

Extract from “Let’s Meet on Platform 8”

Chapter 1

It was the hole in her pantyhose that made Teri start crying. She looked at them in desperation as sheer as they were. They were black with added Lycra ‘For Working Legs’ and she’d paid £7.99 for them. Seven whole pounds and ninety-nine pence for one pair of pantyhose - and now look at them! Perhaps they would have lasted longer if she’d bought the ones for non-working legs.

Her knee was scraped and bright scarlet blood was oozing through the grey grit-encrusted skin. She hadn’t had a scabby knee since she was ten, when she’d fallen off the swings in the local playground in the unenlightened days before the Council used knee-friendly landing areas. To help matters along, her briefcase - exacting some minuscule revenge, as only briefcases can - had decided to shed its contents, and her papers blew along the platform in the frantic funnelled breeze from departing trains - including hers.

‘Oh hell. I’m really sorry. Here, let me help you.’ His voice was like being stroked with velvet. Okay, so it was a very romantic-novel type of thing to think in the circumstances. But it was true. The voice was soft and soothing and held the faint trace of a quiet, reassuring Scottish burr whose corners had been knocked off by too many years spent far from home. He looked sort of romantic hero-ish, too. Probably tall, though it was hard to tell as he was crouched over her briefcase carefully gathering its contents to his chest, while the last breathless stragglers hoping vainly to catch the 18.07 for all stations to Milton Keynes pushed heedlessly past them.

‘I was rushing to catch the train,’ he explained. ‘I just didn’t see you. I’m sorry.’

‘Damn,’ Teri said, fishing in her pocket for a tissue. There was one lurking in the corner but she could tell by its disconcertingly crispy feel that it was far too disgusting to pull out in public. ‘I’d gathered that.’

‘I feel terrible.’ He put her papers inside her briefcase and clipped it shut. ‘But probably not quite as terrible as you,’ he added hastily.

‘You’ll miss your train.’ She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Although he had stooped to her level, she looked up at him. There was definite eye-contact. Lots of it. His eyes were greeny-gold and bordered with dark-brown rims - as if someone had carefully and lovingly outlined them with brown felt-pen to make the whites look washday-white. They were soft and warm and she could tell he laughed often. At the moment, they positively oozed concern. Either he was genuinely mortified or he was the leading light in his local amateur dramatics group.

‘It’s already gone.’ He produced a clean white handkerchief from inside his coat with the air of an accomplished magician. ‘It stopped at every station anyway. It would have taken ages to get home. Here.’

Teri took the handkerchief reluctantly. She had no idea that men under fifty carried handkerchiefs anymore. It was the equivalent to wearing a string vest on chilly mornings or socks with garters or, even worse, those metal armbands that held shirt-sleeves up that were otherwise too long. This hanky looked far too clean to wipe dirty things with. Hesitantly, she dried her eyes.

‘Now fold it over and do your knee,’ he instructed.

She looked at him to check that he was serious.

‘Go on,’ he urged.

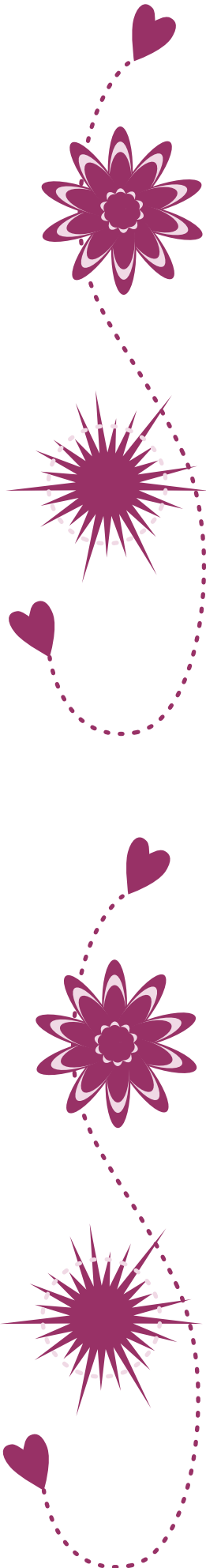
It was a long time since she had been treated like a four-year-old - probably not since she was four, in fact. And it was even more mind-boggling that, for the moment, she didn’t resent it.

Teri dabbed gingerly at the blood and grit, totally ruining the immaculate white linen. She winced. ‘Ouch.’

He frowned. ‘I think you need to get that properly cleaned up.’ He offered her his arm. ‘Here, let me help you to your feet.’

He slipped his arm under hers and lifted her easily to her feet. Teri’s knees buckled. ‘I think I’ve sprained my ankle!’ The tears sprang afresh to her eyes. ‘That’s just about a perfect sodding end to a perfect sodding day.’

‘Let me have a look.’ She hopped round on her good leg, holding on to his shoulder while he examined her ankle. ‘No bones broken, but I think your diagnosis is right. Looks like you’ve twisted it.’



‘Are you an expert then?’

He stood up and rubbed his hands together. ‘No, but I’ve watched Match of the Day often enough to know when a footballer is really hurt or when they’ll be running around the pitch the next minute as if nothing’s happened,’ he replied earnestly.

He straightened up and raked his fingers through his hair. It’s amazing the details you notice when you’re in pain, Teri thought. His hair was dark and wavy, slightly flecked with grey. Mid to late thirties, she guessed. It was receding slightly at the sides, giving a hint of the baldness that would rob him of his youthful looks later in life. But then nobody was perfect. She should know. She’d dated more men than she’d had low-calorie, low-fat dinners and still hadn’t found Mr Right. She’d been through all of the other Mr Men though, in a short history of painful relationships - Mr Lazy, Mr Greedy, Mr Bump, Mr Completely Selfish, Mr Looking-for-Mother-Substitute and Mr Downright Pervert - but, as yet, no Mr Right.

‘If I put my arm round you, could you manage to hop to the public loos? They’re not far - just at the end of the station.’

It was possibly the most original chat-up line she’d heard recently - if indeed that was what he was trying to do. Surely there were easier ways to hit on women?

‘Can you manage this?’ He passed her handbag to her and gripped her briefcase in the same hand as he held his own.

Teri nodded and hung on to him.

‘It would help if you could just relax your grip a bit,’ he said breathlessly, as he shifted her weight to his shoulder. ‘I’ve nothing against blue, but I’d rather my face wasn’t that colour just at the moment, thanks. Otherwise, we might not make it to the ladies’ loos.’

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Teri said. God must have a really warped sense of humour to put her in this predicament with the most decent-looking man she had bumped into in ages - quite literally. ‘You really don’t need to do this, you know.’ It was hard to hop and talk at the same time.

‘Call it a salve to my guilty conscience. And anyway, there isn’t another train for twenty minutes.’

‘I’m glad to be able to fill in the time for you.’

‘Oh sorry, I have the knack of saying the wrong thing.’ He looked like a scolded schoolboy.

‘Then let’s just concentrate our efforts on getting me to the loo in one piece.’ Hopping up the steep concrete slope from Platform Eight back on to the main concourse at Euston station was an experience Teri wasn’t keen to try again in a hurry. But, as usual, in the rush-hour no one gave her a second glance. All commuters worked on the same premise. If they simply looked the other way there was no chance that they could be called on to provide assistance which would delay their flight from the City to the relative sanity of the suburbs - for the few brief hours of respite before they turned round and did it all again.

They reached the entrance to the ladies’ loo. ‘I’ll wait here,’ he said. ‘Take your time.’

The loos weren’t very clean - not enough to warrant a twenty-pence entrance fee, anyway. Teri looked at her face in the smeared mirror. Or more accurately, her smeared face in the smeared mirror. Wiping the panda-circles of mascara from under her eyes, she noted regretfully the decreasing amount of white on the borrowed linen handkerchief that she still clutched like a security blanket. She dragged her fingers through her hair and fluffed it up hopefully. It fell flat to her head instantly. She would bet a pound to a penny that Kelly Ripa didn’t have bad hair days. Especially when she had Mr Fanciable of the millennium dancing attendance on her - even if it was in slightly less than romantic circumstances.

‘A nice young man asked me to give you these, dear.’ A white-haired old lady thrust a packet of tights into her hands.

‘Thank you.’ Teri raised her eyebrows appreciatively. Thoughtful with a capital T. ‘Wait.’ Teri touched her arm. ‘How did you know they were for me?’

‘He told me to look for the dishevelled woman with a scabby knee,’ she replied sweetly. ‘It had to be you, dear.’

‘Thanks.’ Teri smiled a tired smile. ‘Thanks a bunch,’ she muttered under her breath.

One attempt at trying to lift her foot into the wash basin whilst balancing on her good leg told her that it was far too acrobatic a manoeuvre to consider in a tight skirt, considering the indignity she had already suffered. And the paper towels were too rough to bathe her knee with, so Sir Galahad’s handkerchief was pressed into service again, then she dried her knee under the hot-air blower that was thankfully broken and was blowing cold. As an afterthought she gave the sodden stained handkerchief a cursory blast.

Teri nipped into one of the cubicles to change into the new pantyhose and meditated on what

kind of man would even think to go and buy her a replacement pair. Okay, they weren't anything flash, no Lycra, no Tactel for velvet softness, no satin sheen for enhanced elegance, no elastane for a perfect fit. But they were the right size - although with one size you couldn't go too far wrong - and the right colour - again with black you were pretty safe. At least he had noticed.

And so what if his description of her had been a little less than flattering; it was accurate. He could have said 'attractive, but dishevelled woman', it's true. But then Teri was a firm believer that actions speak louder than words.

He was still waiting outside. Which was just as well because he had her briefcase. But she wouldn't have been surprised if he'd disappeared. After all, he could have just dumped it and cleared off. He could have just dumped her and cleared off, too. He'd done enough already really - despite the fact it was his fault she had been knocked down in the first place.

Her knight in a crumpled suit was lounging against the glass wall of the sunbed salon tucked incongruously into the corner opposite the toilets. How many people clamoured to top up their tans in the salubrious setting of Euston Station was another one of life's little mysteries that deserved further consideration at a later date.

She hopped towards him. 'Thanks for the pantyhose.' She showed him her knee, which through black nylon looked reasonably presentable.

'I hope they were okay. I didn't know if you wore pantyhose or . . .' he blushed ' . . . or well, the others, you know.'

It was years since she had seen a man blush. They didn't any more, did they? Good grief, it was endearing. Carrying a handkerchief and blushing - this one was a prize. 'Well, you wouldn't, would you?' she teased.

'I got them in Knickerbox,' he said by way of explanation, gesturing towards the glass kiosk filled with pastel shades of frillies in every shape and size imaginable, marooned in the middle of the concourse. 'They have nice things in there.'

'Really?' Teri arched her eyebrows. His skin flushed to a deeper shade of beetroot. She wondered briefly if he was a pervert.

He cleared his throat. 'We'd better move it or we're going to miss this train, too. How's the ankle?'

'I'll live. But I may miss my salsa dancing class.'

'Come on then, take my arm again.' It had in fact improved to two limps and a hop and they struggled back to the platform for the next train. He paused to look at the display board.

'Which stop?' he asked.

'Leighton Buzzard. And you?'

'Milton Keynes. This one will do us. It leaves in five minutes on Platform Eight.'

They set off again. 'Look, you're helping me marvellously . . .' Teri paused for breath, ' . . . with my Long John Silver impersonation.' Limp, limp, hop. 'And I don't even know your name.'

'Jamie,' he puffed. 'Jamie Duncan. I'd shake your hand but you don't seem to have one free.'

'I'm Teri Carter,' she said breathlessly, trying to co-ordinate breaths and hops to synchronised intervals. 'Pleased to meet you. I think.'

The train was sitting waiting patiently and already most of the seats were taken in the first few compartments. 'There are two together in here.' He opened the door.

'Look, I'll be fine. You've done enough.'

'I insist. My guilt complex still hasn't gone.'

They both sat down gratefully, opposite each other, and Jamie dropped the briefcases on the floor with a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness for that! I'm not sure which is heavier - you or your briefcase.' Several newspapers in the surrounding seats lowered to look briefly at the object of his derision.

'Well, next time you decide to knock a woman over, choose a smaller one.'

'Sorry.' He winced. 'Put your foot up here. It stops the swelling if you elevate it.' He indicated the seat beside him.

'More information gleaned from Match of the Day?'

'ER.'

'I didn't have you down for an ER watcher.'

'I'm not. My secretary tells me all about it - usually in its full Technicolor glory. She's obsessed with watching operations.'

'Animal Hospital is her favourite.' He gave Teri a sideways smile. 'If you'd been a pregnant

rhinoceros I'd have known exactly what to do.'

'That's very encouraging, but it probably would have involved more than a pair of black tights and a strong shoulder.'

Jamie shrugged. 'Infinitely more.' Again, he patted the seat next to him. 'Foot.'

Obligingly, after adjusting her skirt to provide a modicum of modesty she raised her foot. He touched her ankle, stroking the swollen area gently. His fingers were cool against the hot skin that throbbed through her pantyhose. Why was her mouth suddenly dry? It was probably delayed shock. She should have bought a drink from the End of the Line Buffet.

'I don't like the look of that.' He tutted and shook his head ponderously. 'I don't like the look of that at all.' His eyes travelled up to her knee. 'Does it hurt anywhere else?'

'Only when I laugh,' Teri said tartly and wriggled her skirt down.

The guard blew his whistle and there was a succession of slamming doors. Their carriage door was wrenched open and a sweating businessman with a florid face and a wet, bald pate squeezed himself on to the seat next to Jamie, smiling genially at him as he lowered his bulk, sandwiching her foot with his bottom. Casually, Jamie lifted her foot and put it on his lap as if it was something he did every day.

Teri didn't know which would be more embarrassing, to move her foot away or leave it there throbbing as acutely as her temples. The train jerked out of the station and she decided to leave it there for the time being until she could devise a way to extricate it without drawing too much attention to herself.

'So what do you do when you're not discussing ER or Animal Hospital with your secretary?' she asked, more in an attempt to deflect his eyes from her legs and the fact that one of them was resting ever so comfortably in his lap than out of sheer unadulterated interest.

'I'm a Database Manager for an insurance firm - the Mutual and Providential.'

'That's interesting.'

Jamie smiled. 'That's polite.' He had perfect white teeth, like the ones in a toothpaste advert. The sort of teeth that meant you needn't care less whether there was added fluoride or chloride or bromide - the sort of teeth that made you want to get your own teeth very, very close to them and have first-hand experience of that fresh-breath ring of confidence that toothpaste advertisements were so keen on.

'It's actually the most boring job in the entire universe,' he went on. 'That's why I spend my days discussing the latest load of twaddle on television with my secretary.'

He wasn't touching her foot any more, which somehow made it worse. She couldn't relax, because it might flop and nestle somewhere more intimate than it was now. She was going to get cramp at this rate.

'What do you do?' he asked.

'I work in television.'

Jamie gave her a grimace. 'Foot in mouth again.'

'That's all right,' Teri laughed as he flushed. 'Most of it is a load of old twaddle. I work for City Television. And I can't claim any credit for the actual programmes. Like you, I'm at the boring end.'

'I didn't think there was a boring end in television. I thought it was all glamour and luvvies and dahlings and free booze.'

'I'm a programme assistant. If you can make coffee and count you could do my job.' It hurt more than her ankle did to admit that, and she wondered why she'd told him. Why was she sitting here in a rush-hour commuter train with a stranger, her foot resting just centimetres away from his groin, letting him know about the frustrations of her job? She was one step away from telling him her whole life story.

In ten years of commuting, Teri had never had a conversation with anyone else. She saw the same faces every day, year in, year out, rain, hail and snow - and never a word was spoken. It was an unwritten rule. There might be the odd person with whom she was on nodding terms, and once, about three years ago, a woman who ran the Brides' Book at the John Lewis store in Oxford Street had accidentally prodded her with her knitting needle just outside Berkhamsted and they had chatted amicably for the rest of the journey. She had told Teri that she was knitting a matinée jacket for her new grandson and Teri had wondered if babies still wore white matinée jackets knitted by their grandmas. After that they had been on good nodding terms, which included a smile, but that was about it. She hadn't seen the woman recently and had assumed she'd retired - or maybe died.

'You're probably underselling yourself.' His voice broke into her thoughts.

She shook her head. 'No, but I don't intend to be at the boring end for ever.'

They whistled through a tunnel, the wind buffeting against the windows making conversation impossible. The train was cold as they always are in winter - it's only in summer that hot air belches out relentlessly from beneath the seats - and Teri stared out of the window into the street-light-flecked darkness.

The line passed by the McVities' biscuit factory just outside Watford Junction. The enticing aroma of warm cookies hadn't twitched her nostrils tonight as it usually did. It normally started her taste buds tingling and her stomach rumbling so that the first thing she did when she got through the door was head for the jar where the Jaffa Cakes were kept and immediately eat three to sate her appetite until it was time for her calorie-counted meal. But not tonight. Tonight her stomach was churning but she certainly couldn't put it down to the enticing smell of baking biscuits. Perhaps it was Jamie. She hoped to goodness that he wasn't a mind-reader.

He looked at her and winked. It was a reassuring kind of wink. A little shiver had travelled down her spine for a moment, but fortunately, this wasn't a wink that said, 'yes, I am a mind-reader'. It was just a wink. His face didn't move at all, just his eyelid squeezed languorously over his eye.

They were definitely feline, his eyes. They reminded her of one of her mother's cats - a long-haired white one with ginger ears called Sooty, which spoke volumes about her mother's state of mind. If anyone had winked at Teri on a train before, she would have hit them squarely on the head with the Daily Mail. Tonight, the Mail lay unopened in her traitorous briefcase and she just smiled back.

As the train slowed into Leighton Buzzard, she reluctantly removed her foot.

'Better?' Jamie asked.

'Much.' The puffed skin was swelling over the top of her shoe most attractively. 'Thanks for your concern.'

'It's the least I could do.' He stood up and picked up both briefcases.

'I can manage, thanks.'

'I want to see you safely home.'

'But you live in Milton Keynes. You'll have to wait for the next train.'

'You won't be able to drive.' It was a reasonable assumption. 'Is your car at the station? Or is someone meeting you?'

'No, neither. I usually walk.' She realised as she said it that walking home would be impossible. 'It's about fifteen minutes,' she added lamely.

'Then we need to get you into a taxi.' Jamie ushered her off the train, hand firmly under her elbow. Teri winced as she hit the platform awkwardly. He helped her towards the footbridge which led from the platform to the exit. They made slow progress. One limp, one hop. Was that an improvement or had it got worse?

'I'm not a mugger or a rapist,' he said thoughtfully as they inched their way along. 'There's no need to worry.'

'Thanks for that character reference,' Teri puffed. 'It hadn't crossed my mind until then.'

'Unless, of course,' he hesitated. 'If there's someone waiting for you and it would be difficult ...'

'No, there's no one waiting,' Teri answered truthfully. 'Well, at least I don't think so. I'm sharing my house with a friend at the moment but I can never tell whether she's going to be there or not. Her husband's just run off with some teenage bimbo and she's staying with me.'

They took the steps one at a time, Teri clinging on to both Jamie and the handrail for support. 'Though how he found anyone more bimbo-ish than my friend Clare it's hard to imagine. She's a trolley-dolly - sorry, flight attendant - at Luton airport, hence the irregular time-keeping.'

His arm was strong around her and his skin still held the faint scent of a citrus aftershave that said expensive. She was glad she'd agreed to let him take her home. Not that he actually gave her a lot of choice, but she could have invented some excuse for getting rid of him if he'd shown imminent signs of turning into a nerd. She'd had a lot of practice in the past.

To add to the bitter cold it had started to drizzle, but thankfully there was a solitary taxi still left at the rank when they emerged from the station. It was a Mercedes - one that had seen considerably better days, and its interior had been brightened by the touching adornment of nylon leopardskin seat covers. They huddled inside, brushing a sprinkling of raindrops from their clothes.

Teri gave her address to the driver and he swung out of the station road and headed up the hill towards her estate which had grown over the years to make an endless sprawl of unimaginative commuter housing. Jamie was peering out of the rain-streaked and steamed-up window trying to see where he was going in the darkness.

The taxi driver turned into the estate and threaded his way through the maze of roads. The leopardskin-lined Mercedes slowed to a halt.

'We're here.'

Jamie helped her out. He turned to the taxi driver. 'Can you wait for me, please? I won't be long.'

Teri felt a flash of disappointment. Any thoughts that they might linger over a medicinal glass of Beaujolais had just gone straight out of the window.

'Give me your key,' he instructed. Teri obliged and Jamie opened the door. 'I'll resist the urge to carry you over the threshold, seeing as we've still to be formally introduced.' He ushered her inside.

The house was in darkness - which was a good sign. At least Clare wasn't around to poke her nose in. Jamie led her gently to the sofa and flicked on the light switch. 'Now let me make you a coffee or something.'

'Really, I'm fine. Your meter's running.'

'Black or white?' he insisted.

Teri gave a sigh of resignation. 'Black, no sugar.'

He disappeared into the kitchen and, following the banging of several cupboards, reappeared moments later carrying a tray which he placed beside her.

'Cheese and biscuits - a very fine Camembert - not exactly a wholesome meal, but filling. One biscuit jar containing only Jaffa Cakes - Madam's weakness, it would appear.'

'Quite.' That - and tall dark handsome strangers, Teri added silently.

'One cup of hot coffee, black, no sugar. One large brandy, two painkillers and a bag of frozen peas for reducing the swelling in Madam's ankle.'

'Where did you learn your bedside manner from? Was it Match of the Day, ER or Animal Hospital?'

'From your first-aid book on the shelf next to the kettle - a very sensible place to keep it.'

He pulled the footstool towards her, lifted her foot, rolled the peas in a clean tea towel and balanced them on her ankle.

'Comfortable?'

She nodded.

He passed her the remote control for the television and crouched down before her. 'I'm sorry, but I have to go. Is there anything else you need first?'

A lump had risen in her throat. 'No, you've been very kind, thank you. I really appreciate it.'

'Well.' He stood up to go. He really was quite tall. 'Perhaps we'll bump into each other again on the 18.07. Just joking!' He made his way to the door. 'You probably need to stay off that ankle for a few days.' His face was suddenly serious and he looked embarrassed again. 'Are you sure you're going to be all right?'

'Yes, fine. Clare should be back tonight. Your taxi driver will be getting impatient.'

'I'll see you then.'

'Yes, thanks again.' The front door slammed behind him. She watched, stranded on the sofa, as he got into the taxi and it drove away. He really was the nicest man she'd ever met. There weren't many of them left any more. She was an expert in not-nice men. No one had been that kind to her since she'd had her tonsils out and the doctor insisted she eat nothing but ice cream for days. So what if the resulting stomach ache had made her feel even worse than having her tonsils out. It was the thought that counted.

Teri flicked on the television and channel-hopped. Nothing but wall-to-wall soaps. There was no way she could cope with another dose of emotional strain tonight. She sipped her brandy and then, abandoning any sense of decorum, tipped the rest into her coffee and swilled it down with the two painkillers.

Suddenly she felt alone and unloved. Her eyes filled with tears and sobbing on to the Camembert, Teri pulled Jamie's handkerchief out of her pocket. It was dirty, bloodied, streaked with mascara and wet, and still she had an overwhelming urge to use it to wipe away her tears. Damn the bloody man! Fancies himself as a knight in shining armour and he didn't even think to leave a box of man-sized Kleenex to hand. Then again, he might not have imagined her crying quite so uncontrollably when he left. She certainly hadn't