

1. *Brothers and Brides*

Lightweight overcoats didn't hide their dark blue tunics and black clip-on ties, so it was obvious to the builders on the site that these two men were police officers. As the taller almost danced a jig over the bare ground, which bulldozers had cleared just the day before, the other tried to cover a stack of breezeblocks with a supermarket carrier. Twice the light breeze threatened to snatch the bag away before he managed to trap it beneath his backside.

Once settled, the sitting police officer said, "John, stop dancing around and tell me what this is about."

John took a deep breath, stretching his lungs until they were full of the fresh country air. "The builders say it can be ready in weeks. What do you think?"

"It's a building site. There's mud all over my boots, and I'm at work in an hour so you tell me what I'm supposed to think."

"This is my plot, Mike. You're the first to know. I've put the deposit down and everything. It's going to be my house. This will be my lawn and look at this fantastic view. What do you think?"

"I guess it's great, but a single man's rent allowance won't help much towards a mortgage. You'd be better off staying at home with your mother."

"I won't be a single man much longer."

"Are you telling me you're engaged? I didn't even know you had a steady girlfriend."

"Well, I'm telling you now. I'm getting married on Thursday."

"Thursday - THURSDAY! That's less than a week away. We're supposed to be friends and you're just getting round to telling me."

As though determined to keep him from witnessing the flash of anxiety, which drained the colour from his face, the larger man kept his back to his friend and spoke into the summer breeze. "We're more like brothers than friends, but listen, Mike, there's something I haven't told you."

"That's nothing new. You never tell me anything."

John said, "This is about my fiancée."

"There isn't any need to explain. I guess you're rushing this marriage because you've slipped up, made her pregnant, and her dad has a shotgun. You can't have known her for long."

"All right, I agree." John turned, smiled and joined his friend on the breezeblocks. "As a matter of fact, when we marry, I'll have known Susan for seven weeks. Her dad is long since dead, and she's not pregnant."

"Then why are you in a rush?" Mike shuffled along to avoid the heavier man squashing him or sitting on his lap. "Listen; this is serious. Buying a house and seven weeks from meeting to marriage seems to me that you are hurrying things along a tad."

John said, "You can talk. You met and married Debbie in what? It wasn't a year; I know that."

"Eleven months is a hell of a lot longer than seven weeks. I take it your bride is keen on rugby, so we'll be seeing her on the touch line."

John shook his head. "I wouldn't count on it, but she won't make me give up my rugger like your wife did."

"There's more to life than rugby, though offhand, I can't think what. Will this marriage put the brakes on your other sport?"

John held his hands together and looked at his feet. After a minute or two, he said, "What do you mean?"

"You know damned well what I mean. You're screwing half the wives on the subdivision."

Before John could argue or say anymore that his usual, "All right, I agree," the friends became aware of two men approaching. Both wore suits, which looked incongruous against their rubber wellington boots and yellow safety helmets.

Mike nodded a greeting while John jumped to his feet and welcomed them as visitors to his plot. "I'm the purchaser," he announced, beaming with pride.

Mike stood to let the newcomers spread a large plan on the breezeblock stack.

"Then you'll be pleased to know," began the map spreader as he fought to secure the corners against the breeze. "The council has decided instead of numbers, these houses will be named after towns, lakes and tarns in the Lake District. They'll be in alphabetical order. Look, I'll show you." He prodded the map. "In this road, there's Blackbeck, Boretree, Bowscale, and then yours, Brothers Water."

"Brothers Water," John cuffed his friend as the surveyors left. "There you go; I told you; we are more like brothers than friends. So what do you say? I'm getting married in less than a week. Will you get my bride to the registry office?"

"If I'm to be your best man, I'd better get working on my speech."

"There won't be a reception, so you don't need a speech. Other than my mom and Susan's mom, there will be no guests."

Mike said, "My mum and dad will be disappointed. They've always thought of you as a second son."

"All right, I agree. Your mum and dad should be there, and Debbie if she is up to it with the baby."

"No guests, no reception and no speeches. I guess this will be a very quiet wedding. You have to tell me what's going on."

John shook his head. "Oh, things, that's all."

"What are friends for if you can't share your problems?" John turned away again leaving Mike to talk to his back. "Rule 1: You can't keep these things bottled up. You know how we deal with things in the police."

John's reddening face betrayed a rising temper. "All right, I agree. You've said the same a million times."

Mike said, "Okay, so you do it. Make a joke and get it out of your system. All policemen deal with blood and guts at some time. We deal with it, joke about it and if you have to, cry about it later."

"How many policemen come round and cry on your shoulder? How many offload on you? I'll tell you the answer in one word - none. When was the last time you wanted to discuss what you did at work? I'll tell you in one word again - never, not once. We're coppers and coppers don't do that. We cope by keeping work at work and home at home. Why do you always expect me to be different?"

Mike lowered his voice to little more than a whisper, "Because I don't have the same experience; that's why. Make a joke and let it go."

"They accused me of murder," John retorted. "What's there to joke about? Some still put me at the top of the list when it comes to suspects. No one has accused you of murder."

It was Mike's turn to speak into the breeze, "No, they haven't, but you can't be rushing this marriage because of Francis Turner. He's dead, buried, and nothing will bring him back."

"Do you know what I do, Mike? Every time some bastard says, you did it, Collett. You beat the man to pulp just because he was queer, and we all heard you threaten him. I

just give them a nod and a smile, because I won't let them rattle me. Then I say, 'Screw you,' and visit one of their wives. That's how I deal with it. I screw them and then their wives. Do you want to know the truth, Mike? Do you want to ask me if I beat him to death? Ask, Mike, because I'll tell you the answer. I can't remember. I can't damn well remember. Now make a joke out of that."

John shook his head again, and with one more breath of his precious open air, he turned and stormed back to his car.

Just over a week later, dressed in his only suit, Mike drove his Volvo into Canaan Road. An attractive woman, whom he judged to be around her mid-thirties, opened the door and greeted him with enthusiasm.

"You must be Michael. John has told us so much about you. Please call me Terri; everybody does. Susan is almost ready. Oh, is that your wife in the car? Please tell her to come in."

Mike turned to nod in the direction of his wife. She turned her head away. As usual, harsh words had left Debbie's lips that morning, so she had chosen to stay in the car, where she clung to Rebecca, their fifteen-month-old daughter.

"No," Mike answered with a sigh. "Debbie is eight months pregnant and not feeling too well." He didn't add she had already declared she had no desire to become involved with this "damned wedding." Mike followed Terri into the house to meet, collect and escort his friend's chosen bride.

Dressed in a white shift dress, with no jewellery, hat or makeup, Susan Gallagher stood in the centre of the front room, pale, slim and almost childlike. Her long, straight hair fell loose on her shoulders. The mystical serenity she seemed to exude stunned him. As he reached for her hand, she trembled so much the petals shook their way to freedom from the small posy she held. Knowing quite well it wasn't, Mike asked, "Is everything Okay?"

Terri answered, "Susan will be a minute. She is nervous of the outdoors. That's all it is."

Susan turned. Her eyes were wide, like those of a rabbit caught in the headlights. She nodded and raised her hand. Mike reached out and their fingers touched. Susan flinched and pulled away. Mike blew on his fingertips. "It's Okay, they have that effect on all the ladies." Her eyes told him the comment amused her. She raised her cold hand again. This time, when she felt his touch, she didn't pull away.

"It's t-time," she stammered. Each word demanded intense effort to force it into sound. She clung to his hand and arm until they reached the car.

Debbie didn't speak or even exchange a greeting. Terri joined her daughter on the rear bench seat. As though determined to draw Debbie into conversation, she made the odd polite comment, but Debbie didn't reply. Terri carried on regardless. Seeing the difficulty Sue had in speaking, Mike assumed one way conversations were frequent in their home.

With Susan so shy and agoraphobic, Mike thought about his friend with his obsession for open spaces. As Terri explained Susan's reluctance to step outside, the thought that opposites attract crossed his mind.

The registrar cocked his head forward, but no one heard a sound from the bride's trembling lips. He accepted the nod of her head as affirmation, and the wedding went ahead. John eased the few remaining stalks of the posy from her hands, so she could sign the register. By the time the wedding was over, contractors had laid the foundations for Brothers Water.

"Hey, Mike, did I tell you I've got the police house next door to yours for a few weeks."

"No, but since when do you tell me anything."

It took around four months before the new house was ready. By that time, the shy, agoraphobic and stammering Susan Collett welcomed Mike and Debbie, Rebecca and their new baby as the closest of friends. Once again, Susan struggled to say those same two words, "It's time," and braved the outside world on the journey to her new home.

"I've got you a house warming present," Mike said. "I couldn't help noticing the hundreds of books you have, so I thought you'd like this."

Susan's face lit with joy as she ripped the wrapping paper. "I guess you like it. It's about the Lake District Tarn where your house gets its name." Susan reached behind his neck and planted her lips on his. Mike hadn't expected this intimacy and pulled away. Debbie scowled.

On their return home, she said, "Can't you keep your fucking hands to yourself?"

Mike shook his head in dismay. "You don't have to swear."

"Oh fuck you, Mike Newman."

Mike said nothing, but, under his breath, counted the F words as Debbie voiced rant after rant.

"I guess it's time we thought about buying a place of her own," he suggested as he climbed into bed that night and snuggled down to capture her warmth. Within minutes, she was shouting again, although, for the life of him, Mike couldn't understand why.

In the early hours of the morning, Emma, the new baby, wailed. Mike woke. At first, he assumed Debbie was attending to the baby. He went to join her, but she wasn't there. The baby was alone, so he warmed a feed and changed a nappy. About an hour later, he settled the baby back in the cot and returned to an empty bed.

When Mike visited his friend two days later, he found the heavily built police officer sitting on the new lawn at the front of the house. John was pale, and despite the late summer heat, he was shivering. Mike said, "You look a mess. What's up?"

Mike thought he recognised a hint of fear, which flashed in John's eyes. However, that's all it was, a hint, which disappeared with a smile. "You know that book you gave us," John said. "Do you know how Brothers Water got its name? Legend has it two brothers drowned in that lake, so the locals changed its name. We live in a house shrouded by death."

An estate agents van pulled up outside the house. A man jumped out and started to erect a For Sale sign.

"Are you moving?"

"I reckon we'll have a buyer within a day or two."

"But why? You've just moved in."

"All right, I agree, but it's that legend. I can't live with ghosts."

Mike looked horrified. His mouth quivered. "You can't believe you've seen a ghost. How can a new house be haunted? Get real, there's no such thing."

John's face bore the broadest of grins. "Just teasing," he said, delivering a playful slap on Mike's back.

Despite the reassurance, Mike remembered that brief shadow of fear he had seen in John. "Legend or not," he said, "There is something about this house that has unnerved you, my friend."

John ignored the remark and enthused about the move. "It makes sense. We're going to make a massive profit, and more besides. You have to get out of that police house and buy your own place. You'll never regret it."

"Okay, I guess I'll think about it when Debbie comes back."

"Comes back? Has she buggered off again?"

"Seems like it."

"Who is it this time?"

"I thought it might be Kevin Roberts again, but he's still around."

"Mike, you need to..."

Mike interrupted, "Don't tell me to divorce her. Debbie knows she can come back with her tail between her legs and I'll take her back again."

"And again and again and again. You must get this sorted."

"She'll be back, but it won't get sorted."

"Then you'll be shackled forever."

"I don't see it like that. She's still my wife and the mother of my daughters. We just need to get through the tough times."

"Mike..."

"No, I won't listen. Debbie's my wife: not my slave, not my property. She's not wearing shackles. Okay, I don't like it when she takes flight, but she comes back. That's the point. She comes back, and for a while, we're happy again. You don't understand, but you've screwed around enough in the past, and even now, you're still having your affairs. I guess that's why you married Susan, because she will always be there when you go home. That's just how I am with Debbie."

"It might say St Michael in your underpants but that doesn't make you Saint Mike. You should play tit-for-tat. Screw around and see how she likes it." John cuffed him on the shoulder. "Next rugger game, I'll make sure Roberts gets a kick where it hurts."

"No, let it run its course. Meantime, I'm going to be late for work."

