

## BLIND TRUTH

Distant thunder mumbled menacingly. Lightning flared and in that split second of its illumination he saw the house clearly. Empty. Cold looking. Weeds waist high in the front garden. The 'For Sale' sign creaking on rusty hinges as it swung in the wind. John dreaded this moment. An engineer on a North Sea oil rig he had arrived back in his home town two days ago after being away for almost a year. This was the first time he had plucked up enough courage to see the house. A decision to sell must soon be made. There had been an offer in his absence, but he could not bear the thought of parting with the past. He felt the very walls of this building were impregnated with memories too precious to lose. Was this to be the sad final chapter?

He stood there. Trying to hide all the hurt inside. Thinking of that ugly time. A previous shore leave. So long ago but the memory will not fade. He had stepped out of the biting wind and rain and into his favourite pub to wait for Sandra. She worked late shift at a local factory. They had arranged to meet at the pub which was only a short distance walk away from their home and have a meal. John was happy and looking forward to the evening with Sandra after several months apart.

"Hello John. The usual is it?" asked Bill the barman.

"Yes, and have one yourself" replied John nodding at the same time to a group of long standing friends sitting at a table. After a while John joined them. During the conversation that followed he asked if they had seen anything of Sandra whilst he had been away. The men sitting at the table seemed reluctant to discuss her. When John persisted with questions they merely grunted excuses. Some even moved away to join others or to play darts. John thought this was odd. After all, both he and Sandra had grown up in this small community where most people knew each other.

After a few more drinks John's mood darkened. He noticed the barman casting glances in his direction. With a sense of foreboding John called him over.

"What's going on Bill?" he asked.

"What do you mean John?"

"Whenever I ask about Sandra I'm avoided like the plague. If something's going on I want to know about it."

"It's not for me to say," replied Bill.

Tell me for Christ sake before I go mad." whispered John.

"There have been rumours. She has been seen with another man. Getting into his car and that. It's all I know. She hasn't been in here much since your last leave."

"Who is this man?" demanded John.

"I dunno."

John didn't believe him.

"It's probably just rumours. Look, that's all I know. Go easy on the drink John. You said you're meeting Sandra here soon for a meal so just forget what I've told you," said Bill anxiously. He knew John had a short fuse and a reputation for violence.

Morning came. The cold wind from the previous evening had passed. The sun rising over the horizon, a dull red brightening amid scudding grey clouds. They walked hand in hand to

the church where one day they would be married. Some of the friends from the pub were there. John looked at their faces for some tell-tale sign or uneasy glances. He saw none and put his suspicions down to overreaction.

He heard nothing of the early part of the sermon. Quite content to dwell on the previous evening. After the pub meal they had walked slowly home. Sandra acted normally, and they discussed the house and their future plans. John wanted to renovate the roof and have a conservatory built on. Sandra was more cautious. They still owed several thousand pounds, and both wanted to pay off the mortgage first, then marry free of debts. They could then start a family straight away.

"There is something I want to tell you," said Sandra.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I don't want you to go back to the oil rig again. I need you home here with me."

"I'm getting good money on the rig. Two more 12-month contracts and we'll have sufficient to clear the mortgage and to have a conservatory built on."

"Don't you understand?" said Sandra. "I want you home for good now not in two years' time. Let's sell this house and buy a smaller property. Just big enough for the two of us. That's all we need."

"What are you trying to say Sandra? That we don't need a three bed-roomed house. Of course, we do." John was shocked, and his voice rose as he went on to say. "But we're planning to have children. We'll need the room."

"OK, anything you say John. Don't let's argue and spoil the evening. It's good to have you home." replied Sandra who always worried when John raised his voice. He was a good man but he had a violent temper. The following morning John woke early, pleased and happy. Convinced that everything was alright, and the rumours were just malicious gossip.

Suddenly he became aware of his surroundings and began to listen to the sermon. It was about an unfaithful wife. As John listened all his fears came flooding back. A black mood descended. A churning and boiling inside his head. Out of control he ran from the church leaving Sandra behind.

John paced the streets for hours trying to calm himself. A phone box on a corner gave him hope. He entered and rang home ready to apologize.

No answer.

He quickly dialed another number. The phone is answered.

"Alf, you're my best friend. I need your help. Can I come and see you?"

"I'm sorry John." was the reply. "Can't speak to you now. Let's meet at your house tomorrow evening. There's something we must discuss. It's very important, but not now as I'm just on my way out."

John walked quickly home, feeling better after talking to Alf. He had known each other from schooldays. Alf was good at solving problems. He trusted Alf. He hoped Sandra would be home. They could kiss and make up. He felt angry and ashamed for acting the way he did. He trusted Sandra. No need to think otherwise.

The house was empty.

No sign of Sandra, but there was a message on the answer-phone.

'Please contact the oil rig. Urgent.' Feeling disappointed he rang the number.

"You are to return at once," said his boss, "The relief engineer has been taken ill." "But I've only just started my leave," protested John.

"We're already behind quota," his boss replied. "If you're not at the helipad by noon tomorrow then you will face the sack. You know the contractual terms and conditions.'

John knew it was useless to argue and with the mortgage still owing he needed the work. John had no option. He must return.

In a quandary now. He needed so much to speak to Sandra, but he had no idea where she was and the train he must catch would soon be leaving.

I know what I'll do" he said to himself whilst throwing a few clothes into a bag. 'I'll tell Alf He and Sandra grew up together. He'll be able to pacify her, after all he's going to be best man at our wedding."

Bag packed and into the waiting taxi. A quick dash through the streets.

"Wait here driver for a few minutes," said John as he got out and quickly ran up the path to the front door.

After banging frantically, the door opened. Alf looked out but seeing John tried to shut the door in his face. In that brief moment, John saw Sandra sifting on a chair.

His mind blew up. Difficult to remember the sequence of events. He managed to force the door open. He struck Alf knocking him to the floor. Furniture was smashed as in a jealous blinding rage he went on the rampage. Completely out of control.

You have it all wrong," shouted Alf in desperation. Trying to ward off the blows.

Sandra grabbed hold and pleaded with him to stop. John shook her off shouting Two timing bitch," as he relentlessly beat Alf to a bloody pulp. The last sound he heard was a faint wailing from Sandra. He took one last look at her curled up and trembling on the hail floor before stepping over the unconscious body of Alf and walking out to the waiting taxi.

During the months that followed John put all his energy into work on the oil rig. He refused to answer the phone and all letters received were cast unopened into the North Sea. In a way he was glad to be on this metal island. Perhaps in time he would heal and his black mood would lift. Then he could start life afresh, but he vowed never to return to his home town.

"John," called the boss. "Come into my office and take a seat"

"Anything wrong?" asked John as he closed the door behind him. "We are on target." "This is personal. I've just had along chat on the phone with your friend Alf"

"This is none of your business," answered John getting up to leave. 'And Alf is no friend of mine."

"Just shut up, sit down and listen," shouted the boss.

John remained standing. His mood beginning to darken.

"I'll be brief," said the boss. "Then you can go and do as you wish. You have a girlfriend Sandra?"

"Had," interrupted John.

"Just shut it and listen. Sandra is dying. Now you can have immediate compassionate leave or you can walk out that door and go back to work. It's your choice. Your conscience. Take your pick. That's all I'm going to say on the matter."

Helicopter. Train. Taxi. All on time and racing John home.

A hospital side room and an unsmiling sympathetic stranger dressed in green.

"I'm very sorry. We did everything possible to save her."

"Then why did she die? What was wrong with her?" John asked, unable to grasp or take in the situation.

"Didn't she tell you," the man in green said. "She was born with a heart defect. This was discovered by chance a couple of years ago. She was having regular treatment here at the hospital and we expected to have the problem fully rectified,"

"Then why wasn't it?"

About a year ago she was brought in. She had suffered a great shock of some sort although she refused to talk about it. This aggravated her condition. We cannot understand why she failed to respond to treatment. It was as if she had given up the will to live."

Full of anguish, John returned to the hospital waiting room. Alf was there. They looked at each other. Neither spoke for a while until Alf broke the silence.

'You were away when Sandra found out about her condition. I've been bringing her to this hospital on a regular basis for treatment.'

Why wasn't I told?' asked John in a subdued voice.

"She swore me to secrecy," replied Alf. "Hoping for a full recovery' and this was on the cards as treatment progressed. She wanted to tell you quietly and in her own time that she may not be able to bear children. She loved you dearly and wanted nothing to stop her from marrying you."

\*\*\*

John continued to gaze at the house. Their house. Oblivious to the approaching storm. He had made his decision.

They found his body the following morning. Hanging from a tree and next to the 'For Sale' sign.