

## Courting Disaster

Bryn looked down at his pint and tried to blend into the shadows. The slim, grey-haired, ironmonger was torn. He hated almost everything about the newly-refurbished Legless Ferret - the décor; the inane twittering from the cinema-sized TV screen filling the wall where the dartboard had hung; the landlord; and the beer, especially the beer – frothy, iced, industrial effluent.

Only one thing enticed him to spend most lunchtimes and evenings in the soulless pub: Gloria.

Avoiding his gaze, she rounded the bar. He lifted his beer and peered over it, watching her move among the tables, strawberry blonde hair framing green eyes and high cheekbones, the cupid's bow of her lips shining with red gloss.

A goddess with a spray can and a J-cloth.

Today's bright summer dress was more conservative than her usual attire. It took a little more imagination to picture what lay beneath the high neckline. And yet...

A cough drew Bryn's eyes to the bar. Dennis, the burly landlord - and Gloria's husband - was eying him suspiciously.

Bryn blushed as he offered Dennis an apologetic shrug and a weak smile. The landlord scowled and shook his head in exasperation. For a moment, Bryn feared an escalation, but Dennis settled for a look that said, *you just watch it*, then went back to polishing wine glasses, holding each up for inspection before placing it upside down in an overhead rack.

The ironmonger knew he was sailing close to the wind - again. But he couldn't help himself.

When he was certain Dennis was lost in his polishing, he turned back to Gloria. Giving no indication that she'd noticed the brief confrontation, she leaned over the table opposite to scrub at some especially stubborn stain. Bryn took in the shapely calves below the three quarter length hemline. After a quick glance toward Dennis, he allowed his imagination to roam.

An hour later, he was admiring the way the light from the skylight played on Gloria's cheeks, when the shop bell gave an insistent ring.

'Damn!' he cursed.

All the time he'd been out there re-pricing old stock, not a single customer. Now, someone turns up.

He raised his eyes in resignation, put a finger to his lips and whispered, 'Excuse me, my dear.'

Pulling on his brown shop-coat and doing up the buttons as he went, he pushed through the curtain partitioning the stock room from the shop. There was no-one in sight, but he heard rustling behind the groaning display stands running the length of the dark interior.

The displays had done nothing but groan since the advent of the large DIY stores. People came in now only when they'd forgotten something during a visit to one of those warehouses – a couple of screws, a hinge, a box of nails. Some of the stock in the dark wooden drawers running floor to ceiling behind him had been there since he'd taken over from his father in the early 70s.

All that time, he'd made barely enough to live day-to-day. And as for the shop being his pension, he doubted anyone would take it off his hands when he retired in a few short years. But there were compensations. The lack of customers left time for other pursuits. He glanced at the curtain and drummed his fingers on the worn oak counter.

A man appeared clutching a packet of wall plugs.

'Hello, Dennis,' Bryn said, trying to hide his dismay.

At a sound from the stockroom, both men looked to the curtain. Dennis eyed it with suspicion. Bryn felt sweat prickle his upper lip.

'Damn that poltergeist,' he said, feeling rather proud of his quick thinking.

Gloria's husband seemed unimpressed, but he re-focused on Bryn, his face etched with impatience.

'Just these, please,' he said, his tone making it all too plain he wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been an emergency.

'One pound seventy nine,' Bryn said, hoping the other man didn't notice the catch in his voice.

Dennis handed over a note, took his change and, with another suspicious glance at the curtain, turned and walked away.

Bryn closed the till on his likely takings for the afternoon and fell back against the wooden drawers. There he remained, eyes closed, until long after the bell had signalled the landlord's departure.

Only when his heart stopped pounding did he take a deep breath, pull back the curtain and rejoin Gloria in the stock room.

As well as a leisurely lunch, Bryn enjoyed lengthy morning and afternoon coffee breaks, especially since Hannah had arrived. The 30-year old entrepreneur had turned the old butcher's shop into a very cosy little café.

Large windows threw light on homely pistachio walls, checked table cloths and shelves lined with copper kettles and china teapots. So complete had been the transformation that Bryn found it hard to conjure up a single image of the shop's previous use. He wondered how Hannah had got it so right, when those responsible for The Legless Ferret had got it so wrong.

The bell above the door gave a chirpy tinkle at odds with the harassed expression of the middle-aged woman who entered. Josie carried a tray of cookies. She handed it to Hannah and wiped flour down the sides of her light blue overall.

Bryn took a sip of coffee. Now there was one woman he'd never been tempted to undress. As if aware of his gaze, she turned and gave a thin-lipped smile.

'Hello, Josie,' he said. 'How's tricks?'

'Oh, you know, Bryn, mustn't grumble,' she said in a grumbling sort of way.

The till drawer opened and she perked up, turning back to the counter. Hannah handed her a note and some coins. The baker's face fell as if she'd expected more, but with a quiet, 'Thank you,' and a shy wave, she walked out of the shop.

Bryn ignored her and smiled at Hannah. The young blonde smiled back, then leaned into the glass display cabinet to lay out the cookies.

Would he miss any customers if he had another coffee? Probably not. And while he drank, he could get to know Hannah better. Who knew, after Gloria..?

The weekly quiz seemed to be the highlight of the village calendar. It certainly drew more folk than the vicar's church services. Bryn guessed the poor man sitting opposite was having the same thought, but he decided not to rub it in.

Once again, he and the elderly cleric had been thrown together, unwanted on other teams, although for very different reasons.

In the vicar's case, it was because he seemed totally ignorant of any subject beyond the classics and religion. And everyone knew that Dennis would ask many more questions about Coronation Street and X Factor than Plato and Revelations. Added to which, the

poor man was so deaf he tended to broadcast the answers given by fellow team members to the whole room. A complete liability.

Bryn, on the other hand, was unwelcome because over the years he'd managed to arouse the suspicion or enmity of almost every man in the village. Perhaps they viewed themselves as cockerels, trying to protect their hens from his wily silver fox.

Whatever the reality, his reputation had de-barred him from just about every team. As usual, he and the vicar had made up a foursome only by inviting a couple of B&B visitors – a liverish sales rep and a walker – to join them. But perhaps these guests would lift the Odds and Sods, as Bryn called them, above their usual lowly finishing position.

Not that Bryn cared. He wasn't there for the quiz. He looked over to where Gloria was chatting to Dennis.

She really was the most remarkable woman. Even after so many weeks, she was still an enigma, revealing nothing beyond her physical attributes. Magnificent as these were, he wanted more, to discover a window into her soul. Tonight, perhaps...

Dennis coughed and gave Bryn the first of many, increasingly severe, looks.

The shop bell rang.

Uhh! Not again, Bryn fumed.

'Bryn!'

Alright, alright. 'With you in a minute,' he shouted, gently stroking round the curve of Gloria's left breast.

The curtain flew open.

Bryn jumped up and retreated three paces.

'Hello, Dennis,' he said meekly.

He should have guessed his behaviour at the quiz would lead to a visit.

The landlord of The Legless Ferret stood transfixed, jaw gaping as he took in the scene. Bryn could hear cogs whirring in the poor man's head.

My wife! Naked! With Bryn Thomas! How? When?

Gloria looked at her husband. Her eyes finally shone with the life force that Bryn had sought for so long.

Dennis's cheeks reddened. His hands curled into fists. He looked from Gloria to Bryn, then back to Gloria. Like a striking cobra, his right hand jabbed into – through – his wife's face, the canvas tearing like tissue paper.

Bryn closed his eyes and cringed, opening them only at a prolonged ripping sound.

Dennis had dragged his forearm the length of the picture, tearing Gloria from her smouldering eyes to her painted toenails.

Would it be enough to assuage a husband's anger? And if not, would he choose to attack Bryn, or his pension - the other nudes adorning the walls?

The answer came as Dennis turned to face him. He roared and lunged forward.

Bryn dropped his paintbrush and cringed against the back wall. When would he learn to choose women without partners?

Hannah wasn't married.

He turned side on, raising his left leg and arm to shield the body parts he felt Dennis was most likely to target.

But did the café owner have a boyfriend?

The first blows rained down.

When he got out of hospital, he'd have to find out.