FRANK DERRICK'S HOLIDAY OF A LIFETIME

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PAN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

An eighty-two-year-old man wearing a pair of Desert Storm camouflage cargo pants, with long white hair that ended halfway down the back of what was – even at an airport where all day flights arrived bringing passengers back from holidays in Hawaii and Acapulco – an incredibly loud shirt, was walking towards the check-in desks. He was carrying a large suitcase in one hand and an overnight bag in the other, both with a pattern like that of a stair carpet in a country hotel. Despite the abundance of pockets available in his trousers his passport and plane tickets were clenched between his teeth, like a dog with a newspaper.

Frank Derrick's suitcase was the only one in the airport that wasn't on wheels and he kept tripping over all the other wheelie cases, like a pedestrian who'd accidentally wandered onto the M1. In the queue for the check-in desk Frank caught his breath, got the feeling back in his arm and wiped the dribble from his passport.

'Good morning, sir.' The woman behind the check-in desk smiled. 'Los Angeles?'

'Yes,' Frank said. He gave her his passport and ticket and she entered some information into a computer.

'I'm going to visit my daughter,' Frank said, 'and my granddaughter, to help her with her reunion project.'

'That sounds like fun,' the woman said and she asked Frank to put his suitcase onto the conveyor belt by the side of the desk.

'Did you pack the bag yourself?'

Too exhausted from carrying the case to think of an entertaining and witty answer, Frank simply said, 'Yes.'

The woman strapped a paper label around the handle, the conveyor belt started moving and the suitcase disappeared through a set of rubber curtains like a coffin in a crematorium. For the moment at least Frank hoped that it would be mistakenly loaded onto a flight to New Zealand or blown up by the police in a controlled explosion.

It felt good to be free of the heavy baggage, and not just the suitcase but everything that he was leaving behind at home in Fullwind-on-Sea, including his actual home and the village itself. Frank said goodbye to the woman, picked up his hand luggage and started walking towards passport control, the departure lounge and America.

1

HALLOWEEN

Frank's daughter, Beth, had once told him that she always dreaded receiving an unexpected phone call that began with, 'Is that the daughter of Francis Derrick speaking?', and although it was less likely to happen the other way around, there was a serious tone in Beth's voice that told Frank that it was going to be one of those phone calls.

'Now, Dad,' she said, 'I don't want you to worry,' which naturally made him immediately worried. 'It sounds more dramatic than it necessarily is. Maybe you want to sit down, though. Are you sitting down?' The longer Beth took to reach her point the more worried Frank became.

'I'm sitting,' Frank said. 'What is it?' He sat down.

Beth paused, preparing herself to say something that, clearly, she found difficult.

'There are two things I need to tell you. I wish I could give you the option of choosing which you want first, the good news or the bad news. But I'm afraid they're both fairly bad. Oh God,' Beth took a deep breath, 'I've made myself too nervous to tell you either of them now.'

'Beth,' Frank said, trying to appear calm and in control and not sound as desperate as he was to find out what was

troubling his only child so far away from him on the other side of the world, 'what is it?'

'Jimmy has left me and they've found a lump.'

It was such a lot of information delivered in such a short and almost poetic sentence that Frank wasn't sure that he'd heard what Beth had actually said correctly and yet he didn't want to ask her to repeat it. He was sitting down but he felt as though he was standing. He had the sensation that the room was moving and he thought that he might throw up. He needed to say something. He should at least ask what kind of lump and where it was. When Frank's wife Sheila was alive she always dealt with Beth's medical emergencies, the grazed knees and the calamine lotion, thermometers and plasters. Sheila knew where the dock leaves grew when Beth had fallen into a field of stinging nettles and how to remove a splinter without Beth even noticing. What would Sheila say now?

While Frank searched for the right words, Beth inundated him with technical details, symptoms, prognoses and Latin terminology. She talked about the wonders of modern medicine and some of the best doctors on the planet, about early diagnosis, expected full recovery and how different things were nowadays and thank God that she had medical insurance. Beth told Frank that a month or so after the lump from her breast was removed she'd have a few weeks of radiation therapy to eliminate any remaining cancer cells.

'Radiation therapy?' Frank said. It sounded so violent.

'It's just an X-ray, Dad,' Beth said. She continued to play down the severity of the disease, as though Frank was the one who needed comforting. She told him about increasing

survival rates rather than decreasing death rates and least-invasive surgeries and how the tumour was smaller than a nickel.

'How big is a nickel?' Frank said.

'Around the same size as a ten-pence piece. I think.' The conversation took a bizarre but welcome turn as they tried to determine the comparative size of different British and American coins. 'They're operating on Monday,' Beth said.

Frank couldn't work out when that was. He had forgotten what day it was. He tried to factor in the time difference in his calculations.

'The day after tomorrow,' Beth said, picking up on Frank's loss of bearings. 'I've been scared to tell you.' She paused. 'Are you okay?'

'Me? You shouldn't be worrying about me,' Frank said. 'I mean, how are you? Are you okay?'

'Apart from the break-up of my marriage and the cancer?' Beth said and then she apologized for being flippant and blamed that on her daughter Laura. 'She's been keeping my spirits up by making tasteless jokes about it all. They do say that laughter is the best medicine.'

They're wrong, Frank wanted to say. It isn't the best medicine. A year and a half ago on his eighty-first birthday, he'd been run over by a milk float. It was travelling at five miles an hour and he'd ended up beneath it covered in milk and eggs. It should have been hilarious. But it didn't help with the pain. All the other things that Beth had just explained to him and that he had already forgotten or not understood because they were in Latin or American or medicinese: he hoped that those things were the best medicine. Medicine was the best medicine.

'How is Laura?' he said.

'She's fine, Dad. Actually, she genuinely has been great. With both things.'

'Both things?'

Frank had forgotten about Jimmy. They weren't equally bad pieces of news. Not to him at least. Neither was good but one of them was clearly far worse than the other.

Frank had always liked Jimmy. He was the first of his daughter's boyfriends that he had liked. Up until she'd met Jimmy, Beth appeared to be attempting to break some kind of bad boyfriend record. Frank had wondered whether she was doing it as an act of rebellion against something that he or Sheila had done. Had they been too strict with her? Was it their fault that in her teens Beth dated so many self-centered, boorish, rude, slovenly and thoughtless boys? She went out with petty thieves, racists and two drug pushers in the same way that other girls were attracted to blond boys or nerds. Jimmy was a whole different set of Seven Dwarfs by comparison. He was charming, helpful, humble and polite, conscientious, affable and kind. He was more faithful than Lassie. Jimmy had been a better father to Laura than her actual father, who hadn't stayed around long enough to witness Laura's first picture being taken in the hospital. Laura's father had left before the first ultrasound scan. Frank had agreed never to speak his name, but David might have been Beth's worst bad boyfriend. He was at least her last.

Five years after David's departure, Beth had brought Jimmy home to meet her parents and he'd seemed so perfect. It was impossible for Frank not to feel relieved. Jimmy brought flowers for Sheila and he gave Frank a bottle of

what looked to him like very expensive wine (the bottle was dusty). Almost a year after Sheila had died, Jimmy asked to speak to Frank in private. He addressed him as 'sir' as though they were in a movie and he asked for Frank's permission to marry his daughter. Frank was overjoyed and he'd said yes of course and Beth and Laura, who had been eavesdropping in the hall, came rushing into the living room. Jimmy, who bought and sold wine for a living but rarely swallowed any of it himself, opened a different equally expensive-looking bottle and they raised a toast to the future Mr and Mrs Brooks. Beth said that Frank wasn't losing a daughter but was instead gaining a son. The thought hadn't crossed Frank's mind until then but once it was there he couldn't get rid of it. Soon after the wedding, tired of the constant travelling back and forth to America to get his US passport and visa stamped, Jimmy moved permanently to Los Angeles, taking Beth and Laura with him and Frank lost his daughter all over again. Ten years later, it appeared as though he might lose her forever. And he'd lost his son too.

It was because Frank liked him so much that Beth had waited until two months after Jimmy had left to tell Frank how they'd been gradually drifting apart for the past year. Sometimes, if she didn't feel that there was any benefit to Frank knowing it, Beth would keep bad news from him. She hadn't told him when Jimmy's mother had died, for instance, or when Laura had been arrested for underage drinking. She wanted to protect him from things that wouldn't affect him directly and that he would otherwise never have any way of finding out. She had even battled with her conscience before telling Frank about the cancer. Could she go

through surgery and a month of radiation without telling her father? Would she be able to carry that secret around with her, if not for the rest of her life, for the rest of his?

Beth had planned on eventually telling him about Jimmy but the more time that went by the harder it would have become. If she hadn't found the lump it was possible that she would never have told Frank about Jimmy leaving and Frank could have lived the rest of his life blissfully ignorant of the fact that charming, helpful, humble and polite, conscientious, affable and kind Jimmy, whom he liked so much, didn't live there any more. But two pieces of bad news delivered together seemed somehow to lessen the blow of them arriving individually.

'Does Jimmy know? About the . . .' Frank was afraid to say the word out loud. He'd been just as reticent in naming Sheila's Alzheimer's; even now he talked about how she wasn't herself and he referred to her forgetfulness, as though she just needed to go back into the room where she'd forgotten everything and she would instantly remember it all.

'No,' Beth said. 'He doesn't know.' Frank thought it was likely that she was never going to tell Jimmy.

'Where is he now?' Frank asked.

'He's staying at his brother's in Pasadena.'

'Is that far?'

'About an hour's drive.'

'Right.'

Frank was no wiser. Beth had often talked about the terrible traffic in Los Angeles. How far was an hour's drive? Five minutes' walk? He felt that he should be contributing something to the conversation, at least asking questions, but once again he felt lost.

'Is Laura okay?' he said, his default question.

'She's fine.' Beth's default answer.

On any other day, Frank would have been devastated at the news of Jimmy's departure from the family but for now he could only focus on his daughter. She told him to promise not to worry and she wouldn't hang up the phone until he did. Frank promised, however meaningless that promise was. Because he *would* worry. Beth told him that she loved him and they said goodbye. When she hung up, Frank listened to the phone line. There was a second or two of nothing and then the short loud boop of disconnection, followed by silence and the crackle of the static and dust in the wires of Frank's ancient phone that he'd had for so long that he didn't realize he was still renting it from British Telecom. The basic £30 plastic phone had so far cost him over £750. Almost a minute passed and then he put the phone down.

2

THANKSGIVING

Halloween seemed to go on for days. Frank sat in the dark watching television with the sound down, ignoring his doorbell ringing from dawn till dusk with people trying to trick him out of his treats. It carried on right the way through November.

Dong-ding – 'Do you need a gardener?'

Dong-ding – 'Did you know you've got a few loose slates on your roof, mate?'

Dong-ding – 'Can I interest you in boiler cover?'

Dong-ding – 'Have you considered an emergency twenty-four-hour call-line neck pendant?'

Dong-ding – 'Are you happy with your mobile provider?'

Dong-ding – 'Have you thought about Jesus today?'

Frank Derrick's doorbell was the talk of Fullwind. The paperboys passed the news to the postmen, who sent a letter up to the roofers, who shouted it from the rooftops to the window cleaners below. Jehovah's Witnesses spread the word to the charity collectors, to the political canvassers and the gardeners touting for business who, in turn, told all the trick-or-treaters and knock-down-gingerers. It seemed like everybody wanted to have a go on Frank's doorbell.

It was, to be fair, an unusual doorbell. The two notes of Frank's doorbell were the same as those of the world's most recognizable and popular doorbell – the 'ding-dong' of sitcoms and Avon ladies – but when everyone pressed Frank's doorbell, the two notes ascended; they went up instead of down – 'dong-ding' – as though the bell was asking a question or as if it had an Australian accent.

When the doorbell rang one morning at the end of November, Frank decided to ignore it. It would only be more door-to-door spam. He wasn't expecting anyone. He doubted that all his neighbours would be waiting on the doorstep to sing him an early Christmas carol before presenting him with a huge hamper and an enormous card too big to fit through the letter box, signed by them and everyone else in Fullwind-on-Sea. And if it was carol singers, they'd be tone-deaf carol singers or local children who didn't know the words. The same lazy local children who dong-dinged Frank's doorbell at Halloween with the hoods of their sweatshirts pulled over their heads or stood outside the library on 5 November with a balloon in a pushchair.

The doorbell rang again.

'Perhaps it's for you, Bill,' Frank said. He looked down at his cat and the cat looked back with the same impossible-to-read expression as always. It never changed, whether he was happy or sad, indifferent, hungry, thirsty, full, bored, excited, angry, scared of a dog, chasing a mouse, coughing up a fur-ball; the same blank expression of Botoxed irascibility that, today, seemed to be saying:

Whatever, Frank. Just answer the door and let me out. Going to the toilet indoors is so bloody uncivilized.

Frank sighed. 'Dong-ding merrily on high, Bill.' He

walked across the living room, stepping over DVD cases that he was in the middle of putting into alphabetical order. Frank had a lot of DVDs and he'd made it as far as 'I' before he'd stalled for almost an hour to perfect his impression of Michael Caine in *The Italian Job*. With Frank's impressions it could sometimes be as star studded as the red carpet on Oscar night in the living room. Michael Caine, Humphrey Bogart, James Stewart, Sean Connery and Roger Moore could all be there. Most of the time, though, the carpet wasn't red; it was cream-coloured, more freshly so underneath the armchair and sideboard. And it was just Frank and his poker-winning-faced cat Bill – which hadn't seemed such a daft name for a cat when Ben was still alive – eating their individual dinners for one in front of the TV.

Frank stepped over the DVDs and walked into the hall and down the stairs, with Bill following behind, weaving between Frank's legs to undertake and overtake and almost trip him up.

At the bottom of the stairs Frank picked up the day's post. The junk mail was plentiful at this time of year and it all had a seasonal theme. Thermal underwear catalogues, warm cardigans and fleece pyjamas, Christmas stocking-filler gift ideas, bed-socks, anti-slip over-shoes and SAD lights. At some point in his life Frank had neglected to tick a box on an order form and now everybody had his address. There was another free pack of charity Christmas cards that he had no one to send to and a leaflet from the Government containing helpful but often contradictory tips for surviving the winter. 'Keep moving', 'stay in one room', 'wear a hat in bed', 'eat a hot meal', 'keep your spirits up', etc. He put the leaflet and the Christmas cards on the bottom stair and

picked up an envelope. It had a US stamp and was addressed to Frank in Laura's handwriting. He opened the envelope and took out a greetings card. 'Happy Thanksgiving', the card said above a cartoon picture of a smiling turkey with surely little to be smiling about or giving thanks to at this time of year. The card was signed 'Beth and Laura', both names in Laura's handwriting.

When Beth had announced that she was moving to Los Angeles ten years ago, she had reassured Frank that it was only twelve hours away. She would be back to see him soon and often. She would telephone at least once a week, write regular letters and, when Frank had set up his computer account at the library, they could exchange emails and eventually they would even be able to talk face to face over the Internet via webcams. Beth had joked that Frank would probably see more of her than he had when she was living just fifty miles away and he would soon be sick of the sight of her. She'd said that it took longer to travel to Scotland or Cornwall than to Los Angeles and Frank had joined in by making his own joke about how it would probably be cheaper too, because he didn't want his daughter to feel guilty about going to live so far away.

Frank knew that the flight to England might only take twelve hours but there would be a two-hour journey through heavy LA traffic to the airport and another few hours for check-in and security, a couple more hours in customs, passport control and waiting by the baggage carousel at Heathrow, plus three or four hours in a taxi or on delayed, overcrowded and dirty trains and rail-replacement buses from Heathrow to Fullwind to take into account. By the time they arrived they'd be exhausted and jetlagged and it

would be almost time to leave again. And Frank knew that the plane ticket wasn't really cheaper than a train to Scotland or Cornwall. He knew all of this but he didn't want to hold Beth back. He didn't want to be her anchor.

For her first six months in America Beth was a tourist. She sent Frank postcards and letters folded around photographs of her, Laura and Jimmy at Disneyland and Universal Studios, window shopping on Rodeo Drive or posing with their hands and feet in the cement prints of the stars outside the Chinese Theatre. She sent Frank a picture of them cycling along the beach at Santa Monica, with the sun glistening on the Pacific behind them, the water the same vivid blue as the sky so that it was difficult to be sure where one ended and the other began. Frank knew that the charity shop, the mini supermarket, the poorly stocked library and the brown tide bringing seaweed, carrier bags, nappies and tin cans onto the hard stones of rainy Fullwind-on-Sea would be almost impossible for Beth ever to think of as a holiday destination again.

Every year she sent Frank a new photograph of Laura, taken on or around her birthday and Frank put them all in a photo album that his wife Sheila had started when Laura was born. Frank had taken over the job when Sheila's illness meant that she couldn't remember how to perform the simple task and also because her not knowing who these strange people in the photographs were upset Frank. There were times though, right up until just before Sheila's death, when Frank would sit with her and they'd look at their photo albums together. Sheila would place her fingers on the unfamiliar faces behind the protective plastic and Frank would detect the tiniest spark of recognition. It was as

though her fading memory was stronger in her fingers, in the same way that they were more susceptible to the cold on a winter's day.

In the album's first photograph of Laura she was only a day or two old. She was perched awkwardly on Frank's lap in the hospital with her tiny hand wrapped around his finger, and Frank had watched his granddaughter growing up in the birthday photographs. At first she was desperate to have her picture taken, excited and showing off in her ballerina dress or fairy princess costume or cuddling her latest favourite doll or soft toy. In her early teens she became more camera shy and reluctant to smile and then in her mid-teens she was determined not to smile at all, not wanting anyone to see the braces on her teeth and hiding her face with her fringe, or 'Laura's bangs', as Beth had written on the back of the picture taken on her fifteenth birthday. After her sixteenth birthday, the photographs had stopped. Frank presumed that Laura was now too cool, too self-conscious or too busy with boys to have her photograph taken by her mother any more. Or perhaps there was nowhere left in Santa Monica that still printed photographs. Next year Laura would be twenty-one and Frank wondered whether the birthday photographs would resume again now that she was officially an adult and in charge of her own photographic destiny.

In the ten years that Beth had been away she'd visited England twice. The second time was five years ago when she, Laura and Jimmy had stayed not far from Frank, in a guesthouse that made Fawlty Towers seem welcoming. After a week and a half of drizzle, jigsaw puzzles and only three television channels, they went back to America. Beth

said that the next time they would have to stay for longer to make the exhausting journey more worthwhile.

At the end of their stay in Fawlty Towers, Beth had repeated the same promises to Frank that she'd made when she'd first left for America. She said that she would be back soon and she would write and she would phone. Frank asked her to at least make sure that she rang him as soon as they were safely home, no matter what the time of day or night, as he would worry otherwise. He'd presume the plane had crashed or that they'd been mistakenly arrested for drug smuggling. Beth forgot to ring. Just as she had always forgotten to phone when she returned home after visiting Frank when she still lived in England. Frank would watch the phone, waiting for it to ring until eventually he wouldn't be able to wait any longer and he would call Beth, who would apologize for having not rung, saying she was exhausted from the fifty-mile drive back to Croydon. So Frank knew that it was unlikely that she would ring him after a five and a half thousand-mile journey home to LA and it would be he who would have to ring her.

When Frank had been run over by a milk float on his eighty-first birthday, he'd spent three days in hospital before returning home with a broken toe and his arm set in plaster at an angle like a boomerang. Frank knew that Beth felt awful for not flying back across the Atlantic to look after him so soon after her last visit but he didn't want to be her anchor again – or, in this case, her boomerang – and as a compromise Beth arranged and paid for a care worker to visit Frank once a week for three months to tidy his flat and do the washing-up and to scratch the itch inside his plaster cast and keep him amused until he was fit and well again.

During that time Beth had phoned more frequently, perhaps out of guilt as much as concern, but by the time the plaster cast was off she was phoning less and less often and soon it would be Frank who would have to phone her.

When Beth had first moved to America, Frank had phoned Beth all the time, often getting the time difference wrong and waking everyone up or interrupting their dinner or breakfast or catching them all as they were just going out the door to work or school or a mall. Sometimes Beth's husband, Jimmy, would answer the phone and even though in person they got on so well, somehow over the phone neither man would really know what to say beyond things like 'How are you?' and either 'Is Beth there?' or 'I'll get Beth.' If Laura picked up the phone, when they first moved to America she would answer with an excited '*Helloo, Gaga*' – her name for Frank, from when she had been too young to pronounce 'Granddad' – followed by a breathless commentary of all the things that she'd been doing at school and the names of her new friends and so on. After she'd turned thirteen Laura was less verbose, her mind elsewhere, and then in her mid-teens she would simply say hello and then call out, 'Mom!' Frank would sometimes mistake her voice for Beth's, even though Laura was already more American-sounding than her mother and he listened to her growing up on the telephone in the same way that he'd watched her do in her birthday photographs.

Since Halloween, Laura had kept Frank updated on Beth's progress via email. She would assess her mother's mood, her sleep patterns, appetite, frame of mind, energy and outlook. She'd told Frank of the success of the lumpectomy and how Beth was coping with the prospect of weeks

of radiation therapy. The emails hadn't stopped Frank worrying but they had helped him worry a little less.

In her emails Laura always referred to her mother's cancer as 'Lump'. Even after surgery when the lump had been removed, dissected, pathologized and incinerated as medical waste, Laura continued to refer to her mother's cancer by the nickname that she'd given it. She said that it was important to give your enemies a name and that somebody famous – 'Jesus or some other guy' – had said something clever about it. Later on she'd emailed Frank again to say that she'd got the quote wrong but it was from JFK: 'Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names.'

Frank put the Thanksgiving card back in the envelope, He was eighty-two years old. He had to scroll down to the very bottom of the drop-down menus on the auction websites that he'd registered on to find his year of birth. He was almost too old to be considered alive or at least to be using the Internet. Even the private health and insurance companies had stopped sending him special offers for free health checks or 'full body MOTs'. Medically he was a write-off. He was uninsurable. An accident waiting to happen, whether it was falling down the stairs or being run over by another milk float. The Grim Reaper had more than just a scythe. He had an armoury larger than North Korea's. Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, pneumonia or a stroke, so many natural causes; Frank was probably carrying something around with him already. Diabetes or heart failure, osteoporosis, or perhaps he'd die from something mundane such as the flu or a septic finger. Maybe he'd choke on a peanut because there was nobody there to stand behind him, wrap their arms around his waist and squeeze. Frank wasn't one of those people

who, when nearer to the end of their lives, cheerfully accepted their fate. Frank wasn't unafraid of dying: it terrified him. He wasn't ready for it and he doubted that he ever would be. He wasn't prepared to meet his maker. He didn't even believe that one existed. But he would have dropped down dead right now if it meant that Beth would never be ill ever again.

Even though she had assured and reassured him that everything would be fine, and in spite of how well the surgery had gone and how rose-tinted she made the prognosis sound, ever since Halloween, his daughter's illness had never been far from Frank's mind. And when he managed to forget about it for a while, there it was in the plot line of every soap opera and in news stories on the television and in the papers. It haunted his dreams, both at night and during the day. In spite of everything he'd been told to the contrary and regardless of all the medical opinion and secondary medical opinion from doctors, surgeons and oncologists, he couldn't stop himself from thinking that his daughter was going to die before him.

He looked at the silhouetted figure through the frosted glass of the front door. He didn't hurry to open it. Whoever was on the other side of the glass would have seen him too and they wouldn't be going anywhere until they'd at least tried to sell him something: a stair lift or a burglar alarm, or until they'd had the opportunity to offer to landscape his garden, repoint his chimney or steal his pension. He unhooked the chain and opened the front door.

It was Frank's landlord. Frank had only met him twice. Once when he'd moved in twenty-four years ago and this

was the second time. When the landlord spoke he mumbled. It was difficult to understand what he was saying. He sounded like he had too many teeth or had been stung on the tongue by a wasp. The landlord shook his hand and, in a voice that was similar to Frank's impression of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather* – an impression that he'd dropped from his repertoire after almost choking to death on a small ball of cotton wool – he made Frank an offer he couldn't refuse.

3

Frank lay in bed wondering what the time was. He looked over at the alarm clock and tried to bring its numbers into focus. He thought if he could tilt his head to just the right angle he would be able to see the numbers through his glasses on the bedside table next to it, but he couldn't. The first movement of the day to reach either his glasses or the clock was always the most difficult. It was worse than getting out of a deckchair opened out to the last notch. The first move of Frank's day was an activity that would be better suited to the afternoon when his joints were fully warmed up. He looked at the clock again. If he got out of bed too early, the day just seemed to go on forever. The last thing he wanted to do was to get up too early. Usually Frank would wait until he heard the first plane from Gatwick flying over above his flat. It would then be around 5 a.m. and he'd get up.

He rubbed his eyes and one more time tried to bring the alarm clock into focus. The cheque that his landlord had given him was on the bedside table next to the clock. Frank had put it there the night before in case he was burgled, even though he knew that to anyone without a bank account

in the name of Frank Derrick the cheque was just as worthless as everything else in the flat.

On the doorstep yesterday morning, when Frank had first looked at the cheque – which the landlord hadn't let go of, as though he was Chris Tarrant on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* – he'd looked at the pound sign, the number five and the five zeros that followed and he'd wondered how his vacating his dull two-bedroom flat could possibly be worth half a million pounds to anyone. He understood that house prices had rocketed and that he was living on one of the most sought-after roads in one of West Sussex's retirement hotspots. With the flat empty the landlord, who already owned the flat downstairs, would be able to knock the whole building down and build ten bungalows in its place, but half a million pounds?

It hadn't been the first time that Frank's landlord had suggested that he should move out. His rent arrears reminders often came attached to details of more affordable, smaller flats nearer the town centre that Frank might be interested in: something on the ground floor or with a lift and without a garden, as it was obvious to anyone who'd seen the long grass and the weeds that Frank had no interest in gardening.

When Frank's eyes had eventually focussed on the comma after the five and the full stop after the first three zeros, he saw that the cheque was for five thousand pounds and not five hundred thousand, hardly a life-changing amount. Unless the timing was right of course; if it came at the right time in your life, like now, *now* was the time that five thousand pounds could really change Frank's life. He was overdrawn at the bank, he had unpaid phone, gas and electricity bills: the next cold winter could finish him off.

With five thousand pounds he could have paid off all his outstanding bills, he could have had the heating on in more than one room in the winter. He lay in bed looking up at the ceiling. It needed painting. So did the walls. He could have decorated the whole flat with five thousand pounds. He could have got the hot water boiler fixed or have bought a wider-screen television – he'd had to move his armchair closer to the screen to be able to read the subtitles of all the Scandinavian crime shows that he'd been watching lately. He could have had laser eye surgery with five thousand pounds and the TV could have stayed where it was. With five thousand pounds he could have built the home cinema in his garden shed that he'd always dreamed of. The next time a roofer or landscape gardener rang his novelty door-bell to offer their services Frank could have given them a heart attack by saying yes.

Of course, if he had accepted the five thousand pounds he was being offered to move out of the flat, then he would have had to move out of the flat. Catch twenty-two. There would be no point fixing the roof or landscaping the garden, no use turning up the heating or widening the television if he wasn't there to appreciate it. And besides, weren't all these repairs and renovations the landlord's responsibility anyway?

There was a distant rumble and as it grew louder and closer Frank started to get out of bed. Whether he took the sound of the aeroplane passing over his flat as a sign or simply felt that it was time to get up didn't really matter. He'd already decided what he was going to do long before it had even been cleared for take-off.

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It was ten o'clock at night in Santa Monica when Frank took his address book out of the desk drawer to look up Beth's telephone number. It was the only number that he ever actually dialled. The majority of Frank's phone calls were incoming and cold. Calls that came from withheld numbers in warehouses on industrial estates. And yet still he could never remember Beth's number. He found it in the book and dialled.

'Hello.'

'Elizabeth,' Frank said.

'Hi, Dad.' She sounded tired and a bit irritable.

'I hope I didn't wake you.'

'Just snoozing.'

'Now,' Frank said. 'I'm not expecting you to pay. I should probably get that out of the way first. But I've been thinking . . .'

Frank rattled through a series of advance codicils and preliminaries on the way to making his point, just as Beth had done when she'd called him at Halloween. But she'd been preparing Frank for bad news; her preamble was a warning of scenes that some viewers might find upsetting. Frank's preludes were a jovial 'fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy ride' warning before a funfair thrill.

'I can get a taxi from the airport and stay in a hotel, obviously,' he continued. 'I wouldn't get in the way and you could carry on as normal. Just for a couple of weeks and obviously not until after your treatment is finished. What do you think?'

Beth didn't answer for such a long time that Frank wondered if they'd been cut off.

'If you want me to, of course,' Frank said.

'Dad,' Beth said, 'I'm not really sure what it is you're talking about.'

'I was thinking that I could come over. To see you.'

'Right,' Beth said. Frank had hoped that she would have sounded more excited.

'I'm going to organize it all myself. You won't need to do anything.'

'Right,' Beth said. 'You're coming here?'

He could feel rainclouds gathering above his parade. He put up his umbrella and continued.

'I thought that I could be there for Laura's birthday.'

There was another really long pause before Beth answered.

'Wouldn't you prefer it if I looked into it for you first?' she said. 'The flight isn't cheap.' She sounded so weary and for once Frank selfishly hoped that it was because of Lump.

'I want to do it myself,' he said. 'Of course, I know you'll probably want to speak to Laura about it first.'

There was another long pause before Beth answered. It was like a satellite interview on the news.

'Laura will be thrilled, Dad. But do you even have a passport?'

'Yes.'

'A valid one?'

'I'll renew it.'

'Travelling all that way, though? On your own?'

'It will be an adventure. I'll be like Michael Palin.'

'Michael Palin always has a huge film crew with him,' Beth said. Frank detected the hint of a light, if somewhat

resigned, humour in her argument. 'Aren't you afraid of flying?'

'I don't think so,' Frank said.

'The seats are very close together on planes now, you know; you're not young any more, Dad.'

'I know that. But I'm shorter than I once was.'

There was another long pause and then Beth asked the five-thousand-dollar question that Frank had been dreading.

'How are you going to pay for it?'

He had hoped that he could email her later about his surprise lottery win or the old bank account that he'd thought he'd closed down years ago that had built up thirty years' worth of interest. It was so much easier to lie electronically. If he told Beth the truth, she would only make him tear up the landlord's cheque after pointing out the elephant in the room – the homelessness elephant.

'Premium Bonds,' Frank said.

'What?'

'I won some money on the Premium Bonds. Not a huge amount but just enough for a holiday.'

'Do they still have those?' Beth said.

'Yes, of course.'

'And you won?'

'Yes. I forgot that I still had them, to be honest.'

'How much did you win?'

'Five thousand pounds.'

'Really?'

'It isn't all that much.'

Unless the timing is right.

'I really didn't think they existed any more,' Beth said.

'They do. It took me ages to find them after the letter arrived. I had to turn the whole flat upside down.' The more detail Frank added to the lie the more he began to believe it himself; he just needed to make sure that he stopped before he went too far and introduced an alien invasion, a romance or he broke into song. 'They'd fallen down the back of the drawer in the kitchen,' he said. 'There was a coffee stain on the envelope but the Premium Bonds are all right. I cheered when I found them. I frightened the life out of Bill.' Involve Bill, Frank thought. His star witness. All three wise monkeys in the form of the world's most inscrutable cat. Try cross-examining that, Perry Mason.

Beth was so used to Frank's get-rich-quick schemes that it was difficult for her to see this as anything different. He was always sending emails or leaving excited messages on Beth's answering machine about a horse running with the name 'Beth's Chance' or a jockey named Derek who was riding a sixty-six-to-one outsider called Lucky Francis.

Last year he'd bought a digital camera and every day for a month he'd taken pictures of charity shop bric-a-brac, ornamental wildlife, decorative plates and metal serving trays and eggcups that he insisted were silver rather than simply silver-coloured. He'd attached the photographs to emails and sent them to Beth, freezing her Internet connection for hours because the files were so large.

'Well,' Beth said. 'I suppose. I mean, I'm going to need to look at my planner.' She translated for him, 'My calendar.'

'Of course.'

'I can't just drop everything.'

'I wouldn't want you to.'

'It is a very long way, Dad.'

'It's only twelve hours,' Frank said, unknowingly using one of Beth's own arguments from ten years ago.

Before she could change her mind or ask him to fax the Premium Bonds letter to her, Frank talked her into getting her planner now and deciding on suitable dates. He knew that he would still need to show her proof that he was serious, either a copy of his plane tickets or him standing on her doorstep in Santa Monica, before she fully believed that he was really coming. He hoped that she wouldn't remember that he'd cashed his Premium Bonds in years ago to pay the rent that was long overdue on the flat that he was about to give away and also that he didn't drink coffee.

He said goodbye and opened his address book again and for the first time in a long time he dialled a different number to Beth's.

It was very early in the morning but the landlord answered, his mumbled voice seeming easier to understand over the phone, as though he was talking through a kidnapper's voice disguiser on its reverse setting.

Frank told him that he wanted to accept his offer. The landlord asked Frank to sign the letter of agreement that he'd given to him with the cheque and to post it in the stamped, addressed envelope that he'd provided. In the letter Frank agreed that he would vacate the flat within three months. The landlord said that he would transfer the money into Frank's bank account straight away and he told him to tear the cheque up. It was just for show. It was like a huge stunt cheque presented to a charity by a supermarket on a telethon. If Hilary, the head of Fullwind's Neighbourhood Watch, had been at her window opposite Frank's flat yester-

day, she might have taken a photograph of Frank and the landlord, each of them with a hand on the cheque. She could have given the photograph to the local newspaper to go under the headline 'Local Man Makes Huge Mistake'.