

BEST WAY OUT

Pat Garwood

- first chapter preview -

CHAPTER ONE

YEAR 2000 ~ Linda - aged 47

Linda looked across at the tousled dark hair on the pillow next to her. He was asleep and so young. Oh God he was young, but utterly gorgeous. She couldn't quite believe that she could have become involved with a young man of twenty-four. She was sure it wouldn't last but what the hell.

The last couple of years had been the worst of her life. After twenty-three years of what she had thought was a happy marriage, her husband Chris had informed her one evening, out of the blue, that he was leaving her. He had fallen in love with a woman he'd met on a conference trip to Berlin and they had decided they wanted to live together. He took off his wedding ring and put it on the hall table. 'I'm sorry, Linda,' he'd said, 'that's just the way it is.' Before she'd had a chance to say anything, he went out of the front door, shutting it firmly behind him. She was utterly shocked and stunned. She had seen no sign or indication of anything being wrong. The following day he had arrived with a van and taken all his clothes and books and various other possessions. She'd taken the day off work as she couldn't face going in and had just stood there, watching him, white-faced and numb. She couldn't believe what was happening. She was too proud to cry or beg him to change his mind. He had only spoken to ask

her a few practical questions, and it was as if he was talking to a complete stranger; totally cold and unreachable. As he left, she'd asked him about the boys and he'd said they were young men now – they'd understand.

Noah was twenty-two and Mikey was only just twenty. She dreaded having to tell them, she knew they were going to be devastated. Noah had just started a new job and Mikey was still at Uni. She didn't want to tell them over the phone so she asked them both to come over on the next Saturday afternoon as she needed some help and advice about something important. She couldn't believe Chris was doing this to them. She felt sick all the time, couldn't sleep and could hardly eat anything. First positive thought – she might lose some weight!

When the boys arrived, their first question was 'where's Dad?' As she began to tell them, she finally broke down in tears, she couldn't help herself. They were both incredibly upset and protective of her.

'Don't worry, Mum,' said Noah, 'we'll look after you. Dad must be having a mid-life crisis. He's not himself, he'll be back in no time, begging you to forgive him, you wait and see.'

'The bastard,' said Mikey angrily, 'how could he do this and how could he take all his stuff like that. I hate him. I'm never going to talk to him again. Who is this bloody woman, anyway?'

'It's no-one we know,' said Linda, 'it's someone he met through work.'

‘He must be mad,’ said Noah, ‘no-one could be as good as you, Mum - you’re the best.’

He came over and gave her a big hug. He was so much taller than her and she felt small and comforted by him. Then Mikey came over and hugged her as well and they stood in a strange threesome, trying to ease the hurt.

They decided to go for something to eat, in the garden of a nearby pub and Linda found that she was actually quite hungry and managed to get through a plate of chicken salad and a glass of white wine. Thank God for the boys she thought as she watched them across the wooden table. They both looked so grown up, what a shame they had to cope with all this. She knew Chris was proud of them both and loved them, so what was he thinking? Quite apart from her, how could he risk spoiling his relationship with them? It really was as if he had lost his mind.

The days had drifted on and she’d managed to keep going to work at the hospital. She was a radiographer and actually found it a helpful distraction, but the house felt very quiet and empty every night when she got home. Chris showed no signs of changing his mind and she found that all of their friends were appalled when they found out what had happened and hugely sympathetic towards her, but nevertheless invitations to dinners or parties slowly dried up and she found herself quite lonely. She had a few close girlfriends but only two lived within reach and they had their own lives to deal with.

Then one day Andy had turned up at the hospital for an x-ray. He was in quite a lot of pain after being knocked off his bike by

a car and falling heavily on his left wrist. She could tell at once by the x-ray that it was badly broken and was going to need to be put in a cast. He was very upbeat despite what had happened, and flirted outrageously with her throughout the session and she found herself responding. It was such a joy to have a conversation with someone who made her laugh and he was incredibly handsome. It was absurd to even think that he might be attracted to her, at her age, but her self-esteem had been so low since Chris had left that even a few crumbs of compliments and kindness made her feel better about herself. He told her that she had beautiful eyes and wonderful skin. He was a photographer and asked if he could possibly take some portrait photographs of her in his studio. She laughed and told him not to be so silly and sent him on his way.

When she had finished her day's work she went out into the corridor and there he was; sitting with his arm all nicely plastered and a huge smile on his face.

'I meant it,' Andy said, 'I really do want to take some photographs of you. You have such a beautiful lived-in face.'

'Oh, thanks very much!' she said, laughing, despite herself.

'No I mean it in the best way. Listen, what I really want to do is take you out for a meal so I can watch it from all angles, then I'll know how I want to frame it. Are you free this evening?' he asked.

Linda looked at him. What to do? She was free every evening and she'd had her fill of her own company and a quick ready-meal in front of the television.

‘Well, alright then,’ she found herself saying, ‘where shall we go?’

‘Great!’ he said, leaping to his feet, ‘I know just the place. Do you like Italian?’

‘I love it,’ she said.

‘It’s only round the corner, so we can walk.’

‘It’s a bit early,’ she said, ‘will they be serving?’

‘We can have a chat and some coffee first,’ he said, ‘come on, I want to find out all about you. Please come.’

In the end, they stayed in the restaurant until about ten p.m., talking and laughing and just enjoying a stress-free evening. They got on so well. She had to help him with his meal, cutting up his food for him as he hadn’t yet come to terms with the cast on his wrist. She told him all about Chris and he said he thought it was a mistake that her husband would live to regret.

‘There aren’t many women like you around,’ he said, ‘you’re very special.’

She was surprised at how intelligent and knowledgeable he was. It was like spending the evening with a man of her own age. When he told her he was twenty-four, it came as a shock to suddenly realise that he was only two years older than Noah.

‘It doesn’t matter what your age is,’ he said, when she confessed to being forty-seven, ‘it’s how we are inside, in our minds and hearts, that matters.’

At the end of the evening Andy said he’d have to get a bus to his studio, where he also slept. He couldn’t ride his bike, which had been trashed in the accident.

‘I was lucky to have been thrown clear,’ he said.

It seemed natural to offer to give him a lift home as she had her car parked in the hospital car park just round the corner.

And so it began.

YEAR 2030 ~ Linda - aged 77

So this is it, she thought calmly as she looked up at the sign above the door. This is my final day on earth. Alongside the calm was a strange low-key excitement. She was finally here.

There had been a ten month waiting list for her to be able to take up her place, and many things to do: quiet and careful arrangements to make, papers to sign and letters to write in readiness for posting, she had them with her to leave at the desk as she went in.

As advised she had brought no valuables with her, just enough money to cover her taxi fare and the letters and a photo of the

boys. It gave her a sense of freedom to be travelling so light. Why is my bag usually so heavy, she thought, I never use half the things in it.

Taking a deep breath she rang the bell and looked up again at the sign. *LEEWAY LODGE* it said in gold letters.

‘Can I help you?’ came a pleasant female voice, through the speaker by the bell.

‘Oh yes, it’s Linda Marsden.’

‘Do please come in, we’re expecting you,’ the voice continued as a buzzer sounded and the door opened.

She stepped inside and the door closed behind her with a click. A slight shiver went up her spine.

She found herself in a large elegant hall, with several doors leading off it and a staircase that curved its way up to a higher floor. A friendly looking middle-aged woman was rising from the desk and coming towards her.

‘Mrs Marsden,’ she said, holding out her hand, ‘I’m so glad you could join us. My name is Cathy and I’ll be looking after you this evening and making sure you have everything you want.’

She led the way into a sitting room, where there were a few people dotted around, sitting comfortably in armchairs or on sofas, talking softly to each other.

‘Do take a seat and someone will be coming to have a word with you all, very shortly. Would you like a cup of tea or coffee, or maybe a soft drink?’

‘I’d love a cup of tea,’ said Linda gratefully. As she sat down, she realised how tired she was. It had been quite a long journey and she’d felt compelled to leave the house reasonably tidy before she left. How daft, in the circumstances, she thought, smiling to herself.

‘Right you are, tea it is,’ said Cathy. She turned to include everyone else, ‘if anyone would like to use the toilet, it’s just the other side of the hall,’ she said, leaving the room.

Linda put her bag down on the floor and looked around.

‘Are you OK?’ a deep voice came from one of the armchairs to her right, making her jump.

‘Oh, I’m so sorry I didn’t see you there,’ she said. Her sight had been getting much worse recently and she’d not collected her new prescription glasses; it seemed to be somewhat unnecessary.

‘It’s not going to be easy,’ he said, ‘any of this. My name’s Frank, by the way.’

‘Oh Hello...I’m Linda.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said, not getting out of his chair.

‘What time did you get here?’ she asked.

‘About twenty minutes ago,’ he said, ‘I know they said to come between five and six but I got here early.’

He gave her a smile and they lapsed into silence.

There was a ring on the front doorbell and they all turned towards the sound.

Shortly afterwards Cathy brought in a tall stooping man with a stick and wearing a hat. She offered him a seat and a drink.

‘Well, you’re all here now’ she said warmly.

‘There won’t be long to wait before Dr Fordyke comes down to talk you through the plans for the evening.’

After a short while she brought both Linda and the tall man a cup of tea offering them sugar, which Linda refused. The tall man took five lumps, which amused her.

She looked round at the others. Everybody had the same look on their face; quiet determination and a sense of readiness for what lay before them in the next few hours. They had all made the brave decision to end their lives, not alone and not with family or friends but here in Leeway Lodge, with only the company of a few like-minded fellow travellers.

The clinic offered to help people of 75 and over. Linda herself was 77 and she could see that most of her fellow guests were in their late seventies and eighties. They all looked to be in reasonably good health, which was one of the stipulations

when applying. Those with terminal illnesses or life-threatening problems were catered for by the National Health Provider: if they chose to end their lives it was possible to do so for free. Assisted death had been legal in England for several years thank goodness, but if you had no serious health problems and felt you had lived your life to the full and were ready to go, then it was your own decision and you had to pay at a private clinic like Leeway Lodge. Money well spent, thought Linda.

She hadn't told her sons, Noah and Mikey, what she was going to do. They were both incredibly busy with their careers and family life. Also, she knew that Noah would be totally supportive and be with her all the way, but Mikey would be horrified and beg her not to go ahead. It would almost certainly cause a rift between them which might never heal. That was the last thing she wanted. This way was best - she'd had ten long months to think about it and she was absolutely certain that this was the right way for her. So much had happened to her through the years, both good and bad, but now, as old-age came to claim her, she felt it was time to quit, before it entrapped her in its steely grasp.