



TAKE A WAIF

by

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Synopsis

The story revolves around two main characters: Jenny Valance and Alec Farthing. Jenny is a 17-year-old girl who is on the streets, homeless and begging for money, when Alec first meets her. Alec is a single, 38-year-old man who lives alone.

The story opens with Jenny begging money off Alec as she is sitting in a shop doorway and he is hurrying to do his weekly shopping. He realises that she is in genuine need and gives her £10. Jenny is utterly stunned by such an offering, and asks if she can accompany him to the supermarket so as to get more for the money than if she were to go to a café. He is glad of the opportunity to do something so practical to help her, and begins to get an impression of a very young, yet very polite, well-spoken and attractive girl. He feels compelled to pay for her shopping when they get to the checkout, adding almost another £5 to what he has already given her, for which she is tearfully grateful. He then finds himself unable to leave her to just wander off to meet whatever fate awaits her. He invites her to his flat for the evening, suggesting that it would be a warmer place to eat her food than the streets.

At this last offer, Jenny thinks Alec is trying to get a sexual favour in return for his generosity. She goes with him anyway, partly because of the offer of warmth and comfort, and partly because she thinks she owes him something in return for his generosity. His offer turns out to be genuinely altruistic, though, and he offers her a place to sleep – a sofa-bed in his lounge – with no strings attached. She offers to clean his flat the next day by way of repaying his kindness. The next day, he finds she has done exactly what she said, and his flat is spotless. He offers to allow her to stay indefinitely, until she has sorted out her life. He also asks her to be his housekeeper and offers to pay her for cleaning his flat and running errands, to which she agrees.

During their first weekend together, Jenny begins to feel the first stirrings of romantic feelings towards Alec. However, he has already told her that the reason he is not married is that he was never very good at dealing with such relationships, and that he never knows how to read such situations. It seems clear to Jenny that, although he shows her great generosity and consideration, his friendship is purely platonic and he regards their age difference as making anything else out of the question. Jenny has a nightmare in which, in response to a move on her part towards romantic involvement, Alec becomes angry and

Over the following weeks, Alec is increasingly impressed by Jenny's diligence in carrying out the tasks he gives her in her role as housekeeper. Jenny feels ever more happy with the life she is now living, and increasingly grateful to Alec for the lifeline he has given her by allowing her to stay with him. Then, while out shopping for Alec one Monday, Jenny sees a sign advertising a job in one of the shops. She applies for it and is employed as a

shop assistant on a 3-month trial, much to her own surprise. Having a job gives her a much greater sense of self-esteem than she had before, and she now feels as though she is contributing to the household finances rather than being a burden.

We begin to discover that Jenny's feelings for Alec are echoed by the latter. However, he feels bound by the promise he made on the evening when he first invited her to stay with him. He feels certain that if he does or says anything to show his true feelings, she will feel betrayed and will want to leave, and he would regard that as being equivalent to throwing her back out on the streets. He therefore resolves never to let her see his feelings. The feelings that each of them are hiding begin to cause both of them angst. Jenny, in particular, finds it increasingly difficult to suppress the deep love she feels for Alec. She decides that the only way she will be able to resolve the situation will be to find a flat of her own. Her job is going even better than expected, as the shop have decided to end her trial period early and take her on full-time, with a substantial salary increase.

Jenny moves into her own flat, and she and Alec agree to meet up for a meal together the week after her move, so as to keep him up to date with how she is getting on. When they meet, though, both are convinced that this is the last time they will ever see each other, and that they will now continue their separate lives. However, Jenny is finding that living without Alec is even worse a burden to bear than living with him. At the end of their evening together, they return to her flat to show him around and share a last coffee. As the evening draws to an end, she blurts out her feelings for him. She expects the confession to destroy their relationship, as she is sure Alec will feel too awkward about the situation to want to encourage her further. Instead of this, though, he responds by confessing his own feelings for her.

Their relationship now develops from mere friendship into a full-blown love-affair, as they are finally able to express their feelings for each other. However, mindful of the possibility of scandal due to their age difference, they agree to be discreet about things. They find a way of continuing their relationship in a way which avoids other people realising what is going on. Despite their public discretion, though, their relationship is passionate and intense whenever they are alone.

Alec discovers when Jenny's birthday is. Realising it is her 18th, and that afterwards she will be a full adult, he organises a special party for her at a favourite pub-restaurant of theirs. The whole occasion takes Jenny completely by surprise in terms of the number of details Alec has taken the trouble to organise. When they get back to his flat he surprises her still further by proposing marriage, to which she agrees enthusiastically. He persuades her to go with him to meet his sister and her family. The two of them go and spend a week with his sister at her holiday cottage in Weymouth. Jenny becomes instant friends with Alec's sister Teresa, her husband Terry and their two children Simon and Sandra. The two children are close to her in age, so the three of them become especially good friends. Jenny ends up asking Terry to give her away when she gets married, and also asks Sandra to be her bridesmaid.

In the final chapter, Alec and Jenny get married. During the reception, Jenny makes a very eloquent speech in which she publicly thanks Alec for all he did for her and promises him her eternal gratitude and love. The mutual respect the two of them have is evident to everyone.

Back in Alec's flat, the morning after their wedding night finds Jenny worried. It transpires that she stopped taking her contraceptive pills before the wedding, wanting to get pregnant on her wedding night. However, she has only just realised that she never asked Alec's opinion on the matter and that she has therefore taken a huge step without consulting him. Alec surprises her yet again by being enthusiastic about the idea of becoming a father, instead of being annoyed. In fact, he is keen to make sure she gets pregnant. They retire to

bed to continue the attempt, and the story ends with the hint that Jenny has become pregnant as a result.

Chapter One

“Could you spare some change, sir?”

Brett Farthing had been so engrossed in thinking what shopping he needed to get that he hadn't been paying any attention to what was around him as he walked down the street towards the superstore. He jumped slightly at the voice and looked down into the doorway of a menswear shop which he was just passing. It was nearly seven o'clock in the evening and the shop was now closed and in darkness. Even though the clocks had not yet gone back, the evening was already dark and the nearby streetlights only cast a dim, oblique light into the slightly recessed doorway. He would not have noticed the woman sitting there if she hadn't spoken.

He couldn't make out many details in the dim light. All he could tell was that she looked a little bedraggled. Her slightly smudged face was framed by long strands of greasy-looking hair, most of which was hidden by the dark-coloured woollen hat which covered her head. She was wearing a thick parka-style coat and hugging a grubby brown sleeping bag around her legs against the chill of the mid-October evening. She looked quite young, and lacked the phoney dressed-up-to-look-down-and-out appearance of one of the professional beggars who gave such a bad name to those who were genuinely down on their luck. Even her request for money had been polite, quietly-spoken and deferential, in contrast to the more common and abrupt cry of “spare some change?”

“I'm sorry love, I didn't see you there,” he said, stopping to fish in his pocket.

He examined the contents of his hand thoughtfully as he withdrew it, removed a few items from it and then offered what was left to the woman. “Of course I can spare money for someone in genuine need. Here you go: get yourself something good to eat.”

The young woman stared in unconcealed astonishment at the £10 note he was offering. She reached for it gingerly, as though expecting him to snatch it away at the last moment. She looked hard at it and then looked up at him with an expression of sincere gratitude. Tears glistened in her eyes.

“Thank you ever so much,” she said, in a quiet voice which trembled with barely-concealed emotion. “That's really kind of you.”

Her sincerity was quite apparent, and confirmed Brett's impression that this was no professional con-artist. Now that she was looking directly at him, Brett could see that she looked even younger than he'd first thought. She couldn't be out of her teens yet. She was also quite pretty, under the dishevelled appearance, and he found himself wondering how such a well-mannered, good-looking young girl had ended up in such a predicament.

“You're young to be living rough on the streets,” he remarked.

She shrugged. “What's the right age for it, do you think?” She immediately grimaced in self-reproach, hung her head and covered her face with her hands. “Sorry! Sorry! I shouldn't repay your kindness by being rude like that! I'm sorry!”

Brett smiled wryly. "It was a good answer to my question though, wasn't it? You're quite right, there's no such thing as a right age for someone to be living like that."

He stood looking at her for a few moments, wondering what else to say. All of a sudden, even the ten pounds seemed mean. Here was he, hurrying to buy his week's shopping and worrying about forgetting some item which he could easily return to get, and she didn't even have a home to go to. He wished he could do more than just give her some money.

Jenny Valance looked up at the man, wondering why he hadn't just hurried off, like most other people. From where she was sitting, it was difficult to tell how tall he was, and he was lit from behind by the streetlights, making his face difficult to discern. He looked slightly overweight, although that might just be the effect of the thick jacket he was wearing. His voice, and the way he spoke, made him sound like someone with a good education, and something in his manner suggested he was quite a bit older than her. If only she could see him better, so she could recognise the face if she saw him again. At the very least, she wanted to look him in the eye and thank him properly for his generosity. More than that, she found herself drawn towards the friendliness that she sensed.

"Are you on your way to the superstore?" she asked, nodding towards the bag he was carrying.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "Off to get the week's groceries; my Monday evening routine."

"Would you mind if I tagged along?" she asked hopefully. "I can get more for this ten pounds there than I could in a cafe, but they tend to be a bit suspicious of down-and-outs in that particular shop. I hate having people think I'm going to steal something, and they might not think I'm a shop-lifter if I'm with someone else."

"Of course you can accompany me," he said, seizing the chance to help her in such a practical way. "It'll make a change to have some company while I'm shopping."

She got up and carefully folded her sleeping bag. Then she picked up a large carrier bag which had been lying next to her, which he'd assumed was just litter, and stuffed the sleeping bag into it.

She turned and looked at him. "Thank you again for your generosity," she said, looking him in the eye. "I want you to know how much I appreciate it, and I promise you I'm not going to spend it on drink or drugs. This will feed me for a couple of days, if I'm careful."

"You're very welcome, my love," he said. He nodded at her bag with an expression of surprise. "Is that all you've got to carry? I assumed you had a rucksack or something, with the rest of your stuff in it."

"Just the sleeping bag and what I'm wearing," she said without any apparent bitterness. "I decided to travel light."

They started walking towards the superstore.

"I'm Brett, by the way, Brett Farthing," he told her.

"Jennifer Valance. Jenny to my friends and to people who give me tenners."

Now she could see him better, and was able to get a proper idea of his height, she decided she liked the look of this unusually kind man. He was probably in his late thirties or early forties – about the same age as her Dad, but with a much kinder face. He was slightly taller than her and was quite good looking, in an avuncular sort of way. She

decided that his apparent girth was, in fact, the result of the rather thick jacket he was wearing against the cold.

When they got to the shop, they both took hand baskets, rather than trolleys.

“It stops me buying too much, if I have to carry a basket instead of using a trolley,” Brett explained. “When it starts to get too heavy, I know I’ve got enough.”

“I never have a problem carrying what I can afford to buy,” Jenny quipped, and then sighed and looked pained. “I’m sorry, that’s the second time I’ve been cheeky to you. Please don’t take offence, it’s not aimed at you.”

“I know that,” he said gently. “I can’t begin to imagine the kind of attitude I’d have towards life if I was living on the streets. It wasn’t a particularly snide remark, in any case, and at least you made it sound light-hearted. You evidently still have a sense of humour, despite your plight.”

They continued round the shop, drawing a few stares from other shoppers, who evidently thought it odd for a well-dressed man in his late thirties to be shopping in the company of such a scruffy girl. Conversation between them was restricted to the occasional comment. Jenny didn’t seem inclined to make much conversation, and Brett, guessing from her earlier comments that she didn’t particularly want people to know she was a down-and-out, decided to say as little as possible. He became engrossed in his shopping, going through his usual mental list of groceries. Jenny selected a large Cornish pasty, three apples, a packet of biscuits, a pack of cereal bars and toilet paper. She looked at him sheepishly as she added the last item to her basket.

“It’s the little things that sometimes get me down,” she said. She shrugged and looked carefully at the prices on the items she had. “My maths says that’s four pounds eighty-five. I’ll be able to buy some more food tomorrow with the rest of the tenner you gave me. I still can’t believe my luck, you know. I really, really appreciate you giving me that much money.”

“I know you do,” Brett said kindly. “The look on your face when you saw it told me that. That alone was worth the money.”

They queued together at the checkout, chatting about trivia as they waited their turn to be served. Then, as the checkout girl was scanning his items, Brett noticed Jenny counting on her fingers as she looked at the ten pound note. He realised that his conscience wouldn’t allow him to let her spend it. She might need it for something more important than groceries tomorrow. After all, a woman might sometimes have other necessities to buy. He pushed her items nearer to his and told the girl to include them in his total. Jenny watched in open-mouthed astonishment as he carefully packed her things into a separate carrier bag before paying for them.

“That’s another four pounds eighty five you’ve just given me!” she exclaimed once they were outside the shop. She was almost in tears. “The tenner was more than enough. You didn’t have to buy me my groceries as well.”

“I seem to have developed a liking for seeing that expression of amazement on your face,” he said, feeling rather smug at the pleasant surprise he’d just sprung on her. “You’re a very nice young lady, and it gives me a good feeling to know I’ve done something to make you happy. Anyway, now you’ve still got ten pounds for tomorrow, instead of just five.”

“Thank you,” she said, shaking her head in disbelief as she looked at her bag of provisions. “You’re the kindest person I’ve ever met. I hope you win the Lottery.”

Brett snorted cynically. “I’d rather give you another tenner than waste a pound on a voluntary tax.”

They began walking in the direction of his flat, and were soon at the end of the street where he lived.

“Well I’d better get these groceries home before any of the frozen stuff thaws,” he said.

He looked at her uncertainly, wondering how one went about saying goodbye in these circumstances. It felt too callous just to say goodnight and leave her to her own devices.

“Where are you going to go to spend the night?” he asked at last.

She shrugged. “Anywhere I can find a bit of shelter from the cold and where no-one will bother me,” she said, looking around her. “Any direction is as good as any other for me.”

She looked at him quizzically, wondering why he didn’t just say goodnight and go indoors.

He hesitated a moment longer. “Look, I’ve got a microwave. How would you like to have that pasty hot and a warm drink to go with it? Come and stay with me for the evening and sit somewhere comfortable to eat your meal, instead of some cold park bench or shop doorway. What do you say?”

She regarded him silently for a few moments with an expression on her face that he was unable to read. He wondered if he was starting to embarrass her by continuing to offer further charity beyond what he’d already given her. He supposed that too much kindness might start to feel embarrassing to the recipient, even if they were in desperate need.

“Won’t your wife mind you bringing in a girl off the streets?” she asked, although she guessed from the little shopping he’d done what his answer was going to be. “You’ve already been so kind and I’d hate to be the cause of any trouble.”

Brett smiled. “I’m not married. I live alone, so there’s no-one else who will be worried or inconvenienced by you coming in. Wouldn’t you like to be indoors, out of the cold for the evening, and have someone to talk to? I would certainly enjoy a little more of your company tonight. It can get lonely when you’ve no-one else around.”

After a little more hesitation she gave a resigned shrug. “Okay, if you put it like that. It’s been a while since I had a hot meal and somewhere comfortable and warm to sit. Thanks.”

There was something less enthusiastic about her thanks this time, and he wondered if she was feeling upset about the fact that he had a home to go to and she didn’t. Perhaps she thought he was rubbing her nose in it? He mentally shrugged as he turned to lead the way into the flat. Maybe it was just his imagination; she might just be feeling depressed by her situation.

Brett’s flat was on the ground floor of a converted three-storey Georgian building. It consisted of a single large lounge/dining room, with a kitchen area at one end, one bedroom directly off the main room and a reasonably large bathroom off the small hallway which led to the front door. There were French doors at one side of the lounge. In answer to Jenny’s curious glance at them, Brett said they led to an old conservatory overlooking the garden at the back of the house.

“Nice flat,” Jenny remarked, gazing around the main room as Brett took his coat off.

“It’s big enough for a single person or even a couple,” he said. He pointed at the very high ceiling. “It’s a devil when you have to change a light bulb, though. Sit down and make yourself at home. I’ll put this stuff away and then put the kettle on for a drink. Do you prefer tea or coffee?”

“It’s so long since I had a proper cup of either,” she said. “I don’t really mind; whichever you’re going to have. Could I use your loo? I’m dying for a pee.”

“Of course you can. It’s the other door off the hallway.”

She put her two carrier bags down on the floor next to the sofa and went back out into the hall.

“Is there a lock on this door?” she called out. “I can’t find one.”

“I’ve never got round to putting one on,” he called back. “I’ve never needed one, living alone.”

He had put his shopping away by the time she returned.

“That feels better,” she remarked. “Even without a lock, your bathroom’s a lot more dignified than squatting in a dark alleyway, hoping no-one is going to come past.”

“Take your hat and coat off and sit down,” he said, seeing that she was just standing in the middle of the room. “There’s a spare coat-hanger on the hooks in the hall.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she pulled her hat off and then unzipped and removed her parka. She was wearing a thick, grey jumper underneath the parka, and Brett now noticed that what he had thought was a pair of jeans was actually a full-length denim skirt. For the first time, he also noticed the very worn-out and dirty pair of trainers that she was wearing. She went and hung her coat in the hall and then came and perched herself on the edge of the sofa, looking a little nervous. Now that there was enough light to see her properly, and she was no longer half-hidden behind the hat and the shapeless coat, he could see that she was even more attractive than he had thought, despite the smudges on her face and her dirty hair.

“Where’s that pasty of yours?” he asked. “If you give it to me, I’ll microwave it for you. I bet you’re starving, aren’t you? When was the last time you ate?”

“I had a sandwich mid-morning,” she said.

“Do you want me to make you something to go with the pasty?” he asked. “I’m only going to have a sandwich myself, because I had a cooked meal lunchtime, but I can make something for you, if you like.”

“Oh, please don’t go to any trouble,” she said quickly. “You’ve already given me much more than I ever imagined anyone would give a down-and-out. The pasty will be enough.”

Presently they were eating at the small table in the dining area. Jenny was rather quiet during the meal, only answering Brett’s attempts at conversation with monosyllables. He got the impression that she was unhappy or worried about something, and wondered what was wrong.

“Have I said or done anything to upset you?” he asked at last. “You’ve seemed edgy ever since we got in.”

She stared unseeingly at the last mouthful of pasty for several seconds before answering. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to what’s coming. I mean, you’ve been very

kind and everything, and I'm grateful – more than grateful – for what you've given me. I suppose it's only fair, really. Even so, I can't pretend I'm going to enjoy it."

"I won't turn you out, if you can't face going back on the streets tonight," Brett said, thinking she was referring to a dread of sleeping rough. "There's plenty of room here. Stay the night, if you like."

"Of course," she said with a shrug, still looking down at the remains of her meal. "I know what the deal is."

"Deal?" Brett asked in confusion. He suddenly had the impression they were talking at cross-purposes. "What deal?"

"You've given me enough money to see me through two or three days, bought me some food and given me a sample of home comforts. I suppose you're entitled to a bit of comfort in return. Just... please don't be too rough with me."

"Rough?" Brett asked, even more confused. "Jenny, what *are* you talking about? I'm afraid you've lost me completely."

"I suppose this is better than some of the stories I've heard," Jenny continued, apparently without hearing him. "At least you're not trying to drug me first or pimp me to the highest bidder. I'll try to make it good for you, if you promise not to hurt me."

The penny suddenly dropped. All of a sudden, her hesitancy in agreeing to come into the flat, and her apparent tension since they'd been here, made sense. With a shock, Brett realised she thought he was trying to get a sexual favour in return for his generosity. What was worse, the poor kid was in such a desperate state that she'd been prepared to go along with what she thought was her side of a bargain, even though she didn't relish the idea. Even out in the street, where she could easily have declined to come in without giving offence, or even run away, she had felt an obligation to comply with the request she thought he was making.

"Oh, Jenny!" he said. "Oh, you poor girl! You thought you were going to have to give me your body as some kind of repayment? How could I be so stupid as to allow you to think that? It never even occurred to me that you might interpret my offer to come here in that way."

Jenny gave a nervous burst of laughter. She clapped her hands to her cheeks. "You didn't ask me here for sex?"

"No, the idea never even crossed my mind," Brett said. "If I'd realised that was what might be construed, I would have made clear my real intentions. You're such a young and pretty girl, it was breaking my heart to see the plight you were in. I just couldn't bring myself to leave you to your fate when we were so close to my flat. Please forgive me for giving the impression that I wanted you here for my own needs."

Jenny's eyes had started to look moist as he spoke. Now she suddenly burst into tears and put her face in her hands. "Oh, you ungrateful little cow, Jenny! I'm so sorry, Brett! I've become such a cynical little bitch since I've been living rough. I deserve to be out on the streets for thinking something so horrible, after the kindness you've shown me."

Brett got up and went around to her side of the table to put his arm around her shoulders. "You don't deserve to be on the streets, my love," he said. "No one does. Don't upset yourself. It's my fault you thought that was what I wanted. If I'd thought more carefully about the situation, I could have made clear that wasn't what I was suggesting. I feel awful, having made you think you had to use your body as some kind of payment."

He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and offered it to Jenny to dry her eyes. Then he returned to his seat.

“Now we’re clear about that, let’s rewind the conversation to where I thought it was five minutes ago,” he said. “Would you like to stay here for the night instead of sleeping rough? I promise you there are no strings attached. This sofa is actually a sofa-bed and I can easily make it up for you to sleep on. It will be much warmer than sleeping outside. I can’t stand the thought of a young girl like you sleeping rough. I know that’s probably considered a non-PC attitude these days, but that’s how I feel. I would never forgive myself if I let you go back out and then discovered you’d been raped, or worse.”

“I wish everyone was as non-PC as that,” she said. “It’s a very kind offer, but I’m starting to feel bad about accepting so much from you. I really ought to leave now and sort out my own problems.”

“Believe me, it’s already given me a lot of pleasure to see how much you’ve appreciated the small things I’ve done so far,” Brett insisted. “Misunderstandings aside, I’m enjoying seeing you out of your predicament for a few hours. Please stay for the night, just so I know you’re safe for a few hours longer.”

She hesitated again, as though there was something still bothering her. “I shouldn’t, really. It’s not fair on you, having a dirty down-and-out staying in this nice flat.”

“Please don’t use that description of yourself, Jenny,” Brett said gently. “You’re a young woman who’s hit a bit of bad luck, that’s all. I don’t know what circumstances forced you into this situation, and I don’t want to pry if you don’t want to tell me about it; but I’m willing to do what I can to help you. You do believe me when I say I don’t have any ulterior motives, don’t you?”

“Oh, of course I believe you,” she said quickly. “I was just showing what a nasty mind I had before, thinking no-one could be as generous as you without wanting something in return.”

“So what’s the problem with staying? Even if you only stay one night, I’ll feel as though I’ve done something to help.”

“Well... okay,” she agreed, although still seeming reluctant. “How about if I clean your flat in the morning in return? Not that it’s particularly dirty, but I’d feel I was doing something to repay your kindness.”

“Okay, that sounds a fair deal,” he agreed. “It’s better than having you think I want your body, anyway.”

He began to clear away the meal, and Jenny got up to lend a hand.

“If you’d like to have a bath or a shower while I do the washing up, you’re more than welcome,” he told her.

“I’d love a bath, if that’s okay,” she said gratefully. “I haven’t had a proper wash for ages. I’ll feel cleaner, even if my clothes are still mucky.”

“We can wash those, too, if you like. I’m sure we can find something for you to put on while they’re all drying. I’ve only got men’s clothes, of course, but we should be able to find something that doesn’t look too out of place. I’ve got an old pair of pyjamas that you can wear tonight, and a spare dressing gown to keep you warm until you go to bed. We can put your clothes in the wash after you’ve had a bath. They probably won’t dry by morning, even if we hang them near the radiators, but they should be ready sometime

tomorrow. With the size of the rooms here, I find washing dries really well indoors when the radiators are on.”

He went and fetched the pyjamas and dressing gown, while Jenny started running a bath. He knocked on the bathroom door, waited till she called him in, and gave her the change of clothes.

“There’s soap and shampoo on that little shelf over the bath, where you can reach it,” he told her. “Use whatever you want. The bath towel was clean this morning. Can you think of anything else you might need? I won’t be able to bring you anything once you’re undressed. I’m sorry there’s no lock, but I promise I won’t come in again while you’re here.”

It was half an hour before she emerged, clean and dressed in his old pyjamas and dressing gown, and carrying her own clothes. With the grime removed, it no longer required any imagination to see how pretty she was. Even though her wet hair still hung straight down and looked dark, Brett thought that it was probably actually a golden-blonde colour and that it might have a lot of natural curl to it. After their earlier misunderstanding, though, he refrained from showing open admiration for her looks, feeling sure that his compliments in the street had contributed to the conclusion she’d jumped to about his intentions. He didn’t want to make the poor girl nervous again.

They loaded her clothes – including her trainers – into the washing machine and left them to wash. Brett fetched his hair dryer and a spare hair brush, and Jenny spent a few minutes drying and brushing her hair, confirming Brett’s guess about its colour and natural curl. Then they sat and watched TV for an hour, until the washing machine had finished its cycle. When it was done, they hung the washed clothes up to dry in the sun-lounge and then made up the sofa-bed. Jenny insisted on helping with that, as she had with the washing up.

“Well, goodnight, then,” Brett said once the bed was ready. “I hope you have a good night’s sleep. Will you be warm enough with those blankets and the spare duvet? Don’t be afraid to wake me, if there’s anything you need.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Even the floor would have been an improvement over the streets.” Once more, the air of tension was back.

“I’ll close my door, once I’m in my bedroom, so you’ll have privacy,” he told her. “If I have to get up in the night, I’ll try not to make too much noise. I promise I won’t try anything funny.”

“I’m not worried about that any more, Brett,” she said.

With a sob, she suddenly flung her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. “Thank you so much for everything. I can’t thank you enough for all this. You’ve no idea how rare it is to find someone so kind. I’m ashamed of what I thought when you brought me here.”

“There, there,” he said, patting her shoulder gently. “I’m ashamed for letting you think it. Don’t say any more about it. It’ll be a funny story to tell your friends one day.”

They said goodnight at last and Brett shut his bedroom door behind himself.

