

Gemma's WhiteCliff

Keith Hoare

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British Library Cataloguing In Publication Data. A Record of this Publication is available from the British Library

First Published 2007 by:

Exposure Publishing, an imprint of Diggory Press Ltd

Three Rivers,

Minions,

Liskeard,

Cornwall, PL14 5LE, UK

&

Diggory Press, Inc.,

Goodyear,

Arizona, 85338, USA

**ISBN 978-184685-693-3**

<http://www.gemmaswhitecliff.com>

Gemma grabbed her school bags as the train pulled in, placing a book she'd been reading back into her coat pocket. She took her favourite seat in the carriage, which was, as usual, virtually empty apart from the regular passengers that used the train. However, before it pulled out of the station, a man of around forty came into the carriage and looked round before settling down in the seat opposite her. He nodded a greeting before pulling out a newspaper and starting to read.

She'd watched him as he'd entered. He must have been around six-feet in height, with short wavy black hair and dressed immaculately in a pinstripe suit. Not the type of person usually on the early train; more likely to catch the later one, which carried office workers. At that moment the train set off. After looking out of the window for a short time Gemma removed the book from her pocket and resumed reading.

Nearly sixteen and finally leaving school for college in a few weeks, Gemma had always been taller than the other girls in her year. As a result, she looked gawky, her clothes never seemed to fit and she didn't like herself. But the last six months had seen a remarkable change; she'd stopped growing at five-feet eight and was beginning to fill out. With her long blond hair and blue eyes Gemma had not only turned into a very attractive girl, but one in which older lads had begun to take a real interest.

However, even with all this newfound attention she still didn't have a steady boyfriend, and wanted one desperately. This need was based upon her being fed up at home with little or nothing to do, rather than really wanting a boyfriend, though she dreamt of being taken out for a day at the weekend and to a movie during the week. But she found the boys in her class at school too immature, besides having no transport. The older ones that did have a car, despite their attention when they saw her in town, weren't particularly interested in having a fifteen-year-old as a steady girlfriend, particularly as she lived twenty miles away. The few she met in her local village simply weren't her type. They

were too provincial, whereas she was very much a city girl with city ways. Although she was more confident in herself, her life at this moment in time was particularly boring.

Gemma was distracted from reading her book as the ticket inspector entered the carriage. She smiled and handed her ticket and school pass for him to check. He took a cursory glance, thanked her, and moved on. After continuing to read for another twenty minutes she placed the book on the table in front of her and gazed out of the window.

“Are you enjoying the story?” the man suddenly asked.

“Excuse me?” she replied, turning to look at him.

“The book. Are you enjoying it?”

Gemma wasn't shy, or afraid to talk to people. She was well aware that strangers might pose risks (teachers told them this twenty times a week at school), and under normal conditions she'd be very nervous if an older man started talking to her. However, on the train and in a carriage containing other people she knew by sight, she didn't consider herself to be at any risk from this man. “Oh... Yes, I've read a few others by the same author. He's one of my favourites.”

He grinned. “That's interesting; tell me which book did you like the most then?”

Gemma frowned. How would this man know anything about the books? After all, they were typical older teenage stories, not what a man would want to read. “You mean to say you've read the books as well?”

“I should. After all, I wrote them, although I confess I didn't read them after the proof copy had been finalised and passed.”

Gemma couldn't believe her luck! To be actually sitting opposite one of her favourite authors. “I love *Call out of the Dark*. It's so exciting when Peter's face-to-face with the drug baron and he bluffs him into handing over the drugs with the police watching.”

“Ah yes, I remember that part of the book, it was one of the most difficult chapters to write. So do you have any more of my books?”

“I’ve got five altogether,” Gemma replied, pulling another book from her bag and showing it to him. “I bought this last week, the others I received through the post.”

“So you’re in a book club?”

“No, Mum wouldn’t let me be a member of a book club; I won a competition after filling in a form in at the shopping centre. I fill loads of competition forms in and never win anything, so I was really surprised when I won book tokens; anyway, I sent them off for the books.”

The man grinned. “And you spent it all on my novels? I’m honoured.”

“Yes, the majority... but they are good stories and it means I’ve got the set now.”

They both fell silent. Gemma had an idea and was building up the courage to ask him. Eventually she decided to take the plunge. “Can I ask you to do something for me, please?”

“Of course, if I can.”

“Would you sign this one? My friends won’t believe I’ve met you otherwise.”

He took the book from her, removing a pen from his inside pocket. “What name should I sign?”

“Gemma, please.”

He signed: *To Gemma, one of my top fans.*

She looked at the signature, then towards him. “That’s cool, thank you.”

“Anyway, Gemma, tell me, what do you like doing in your spare time – apart from reading that is?”

Gemma shrugged. “Not much these days, that’s since we moved to the country. Mum loves horses, Dad plays golf or does off-roading with his four-by-four.”

“So you don’t like any of those things then?”

“No, not really, I fell off a horse when I was eight and have been scared of them ever since. Mind you, I’m not as bad as I was, at least I do ride sometimes, but I don’t showjump like Mum. We did have a dog I’d take for walks before he died; mind you, he was very old. Then on Saturdays I come into town and meet my friends in the shopping centre. Sometimes we go to a club called Heatwave.” She scrunched her face. “It’s not a real nightclub, more a coffee club, but there’s good music. At half ten they close

and we all have to leave, then it changes to a full nightclub until four in the morning. We've never been then, but in a couple of years we will. Sundays I used to work at a garden centre a couple of stops down the line from home. I ran their café, but the centre's having a hard time and doesn't need me anymore."

"It sounds like you have lots going on in the countryside, but I suspect you are more of a town girl in your heart of hearts?"

"I suppose I am, but when you're not old enough to drive and rely on public transport, you realise why people want to live in the town. The house we live in now is okay, but really, really big. There was one advantage in moving though."

"There was?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, my bedroom's twice the size of the one in the old house, so now I've loads of wardrobe space." She looked at him for a moment. "Anyway, enough about my life, it's too boring. Where do you live?"

"I live in Wellchurch and work in the city, but today is slightly different, otherwise I'd have been on the seven o'clock train."

"Why is today different? Although, it was lucky you did, at least I got to meet the author of the books I'm reading."

He leaned forward, his voice low, though with the spacing of the other passengers in the carriage no one would have overheard their conversation. "I'm on a mission. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes, of course, but what sort of mission?"

"Well, I've been to my publisher with a new novel, at this stage it's all very cloak and dagger, so no one knows what's in it. Anyway, the proofs are finished and we've been going through pictures of girls for the front cover. I use an agency and they sent the photos down to my publisher. The problem is we've spent half the day looking through the ones they sent and I still can't decide on which one's suitable; you see, she's got to have very much a girl-next-door look. Very feminine, a touch naïve, if you understand what I mean. You see all the photos I saw were models, or kids striving to be models, far too perfect for my idea of such a girl."

He opened his bag and placed a number of photos on the table between them, spreading the photos out. “What do you think?”

Gemma’s eyes opened wide; he was actually asking for her opinion about who should be on the front cover. She looked at the girls’ pictures, studying each one, then looked up at him watching her. “I can see what you mean; they aren’t exactly the schoolgirl image, some of them look to be in their twenties, not teens.”

He raised his hand and waved a finger at her. “That’s exactly what I said to my publisher; they were just not right; you have good perception. It’s a good job I’ve still got two or three weeks to find the right girl.”

At that moment the train began to slow down. Gemma grabbed her bag and stood up. “I’m sorry I have to go, it’s my stop. It’s been really nice talking to you; good luck with finding a girl for your book. I’ll look out for it on the shelves.”

He smiled at her. “I’ve enjoyed our conversation as well. Have a good weekend and who knows, we may perhaps meet again.”

Gemma stepped down from the train and walked slowly up to the ticket barrier. As usual there was no one there and she glanced back as the train pulled out. To meet Steven Shaw in person had really made her day; she couldn’t wait to tell her mother and show her the signed book!



It had been a week since she'd met Steven Shaw on the train. Gemma had told her mother and shown the signed book to many of her friends. They were all envious that she'd actually talked to the author; even her mother was pleased for her, although she again warned Gemma against talking to strangers on the train. But Gemma had told her the carriage was half full and he'd been very nice and courteous. However, her mother had slight doubts as to the real intentions of a middle-aged man talking to a schoolgirl, and made a point of ringing the railway company who operated that line, to make the staff aware of what happened.

"Where's Gemma?" her father asked his wife as he entered the kitchen. "She's coming, isn't she?"

Her mother smiled. "Of course she's coming. I called her ages ago, but she'll still be getting ready knowing our daughter."

He sighed, taking a seat at the kitchen table and filling a cup with coffee. At that moment Gemma came into the room, dressed casually in jeans and top and with her hair down. She kissed them before taking the chair opposite her father and pouring herself a coffee. "What time's the auction, Dad?"

"It starts in about two hours, but we need to get off soon because they've a small all-terrain vehicle I'd like to give the once over; it'd be really useful to get to the far pastures."

"Could I use it on our land?" she asked enthusiastically.

"You'd kill yourself, Gemma; it's more dangerous than the Land Rover."

She frowned. "No I wouldn't, besides, its okay you two having all the powered vehicles but I'm the one that often has to walk and bring the horses back, or go and shut a gate someone's left open."

Her mother joined in at that point, seeing the disappointment in her daughter's face. "Dad and I will see, love, I think with a little tuition you'd be able to use it. Shouldn't she, George? Anyway, did you see anything in the list you fancied?"

Gemma shrugged. “No, it’s not my sort of thing; mind you, I might look round the house. I’d like an extra set of drawers in my room, that’s if there’s one that doesn’t look like it’s come out of the ark. What are you two after, as if I didn’t know?”

Her father pulled out the catalogue and pointed to a land lot number. “On that lot there’s an old barn close to a country road, Gemma. Mum and I looked it over yesterday; it would make a fantastic holiday home to let out. We need to get it for a hundred and sixty thousand to be viable; if we’re successful we’ll go for the next lot of fifty acres, as it borders our property and the land around the barn.”

She looked at the list and sighed. “I suppose if you buy another barn for conversion, we won’t have a family holiday this year again. I can’t see the one you’re currently doing being finished and sold this side of Christmas.”

Her father put down the catalogue and looked at her. “We did talk about this, Gemma, and agreed that the barn conversion comes before holidays. But Mum and I have been talking; it isn’t fair on you having no holiday because of what we’re doing. You’re sixteen this year, so you can go away without us. We’ve asked your Aunt Catherine if you and your cousin Andrea can go to Spain this summer for ten days or so. It’d only be a self-catering and low-cost flight, but at least you’ll have a holiday. You might even grab an extra week there and stay with your grandma and granddad in their villa.”

Gemma’s eyes lit up, a beam spreading across her face. “That’s really, really cool. Thanks, Dad. I’ll be able to top my tan up with real sun rather than the sun bed.”

“Well, Mum will sort things out with your aunt.” He glanced at his watch. “Anyway, time we got going, so let’s get on the road, shall we?”

Her mother collected the cups and rinsed them while her father locked up the house, then they left for the auction. It was only six miles away by road, although straight across the fields a good deal less. As they arrived in the farmyard, they noticed a food van had been set up in a corner, and a large number of people were milling about. They were directed to a field converted into a car park for the day.

As they walked back to the yard Gemma's mother turned to her husband. "I want to look at the tack, George. You and Gemma go and sign in and get me a number as well please, then while you look at the vehicle Gemma can come and find me."

Gemma stood around, kicking a tiny stone while her father registered. She didn't like auctions, especially ones where someone had lost their home. Her father handed her two cards, each bearing a number. She'd used these sorts of cards before: they allowed the auctioneer to log a sale without having to take buyers' names and addresses and slowing the auction down. It also meant that sometimes the other buyers didn't know who the actual purchaser was.

Gemma had bid at past auctions but only for small items and her limit was five pounds. However, once she'd bought a box of mixed jewelry; just cheap costume, but she liked wearing necklaces and bracelets and what she bought for two pounds would have cost close to fifty pounds in a shop.

While her father looked at the all-terrain vehicle Gemma wandered off to find her mother.

"Hi, sexy, like the clothes you're nearly wearing. Why don't you come over and talk to us?" a male voice said to her.

Gemma looked at three lads leaning against a wall and smiled to herself but ignored them. She was well used to those sorts of comments when she went to town to see her mates.

One of them came after her. "Come on, talk to us, you look as bored as we are," he urged.

She stopped. "So why are you here then if you're that bored, shouldn't you be down at the pub or somewhere?"

"We live here, or rather did until the bank made Dad bankrupt. So the auctioneers gave us a job for the day, showing people where everything is, and making sure no one pinches anything."

"That's awful; I don't think I'd like to come back," Gemma replied with concern.

He shrugged indifferently. "It's alright; mind you, we're in a rented house now, and that's got central heating. Try living in this place in the winter. Anyway, I'm Darren, that's Kenny and the other's Callum."

"I'm Gemma. So why did the farm fail then?"

“Dad injured his arm but never said anything, just a cut and a sprain really. But the cut got infected and before he knew it his whole arm had swollen up. He still wouldn’t go to hospital, preferring Mum’s home-made remedies.”

Gemma looked confused. “What’s his cut arm got to do with losing the farm?”

“Well, he ended up in hospital with blood poisoning. It stunk rotten I can tell you, and besides Dad being pretty ill they had to take off part of his arm. After that, we couldn’t keep the place running and debts just started mounting.”

“But he must have been insured?”

Darren laughed. “Yeah, through the Farmers’ Union. But they wouldn’t pay out, saying he’d not sorted out proper medical assistance and had caused a simple injury to become life threatening. The mortgage company said the same and they didn’t pay up. We argued and had a solicitor try to sort it but he got nowhere; then the bank wanted its money and just walked in one day and took over.”

“Your mum must be devastated?”

He could see the concern in her face and decided perhaps she’d begun to feel sorry for him. “You’re right, Mum took it bad, and so did I, being the eldest that is. But we’re trying to live with it and I’m at least going to college in September. That’s something I’ve not been able to do for three years because of this place.”

“Well, I hope everything goes well. Maybe I’ll see you around but I’ve got to go; Mum needs her card for the auction.”

“Can I buy you a burger later?” Darren asked.

Gemma smiled. “So long as you don’t call me in a derogatory way again.”

“Yeah, that’s Kenny and his mouth. He’s at that age, but I’ll give him a good kicking if you want?”

“No, it’s okay, just tell him will you. Anyway, I’ll see you later.”

While Darren watched her go his brother came up beside him.

“That’s a really sexy girl, Darren, wouldn’t mind having her in the barn.”

Darren turned and slapped him across the head. “Keep your dirty mind to yourself. I’m taking that girl out.”

Kenny laughed. “Oh yeah, in your dreams. She’ll already have a boyfriend, those sort always do; anyway, she’d never agree.”

“Well that’s were you’re wrong, she’s having a burger with me later,” Darren replied cockily before turning and walking away. Kenny stood for a moment and glanced across at Callum. “Hey, Callum, Darren’s got himself a date at the burger wagon with that sexy blonde. How cool’s that then?” Callum burst into laughter and they both ran off to join Darren.

Gemma caught up with her mum, giving her the card. “I’m going into the house, you never know, I might find something I’d like.”

“I’ll come with you, love; everything’s a bit too old and worn for the pony club.”

They wandered around but found nothing they wanted to buy, and eventually joined her father who was already on one of the chairs provided in front of the auctioneer. As they sat down on either side of him he urged them to move closer, his voice low so only they could hear. “Bit strange, there’s only three people who’ve logged funds for the land part of the auction. Maybe there’s no real demand, so we might get it cheaper than we thought.”

“What’s the funds bit mean?” Gemma asked.

“Well, love, when you’re buying property or land in some auctions, like a forced sale, they often require proof you have money to cover the bid you’re making. The last thing they want is unsold property or land on their hands afterwards, so that’s why my card is a different colour to yours. In our case we logged a quarter of a million bank guarantee against our bids, and the card I hold shows this to be the case.”

Gemma’s eyes widened. “Have we got that much?”

He smiled. “No, all it means is the bank will support a mortgage or loan to that amount; not that I intend to spend it, but you always need a buffer.”

“But what would happen if you lost your job or you had an accident, couldn’t we be in the same position as these people?”

Margaret smiled. “That’s our Gemma: always worrying about ‘what if’.”

“No, Mum, I’m serious, I’ve just spoken to three lads who lived here; now they’re in a rented house with nothing just because their dad had an accident and lost his arm. We’ve a lovely home, I’d hate to see everything you’ve done turn out like this, for the sake of a few acres and maybe another barn conversion.”

“She’s right, George; Gemma should understand what we do.”

“Okay, Gemma, a quick explanation,” her father began. “As you know, we don’t farm. We rent out the land to people who do. That means we’ve an income from the land we own. Currently we have a number of farmers who rent our land, so if one goes out of business, like this one, the odds are the others will carry on and may even take up the vacant land. Barns and buildings are a bonus, if, like the one we’re doing up at the moment, we can get planning permission to turn it into a house. On top of all that we life insure each land purchase, so if I were not here your mum would owe nothing. Now are you happy?”

Gemma gave a weak smile. “Of course, I knew you’d have everything sorted; it’s just when you hear what happened here you get a bit nervous, or I did at least. You have to remember my savings are only a few pounds and what you do seems really scary.”

He put his arm around her and hugged her. “Don’t worry, love; we wouldn’t risk our home or your future.”

At that moment they had to stop any further conversation as the auction began. The first items were just implements and didn’t fetch very high prices. The all-terrain vehicle received heavy bidding. George dropped out when it had gone over £600. By then the auction had run for two hours. The auctioneer looked round the crowd.

“We’ll be taking a short break before the land sales, if anyone still hasn’t registered and obtained a pink card, please do so now, thank you.”

An hour before this announcement Gemma had gone for a walk, she’d become very bored but promised to return for the land sales. Callum saw her on the way back to the farmyard after she’d wandered down the main entrance track before turning back.

“Bought anything?” Callum asked, intending to strike up a conversation with her.

She shook her head. “No, farm bits aren’t my sort of thing.”

“Do you live round here?”

“Yes, a few miles away.”

“Got a boyfriend, have you?”

“That’s my business.”

“Which means you have, and not admitting it?”

She shrugged. “If that’s what you want to think, not that I can see it’s anything to do with you.”

“It bloody well is if you’re going to go out with our kid. He may think he’s a chance with you, but I know different,” he retorted.

Gemma scrunched up her nose. “Since when am I going out with your brother?”

“He thinks you are; said he’d a date.”

“I’ve got no date with your brother, unless you mean his offer to buy me a burger? That’s hardly a date.”

“Yeah, whatever, but in his mind it’s a date; anyway, he’s got no money so you should refuse. It’s bad enough your sort taking our home and the things for peanuts without expecting us to feed you as well.”

Gemma was incensed. “Excuse me, I’ve bought nothing; besides, I don’t need your brother to buy me food, I’ve my own money thank you.”

“So why are you here? It’s hardly a tourist area, so you’re either gloating or expecting to buy something at a knockdown price.”

Gemma was getting fed up with this lad. “What’s it to you? You don’t live here anymore. But if you must know we aren’t interested in the farm, or even the equipment. Maybe just some of the land. Dad rents it back to farmers round here, those who can’t afford to buy, but that’s it. So why am I getting a hard time?”

“Well whatever, keep away from my brother, that’s all, we’ve enough problems without him getting involved with your kind.”

“And what kind’s that?”

He laughed. “A stuck up mummy’s child that’d shit herself if I went boo.”

This time it was Gemma’s turn to laugh. “Grow up, little boy, I go to a school of four hundred kids. There you live daily

with drugs, insults, fighting, and lads that'd slash your face with a Stanley knife just for fun. If that weren't enough, we also get threatened for our pocket money. Even some of the girls are as bad as the lads, enjoying sticking your head down the toilet if they don't like your face; so don't give me that shit. Talk like that in our school and you'd not see the day out without a good kicking."

Then she walked away; after just a few yards Darren came running up to her. "Thought you were coming for a burger?" he said breathlessly.

"I was, but forget it and if you want to know why ask your stupid brother."

He grabbed her arm. "What's he been saying?"

Gemma shook herself free. "Listen, what's it matter? I don't fancy you, I'm not that broke that I need someone to buy me a burger. Besides, I'm here with Mum and Dad, not alone, so I'd prefer to stay with them."

Darren stormed away, shouting after Callum that he was dead when he got hold of him. Callum was already running away towards the main entrance.

Gemma grinned and returned to the auction area, flopping down alongside her father. She'd had enough of lads her age. "They're stupid," she said to herself, "from now on I'm getting a boyfriend a lot more mature and with at least some brains."

However, much as Gemma wanted this she knew it wasn't going to be easy. After all, even at sixteen it was very unlikely her parents would allow her to stay out late and never overnight with a lad, and the sort she wanted would expect that. But she did have the advantage of her height, her figure, and her great personality (well, she believed it was great anyway) to attract the lads, which she seemed to achieve with relative ease.

"Sandwich, love?" her father asked, bringing her out of her thoughts. She accepted it gratefully and with a half bottle of sparkling water she'd been carrying around, settled back to read the land listings. At that moment the speaker came to life; it was now time. Dozens of people crowded into the area to listen to the bidding.

First was the farmhouse with the five surrounding acres. The bidding soon rose to over £100,000 and kept climbing until it stuck at £190,000. The auctioneer tried to push it up, calling out

that he was now selling, indicating to the audience that the reserve had been exceeded. Suddenly it was over and the hammer came down.

George turned to Margaret. "That's forty thousand below the expected, very interesting. I wonder if it's setting the level for land values."

"Let's keep our fingers crossed, shall we?" she replied as the first of the plots came up that they had no interest in. Then it was a plot bordering their land. George ignored the low bids, finally raising his hand to offer £1,550. No other bid followed and the hammer came down. They'd bought 50 acres for just over £77,000. Then they went for the next lot, complete with barn and 20 acres. The room was silent, after rising fast to £1,000 an acre. George responded with £1,100, holding his breath as the auctioneer suddenly brought the hammer down. They had it.

George made few calculations on his note pad. "We're at a hundred thousand, love. I'm going for the other one bordering us. Do you agree?"

She nodded her agreement. George ignored the next lots then bid on the final 50 acres, though he was pushed to £1,600 before he won the bid.

"That's useful acres, Gemma, for one hundred and eighty thousand pounds plus a barn ripe for conversion. It's been a good day," he said.

She gave a weak smile. "But you didn't buy the all-terrain vehicle. I hope you're not expecting me to go and look at the fences on foot now? I'd be gone a week."

He laughed. "Don't worry, love, we'll soon have it all rented. This last bit will join up some of the fields very nicely. Besides, there's always the horses; you've just got to get your confidence back, then you'll never be off them. Anyway, let's you and I go and sort the payment out, shall we?"

After he had signed all the papers they made their way back to the car.

Darren stood with his brothers, watching her leave. "See you around?" he called.

Gemma ignored him and stayed at her father's side.

"Do you know them, love?" her mother asked.

“Only to talk to, they used to live here; it was their dad who became ill after the accident.”

Just as they were about to climb into the car a man ran up to them, breathlessly. “Mr. Watson?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m George Watson; this is my wife Margaret and Gemma our daughter. Can we help you?”

He nodded a greeting to them before looking back at George. “The name’s Harry Burk. I live at Ridge End Farm. You bid on lot hundred and forty and won. Other farmers in the area tell me WhiteCliff doesn’t farm apart from having a couple of horses, but it does rent land.”

“That’s true,” George replied.

“I was wondering if you’d consider renting the land you purchased today?”

“Are you interested in the hundred acres? We’re not renting the twenty around the barn for the moment.”

“Yes, that would be fine. I could pay around two hundred an acre with a long lease, mainly because of planning for livestock.”

“I can’t see a problem with that, Harry. Why don’t you come over to WhiteCliff next week and we’ll finalise all the details. Have you a pen and paper, love, so I can give Harry our telephone number?”

Harry took the number and left to collect other items he’d bought.

George looked at his daughter. “Now do you understand, Gemma? We buy land, and then rent at above loan repayment rate. In this case we’ll earn twenty thousand a year, guaranteed for a few years, which adds to our investment and gives us a little extra.”

Gemma grinned. “That’s really cool, Dad. I wish I had some land then I wouldn’t have to work. For twenty thousand a year I could just laze on the beach all day in sunny Spain.”

“Come on, let’s go and look at our barn, shall we?” he laughed. “Anyway, Gemma, one day it will be all yours. It will be interesting to see if you really do what you suggested, when you own WhiteCliff.”

She climbed into the back of the car. 'Some hopes,' she said to herself, 'they'd have sold WhiteCliff and retired long before I inherited a field to rent.'

Two weeks after the auction Gemma caught a bus into the nearby town on Saturday morning. She'd arranged to meet her friends at lunchtime in a coffee bar. Her only problem was the timetable of the infrequent buses meant she'd be in town two hours earlier than they would, so as she'd time to kill, Gemma would go round the clothes shops looking for bargains.

Dressed very casual, in hipster jeans and short top, her hair hanging loosely, Gemma looked completely different to the schoolgirl with her hair up, who travelled on the train in the week.

She'd been in the town for about twenty minutes, spending time in some of the low cost fashion stores. With ten pounds in her pocket, three pounds of which she'd need at the coffee bar, she was happily going through the five pounds bargain rail when she heard her name called.

"Gemma... It is Gemma, isn't it?"

She turned and saw Steven Shaw standing a short distance away. "Hi," she replied, not really sure how else to answer.

He walked up to her, smiling with some relief. "Do you know, I've been standing here for a few minutes, not sure it was you. I must say you look very different to the girl I talked with on the train."

Gemma felt a little nervous seeing him again, but he'd been good enough to sign her book. She smiled. "So what brings you to our town?" she asked.

"Coffee."

"Coffee! How do you mean?"

Steven grinned. "Let me explain, I come every fortnight to collect my beans from the coffee house in Park Street, in fact that's where I'm going now. They sell Blue Mountain, which I love. So I get them to grind me a pound or two then I keep it in the freezer for a special treat late at night."

Gemma smiled. "That's really cool, not that I like coffee much, well not the real stuff that is. Dad has one of those

percolator things, but it comes out more like ink than coffee and not very drinkable.”

Steven nodded knowingly. “Yes, I can understand that, without very careful control of the amount you put in, it can be a little unpredictable. Anyway, what are you up to, you’re also a long way from home?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Not much, killing time really until I meet my friends in an hour. I thought of getting a new top for the summer but the bargain rails have nothing, and I’m not paying twenty quid for one, even if I’d got that sort of money, which I haven’t.”

He glanced at his watch. “What time do you meet your friends?”

“Around one thirty, why do you ask?”

“Well that gives you quite some time to kill, as you say. I’d be very pleased if you’d join me for coffee, but I’d understand, Gemma, if you said no. After all, I don’t suppose it would do your street cred much good sitting down with an old man like me.”

Gemma laughed. “Don’t be silly, I’d love to have coffee with you, besides, you’re not that old.”

Ten minutes later they were sitting in a small coffee house, the aroma of fresh grinding coffee coming from the shop at the front. A girl not much older than Gemma brought two cups and a carafe of fresh coffee.

“Now, I want your opinion. I know you don’t like coffee much but this, girl, is the best that money can buy.”

She watched as he poured the coffee into her cup, finishing off with a small amount of cream that settled pure white on top. She made to stir it but he caught her hand.

“No, drink through the cream, don’t stir and turn it into some instant stuff.”

She did as he suggested, sipping the strong but perfectly smooth black liquid through the cream cover.

He watched her, allowing a slight smile to cross his face, as she flinched a little when the coffee touched her tongue. “Well, what’s the verdict?”

Replacing the cup, Gemma grinned. “That was really, really cool, I never imagined coffee could taste that good.”

He looked at her as he nodded his head slowly up and down. “And this is from someone who only liked instant coffee. Maybe now you can begin to understand a little of what we connoisseurs look for?”

“Yes, I suppose I can; mind you, if I told Dad he’d got to buy – what was it again?”

“Blue Mountain.”

“Yes, that’s it, at God knows how much a pound, he’d think I’d flipped.”

They chatted on for some time about general things, and then she looked at her watch. “I’ll have to go. I’ve really enjoyed the coffee, thank you.”

“I’ve enjoyed your company as well; perhaps we can do it again sometime, that’s if you want to?”

“I’d love to, maybe sometime when you’re in town?”

“Well, I’m a creature of habit I’m afraid, so I come here every two weeks, often the same seat – if you’re passing you might like to join me?”

Gemma sat quietly for a moment, her response to his original suggestion had been automatic, just being polite, but now he was suggesting they really did meet again in two weeks. This next meeting in her mind seemed more like a date than today, which was just a chance meeting.

Steven seemed to sense the hesitation in the girl’s reaction to the suggestion, quickly cutting in before she could reply. “Listen, Gemma, it’s been really nice meeting you again. If you’d like to join me for coffee, and more importantly if you’re in this area, I’d love to see you, but I’d understand if you didn’t turn up, and wouldn’t be offended, believe me.”

Her mind went back to the auction and the stupid argument over the cost of a burger. She’d decided then she didn’t want someone of their age, nor did she have any real chance with the lads at the disco. They wanted her, yes, but on their terms and that didn’t mean collecting her from home and bringing her back. More like, in her experience, a quick kiss or more, then stuff her on the bus until next week.

Suddenly she made a decision. “No, I want to have coffee with you, really. I’ve enjoyed the experience; it’s so different to

what I'd normally do on a Saturday morning. Thank you for asking me."

"Then it's a date, same time, same seat – a week next Saturday."

Gemma stood to leave. So did he and grasped her hand, shaking it gently. "Till we meet again then, now go and enjoy yourself with your friends."

Why she suddenly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek Gemma didn't know, but she did. Then grabbing her bag she turned and smiled. "See you in a couple of weeks."

He watched her go and pulled a paper from his pocket, after topping up his coffee. The young waitress came over. "Has your daughter gone, can I take her cup?"

Looking up from the paper, lost for words at that moment, he suddenly realised perhaps this was how others looked at him and Gemma, just a father and daughter having coffee. He decided it was best not to correct her, nodding quickly before returning to his paper.

When Gemma left she made her way back to the high street and through to the burger bar. She felt strange, her tummy full of butterflies at the coming meeting, her lips still tingling from her impromptu kiss.

"You're late; we were just going to go," Stacey said as Gemma joined them.

"Sorry, I missed the bus," she replied, deciding it was best not to mention her meeting with Steven.

"You've not heard the latest, have you?" Stacey asked.

"What's that?"

"Cyndy's got herself a new boyfriend. Pete Clark from the estate. He's taking her out to a club tonight, so we're all going to find something for her to wear."

"That's great, Cyndy, you never said last night when we talked."

"I didn't know then, Gemma, I met him this morning when I was getting the paper for Dad, and he asked me out."

"Well now you've said yes, let's go and see what we can find for you to wear, shall we?" Gemma replied enthusiastically.