

# Head Over Heels

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## Day One

It's not easy living alone.

I met Anthea nine years ago, the year after my mother died. We knew right away we were meant for each other and we married two months later.

Anthea was keen to start a family. She was an only child, a late baby. Both her parents were dead, lost in the hills on Skye in bad weather. Her father had been an Investment Manager, her mother a GP. Anthea had been brought up by her elderly grandmother, now long dead. When she discovered she was expecting, she told me she wanted three children but it was not to be.

It's seven months now since the funeral. At least I have Bruno to keep me on my toes.

Anthea chose him from the rescue centre. He had been 'arrested' in a public park, barking at a trapped cat he had tree-ed. His origins were unknown and the rescue centre gave him the name Bruno. He had 'anxiety issues' they said, not good with children or other dogs. A mixture of Collie, German Shepherd and Labrador Retriever, big and powerful, fleet of foot and clever, sometimes sneaky. He had been adopted and returned three times before we saw him. He was on death row, four days into his final week.

His redeeming feature was his big brown eyes. When he turned them on full beam, he melted Anthea's heart. Bruno was a substitute for the child we had lost due to a miscarriage which ended our prospects of having a family.

Sadly, my wife's woman's problems continued and she was gone after a long, slow and painful decline. Through her months of chemotherapy, Bruno lay beside her on our double bed, his eyes fixed on her face, willing her to live. I was relegated to the spare bedroom to avoid the toxic chemotherapy fumes she breathed out.

On the night in question, I had been watching footie on the TV. I had fallen asleep again.

I waken needing a pee. I drain my glass of wine. The bottle was empty. I have been drinking too much. It's become a bad habit. I check the digital clock. Twenty-three past midnight. I stand up, wobble and steady myself and head for the loo for a long, slow dribble.

Bruno follows me, sits outside the open door and yawns. He emits a low rumbling growl. The lights flicker. Is it another thunderstorm coming? I should scoot him around our circuit for his final widdle walk before the downpour. I tog up and clip on his extended

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lead. I decide to keep on my slippers in case I fall over again doing the laces of my outdoor shoes.

Mimicking her delivery, I say:

'C'mon lad, let's do it, 'Let's Fall in Love'.'

It's what Anthea used to say to him before the cervical cancer struck.

I open the door to find the street in darkness, no streetlights, no moon, dark clouds overhead, hard to see. All the other houses are dark, no other dogwalkers at this hour.

I leave the garden gate open and turn right, heading towards the new community park, a brownfield site reclaimed and rewilded by the Council after a long argument with the Coal Board who eventually removed the mine buildings and sealed off the shaft.

Bruno spots something and shoots off in pursuit. Was it a cat or a fox? The lead extends then tightens, dragging me forwards. I stumble. Without warning, I am walking on air, falling. I hit the water, go under and taste muddy water in my mouth.

High above me Bruno is yipping, crying. I go under and splutter back to the surface. I still have the dog lead in my hand but it slips out and I hear Bruno barking madly as he runs off trying to find me. My mouth is full of muddy water.

I slip under again. I was never a good swimmer. I try a breast stroke cum doggy paddle and my hands touch something sharp. Knife sharp. I realise it is a section of ragged pavement. Then I feel some tubing, slippery tubing.

Water pipes? Or electricity cables? If so, are they live?

I feel horrendous pain in both hands. The tubes are slippery with my blood.

I find a sloping piece of pavement and crawl up onto it above the water level. The slab rocks and I start to slide but then it stabilises and I balance on it, sprawled flat on my back, just clear of the water. Is the water rising?

I am shivering. I sneeze. And again. And again. My nose is running. I feel my bladder release and I'm grateful for the temporary warmth.

I look up and see a flash of light. I shout:

**'Help. I'm down here.'**

Her phone torch blinds me.

**'Ronnie, is that you?'**

It's Doreen from number eight, two houses along. She has a toy poodle called Dainty which drives Bruno crazy with her high-pitched yipping. Doreen is a widow nearing

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retirement. She works for the Council Social Security people, I think. Her office is in the same tower block as my small insurance agency business. Anthea was the brains, I was the salesman. Cash flow is the issue. The Internet and online comparison sites are stealing my shrinking client list.

'Doreen, I think I might have a broken ankle and my hands are bleeding.'

'I saw you fall into the hole from my bedroom window. Dainty has been barking crazily for hours. I saw Bruno running away. I've called the Police. It's a sinkhole, they said.'

We hear sirens and blips approaching.

'Ronnie, they say I have to evacuate. I have to go and get Dainty and pack a suitcase.'

Someone peers over and shines a bigger torch. I can see I am a long way down, about forty metres, I think. My glasses are missing and everything is blurry.

I shout up and tell him about my ankle and hands and say I am freezing cold.

'Are you Ronald Caulkhoun from number four? We are evacuating everyone and we need to check on names.'

'Yes, I'm Ronnie Colquhoun. '

'We can't find your wife, Anthea. We had to break in to your house, sorry.'

'No, she died a few months ago.'

'Mr Caulkhoun, have you been drinking? There are a lot of empty bottles in your kitchen.'

'No, I'm OK. It was Bruno who dragged me in here.'

'Who is Bruno?'

'Bruno my dog, ask Doreen from number eight.'

'Is there anyone else down there with you apart from Bruno?'

'No, Bruno ran away.'

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'I'm alone, I think. Unless they are drowned, of course.'

'You're wife, Anthea, you're absolutely sure she's not with you?'

'Yes. She's dead. Cancer. Seven months ago. Ask Doreen from number eight.'

'Right, so, just to check, there are definitely no other occupants at Caulkhoun, number four.'

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'No, just me. Can you get me out of here please before I get double pneumonia?'

'Right away, Mr Caulkhoon, I'll pass on the message to Control. Hold on.'

*"Control, PC Don Brand here. No other occupants at number four. We have Ronald Caulkhoon trapped in the sinkhole. He's injured. Probably drunk from his speech. Needs a medic. Out."*

The light goes away and then there are three lights and a different voice. Fire and Rescue, I think:

'Ronald, are you OK to hold on? It'll take about ten minutes to get a long ladder down to you. We are not allowed to enter the sinkhole, Health and Safety.'

'No point in a ladder. As I said before, I've broken my ankle and my hands are shredded. There is no way I could climb a ladder.'

'How about we throw you a rope with a harness on it, would you be able to get into it.'

'Maybe. Worth a try.'

## Day One, later.

It is just after three o'clock in the afternoon. I'm in a hospital bed, wired up to monitors and drips and doped up to the eyeballs. Without my glasses, everything is blurred.

I have a plaster on my left leg and huge bandages on both hands.

My stomach has been pumped and my bowel has been irrigated to wash out any harmful bacteria. I've been made to drink three litres of water and I'm now peeing for Britain, countless pee bottles filled. Since I cannot hold these bottles because of my bandages, I have to suffer the indignity of fumbling hands and awkward smiles.

I nod off and waken with someone sitting at my bedside. I am desperate for another pee. It's her smell that I taste first, the fish paste stuff she feeds to Dainty. I close my eyes but not quickly enough.

'Ronnie, it's on the BBC and in the papers. A second sinkhole has opened up across the road. Your house is the worst affected. I heard the MP saying it might have to be demolished. To get in to see you, I told them I'm your cousin, your only living relative. Your Bruno is still missing. Someone has started a poster campaign and a 'Find Bruno' Facebook page. Dainty and me are living at my sister's place on the other side of town. Most of the others from our street are in hotels scattered all over the place. Mr Gibson's brand new Honda CRV at number six fell into the sinkhole after you were hauled out. He screamed blue murder at them, said it was their fault because their rescue tripod

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weakened the edge of his driveway and caused his car to fall in. He told me he'll sue the Authorities. His son's a lawyer, did you know that? Someone said it was a faulty water main that has been leaking for months but the Water people are saying that's 'fake news' and have said its slanderous. Ronnie, I don't want ever to have to go back to number eight. My sister wants me to sell up and move in with her but I said no, Catherine, it would never work what with your Percival and my asthma.'

'Percival?'

'Her parrot, an African Grey, thirty-five years old last week. Swears like a trooper, her son did that before he moved out to live with that tattoo woman, you know the one, *Delilah Inks and Piercings*, in the shopping mall.'

A nurse arrives and encourages Doreen to leave.

As the nurse closes the door on her, Doreen's parting shot through the crack is:

'Ronnie, I've sent you an invitation to join our 'Angry Residents' *WhatsApp* group. I think your insurance background will be very useful to us.'

I look at my bandaged hands, glad I have a good excuse for not responding. I'm not keen on social media and I certainly don't want to become embroiled in a pressure group.

My rescue nurse, whose name badge announces her as 'Annabelle', deals with the pee bottle and then checks me over.

Noting my numbers on her iPad, she says:

'Ronnie, sorry but we need your bed. You're out of danger now and the Sinkhole Coordinator from the Council Offices is sending a taxi at five-ish to move you to the *Treetops Care Home* where they have a 24/7 nursing service. It's really, really nice. My sister Angie works there and when I rang her to tell her all about you, our most famous patient ever . . . '

There is a soft knock at the door.

Annabelle answers and returns with a sealed package of medications from the hospital Pharmacy.

'I'll give this to the taxi driver and he'll give them to Angie. Oh, by the way, she says she knows you from school. Angie Brankin she was back then before she married that drunk layabout Trevor Pearson. Why in heaven's name did she marry a Long Distance HGV Driver? Thankfully she got shot of him last year. He's moved back in with his mother, Magda, another drunk. Two pigs in you know what. The only good outcome for Angie is she has no kids to complicate matters. I mean, I love my twin boys to bits but they are a nightmare and Ian's useless, always down the bowling club or away with his darts team.'

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If it wasn't for his Mum I'd get shot of him. Edith is really lovely, without her I would go under. Sorry, slip of the tongue.'

She checks my readings again and is about to leave.

'Annabelle, could you do me another pee bottle please, I'm desperate again.'

'Of course Ronnie, my pleasure. Tell you what, I'll put on a fresh nappy too, shall I? You'll be leaking at the back end for a few days with that washout stuff they gave you. Still, better to have that than letting those deadly sewage bugs into your system, eh?'

## Day One, later still.

It's just after ten o'clock and I've had my doses of painkillers and antibiotics and I'm hoping for a good night.

Angie Pearson slips into the room, carrying a pee bottle and a fresh incontinence pad.

She is a good-looking woman, nice, sensible hair and good make-up, not caked-on like Annabelle. The room fills with her perfume, fruity and spicy.

Angie leans closer, places her hand behind my back, eases me forwards and adds a second pillow to help me sit more upright. She has nice minty breath.

I immediately wonder what my own is like. Near her end, because of her medication, Anthea's breath was, frankly, *disgusting*. It's stench pervaded the whole house.

As Angie moves around my bedroom, tidying everything, I can hear her humming to herself:

*Michael, row the boat ashore, hallelujah*

*The River Jordan is chilly and cold, hallelujah*

*Chills the body and not the soul, hallelujah*

She checks in my en suite bathroom and returns with a toothbrush loaded with paste, a glass of water and a bowl to spit into.

She brushes my teeth. I rinse and spit out and she repeats the brushing and rinsing out process twice more, then unwraps a mint and pops it into my mouth.

'Well, Ronnie Colquhoun, I'm on call tonight which means I sleep over in a cubby hole bedroom at the end of the corridor. If you need me, press the buzzer with your elbow. Because you're a 'recent', that gives you priority and they've routed you directly to me.'

'So, I'm a sort of VIPee-er?'

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'Ha-Ha. Ronnie, I know this is out of order but do you remember that time we left the school dance early and you had a packet of Durex?'

'Vaguely.'

It's an encounter I've relived hundreds of times.

It had all gone wrong, pre-ejaculation the first time as she tried to help me put it on. Later, after recovery with more kissing and fumbling, our second time had all happened in a rush. Then our tryst was over, no time to use the third condom because of Angie's curfew.

She had said:

'Well Ronnie, if you don't mind, I'll keep this last one for next time, will I?'

Then my father got a new job and we moved to Manchester where he was in charge of a larger non-ferrous scrap metal business. But that didn't work out. When we moved back, his old boss went back into retirement and Dad got his old job again. A year later Dad died in a car crash, his old Corsa crushed by a Range Rover. It was the woman's fault. The insurance compensation settlement paid for our house at number four, a huge move upmarket from our Council high-rise.

By then Angie was away to nursing college in Glasgow. Then I heard she was married, somebody famous, Mum had said. This marriage did not last and she was divorced within a year. I had not heard she was back in the area, remarried and divorced again, according to Annabelle.

## **Two Weeks after Day One.**

My hands are healing well. The fingertips are okay but my palms are tender. My ankle has been X-rayed. They say it's healing but I've been warned I must not put any weight on it. I have crutches but I can only manage to cross the room without risking damage to my hands. Angie found me padded gripper gloves which help a bit.

My house at number four is still out of bounds. The Council have offered me a hotel room in a tower block miles away. Angie volunteered to take me in. When we arrive, I am stunned to find she lives in a large beautiful three-storey villa in the poshest street in town. The garden has a croquet lawn.

When she sees my reaction, she smiles and whispers in my ear:

'My first husband was very good about the divorce settlement. Well, actually Ronnie, he had no choice, really. He was a very naughty man and a QC to boot. He's a Judge now. He



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still remits my index-linked monthly allowance and I keep my photographic evidence locked safely in a private vault at Barclays.'

## Six weeks after Day One

A physio has been visiting most days. Darren is in his late forties. Talkative. Very. His brother works at the Council. He told Darren the sinkhole was due to old mine workings. The Council are planning to sue the Coal Board Trustees, who, apparently, have a lot of money put aside as old mine workings are a big issue all up and down the country. The Council are planning reparations to our street but it is complicated because of all the Utilities involved.

Angie told me the *Find Bruno* hunt has petered out, the Facebook page shut down to new postings.

BT have re-routed my office number and I'm fielding occasional business calls from my clients as best I can on my mobile phone. Angie has been to the office and brought my laptop and my rolodex.

I am now adept at using my crutches. My hands are okay now, just my ankle which is nearly healed. I have taken a few steps putting weight on my left foot unaided with almost no pain.

Darren is down to twice a week and has provided a Zimmer which I am not yet allowed to use, officially. He says his brother says I should sue the Coal Board for compensation, injury trauma and loss of earnings.

Eric Gibson's son Peter has been in touch by letter, offering to sue the Trustees on my behalf on a 'no win, no fee' basis. I drop his letter in the recycle bin.

Rumour informs me that my home has been burgled during my long absence. Days later, this information eventually reaches me officially, delivered in a visit from PC Don Brown. I ask him if my front door was repaired after their forced entry. He shrugged his shoulders and his face reddened. I asked about our home safe but he thinks the robbers must have taken it. I don't tell him it is in the garage hidden in the bottom drawer of an upright freezer, a tip we got from a book Anthea had read.

This is Anthea's safe. It came with her when she moved in. When I asked her what she kept in it, she was a bit mysterious, saying it was 'just old stuff from her father'. I don't have the key, I've never seen it. I suspect Anthea must have hidden it, probably in her clothes wardrobe back at number four. When I feel like it I'll call out a locksmith to open it. All our important personal and legal papers are in a bigger safe, at my office.



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I was allowed one visit to number four and made a long list of what had been taken and damaged, to submit with my claim, adding lots of photographs. Angie was with me and we brought Anthea's safe back here, hiding it in a walk-in cupboard behind suitcases. Her house has a fancy alarm system and is in a Neighbourhood Watch area.

Two days after sending in my insurance claim, I got a return phone call from the independent Loss Adjuster, Ewan Sinclair. I know him well. He is coming round later today.

Angie is keen on home-made everything. She is very definite about the harm caused by processed foods. They are unhealthy and contain addictive substances, especially snacks. Everything she cooks is made from ingredients from organic sources. She clears up and washes the dishes by hand. She hates dishwashers. She had a bad experience, her ex Trevor overloaded hers and it went on fire, ruining her new kitchen. The insurance company refused to pay to compensation, citing the report from the Loss Adjuster.

Angie hates alcohol. I too have adopted a sober lifestyle and I'm feeling better for it. I've lost sixteen pounds and feel, well, to be frank, 'amorous'. Everything down below that was once tired and lazy is, well, quite vigorous again.

## Nine Months after Day One

The Council made me an offer for number four which I haggled over. They raised their offer twice. When it was up by 12%, I signed their forms and banked £323,183 and amount which included my three-year-old Honda Jazz.

Ewan Sinclair valued my loss at £93,445 which we both knew was very generous.

Angie insisted we call a locksmith.

Anthea's 'stuff' from her father was a sheaf of share certificates, Shell, BP, British Gas and others; current value £679,000 approximately.

Ewan has offered me a partnership in his consultancy business. I plan to accept and sell on my dwindling list of Clients to the highest bidder.

In the afterglow, we are lying in bed, smiling at each other. There was no need to fiddle with a condom, I have been snipped.

'Well Ronnie Colquhoun, what do you say? Will you marry me?'

'Yes Angie. It seems I've fallen head over heels for you.'

'Okay Ronnie, I'll take you on and hope it's third time lucky. But I have one condition.'

'Yes?'

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'Your wealth is entirely yours and my wealth is mine, always, until death do us part. When we are hitched, we'll set up a joint account and each remit our agreed monthly share towards running costs for this house and so on. Are we agreed?'

'Mmm, yes, good idea. Angie, did I ever tell you that you are a very wonderful woman.'

'Thank you, Ronnie. And you are a very wonderful man. And just one other condition.'

'Yes?'

'No pets.'

'Agreed.'

'Oh Ronnie, give me a cuddle.'