

An Old-Fashioned Arrangement / Susie Vereker

AN OLD-FASHIONED ARRANGEMENT

by

Susie Vereker

CHAPTER 1

Eight o'clock in the morning seemed early for a social call, even in Geneva. Fortunately Kim was already dressed when the gate bell rang. In the hope that she might later be inspired to weed the borders before winter arrived, she'd put on her gardening clothes, jeans and an old M & S shirt. She had a free day and intended to spend it at home, virtuously catching up on domesticity. She had even started to make a list. Lists didn't normally feature much in her life so that made her feel good.

Then she heard the bell.

It rang again, unnaturally loud in the quiet house. Her heart thumping, she ran downstairs to the entry phone and was not reassured to hear the voice of one of her husband's colleagues. She watched from the window as Madame Frank, the voluptuous beauty from Personnel, came teetering across the damp courtyard with Hoffer close at her heels like an amorous little terrier.

Kim opened the door. Impressively chic in black with a silk scarf draped around her broad shoulders, Madame Frank shook her hand solemnly. Hoffer did the same, baring his teeth in a brief contorted smile, and then he, too, assumed a more sombre expression. After numerous repetitions of '*bonjour, madame*' they enquired after her health, and as the conversation proceeded in this polite Swiss fashion Kim began to relax a little. Perhaps nothing was wrong after all.

It was not until her guests were seated side by side on the sofa that she heard the words 'bad news'.

Her stomach turned in sudden sick panic. 'The school bus, nothing happened to the bus, did it? My son - '

'Oh no, not your son. Nothing to do with your son, Mrs Ellis,' said Madame Frank, leaning forward.

Kim breathed out slowly. Thank God, thank God.

'Rather it is *à propos* your husband, madame. When did you last see him?' asked Hoffer.

'Oh it must be over five weeks ago,' she said carefully. 'He's on a trip to South East Asia, as you know.'

'And when did he last telephone to you?'

'Not since he left.'

'Ah,' sighed Hoffer.

The tone of his voice was disturbing. 'But it's not so unusual. He doesn't often call when he is abroad.'

'But you see, madame, he's required to be in constant contact with us at the office and we also have not received a telephone call or email since four weeks. We have no absolute confirmation but we regret, we much regret, that he was very likely a passenger on a small private aeroplane that's missing in Indonesia.'

Hoffer's words sounded unreal, incredible. Kim heard what he said but she could not seem to grasp the meaning. A horrible chilly calm enveloped her. During the fourteen years of their marriage, Richard had a tendency to disappear now and then, usually because of a small misunderstanding with his employers. This misunderstanding often ended with his enforced resignation from the firm concerned. But then he would contact

her after a week or so, and they would all move to yet another country where Richard, handsome and plausible, would find yet another job - selling anything from luxury hotels to pharmaceutical products.

These moves were not ideal for the family, he'd say, but he was doing his best to find his niche in the right sort of country. It had appeared that Switzerland was the right sort of country. Despite the fact that Richard travelled a great deal, or perhaps because of it, they were settled and happy here.

Until today.

'How long has the plane been missing?' Her voice, hollow and peculiar, seemed to come from far away.

'Four days, we are told.'

Four days?

Hoffer went on, 'Reports speak of it disappearing somewhere over Borneo, but we have few details. According to our agent in Jakarta, your husband took a flight with a somewhat informal airline based on one of the remote Indonesian islands. The authorities have obtained a flight plan, and unfortunately your husband's name is on the passenger list. No wreckage has yet been discovered - such a small plane missing in a jungle area, it may never be discovered.'

There was a long pause. Finally Kim heard herself say, 'But there could still be survivors, if nothing's been found.'

Madame Frank spoke. 'Our deepest condolences, Mrs Ellis. From the rumours that have reached them from tribesmen, the authorities suspect a mid-air explosion.'

'I thought you said they weren't sure what happened.'

'It seems they are reasonably sure.'

Kim stood up and walked to the window. She looked down through the trees and across the rooftops to the lake below. The early autumn mists had dispersed and she could see a yacht on the quiet grey water. Then the yacht became blurred.

'May I call your doctor? Perhaps a *calmante*?' suggested Madame Frank.

'I'm all right, thank you,' muttered Kim, holding on to the back of the armchair. They were clearly expecting her to break down, but shock and conflicting emotions paralysed her.

Madame Frank said, 'A friend then. I will contact a friend for you, if you wish.'

'Thank you. Perhaps later. I mean... I mean I'll phone someone myself.' She stared out of the window again. 'At the moment I think I'd rather be alone, if you don't mind.' It was what she wanted to say and yet she felt as if someone else was speaking, a stranger, oddly calm and controlled.

'Of course, we shall leave you then,' said Madame Frank rising to her feet.

Hoffer intervened. 'But before parting, we need to check your husband's dossiers, files, here at home as certain papers are missing from the office.'

'No,' said Kim sharply.

'But, madame, it is necessary.'

'No, it can't be, not today. Anyway Richard keeps - kept no office papers at home. And he took his laptop with him.'

'But we need to be sure of that, urgently.'

She took a deep uneven breath. 'I'll, I'll check the desk and if there are any company papers, I'll bring them to the office later.'

Madame Frank shook her head. 'It would be so much less painful for you, Mrs Ellis, if you'd allow Monsieur Hoffer to do the work for you. He would only take about half an hour.'

She stared at him. It was still hard to understand what they were talking about. 'Half an hour! No, I'm sorry, I want to be alone in my house now please.'

Hoffer's expression changed. 'You forget, madame, that it is not, in fact, *your* house. The rent for this charming villa in this exclusive suburb is paid by the company. So it is the company who holds the tenancy agreement with your landlord, not you, and now we require the property for another employee.'

The enormity of what had happened began to penetrate the blankness of her mind and Kim sank down into a chair. Then the practical automaton took over again. 'And exactly when does the company require the house?' she asked shakily.

'The terms of your husband's contract of employment state that if for any reason he ceased to work for the company, you must leave the house within one month. Now, Mr Ellis has been out of contact for over a month. That is, even before the crash he failed to keep in touch. As he appears to have committed certain other procedural irregularities, and therefore has not fulfilled his obligations, so you could be required to leave immediately.' He waved his hand. 'But the chairman does not want to put you to such inconveniences.'

'But -'

He waved his hand again and continued, 'Yes, he has kindly agreed, because of the tragic circumstances, that you and your son may stay for a further month from today and your husband's successor will be placed in temporary accommodation.'

She stared at him in astonishment. 'Richard's successor has already been appointed?'

'Yes,' said Hoffer calmly. 'Meanwhile, because the company is permitting you to remain in the house for this extended period, you will be expected to assist us with our investigations.'

Another shiver passed over her.

'We are not satisfied with your husband's accounts and records,' he continued.

'Of course, we're not suggesting anything grave. Just small oversights probably,' put in Madame Frank.

Hoffer glared as if to silence her. 'We are a company that sets high standards and it appears that Mr Ellis may have used confidential client information to his own advantage. In other words, we suspect that he became involved in a private deal, in breach of company rules. Therefore we must regret to inform you that no further salary or final gratuity can be paid to your husband's bank. Here is a letter to that effect.'

Bewildered, Kim took the letter without reading it. 'No, I don't suppose people would pay a salary to a dead man,' she said slowly.

'As I said, we believe he is actually deceased but there is, madame, as yet no legal proof of death. In any case, there were no widow's pension terms under your husband's contract. I dare say he had his own pension plan and life assurance.'

'I don't know. I hadn't thought. You don't think of these things.'

Madame Frank intervened. 'Poor Mrs Ellis, we must leave her to herself. She cannot consider all this now. We will return another day.'

'No, let him go on,' said Kim with an effort. 'It sounds as if I need to understand my situation. You're saying that, though tomorrow is the first day of October, no money will be paid into our account but that I may stay here rent-free until the end of the month.'

'Exactly,' said Madame Frank, her eyes brimming with sympathy.

'But we do expect you to cooperate in the matter of the missing records,' said Hoffer. He began to edge towards the study door as if he intended to proceed with his search regardless of her wishes.

Kim rose to her feet, blocking his way. 'Let me show you out now, monsieur. If you come back tomorrow, I'll give you any files I find that belong to the office. I don't think Richard would have deliberately broken company rules.'

She led them to the front door. They shook hands and, with further expressions of condolence, departed.

Unlocking the French windows and leaving them wide open, Kim went out onto the lawn which, she noticed abstractedly, was still soaked with early morning dew. After pacing around for a while she sat down on the low wall between the pots of red and pink geraniums. Then, examining the plants in a glazed manner, she began to pinch out the older blossom heads, dropping them on the terrace until she was surrounded by a small heap of bare stems and faded petals.

For many years to come the sharp distinctive smell of geranium leaves would remind her of Richard.

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'How sad, *la pauvre* Madame Ellis, so brave, the British *sang-froid*, the shock,' said Vivienne Frank tearfully. Stopping only to re-pin her Hermès scarf into a yet more becoming style, she installed herself behind the wheel of the Mercedes. This operation was much enjoyed by her passenger, Hoffer, since it afforded a glimpse of majestic thigh. Vivienne was a large woman devoted to small skirts.

As she drove through the quiet streets of Cologne, he forgot his irritation with Mme Ellis and ventured to lay his hand on Vivienne's right knee which pumped gently up and down as she applied the accelerator.

To distract her attention from his advances, he agreed, 'Yes, the poor lady.'

'So young to be widowed,' said Vivienne.

'I have been checking the file. She's forty-five and the son is eleven.'

'But she looks younger, and so lovely too.'

'She may be attractive to some, but not to me,' lied Hoffer tactfully. 'In my view, all that dark hair, it is too long for a woman of her age. And those jeans...'

'True, she has no chic.'

'No chic at all,' agreed Hoffer, though he had enjoyed the curves which the jeans revealed. He advanced his hand a little more. 'And the skin with those freckles.'

Vivienne drove more slowly but pursued her train of thought. 'I like freckles as long as they are pale, like hers. Not too gamine. And without doubt her eyes are fine. I suppose she may marry again, but it appears she is not to be a rich widow. And no career either. Or did you say that she teaches English?'

'I believe she has a few pupils but it is hardly a high-income job,' he said, squeezing an enjoyably plump thigh.

Vivienne slapped his hand away. 'Imbecile, I am not made of wood.'

Hoffer leered. 'That's true, that's true.'

'Keep your hands to yourself, *chéri*. I cannot concentrate. Do you want me to crash the company car? In such a case, Mrs Ellis would not be the only person without a career.'

They were silent for a while as they reached the neat promenade by the lake.

'Do you really not consider her a desirable woman?' asked Vivienne, clearly obsessed by the subject.

In his view, Vivienne had allowed herself to become too much involved in this whole case. She seemed unnecessarily upset when the news of crash came through, over-emotional and anxious. Could be due to her age. It had occurred to him lately that she might be approaching the menopause years. Sometimes he even dreamt of finding someone a little younger.

'Madame Ellis? In some ways she may attractive, perhaps,' he replied cautiously, 'but her temperament seems somewhat unfeminine. I have often found her over-opinionated.' It was true, he thought. He really preferred a more acquiescent, traditional woman like his former wife. Though outside office hours one noticed Vivienne's perfumed flesh rather than her personality, she, too, could be as obstructive as Madame Ellis.

Vivienne was still talking about her. 'Let's hope she'll find a nice new husband to take care of her.'

'But, my love, how old-fashioned you are. These days I thought it was correct for ladies to take care of themselves.'

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Spurred on by a strange unnatural energy, Kim hurried down the tree-lined road towards the village centre. It had proved impossible to stay at home staring at Richard's endless neat files full of old bills and unimportant letters. She needed to walk, to be outdoors, to do something domestic and mindless like shopping, buying food for James's dinner. She must focus on James. Oh God, he must be protected at all costs. Everything must be kept as normal and stable as possible. How on earth would she tell him? She began to rehearse, to try and think of the right things to say, but couldn't imagine how she would begin.

An Alsatian guard dog barked and snarled as she passed the tall gates of its domain. Another took up the chorus until all the dogs in the street were barking at her. Hardly aware of them or of a workman sweeping up the early autumn leaves, Kim rushed on.

When she reached the elegant little supermarket, she took a wire basket and began to fill it with treats for James: fillet steak, crisps, Coca Cola, chocolate ice cream, nothing healthy today.

'*Bonjour, madame,*' said the familiar check-out girl, with a well-trained smile.

'*Bonjour, madame,*' echoed Kim. She handed over her credit card.

The girl swiped the card through the machine. There was a long pause. Sighing loudly, a fat woman in the queue behind began to shuffle her feet impatiently. The cashier passed the card through the machine again. Eventually almost as embarrassed as Kim, she whispered that the card had not been accepted. It must have been damaged - or the machine was playing up. That was often the case, regretfully.

Scarlet in the face, Kim searched through her purse for some cash. She could hardly see the coins for the irrational tears trickling down her face. No, there wasn't

enough money. She scabbled through her handbag again and, to her relief, found a fifty franc note. She paid the bill and, jamming her purchases into two plastic bags, fled outside.

Home. Must get home. She was halfway there before she managed to control herself. Sinking down on a bench, she sat staring at the traffic for a while and then a squirrel climbing up the ivy of a grey stone house opposite caught her eye. Hypnotised, she was afraid it would fall. When finally it reached the safety of the roof, she felt temporarily released, able to move again. Summoning up all her strength, she put on her sunglasses to hide her red eyes and hurried back towards the village.

In the small branch of the Union de Banques Suisses, she inserted her card into the cash dispenser and tapped in her code. There was another long unnerving pause and a great deal of clicking, and then instead of spewing out cash the machine advised her it was retaining the card.

Panic mounting again, she approached the disapproving young clerk. With much opening and closing of security doors, he showed her through to the inner office.

The manager, a pale young man with thick spectacles, appeared to have been expecting her and offered his deepest condolences with polite embarrassment. Kim felt momentarily sorry for him as he struggled to convey the correct amount of professional grief.

When she was able to raise the problem of the credit card, he said, 'Regretfully, madame, your account is closed. It is in the name of your husband and the Personnel Officer of his employers has reported him as being deceased.'

'But there's still a chance, a small chance that he may be alive. There's no proof as yet. You see, there's my son... we need money for bills, to eat.' She kept her dark glasses on and her shaky hands clenched.

The manager made a rapid telephone call. 'I am very sorry, madame, but, as I said, everything is in the name of your husband. We profoundly apologise if we have been premature to treat him as being deceased but, for a variety of delicate reasons, his account must remain frozen. In the circumstances, the bank is unable to allow overdrafts on accounts that have no incoming funds due.'

'I see. I didn't realise it was overdrawn.'

'Only a little, madame, but the Bank is unable to allow the deficit to augment.'

Determined not to become emotional again, she stared down at the carpet, focusing on a small black stain. She was trying to calculate how much cash there was hidden in her cupboard, when she realised that the manager was speaking. He seemed to be asking her about her resources.

'The shoe box,' she muttered idiotically.

He stared at her.

She cleared her throat, 'I mean, there's a joint deposit account in England.'

Brightening, he suggested she should open an account of her own, transfer some money from this one in England. He would explain the procedure. Once the funds had cleared the new account would function and her new credit card would arrive within two weeks, maybe less. He then produced an application form five pages long and handed her a ballpoint pen decorated with the bank's logo.

With a shaky hand, she managed to write her address and date of birth but then her mind glazed over again when she saw all the details required. Richard's birthplace?

Her paternal grandmother's maiden name? Such strange questions. Most difficult of all was the one that ought to be easy: there was a box requiring an answer on her marital status. After a pause, she wrote 'widow' and stared at the strange word.

Unable to complete the form in full, she was advised to return with all the necessary information - plus a copy of her passport, her residence permit, her driving licence - as soon as possible so that everything could be arranged.

Obediently she hurried home but when she reached the sanctuary of her kitchen, she realised she had left her groceries at the bank. Probably by now the ice cream was dripping more stains on to the red carpet.

She sat down at the table and wept at last for Richard, and for the slow and unrecognised death of her marriage a long time ago.