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Prologue

Fate . . . it comes to us all.

One's lot in life walks hand in hand with destiny.

It was Friday, 3 September 1976 when I met a striking young woman.

I was standing outside the high metal gates of New-bridge Primary School in West Yorkshire where I had been deputy headteacher for the past six years. Our newly appointed music teacher was due to arrive and the head-teacher, Jim Patterson, had asked me to look out for her.

A car pulled up across the road driven by a man wearing a bright red headband over his lank shoulder-length hair and smoking a roll-up cigarette. He was driving a battered Vauxhall Viva, hand-painted with psychedelic patterns and a sign on the door that read: 'MAKE LOVE NOT WAR'.

A woman emerged from the passenger seat. Medium height and slim with a mass of wavy black hair, she wore blue bell-bottom cords, a collarless white blouse and a

black waistcoat stitched with yellow flowers. Over her shoulder was a cumbersome shoulder bag and she was carrying a guitar case.

The car roared away and for a moment she looked after it and sighed. It was as if for some reason she was weighed down by a millstone of memories. Then she caught sight of me, waved and gave me a cautious smile.

She crossed the road and looked me up and down while assessing my gangling six-foot-one-inch frame. My long brown hair hung over the collar of my baggy sports jacket. What I considered to be a fashionable ensemble included a wide flower-power tie, flared chino trousers and suede desert boots.

‘Hello. I guess you’re waiting for me,’ she said.

‘I’m Jack Sheffield. Welcome to Newbridge.’ We shook hands. ‘You must be Ms Kowalski.’

She seemed amused by my formality. ‘Kowalski, yes . . . but call me Izzy.’

‘Izzy? Short for Isobel?’

She grinned and shook her head. ‘No, Ysemay . . . Irish mother, Polish father. Izzy is much simpler.’

‘Well, pleased to meet you, Izzy . . . and call me Jack.’

‘Short for John?’ she asked with a mischievous smile.

I had been christened Jack but accepted the riposte. ‘Touché,’ I said with a grin. ‘Come on, the head is expecting us. Shall I carry something for you?’

She passed over the guitar case. ‘Thanks, Jack.’

I gestured towards the worn school steps that led to the entrance door of our Victorian school building.

‘Fine, let’s go,’ she said with sudden confidence and we strode off across the tarmac playground.

Prologue

I glanced at her, aware of the intensity of her stare as we walked into school. Her grey-green eyes were the colour of moss on limestone. I was soon to discover that when she smiled her glance could light up a room. However, when she was sad, and there was a hint of that on this autumn morning, her eyes were soft with sorrow.

I had never been a believer in kismet, the notion that life is already planned and we cannot control the outcome. However, it seemed a predetermined course of events was about to run its course and an unseen fate awaited me. The academic year 1976–77 was destined to change my life and shatter my peaceful dreams.

I was a thirty-one-year-old bachelor and the unexpected lay around the corner . . .

Chapter One

The Colour of Music

'Jack, what a surprise!'

It took me a moment to gather my senses. The woman before me looked as though she had just walked off the cover of a Nordic fashion magazine: tall, slim and blonde.

'Oh . . . good to see you again. It must be . . . what, five years?'

She smiled. 'It's six. We said goodbye in 1970.'

I thought back to our last conversation. 'That's right, we did.'

She gave me a direct look. 'Jack . . . I remember it well.'

It was Saturday, 4 September and I was in a coffee shop in Leeds city centre. I had taken my mother shopping and she had gone on to meet her sister. In my own private space, I was flicking through the pages of the *Times Educational Supplement*.

I gestured to the empty chair opposite. 'Have you time for a coffee?'

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‘Love one.’ She glanced at her wristwatch. ‘I’ve still got an hour before I collect Sherri.’

‘How is she? She must be grown up by now.’

‘Fine. Thirteen and almost as tall as me.’

‘Time flies.’ There was a moment’s pause. ‘So . . . a coffee. Anything else?’

She smiled again. ‘Not just now, Jack.’

I ordered at the counter and looked back at Donna Clayton as she sat at my table and opened her handbag. She appeared more self-assured now, a confident woman. I had been teaching in my previous school when we first met. Donna had been a single parent eking out a living as a hairdresser and part-time barmaid. In those days she wore tight jeans and baggy jumpers; now she looked elegant in a figure-hugging trouser suit and white blouse. Bright and determined, she had aspirations to become a teacher and I had helped her along the way. She was the same age as me but we had walked different pathways.

I put a cup of coffee in front of her and she took a photograph from her handbag. ‘This is Sherri now.’

A tall, leggy teenager stared back at me, the image of her mother. ‘Well, she’s certainly grown. When I first saw her she was a six-year-old with pink hair.’

Donna laughed, ‘Yes, a hairdressing faux pas. Happy memories, although I recall that the headteacher didn’t approve. I was pleased when he moved on. It was a different school when Mrs Priestley took over: caring and supportive.’

‘You must be very proud,’ I said and handed back the photograph.

For a few moments we sipped our coffee in silence.

Finally Donna looked at me and said, 'So, what's happening in *your* life?' She pointed to the *Times Educational Supplement*. 'Looking for another job?'

I shook my head. 'One day maybe.'

'I knew you had got a deputy headship.'

For a few moments I waited for the question I knew she would ask. After a little more small talk it came.

'So . . . how's Penny?'

There it was. Direct as always.

'I don't know.'

I could see she was intrigued. Back in 1970 Penny Armitage had been a relationship that had briefly dominated my waking dreams.

'Sorry, Jack, I just assumed . . .'

'No. It ended as quickly as it had begun. She moved to London. Last I heard she's still there.'

Donna looked thoughtful as she settled back into her seat and stared into her cup. Around us there was the hiss of the coffee machine and the chatter of shoppers.

I went on: 'What about you? Did you enjoy Bretton Hall?'

Donna had begun a three-year teacher-training course there in 1970.

She looked up at me, more animated now. 'It was the turning point of my life. Essays, teaching practice, new friends, a sense of purpose. Great times.'

'So where are you now?'

'I was lucky. I got a job straight from college at Bracken Primary School up near Oakworth, teaching second-year juniors. I love it. It's a brilliant school.'

'I'm pleased for you. I knew you could do it.' It was rewarding to see her so excited about her work.

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'I'm renting a cottage in North Beck village. It's within the catchment area for The Ridge so perfect for Sherri.'

This was our local comprehensive school. 'I'm sure she'll do well there. It has an excellent reputation.'

She nodded and smiled. 'Yes, she loves it and has some good friends.'

I noticed her hair was shorter now, a neat bob cut. It suited her.

'So what's she doing now?'

'She's in the art gallery, finishing up a school holiday project about Henry Moore. She's excited that he's a famous Yorkshire sculptor.'

'That's right, born in Castleford.'

She finished drinking her coffee and looked up again. We both knew we had been avoiding the questions we wanted to ask. I took the plunge. 'So, what about you? How's *your* life?'

She clasped her hands and rested her chin on them in contemplation. 'It can be tough at times as a single mum but I have a beautiful daughter.' For a brief moment her eyes were mirrors of an unsettled past. 'That's where my happiness lies.' She picked up her handbag. 'It's been good to see you again, Jack, but you probably have things to do.'

I was unsure what to say and stood up. We faced each other and her blue eyes looked into mine. She paused and sighed. 'Jack . . . I'll always be grateful for your support.' Then she stepped forward and kissed me gently on the cheek.

As she turned to walk away she left behind a hint of Yves Saint Laurent and a moment of loss.

'Donna,' I called after her.

‘Yes?’

‘Just a thought. There’s a Primary Curriculum course at the Teachers’ Centre in Milltown. It’s in the evenings, starting on the sixteenth if you’re interested.’

‘Thanks, Jack. Maybe. I’ve got Sherri to think of.’

‘Ah, yes, I understand.’ But as I watched her leave, I knew I wanted to see her again.

Monday, 6 September dawned bright and clear for the beginning of a new school year. As I climbed into my Morris Minor Traveller and drove away from my bungalow in Bradley village near Skipton I felt that familiar sense of expectation. I had always enjoyed the heartbeat of the seasons and the steady rhythm of the cycle of school life with its autumn, spring and summer terms. It was the job I loved and now I wondered what was in store.

The early-autumn sunlight bathed the distant fields in a golden light as I drove south towards the cobbled streets of Milltown and the village of Newbridge on its outskirts. I turned on the car radio and hummed along to the new number one, ABBA’s ‘Dancing Queen’.

As I crossed the River Aire over the bridge at Hog Holes Beck, Newbridge Primary School suddenly came into view at the end of the High Street. A red-brick Victorian building with a grey-slate roof and a tall bell tower, it had been at the centre of this large village community for over a hundred years. Beyond the school gates a side street behind the main building led to a car park for the staff and visitors.

I picked up my old leather satchel, locked my car and walked towards the steps that led to the main entrance.

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'Mornin', Mr Sheffield.' It was Big Frank, the caretaker, carrying his yard broom. At six feet four inches tall, forty-year-old Frank Cannon was a hard worker and a huge presence around school. 'Another year – let's 'ope it's a good un.'

'Morning, Frank. I'm sure it will be.'

Back in 1955 Frank had completed part of his National Service in Malaya. During the jungle fighting, a bullet wound to his thigh had left him with a permanent limp. He had been lucky to survive. It was his tenth year as caretaker and he was proud of his service to the school.

He leaned on his broom, always a signal he wished to impart a nugget of information. 'That new music teacher were in bright an' early. Told me she were in three days a week. Looks keen.'

'Good to hear,' I said with a smile. Frank didn't miss much.

He lowered his voice and tapped the side of his nose conspiratorially. 'Not sure 'bout that 'ippy boyfriend though. Drives like a maniac. No manners. Ah waved but 'e jus' ignored me.'

'Sorry to hear that.'

'What's a smart lass doin' wi' a layabout like that?'

'No idea, Frank. Not my business,' I replied diplomatically.

He gave me a knowing look and picked up his broom. 'They need t'bring back National Service for t'likes of 'im. That would sort 'im out.' He was still muttering as he limped towards the boiler-house doors.

*

After dropping off my satchel in my classroom I walked into the staff-room to have a final look at my school timetable, the result of hours of work on a huge sheet of squared paper. I stood back and admired it with a sense of satisfaction. Michelangelo could not have been more proud when he looked up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I was still in my private reverie when Jim Patterson, the headteacher, walked in.

Tall and genial, fifty-year-old Jim was a superb leader and I had learned so much from him. His communication skills were excellent and he worked hard to support his colleagues. Jim always *walked the job* by visiting every classroom at the beginning of each school day and speaking to every member of staff. 'Early bird, Jack,' he said with a smile and paused to look at the timetable. 'Looks good . . . very colourful.' There was a hint of irony in his voice.

'Thanks, Jim. Yes, I thought it would make it easier to identify hall times and the different lessons.'

'Well, so long as Rhonda gives it the green light you'll be fine.'

Fifty-year-old Rhonda Williams was the head of the infant department and I had a cautious relationship with her. She was fiercely proud of her Welsh heritage even though she had left Cardiff at the age of five.

Jim looked at his wristwatch. 'Anyway, things to do. Catch you later.'

Six years ago Jim had appointed me as deputy headteacher and had given me the task of organizing the timetable. He told me I had to make sure there was an equal opportunity for all the fourteen classes to use our

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school hall for assemblies, physical education and the *Music and Movement* radio broadcasts while leaving time to set up and clear away school dinners. There had been a few problems but, as each year passed, I had become more proficient and finally I was confident I had taken account of every eventuality.

However, the best-laid plans of mice and men don't always work out as one would wish!

The door opened again and our school secretary, Audrey Fazackerly, walked in. 'Morning, Jack. New registers on your desk.' Short, plump and cheerful, Audrey always tried to see the good in people.

'Thanks, Audrey. Efficient as ever.'

She stared at the timetable. 'Oooh, that looks really pretty.'

'Thanks. It's meant to be easier to read.'

For a moment she was puzzled. Audrey had a keen analytical mind. 'Have you allowed extra time for Frank to put out the dining tables? He doesn't mention it but his leg is playing him up again.'

The first hint of doubt crossed my mind. 'Ah, I see,' I said hesitantly.

'Anyway, it brightens up the room,' she said with a shy smile and hurried out. There were new starters to be enrolled.

Forty and single, Audrey's life revolved around the school and local church. However, it was well known that our school secretary was a huge fan of the handsome racing driver James Hunt. She had a photo of the flax-haired heart-throb in the bottom drawer of her desk and in quiet moments she would stare wistfully at her pin-up,

The Colour of Music

unaware that it was common knowledge among the rest of the staff.

At eight thirty it was time to go outside to welcome the parents of the new starters. A reassuring greeting by the school gate always went down well. I walked out into the sunshine and across the playground.

Standing by the wrought-iron gate I surveyed the scene. Crowds of children, sunburned and healthy after their summer holiday, were playing on the school field while mothers, clutching the hands of new starters, the rising fives destined for the reception classes, were flooding in.

Two ten-year-old girls, Susan Verity and Dawn Whitehead, were winding a skipping rope on the playground while Pauline Ackworth and Claire Braithwaite skipped in perfect unison while chanting:

*'Rosy apple, lemon, pear,
Bunch of roses you shall wear,
Gold and silver by your side,
I know who will be your bride.'*

I smiled and wondered if one day I might have a bride.

Thirty-year-old Mrs Brenda Lofthouse arrived and paused by the school gate. "Ello, Mr Sheffield. Flippin' 'eck, ah'm glad that 'oliday's over. 'E's been a right pain 'as my Colin.'

She looked down in despair at her six-year-old son and

took a final puff of her cigarette. Mrs Lofthouse was heavily pregnant and holding her aching back. Colin appeared oblivious to the criticism and continued to pick his nose contentedly. His grey flannel shorts had been recently darned and his socks were round his ankles.

I crouched down and gave him a reassuring smile. 'Are you excited your mum is having a baby?'

Colin seemed perplexed by the question. 'Don't know, sir . . . sort of.'

'What would you like – a brother or a sister?'

Colin gave this considerable thought. 'Ah'd rather 'ave a gerbil.'

Mrs Lofthouse shook her head. 'Sorry, Mr Sheffield. 'E's clueless, jus' like 'is dad.'

Colin gave his mother an angelic smile, made more endearing as his two front teeth were missing. 'Mebbe we can 'ave a kitten, Mam?'

'No! Y'bloomin' can't.'

'Why not, Mam?'

'Cause yer grandma's 'llegic.'

'Llegic?'

'Yes, she can't stand cats.'

Colin was not to be deterred. 'What if Gran slept outside?'

Mrs Lofthouse gave him a push. 'Go play wi' yer friends.' She turned to me and shook her head. 'Kids – who'd 'ave 'em?'

I felt sorry for this hard-working lady as she walked back to the council estate. She was clearly exhausted.

A reluctant Billy Oldroyd was the next to walk in. As usual his mother, Mrs Phoebe Oldroyd, held his hand and

the eight-year-old boy cringed as she bent down to kiss him on the cheek. 'Now work hard, Billy, and be good.' She smiled at me: 'Morning, Mr Sheffield,' and hurried off to catch the bus into Milltown where she worked in a shirt factory.

'Welcome back, Billy,' I said.

'Morning, sir.'

'What's wrong? You don't look happy.'

'I'm not keen on all this *kissing*, sir. My dad kisses my mum when he leaves for work and it puts me right off my porridge.' He put his hands in his pockets and ambled into the playground to find his best friend, Tony Entwistle.

I was still smiling when there was a screech of brakes and a battered Austin 1100 pulled up. Mrs Kathy Swithenbank yelled at her twin daughters on the back seat: 'Come on, you two, I'll be late for work.'

The ten-year-old identical twins, Stacey and Tracey, tumbled out with frowns on their faces. 'Not *our* fault,' grumbled Stacey.

Kathy wound down her window. 'You need to get organized,' she shouted.

'Well, y'should have yelled at us earlier,' retorted Tracey.

As she roared away the girls gave me a big smile. 'Morning, sir,' they said in unison.

'Good t'be back,' said Stacey.

'An' we're in *your* class now, sir,' added Tracey for good measure.

Don't I know it, I thought.

The two tall and athletic girls suddenly sprinted on to the playground and joined in the skipping game.

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It was a few minutes before nine o'clock when I walked back into school. In the hall Izzy was sitting at the piano. Her long hair covered her face as she leaned forward and her slender fingers caressed the keyboard with a light touch.

I watched her for a moment. 'Morning, Izzy. I see you're settling in.'

'Hi, Jack. Just getting ready for my first lesson.'

'That's great. It's in Miss Jolley's reception class.'

She looked puzzled. 'Oh, I assumed it would be in the hall. It just said "Music" on the timetable.'

'No, hall times are in blue.'

She smiled. 'So what colour is music?'

'It hasn't got a colour.'

'Really? How about yellow? That's cheerful.'

'Yellow is for art and craft lessons.'

She held up the hem of her maxi dress and her eyes twinkled. 'How about this? Mint green.'

'Green is for the school field.'

She nodded. 'Yes, I suppose it would be.'

'Sorry,' I said.

'Only teasing, Jack.'

'If there's anything you need, don't be afraid to ask.'

'I won't, Jack. I'm not shy.' She stood up and began to collect her music.

I watched her stride confidently to her first lesson. There was something fascinating about this woman.

At nine o'clock I rang the school bell and the villagers of Newbridge knew that another school year had begun.

After I had completed the registers, the children in my

class, the top juniors who would be eleven during the school year, were full of news. 'We were queuing f'water, sir, from a tap in t'street,' said Gary Cockroft. 'Every mornin' ah were there wi' a bucket.'

It had been the worst drought in the UK since the 1720s and measures had been introduced to distribute precious drinking water. During the heatwave a record temperature of 35.9 degrees had been recorded in Cheltenham.

'Ah saw Big Ben on t'news, sir,' said Stacey Swithenbank. 'It's damaged.'

'Won't be running f'nine months,' added her sister for good measure, and so it went on.

It was a busy morning, making sure everyone had a reading book, exercise books, a dictionary and a Berol pen along with a tin of Lakeland coloured pencils. We began a writing exercise with mixed results as few had picked up a pen during the past six weeks. Either way, it was a positive start and I emphasized that they must set an example to the younger ones and be on their best behaviour. I had found it was always best to start with high expectations.

Monitor jobs were organized and Susan Verity was allocated the job of bell-ringer. When she rang it after morning assembly the children filed out into the playground while the staff gathered in the staff-room.

Audrey had been busy and a neat row of coffee cups greeted us. Soon there was the usual hum of conversation. The two sports teachers, twenty-seven-year-old Katy Bell, a county-standard netball player, and twenty-four-year-old Tom Deighton, a keen footballer and a fast bowler for the Newbridge 1st XI, were checking out a sports-equipment catalogue.

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Celestine Jolley, our timid reception class teacher, was deep in conversation with Audrey about the film stars Ali MacGraw and Steve McQueen, now a married couple.

‘I hope she’s happy with him,’ said Celestine. ‘I’ve heard he wants a wife who will cook and clean for him.’

‘Well, I’d volunteer,’ said Audrey.

Celestine looked aghast. ‘But what about equality of the sexes?’

Audrey smiled. ‘Yes, Celestine . . . but we’re talking about *Steve McQueen* here.’

They shared a secret smile before Audrey picked up an old copy of *Woman* magazine from the pile on the bookshelf and they were soon engrossed in the recipe page.

Meanwhile, Diane Hardisty, who taught one of the third-year junior classes, was telling Izzy that she thought the recent Notting Hill Carnival ought to be banned as it had ended in violence.

‘My boyfriend was there,’ said Izzy. ‘He said he loved it.’

Suddenly the looming presence of Rhonda Williams was before me. The head of the infant department was not a woman to be crossed. Stocky, with short black hair and a severe fringe, she often had the demeanour of a bull terrier. ‘I need to make some changes to the timetable, Jack,’ she said. ‘Hope you don’t mind.’ Rhonda was always polite but firm. ‘Nothing too dramatic, just making sure the infant classes could team up occasionally for one of the new *Music and Movement* radio broadcasts.’

I had learned from past experience not to be confrontational with her. ‘That’s fine, Rhonda,’ I said quietly. ‘Let’s have a chat at lunchtime and see what we can do.’

Suitably placated, she wandered off to discuss with

Celestine and Audrey the recipe for a strawberry walnut gateau.

School lunches were free for staff who sat with the children so, shortly after twelve o'clock, I found myself on the same table as Celestine and a group of lively children.

As usual the dinner lady, Mrs Rita Starkey, patrolled the tables. It was said she had a bark like a farmyard dog and a stare that could stop a clock at ten paces. Although she had the persona of a stormtrooper in a pink pinny, Mrs Starkey was highly regarded in spite of her charisma bypass. Jim tolerated her because she kept order.

'GARY COCKROFT,' she yelled and silence descended. 'There's no puddin' if y'don't finish yer dinner.'

'Why, Miss?'

'Cause ah said so.' Mrs Starkey always had an answer for everything.

'But ah don't like carrots, Miss.'

Mrs Starkey was going red in the face. 'Carrots mek y'see in t'dark.' She regularly dispensed pearls of wisdom amid her admonishments.

Gary looked perplexed.

'Don't make that face. If t'wind changes, you'll stay like that.'

'What?'

'Don't say *what*. Say pardon.'

'Sorry, Miss.'

'An' put that knife down, you'll 'ave someone's eye out.'

Mrs Starkey's dicta ruled our dining room and we all breathed a sigh of relief when she moved to cast a steely gaze over another table.

Meanwhile, Celestine held up a small plastic pencil case and gave it to seven-year-old Henry Dewhurst. 'This must be yours, Henry. It's got your name on it.'

'Cor, thanks, Miss, it were a present for m'birthday. Ah lost it in assembly.'

'Well, keep it safe from now on.'

'Yes, Miss.'

It was later during our meal of spam fritters, chips and peas followed by jam roly-poly pudding and custard that Tony Entwhistle suddenly spoke up. 'Ah think you're a good looker, Miss.'

Celestine's cheeks flushed. 'Oh, Tony, that's very kind.'

'You're like my mum, Miss. She's a good looker as well.'

'Well, thank you, Tony,' said Celestine, somewhat surprised but secretly pleased.

'Yes, Miss, 'cause when ah lose m'football socks she can allus find 'em.'

The penny dropped. 'Ah, I see,' said a slightly deflated Celestine.

By afternoon break it was clear my timetable was going down like a lead balloon. Tristan Lampwick, a rather presumptuous twenty-two-year-old literary buff in his probationary year, said, 'Never mind, Jack. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."'

The fearsome Rhonda was hovering and Tristan stepped back hurriedly. 'It's more a tale of two *departments*,' said Rhonda curtly, 'rather than a tale of two *cities*.'

Across the room I saw Izzy looking at me with a sympathetic smile.

At the end of school ten-year-old Jeremy Prendergast, a quiet and studious boy, came up to me. 'Thank you for a good day, Mr Sheffield.'

'That's very thoughtful of you, Jeremy,' I said. He was clutching his new reading book, *Swallows and Amazons*, the Arthur Ransome classic. 'Definitely one to enjoy. It's a wonderful story.'

He gave a shy smile. 'I read every night in bed, sir. It's like having a friend.'

I knew how he felt.

Dawn Whitehead and Susan Verity were now firm friends. 'I'm going to Susan's house to watch *Go with Noakes*,' said Dawn enthusiastically.

'He's our favourite,' added Susan.

Apparently John Noakes of *Blue Peter* fame was racing on a yacht in the Channel Islands.

'Well, enjoy it, girls, and see you tomorrow.'

'Bye, sir,' they chorused. At that moment they were completely unaware their friendship would continue for the rest of their lives. Such are the bonds that are formed during school days.

When all the children had left I began to tidy my classroom. Suddenly Audrey popped her head around the door. 'Message for you, Jack.'

'Oh, yes?'

'A teacher rang.' She checked her spiral-bound notepad. 'A Miss Clayton . . . says she's booked into the Primary Curriculum course in the Teachers' Centre.'

'Thanks, Audrey.'

I smiled.

Once my classroom was sorted, I walked across the hall to the stock cupboard and saw Izzy in conversation with our Chair of Governors, the Revd Grayson Hubbleby. I wandered over to join them. A kindly fifty-eight-year-old, if a little old-fashioned, Grayson was a regular visitor to school. He was the vicar of St Luke's Church in Newbridge and ran the local youth club with Audrey. A quirky academic, he was also a Latin aficionado.

'I always call in to meet new members of staff,' he said. 'It's important you settle in well.'

'Everyone has been very helpful,' said Izzy.

'Ah . . . "*in die enim bona venimus*"', he said with a smile.

'Yes,' said Izzy with a knowing look. 'We've both come on a good day. I did Latin at school.'

'Really, well . . . good for you,' said our surprised vicar.

Grayson looked up at me. 'Just welcoming our new music teacher, Jack. Another Latin scholar.'

'Yes, Ms Kowalski has many talents.'

Izzy studied me for a moment, a whimsical smile on her lips.

'I've seen your new timetable, Jack, and I noticed Ms Kowalski is in for three days. It's important we make the most of her obvious expertise.'

Izzy glanced at me again. 'Fortunately Jack has sorted all that for me.'

I owe you one, I thought.

The rather stilted conversation ebbed and flowed. Izzy told Grayson that she had trained at the City of Birmingham College in Edgbaston and now worked in three schools in the area as a peripatetic music teacher. 'I'm hoping to start up a school choir here in Newbridge,' she said.

‘That should be wonderful and perhaps we could hear them in church at Christmas.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Izzy cautiously.

Grayson glanced up at the hall clock. ‘Well, must go to prepare for my confirmation class. Pleased to have met you, Ms Kowalski. *Valete, amici mei.*’

‘And farewell to you as well,’ said Izzy without a hint of hesitation.

They shook hands and Grayson wandered off to talk to Jim in the head’s office.

‘Impressive,’ I said. ‘You handled him well.’

‘Thanks, Jack. It was good of him to take time to call in, even if the Latin wasn’t really necessary.’

Izzy looked at the clock. It was twenty minutes to five. ‘I’m not being collected until five o’clock.’

‘There’s time for a coffee if you like,’ I suggested.

She smiled. ‘I’d like that.’

‘In that case, *carpe diem* . . . and don’t ask. That’s about my sum total of Latin apart from my school motto.’

‘And what was that?’

‘*Virtutem petamus*. We seek virtue.’

She grinned. ‘How disappointing.’

The staff-room was empty. I guessed everyone was busy in their classrooms.

‘What do you think of Newbridge?’ I asked as we settled facing each other.

She sipped her coffee thoughtfully. ‘Really good. Nice atmosphere. Lots of potential for music.’ Then she studied me for a moment. ‘What about you? Are *you* happy here?’

Her direct questioning reminded me of someone else.

‘It’s a terrific school, mainly thanks to Jim. He selects

his staff very carefully to produce a team with many talents.'

'And what are *your* talents, Jack?'

'I just enjoy teaching. It's a pleasure for me to come to work. I guess English is my forte but I try to be a decent all-rounder.' I glanced at the clock. 'Who's picking you up?'

'Steve, my . . . boyfriend.'

'*Boyfriend?*'

'I'm not sure it will last.'

There was a pause while the old clock on the wall with its Roman numerals ticked round towards five.

'Sorry about that, Izzy,' I said quietly.

'I'm not,' she said in a determined voice and stood up. 'He's a bit crazy. Keeps saying he's into *sex, drugs and rock and roll*.'

I stood to face her. 'And I'm guessing that's not your scene.'

She gave me a mischievous look. 'That's right . . . I'm not into drugs.' She walked away with a confident step. 'Goodnight, Jack. See you tomorrow.'

I stared after her, captivated by this intriguing woman.

It was close to six o'clock and Jim and I were in the staff-room making a few final amendments to the timetable. The sticky labels were moved around until all the various requests had been accommodated.

'That should keep Rhonda happy,' said Jim as he stood back and took in the kaleidoscope of colour. 'I see art and craft is orange now.' Jim was always perceptive.

'Yes, it made sense.'