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Betrayal

by Garf Collins

As he prepared to brief his latest PhD student, Professor Robert Tyler picked up a paper entitled, 'Agnostic remedies for cancers.' He was startled to see the author's name – Dr Nicola Evans.

He was immediately back nearly twenty years to when she was his research assistant. He took her on as a recently qualified PhD. Her experience in immunology had been impressive. As they worked together he found his normal quiet absorption responding to her vivacity and enthusiasm. He increasingly came to depend on her dedication and ability. They developed a productive relationship – far closer than any he could recall.

He remembered the critical night of their project. They came to the laboratory to assess whether the drug they had added to a cancer cell culture had worked. Looking down the high powered microscope Robert shouted, "Nicola. It's working. The cancer cells are being destroyed. I'll project the image."

He remembered seeing the excitement in her eyes as she looked at the screen. Then in the elation which accompanies such rare peaks of achievement, they hugged each other. The hug turned into an embrace and as they drew back they kissed gently. They kissed again – hungrily this time and he felt her whole body against his as he pressed against her -the lines of the cell image making camouflage on the back of his lab coat. They took their coats off and she leaned back against the bench pulling him towards her. It felt as if they were one as they moved together. He slid his hands under her top and began to caress her breasts.

More breathless kissing and fumbling with buttons then suddenly she pushed him away. "Stop. I want this as much as you do but Security will be here soon. We mustn't be caught out. The conference in Berlin is only a month away. We'll have to wait until then."

He remembered only the frustration of the wait. Any feelings of guilt towards his wife or Nicola's partner were suppressed by his longing for her.

At the conference, they became passionate lovers and in the succeeding months, they managed to find opportunities to continue their relationship. With a feeling almost of pain, he remembered their last rendezvous. She seemed distracted as they made love. Afterwards Nicola spoke of a friend who wanted her lover to divorce and live with her. He was married with two young children. She asked Robert for his opinion. They both knew that this was a coded plea. His answer was,

"She should think carefully about it. Divorce can be very messy and leaves nobody any better off."

Soon after this Nicola moved to Canada to pursue her research. Robert was glad in one way. It had removed a major decision from him. But it was as if the temperature in the lab had fallen. Work was much less fun and he ached from the loss of their intimacy.

Back in the present, he thought of his wife, Mary, and how he had never confessed his affair. Their marriage had been quietly successful and their children had grown up well. He was very grateful to her. But his guilt was less for her than for Nicola. She had left thinking he had been just an opportunistic lover. He had often wondered how much he had disrupted her life but now he knew where she was, he could make up for that. Back home, he chose a card with a medical theme and wrote anonymously, 'I always loved you.'

"She will know who sent it," he thought. "I'll address the card at the lab tomorrow." Now he felt less remorseful about disrupting Nicola's life but guilty at being unfaithful to his wife once more.

"May I use your printer to print out my bridge results?" Mary shouted to Robert as she climbed the stairs to his study.

"Of course. Help yourself."

As she sat down at Robert's desk she noticed a card with a picture of Madame Curie lying on his desk. She opened it and read the words, 'I always loved you.' No signature.

"How strange," she thought, "it can't be for me. He would have put 'Love from Robert or something like that.'"

Unsettled by this random find, her mind teamed with half-forgotten memories of conversations and events. Finally, she came to the conclusion that he must have been planning to send it to another woman. A woman with whom he had a relationship in the past. Mary's dejection at this conclusion quickly turned to rage. "I'll go down right now and have it out with him," she thought. But her experience as a psychologist made her pause.

So when she left the study she shouted down, "I'm feeling a bit achy from my tennis this afternoon, I'm going to have a nice relaxing bath."

As she lay back amongst the foam, Mary started to organise the chaos of her thoughts.

Her mind focussed on the time, nearly seventeen years previously, when Robert's work on the cancer drug had been at its triumphant peak. He had often been absent at the lab and had been in great demand at conferences all over the world. She had put down their lack of lovemaking to the exhaustion that he was clearly suffering. He had returned exhilarated from that conference in Berlin. She had supposed that the acclamation he had received there was responsible, but now she thought of it, didn't his assistant Nicola go too? Then there was the time in June of that year when he was supposed to be staying with a colleague in London. She had tried to contact Robert. She remembered the telephone conversation,

"Hi, John. Sorry to ring so late but Gemma is quite ill and I need to speak to Robert."

"Oh!..Um.Hi Mary. Sorry to hear that. John's not here at the moment. I think he must have gone down to the off-licence. I'll get him to ring you when he comes back."

She had been thinking, "Robert's not much of a drinker. That was a strange thing for him to do," when he had phoned back. It was odd. It sounded like a different phone – more echoey. Not that she had thought much about that at the time. After she had explained about Gemma's illness he had said, "I'll come back first thing. The trains are almost non-existent at this time of night." Hardly the concerned parent.

Finally, she remembered how glum he had been when his assistant Nicola had announced she was going to Canada. It had taken him months to get back to his old self. Shortly before her departure, Nicola had visited. She was pale and hesitant and had asked to speak to Robert. When told that he was out, she had looked defeated and said,

"What a shame. I had wanted to say goodbye – to both of you of course." Then after a polite exchange about plans she had hurriedly departed.

"Obviously, it was Nicola," Mary thought as she ran more hot water into the bath. "Fancy me not putting two and two together before. So the card is for her."

Now Mary had to decide what to do. She tried to assess their marriage objectively. She now knew she had a husband who was feeling guilty enough about disappointing a past lover that he was seeking to reassure her. Good luck with that. But apart from

that brief period around 2002, their marriage had been successful. He was a little too serious at times but his enthusiasm for sport and 'fresh air' as he termed it, had created enormous fun for them over the years and had been excellent for the children. Now the grandchildren were arriving, it had all started again and they were having a great time together.

As she dried herself and dressed Mary made up her mind she wouldn't make a big thing of his folly but she couldn't resist a minor revenge, so when she joined him for a cup of tea, she said,

"Thanks for the card, love. There was no need. I knew you loved me when you didn't leave us all those years ago."