradition. How do you change that? The officer class was still there, even though all the cadets would be officers after today. Still, it seemed to her, there were “officers” and there were officers. Tanya didn’t like that train of thought, it led to anger threatening her mood and, in turn, the day itself.

They were led to a podium to view the afternoon’s events, her mother looked fit to burst. She leant close to Tanya, whispering, ‘What

do you think of your brother? I never thought I would see the day; his father would have been so proud, don't you think?'

Tanya smiled. It could have been a very different story. Her brother loved the beaches in Ibiza, the French Riviera; he could easily have remained a playboy, lived off his trust fund, idled through life. She had not appreciated before, how much this must have troubled her mother, seeing her brother directionless. His life had been one endless party, it must have given her more than the odd sleepless night. *There was much to be thankful for on this day*, she thought. Soldiering was, and always had been, a dangerous business, she reminded herself. Soldiers die. There was fighting in Afghanistan. Harry would more than likely be facing danger at some point, that possibility was very real.

When the parade began, Tanya watched the cadets carefully. She was envious as they marched proudly past in their smart uniforms. Again, a touch of jealousy appeared in her thinking; she had been as directionless as her brother, though without the partying. Harry had once been snapped by the paparazzi cavorting on a beach with a famous model when the latter was topless and wearing a string bikini. Why had nobody intervened in her life, placed her on the straight and narrow?

The general spoke well. He remembered, just as if it was yesterday, what it was like standing as they were, listening to speeches, how privileged he was to be standing before them today. How many times he had been thankful for the lessons he had learned as a cadet while attending the academy. How in the bleakest moments this training had kicked in, saving not only him, but the men under his command. He told them how he looked out upon them at the start of their careers, while his own was coming to an end, with envy. How he wished that he was starting again, that he was certain they would enjoy as successful and varied careers as he had. Tanya tuned out when, as he began to speak of duty and service, having spotted Harry, she wanted to wave, then decided that it would, under no circumstances, be appropriate.

With great fanfare, the parade ended. Tanya looked across to her mother who was bursting. It had been years since she looked this happy.

It pleased Tanya as it made the trip worthwhile. The general led them off the podium and after a short walk, for which he apologised, he led them into a marquee for refreshments. They sipped on champagne while they waited for their hero to arrive.

Tanya had goose bumps just thinking about what happened next. Recalling again her aunt's prophetic words, about meeting someone at the wrong time, her aunt had further added that Tanya was one of the lucky ones, for most people it never happened. 'True love,' she had stated, 'was rarer than anything known.' Therefore, by her reasoning, it needed to be respected. Tanya understood this. *And when it happens, she thought, nothing no matter what it is will ever be as important again!*

He appeared as just a glimpse through the crowd, walking next to her brother. Her mother, incidentally, stepped in front of him, blocking any closer view as she gave Harry a hug, before passing her brother over to her. She hugged Harry tightly excited to see him.

'Hello,' he whispered into her ear, 'I'm glad you came.' Then almost as an afterthought, 'Oh, I almost forgot,' moving aside, 'this is Evan.'

Tanya almost fainted as the thunderbolt struck her. He was standing in front of them with his hand outstretched, her mother shook it. When it was her turn, all she could say was, 'Yes.'

'Yes,' she said again, then stood there speechless.

They all turned, staring at her; she was saved by the arrival of General Sebring. *Wow!* was the only word that occupied her mind. She reminded herself that she was a strong-willed, independent woman; she didn't need the arrival of Prince Charming types, but here he was, squeezed into a uniform with polished buttons. A uniform that barely hid his muscles, that enhanced his beautiful face and bright blue eyes, instantly reducing her to a babbling idiot.

Tanya had to stop for a moment, wiping the tears from her eyes. She struggled to compose herself, feelings of happiness that she was helpless to avoid, overwhelming feelings she struggled to describe. *Something is wrong, she thought. I know it is, take a hold of yourself.* It was

the voice of her father: stern, loving. Calm down! The voice was as clear as if he were in the room, returned from the grave. It had the desired effect, but only for a moment. In her mind she could see herself there, but with no memory of what they were talking about. She spent the entire time looking at Evan, captivated by him. When Harry and Evan excused themselves to go and collect their things, she snapped out of it, watching carefully as he walked away. Her mother was chatting to the general, who she learned was now joining them for dinner.

‘What do you know about him?’

‘Who, darling?’

Both the general and her mother turned to face her.

‘That young man with Harry?’

‘Evan, he’s a friend of your brother’s.’

‘Absolutely first-class young man,’ the general added.

‘Where’s he from, how old is he, is he married, engaged?’

The general and her mother exchanged glances, then stared at her with expressions of amusement.

‘He’s from London, no, he may have grown up in Wales originally, I’m sorry I really can’t remember. As far as I can recall, he’s unattached, most of the young men, who come here, are.’

‘You can ask him yourself darling, he’s joining us for dinner this evening,’ her mother added.

‘Yes of course.’

She felt like a teenager, giggly, like when someone she fancied winked at her, in her long-forgotten youth. How could this be? She was not normally affected like this. She had dated other men but nobody had ever aroused feelings like this within her. She felt tingly all over, her skin ached, she could feel her blood as it flowed through her veins, she wanted to shout, yell, chase after him. What if he needed something, some help or assistance, something only she could provide? Could this be happening to her, could your life change in an instant? Yes, she thought almost giggling, then doing it again covering her mouth, this time as she attracted the stares of those around her.

‘Tanya, please excuse us, I want to introduce your mother to the minister.’

She waved them off, watching as they weaved their way through the crowd. Had they not realised that she had just fallen madly in love, to admit it was scary but admit it she would. Here was the man she would love forever and then some, for whom she would do anything, and she was certain he felt the same in an instant life changed. Was it that simple?

Standing alone, she knew how true that feeling was. How definite she was she had met her perfect match, her soul mate, in that moment. That perfect moment, forever frozen in her mind, she knew what her life would hence forth be about. *Control yourself, take things easy*, she reminded herself. What if he is married or has a girlfriend or boyfriend, a million things. *No*, she thought, *he has nobody, he has been waiting for me as I have been waiting him, now he is here, it's perfect. He will be mine.*

She stood for a long time, holding a glass of champagne but not drinking. How long had it been since she had been happy? Truly, madly, emotionally happy. She could not remember. The world around her melted away as she basked in the joy, the purity of the moment. When her mother and the general returned, she was standing in exactly the same spot, transfixed, staring into space.

The general walked Tanya and her mother back to their car. Harry and Evan arrived soon after them. Her heart, once again, was set a flutter. Her mother sat in the front allowing the three young people to occupy the rear seat. Tanya sat in the middle and this position provided her certain opportunities. While her brother chatted with their mother, she could make small talk with Evan. She could also make some covert contact with him under the guise of car movement. She would make small talk without losing too much self-control.

Things like, ‘Where did you grow up?’

‘What do your parents do?’

‘Can you take your shirt off?’

That sort of thing.

She learned that he had been born in Wales, that his father had been in the army then joined the police force rising to the rank of detective inspector. They had moved to London when he was eleven. He had been a promising snooker player in his youth, his parents were alive but were away visiting his sister who lived in Florida. His sister had just had a baby, the first grandchild. He did not have a girlfriend, he smiled while answering this question. A wry conspiratorial smile. Harry had invited him to join him on leave, but he had decided to find a nice quiet place, buy a few good books then settle in. Unless, of course, something better came up. He smiled once more as he said this and his hand, accidentally on purpose, brushed her leg on a straight road with no bumps.

Tanya leaned into him on a gentle corner with no internal car movement, her senses were on high alert. *My god, he feels it*, she thought. Something was pulling them together. She leant into him again. He met her in the middle. It was electrifying, the car ride became a testing ground where each would instigate something, then judge the reaction of the other. Evan had been studying psychology at university when he was accepted into the army. He had plans to finish his studies one day; he would like to be a detective like his father had been. All too quickly they were back at the hotel.

She reluctantly left Evan and the rest of them in the hotel lobby, then almost ran up to her room. There was much to do. She placed a call to the concierge and soon everything was organised. The spa was full, but they arranged a hairdresser and beauty specialist to visit her in her suite.

She showered, then the hairdresser washed her hair. The beauty specialist went to work, before the hairdresser moved back in to finish the job. Turning her attention to her wardrobe, she had little choice but to settle for the black dress she had packed. It would do. It hugged in all the right places. She was thankful that she had the impulse to pack the high heels.

The only jewellery she had with her was her Rolex watch and a diamond bracelet, both gifts from her late father. In desperation, she

had no choice other than turning to her mother for help. Tentatively, she knocked on the door to her mother's suite. To her surprise, it was opened by General Sebring. He ushered her in without a word, her mother was seated on the sofa a large silver tea tray sat before her.

'What is it darling?'

Her mother looked up at her with those dark green eyes that Tanya had always found fascinating. There was something different about her, a look of excitement, of happiness, a certain contentment she wasn't used to seeing displayed. It was too easy not to think of her mother as a living breathing human being, not just her mother. Then it dawned on her, that she was imposing on them, intruding on an intimate moment perhaps, oh dear, she blushed at the thought.

'I just um, well I didn't bring my jewellery case, I wanted to,' she stammered. After composing herself, Tanya spoke clearly. 'I thought that perhaps you might have some jewellery, I could borrow.'

Her mother spoke, directing her comment towards the general, rather than her daughter.

'Young people these days, never think ahead. Please excuse me for a moment, Henry. Come darling, let's see what we can find.'

She led her through to the bedroom where Tanya was surprised to see three, large jewellery cases on the dressing table. She opened each of them.

'Now let me see, oh I have just the thing. This was a present from your grandfather, a family heirloom.'

She rummaged around in the bottom of one of the cases and pulled out a large velvet bag. Inside was a three-layered gold chain. In between, each of the finely woven gold links were encrusted with precious stones: rubies, emeralds and diamonds beautifully set into the gold. At the front, each chain was separated by a gap of a few centimetres. It was antique; the artistry and skill used to make it, incredible.

'Here, sit,' her mother commanded. There was real affection in her mother's voice. She was enjoying this more than she would allow herself to admit. Her mother noted the change in her daughter,

knowing instantly this man meant something more to her, that he was important enough for her to want to visit her mother and borrow jewellery, something that was very out of character. She wondered at life, marvelled at it. *It never ceases to surprise you*, she thought.

Tanya sat at the table, lifting her hair to allow her mother to place the necklace and fasten it. It looked heavy, but she could barely feel it.

‘What do you think?’

‘It’s beautiful.’

The gold shimmered brightly against the black of her dress, the precious stones sparkled.

‘Now, what else?’ her mother said, clearly thinking the necklace was not enough. She rummaged around in the cases again, this time taking out a smaller blue velvet bag.

‘I bought these for myself when I was just a little older than you are now.’

They were gold and diamond earrings. Tanya carefully put them on, her mother smiled at what she saw. Gently, she placed her hands on Tanya’s shoulders. Tanya took her left hand and placed it on her mother’s.

‘You look spectacular.’

Tanya stood to go.

‘I’ve imposed myself enough on you. Thank you for your help.’

‘Hold on a moment. Here take this one.’

She handed her daughter another velvet bag. This one was green and larger than the others, but lighter.

‘You can put that one on in your room. After all, a woman doesn’t ever have to be completely naked.’

She smiled and winked. Tanya took the bag and went back to her room. When she had closed the door, she opened it. Slowly, she removed what was inside with a loud gasp.

‘Mother!’

They were five for dinner. The general, Harry and Evan looked

handsome in their dress uniforms as they met in the bar. Tanya was the last to arrive. She could not only feel Evan's, but all of their eyes, on her. It made her blush. She looked stunning.

She had put on her mother's surprise final piece of jewellery. It added to the sensuality that she was feeling. She had managed to calm herself down, that was, until she saw him.

The general took charge as soon as Tanya arrived. He summoned the head waiter with a wave of his hand, then they were shown into their private dining room. It was an elegant, intimate space with soft mood lighting. The chairs were red and extremely comfortable, the colour offset the beautiful mahogany dining table.

The table was laid with crisp, white linen placings and napkins, the porcelain crockery accentuated by the antique silver cutlery and servers that shone brilliantly. The ladies were seated first, then the general. They paired up, with Harry the odd one out at the head of the table. Her mother was wearing a tiara that had been a gift to one of the ancestors by a Russian Tzar. Evan, to her great delight, sat next her. They should have found someone for Harry, but then it wasn't meant to be a date night. There were three waiters, dressed in gold embroidered white uniforms. Linen napkins were carefully placed upon each person's lap, the atmosphere was formal, the menu modern.

Tanya hung off Evan's every word, she quickly noticed he, in turn, hung off hers. All five of them sat bolt upright, watching their behaviour carefully in the initial stages. As the meal progressed, they became more relaxed. By meal's end there was a feeling of casualness.

The general was a great host, relishing in the role. He had lived an interesting life, the son and grandson of former soldiers, he grew up in Surrey. After the war his father worked as a banker providing well for them, he had a sister who was younger. His mother didn't like boarding schools, so he went to a co-educational day school close to their home. He played cricket, rugby and enjoyed a game of tennis. Life was good. He started studying at university, then after two semesters decided he wanted some adventure.

The army in the late 1960s was not the most appealing of careers. When he arrived at Sandhurst, it had been at a time when numbers were down and society was asking questions about military expenditure. There had been a marriage once but that had not been a success, there were no children, his only regret. He had a million stories. Tanya liked him. Maybe he was stepfather material. This hurt, but those feelings weren't fair on her mother, who was the happiest she had seen her in years.

Evan had been assigned to his regiment; Harry was still waiting. The general promised to find out what he could to expedite things. Evan expected to find himself in Afghanistan inside of a year. He politely kept this out of the conversation and after dessert he excused himself.

When he left the room Harry leaned across whispering to his sister, 'What do you think?'

'He's very nice.'

'He's a good man. I have got to know him well over the past year.'

When Evan re-entered the room, Tanya moved her leg so it was touching his. He smiled. Coffee was served and she could feel the heat of his body through the material of his uniform. After coffee, her mother and the general mercifully excused themselves. The three remaining members of the party decided to move out onto the terrace. Finding a comfortable nook, they ordered cocktails. Harry left them with a smile after two rounds. It had become obvious to him that he did not exist in their world.

Tanya and Evan had two more rounds; both were more than a little lightheaded. Their combined energy continued to build. When they finished their drinks, Evan stood, offering Tanya his hand without a word. Tanya took it without hesitation; his touch was electric. There was a deep underlining meaning in accepting Evan's hand, both of them understood this it was private, personal. Tanya fully aware, had accepted willingly without hesitation.

The hotel had several beautiful tranquil walled gardens, each with a different theme, that were connected by gravel paths that wove their

way through each garden then onto the next, eventually winding their way back to the hotel. It was now late into the evening, but it was still warm enough and light enough for a late stroll, nothing unusual about it. They may even encounter others.

In silence, he led her along the path through the entrance into the first garden. As soon as they walked through the entrance, he drew her to him. Falling into his arms, their lips met for the first time. His hands dropped to her waist, lifting her dress slightly. After what seemed like hours, she opened her eyes, staring into his that were wide open.

This garden had a Japanese theme. Tanya spotted a pavilion that had a very Japanese look. She pointed towards it and it was now her turn to lead the way, Evan was happy to follow. It was darker inside the pavilion than it had been in the garden. There was a wooden bench that looked out onto a koi pond; water ran out of a fountain made from bamboo. It was the only noise, other than their breathing, just for a moment they each considered whether they were moving too quickly! They had already gone beyond the point of no return.

Quickly they succumbed to their overwhelming desires. Standing near the bench, kissing passionately, their hands began exploring each other's bodies. Evan's fingers lightly pressed against the fabric of her dress. Tanya was hesitant at first, but as her desire rose, she became more daring. His hands cupped her buttocks, then they were under her dress. When he touched her bare skin, she gasped. He lifted her dress and their movements became frenzied, frantic. He pulled her underwear down by the sides and moved his lips to her neck. Tanya moved back against a column; his hands were on her bottom. She jumped, wrapping her legs around him. It was intense. They were completely lost in the moment; with total abandon they consumed each other. Tanya cried out biting her lip.

Tanya was sitting on Evan's lap, facing him. Basking in the afterglow, their lips met again savouring the most intimate moment of their lives.

The memory burned forever into her mind.