

## *Chapter Three*

Maxwell skidded to his usual stop at the kerb outside his town house in Columbine. The stop was rather more precipitous than usual, as Jacquie's car was parked there as well. Maxwell's heart did the little flip it always did when he knew he was about to see his wife. The word was still unfamiliar, but the woman wasn't. She had been in and around his life for years, in various roles from irritablee to lover to mother of his son, and now, wife, but even so a little shock went through him every time he came home and found that she was there. He was smiling to himself as he walked up the path, deciding as he went whether he would knock, ring or use his key.

A shrill voice cut him to the quick. 'Well, Mr Maxwell. That smile is a bit of a surprise to me, I don't mind telling you, what with one thing and another.' Mrs Troubridge popped up on the other side of the hedge, giving shape to the disembodied voice. She looked like a prune with hair.

A cold hand clutched Maxwell's heart. To be fair, it

always did when Mrs Troubridge was in the offing, but something told him that this time there was a really valid reason for it. He licked his dry lips. 'One thing and another, Mrs Troubridge?'

'Yes, well, the accident. Presumably that's why you are home so early.'

'I'm not early, Mrs Troubridge. I'm a teacher. We always get home early. And have long holidays. Our salaries are stupendous and we have total job satisfaction. We don't really know we're born. *What accident?*' The last two words were issued in a distant scream, as though from someone underwater down a well many miles away. Faint, but piercing.

The little woman visibly left the ground and clutched at where anyone else's heart would be with a claw-like hand. In the empty recesses of her head she remembered that Maxwell's first wife and child had died, long years ago for her, yesterday still to him and, in her selfish, addled way she was sorry for what she had said. 'Mr Maxwell, I didn't mean to alarm you. I'm sorry for what I said.'

This was almost as big a shock as he had already had and he wasn't sure how many more he could take. He drew a deep breath and tried to calm down. 'What accident, Mrs Troubridge?' He hadn't slipped off his cycle-clips yet in case he had to be away again and mentally noted the distance to Surrey, still saddled at the kerb.

'Nolan. Playground. Casualty. Not serious.' She had resorted to telegraphic speech, a decision arrived at as less

likely to spread alarm and despondency. Her aunt had been incarcerated in the war for just that reason and she had never quite forgotten it.

But she was speaking to air. Maxwell had thrust his key into the lock after only the tenth attempt and was bounding up the stairs three at a time. He burst into the sitting room, to find Jacquie sitting in his favourite chair with Nolan asleep on her lap and Metternich the cat on the chair's arm, glaring balefully at her. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears and she was still wearing her coat. The smile she gave him was watery and the finger she raised to her lips was shaking.

He was on his knees at her side in a heartbeat, hat and scarf flying in all directions. Metternich gave him a cuff round the head for the look of the thing, but he wasn't giving it his full attention and it was a shadow of his usual offering. His slit eyes were fixed on the Boy. He was considering changing the help; he and the Boy just weren't getting the service they deserved. He had sent the little chap out in the morning, all neat and tidy, with a quick lick to finish him off, and they bought him back filthy, with a big white bandage and smelling of clean, which made the cat's nose ache.

'What happened?' Maxwell whispered, stroking her hair and reaching out a tentative hand to touch his little boy's cheek.

'Well, you know Nole,' she said quietly. 'Never does anything by halves. He was on the climbing frame at the afternoon break and he climbed up the ladder. Unfortunately, when he got to the end, he just kept

climbing. Pitched right over and landed on his chin.' She pointed to the dressing. 'Five stitches and a bruise the shape of Australia. And the size.' She tried to smile, but failed and the quivering lip spilt over into crying. She stifled the sobs when the boy stirred and muttered in his sleep. A cloud went across his face as the pain stabbed briefly and then he was off again, twitching as he slept, like Metternich did. Maxwell hoped that this didn't mean that Nolan was disembowelling rats in his dreams.

'So,' she continued, 'Mrs Thomas scooped him up and took him to the nurse. It was bleeding everywhere.' She moved her protecting arm and Maxwell saw the front of his son's T-shirt, soaked in blood and his mother's tears. 'They waited until it stopped and then realised it would need stitches. They called me and I met them in A&E. He was so brave, Max. He didn't cry at all. His chin was so small they couldn't give him a local, so they just stitched it up. And he didn't cry. Not once.'

'You made up for it, I suppose,' he said, looking as though he might join her.

She compressed her lips and nodded. She took a deep breath through her nose and calmed down. 'They said it was a really common injury. One of the nurses and both of the doctors said they had scars under their chin.'

Maxwell lifted his head and pointed.

'Oh, Max, I had no idea you had a scar there. When did you get that?'

'Crécy, was it? Poitiers? Agincourt? No, I tell a lie. I was coming up to five and I fell out of a tree.'

'You were up a tree when you were five?'

'Four.'

'Even worse.'

'Different days, darling, different days. I'd climbed the Matterhorn before I was twelve. Metternich has one as well. Don't you, Count?'

Oh, the old buffer was whittering again. The huge black and white creature couldn't understand what he was going on about, but if they had asked him, he could have assured the Boy's mother that anyone who was anyone had a scar under their chin. He had a fine example, the result of a rather overzealous use of the cat flap when he was only knee-high to a vole. And it was only his lustrous fur that hid all the other wounds of battle. Under all that black and white he looked like Moby Dick.

'Why didn't you let me know?' he asked her. 'I nearly had a heart attack when Mrs Troubridge collared me outside with tales of death and destruction.'

'Max, I *tried* to let you know. I rang school but you'd gone. I got Mrs B. Then I tried your mobile, and guess what?'

'What?' Maxwell was almost certain he knew what was coming.

'Well, surprise, surprise, I got Mrs B again. Your mobile was in your desk drawer. I suppose I should be grateful that you are improving. At least it was switched on.'

'I wondered where it was,' he said sheepishly.

'Well, never mind,' she said. She was too relieved that her son was safe to be angry at his father. 'But, Max,' she looked seriously at him. She saw her opportunity and she

took it. 'This could have been a bad accident. I might have been unavailable. You really have to carry your phone.' Then, as an afterthought, 'And have it switched on. On your person and switched on. That's nice and easy to remember, isn't it?'

'I do understand that,' he said, stroking Nolan's cheek with the back of his fingers and ignoring Jacquie's rather patronising tone. 'I know I ought to be contactable. But I can't have my phone switched on in lessons. I have banned all phones in my class.'

'I thought they were banned at school in general.'

He drew back from her and looked at her as though she was a new and interesting animal just invented by David Attenborough. 'Dear girl, I had always been led to believe that you were a Woman Policeman. Can you really be that naive?'

She shook her head, smiling. 'Sorry, I can't imagine what I was thinking. But, seriously, Max, can't you have it on silent?'

'I don't know. Can I?'

'Of course you can. Or, you could let messages go to voicemail and pick them up in breaks.'

'Again, I must respond – can I?'

'Max, do you know how to use your phone?'

'Of course I do. I've phoned you with it.' He sounded triumphant.

'Yes. I remember those rare times. And, before you say, I have phoned you. Texting?'

'I've had texts.' Triumph was giving way to truculence.

'Sent one?'

'I may have done.' It was pure Homer Simpson.

'To the right person?'

'Who knows?' To Maxwell, a text was something historical. They'd called them gobbets in his day; people were rather more unpleasant in his day.

She sighed and hefted Nolan into a more comfortable position. 'I tell you what, Max. What if you go and make me a cup of tea? I've been sitting here for what seems like hours. I just can't bear to disturb him. I'm absolutely parched. Then, we'll have a lesson in how to use a mobile phone.' He opened his mouth to reply but she was quicker. 'Properly. In all its web-surfing glory.'

He tried to change the subject. 'Is it all right that Nole is sleeping like this? He hasn't got concussion or anything, has he?'

'No, he's fine. They gave him a paediatric painkiller in A&E, just to get him over the first few hours. He'll be right as rain in the morning, but I think I'll sleep in his room on the futon, just to be in range if he needs someone in the night. So,' she made flitting motions with her free hand, 'off you go and make my tea and then we'll talk phones.'

'Ah!' He raised his finger in badly disguised glee. 'My phone is at school.'

'Ah!' She was equally gleeful but with more reason. 'Our phones are the same and mine is here and juiced up and ready to go.'

'Ah!'

'Yes?' She smiled the smile of a woman who has won.

He sighed. 'Nothing. Just "Ah!"' And he went into the

kitchen and began to gather the makings of tea together. Then, like a peal from heaven, the doorbell rang. He stuck his head round the sitting room door, stifling a grin. 'I'll get that, shall I?' he said, and positively skipped down the stairs.

Closing her eyes in resignation, Jacquie settled herself more comfortably under her sleeping son and rested her free hand on her cat-by-marriage. With luck it would just be someone from Kleeneze, a nosy Mrs Troubridge or, at worst, a Jehovah's Witness. Maxwell was particularly effective in dealing with all three – 'Not today, thank you', 'I was just about to have a shower – join me?' and...but luck was not on her side. Above her son's soft breathing and the cat's reluctant purr, she could definitely hear sobbing, and whilst it was not uncommon for Jehovah's Witnesses to sob as they left the doorstep of 38, Columbine, it usually took longer than the few minutes Maxwell had been at the front door. Using the wriggling technique that all mothers subliminally learn as they give birth, she extricated herself from beneath Nolan and left him sleeping in the chair. Metternich, with the speed and cunning native to all cats everywhere, was in the warm space left like a rat up a pipe, although that was not necessarily the analogy he would have personally chosen, given the option.

She went to the head of the stairs and stood back in the shadows. Maxwell was filling the doorway from her vantage point but the voice told her that their visitor was a girl, Sixth Form no doubt. She tuned her ears to maximum Woman Policeman mode and didn't think

she recognised it. So, not one of the elect babysitting brigade, then. But even so, she sounded quiet and not argumentative, so it wasn't one of the drop-outs who littered their doorstep briefly halfway through every year, arguing the toss as to why nail extension technology should be an AS subject. Leaving school had seemed such a Utopian dream at the end of Year Eleven. Six months filling shelves at Morrisons killed all that. Jacquie hesitated, not knowing whether to go down and defuse a situation which might not exist. In her line of work, she was fully aware of how unwise it was to allow a male teacher to be alone with a distressed adolescent girl, although 'alone' was probably not the way to describe their front step, with Mrs Troubridge just a hedge width away. But, on balance, Mrs Troubridge was probably not a witness to rely on, as she had long ago decided that Maxwell, although handy for putting up pictures and carrying out heavy rubbish, was, underneath a pervert, no better than he should be. She decided to go down.

At the sound of her step, he turned. 'Darling, we were just talking about you. Is Nolan awake?'

'No, no, he's still sleeping. I tucked him up on the chair. Metternich is watching him for me.' She smiled at the girl, standing there on the path with tear stripes down her cheeks. 'Who's this?'

'How rude of me,' Maxwell muttered. 'Julie,' he gestured to Jacquie, 'this is my wife. Mrs Maxwell,' he added, perhaps a tad redundantly. 'Darling, this is Julie, who seems to have a bit of a problem but doesn't seem able to explain what it is.'

'Julie,' Jacquie smiled. 'Why don't you come in? Perhaps it will be easier for you when we are inside. I'm afraid our son has had a bit of a bump at school today and is asleep in the sitting room. Shall we go into the dining room? I can leave the doors open and then I'll hear him if he calls, but we won't wake him up.'

The girl looked from Maxwell to Jacquie. These two were difficult to read, not like her parents, who left no doubt about what they felt; mostly anger. But Mad Max made it easy for the girl by stepping aside and gesturing her upstairs with a courtly wave.

'After you, ladies,' he said, adding, 'I was about to make some tea, Julie. Would you like some?'

'Have you got any Coke?' she asked, not really knowing if old people had such things in the house. 'Diet, if you've got it. Citrus Diet for preference.'

'Goodness me,' Maxwell said. 'My very own favourite, in the soft drink line. Well, well. We must have been separated at birth or something. Coke it is. Is that all round, heart?'

Jacquie smiled at Maxwell and then at the girl, standing uncertainly on her landing. She ushered her through the door into the dining room. 'I'd rather have tea, if that's still on the cards,' she said. 'Can there be biscuits?'

'I'm sure there can,' he said. 'Abyssinia,' and he went off to the kitchen, with a sneaky check on his two boys. Nolan was curled up with his fingers in his mouth and the cat was curved into him, like a spoon. See it every day though he might, Maxwell could still hardly credit the

sight of the hard-bitten assassin sleeping with the enemy. He just hoped that Metternich wasn't playing the long game and was not planning a major coup, such as eating Nolan one evening when everyone's back was turned.

Shouldering the dining room door open and balancing a tray, Maxwell could only marvel again at the woman he had married. She was sitting next to Julie, who was now noticeably calmer. They were looking through the thin volume of Maxwell and Jacquie's wedding photos. Julie was cooing and pointing wordlessly, to emphasise some esoteric fashion speciality invisible to Maxwell and to men everywhere. She looked up as he came in and set down the tray, her eyes still red-rimmed but her mouth now in an uncertain smile.

'These are lovely photos, Mr Maxwell,' she said. 'You look very smart.'

'Oh, yes,' he said, passing her her Coke, with ice and a slice. Jacquie got her tea just as she liked it; in a mug and thick enough to stand on. He sat down opposite and smiled. 'I polish up quite well, don't I?'

Julie was one of the Sixth Form girls who actually thought that, ancient as he was, Mad Max would stand up quite well with the likes of...well, that was always a difficult list to start, but with the old actors her mum liked – Sean Connery, that was one. Piers Brosnan, he was all right. She looked up under her lashes and admitted that Mad Max wasn't quite in their league, but he looked very nice in his wedding photos and very proud as well. Mrs Maxwell was nice as well. Really understanding.

Tears stood in Julie's eyes again and Jacquie patted her hand.

'Come on, now, Julie. Explain to Mr Maxwell what you have just told me.'

The girl looked at Jacquie doubtfully. 'But, Mrs Maxwell...will, I mean, does Mr Maxwell...?'

Jacquie smiled and looked at her husband, sitting in a posture of confused alertness opposite. 'I think what Julie means, darling, is that she isn't sure you will quite get what she is talking about. It's a bit technical.'

'Technical?' Maxwell was puzzled. 'You're not doing CDT, are you, Julie? IT? Anything like that?' Encyclopaedic though his knowledge was, Maxwell could not keep *all* his students' timetables in his head.

'No, Mr Maxwell. I'm doing English, Geography and History. It's nothing to do with my subjects. It's this.' She held up her mobile phone, which obediently beeped for an incoming message. She dissolved into tears again. 'It just keeps on and on. I can't stand it.'

If Maxwell was confused before, he was totally at sea now. 'Can't you just turn it off?' This was, after all, his own preferred method.

'That doesn't help, Max,' Jacquie said, absently patting Julie on the back. 'The messages are there when you switch the phone back on. They're not like calls. They are automatically stored on the phone.'

'I think I knew that,' Maxwell said, uncertainly. A distant memory from a long-ago reading of an instruction manual rose to the surface. 'I seem to think you can block a caller.' His hatred of the moronic interrogative

prevented him from making the statement a question, but it was one, nonetheless.

Julie and Jacquie looked at him, their eyes big with concern. Their worlds had rocked on their axes. Jacquie was the first to recover the power of speech.

'Yes,' she said, only just biting back the 'well done, dear'. 'You can do that, but not when the caller withholds their number. You can block all withheld numbers, but of course that means that anyone you *know* who habitually does that would be blocked as well.'

'Yes,' Julie said. 'That's the problem. My stepdad is a doctor and he withholds his number. He often has to ring me, or text, and so I can't block withheld numbers.'

Maxwell seemed to see a simple answer just in front of their noses. 'Can't he *unblock* his number when he texts or rings you?' It seemed too simple to be true.

'It's a bit of a faff,' Julie said. 'He wouldn't always have the time. Anyway...' she looked at Jacquie, asking for help.

'Julie hasn't told anyone about this,' she said, giving Maxwell what he had learnt to consider The Look. 'She hasn't even told her friends. The texts are not very friendly, Max. In fact, they are really very disturbing.'

'Can we see one?'