**# 22 Black & White Shoes**

Madison came away from university with honours and distinctions, so was welcomed into her father’s business with open arms but refused the directorship that she was offered, insisting instead, on learning the business from the ground up.

Eighteen months later, having worked in every department at Carmichael Industries, Madison was invited to present her detailed analysis and recommendations, at the next board meeting.

Two days before the gathering at company headquarters, Madi distributed her thirty-page report to all ten directors. Her analysis started with a scathing attack on them for their failings and mistakes. No stone was left unturned; everyone was targeted including her father.

He was furious and tried to make contact but Madison had pre-empted his reaction and booked herself into a small country hotel, so was unavailable for comment.

At ten o’clock on the due date, Madi walked confidently into the company's headquarters. As the oak boardroom doors closed behind her, heated exchanges broke out, fuelling a tense atmosphere as passions intensified.

Her father as chairman struggled to quell the shouting, as several members wanted her thrown out and barred from the company's premises.

Madison stood silently looking at her irate accusers for a few moments, before confidently taking control with her opening gambit.

“Gentlemen, you have a traitor in your midst—” she declared, then paused for effect, creating an eerie silence that had an air of anticipation, before she continued.

“Mr Chairman, to your company's detriment, this board member is helping your biggest competitor.” She held up a hand to stop her father’s interruption, before pointing directly at a man sat opposite her.

“Mr Feira has been conspiring with Shelby Industries for several years,” she added aggressively.

Out of all the people around that large table, Feira had been sitting relaxed with his legs crossed; casually dusting the expensive black and white shoes he was renowned for wearing.

But when the accusing finger pointed at him, his round chubby face turned almost purple with rage. He leapt out of his seat and spluttered a ferocious denial, which Madison cut short.

“Sit down— you are both a liar and a cheat,” she barked.

Feira dropped back into his seat, in wide-eyed astonishment, as his accuser continued.

“I have more than enough evidence against you. In fact, as of today, our company lawyers are in contact with the serious fraud office.” She paused, leaned across the table towards Feira and lowered her voice.

“I’d advise you to leave the building immediately. If I have my way, Carmichael Industries will be suing you for a great deal of money,” she stated, her gaze fixed on his bloodshot eyes.

In the tense expectant silence, all eyes were fixed on the accused, who slowly rose from his chair. He cleared his throat as though preparing to respond but suddenly turned and hastily walked towards the door.

In that charged atmosphere, all that could be heard was the faint squeak of his black and white shoes, seconds before the door slammed shut behind him.

For a few moments, remaining board members looked at one another in astonishment but chairman voice broke the spell.

“Madison, will you kindly explain?” he demanded.

Over the next twenty minutes, Madi set out what she’d unearthed during her investigations. How Feira’s actions had been undermining their company in favour of Shelby Industries by passing on sensitive technical information and making contract disclosures. Even raw materials paid for by Carmichael Industries had been diverted to their rival.

“How on earth is that possible?” a gaunt stick-like man at the far end snapped.

Madison suppressed a smile.

The questioner had long strands of thinning hair plastered like stark tramlines from one side of his balding head to the other. Instead of hiding his problem, it drew more attention to it.

“Simple,” she replied. “When you have corrupt managers, a signature on an invoice validates a product we haven’t received.”

“I don’t really understand,” was his quick retort.

“And there sir, lies the problem. You have lost control of your company,” Madi emphasized.

There were raised voices from a few around that table and almost all denounced her information.

“Order, order, please,” the chairman shouted.

As noise levels decreased, Madison hit them again. “You are losing millions and you don’t even know it,” she said with just enough contempt in her voice.

This was followed by more animated arguing but Madi raised her voice above them all.

“And, gentlemen, I can prove everything.”

That remark deflated even her most hostile opponent, the room fell deathly silent as all eyes glared in her direction.

Her presentation that followed demonstrated where the company was going wrong, what practices needed to be scrapped or modified, and the benefits this would achieve. This brought raised eyebrows and looks of astonishment from most.

“You're saying we have people working for us who earn more dishonestly by defrauding our company than we pay them in salary?” Someone asked.

“Yes— and several have worked here for years,” Madi replied.

This revelation brought more head shaking from the older directors. One stood and rapped his knuckles on the highly polished table.

“This is deplorable— I call for a no-confidence vote against the chairman.”

Madison glanced quickly at her father.

Noticing the gleam in his daughter’s eyes stopped his response, as she turned to address his attacker.

“Mr. Martinez. I believe you’re a board member of Amazon Timber— a company that supplies us with shipping pallets.”

He shuffled uneasily on his feet. “This is a well-known fact, young lady,” he replied in a superior tone.

“Amazon’s operations manager is in cahoots with one of our staff. I estimate we are being overcharged by two hundred thousand dollars a year for goods we do not receive,” she stated flatly.

“Well— that has nothing to do with me, madam,” he stammered as he sat down abruptly.

“Not directly— but as a director, you are ultimately responsible,” she paused and looked around at the others.

“This is one of many failings that have grown from petty pilfering to major fraud that needs addressing now. You cannot, and should not, point a finger at one person around this table and hope to diminish your responsibility— everyone here is responsible and must act accordingly.”

After half an hour’s general discussion, Madison disclosed an amazing plan that would take some time to complete but would ultimately allow them to mount a successful, albeit hostile takeover of Shelby Industries.

This brought growls of disapproval from three older members.

“Sharp practices,” said one.

“Not proper and above board,” another countered.

The third nodded in approval. “Quite so, quite so,” was his only input.

Madison ignored them, choosing instead to explain her vision for the company while standing behind Feira’s vacant chair.

As all of this was taking place, the chairman was reappraising his daughter. After his initial outrage over her report, he was viewing his maturing offspring in a completely different light.

“Gentlemen,” Madi concluded. “I want to see our company the strongest, most successful in the world and I believe this is possible with the correct business plan in place.”

Carmichael Industries chairman sat silently looking at his fellow directors for several seconds before he spoke.

“In light of today’s disclosures, I’m sure we all need to take stock but it’s blatantly obvious we need to act sooner, rather than later.”

“Our company does need revitalizing, competition is growing all around us and some of our practices could well be out of date.” His comments brought disapproving head shaking from the old guard and concentrated thought on the faces of others.

“I suggest we adjourn for coffee. This will give everyone time to consider what has been said,” he paused and looked at his watch. “We’ll reconvene at eleven-thirty. At that juncture, you may ask my daughter whatever questions you feel are relevant.” With that, he tapped the table with a small gavel, before getting to his feet.

§

Madison’s interrogation— and to her, that’s what it felt like— started moments after their break and lasted almost an hour before her father brought proceedings to a halt.

“As you are all aware, Mr Salvador our CEO,” the chairman paused and gestured to a man two seats to his left, “is due to retire at the end of this year. We have spoken over coffee and he has agreed to my proposals if the board approves,” he paused again and looked around at his fellow directors.

“My motion is as follows: as of today Mr Salvador will resign his post as CEO, but will stay on as an adviser. Remuneration and bonuses will continue to be paid in full. Secondly, my daughter will be offered the position of CEO and will take a seat on the board.”

A stony silence hung awkwardly for several seconds.

“Those in favour— please indicate?” He asked.

Several seconds ticked by.

“Those against?”

The three old guard raised their hands.

“Motion carried,” the chairman announced.

One of the old guard raised a hand as he spoke.

“This is preposterous! We’ll be ridiculed, the company shares will plummet. I warn you, sir, I will have to seriously consider my position with this company.”

Madi’s father nodded thoughtfully before replying.

“Sir— if my daughter agrees to take up our offer, then the ball is in your court.”

Madi turned to her father as he continued.

“Well, Madison, can you accomplish what you’ve set out? And what do you have to say to those who voted against your appointment?”

“With the board’s backing, it can all be accomplished,” she replied confidently, then briefly locked eyes with her doubters. They hadn’t a clue who or what they were against, she thought, then with a forced smile, continued in a conciliatory tone.

“I can’t expect everyone to agree but would hope to be judged on my results.”

That smile, tone and body language, concealed some very underhand aggressive tactics, which would make her father baulk if he got wind of them.

Another issue closer to home could also jeopardize her fanatical desire, to take control of this Industrial Conglomerate

Otto her husband, whom she’d envisaged being of considerable help, because of his valuable political connections, had become a liability.

His fiery temper and violent outbursts had multiplied dramatically, due to his excessive drinking and drug use.

A week ago he’d totally destroyed an inanimate object that refused to work correctly, making her feel extremely vulnerable.

After he’d calmed down, she’d suggested he should seek advice at a clinic in Switzerland but this had brought forth a more violent outpouring of rage. So much so, she’d locked herself away in a spare room.

At breakfast the following morning, he’d been so apologetic, promising he’d stay well clear of drink and would seek advice but deep down she knew his words and shallow efforts were all for show.

§

Five kilometres from the city, huge prison gates opened briefly. An emaciated man walked unsteadily into the bright sunshine and freedom.

“Don’t make any long-term plans, you prick,” a guard jeered, then laughed because the battered suitcase the old man was carrying had burst open, releasing a few threadbare clothes and a pair of shabby black and white shoes.

Feira had been paroled. Sentence slashed because he was dying. Cancer they’d said. A few months at best, if he was lucky.

He’d served two years of a ten-year stretch, brought about by a woman he’d cursed every night since those gates had cut him off from the outside world.

That raw infested wound in his mind had been inflamed further because the sadistic bitch had systematically stripped him and his family of everything they owned.

So before succumbing to the repulsive fungus that was ravenously eating him alive, he was determined to fulfil an oath he’d taken the day he was thrown into that filthy hell hole.

One way or another, he’d kill Madison Carmichael for humiliating him, then for destroying his life and everything he’d built.

§

Two days out of prison, Feira shuffled into a dimly lit bar filled with the stench of stale tobacco and liquor.

A solitary man with a pockmarked face and long black greasy hair sat at the bar. His emotionless dark eyes glared at the new arrival via a cracked bar mirror.

Picking up his shot glass, he threw its contents to the back of his throat before turning.

“You’re fucking late,” he spat. “I said seven, not ten past.” He didn’t wait for a reply. “You got the money?”

Feira handed over an envelope containing a thousand American dollars, every penny he had. The man quickly scanned its contents before adding, “Make sure you’ve got the rest on completion.”

Feira didn’t have it but was prepared to take the consequences - the thought of revenge was all that kept him alive. He nervously cleared his throat and looked into the killer's eyes. “Remember, I have to be there when it happens. I have a score to settle.”

The man opposite sneered for several seconds before his lips curled into a patronising smirk. “Did the Carmichael woman screw you good, old man?” He sniggered.

§

As soon as Madison got into the car, Otto started arguing.

In the short time it took to drive into the country, he was ranting at the top of his voice as he attempted to punch her, causing their vehicle to swerve violently across the road.

To get away from his fists, Madison fought her way into the back seat, as her attacker continued to scream abuse. So both were unaware of a speeding truck that had pulled alongside them.

A moment later it slammed into their vehicle, forcing it off the road.

Out of control the car plunged down an embankment, propelled into a series of violent somersaults. When the battered remains finally came to rest, it was upside down on a narrow gravel track surrounded by huge amounts of swirling dust and steam.

Amazingly Otto was only cut in a few places but was swearing at the top of his voice because he was unable to free himself from the wreckage, due to his foot being trapped between brake pedal and bulkhead.

Madison lay face down on the gravel track, with her legs still stuck inside the vehicle. She knew she’d broken her wrist because a small bone was sticking through the skin. A more serious problem lay within; even in her dazed state, Madi realized she’d either broken her back or pelvis. If she tried to move, the pain was unbearable.

It seemed only a few moments had passed before her spirits lifted because she noticed someone walking hurriedly towards her. As the gap closed between them, she realized it was an elderly man carrying a red container but oddly he kept looking over his shoulder the way he’d come.

His anxiety was due to a small packet containing carefully cut newspaper the size of dollar bills, which he’d just handed over. To try and delay the deadly consequence of his actions, he’d tightly wrapped the fake money several times, hoping this would buy him time.

Madison wouldn’t have recognized Feira but for the combination of his shoes and the glint of a gold tooth as he leered down at her. This ignited a terrifying realisation that saturated her damaged body with something colder than ice.

She pleaded as he emptied the can over her and the car.

Then begged as the flames raced towards her.

For a few terrifying seconds, all Madison could hear above her own agonizing screams was Otto’s hysterical laughter.

But just as the flames and blackness engulfed her, she heard a loud gunshot.

She didn’t feel the warm blood that splattered her face or see the smiling old man who now lay beside her.

**# 23 When The Time’s Right**

There were a few people in the coffee shop when Helen arrived. Leg weary shoppers with multitudes of coloured carrier bags stuffed under small tables supporting tall precarious cups of coffee.

Helen had skipped lunch because she was apprehensive about her pending rendezvous, but was almost tempted by the display of delicious looking buns. Their crinkly paper corsets supported large swollen tops, decorated with half submerged fruits that looked irresistible.

She glanced at her coffee’s smiling face and half-wondered how, but her mind was still processing ‘*Irresistible*’, or in her case, her total lack of ‘*Irresistibility’.*

In two days she’d be thirty-one and had been alone for nine months, dumped, divorced, after fourteen years two months and eighteen days.

Irritatingly, although she could figure the hours and minutes since it happened, that was erased by the memory of her late father’s voice filtering through from her subconscious.

His outburst had lasted several minutes. He’d paced their kitchen floor, expressing himself with his limited vocabulary, fleshed out with a large array of repeated expletives.

‘You’re both too bloody young to get married,’ he’d shouted. ‘What the hell are you thinking, girl? And why throw yourself away on a grease-monkey like him— he’s got fuck all.’

These eloquent pearls were thrown hard when she and Gill had broken the news.

Then on hearing her father's displeasure and seeing the expression on her mother's face, they had jointly decided, without a word passing between them, not to mention she was two months late.

Helen played with her coffee, pulling the foam smile into a melancholy grimace, which was more in keeping with her thoughts.

Thinking back on her unplanned pregnancy, Helen couldn’t understand why she’d gone through with the marriage. She liked Gill well enough, they’d obviously done the sex thing a couple of times— but to be truthful, she wouldn’t have minded if he hadn’t wanted to repeat the process.

In fact, she still couldn’t understand why there was such a fuss about it. Of course, she’d read books about passionate affairs, filled with desire and longing.

Oh, yes, she’d had plenty of longing, thank you very much.

When her husband did want to get his leg over, she was engulfed with it— longing for him to finish his business. Thankfully it was over quickly, he’d then roll off with his usual grunts and groans and instantly fall asleep.

Helen glanced at the couples dotted around the shop. Most weren’t talking— well, the female couples were having a right old chinwag but the others— husbands, wives— were glued to their smartphones.

Sitting back in her chair she sighed inwardly. Her marriage had ended, he’d found another woman.

‘God help her,’ she thought.

After the initial shock and upheaval had worn off, there was the realisation she didn’t love him. Not the way it’s portrayed in books or films. And she’d definitely never experienced encounters like the women at work described.

*‘Oh! The more his hands explored, the more I wanted to rip his clothes off. Then when we kissed, me legs turned to jelly.’*

Helen smiled to herself. Her legs had done that years ago when the nurse told her she was pregnant with little Jimmy.

Sadly Gill had never ignited those emotions. He was heavily involved with his work and hobbies, so that must have been fulfilling enough or maybe he just didn’t know any different. When they’d started courting he was seventeen, she’d just turned sixteen and knew nothing about life or sex. So their intimate exploring was more an awkward fumbling, carried out in silence.

But now sat in this posh coffee shop, she was waiting for a man.

A man she didn’t really know.

Mulling that over, she was edging towards the notion— she’d rather leave and go for a walk in the park— *alone*.

They’d arranged to meet at four, so there was still time to escape.

She had visions of them looking at one another after the polite pleasantries, unable to think of anything interesting or non-interesting to say— or she’d make herself look stupid, by asking the same question twice.

Standing to make her escape, Helen quickly glanced at the chair to see if she’d left anything.

It had to be for the best, she was so out of practice with it all.

But when she turned to leave, he was stood there with a cute smile on his face.

“Good afternoon, Helen. We did say four o’clock, didn’t we?” He asked glancing at her empty cup.

“Oh! You’re here.” She let out a nervous laugh. “Yes, it was four. I arrived a little early because—” she broke off and filled the gap with another titter.

“Were you just about to leave?” he asked pointedly.

“Oh! No, no— I was going to move— this chair isn’t that comfortable.”

He smiled warmly but with his penetrating eyes on her, she felt as though he was reading her mind.

“I see you’ve finished your coffee. Would you like another— or shall we take a walk in the park?”

She looked quizzically— *was*he reading her mind?

§

Helen had met Mark at a party months ago. She’d guessed he was in his late forties, early fifties but had a brighter younger personality.

He’d arrived with a gorgeous woman— No— she was a child, much, much, younger than him.

Probable nineteen or twenty but looked mature enough to be thirty, if you understand my meaning?

To be truthful, the poor girl was probably the most looked at person in the room. Not blatant staring I have to stress. More glimpses when the opportunity arose, which added up to a good old stare in the end.

Her lean shapely body was only surpassed by everything else about her. Whatever men were looking for, she had it in abundance— even her eyes said it.

The beautiful bitch made Helen hold her stomach in all evening.

The following morning her muscles felt raw, making her wonder if she should start doing some activity before everything sagged.

That ominous thought lived with her for a couple of days until her muscles forgot.

Now stood in the coffee shop, they were tense again, because this lean attractive man was looking at her.

Mark was of medium build with dark greying curly hair. His slightly rugged facial features were in keeping with his outlook on life. After their brief light-hearted conversation at the party, it appeared he wasn’t weighed down by the normal things of life, like most men his age. Mind you he’d been married twice and had children, so there was plenty of baggage.

She’d gleaned this titbit of information from a friend of a friend, who worked in his office.

Walking home alone from the party, her encounter with Mark preoccupied her mind.

He must have had troubles and worries like everyone else, she reasoned, but he seemed to be able to leave them behind and come out to have a good time. When he was talking or listening to what she was saying, his sparkly blue eyes delved into hers, which she found very charming.

His companion, Miss Plentiful, had been accosted on her way back from the bathroom by three men who were busy entertaining her, while Mark retrieved more drinks at the makeshift bar. It was here he’d introduced himself and they’d struck up a conversation.

As their short encounter ended, Helen realized she’d opened up to him more than any other man. He’d known the right questions and seemed genuinely interested in her responses. Oddly to her, it was as if they were the only people in the room and when he’d left her, she had felt lonely and jealous of the other woman.

Their second meeting had happened a week ago and was shorter than their first.

She’d been on her way to a pasta night at a friend’s and had popped into the off-license, when Mark rushed in. He’d quickly grabbed a bottle, said to the cashier he was doubled parked, then noticed her.

Their limited conversation was like rapid fire.

‘Hello, Helen. How are you? Great to see you again. Would you like to meet for drinks next week?’

All she’d managed was, ‘Hi. I’m good, thank you. You too. Yes, that would great.’

He’d scribbled her number on the wine bottle label and disappeared as quickly as he’d arrived.

§

The afternoon sun was closing in on the horizon, sending long shadows creeping across the park’s manicured lawns, as the strolling couple approached a wooden bench.

Helen sat and took several controlled breaths to relax her confusion— perplexing thoughts that had been generated minutes earlier.

They’d been walking along the narrow path, as a number of probing questions had bunched in her mind.

She’d casually asked Mark about Miss Plentiful, the young woman he’d taken to the party. He’d replied in a very relaxed manner.

“We only went out a couple of times.”

“But she seemed to have all the right bits in all the right places,” Helen replied with a nervous laugh.

He’d smiled impishly. “Yes, she did, didn’t she? But sometimes, Helen, everything is on the surface and nothing beneath.”

“Do you mean she was shallow?”

“Oh no, on the contrary, the lady in question was far from that,” he responded.

They’d walked on in thoughtful silence before Mark continued.

“Paula is not like you Helen. She doesn’t have someone hiding inside who wants to come out and enjoy life.”

This remark had frozen her in mid-stride, as she spun round to face him.

“What?” she’d spluttered. But his expression was inquisitive and his kind penetrating eyes never left hers.

“Does it unnerve you that I’m so— frank or forward?” he’d asked.

Helen glared at him for several seconds.

How had he concluded she’d a repressed person stowed away? What gave him the right to make that sort of idiotic assumption?

“Don’t you think I enjoy life?” she’d asked indignantly.

“Helen— you’re misinterpreting what I said. I’m sure you do enjoy life. But I sense part of you wants more and I think you’d like to give more too.”

“How do you figure that after only forty-five minutes of conversation?” she’d stammered.

His laugh was light and good-natured, as was his crooked grin that made her smile. Then he’d taken her hand and indicated to the park bench, where they’d sat in silence for a few moments.

“This repressed inner lady was noticed at the party and she is very disappointed in you,” he said in a sweet mocking way.

Even though they were still holding hands, Helen suddenly felt vulnerable.

Was he reading her mind? He’d said repressed— but he was right.

She realised she’d missed out on a great deal that often fascinated her imagination. Things she wouldn’t have the courage to try— or would she?

Oddly holding his hand made her inquisitive and a little confident— which was very confusing, because that vulnerability thing was floating around.

Mark smiled warmly and squeezed her hand, making her glance down at their interwoven fingers.

These weren’t like Gill’s. They were soft and slender without cuts and dirty nails— hands that could massage your shoulders and neck.

That sudden thought made her release her hand, which changed his expression to one of concern.

“Mark,” she said, “if I ask you a rather intimate question, would you answer it honestly?”

His eyes brightened, a lopsided grin curled his lips, making her stomach grumble for some reason.

“Sure, but you have to reciprocate,” he said softly.

She made a face. “Ok! But be gentle with me, please.”

Over the next twenty minutes, she laughed until her stomach hurt. Blushed so much her face glowed. Her body temperature jumped and fell, as cold shivers darted up and down her spine.

Then the question she was determined not to ask suddenly came out of her mouth.

“What was it like to make love to ‘Miss Plentiful’? Amazing I would expect.”

Mark was thoughtful for a moment.

“Helen, I never discuss what happens in my relationships with anyone.” He paused for a moment, his eyes looking deep into hers. “But to help the inner you move forward, I will this time.”

That response sent trepidation scorching through every fiber of her nervous system.

“Paula was a warm and lovable person but she didn’t, or couldn’t, fulfil my needs. Intermittently she held back, as though not wanting to let go.”

Helen took a shallow breath and held it. Her teeth gripped her bottom lip as the anticipation level raised another notch.

“It could have been me. The difference in ages or lack of symmetry. It was as though she was trying to hide or suppress her pleasure. Afraid to enjoy and share.”

Over the next few seconds, Helen slowly released the air from her lungs, hoping that would stop her stomach from rumbling, as Mark continued.

“But I came in contact with someone many months ago. She told me she’d never experienced those deep feelings, even though she’d been married and had a family.” He paused and took her hand in his. “We eventually ended up having the most amazing relationship that was so fulfilling for both of us, each time we made love it took our breath away.”

Several seconds slipped by in silence. Then Helen spoke almost in a whisper.

“I’ve read about feelings like that and how amazing they are but sadly— I’ve never experienced anything remotely like it.”

“I know,” he replied softly.

Helen jumped to her feet almost as a reflex and glared down at him.

Was he toying with her? Making fun of her lack of experience? But how could he know?

She was about to demand an explanation when he stood and took her hands in his.

“Helen, that story wasn’t totally truthful— it was actually a dream.”

“Oh! I see— one of your male fantasies,” she responded sarcastically, then gave a nervous laugh and tried to free her hands.

Mark gently pulled her closer.

“Helen— the dream was about *you*,” he said softly.

“That’s impossible. We’d never met until the party,” she countered.

“Yes I know— that’s the odd part about it,” he replied with a cute smile that turned her legs to jelly.

**# 24 A Beautiful Garden**

Ishara was sitting at a market stall when a white man stopped to look at the fruit and veg.

He was well built— in his sixties she thought, with blue eyes, greying hair and a large prominent nose.

“Hi, do you speak English?” he asked. She stood, nodded and smiled. “I came top of my class,” she replied confidently, which took him by surprise.

The young woman was attractive, probably in her late thirties, with a slender figure and tall for a local— she stood a head taller than most women he’d seen. Her black hair was pulled up into a sizable bun at the back of her head, so he guessed it was quite long. But her faint western features and dark almond-shaped eyes were what captivated him. This woman didn’t need makeup to enhance her looks, her mixed blood parentage made her very attractive indeed.

Realizing he was staring, he tried to disguise it with a question. “What is the name of this fruit, please?” He already knew but her response would give him more time to gaze.

“This is Tarap, one of my favourites. It's very popular with wildlife when it becomes overripe and falls to the ground.” The stranger gave a wry smile because of her confident response and conviction.

“You speak extremely good English. Did you study abroad?” He asked.

She shook her head. “No, my school teacher was English and helped me a great deal; I also read what books I can find.”

It was mid-afternoon and the market was winding down, so they were able to chat without interruption and she appeared happy and interested to do so. Five minutes later an old stooped gent arrived and spoke to her in their local dialect before handing her some money. After shaking his hand, she turned to the stranger.

“I’ve just been paid for the produce I brought into town. I’m now going to sit over there and have a drink before walking home. You’re very welcome to join me,” she said, then added with a smile.

“It will give me a little time to practise my English.”

“Thank you, I’d enjoy that very much,” he responded, as she held out her hand.

“My name is Ishara. What shall I call you?” Amazingly her hand was soft and smooth but with a strong grip.

“I’m Stanley Welbeck. Friends call me Stan.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Stan,” she responded, then retrieved a small wooden shoebox from under the stall, before leading the way out of the market. As they crossed the road, she noticed Stan was wearing boots. “Do you have a motorbike?” He pointed in the direction they were walking to a big bike parked outside a cafe. She smiled and nodded in appreciation, then opened the shoebox and released a black and white dappled pigeon. They watched it circle over the rooftops before it disappeared.

“They do like to be free,” Ishara whispered, then sat in the shade of the cafe’s tarpaulin overhang.

To Stan’s surprise, the man sat at the next table gave Ishara a withering look before scurrying off, leaving behind his half-eaten meal.

“Was the bird a pet?” Stan asked but his question drew no response.

“Where are you going to next?” Ishara asked.

He studied her for a moment because something felt odd, then brushed the thought off as he retrieved a gadget from his pocket. “There are two trails I’d like to ride. One starts just outside Putagan village, the other is on the other side of this range.”

“I live close to that village, maybe I can help.”

He moved his chair closer and indicated the route on his GPS.

“Oh, that's where I live next to the river, you’ll be able to cross there but you’ll get no further,” she advised.

“I was told this trail joins a tarmac road about thirty kilometres after a second river crossing.”

“It did before the earthquakes four years ago. There were so many landslides and this trail ends close to my home now. Nobody else lives up there, so it hasn’t been repaired. It's the same from the other direction,” Ishara explained.

“You live there with your family?”

“Well sort of,” she uttered with a cheeky smile, before adding, “There’s about twenty of us.”

“Gosh, that must be a bit of a crush, if you all live in the same house?”

Her giggle was endearing and her demure look attractive.

“It's not as bad as it sounds.”

“How far to your home from here?”

“The bus takes me so far, then I have a fifteen minute walk.”

“Well, if you’d like a ride, I’d be happy to take you home. Maybe I can take a few photos by the river.”

Her eyes sparkled so brilliantly, he knew the response before she opened her mouth.

“Your bike looks very expensive and it looks like it could go anywhere. I don't think I’ve ever seen such big tires.”

“I do like getting out and experiencing the wilder parts,” he replied with a grin. She smiled coyly and nodded.

“Are you from the UK?” He nodded and finished his drink. “Do you stay here long, Stan?”

“I’ve got another few days before riding back to Kuching, then I’ll ship me and my bike back to England.”

“Do you have family over there?”

“No, I couldn’t have children and my wife pulled up stakes and left me several years ago.”

“You live with your girlfriend now?”

He laughed and shook his head. “She left five months ago, so I decided to go travelling.”

“Well, Stan, you might be lucky and find a good girlfriend here.”

§

The bike ride made Stan smile. Ishara moulded her body to his back, her slender legs gripping his as the bike snaked quickly along the twisty lane.

At the river, things were more relaxed. Ishara sat with her feet in the cool water, watching the white man take photos. Some of the still pools reflected the overhanging forest, which seemed to fascinate him.

Then he enticed her to pose and minutes later she was lying on a large rock in the slow-moving waters. After a few shots, she’d dash back to look at the results on his expensive camera, then run back laughing to reposition herself for a better take.

Minutes later they were riding slowly across the river, heading into the forest proper.

The narrow track reached in a hundred meters or so, to where the vegetation had been cleared, creating a large paddock area under a high tree canopy. The wooden stilt house was a low profile structure with several square windows with no glass and a large entrance door that stood open. It sat on ten legs, lifting it three meters off the ground with a wide set of steps climbing to a balcony, where a table and four chair’s sat.

The spacious paddock looked neat and tidy. Even the grass was cropped short, making the huge trees stand out like majestic sentinels. But what took Stan’s breath away wasn’t the tranquillity and serenity but the garden off to the right that contained a magnificent display of huge flowering shrubs, the abundance of which he’d never seen before. The profusion, variety and colour variations were almost too much to take in.

“Gosh I’ve never seen anything quite like this, it's almost too good to be true,” he gasped.

“It's all down to one of my grandmother’s secrets,” Ishara responded, then ran off towards the house, as she shouted, “I’ll go make tea.”

The astonishing floral display triggered another intense photo call but ten minutes later the natural light changed, bringing things to a halt. That's when Stan realised that apart from several dogs, cats, and a few caged animals they were alone. Walking towards the veranda he passed a small bird coop sat on a pole. The wood roofed square box had wire net sides that contained a black and white dappled pigeon. He stood looking at the familiar bird as a grey one arrived and hopped through a one-way entrance, causing a small brass bell to tinkle. A messenger, he wondered.

“Is your family away?” Stan asked as he sipped the hot tea he’d been given.

“No, everyone is here, these are all my family.” Ishara pointed towards the animals.

“You live way out here on your own— alone?”

“How could I be alone with all these?” she said with a laugh, then indicated to the bird coop. “And my auntie’s pigeon has arrived, so she’ll be here in two days to help.”

“What do you need help with?” he asked but Ishara changed the subject. “My great-grandmother was the one who found both secrets. One was how to make this ground grow plants like these,” pointing at a stunning Bougainvillea that had wrapped around the far end of the house.

Stan stood and gazed around the garden. “Well, whatever it is, you could sell it and make a fortune,” he paused for a moment. “If I hadn’t seen this with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed how vibrant and healthy these plants look.”

Ishara studied her guest for a few moments remembering her grandmother's words.

‘Men are only good for one thing— fertilizing.’ That statement would usually start the old woman chuckling, ending with a coughing fit that displaced the betel nut and tobacco that was always in her mouth, as she gasped for breath. But Stan’s next comment brought her mind back to the present. “Yes, the product would make a fortune I’m sure.”

“Why would I need that? I have everything I need here,” she responded.

“You could buy a car or a bike.”

“I walk, it's healthier.”

Stan sat down and smiled. Ishara was right about looking healthy; she was a picture of it. “You mentioned secrets, is there more to this mystical paradise?”

“Oh yes, the other is a special distilled elixir that gives a long healthy life.”

Stan gazed at this beautiful woman. “Do you take this elixir?” She grinned and nodded. “Of course, a little every day.”

“If you don't mind me asking, Ishara— how old are you?” Her smile was broad and radiant. “Well, how old do you think I am?”

He drew air through his teeth. “Gosh, that’s very hard to tell— but I’d guess thirty-something.” Ishara smiled and her eyes glinted, which made him laugh. “Ok! — I’ll go for thirty-eight, no, thirty-seven.”

She grinned and shook her head, her eyes growing larger with enjoyment. “No Stan, but thank you for the compliment. Last month I turned fifty.”

Her response made Stan sit upright in astonishment as the colour drained from his face. “You have to be pulling my leg?”

“No— if I live as long as my great grandmother, then I am halfway through already.”

Stan gawked at her, then realized he was holding his breath. Ishara was attractive, relaxed and appeared unaffected by the wants and needs of the outside world. Immersed in her serene paradise, Stan felt light years away from reality. The tranquillity and difference here were mind-boggling. But in the back of his mind, he was wondering how to wangle samples of both ingredients because he knew someone who could analyse and mimic them. In his mind, he could be close to making a great deal of money.

“Ishara, Is it ok to have a wander around before I leave?”

“Yes, of course, but please don't go close to the old barn over there,” she asked pointing to a wooden structure at the edge of the paddock. “There's an old dog in there getting over an illness and if he’s disturbed, he barks endlessly.”

The soil sample was fairly easy to obtain. He dug down with a sharp stick into the rich loam before stuffing four good handfuls into a plastic container, which he discreetly returned to his camera bag.

Quickly washing his hands in the river, he realized obtaining the elixir would be a more difficult task. With that thought in his mind, he wandered back towards the house and met Ishara coming from the barn’s direction, where she’d been keeping an eye on Stan.

“Just delivered the old dog some food,” she said.

Stan smiled. “Is it very old?”

Ishara nodded. “Yes, and its brain is going too.”

“Have you tried your famous elixir on it?”

“It doesn't work. My grandmother said it only works on humans because of our superior brain.”

Stan gazed at her for several seconds.

“Would you be willing to let me take some to have it analysed?”

Ishara turned on the house steps, her voice resolute. “That is not possible, it's a family secret and it has to stay that way.”

Stan was going to respond but could sense it would only antagonise.

As they sat on the veranda in silence Stan gazed around the paddock, wondering how he could obtain this odd local brew.

But what was at the forefront of his mind was how perfect it was here, how peaceful and relaxing. With that thought in his mind, he looked at the woman opposite.

“I could live here forever, it's beautiful and so far from the crazy rush and tumble of life.”

Ishara’s eyes smiled warmly at him and he thought they glistened with emotion as she spoke.

“Could you really give up your life out there for something like this?” she asked pointing at the garden.

He thought for a moment before nodding. “Yes— to be at one with nature and be here with you would be amazing.”

A moment later, Ishara stood and walked into the house, returning quickly with an old pot-bottle. After removing the cork she carefully poured the orange liquid into a small shot glass before placing it in front of her guest. Stan looked at it for a moment before glancing at Ishara, who spoke in a calm measured tone.

“Are you sure you’d like to say here and be at one with nature— as you put it?”

Stan’s mind was trying to figure out a number of things at the same time. Could he spill some liquid on a tissue to take home or spit fluid into a tiny flask he had in his pocket? Glancing up at the tree canopy, he reasoned it was an hour away from getting dark, so he had to make a move soon but then Ishara’s voice brought his mind back to the drink. “It might make you a little light headed at first but then you’ll feel a beautiful calmness.”

Stan stared at the glass for a moment. What the hell, in for a penny, he thought before taking a sip. It tasted of Tarap and appeared thicker than normal fluid, like an expensive liqueur.

“Wow, it's delicious,” he said before drinking the rest. Ishara quickly gathered up the bottle and glass, before heading for the kitchen.

Stan’s dizziness came quickly, followed by shimmering coloured lights in his peripheral vision. Moments later his slight anxiety was surpassed by a warm comforting feeling that grew from his stomach and brought a euphoric feeling and light-headedness.

When he woke, his first thought was that it was early morning, a split second before panic and terror encapsulated his brain. He couldn’t move anything, his eyes were stuck looking forward in his head. He’d a sensation his hands were resting on his lap but that might have been because his peripheral vision could just see them. He wanted to scream but panic made his mind suddenly blackout.

When he came around, his inert eyes were still staring at the same blank patch of wall but he could hear footsteps coming up the stairs behind him. Moments later an old woman shuffled past ignoring him completely. When she entered the house an argument broke out but the confrontation suddenly switched to English.

“Oh! Did he indeed,” the old woman snorted.

“Yes, it's hidden in his camera bag.”

“Well then— the naughty boy will have to stay. His possessions will bring a good price and his nutrients— will be received gratefully by all.” Then she began chuckling, which turned to a chesty cough but what Sam’s terrified hysterical mind heard next made his bodily functions simultaneously let go, a split second before he blacked out.

“So, Grandma, shall we chop him up and use him to fertilize the new Rambutan trees?”