Afternoon Tea

Hazel Cooper

Georgina smiled at her reflection in the bedroom mirror as she patted her hair into place and applied a dab of powder to her nose and forehead. She was looking forward to having Michael to tea and wanted to look her best.

She had met Michael a few weeks ago at the local Scottish country dance club that the neighbours suggested she join so that she could get to know people. Although she was nervous on her first visit the club etiquette that existing members take turns to dance with the newcomers meant that she was hardly ever sitting down and feeling like a wallflower. As she had previously had some experience of Scottish dancing she managed to fit in with the steps quite competently but it was Michael, another newbie, blundering around, who had everybody laughing and she found herself more often by his side helping him get through the dances.

"Take your partners for the Dashing White Sergeant", shouted Mike, the caller, and Georgina and Michael once again found themselves together and then enjoying tea in the interval. After a couple of weeks Georgina invited him to the flat. It seemed that he was a travelling rep for a fragrance company and was visiting the area, where he was presently staying in the local Holiday Express Hotel. It was a great pleasure for him, he admitted, to be able to enjoy the home comforts of an attractively appointed apartment rather than the blandness of a hotel room. He admired the collection of Moorcroft, the Lalique vase and a very attractive original painting by a local artist, whose work had recently been hung in the Royal Academy, thereby greatly increasing its value, as she had proudly explained, that was displayed over the fireplace. Michael himself seemed well heeled, sporting a Rolex watch and what seemed like a bulging wallet when paying for the tea and Georgina had hatched a plan.

Now she waited for him to arrive for his second visit. The tea things were ready on a tray in the kitchen and the home-made cake and biscuits placed on plates. The bell rang and with a final smoothing of her skirt she went downstairs to open the door. The sleeping tablets were ready crushed in the bottom of the teacup and she hoped there would be no problem with them working. She would just have to wait until he'd nodded off and then relieve him of his watch and wallet before grabbing her suitcase, already

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packed, and making off. She did not imagine he would hang around once he had come to and found himself alone in the flat but would make a quick exit and not phone the police. She would return later to set the alarm and hoped these plans for the afternoon would work out. Georgina opened the door and welcomed him in with a smile.

Tea was progressing well: Michael had politely offered to carry the tray in for her and placed it carefully on the polished coffee table. They relaxed back into the armchairs. He had plenty of anecdotes about the customers he visited and Georgina was laughing and feeling relaxed, but as time wore on she became aware of the time and concerned that the sleeping tablets did not seem to be working. Then she remembered with a jolt that Michael had put the tray down and she thought that perhaps he had twisted it round so that in fact it was she who was drinking the laced tea. Hurriedly, she put it back on the tray half finished.

Just as she had this thought Michael got up suddenly and said "Look, I've been thinking. I haven't shown you any of my samples, have I? Why don't I pop out to the car and pick out some of the popular ones? There might be something there you'd fancy. In fact, I think I've got just the one", and then he was walking briskly along the hall and out to the car. When he returned with a small bag in his hands he smiled and said "Why don't you sit down, and I'll spray some on a cloth and waft it under your nose – get your opinion", and he put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her back into the chair. "Take off your glasses and close your eyes", he commanded in a soothing voice and as she reached out to put her glasses on the side table she heard the soft hiss as the perfume was sprayed onto the cloth and felt it being pressed to her nose. She sniffed hard but couldn't really identify any particular aroma so she took a deeper breath.

When she opened her eyes, feeling rather groggy, all she saw was an empty room. Where were her glasses? She fumbled on the table at her side where she found them and put them on. She looked round. Where was Michael? She called his name in a feeble voice, increasing it a bit as panic began to set in. "Michael, where are you?" she called. But Michael was not there, and nor were the Moorcroft collection …. the Lalique vase …. and the beautiful painting over the fireplace. Desperate, and in disbelief, she grabbed the arm of the chair to lever herself up and tottered into the bedroom where the dressing table was devoid of the heavy silver photo frames, drawers were open and it was obvious that they had been ransacked and jewellery stolen.

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Moaning in despair Georgina fell on to the bed. She took several deep breaths to calm herself and, gathering her wits about her, she reached for the bedside ‘phone to ring the police but she paused for a moment before doing so. She thought it might be prudent to a create a story about how she had been overpowered by a rogue caller rather than admit to her gullibility, and she made up a credible narrative along this line. She hoped that the police would be convinced by this and that she could also use the scenario to explain it to her brother and his wife, when they returned, whose home it was and for whom she had been house-sitting for the last three weeks.

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