

## The Helping Hand

by Judith Horth

Howard flung his jacket over the back of the armchair. “Shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes to mow that lawn, Andrea,” he said, taking the shed keys from the hook by the kitchen door.

“Cup of tea and a piece of cake afterwards?” Andrea replied. “Pauline brought me a chocolate cake this morning, and I’ll never be able to eat it all myself.”

Howard nodded and disappeared down the garden path to the shed.

“Bastard.” Andrea shut the door. “Fifteen minutes, eh? Plenty of time. You’re about to get your comeuppance, my fine fellow.” She waited for the roar of the lawnmower.

Howard pushed the mower through the long grass. Why did the old bag leave it to grow so long? He’d have to empty the grassbox several times. Such a pain. And why hadn’t Pauline picked up his meds from the chemist that morning? Bloody women! Still, he could pop into the pub for a well-deserved quick pint after he’d collected his prescription. He’d drink his tea and scoff the bloody cake as quickly as possible, and then be on his way.

In the kitchen, Andrea was busy. Picking up Howard’s jacket, she felt in the pockets for the little dispenser containing his heart pills. There was only one left – what a fool to let his supply run down like that! She tipped the tablet into the palm of her hand. It looked identical to the soya tablets she had purchased from Holland and Barrett – he would never know the difference. She made the substitution and replaced the dispenser. In another pocket she found his two Epipens. It had taken some time to find two used pens, and she’d had the distasteful task of going through their bins for several nights before she found them, but found them she had, and now she popped the empties into his pocket. She’d dispose of the new ones later in a public wastebin. Now for the chocolate cake.

Pauline had been upset when she brought the cake round. “Bloody Howard thinks I’ve got nothing better to do than run round after him. He knows I’ve got a busy day today, but does he care? Just barked out a few commands as he left the house - ‘Pick up my meds; collect my suit from the dry-cleaners; your car could do with a wash.’ On and on. I sometimes wonder why I stay married to him.”

Why, indeed, thought Andrea. Pauline was a perfectly capable, bright woman, but Howard never had a good word for her. Or for any woman. Only yesterday she had heard him yet again call her “the silly old bitch next door”. He would be no loss. She smiled. Never you mind, Pauline dear, she thought. I like to use what I know to help my friends and I know how allergic he is to soya. I’m going to help you out. She hesitated – the lawnmower had stopped. Was he coming back in? No. There it was again – he must have been emptying the grassbox. But she must hurry.

Taking Pauline’s chocolate cake from its tin, she cut two slices, one small, for her, and a larger one for Howard. She knew he wouldn’t be able to resist. Scraping off the chocolate buttercream, she replaced it with some she had made earlier, carefully colour matched to the original but containing a substantial amount of chocolate flavoured soya protein powder. That should do the trick – but she’d just pop a little soya milk into his tea with the ordinary semi-skimmed.

“Tea’s ready,” Andrea trilled, as Howard came in and retrieved his jacket. “And I’ve cut you a lovely big slice of cake.”

She watched as he bolted the cake and washed down the soya tablet with his tea. “Must be off if I’m to make it to the chemist on time. Wouldn’t do to be without my heart pills! The old ticker relies on them!”

As he headed over the road and across the stile, making for the path that would take him across the fields and into town, Pauline wondered how long it would be before the anaphylaxis began and his weak heart failed.