## Summary and introduction

Habitat Man by D.A. Baden 

**Summary:**

Inspired by a real-life green garden consultancy, this eco-themed rom-com combines comedy, fiction and science to foster green solutions. Tim – the unlikely hero – is fifty, single and trapped in a job he despises. In a desperate quest to find love and meaning, Tim transforms himself into *Habitat* *Man,* an eco-friendly twenty-first century superhero who endeavours to rescue the planet through a combination of wildlife gardening, composting toilets, bird psychology and green funerals. When Tim accidentally digs up the body of the fabled guerrilla knitter in a back garden, his struggle for a better future becomes threatened by secrets from his past. Tim’s crises mirror those faced by the planet, and his sharing-economy, costing-for-nature policies offer hope for us all.

**Note:** The following chapter extends the back story hinted at in earlier chapters about Tim’s not-quite son he was forced to leave behind. It also references his growing fears about the body he uncovered in a garden while digging a pond. He was happy to keep quiet and forget about it for fear of his past being raked up, but it’s not so easy. I am happy to rewrite chapter 25 so it works as a stand-alone story and amend to echo other issues covered elsewhere in the anthology. So please let me know any suggestions before I start rewriting. Chapter 31 isn’t relevant really, but on page 11, Tim rhapsodises about the composting toilet at the inquest, providing more detail of the benefits. As well as introducing composting toilets, this story also talks about biodiversity and upcycling and undermines consumption-based values.

## Chapter 25: The Composting Toilet

***From:*** *Transition****To:*** *Tim Redfern*

***Subject:*** *Dr Eleanor Trimpton and Dr Eric Williams, Shirley*

*Dear Tim*

*This is a couple from Shirley who want to create habitats for children and wildlife.*

*Cheers*

*Karen*

My route to Shirley took me down through the underpass into the west side of the common, a route I generally avoided due to the memories it conjured up. The council had given up trying to control the graffiti in the underpass and now it was like an additional art installation for those in the know. It followed the principle of survival of the fittest. The poor ones were painted over quickly, so the quality was pretty high. I used to take young Danny to the pond on the common, and the only way I could drag him away was by taking him back through the underpass, where we’d pretend to be pretentious art critics, analysing the swirls and patterns on the wall.

Chafing at the restrictions of young motherhood, Danny’s mum was happy to let me take him out. Danny’s new ‘dad’ though, was less keen, resenting, I suppose, that for the first four years of Danny’s life, I’d been the father figure. The last time I’d had Danny for the day, he’d been delighted to see a graffiti artist painting on the walls, and even more delighted when he was allowed a spray himself. When I was ‘caught’ bringing him back, I’d thought the commotion had been about the paint he’d got on his clothes. That was the last time I saw Danny. Bewildered by all the shouting, tears streaming down his face, howling, pleading with me not to go.

I came out of the darkness of the underpass and ran doubled over with the memories towards a thicket of trees that offered cover. I fell to the ground, waiting for the waves of emotion to pass. Regret, bitterness, fear, anger, jealousy, love.

My phone went, another text from Fern. Furious, I deleted it immediately. She should have got the message by now. I don’t want to be dragged into it. It’s just another thing stirring everything up. I’d had enough of everyone thinking the worst in my home village. Not because they really believed it but because it makes for a better story. Why should I risk it all coming out just because I was the unlucky sod who’d dug up a body?

I stared up at the sky through the trees, noticing after a while, that the spring leaves were coming through. Gradually, I tuned into nature and let the sound of the wind in the trees calm me. Could I perhaps tell Lori? The thought set my heart hammering in my chest, and I abandoned it immediately. No, soon Fern will give up. I’ll avoid the underpass and any visits where there are young children that might stir up memories. How would I phrase it? Green garden consultant – no families. That wouldn’t wash. And what about my upcoming visit, asking for habitats for children and wildlife?

I scratched in the earth under my hand, remembering how I’d share with Danny all I’d been learning at university. We’d dig about in the ground and list all the creatures we found: earwigs, beetles, springtails, worms, millipedes, woodlice. Today, my scratching yielded a perturbing lack of life, just some ants.

‘Man-up, Habitat Man,’ I told myself sternly. This is your atonement, you’re making a difference in people’s back gardens, doing your bit for biodiversity and the environment. Focus on that and you’ll be alright.

A jay chattered in the branches above, then an answering chatter from another tree. The sun came out and the leaves above me shimmered with a translucent green. Glimpses of blue sky appeared through the foliage. I picked out the thin high notes of a bird nearby, a tree creeper perhaps. Through the leaves I saw a flock of starlings high in the sky, swooping one way then another. I climbed to my feet and watched. Hundreds of them swirled and turned and dipped, as if to some inaudible music or hidden plan. I wasn’t the only person to notice, every person on the common was gazing upwards in wonder. Mesmerised, I started walking again.

I found myself in front of a house in Shirley. Eric, a tall blonde man in his thirties, answered the door. I looked up to point out the murmuration to him but the starlings had disappeared from sight. I shook off the fanciful idea that they’d led me there and introduced myself.

‘I’m Tim, about your garden?’

‘Hello. I’m Eric, come on in.’

In a blur, I allowed myself to be led to the back garden having vaguely taken in that his wife would be back soon with the boys. I pulled myself together and paid attention as he showed me around. If nothing else, I could make a difference here, although it seemed already to be a perfect habitat for wildlife. The grass was quite long. Garden debris had been piled up by the side providing a habitat for invertebrates. Half-buried logs for the vertebrates, water butt, bags of peat-free compost, a swift box under the eaves. They had a pond and the area between the pond and the shrubs by the fence had been allowed to grow over, providing cover to allow amphibians to travel to and from the pond without fear of being picked off by birds.

I should be pleased but instead I felt irritated. Not much atoning to be done here, it was already exemplary. This was the trouble with getting clients from the Transition list, I was preaching to the converted, not making a difference at all.

‘How can I help?’ I asked.

‘It’s the neighbours.’

I glanced over at the neat garden next door. ‘Sorry, I don’t understand?’

‘It starts with an enquiry if our lawnmower is broken and would we like to borrow theirs, but what they really mean is cut your damn lawn.’

‘Er…’ I hesitated, unsure what was required.

‘If we can say we paid someone to check our garden as a professional habitat man, then that’s different,’ said Eric.

I got it at last. ‘Long grass is only acceptable if it’s on purpose, accredited by a professional?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Dad! Tell Olly that caterpillars are green.’

We looked up as two boys ran into the garden, the eldest in school uniform. That’s all I needed, two cute boys Danny’s age to rub it in.

‘This is Olly and Jacob. Boys, say hi to Tim.’

They ignored me, lost in their own argument.

‘I don’t see why they can’t be red.’

‘When you go to proper school, you’ll have to draw them the right colour.’

‘I know,’ said Eric keen to distract them, ‘find all the snails and throw them over the fence.’

I tried to tune out the sound of the boys shrieks and find something useful to tell Eric.

‘Right, so we need to make it look more managed.’ I pointed to the untidy pile of vegetation at the side. ‘If you chop your garden debris right down then you can pile it up under your hedges and shrubs to act as a mulch. It will create habitats and enrich the soil and look less messy.’ I saw some secateurs and lifted an old branch that had been cut back and cut it into inch-long sections to demonstrate.

‘There’s something!’

I tried not to look, but small grubby hands cupping something were held out hopefully to me.

I couldn’t resist and squatted down. It was a big black beetle with a shiny purplish sheen to its head.

‘Do you know what that is?’

‘A beetle?’ suggested Jacob.

Olly ran up to look. ‘Beetle,’ he agreed.

‘Well done. It’s a violet ground beetle. It shows your garden has excellent biodiversity.’

‘There’s a snail,’ shrieked Olly and ran to throw it over the fence.

He must be about four, a sweet age. My throat tightened. I blinked and focussed my attention on the lawn.

‘You can have different mowing regimes for different parts of the lawn to delineate wildlife areas and make it look deliberate and managed, rather than unkempt,’ I suggested to Eric.

‘No, we already know what we’re going to do…’ Eric nodded next door where the neighbour had appeared to hang out her washing and spoke loudly, ‘we should keep our grass long you say?’

I raised my voice slightly. ‘Yes, one of the easiest things a gardener can do to enhance the wildlife value of their garden is to mow the lawn less frequently.’

‘We’re getting a meadow,’ he added.

‘For a meadow, you’ll only need to cut the grass and compost the clippings once a year, in late August,’ I said.

‘Thank you for your professional opinion as wildlife consultant. We’ll do as you say.’ He winked at me.

I smiled politely. I’d done my bit, now I wanted to go. I wasn’t going to be much more use here.

‘Well good luck with your meadow. I’ll send you a report with some suggestions as you may find that just planting wildflower seeds isn’t that effective as grass out-competes the wildflowers. But there are solutions…’

‘It’s okay, we’re buying one. I wanted to ask what the difference is between meadow mat and wildflower turf?’

‘A more relevant question is whether you want an eco-friendly garden or an instant meadow?’

‘Is it either or?’ To his credit he seemed concerned.

‘Thing is, Eric, most wildflower or meadow mats are plastic-backed.’

‘Yes, but they said it breaks down.’

I sighed, exasperated by what was essentially greenwash. ‘It doesn’t break down, it breaks up into micro-plastics, which is even worse for wildlife.’ I shrugged and prepared to go.

He looked at me aghast. ‘They should really say; the whole point was for us to benefit wildlife.’

I softened, perhaps I could do some good here after all.

‘Meadows tend to develop over time in soil with low fertility—’

‘Hello.’

I looked up to see an attractive lady come and join us.

‘Tim, this is Eleanor, my wife.’

‘Hi.’ I nodded at her.

‘Darling, Tim says it’s more eco-friendly to grow our own meadow,’ said Eric, offering his cheeks for a kiss.

‘Okay, then you must tell us what we need to do,’ Eleanor said to me at once.

I’d been expecting resistance, and bit back a comment about it also being much cheaper.

Eleanor noticed my surprise and shot Eric a pointed look, which he accepted with a shrug. ‘Eleanor told me we couldn’t invite you just for the neighbours,’

She smiled at me charmingly. ‘I told him – darling, you are wasting the man’s time when he could be doing more good elsewhere.’

I smiled and agreed, warming towards them.

‘But the neighbours might want a visit too, and…’ Eric looked for a moment like an excited child, ‘I wanted to show him this.’ He headed towards an intriguing wooden hut perched on a raised patio area at the bottom of the garden.

‘It’s a cool design. Is it a shed?’ I asked.

‘Come and see.’

Jacob skipped down to join us, closely followed by Olly. ‘Do you want a wee?’

‘Or pooh,’ giggled Olly and ran off shrieking.

Eric laughed. ‘This is our composting toilet.’

It was beautifully designed, almost an arch shape, with a circular stained glass window towards the top of the door to allow in light. The way it curved into a point at the top gave it an ethereal *Lord of the Rings* look.

‘I’ve heard of these, but I’ve not been in one.’

He looked at me expectantly so I opened the door and beheld the loo. The toilet was small but stylish – a square box painted in red, gold and white.

Eric’s face was bursting with pride. He lifted up the slab of wood that the toilet seat was set into. Underneath were two compartments. At the front was a large plastic bottle and at the back in a separate section was a square plastic container, lined with a large bag and half full of wood shavings.

‘We have a twin-bowl design that separates the solid from the urine, to keep it dry so you don’t get flies. It goes dry and crumbly when it meets the oxygen and breaks down into germ-free compost, so you only need to empty it about once or twice a year, and you can use it to revitalise the soil.’

‘This is Eric’s new toy,’ Eleanor told me smiling.

Eric returned to his explanation. ‘When you go, you use toilet paper as usual, then instead of flushing, you put down two scoops of wood shavings. No water, no chemicals. It doesn’t smell at all, does it?’

‘No it doesn’t.’

‘Would you like a go?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Maybe later.’

‘I’ll just top up the wood shavings in case.’

Eleanor laughed and rolled her eyes. ‘We’ll leave him to it. Tim, come have a coffee and tell me what we should do.’

We headed back towards the house and I shared my vision for the garden with Eleanor.

‘If you allow your grass to grow, daisies, clover, buttercups and dandelions will naturally proliferate, creating a meadow-like effect.’

Eleanor looked around nodding.

‘For a wider variety like poppies, cornflowers, etc. remove some turf round the edges and replace with some horticultural grit or sand mix and sow wildflowers there.’

Eric stepped down from the hut to join us and I realised the patio outside the kitchen mirrored the raised patio the composting toilet was on.

‘The path you walked on just now could be a raised decking, like a boardwalk from one patio to the other,’ I told them both when he joined us. ‘That would protect the long grass and provide a sense of a designed garden rather than a garden simply left to run wild.’

‘Yes, a path direct to the hut,’ cried Eric, delighted.

‘I know of some decking you can use,’ I said, thinking of Lori’s old decking that hadn’t yet been taken down the dump.

‘‘Perfect… Olly, stop that!’ Eleanor rushed to stop him throwing a snail over the fence.

‘But Dad said to.’

‘Not when she’s in the garden,’ she hissed.

It began to rain softly.

‘Come on, let’s go in now,’

Jacob sped past Olly yelling, hitting him with a stick. Olly howled and chased him inside.

We followed them in to a large kitchen/dining-room. Eleanor pushed aside paper and colouring pencils and set some biscuits on the table.

‘Wash your hands first, and get changed,’ said Eleanor when they made a grab for them. They trooped upstairs and the kitchen was quiet.

Eric joined me at the table. ‘Sorry about the neighbour thing, but we need them onside.’

‘It’s because lawns are a status symbol,’ Eleanor said, setting out coffee cups.

Eric looked proudly at his wife. ‘Eleanor is a psychologist at the university. She can explain the neighbours’ attitude.’

Eleanor poured thick dark coffee into tiny cups as she spoke, ‘My research is in conspicuous consumption and its symbolic value. Since lawns have no value for food or income, the larger the lawn and the less useful, the higher status it gives.’

‘That’s why the neighbours have a go,’ added Eric.

‘Is a question of self-esteem. Showing off by having high status stuff only works if others want it too.’

I nodded, interested. It made sense of an attitude I’d come across at work. ‘My ex-work colleagues used to take it as a personal affront that I wasn’t interested in their latest sports car or four-wheel drive,’ I told them.

‘That’s because if you don’t want what they have, it loses symbolic value. So the neighbours think we dismiss their values by not caring about our lawn.’

The boys ran back in the kitchen and descended on the biscuits.

‘We’re bored,’ said Olly, crumbs falling out of his mouth.

‘What can we do now?’ said Jacob.

I couldn’t help myself. ‘Do you want to play the caterpillar game?’

I took their shrieks as agreement. ‘Draw ten caterpillars, cut them out and then colour them in, five in red and five in green.’

Eric shot me a grateful look and passed them over the paper and colouring pencils and they sat quietly colouring in.

‘But what is so interesting,’ continued Eleanor, ‘is that with the turn against consumption, now when people see goods, they don’t necessarily think, “that person is doing so well,” they think, “that person is destroying the environment.” It’s no longer a status symbol but irresponsible, you see.’

‘Done it!’ cried Jacob.

‘I done first!’ Olly, held out paper caterpillars for me to inspect.

I checked them quickly and nodded. ‘Now, hide your caterpillars in the garden. Olly, keep to the left and Jacob to the right.’

‘Okay!’ The boys ran off to do my bidding.

Eleanor resumed her point smoothly, clearly used to constant interruptions. ‘Or worse, conspicuous consumption is seen as pathetic, as if trying too hard.’

I considered this and sipped the coffee, wincing at its strength. I tried to picture my work colleagues. ‘I only buy second hand,’ Martin would brag. ‘We’re full-on minimalists.’ Simon would respond, not to be outdone. ‘I buy nothing at all.’ ‘I’ve given all my possessions away and donated my body and my family to the earth.’ My inward chuckles at their imagined one-upmanship in non-consumption ceased abruptly when I was reminded again of the body I’d dug up.

‘Tim, you look a little tense, how about some wine, if you don’t have to rush off?’ Eleanor said.

‘Yes, have a drink and relax a little,’ Eric urged.

I hesitated.

‘We’re your last call today, no?’ enquired Eleanor.

I nodded and she grabbed some glasses and a bottle of Chianti and set them down on the table with some breadsticks.

The boys skipped back into the room.

‘Hid them!’

‘Now go and find them,’ said Eleanor, pouring the wine.

‘Hold on,’ I said to the boys before they rushed off. ‘Pretend you’re both hungry birds collecting caterpillars to eat, but come back when you’ve found six of them.’

I accepted a glass of wine, feeling glad I’d come. I felt sorry now for misjudging them. Eleanor seemed to read my mind.

‘You think we waste your time asking you just for the neighbours?’

I started to protest, but Eric jumped in. ‘There’s no point denying it, Tim, she can see through us. That’s the trouble with being married to a psychologist!’ he burst out laughing, clearly not too unhappy about it. ‘But we’ll do the meadow as you say.’

‘If you plant yellow rattle seeds in autumn or some plugs in spring that will reduce the vigour of the grass, giving other wildflowers more of a chance. It wouldn’t be long before your garden is alive with all kinds of butterflies,’

‘I like it. We can get the boys to identify them,’ said Eleanor.

 ‘Moths too. Soak a cloth in a sugary drink and hang it from your washing line to attract them. Or simply hang a sheet with a light behind it and at night all kinds of moths will be drawn to it, and your boys could have fun classifying them. They’d also attract bats, which they might like.’

Olly rushed in with a triumphant cry. ‘I found six first.’

Jacob followed hot on his heels. ‘I got five.’

‘Let’s see,’ I said.

Olly held out five red caterpillars and one green caterpillar.

‘Now show me yours, Jacob.’

Jacob held out five caterpillars, all red.

‘What do you notice?’

‘They’re all the red ones.’

‘Well done. Why do you think that is?’

‘Because they were hid easier.’

‘Did you hide the green ones more carefully?’

They shook their heads.

‘I know, red ones are easier to spot,’ cried Olly.

‘Yes. And that’s why caterpillars are green.’

The boys jumped up and down as they got it.

Eric clapped his hands delighted. ‘Do you have any more games like that? We could use you for the children’s parties.’

‘No,’ I lied.

‘You’re so good with them. Do you have children?’ Eleanor asked.

‘Erm…’ I put the wine down and shook my head. ‘I think I will have a go at your composting toilet.’

Eric smiled delighted. The boys jumped up to follow me, but he held them back.

‘Leave him in peace. It’s his first time.’

I left the sounds of chattering children and walked outside. A few slow soft drops of rain remained, then petered out when the sun emerged, setting the raindrops sparkling against the vegetation. I walked down the garden to the hut and went in. I sat down. It was perfectly quiet except for the distant sound of a wood pigeon. It smelled of forests and fresh air. The feeling of calm and sanctuary in the toilet reminded me of Daisy’s garden. That sense of perfect harmony between art and nature, soothing to the senses and the spirit. No harsh lights, whirr of fans, smell of urine overlaid with air freshener. Instead, daylight streamed in through the small window, which I now saw had a picture set into the glass, a frog on a lily pad amidst dragonflies and bulrushes. The sun caught the stained glass window and brought the scene suddenly to life creating an almost religious experience. The elusive frog so sensitive to water pollution, safe here where our waste was used to nurture life. A benign, quiet smell of wood shavings. I heard the characteristic chirp of a grasshopper and smiled. Danny would love that, and the pond too.

This time, I didn’t push the memories away. I thought back to the decision I’d faced, try again to see him and risk a jail sentence and destabilising a new family, or walk away. In the sanctuary of the composting toilet, at last I forgave myself. There was no way I could have known then, or even know now, what the right answer was. But I knew that the decision had been made out of love.

Fern and the grandad had acted out of love too. She might end up in court, as I did, but on a possible murder enquiry. I remembered the desperation in her voicemail message. We make bad decisions when we make them from fear.

I looked at my list of unanswered calls from Fern, picked the latest and hit reply. She answered straightaway.

‘Tim. I’m so glad you called.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t get back to you earlier, I’ll do all I can to help,’ I assured her from the seat of the composting toilet.

‘We need to talk, but not on the phone. Can you come round tomorrow, first thing?’

‘There’s something I need to do first. I’ll aim for mid-morning. And don’t worry, you acted out of love.’ I ended the call.

It was time to tell Lori. I should give her some credit, and trust her to understand.

I breathed out for what seemed like the first time in months and relaxed. I felt a swelling up, a feeling of rightness, of great joy, a letting go.

I used the paper then put two scoops of wood shavings down the toilet and used the hand sanitiser. I opened the door and walked out into the garden and back into the house.

Eric recognised something in my shining face and nodded satisfied.

## Chapter 31: The Inquest

I sat on the bench near the shrouded statue of Lord Palmerston, watching a park gardener spraying the roses. Lori arrived just as I was about to suggest to him that planting garlic among the roses would deter the aphids without the need for pesticides.

‘Hi, Tim.’

‘Lori!’ I stood up and beheld her with delight. She stepped forward and I enfolded her in my arms for a lovely moment. A faint chant of ‘Fashion is Ecocide,’ grew louder, and we quickly found ourselves in the midst of Extinction Rebellion protestors marching towards the courthouse waving banners.

‘Shall we?’

Lori nodded and we followed them towards the courthouse. It hadn’t been possible to completely surround the building, but the knitters had taken over the park next door for their eco-fashion exhibition. By XR standards it was very peaceful. Instead of the angry speeches and chants I’d heard in the London protests, there was the steady click-clack of knitting needles and murmur of information being passed on to the numerous people who were passing by or heading for the courthouse.

Lori paused by a cardboard cut-out of a figure dressed in denim jeans. ‘This one has double the carbon footprint of the nylon trousers, I wouldn’t have expected that.’

‘Even more if you include the laundry, dear,’ explained the lady sitting by the cut-out figure knitting away. ‘Jeans are heavy so they take more energy to transport and use a lot of water washing and lots of energy drying. Those lightweight nylon ones use a fraction of energy in the laundry costs.’

‘Heating water is very energy intensive,’ I added, remembering my Costing for Nature calculations.

‘That’s right, my sweet. Best not to over-wash clothes, increases wear and often unnecessary. Dry on the line outside if you can, as jeans take ages in the dryer. Your nylon trousers are much lighter, use less energy, dry in minutes.’

‘I thought acrylics were bad.’

‘So they are, my lovely. They’re toxic to the people making it, non-biodegradable and carbon intensive, but cotton uses so much water, and you get lots of pollution going into the water from the process.’

‘What are you knitting with?’ I asked her, pocketing a leaflet.

‘I’m knitting with recycled yarn, but see the lady over there?’

I recognised Fingers. ‘Knitting with nettles?’ I ventured.

‘Yes she is, and further on you’ll see clothes made out of hemp, bamboo, flax and Tencel fibres.’

I saw Mark with another band of protestors, their fearful banners proclaiming the end of the world seeming out of place. While Lori was browsing the stands, I went over to say hello. His greeting was muted, so I got it out of the way. ‘Sorry about the parakeets and the kebab.’

He relented. ‘This was a great idea of yours, Habitat Man.’

‘It was a team effort.’

‘The fashion swap really brought in the crowds.’ Mark nodded towards the far corner which thronged with people carrying clothes.

‘Habitat Man!’ I heard a familiar booming voice. It was Tri.

Lori returned to my side. ‘Lori, this is Mark who organised this, and Tri, from the, what was it?’

‘South Yorkshire Yarn Bombers.’

‘This is wonderful,’ Lori told them.

‘It’s just,’ Mark looked round disappointed, ‘well there’s not much shouting.’

‘It’s the feminine influence,’ proclaimed Tri. ‘Whereas men want to dominate and shout, here we persuade.’ He bounded off to speak to a couple who’d approached his cut-out.

‘Is that the crypto-feminist?’ whispered Lori.

I nodded and jumped as the clock on the civic centre struck the half hour.

‘We’d better go.’ Lori hurried towards the court building. I was spotted by a huddle of journalists that hovered around the entrance. Cameras flashed and cries of ‘Habitat Man,’ ‘what did she do for love?’ and ‘was it lamb in that kebab?’ rained down on me. A mic was thrust into my face. Before I could speak, an official whisked me inside and through a door marked private. Lori was being herded into the courtroom, along with a mish-mash of knitters, protestors and general public. She turned round and looked quizzically at me. I managed a reassuring smile before I was ushered into a private waiting room and told to wait for the coroner’s assistant. I regretted now not reading the information on my summons. Everything related to the case had been accompanied by a buzz of panic that had prevented me from taking any of it in. What a drama queen I’d been about the whole thing.

I entertained myself by reading the leaflets handed out at the protest. Linen yarn is made from the flax plant and is good for knitting summer clothes due to its thermo-regulating properties. Perhaps I’d knit something for Jo for when the menopause hit. She hated the heat. I laughed out loud when I thought how she’d wound me up over the life coaching mark. I texted her an LOL and enquired after her audition. I moved onto the leaflet about the Global Organic Textile Standards certification scheme, and how a GOTS logo means the fibres have met environmental and labour standards.

Jo texted back. *They love me.*

*Of course they do,* I responded. *You’re an evil genius.*

I paced around, rehearsing speeches in my head, and wondering what was going on in the courtroom. I’d just purchased some bamboo socks on my phone for my dad’s birthday and was partway through ordering a hemp shirt for myself, when an officious man with a clipboard came in and frowned at me.

‘Mr Redfern?’

‘Yes?’

‘We can’t find your witness statement. Did you send it in?’

‘No, sorry.’ I didn’t admit that I hadn’t read beyond the time and place.

He sighed. ‘Have you brought it with you?’

I shook my head apologetically. ‘Could I write it now?’

‘Looks like you’ll have to. I have a blank form here. But write quickly, and legibly. I’ll wait.’

I started writing my account of finding the body. ‘I can’t remember the day—’

‘Twenty-eighth December.’

‘That’s it.’

‘You get in much more trouble trying to avoid…’ he petered out when I glared at him. He’d sounded just like my mother. I felt like I was fifteen again. He shook his head and glanced up at the clock, not bothering to conceal his air of being put upon.

I concluded my brief statement. *Called to advise on a pond by Daisy, ended up digging it. Found bones. Daisy’s mother Fern arrived and told me it was her mother buried there who’d died of cancer but wanted a home burial. They didn’t know if it was allowed so they just did it themselves. I went home.*

‘Is that it?’ he asked when I handed him the form. I was reminded again of my mother gazing critically at my school homework.

‘It’s concise,’ I claimed defensively, ‘but accurate.’

‘Come with me.’ He led me out of the side room and into the courtroom.

I paused to check for the anticipated feeling of panic. It wasn’t there. I was ready to do my bit.

He tutted when we entered and saw a man on the stand already answering questions. ‘He was supposed to be after you,’ he frowned at his clipboard.

‘Sorry.’

‘Just sit anywhere till you’re called.’ He gave me one last accusing look, took my witness statement up to the coroner and handed it to him discreetly. I looked around, no jury, no wigs. Excellent. The benches were full of people, some of whom I recognised from Mark’s house. Lori waved at me from the far end and I headed towards her. As I squeezed past a couple of elderly ladies, one of them grabbed my wrist and pulled me down.

‘Timothy!’

‘Mum?’

‘Sit next to us.’

‘No I’m—’

‘Sit down!’

I gave in and sat down. Next to her I recognised her neighbour, Mrs Lacey. I’d not had much to do with her in the past, but she beamed at me as if we were old friends. I shrugged helplessly at Lori who was watching bemused.

‘Look, Mum—’

‘Shush.’

‘He’s from the Natural Death Centre,’ Mrs Lacey whispered over to me.

‘What did she ask you?’ the coroner was asking the man.

‘She asked about burying bodies in gardens.’

‘Did anything strike you as unusual?’

‘Not at all. We have similar discussions every day with relatives who hate the idea of a standard funeral. Most people are unaware of how much they can do themselves. It’s perfectly legal to keep a dead body in your house, and wash and prepare it yourself, and do your own funeral and we assist with this. Many people find that it’s an expression of love for the deceased to take on these functions and return them to the earth as naturally as possible and in a way that cherishes both the environment and the family.’

The stenographer was typing rapidly. Soon she’d be typing my words. I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked round. It was Tri, burly and bearded amidst a row of lady knitters.

I smiled quickly and turned back round.

‘It’s only in our developed cultures that the idea of death is distasteful,’ the man continued. ‘We’re taught to feel squeamish at the sight, or even the thought of a dead body. I suspect that these feelings of distaste and avoidance are actively encouraged to feed a profitable funeral industry. They can make people feel like they’re not respecting their loved ones unless they order the most expensive mahogany coffin.’

Mrs Lacey was nodding avidly. I wondered where Mr Lacey was. Mum took her hand and squeezed it, and I guessed.

‘They pour toxic chemicals into the deceased bodies and bury them six-feet deep where the aerobic bacteria can’t penetrate. This means that the process of breaking down releases methane which is a greenhouse gas many times more potent than carbon dioxide, and we’re encouraged to see this as the natural, loving way to dispose of our loved ones, when it’s anything but. Also consider the emissions and fuel-use associated with cremation, the use of stone for memorials, often shipped considerable distances from overseas quarries, or the use of formaldehyde for embalming.’

‘Yes, yes,’ interrupted the coroner, looking up from his notes. ‘But the real question is, did Ms Fern Donovan Brown tell you about the body in the garden?’

‘No, she said her father was dying and she wanted to bury him in the garden.’

‘Did she mention anything about registering, or more precisely, not registering the burial and the death?’

‘No. Well, kind of. I thought it was hypothetical. I can’t remember exactly what she asked, but I told her that it was legal to bury bodies in a garden, as long as it’s not near a water supply and the burial site is registered, and obviously the death needs to be registered.’

‘Obviously is my least favourite word. I find whenever someone says “obviously” it’s far from obvious. Let me be more precise in my question. During your discussion, was she made fully aware that an unregistered death and burial would be illegal?’

‘I suppose she was.’

‘Did you tell her how to find out if a body had been registered?’

He shot an apologetic look at Fern. ‘Yes.’

‘Did that not raise alarm bells?’

‘No. Why?’

‘Why would she want to know how to find out if a death had been registered if her father hadn’t yet died?’

‘Oh. I don’t know.’

‘To confirm, Ms Donovan Brown was aware of the illegality of not registering the death of her mother, and of the illegality of not registering the burial site, and aware of how she could check, in the face of her father’s inability to tell her due to his illness, whether the death and burial had been correctly registered?’

‘Yes, that’s correct.’ Was I imagining it or did his glance over at Fern look slightly more suspicious this time.

‘Thank you for your testimony; you may sit down. Now I’d like to recall Ms Donovan Brown to the stand.’

The man sat down and all eyes turned to Fern as she took the stand. Her gaze alighted on me. I smiled at her but she looked away grim-faced.

‘Oh dear,’ whispered Mrs Lacey, nudging me. ‘She’s not happy with you is she?’

I didn’t deign to answer, and leant forward to hear what the coroner was asking.

‘In your statement yesterday, you testified that you didn’t know that the death wasn’t registered.’

‘That’s right.’

‘But we just heard that you knew exactly how to find out if a death had been registered, and in the police report it indicates that someone checked the records the day after you visited the Natural Death Centre.’

A buzz went round the court. It looked like Fern had been caught out in a lie.

‘Sorry. Yesterday when you asked if I knew the death hadn’t been registered, I thought you meant at the time. Dad took care of that.’

‘But we just had testimony that you found out a few months ago that it hadn’t.’

‘Yes, I knew later.’

‘So you were aware the death wasn’t registered and yet you didn’t go to the police.’

‘I was worried it would look bad. I told Daisy not to dig in the garden,’ cried Fern in a fit of frustration.

‘It’s not your daughter Daisy on trial for disobeying your instructions, it’s you who must answer the questions raised by your covering up of the body, of how exactly your mother died.’

His voice held a sternness that hadn’t been there before. I worried for her.

‘Your father secretly and illegally buried his wife in the back garden. And you then continued the cover up. Was it kept a secret because it wasn’t in fact a natural death?’

‘No, of course not, she died of cancer like I said yesterday. All we did was bury her ourselves.’

‘Thank you, you may step down. Mr Redfern, please take the stand.’

Fern didn’t meet my eye as we crossed each other. She was angry I could tell. I would do all I could to put things right for her.

I was sworn in and then the questions began.

‘Can you tell the court why you were digging?’

‘Daisy wanted a pond. Really I’m not there to do the digging myself but she wasn’t very good at it.’ I looked out for Daisy hoping to smile at her to show no offence was intended. I couldn’t see her, and realised she must be at home tending to her grandfather.

‘Just to be straight, you had no idea a body was buried in the garden?’

‘Erm. No?’

‘You don’t seem sure?’

‘Well, it’s just her grandad wasn’t keen for anyone to dig in the garden.’

‘In what way did he show that?’

‘He told us not to dig a pond and, well, he glared at me.’

‘So after being told not to, you went ahead and dug a pond the moment he wasn’t able to object?’

‘I thought it was okay?’

‘What made you think so?’

I hesitated, I didn’t want to get Daisy into trouble.

‘Go on,’ pressed the coroner.

‘Daisy said it was okay.’ I gulped, my pause had made Daisy’s request sound dodgy. I spoke quickly, trying to make up for it. ‘She was crying as her grandad was ill and said she wanted to make the garden nice for him. It’s a lovely garden, and that area is perfect for a pond. Ponds create a host of habitats and it’s the first thing I’d advise when visiting any garden if you want to increase its wildlife potential.’

‘When you came across the bones, what happened?’

‘I was shocked, and so was Daisy, then Fern turned up.’

‘And how did Fern explain the body?’

‘She said that her mother had been ill but wanted to be buried in the back garden, naturally with just her family, and a lovely willow coffin.’

I remembered what Lori had said about providing benign reasons for the home burial.

‘Willow itself has high wildlife value as a tree and willow coffins and shallow burials are better for habitat and the soil. Also—’

‘Thank you, the court has been made aware of the benefits of willow coffins.’

‘But it’s not just that, they wove their own coffin and she knitted her own shroud. This garden where they live, I wish you could see it. It’s nurtured with love. Fern’s mother, her body is replenishing the soil, making it fertile. It’s not carted off like something shameful. It’s like… it’s like composting toilets. Do you put your waste far away where you can’t smell it, or do you use it to nurture the earth? We flush our waste away so we don’t see, but you can’t disguise the stink. Like when you’re in Riverside Park and sometimes there’s a faint smell from the water-processing treatment. If we all had composting toilets, you wouldn’t have that.’

I glanced towards Lori. She was smiling and I continued encouraged. ‘Instead, the waste would, after an appropriate period of time in the correct conditions, nourish and enrich the soil and not smell at all, as long as the wet waste is kept separate from the solid. You can put the wet waste on your compost bin and stir it around a bit. That will create heat and nitrogen which gets the process going nicely. But if it’s your main toilet, I wouldn’t, you don’t want to drown your compost with wee. It’s a question of balance.’

The coroner was reading his notes, and frowning slightly. ‘I’m sorry I don’t see the relevance. Do the family have a composting toilet?’

‘No, but they should. We all should.’ I saw my mother shaking her head.

‘What is the relevance?’

‘It’s about loving our…’ I hesitated, not wanting to say shit and losing faith suddenly in the point I was trying to make.

‘Shall we move on?’

‘No.’ I had it now, back on track. ‘The point is that they didn’t want to hand the body over to strangers who didn’t care for her. Instead they made her body part of the beautiful environment they’d created for themselves in the back garden of a slightly grubby suburb. Birds sang, Your Honour, bees buzzed, trees rustled and the earth was rich with life because they didn’t poison the soil with chemicals but nurtured it with her body that was not really dead, but now a life-giving force to the soil. Just like,’ I said triumphantly, ‘our shit, instead of being flushed away like something shameful, processed with chemicals and creating an acrid pong in what is rather a beautiful part of Southampton, can with the composting toilet, nourish the soil leading to new growth and flourishing of life, in what has become, in many gardens, a worryingly barren soil. They did it out of love, Your Honour, out of love for her and love for the environment and Mother Nature herself.’

A smattering of applause came from the benches at the back. Lori was wiping tears from her eyes, although it looked like she was laughing rather than crying. My mother still looked puzzled, but Mrs Lacey was clapping. I smiled around, pleased with my speech. Habitat Man, you’ve done good, I told myself and turned to leave.

‘Before you go, Mr Redfern, can we return to that phrase, which I believe you have uttered several times, “they did it out of love.” What did they do?’

‘Buried her in the back garden.’

‘Just buried?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What were you told about the manner of her death?’

‘Fern told me that her mother was dying of cancer, that she knew she was going to die.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did they tell you if she went to hospital or was treated by doctors or died at home?’

‘I don’t remember, I was still quite shocked about finding the bones.’

‘You don’t remember?’

‘No, but I don’t think so, no.’

‘Is it fair to say that you admire their actions?’

‘The family were wise, Your Honour, wiser than most of us. We hide away the things we don’t want to think about like death and human waste, but if we face them squarely they become opportunities for renewal and regeneration. Their garden was one of the loveliest I’d visited. There was a balance, a harmony a Feng Shui if you will, it just needed a po—’

‘So you admire their actions in terms of the home burial?’

‘Yes I do,’ I claimed stoutly.

‘And the fact that they didn’t register the burial, or the death?’

‘I didn’t know about that at the time.’

‘At the time? Mr Redfern, did you know that the death hadn’t been registered later?’

I hesitated. ‘Yes,’ I admitted.

‘How did you find out?’

‘Fern told me.’

‘How? Were you in regular communication? Friends perhaps?’

‘No, not at all, she wanted me to come round.’

‘Why?’

‘To er, to ask me not to tell anybody about the body.’

‘I see. Did that strike you as suspicious?’

‘Her explanation made sense, she was worried her father would die soon and he wanted to be buried with his wife in the garden. They didn’t want it to be a crime scene.’

‘Crime scene? What kind of crime?’

I flustered and cursed myself again for not having read the paperwork. I didn’t even know if she was being charged with something. I took a guess. ‘Wrongful burial?’

‘Not assisted suicide?’

‘What?’ I shook my head, trying to process the suggestions being made.

‘Thank you that is all.’

I was ushered off the stand.

A quick glance revealed that there were no seats left next to Lori. I sighed and made my way back to where my mother was waiting for me.

‘What on earth—’ she began, but was interrupted by Tri hissing my name.

‘Well done, Habitat Man,’ he whispered loudly.

‘Told you,’ whispered Mrs Lacey to my mother.

‘It’s the wizard now,’ said one of the women behind us.

‘What?’ This was a new world to my mother and she was struggling to take it all in.

I heard the familiar irritated voice of Geoff and tuned into the proceedings. The coroner was reading the notes in front of him with a sceptical expression. He looked over at Geoff on the stand. ‘It says here that you’re a… wizard?’

‘I identify as a witch.’

The cackling from Tri and the knitters behind me drowned out the coroner’s next question. I looked round, a couple of them looked rather witchy themselves. Tri was shaking his head. ‘Not right,’ he muttered indignantly, ‘co-opting the female experience.’

Lori shot me a quizzical look. I longed to be sat next to her, she’d love this. The coroner gave the knitters a stern look and they subsided.

‘I can testify that she was very ill,’ Geoff was saying. ‘I was just starting out, she was one of my first reiki—’

‘Victims?’ heckled Tri, smirking and nudging his neighbour.

‘That’s religious intolerance,’ claimed Geoff testily, glaring up at the benches.

‘Withdrawn,’ he shouted.

The coroner treated the back benches to a stern gaze. ‘Quiet please.’

Geoff pursed his lips in annoyance and continued. ‘The point is that I can testify that she was ill. I knew Fern and she asked me to do some reiki on her mother.’

‘I assume it didn’t work?’

It was the coroner’s turn to be treated to one of Geoff’s glares.

‘She was pissed off when it didn’t make any difference. She said: “It didn’t bloody work. We’re going to have to take things into our own hands”.’

‘This was a long time ago, how can you be sure you remembered her words correctly?’

‘It was my first time, for Puck’s sake, and the woman was dying of cancer. She needn’t have been so harsh.’

I caught Lori’s eye and grinned.

‘Is it possible that your interpretation is affected by your hurt feelings at the insult to your skills?’

‘Thanks to Tim, my powers are restored now.’

The eyes of the court turned to me. I shrugged modestly, and self-consciously looked back at Geoff.

‘This is not an opportunity for you to promote your reiki practice.’

‘I don’t see why not, the other fella promoted his natural death business didn’t he? He had ages on it.’ He had a point and I felt a little responsible. I suspected the coroner had let him run on to give himself a chance to read my witness statement. ‘Everyone’s going to go off and do a green funeral now. So what’s wrong with people coming to me for a bit of reiki? And I do spells.’

I saw Fern scribbling a note and handing it to a smartly dressed man sat beside her. He read it, then stood up.

‘Fern would like an opportunity to take the stand for a moment.’

Geoff stepped down and Fern took his place.

‘Ms Donovan Brown, you want to add something?’

‘He asked me out, and I said no, that’s why he’s trying to land us in it.’

Geoff rose up from the bench. ‘You were pretty mean.’

‘My mother was dying for goodness’ sake, and you’re making a pass? After you failed to cure her?’

The court was agog with the drama, heads looking to and fro at Geoff and Fern. She looked indignant and he sat upright, his face taut with relived rejection.

‘Thank you, you may sit back down. I’d like to recall Mr Geoffrey Blackman to the stand.’

Glares were exchanged as they crossed each other.

‘Is it true that you asked Ms Donovan Brown out after failing to cure her mother, and she turned you down?’ asked the coroner.

‘Yes, bu—’

‘Is it fair to say that you harbour resentment against her for rejecting you?’

‘I admit she hurt my feelings. Her mother did too. I think it’s important that men are finally allowed to express their emotions. But that doesn’t change what I heard. They said they were going to take it into their own hands.’

‘And what did you take that to mean?’

‘Murder.’

A hum of shock went round the court. I looked at Fern with new suspicion. There had been a fierceness about the grandad when he’d been stirring his vegetable curry, he’d given me a nasty look – he didn’t even give me any curry, and Fern had been insistent, she’d asked me to keep it quiet. Could Geoff be right?