

# Accidents and Meetings

Louise Sellers

Thanks to my beta-reader “fredbasset” (from livejournal).



# Chapter 1

## Accidents and Meetings

Nick remembered the house from that first evening in this new world, when he'd gone blundering in to tell Jenny about Claudia only to be faced with the fiancée. He felt his face go hot at the thought. He pulled up and looked across at her.

"Here we are."

She began gathering up her bag and coat. "Thanks for the lift."

"Any time."

She paused a moment. "Look," she said, suddenly, "why don't you pop in for a minute. I can find that plumber's phone number I was promising you."

It couldn't do any harm and he did need to do something about his bathroom soon. "OK."

He paused in Jenny's hallway, mentally comparing it to Claudia's flat. The print on the wall was the same, one of Van Gogh's sunflowers, but Claudia had had coat hooks by the door giving her hallway an air of informality. Jenny's was pristine with bare floorboards and a small table under the print. Claudia had matched the print with walls painted the yellow of the sunflowers, Jenny had matched it with walls painted the pale blue of the background.

"It's in here somewhere." Jenny's voice floated in from a side door.

Nick wandered through to find himself in a home office. Jenny clearly had a repressed disorganised side. Papers were piled on the desk and the shelves above it in teetering piles. Jenny was perched on the desk in her high heels, giving Nick a stunning view of a pair of very shapely ankles. Nick couldn't remember ever paying much attention to Claudia's ankles, but then Claudia had favoured trousers. He resisted the temptation to run a hand over them. Jenny handed him down a large box file. It had "HOUSE" printed on the spine in felt tip. Two more followed it and then she climbed off the desk.

“Everything to do with decoration is in those,” she said.

She opened the first and a pile of catalogues, swatches and scraps of paper burst out. Nick opened the second with some trepidation.

“What am I looking for?” he asked.

“Business Card. Walsh something... or maybe West.”

Nick began picking through the contents.

The doorbell rang. Jenny swore in a fashion that surprised him. Underneath the surface, he suspected, Jenny was a very different person.

“Back in a minute,” she said.

Nick continued carefully leafing through the file but he couldn't help hearing a woman's voice floating through from the hall.

“...of course we could just have gone back to the hotel but since we were close we thought we'd drop in to see you instead. I phoned ahead but all I got was the answerphone.”

“Did you try my mobile?”

“I think the number I have must be out of date.”

“Hello!” A white-haired man appeared at the doorway to the study. He was tall and thin with a bushy moustache and equally bushy eye-brows.

“Hello,” said Nick, uncertainly.

The man held out his hand. “I'm Jim, Jenny's father.”

“Nick,” said Nick grasping the hand. “I work with Jenny.”

“Do you now?” said the man. “All that hush hush stuff.”

“Errr... yes,” agreed Nick.

A shortish woman appeared in the doorway with neatly permed white haired and disconcertingly blue eyes which eyed Nick with frank appraisal. He found himself dusting down his jacket anxiously. Jenny trailed in her wake looking a little helpless.

“Mum, Dad, this is Professor Cutter from work. He gave me a lift home.”

“Oh?” asked her mother.

“Jenny's car got,” Nick searched for a word, “damaged.”

“Damaged?” asked Jim, “How?”

Nick and Jenny exchanged a glance over her mother's head. “It got stepped on,” was not going to be a good answer.

“Hush hush, Dad,” said Jenny.

“Really!” his bushy eyebrows shot up.

“I hope you get it paid for, dear,” said Jenny's mother.

“Don't worry,” said Nick, recalling with a smile Lester's face as Jenny had vented her ire on him. “She's already sorted that one out.”

“Has she now,” Jim’s eyes twinkled. “Some poor Civil Servant been cowed into submission has he?”

Nick nodded, grinning.

“Good oh! Been terrified of her myself since she was about five.” Jim confessed, conspiratorially.

“Dad!” said Jenny. “Nick, this is my father Jim and my mother Lynette.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Nick shook hands with her mother.

“We’ve brought wine,” said Lynette, holding up a Tesco’s wine carrier full of bottles. “You’ll stay for a drink won’t you?”

“Well, I,” began Nick.

“I wouldn’t argue, if I was you,” said Jim. “It isn’t worth it. Jenny takes after her.”

Nick found himself swept into a living room decorated in the muted shades Claudia had favoured but enlivened with artwork, cushions and throws in bright primary colours. Wine glasses were produced and before he knew it he was sat on a sofa trying to explain evolutionary biology to Jenny’s mother.

“What I don’t understand,” said Lynette after a while, “is why this terribly secret project Jenny’s working on needs an evolutionary biologist. It all sounds terribly interesting but I don’t see the connection to national security.”

Nick floundered for an answer.

“Geology!” put in Jim suddenly, “Oil, natural resources, that sort of thing.”

“Well...” Nick found himself unwilling to actually lie to these people.

“Dad!” said Jenny, “Stop fishing. I’ve had to warn you before.”

“I always wanted to be a spy, darling,” he said, apologetically. “You can’t blame me for wanting to live vicariously through you.”

Nick looked at his wine glass. It appeared to have refilled itself.

“I’m not a spy,” said Jenny with some dignity. “I’m a PR specialist working on a sensitive project.”

“Whatever you say, dear.” Nick found Jim was wagging his eyebrows at him again and he couldn’t help grinning back. It wasn’t often he got to see Jenny being teased, or at least, not often he saw her being teased good-naturedly. In fact, he wasn’t sure he’d often seen her relaxed. Her cheeks were a little flushed and the smile surprisingly unguarded. It suited her.

“Do you have any food, dear?” asked Lynette. “We thought we might treat you to a take-out. The Professor too, if he’ll stay.”

“Call me Nick.”

“That’s all settled then.”

Nick blinked. He didn’t recall actually agreeing to dinner.

Jenny disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a selection of menus. After some discussion they settled on Chinese. While Jenny phoned, Nick found himself, sipping his wine which seemed to have refilled itself again and justifying the existence of paleontology to Lynette, who conceded it made good TV but wasn't clear what it's benefit to mankind was.

"We need more physicists, you know," she said.

Nick thought of their almost total lack of comprehension of the anomalies and silently agreed, though he was damned if he would say so out loud.

After phoning, Jenny went into the kitchen to set out plates and cutlery. A minute or two later her father followed her to help.

"I'm afraid Lynette is giving your boyfriend the inquisition," he said. "I think she's lumped him in with Media Studies."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Really?" her father said in mock surprise. "Pity," he added.

"You two are incorrigible. The poor man only stepped inside to get the phone number for a plumber."

"He seems like a decent enough chap though and he's coping with your mother admirably."

"She's not started on the social iniquity of the education system, has she?"

"I think she's saving it for another day."

Jenny returned to the living room and paused in the doorway to watch Nick as he described some fossil to her mother. He had the animated look in his eye he always got when on the trail of some pre-historic creature. He looked as dishevelled as he always did but that made him look comfortable and at home where her erstwhile fiance had always appeared awkward and anxious around her parents. She was aware, in her mildly inebriated state, of an immense fondness for him and a pleasure that he was coping with the situation so well. He looked up, catching her eye where she stood, and smiled at her. The doorbell rang and she had to leave the scene to collect the food.

Three hours later, they were still in the kitchen surrounded by empty food cartons and wine bottles. Somewhere along the way her father had dug out the bottle of single malt he'd given her last Christmas and that had led to an involved discussion of whisky and a rather heated disagreement over the comparative merits

of Speyside and Islay. Nick, Jenny gathered, favoured a good flavour of peat in his whisky. Lynette glanced at her watch.

“We really must be getting back to the hotel,” she said. “Do you have the number for a taxi?”

Jenny headed into the hallway, staggering slightly as the alcohol hit her. Lynette followed to rummage in her handbag for a mobile phone.

“I do like your Professor,” she said. “Is everyone at work like that?”

“Not exactly.”

“Bet he’s difficult to keep in line though. I can’t imagine him kow-towing to bureaucracy.”

“No,” Jenny agreed with a smile. “None of them do,” she added, mentally reviewing the scientific team.

“I hope you look after them. I wouldn’t like to see him all Civil Servantised.”

“I do, Mum. Don’t worry.”

“We should offer him a lift, I suppose,” Lynette said doubtfully. “He can’t drive home now.”

“I’ll ask him,” said Jenny and returned to the kitchen.

“Do you want to share Mum and Dad’s taxi?” she asked.

Nick shook his head. “There’s a late bus,” he said. “I’ll be fine.”

The departure took a while with the four of them crammed into Jenny’s hallway exchanging pleasantries. But eventually she shooed her parents out of the house. Her mother’s eyes were dancing and she distinctly had the impression Lynette was considering a comment along the lines of “don’t do anything I wouldn’t”. Given her mother’s legendary exploits in swinging London that had become something of a family euphemism for “Go for it.” Mercifully, Lynette clearly thought the better of it. Jenny and Nick stood next to each other in the doorway, waving as her parents climbed into their taxi. Then Jenny shut the door while a sigh and leaned back against the wall.

“Sorry for hijacking your evening,” she said.

“It was a pleasure,” said Nick. She was suddenly aware of how terribly close he was standing just across the hallway from her, with his hair all fluffy and standing on end. She was, she reflected, really quite drunk. She took a deep breath.

“I should go,” he said. Even in her drunken state Jenny could tell that his eyes had become fixed on her cleavage.

She shook her head. “There’s a spare room. The late bus will be miserable.” She stood up firmly, though regretted it when she realised it brought her that much closer to Nick’s lips.

“I don’t know,” he began.

“You’re staying and that’s final,” she said, firmly, placing one hand against the wall which brought her in even closer.

A smile ghosted around Nick’s lips, “If you say so.”

Jenny leaned in and kissed him, lightly at first but Nick’s arms slipped around her waist and pulled her in, deepening the kiss. Unable to resist, she ran one hand through his hair.

“Though,” she said a little breathlessly, coming up for air, “the spare room isn’t compulsory.”