

Foxwood - Another Year

Chapter 1

“Can’t you do that in the studio?” The question wasn’t really a question, more of a request or perhaps even a veiled command. Josh raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

“I’m only putting on a layer of glaze, Viv. I’ll be done in a few minutes.” He continued to apply the glaze to a small painting lying on newspaper on Viv’s dining table. The small landscape, a little church in the foreground, fields of corn and wild flowers, a distant figure, the splotch of a dog, was pleasing to the eye and would doubtless look good framed and hung at his next exhibition.

The folding doors between dining room and sitting room were open, revealing Viv sitting reading a book, feet up on a pouffe, her face showing an irritation that extended to the way she was glowering at the book and turning its pages. Looking up, she said in a milder tone, “it’s the smell, love. I hate that smell. Why didn’t you do it in your place? Or better still, the new studio or workshop or whatever it’s going to be called.”

Josh straightened up and surveyed the painting critically, blinking several times as if to clear his vision then dabbing gently at its surface at an area that concerned him. He had the tall man’s tendency to stoop a little and the delicate brush seemed lost in the largeness of his hand. As he brushed without answering Viv immediately, his tongue protruded from his mouth and his brow furrowed in concentration. Then he said, “It’s the stand oil.”

“What is? What’s stand oil?”

“It’s what’s in this glaze. And the thinner. I suppose I’ve just got used to it. And the reason I’m not in the studio is basically- Jeff.”

Viv groaned and put down her book. “Is he taking over?”

“Sort of. Feels like that. He’s fixing up the ride –on mower that Lewis seems to have bugged up. If I go in there now, he’ll want to talk. I don’t want to – no, I don’t *not* want to talk to you, Viv,” he said hastily seeing the dangerous look in her eyes. “You know what he’s like- football scores, the latest with Julia, you know what he’s like.” He was concentrating again now, stooping to pick off a hair of the paintbrush from the pale blue of the sky.

“These cheap brushes I got are no bloody good. They shed their hairs far too easily.”

There was silence. The June sunshine flooded through the open windows and outside, Lewis’s dog Jem barked. A car started up. A woman laughed.

“You know, considering how Jeff was when he came here first to live-last summer? He’s a helluva lot more sociable, isn’t he?” Viv took her feet off the pouffe and stood up

stiffly. “Cuppa?” she asked, her tone friendly now, the gripe about the smell apparently forgotten.

“Yes thanks. I’m almost done. I didn’t realise how much you disliked the smell. I’d have finished it off at my place if I had.”

Viv went through to the shiny red kitchen she had chosen over a year ago when she had first moved into Foxwood. Filling the kettle, she took down two mugs from the cupboard, yawning as she did so.

Josh picked up his now glazed picture holding it carefully by the edges.

“I’ll just take it back to mine.”

Viv opened the front door for him, slipping across the landing to open his door. He sidled in with a thanks and Viv returned to make two mugs of tea, then removed the smeared newspaper from the table and scrunched it up into a ball.

In minutes Josh was back wiping his hands in an old rag and he sat at Viv’s table where she put a mug of tea before him and sat down herself.

Taking a sip of the tea she said, “I know what you’re doing, Josh. I’m not stupid you know. You’re trying to demonstrate that you and I can live easily and in harmony in my flat and that you don’t really need yours.”

He assumed an expression of wounded outrage at her suggestion but he knew in his heart of hearts, that territory only infrequently visited, that she’d rumbled him. He did want to move in with her, to spend every night in her bed. He could see no reason to keep on his flat yards away across the landing, especially now as there was a large workroom and studio space, the paint on its walls scarcely dry, where he could work. The new building which used to be the stables of Foxwood. Why couldn’t she see the sense of it? He could sell his apartment, be quids in and invest the proceeds to live out his remaining years,

“You’re an artist, Josh, not an investment banker,” she had remarked tartly when he’s first broached the subject two months before on a walk I to town, “Anyway, I’m not sure I’m ready for that – that commitment.”

“Viv, love, we’re in our sixties. This is the last chance saloon. We’ve both been round the block a bit, it makes sense.”

“I resent the last chance saloon bit and I’ll tell you right now that my journey around the block has been a far shorter one than yours, Josh White. How many children, remind me again?”

“You know what I mean, love,” he said placatingly, taking her hand as they strolled into town down the back lane. “Of course it’s not just the practicalities, is it? You know how I feel about you.” He gave her hand a squeeze and she returned the pressure. “We’re going to stay together. Aren’t we?”

“How many women have you said that to over the years, Josh?” She inquired but the question was rhetorical. “No, no, not that. I’ve got so used to my own space. I like to do things my way. You know what I’m like.” She smiled up at him. “I like to keep my options open. I don’t mean other men- of course not. But Danny... Well, you never know what’s going to happen to Danny.”

Danny was Viv’s only child whose troubled mental health had been causing her problems for twenty years and more. She had bought the two-bedroomed unit at Foxwood with his periods of illness in mind.

Josh sighed and let her hand drop. The trees were thinning out as they approached the tarmac path that led into town.

“But Danny and Faye are fine at the moment aren’t they? Together six months. They looked all loved up when we saw them last anyway. Sure it’s not just an excuse?”

Josh’s voice had developed a harder edge and he had thrust his hands more deeply into the pocket of his fleece as if to rule out any more hand holding, but it was stal mate.

Since then the discussion had been rumbling on in various forms for a few months ever since but Viv had remained adamant. A workshop and studio space had been added at the rear of Foxwood’s eight individual living units so it seemed to Josh even more unreasonable of Viv to object to their living together when he had a space to paint in.

Later that night as they lay in her bed listening to the rain falling softly outside, she joked when he raised the subject again, “You’ll be saying next it would be greener for us to live together.”

“Well yes, so it would,” he began then stopped and laughed. “Well, you know what I mean. I’m here most of the time anyway, aren’t I?”

“Yes, I know and I love that, you being here with me. But not necessarily *all* the time”

She kissed him gently on the nose and turned away from him onto her side, saying sleepily, “Night Josh. Sleep tight.”