

# UP IN SMOKE

by A.A. Abbott

## A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

*Inspiration for this story came from many sources. Thanks are due to all the friends – too many to name - who helped along the way. Special thanks to Anna Hurl and Jeremy White. Although real locations (such as the rather special Kensington Roof Gardens) were used in the setting, and some genuine organisations (like CNTC and HM Revenue & Customs) mentioned to add colour, this is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real people and organisations is pure coincidence and totally unintentional, despite the number of friends who are sure they have met Tony Burton (in many different companies too)! I hope you enjoy the first forty pages of *Up In Smoke*. If you like it, why not read the rest? It's available on Amazon for download to your Kindle or iPad. Or check out [aaabbott.co.uk](http://aaabbott.co.uk) for more free downloads. Have fun.*

*A.A. Abbott*

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SUSAN

Summer time. Thirsty heat everywhere. Even the short midday shadows were hot. The dry dusty banks of the brook gave way to fetid mud at the water's edge. Although little more than a trickle, the rivulet bubbled with life; green weeds straggling like a mermaid's hair, insects humming, small fish swimming.

Susan easily spotted the boy sitting on the bank, one hand clutching a stick with a net on the end.

"Are you Tim?" she demanded.

He turned, nodding.

"Daniel can't come fishing with you. He has chickenpox."

The boy gazed at her, enquiringly. "You're his sister, aren't you? Lizzie."

"No, I'm Susan. His older sister. I'm ten."

Disappointment flickered across his face, then he smiled. "It's a shame Daniel's not here," he said. "I told him there would be sticklebacks, and there are. Hundreds of them."

She crouched beside him to look. The little creatures glinted silver in the sunlight. They were quick, darting here and there between the water weeds, but he was even swifter. She watched as he scooped a wriggling bundle in his net, emptying it proudly into a jam jar sparkling with stream water. The bundle separated into two shimmering fish.

"Look at their spines," he said, and she noticed for the first time the three thorny spikes on each back.

He gestured to his net. "Would you like to have a go?"

She would, very much. She realised now that his equipment was home made. He had added a large twig to a fine net, perhaps a bag

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that had once contained vegetables. Carefully, Susan lowered it into the stream.

"I caught one!" she cried, tipping the squirming fish into his jar.

"Well done," Tim said.

She grinned from ear to ear with the rare delight of doing something clever.

"My stickleback is red," she noticed.

"It's a male wanting to start a family," said the boy. "I'd like a family too, one day. Six children. Or maybe just four."

"Two girls and two boys," Susan said. She was enjoying the even sweeter pleasure of meeting someone else who liked to dream on a sunny day. "What would you call them?"

"Tim!"

Their heads turned towards the sound. Two teenage boys were approaching.

"My cousins," Tim said.

"Playing with tiddlers?" one of them asked. "Come on, Tim, you're holding us up. Your dad wants you with us in the scrap lorry." He bellowed, "Any old iron!"

"I have to go." Tim gently tipped the jam jar's contents back into the stream and picked up his net. As he rose to his feet, Susan realised how tall he was, and thin, stretched out like a piece of elastic. Why, he must be older than her; he might even be eleven.

The two lads were smoking. "Want one?" they asked him.

He took matches from his pocket, struck one with polished ease, lit the offered cigarette. His eyes met Susan's briefly before he took a drag. She watched him turn his back and follow his cousins; part of

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an adult world where, she knew, she was still too much a child to belong.

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SUSAN

The tube had been stifling hot, and slow, repeatedly jerking to an abrupt halt in the tunnels. No explanation was offered. Susan knew she would be late, wondered if Luke Martin would bother to hang around. She didn't really know where the café bar was and was learning that Kensington Park Road was a long street. Her high heels were beginning to pinch. She suddenly hated her shoes, uncharacteristically fashionable and impossible for walking. Most of all, she wished her sister had never talked her into it.

"You can't carry a torch for Tim any more," Lizzie had said. "You need to get out and meet people."

Susan protested that all the fanciable men over thirty were married or gay. Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Not that old chestnut," she said. "Half my girlfriends seem to have got divorced in the last five years, and they've had no trouble finding nice guys. Even though my friends have children, of course."

Susan thought Lizzie was going to say, you always wanted children, and there's not much time left on your body clock.

"You know Tim and I were going to have a family. We tried for ten years. By the time I got an appointment at the fertility clinic, it was too late."

Lizzie pressed home her advantage. "And how long ago was that? You're not young any more, Susan. You need to meet someone soon. Get online. That's what my friends did. There are plenty of fish in the sea. Thousands of men just waiting to see you."

"Are they paying you commission?"

Susan cursed her sister silently as, glammed up in a passable imitation of the old photo she posted on JustDating, she stumbled in her stilettos to see a stranger in a stuffy bar. At last, she saw the place ahead of her, a happy hubbub bubbling up from the clientele sitting at tables outside. Her relief was tempered by the sound of a

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heel snapping as it caught a gap between paving stones, sending her flying.

A suited arm reached out to catch her in time. "Be careful out there, honey." A soft Irish lilt. She looked up to blue eyes brimming with amusement. He was an attractive man, grey hair and suit well cut too, but too old for her. Early fifties at least.

For a moment, her heart stopped. This couldn't possibly be her date. He reeked of tobacco, while Luke was a non-smoker. Yet, doubts assailed her. All she'd seen of Luke was a poorly scanned photograph, merely enough to establish he was clean shaven with a full head of hair. Then, thank goodness, she recalled leaving a message for him on his mobile phone. She'd listened first to a few words he'd recorded about being unable to answer the phone. Luke's voice held no trace of Ireland.

Susan steadied herself and pulled away. "Thanks." She was too shaken to think of anything more to say.

He laughed as she recoiled. "We're heading for a party, off to dance the night away and drink champagne. Would you care to join us?"

She noticed then that he wasn't alone. "Leave her be, Tony, you silver fox," said his companion. He looked at Susan ruefully, blue eyes squinting in the evening sun. "I'm sorry my friend's embarrassed himself. If you knew him as well as I do, you'd be flattered. He only makes an effort like this for beautiful young ladies."

She realised he was from Birmingham, the city's distinctive accent much uglier than his friend's Irish brogue. His rugged face was no more lovely, but she knew intuitively he was a far kinder man. Perhaps it was the contrast with his comrade that made him radiate decency. Susan shivered. "I'm meeting someone," she said, hobbling past the smokers at their tables and diving inside the bar.

"Hello, Susan." Luke Martin was instantly recognisable as the face in his photograph, although his height had been overstated on the website. Expecting a six footer, she found she towered above him in her heels.

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He gestured to an ice bucket and two glasses. "Mind if we take these outside? I'm gasping for a fag."

"I don't smoke. Actually, I'm sure you said you didn't either."  
Cigarettes were for losers; she understood that now, the raw pain of Tim's death still hurting. Luke's would be another unnecessary death if he wasn't careful.

Susan believed she'd hidden her anger, until she heard Luke's reply.

His eyes narrowed. "Don't bite my head off, love."

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GEMMA

Senses heightened by champagne and a line of coke from the generous merchant bankers, Gemma was ready to party. Another glass of Bolly would see her through the dull speeches before the fun began.

Julian Greener spoke first, but luckily kept it short.

"Let's raise a glass to your success, ladies and gentlemen of Albion Tobacco. First, let me toast Tony Burton, your chief executive. The Francisco Tabac deal was one man's dream. I'm delighted to say that we've helped you achieve it. I give you, ladies and gentlemen – Tony Burton!"

Tony stood up. "Good evening, everyone."

Gemma caught his eye. Perhaps she'd been wrong about the speeches. She could listen to her mentor's soft Irish burr for hours.

"Thank you, Julian, and thank you to all the other guys at the bank who helped us make this happen. I've always known that Francisco Tabac, with its solid brands and research facilities, would be a fantastic fit for our business. This is the deal I've waited for all my life. Now we can expand into Europe and beyond. You've all heard that Joe Gentles, my marketing director, has a great strategy ready to go. Millions more people will be smoking our brands."

Joe, a rugged former rugby player, waved from a corner of the room.

"Julian, of course we at Albion owe special thanks to you and Alicia for raising the cash from the City, and to our very own Gemma Lewis, my executive assistant. OK, let's all have some fun tonight because that's what it's all about. We all love to work hard, and," glancing at Gemma, "play hard."

As a jazz trio began to play, Tony was by her side.

"Shall we dance, Gemma?"

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She thrilled to hear him say her name, to feel him slip an arm around her waist.

The night was hers and Tony's. Julian tried to insist on a word in private, but Tony made it clear that business would wait until the morning. Later, they strolled through the gardens so Tony could smoke by the lush palm trees. Julian was paying for the evening out of his fat deal fee, but Gemma knew Tony's PA had spoken to him about the location. Albion always chose venues with outside space for its parties. Tonight, they were patronising the Kensington Roof Gardens in London. She could really get lashed, because the Albion crowd were staying at a five star hotel round the corner.

Working as Tony's executive assistant was fun. He was always ready with a joke, huge bouquets arrived on her birthday, and he wanted her to travel away from the office and attend events like this. To help him gladhand all those oily bankers, he said.

As midnight approached, the bankers, lawyers and even Joe Gentles began to say their farewells to Tony and drift away. He gazed into Gemma's eyes, sending a shiver down her spine.

"Do you need an escort back to the hotel?"

She giggled. "Ever the gentleman, Tony."

He squeezed her hand.

She'd hoped this would happen. She'd booked the room next to Tony's, had invested in a Brazilian wax and wispy pink silk underwear, so light that a single breath would surely blow it away. Just in case.

A sudden clatter of stiletto heels and a cloud of Chanel No 5. A breathless voice.

"Fancy a nightcap?"

Alicia Brent. Gemma, grateful earlier when the banker had suggested they powder their noses together, now viewed her frostily. Her dilated pupils and puppyish eagerness could only mean she'd had a

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top-up. How could Alicia's tiny frame hold any more booze? They really ought to pour her into a taxi and say farewell.

To Gemma's dismay, Tony's eyes lit up. "Sure, why not?"

In the hotel bar, Tony ordered more Bolly. He steered the conversation to safe topics: sport and holidays. Amazingly, Alicia not only drank her fill, but entertained with stories of skiing at Verbier with friends of Prince Charles. She must be rather posh. Why did she bother to work, Gemma wondered.

At 1.00 am, Tony looked at his watch. He asked the barman to take a fresh bottle of champagne and three glasses to his room. "Ladies, I'm afraid right now I need a cigarette, and rather than skulk like a leper outside, I'm going up to my suite. You're welcome to join me for another drink."

Alicia was obviously up for it. Gemma managed by a thread to avoid looking shocked. Did Tony want a threesome? She wasn't planning to find out.

She yawned theatrically. "Bedtime for me, I'm afraid. Good night."

Tony patted her hand. "Mind the bugs don't bite."

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TONY

Albion Tobacco had been kind to Tony Burton, and sometimes he could scarcely believe his good fortune. He'd started as a sales rep in London – no need to stay away from home in those days, but that was when he was still in love with his wife. Having worked his way to the top, he had a fabulous lifestyle. Albion paid for the best hotels in the world, the starriest restaurants, wine, champagne and cigars, and even the most exciting sporting tournaments. Every year, Tony was required by his board to entertain customers at Wimbledon, Ascot, and Henley. He rose to the task manfully. Of course, women were part of the package too. A night in a five star hotel bed without a girl was like a fine meal lacking in seasoning.

He was as dumbfounded as Gemma when Alicia decided to tag along for the night. He slipped to the gents to pop a pill or two of Viagra in case he needed to spread the joy around, but was secretly relieved when Gemma bowed out. He arrived at his suite with Alicia at the same time as the Polish bellboy bearing two bottles of champagne.

A true professional. There was no hint of surprise in his face as Tony arrived, a pretty little brunette on his arm. Tony tipped him lavishly. It was all on expenses anyway. The lad seemed genuinely appreciative and cheerily wished him good night. It would be very good indeed, Tony thought.

He settled Alicia on the couch and parked himself next to her. His cigarettes lay untouched on a desk with the champagne bottles. He didn't offer her a glass, and she didn't mention his announced intention to drink and smoke.

"Did you hear about the Irishman on the building site?" he said. "They tell him he needs an IQ test and ask if he knows the difference between a joist and a girder. To be sure I know the difference, says Paddy emphatically. Joyce wrote Ulysses and Goethe wrote Faust."

Alicia's laugh tinkled like fairy bells. Tony followed his joke with a couple of blue ones to loosen her up. Soon, his arm was round her waist and he ventured a small exploratory kiss.

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The tip of her tongue brushed his. Encouraged, Tony lifted the hem of Alicia's spangly party frock. To his delight, he found stockings. Tights, he believed, were at worst a modern version of the chastity belt, and at best a nuisance. He stroked her inner thighs, marvelling at the satin tautness of her skin. A vision of his wife's plump legs, flabby and puckered with cellulite, appeared in his mind's eye. He shuddered inwardly, then recovered as Alicia unzipped his trousers and knelt before him. He had expected to spend time on foreplay, but he wasn't going to stop her.

It was just the beginning. Swallowing, she said, "I think there's more to come, Tony Burton. Am I right?"

"You bet, honey." She was entertaining him immensely, maybe even more than Gemma would have done. Best of all, he was sure Gemma, too, had pleasures in store for him in the very near future. She'd been gagging for it before Alicia intruded on the scene.

He rose to his feet and motioned Alicia to do likewise. "Come to bed."

Her dress had zips at both side and back; a hook and eye at the nape of her neck. Nothing he hadn't seen before. He unfastened them quickly, undoing her bra in seconds and easing her thong, suspenders and stockings down her slim, lightly tanned legs. All her underwear was black and silky, he noted approvingly.

He pushed her down on the bed, enjoying the contrast between her tanned skin and the pristine white coverlet as she lay spread-eagled before him. His own clothes were swiftly removed. He nibbled her ears, her neck, her shoulders and then, her small but perfect breasts. He preferred his ladies big on top, rather like Gemma in fact, but Alicia was so petite and in proportion that he was prepared to make an exception.

He plunged inside, using all his willpower to be patient, holding back until Alicia moaned and flailed in release.

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She lay, red lipped and wanton, on the virginal bed. She looked ready to start again. He should have taken more Viagra, he mused, exhausted.

"Tony." Her voice was still husky with passion. "May I stay the night? It's so late to find a taxi now and I don't feel safe out on my own."

He was relieved she knew the fun was over, and was happy to be gallant. "Of course." He smiled. "Smoke?"

"You go ahead."

He managed perhaps half a cigarette before languor overcame him. He joined her on the bed, wrapping his arms around her, drinking in the scent of Chanel No 5 before sleep enveloped him.

By the time he woke at seven, Alicia still lay adorably naked beside him. He resisted the temptation to wake her, and calmly rang Gemma to suggest a meeting later. They would have work to do. He slung a bathrobe around his shoulders, made coffee and popped a couple of Nurofen. Before he could check his iPhone, Alicia woke.

"Time for a shower," she said, with a yawn and a stretch.

He looked lasciviously at her toned figure, its flawlessness recalling a classical statue or a girl in a magazine.

Alicia followed his gaze. "That was an awesome night, Tony," she said breathily. "But I don't think we're finished yet." She pulled him towards her for a deep, lingering French kiss.

"Let's shower together," she suggested.

In moments, she was soaping him enthusiastically as the hot water flowed around them. Deftly turning, she steered him between the cheeks of her rounded bottom. Before long, they came together in an explosion of desire.

She kissed him lightly. No tongues this time. "You were even better than before, Tony!" Then she grimaced. "Oh no! I have to get to my

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office for a meeting. Let me buy you breakfast, then I'll leave you in peace."

He insisted on paying. Breakfast for her, he noticed, was no more than black coffee, which she used to wash down two pills from a tiny jewelled box. Alicia called them headache tablets. Were they amphetamines, perhaps? He admired her boldness as she led the conversation from office gossip, to the depressed state of the capital markets, and somehow so naturally, to Julian's deal fees.

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GEMMA

Gemma was usually in bed by ten and up at six. As a mother, it was when her body clock kicked her to say Emilia would be needing her soon. But Emmy was in Birmingham, a hundred miles away. In London, after her late night, Gemma slumbered on until a call from Tony disturbed her tranquillity.

"I've got a few meetings to attend and emails to send. Then I need to go through some bits of business with you, Gemma. How about eleven? Shall I be seeing you in the lobby then?"

He must have realised she needed to rest, she thought fuzzily, setting her alarm.

She hadn't yet drifted into oblivion when Jason rang.

"You didn't call last night. Emilia cried herself to sleep."

"Sorry."

She was, she supposed. A pang of regret wormed its way past the veil of sleepiness and hangover. Its twin sister, resentment, told her that doting daddy could jolly well manage on his own occasionally. His job had required her to move from London to Birmingham, after all. She had no support network there. Worse, the worship that Jason had accorded Gemma since they met in the Dover St bar, that she'd scarcely noticed until it was withdrawn, was reserved only for Emmy now. No wonder she was attracted by the stardust Tony sprinkled on her life. She said goodbye abruptly.

It was raining, a summer shower driving hail into the windowpane. She peeked outside. Alicia Brent was stepping into a taxi. Gemma felt dizzy, her fears of the previous evening confirmed. Then she relaxed as she realised it couldn't be Alicia Brent; this was no party girl in blue sequins, but a hotel guest, smart for work in a black dress. Gemma yawned, and blissfully, slipped under the duvet again.

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ALICIA

Alicia air-kissed Tony goodbye, then strolled over to the concierge's desk. A ten pound note brought a smile from the concierge, and the briefcase she'd left yesterday afternoon. The ladies' cloakroom had plenty of space and mirrors for a girl to make herself presentable after a long night out. She changed into spare clothes – a black wrap dress that was always in the case ready for emergencies, some lacy tights and silver jewellery. Next, discreet make-up, and she was good to go.

She felt fresh and alive. Of course, her night had been all about Tony. Having put his reputation as a ladies man to the test, she had no complaints about either his bedroom technique or his business methods. The day had started well.

She arrived at Canary Wharf in time for the 9.30 team meeting with Julian. As usual, it was in his office, a corner room on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor with amazing views. The Thames sparkled below, while to the north, she could see half of London. This was the room she wanted one day: a huge, airy and expensive space that told clients and bankers alike that you'd made it. No doubt Julian had a massive bank balance to match.

"Good news, guys," Alicia said, as casually as she could manage. "Tony Burton agreed our fees."

Julian's jaw dropped a fraction. "Are you sure? He's been complaining for weeks about my fee proposal."

"Absolutely, Julian. Look, he's just emailed." She showed him her iPhone, being careful to appear merely confident rather than smug. "If you still have concerns, ask him when we see him at the Old Brewery later."

He smiled. "Well done, Alicia. I'm buggered if I know how you do it."

Me too, she thought. I hope you give me a mouthwatering bonus. I earned it last night.

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GEMMA

Gemma's sleep was fitful and filled with ghosts. She heard her mother's voice first.

"Peter, this is the last time."

"I don't know what you mean, darling. You're imagining things." They both sounded tired, a little sloshed. Gemma inched closer to the top of the stairs, tripping on the hem of her white flannel nightgown. Plenty of growing room in that garment, Daddy had said. The conversation stopped abruptly.

10.30 am. Her alarm clock cut through her fuzzy dreams. Her parents, long dead from a crash in her father's latest too-fast car, faded away again. A quick shower finally moved her brain into gear. She sprayed her locks with dry shampoo, smoothed on Touche Éclat round her eyes, spritzed Opium on her skin and felt presentable.

11.00 am. Tony was already sitting in the hotel lobby with his iPhone and iPad. Always a smart dresser, he was suave in a pinstriped suit and one of those check-shirt-and-matching-tie combos that all the guys seemed to wear in the City. Another woman ironed that shirt for him, she mused. She cast the thought aside as she noticed how his silk tie brought out the blue in his eyes, so like her father's. He looked amazing considering how much he drank and how early he'd risen.

"Did you sleep well, Gemma?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, flashing the brightest of smiles.

Tony laughed. "Me too. I called a taxi for Alicia two minutes after you went to your room. Told them to put it on my credit card. Then it was bed for me. I didn't even smoke. Asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. And just as well. I had a hundred emails to clear this morning, and Julian's insisted I do some more City schmoozing with Joe."

"Do you need me with you?"

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"I'd generally say yes, but I think you've worked hard enough recently. Why don't you take the rest of the day off? Hop on the fast train back to your little one in Brum."

"Thanks, Tony." He was so considerate, and not just to her. He'd made sure Alicia went home safely too.

Tony chuckled. "It was a good night, though," he reminisced. "You should join me again when I'm away from the office, and we'll have fun together. Just you and me."

Gemma saw adulation in his eyes. How could she doubt any longer that she was special to Tony? He fondled her knee. A shiver ran down her spine again.

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SUSAN

It had been hectic all morning. Susan liked temping in busy offices; it was a welcome diversion from the pain that otherwise bubbled to the surface of her mind. There was no time for coffee or lunch. Eventually, giddy with hunger, she had to step outside to buy a sandwich.

Lizzie had texted her, Susan noticed. How was last night, she wanted to know.

Susan sighed. She may as well phone Lizzie now and get that awkward conversation out of the way.

"It was dreadful," she told Lizzie. "He developed a nervous twitch when I insisted he shouldn't smoke. I managed an hour in his company before I pleaded a headache." She wasn't sure which of them had been most relieved.

"Don't you have another date lined up?" Lizzie asked. "Matthew Cranbrook. He sounded nice. Really keen, too. He sent you three emails after all. I bet you'll have more luck with him."

"I'm not seeing him." There would be no more internet dating. She would delete her profile that evening, as well as all her emails from the persistent Mr Cranbrook.

Before Lizzie could protest, Susan said she must go, she was desperate for a sandwich. She switched on her iPod to distract herself. Lightheaded, she was almost mown down by the hearse pulling up outside the Old Brewery on Chigwell Street.

It was a large vehicle, but even so, she didn't expect half a dozen people to jump out of it. They were no ordinary undertakers either. Although dressed in black, they weren't carrying a coffin, but placards. 'Murderers', 'Ban Smoking Now', 'Stop this Evil Trade'.

Susan blinked. She recognised their targets: the two men she'd met outside the café bar on Kensington Park Road. They'd just emerged from the building. After her date, she'd wondered if she should have

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gone to their party after all. It could hardly have been as dull as an hour with Luke Martin. Now she was glad she'd avoided them. They must have links with Big Tobacco. Why else were the undertakers here?

"Stop the slaughter!" a man with a megaphone shouted. "Tony Burton kills for certain."

Cameras flashed. The police were on the scene almost as quickly as the press, squad cars blocking the hearse's escape route. The demonstrators threw down their placards and scattered, running towards the high alleys of the Barbican. Susan made a quick decision. She was going to follow megaphone man.

He was walking briskly, blending in with tourists and students, until he left the concrete complex again and caught a bus. She jumped on, touched in her Oyster card, sat next to him.

She should have realised he wouldn't welcome her as his new best friend. He shrank away from her. She was sure if he could, he would have opened the window and jumped out.

"What do you want? Why are you following me?"

"My husband died ten years ago from smoking."

"Ten years ago? But you're in your thirties, I would say. How old was he?"

"We'd both just hit 30. Tim was at work. He just slumped forward at his desk. They thought at first he'd fainted, but it was a lot worse than that."

She recalled Dr Solomon saying at the funeral, It's smoking-related of course, Mrs Farrell. He'd been smoking for 20 years. Why else would a healthy young man have a heart attack?

"You're telling me he was smoking from the age of ten?" His voice registered shock.

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"His family life was haphazard. They moved around a lot. There was a scrap metal business. Tim's mother died when he was young. As far as I can tell, his uncle taught him to smoke to cheer him up."

Cigarettes were cheaper then, and theirs had probably fallen off the back of a lorry anyway. His family had done their best for him. They're just tinkers, he used to say, exasperated, but loving them just the same. And they had loved him, in spite of the obstacles they put in his way: long hours at the scrapyards after school each day, frequent changes of address as they stayed one step ahead of their landlords. They had even, grudgingly, accepted his decision to study to become a solicitor rather than join the family business; it came in useful when they had the odd scrape with the law.

Megaphone man had relaxed. It was as if all his suspicions had vanished, like air from a balloon, deflating him. He had a similar story. His father died of throat cancer. He'd been a wedding singer, and music was his life. There were operations, at the end of which the old man could barely speak, but still he continued to smoke.

"I never told my dad I loved him," he said, tears forming in his hazel eyes. "But of course I did, very much. I still do. And this is the only way I can let him know, wherever he is now. Through FAGSS. Fighting for Action to Get Smoking Stopped."

"Tell me more."

He glanced around the bus. "I shouldn't say much more in public," he said. "Come round to my flat. I'm Dave, by the way."

"Susan." She looked at her watch. "Look, I was on my lunch break. I'll lose my job if I don't go right back. Can I see you later?"

The day's shadows were lengthening by the time Susan left work. She approached Dave's flat in Gospel Oak with even more trepidation than she had her assignation with Luke Martin. Groups of teenagers clustering at the foot of low rise council flats only added to her unease.

Dave lived in a tower block. She buzzed the intercom for him.

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"Hang on, I'll come down to collect you," he said.

She barely recognised him.

"I wore a stick on beard," he said, noticing her surprise. "And a woolly hat. The police may suspect balding, clean shaven Dave Jones of attending the protest – but they can't prove it. I left no fingerprints."

They took the lift to the fifteenth floor, and a concrete landing littered with cigarette ash. The cause of the mess was immediately apparent: a young woman with spiky bleached hair emerged from one of the flats, roll-up in hand. She scowled at Dave, double locking her door, but not before Susan caught a strong whiff of cannabis from her flat.

Dave's flat itself was clean, but appeared to be a nest of paper, the spectacular views of London blocked by books and files piled high on the windowsills.

It was too early in their acquaintance to ask Dave if he'd heard of the paperless office, especially as he was so clearly proud of all his files. He gestured around the room. "I'm gathering as much information about the tobacco barons as I can. This is the result of a decade's work. Those two men – Tony Burton and Joe Gentles – are the chief executive and marketing director of the Albion Tobacco Company. I know where they live, where they work, even what they smoke. We're hunting them down to expose them for the murderers they are. The truth will out, as they say."

"Is what you're doing legal?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. Sometimes not. Making our legitimate views known – that's legal, for sure. Driving a hearse without insurance – definitely not. But they won't track us down very easily. I paid cash for it; gave the buyer a fake name and address. We were all careful to wear gloves as well, you may have noticed. I don't think the police will bother to investigate any further. They'll just send the vehicle to the crusher. It isn't worth a great deal. Best hundred

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pounds I ever spent - although it was touch and go whether the old wreck would make it as far as Chigwell Street. "

Susan listened, a willing disciple, as Dave described his belief in direct action. The protest she'd witnessed was probably just within the law, but that put it at the softer end of a largely illegal spectrum of activities. They used abusive phone calls, letters, naming and shaming. They confronted individuals in pubs and restaurants, even at church. Efforts were focused on the people Dave called key decision makers – cigarette company executives, fund managers who might invest in tobacco companies, and tobacco product buyers for supermarkets.

"Really, we're trying to do two things," he said. "First and foremost, we want to scare people away from the tobacco industry. Starve the industry of key workers, funds and outlets, and it'll wither away. Even a demonstration like that is enough to let their bosses know that we know who they are, and we're watching them. And it helps us to publicise the evil that the industry does, which is our second aim. Of course, other groups like ASH and even the World Health Organisation do that too, but they're almost toothless. I mean, the health risks have been known for 50 years, but cigarettes are still on sale. We're the only group campaigning for a total ban, and that's because we have to stop these murderers hooking and killing more people."

"Where do I sign up?" Susan said.

"We're having a meeting tomorrow evening," Dave told her.

The meeting was at seven o'clock, at a coffee bar in Camden Town. Dark glasses, wigs and anoraks were in evidence.

Dave started by introducing her. "This is Susan – who could be our guardian angel," he said.

Susan was puzzled by his remark, and rather embarrassed when it was greeted by smiles all round and even some clapping. The coffee shop was very quiet otherwise. The only other people there were

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two blonde girls from Eastern Europe working the final shift of the day. They were busy cleaning tables and didn't look round.

The activists began to introduce themselves: Zoë, who said outright that she was Dave's ex, and her new boyfriend Mervyn. They immediately noticed Susan's surprise on hearing they were librarians.

"You think librarians are quiet and law-abiding, right?" Mervyn said. "Well, one out of two ain't bad."

"We wouldn't say boo to a goose," Zoë said, as they both collapsed in peals of laughter.

Neil, a tall, bearded man, was an astrophysics student, Zak a car mechanic and Ruby a hairdresser.

"What do you do?" Zoë asked.

Susan grinned. "Oh, I'm the invisible woman. A temporary secretary. Here today, gone tomorrow."

That was how she liked it. Head down, work hard, don't get close to anyone, then it wouldn't matter if she never saw them again. The FAGSS activists were different, though. At last, there could be a chance to make Tony Burton and his ilk pay.

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

Neil smiled. "Come on our next demo. In a fortnight, we're picketing Tony Burton's house in Penn. Then his friends and neighbours will find out about the cold-blooded killer living amongst them."

Now Susan understood why Dave's files were so important to him.

Neil explained more about their plans. "Tony Burton's Albion Tobacco Company sells over half of the cigarettes in the UK. He lives in Penn, a rather naice," he deliberately mispronounced the word, "village in Buckinghamshire where lots of naice rich people live. We'll be marching through it, delivering leaflets about him to all his

## UP IN SMOKE

neighbours. Nothing libellous of course – we're not that stupid – just the facts, plain and simple."

"It'll do him good to know he can't hide from us," Ruby added.

"Or hide from the truth," Dave said. "He should give up. For the sake of his health and everyone else's."

"Do you need help producing leaflets?" Susan asked. "Just tell me what you want. I'll type them for you, then print them on the colour copier at my work and bring them along."

"You could do something even better," Dave said. "Susan, you're a temporary secretary, right? Well, you should stay away from the demo. We're well known to the police and the tobacco industry, but I bet they don't have any files on you. We should keep it that way."

"I don't understand."

Dave continued. "What we really need is someone working inside a tobacco company. An employee who sees at first hand their unethical marketing practices; all the company knows about the awful health risks and the nasty statistics that they keep secret. Someone who can tell us who the key people are in the organisation, where they live, what their movements are. A spy in the camp."

It began to dawn on Susan what he had in mind. "You mean I should go to work for a tobacco company?" she asked, horrified.

"Relax," said Dave. "It doesn't mean you have to sell your soul to them. You'll be helping us, remember? Passing on information. We'll take care of the rest. You won't be in any danger because nobody there will know."

"How am I going to get a job with a tobacco company? I usually take whatever temporary assignments I'm offered. It could be years before a tobacco role turns up."

"No problem," said Dave. "There are always temporary jobs going at the Albion Tobacco Company in Birmingham. My brother lives down

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that way and he knows the agency people who place temps at ATC. You can tell them you're moving there to be with a guy. Why would anyone check?"

Everyone seemed thrilled that Dave had had another great idea. Susan wanted desperately to help, but she couldn't ignore the chill running down her spine. "They'll recognise me. I met Tony Burton outside a bar two days ago."

Ruby countered her final objection. "That's easily sorted. I'll give you a wonderful new hairstyle. Your own mother won't know it's you."

Zoë laughed. "You're just the opportunity Ruby's looking for! Like every hairdresser, she's itching to do a complete makeover. Be afraid, Susan – very afraid!"

## UP IN SMOKE

### DYMPHNA

Dymphna Burton groaned. When she bought the leopard print chaise longue, she had imagined reclining like a Victorian lady. Reality was a Saturday morning hangover, wearing only a bathrobe and two cold teabags plonked over her eyes. A candlelit table for two, a bottle of pinot grigio in the fridge – what was she supposed to do with it when Tony phoned to say he was working late and would spend Friday night in Birmingham?

The phone rang suddenly, its high pitched notes more strident than usual. She removed the teabags and rubbed her eyes. The black and white Japanese wallpaper, usually the last word in chic, made her blink. Her head throbbed as she prepared for an argument. She was certain it would be Tony, trying to wriggle out of the dinner party for Desiree and Stuart later on.

“Hello, Dymphna.” It was Desiree. “Have you seen the leaflet in the post this morning?”

“I haven’t collected the post.”

“Well you must. I have to say, Tony’s chickens have come home to roost, my dear.”

Dymphna stumbled downstairs, where, finding no mail, she rang Desiree back.

“I’ll bring the leaflet round,” Desiree said.

There was no arguing with her. Redheaded Desiree had a fiery temper. Anyway, although bossy and opinionated, she was Dymphna’s best friend in this parochial, stuck-up English village, and Dymphna wanted to keep her onside.

Struggling into jeans and a pale blue cashmere sweater while her headache raged, Dymphna felt dizzy, but she couldn’t possibly receive Desiree in a bathrobe. The whole village would soon be hearing about it if she did. Her choice of clothes, she hoped, would flatter her pale skin and newly blonded hair, and a slick of pink

## UP IN SMOKE

lipstick would draw attention from the bags under her eyes. She hadn't hit 50 without learning one or two beauty tricks. It was a shame Tony seemed to prefer the office to her charms.

The sound of a megaphone drove her to look out of the window. A raggle taggle group was standing on the sweeping drive that led to Dymphna's mock tudor mansion. Some sported beards, but they were all long haired, so their gender was at first glance unclear. A balding man with a megaphone chanted "Tony Burton, Serial Killer," over and over. The others held placards that repeated the message. Several white vans and camera crews huddled at the roadside beyond.

Dymphna was furious, her hangover all but forgotten. She noticed her garden hose, coiled but still connected to a tap outside. Within seconds, she was confronting the protestors.

"You look like you could use a shower," she said, hose at the ready.

Summer had slipped away. It was a soft, misty day, too mild for frost but hardly balmy. Within minutes, the demonstrators were drenched and fleeing. She chased them down the drive and along the road, as far as the length of the hose would allow, not caring whether the cameras caught a splashing as well.

The rabble scattered to both sides of the road when Desiree and Stuart arrived in his personalised Ferrari, driven hell for leather. Like Tony, status symbols meant everything to Stuart. He had to have the best, from luxury sports cars to expensive holidays to a house in this overpriced home counties enclave, where men surely only bought property because it screamed to all their cronies that they'd made it.

Desiree could scarcely contain her excitement. She gave her friend a perfunctory hug, as Stuart shepherded the two women into the house.

"You need to keep away from those lunatics," he murmured, shutting the door firmly. A siren could be heard, first distantly and then louder as it neared.

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"Look," Desiree said triumphantly, brandishing a leaflet headlined "The Murderer in Your Midst". She read it out. "Penn may seem a safe place, but warn your children about the serial killer living at the Tudor House. Tony Burton, Albion Tobacco supremo, is responsible for millions of smoking related deaths. Why not tell him what YOU think of his evil trade?"

"Lucky I left Rothmans all those years ago," said Stuart, ruefully. "That could have been us, Babes."

"Yes," agreed Desiree. "You poor thing, Dymphna. Everyone's going to read this garbage. The pamphlets have been delivered to all the houses in the village, you know."

"I sent those idiots packing, though," Dymphna said, pointing to the hose.

## UP IN SMOKE

TONY

Arriving home at noon, a bouquet of roses in his hand, Tony was expecting a quiet lunch with Dymphna. Instead, he found his wife surrounded by neighbours and uniformed police; the heroine of the hour. There was a big pot of tea on the kitchen table and a sea of admiring faces.

"You're early to dinner," he said to Stuart.

"You'll never guess what your brave lady has done," Desiree declared. "Only seen off a group of those FAGSS terrorists single handed!"

"Tell me more." He knew she would, anyway.

He enjoyed the story. The leaflets hardly mattered. He suspected most of his neighbours were shareholders in Albion, either direct or through their pension funds. With luck, a few pints would be coming his way when he next visited the Crown. Any embarrassment was outweighed by the sheer delight of imagining Dymphna's fury. He hoped her temper, second only to Desiree's in Tony's opinion, had shocked the wits out of the idealistic middle class protestors. But would it land her in trouble?

"Have the media been in touch?" he asked, anxiously.

"There were a few cameras around, when those silly FAGSS people were here," Dymphna said. "The police asked them to leave."

"That's right. My colleagues had a word."

Until then, Tony had ignored the stranger, a lanky man with a serious expression, rather formally dressed for a Saturday. Even Julian's bankers wouldn't wear a business suit when they worked at the weekend. "You are?" he asked.

The man rose to his feet, easily towering over Tony. "Detective Inspector Cranbrook. We spoke on the phone yesterday."

## UP IN SMOKE

"Of course." Tony recalled now that a meeting had been arranged. Usually, his iPhone would have reminded him. He must have let the battery empty.

"Could we speak privately?"

"One moment." Tony looked directly at Dymphna. "Honey, did you say anything to the newsmen before they left?"

"Well, of course not. I told them no comment."

"Good girl." Thank goodness. He breathed a sigh of relief. He'd drummed into her that she must never, ever give press quotes. Left to her own devices, Dymphna would tell reporters the first thing that came into her head. Of course cigarettes killed people, but they were all going to die some time anyway. Of course she didn't want her husband to smoke, it was such a filthy habit, but he was obviously an addict. Of course the smoking ban was a great idea, she was just relieved that smokers were staying as addicted as ever so her husband was still bringing home a good wage.

"Those FAGSS people are a load of hairy layabouts. Waste of space. They should all be shot," said Stuart, Desiree's husband.

Tony pondered. Given a choice of the firing squad or five minutes at Dymphna's mercy, he decided it would be a brave man who'd deny himself a blissfully swift bullet to the head.

"Well anyway," one of the uniformed policemen said, "I assume you'll want us to press charges for aggravated trespass, Mr Burton."

"No," Tony said. "That's giving them what they want – publicity. I'm after denying them that pleasure."

"Dymphna's already a TV star, surely?" Stuart said.

"We'll see about that. I'll speak to my communications team," Tony replied. Turning to Cranbrook, he said, "You have a cup of tea, I see. Would you like something stronger? I've a collection of fine malts in the next room."

## UP IN SMOKE

"I can vouch for that," Stuart winked. Desiree elbowed his ribs.

Cranbrook shook his head. "Not on duty. You go ahead and have one yourself, Mr Burton." He motioned to the dining room door.

Away from the crowd in the kitchen, Tony poured himself a generous measure of aged Bushmills. "You wanted to see me about some letters?" he asked.

"Yes." Cranbrook delved into a black leather document wallet, showing Tony a photocopied letter. The addressee's details were blanked out, but the sentiments expressed were clear.

"Stop selling tobacco, loser, or it will be your funeral next," Tony read aloud from the typed script. "Short and to the point." He yawned. "I receive letters like this all the time. It goes with the territory in my industry. I'm sure I've seen the exact same one, in fact."

"The person who received this one is dead. He was found hanged yesterday."

"Anyone I know?" Tony understood now why a Met detective would be working overtime, and even taking the trouble to visit a small country village.

"Andrew Bugleman."

Tony knocked back the contents of his glass and filled it right to the brim. He would have liked a cigar, but fear of his wife's rage outweighed the desire. "One of our valued customers," he admitted. Randy Andy owned a chain of specialist tobacconists in London. Although hardly Albion's largest customer, he was one of Tony's favourites, recently divorced and determined to use his penthouse flat in Soho as a pleasure pad. They had enjoyed many an evening in a lap dancing club with Tony's company credit card.

"If you have any poison pen letters still, or receive any more, please send them to me," Cranbrook said. "Forensics can tell us a lot about

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the writers. Incidentally, did Mr Bugleman have any enemies, to your knowledge?"

"Apart from groups like FAGSS?" Tony asked, his tone contemptuous. "You knew they'd be here today, presumably."

"Pure coincidence," Cranbrook said. "Although I think my county colleagues handled it well, and thanks to them, I've identified a few individuals who might help with our enquiries into Mr Bugleman's death." He continued, "I agree that it's inadvisable to press charges for the demonstration, by the way. It was peaceful enough. And I imagine you don't want FAGSS alleging Mrs Burton had committed an assault in defending your property too vigorously."

"There's no chance of that, surely?"

"Only if the FAGSS group forces the point. A murder enquiry and the threat of a stalking case should persuade them to back off. They won't be doing anything if they're locked away in prison, and they know it."

By the time Cranbrook finished, the teapot was empty. Tony looked searchingly at Dymphna, noting the haggard skin and dark circles around her eyes as she said farewells to their guests. Once everyone had left, he could expect the third degree about his absence last night unless he distracted her further. He stuck a bottle of chardonnay in the freezer. It would be chilled in five minutes.

"Hair of the dog?" he said to her.

## UP IN SMOKE

SUSAN

The building was a huge brick box with bright red doors and window frames, in the same bland style as others on the trading estate and completely anonymous. It was surrounded on three sides by car parks, and on the fourth by a garden, little more than a concrete path edged with the sort of shrubs that needed no maintenance. In the centre were two large red framed gazebos, their functional appearance softened by twining ivy. One at least must be a coffee bar, as the welcome aroma wafted across to the front door.

This, then, was the lion's den, and at last it was time for Susan to enter. She smelled the coffee and wished for something much stronger to calm her pounding heart. Throughout her journey to Albion, first on a bus crawling from her lodgings to the centre of Birmingham and then a train, swifter but still shuttling through suburbs she didn't know, she'd told herself she could turn back at any time. Now, at ten to nine, it was too late. She'd somehow made it through the front door, signed in at the reception desk, and was about to meet her new boss.

"Are you Sue Straker from the temp agency?" It was a young, thin woman with a sharp blonde haircut. "Hi, I'm Jade."

Jade was a bundle of energy, appearing to bounce with excitement. "I'm so glad you're here," she said. "It's been two weeks since my assistant went on maternity leave. Awful timing!" She rolled her eyes. "The company just took over Francisco Tabac in France and I've had so much work to do arranging meetings with the French. The agency did explain, didn't they? I'm the PA to the finance director, Jim Harding, and we have to give clerical support to his team as well."

Susan nodded. Dave had suggested a range of company functions in which she could get useful information about malpractices: the legal section, human resources or marketing. But as there was only a vacancy in the finance department, they decided she should take it and try to wangle a transfer elsewhere in the business later.

## UP IN SMOKE

"You settle yourself at your desk, we'll grab a coffee and then I'll introduce you to everyone," Jade said.

Jade was seated next to her, at the end of a large open plan area on the ground floor. There were suited workers already engrossed in their computer screens. It was quiet, except for phones ringing and the hushed tones of people answering them. Most workstations were as bland and impersonal as the building's exterior: a computer, some shelves and a blank pinboard. Jade's desk, by contrast, was adorned by several small soft toy animals. Even her writing pen had a pink fluffy top with googly eyes. Her pinboard was covered with pictures of family and friends, most of them in sparkly frames.

Susan soon learned that grabbing a coffee meant Jade wanted a smoke and a chat, but for now, she took the words at face value. Just next to their desks, there was a side door to the coffee bar. Unlike the finance area inside, the garden hummed with conversation and laughter. In one gazebo, everyone clustered around the counter of the coffee stall. The other was filled with steamer chairs and patio heaters. Most of the coffee drinkers held cigarettes as well. This was the smokers' citadel.

"This is where you'll find out everything that's going on," laughed Jade. She steered Susan towards three other young PAs: Hannah, Rose and Claire.

"Meet the bush telegraph, Sue," said Rose. She introduced herself as a legal secretary. She started to tell Jade about a party at the weekend, at which some of the young lawyers from Albion drank a great deal. Jade remarked that they drank a great deal during the week, too.

"What do you like to do in your spare time, Sue?" Hannah asked.

"Er, sewing, DIY," Susan ad libbed. Despite the long hours she put in at work, there were still weekends to fill. So there was no free time, no chance to think about Tim and how her life might have been, she had redecorated their old flat in Golders Green three times. She was an expert plumber and painter as well as a dab hand with the sewing machine. "I've just moved in with a guy, so there's plenty to do."

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Dave's brother, Graham, had been painstakingly renovating a wreck, and he seemed thrilled that Susan wanted to help.

"You moved to Birmingham for lurve?" said Jade mischievously. "Tell us all about Mr Right."

"He's called Graham. He's a civil servant, who came here from London when his department relocated. We met through his brother." All perfectly true. She omitted a few details. The house share was purely platonic. Susan had a separate room, and she was paying Graham rent.

"And will we hear the pitter patter of small feet?" asked Rose.

"Not at my age."

Agreeably, they seemed surprised that Susan was over forty. She'd had misgivings about Ruby's funky haircut, but it obviously took years off her looks.

Having bought a latte, Jade lit a cigarette. Susan reeled, but thankfully she had prepared herself for this moment. She knew that, working for Albion Tobacco, she'd come into contact with smokers. There was no sharp intake of breath, no look of distaste.

Jade offered her the packet.

Susan forced a smile. "I don't smoke," she said.

Jade looked puzzled. "We always ask the temp agency to send us smokers. It's easier that way. If we offer jobs to non-smokers, half the time they don't show up."

Susan remembered. On Graham's advice, she'd told the agency she was a smoker. "I'm giving up," she extemporised.

Rose was sympathetic. "I'm trying to give up too, but it's hard to, working here. I love coming to the coffee bar to talk to my friends, and it's much nicer if I can have a cigarette like everyone else. What are you using to help you – patches, gum, e-Lites?"

## UP IN SMOKE

Susan had to think quickly. Was there anything in her handbag that could conceivably conquer cravings for the evil weed? "Polo mints," she ventured. "Sugar-free. Would you like one?"

Rose looked doubtful, as well she might, but she took one anyway.

"Mmm," she said, sucking it. "I don't feel like smoking now. Thanks very much, Sue." She flashed a smile of relief, and perhaps surprise, mirroring Susan's feelings.

Susan made a mental note to tell Dave to mention polo mints on the FAGSS website.

The banter continued. Susan began to think the four PAs knew everything about everyone because they asked so many questions. Small wonder that Jade needed an assistant if she spent half her time on coffee breaks.

"Time to go back." Jade's cigarette was finished. She extinguished it carefully and left the stub in an ashtray. "Oh, hello Uncle Joe."

With a start, Susan recognised Joe Gentles.

Jade hugged him. "Sue, meet my uncle," she said.

Joe was about fifty years old, a large framed-man with curly blond hair, grey at the edges and thinning in the centre. His face appeared to have been put together by a committee. There was an overly strong jaw, crooked nose and bushy eyebrows. It was quite the ugliest face Susan had ever seen. But then Joe smiled at Jade, and the contrast was astounding. His face lit up like sunshine breaking through rain clouds. Susan noticed his piercing blue eyes. They seemed so like Tim's. She rubbed her own eyes so nobody saw tears starting to well. The smoke must have irritated them.

"Hello, hello," said Joe. "All right, Bab?"

## UP IN SMOKE

"All the better for seeing you, of course," Jade said. "Although you can stop calling me Bab – it's such a Brummie word. And it makes me feel about twelve."

Joe bowed to her and kissed her hand. "Sorry."

"You are forgiven," Jade replied. "By the way, I was wondering if you had any spare cigarettes?"

"I might have," said Joe, a teasing tone in his voice. He felt inside his pockets and pulled out a couple of packets. "Marketing samples," he grinned, handing them to Jade.

Rose sighed. "That's another reason it's so difficult to give up. Marketing samples! Smoking doesn't cost us anything."

Joe offered her a packet too, but she made a great play of refusing.

"Please excuse my manners," Jade said. "I should have introduced you to Sue."

"Good to meet you, Sue," he said. He held out his hand and gripped Susan's, briefly and firmly. The full blaze of his smile was turned towards her as he asked, "What's your role in the organisation?"

There was no indication that he'd ever seen her before. Again, she thanked Ruby under her breath. "I'm working for Jade," she told him. "And you?"

"Marketing director," he said, candidly. Perhaps she looked surprised, because he followed with another grin, and said: "We have to get our own coffee, you know! All these girls are too busy gossiping to bring coffee back for the boss."

"Rubbish," said Jade, cheekily. "You just want to hear the goss yourself."

"Well, maybe I do," he admitted, sighing with pretend reluctance. "So tell me the latest."

## UP IN SMOKE

Jade lit another cigarette. Susan noticed that Joe didn't smoke, which Dave had said was typical of tobacco company bosses. Reap the profits from killing their customers but on no account poison themselves. The girls told him about the drunk lawyers and Susan's apparent relationship with Dave's brother, Graham.

"He's a lucky fellow," said Joe.

"Yes, no chance for you there, Joe," said Jade, and they all laughed again.

Joe changed the subject. "Would any of you young ladies care to sponsor me in a bike ride from Birmingham to London? I'm cycling for charity next month."

Before they could reply, he continued, looking at Susan: "You're speculating as to how such a fat bastard can be fit enough for a 130 mile ride, and in truth I wonder about that myself. I've been up early to train most days, so I'm quietly confident. And it certainly helps lose the calories from all those business lunches."

Susan blushed. "I wasn't thinking that at all," she said. She was stunned that a tobacco company director could be so altruistic. The only way to disguise her confusion was to offer to sponsor him. "£5 from me if you do it."

"Me too," said Jade. "We'll take your sponsorship form round the finance department. It'll be a good way for Sue to meet everyone."

She was right. Susan marched to each workstation in turn. "Hello, I'm Sue, your new assistant. Would you like to sponsor Joe Gentles' bicycle ride?"

Mostly, her new colleagues welcomed the distraction and she collected pledges for over £200.

Jade was impressed. "Well done. If we'd sent an email, they'd just have ignored it, they're so busy at the moment. Did they all behave themselves?"

## UP IN SMOKE

"A couple of jokers made suggestive remarks about bikes. The strangest thing was seeing people smoking at their desks."

"Electronic cigarettes. The directors don't really approve because Albion doesn't make them, but we're allowed to use them when we're too busy to go outside. Handy on a rainy day too." Jade chuckled. "Let's celebrate with a coffee. With any luck, Uncle Joe will dip his hand in his pocket."

The day passed quickly. There was the circuit of the department for Joe's sponsorship, several visits to the coffee bar and occasionally some filing to do or stationery to order. Towards the end of the afternoon, Susan met another member of the team: Su Lin the cleaner.

"Your names are too similar," Jade complained. "Sue and Su Lin."

"I'll change my name if you like," said Su Lin. She smiled sweetly. She was a petite woman, just a girl really, from China.

"I'm here to learn English," she said, her accent thick.

"What does your name mean, Su Lin?" Susan asked. All the Chinese people she'd met in London had very poetic names. Su Lin's, it transpired, was no exception.

"It means jewel of the morning," she said.

Jade was quite astonished. "I had no idea her name was so beautiful," she said when Su Lin had wandered into the finance director's office with her vacuum cleaner. "She was quite talkative with you, really. Usually she doesn't say much."

Yet she's here to improve her English, Susan thought.

Jade looked at her watch. "Oops, it's nearly five o'clock. Let's do some shredding and then we'll call it a day. There's a big pile of financial reports I need to shred because there were some typos in them. My boss said it was Gemma Lewis' fault – she emailed him some text so late that he had no time to check it."

## UP IN SMOKE

Gemma Lewis' name meant nothing to Susan. She gathered an armful of reports and obediently followed Jade to the shredder.

"You've used one of these before, I expect?" Jade said.

Susan nodded. "Isn't the basket full?"

Su Lin appeared at her elbow. She mimed emptying the machine. They left the reports on Jade's desk to shred in the morning.

Susan had walked out of the building before she discovered she had left her handbag at her desk.

She returned to the finance area. Su Lin was standing near Jade's desk, rifling through the pile of shredding. A couple of pages were poking out of the pocket in her apron. She caught Susan's eye and mimed drawing on the pages, then put her hand at waist level to represent a small child.

Susan shook her head. "No," she said. "All of that has to be shredded. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Sorry," replied Su Lin, replacing the pages on the heap.

"Don't worry," Susan said. She handed Su Lin a blank notepad. "Take this for your little one."

"Thank you," said Su Lin, but Susan noticed she left it behind. Maybe she thought someone would accuse her of stealing it. Or perhaps she had another agenda altogether. But why on earth would a cleaner who barely spoke English want to read a financial report?

## UP IN SMOKE

SU LIN

Tang picked up Su Lin in his BMW. "How did you get on today?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not bad. I picked up their latest monthly management report."

"Well done." There was no smile but she knew he was pleased. For once, he turned down the stereo, which was pumping out his favourite cantopop as usual. It was a few miles to the flat they shared on Lionel Street; a smart address, and she remembered with approval how Tang had insisted on that when Pa first offered them the assignment.

Su Lin pulled the crumpled pages of the report from different hiding places – the pocket of her overall, the waistband of her jeans, and a secret pouch sewn under the front of her jumper. They studied it together when they arrived home.

"They're doing well," she said. "Forecast profits globally are 10% up on last year."

"Mm," Tang was thoughtful. "And about to launch another brand in China, I see. We'd better tell Pa about that tonight."

"There's no rush. Wanting to launch a brand is different from actually doing it. We can make it difficult for them. We've done it before."

"Let's tell Pa anyway," said Tang. "Then at least he can be prepared." He smiled at last. "You're doing a good job, Su Lin."

"It's risky," she said. "I nearly got caught tonight. They've got a new temporary secretary and I'm sure she suspects something. But," Su Lin's brow furrowed, "I don't think it bothers her."

A shadow flickered across Tang's face. "Are you quite sure? Just be careful, Su Lin. And remember, we can always take care of her if you think we need to."

STAY IN TOUCH....

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*A.A. Abbott*