

The Christmas Challenge 2009

Joe poured his cereal into the breakfast bowl and stared at it, emptily. Lethargy prevented him from summoning up the energy to pour the milk and somehow he had to make it through this day. He leaned back against the sink and slowly sank to the stone floor trying to fight back the tears in his eyes but he lost the fight and tears flowed freely. After a few minutes he managed to pull himself together enough to sit sensibly at the kitchen table and pour some milk onto his cereal. His hand was shaking but he had got this far and he reached out to the drawer for a spoon. As he did so, his favourite cat Three Legs hopped in from outside through the open kitchen window and meowed loudly in greeting.

Three Legs had always been an inspiration to Joe. The cat had been through so much. He put a spoonful of cereal to his mouth and this time his hand wasn't shaking. Three Legs hopped on to the kitchen table and Joe stroked him lovingly. He was slowly coming round now; the feelings of desperation had almost gone. Three Legs tried to pinch some of his cereal but Joe wasn't having that so he poured the cat a saucer of milk and gave it to him right there on the table. Joe had never been one to stand on formality. "Anyway, who else was there to worry about", he thought, "now that Suzie has gone." He finished his cereal completely and stood up to make himself some coffee. As he did so two other cats came flying through the window in quick succession. They weren't quite as cheeky as Three Legs and they both jumped straight down on to the floor and stayed there grooming themselves obviously certain in the knowledge that food would very shortly appear and right on cue Joe stopped what he was doing to open a tin of cat food and with practised ease distributed it on to three saucers. Three Legs hopped down and the cats were soon enjoying their breakfast.

Joe stood sipping his coffee at the same time watching the cats thoughtfully. They had done him a big favour this morning. Their presence and their love of routine had brought him back to an even keel; back to a position from which he could recover and maybe even fight back. He hesitantly turned his mind back to Kyle and found he was thinking about him without the anger and hatred, well, not so much anyway. As he washed up his cup and saucer he saw the postman leave some mail in the box at

the gate and without bothering to dry up he unlocked the back door and walked down the garden path and emptied the mail box of its contents. Once back inside the kitchen Joe went to the cutlery drawer and selected his favourite kitchen knife, his jack of all trades, as he called it and then proceeded to open the first envelope which happened to be rather official-looking and brown. "A bill", he thought. His favourite knife soon did the trick. Joe took one look at the contents and then laughed out loud, probably the first time he had laughed at all for several months. He looked down at Three Legs who was the only cat still in the kitchen with him. "There you are Three Legs", he said, we've won £50 on the Premium Bonds. My best mate's just pinched my wife and cheated me out of a quarter of a million quid and Premium Bonds have come up with fifty pounds to tied us over." He managed another burst of laughter but not quite so enthusiastically this time.

He opened the rest of the mail then returned the kitchen knife to the cutlery drawer. As he was doing that Joe paused and brought the knife back out and looked at it strangely. The knife had a blade that must have been eight or nine inches long and the handle was made of bone with a sliver cap at the end. Joe didn't quite understand why but he found himself slowly running his fingers over the brilliantly smooth razor sharp blade. Three Legs was brushing himself against his legs lovingly and then meowed loudly for attention. He had always been a very demanding cat; loads of fuss was essential to keep Three Legs happy. Joe slipped his knife into its slot, closed the drawer and then bent down, picked his favourite cat up and gave him a cuddle. He stood there for several minutes tickling the cat's ears and staring idly out of the window. Three Legs loved Joe and dug his claws into him to demonstrate just how much. Joe flinched at the momentary pain but at that very same instant a plan flashed into his mind. It was a vengeful, thoroughly nasty plan.

Meanwhile, 25 odd miles away a phone was ringing. Suzie glanced at the name on the display and instantly pressed Ignore. Her mind wandered briefly wondering what would happen when she eventually did answer the call. "Focus", she muttered to herself so none of the colleagues around her could hear. "There's nothing you can do now, he'll phone again later, Ill answer it then. I need some time to think."

On the other side of the world Kyle sat on the beach watching the sunset and allowed himself a wry smile.

"Things are beginning to come together quite nicely," he thought. "Now the hard work begins. I'll phone Suzie again later, she's probably at work but I must talk to her, the whole plan depends on her. That's my only worry. I simply must talk to her to make sure it's all going okay." His wry smile slipped a little as he thought of just how much money depends on Suzie doing her bit absolutely spot on right. Half right wouldn't be anything like enough. He had to pull it off to perfection. He got up, lit a cigarette and strolled up to the nearest bar.

Suzie's day kept her very busy and it went quickly; she liked that. When six o'clock arrived she didn't much want to go home, everyone else seemed to be chatting happily about what they were doing for Christmas and couldn't wait to get off home. Suzie was quiet and stayed at her computer till everyone had gone. Then, realising that she just had to go she put on her coat, walked out of the office to her car. As she drove home she thought about what she had done to Joe. The fact that she had left him for Kyle and then found herself being involved in a plan that completely ruined Joe financially was beginning to plague her conscience. Leaving Joe for another man was one thing, taking almost everything that he had worked so hard for, was quite another and now if she was brutally honest with herself she bitterly regretted falling in love with Kyle. She turned into the short drive up to the house. If she hadn't been deep in thought she might have noticed a certain silver Mercedes parked up the road, a car that, if she had seen it she would have recognised immediately. It was only three or four steps from the shadow of a dense old yew tree to the front door of the house and as Suzie turned the key and pushed the door open, Joe silently came up behind her, shoved her roughly inside and then slammed the door shut behind them both. As Suzie swung round to face him, Joe pulled out a knife and pointed it menacingly at her throat, neither of them said a word for several seconds, then, Suzie, as cool as a cucumber, put her hand bag on the hall table which she could easily reach. She did it slowly and at the same time kept her eyes on the knife. "His favourite knife," she thought and strangely remembered just how easily that same knife used to cut through the Christmas turkey in happier times. Joe still hadn't said a word.

"Well, go on the, Joe, kill me," whispered Suzie nervously, "I deserve it don't I? But then I'll be dead and you can't bring people back from the dead can you, Joe? That'll make you a murderer and when they catch up

with you, as they surely will, who will look after Three Legs then?" Suzie was very calm now she knew Joe so well. Suddenly the mobile phone inside her handbag started ringing, she had put "Jingle Bells" on to the ring tone for Christmas. Joe put the knife closer to Suzie's throat then after a few tense seconds he just cursed, "Oh shit, shit, shit," and turned, opened the door and walked away into the darkness. Suzie was shaking now, but found her phone, "Hello," she said, knowing precisely who was on the other end, "Hello, Kyle, yes it's gone according to plan. Yes, I've done that. No, there were no problems. That's right it couldn't have been easier." She paused to listen to Kyle for a few moments. "You want me to catch the next plane to Sydney and join you for Christmas." At this point Suzie took a deep breath then she spoke into the phone very slowly but firmly. "Kyle darling, I won't be doing that and nor shall I be seeing you again in the New Year. I'm going back to Joe. I'm missing the cats. Yes, that's what I said, I'm missing the cats." At that point Suzie turned the phone off, shut the door and walked into the kitchen to make a coffee. As she did so she realised that she was smiling.