**TEXT D** page 8

*1: Stuff Happens*

Pat stood before the door at the bottom of the stair, reading the names underneath the buttons. Syme, Macdonald, Pollock, and then the name she was looking for: Anderson. That would be Bruce Anderson, the surveyor, the person to whom she had spoken on the telephone. He was the one who collected the rent, he said, and paid the bills. He was the one who had said that she could come and take a look at the place and see whether she wanted to live there.

“And we’ll take a look at you,” he had added. “If you don’t mind.”

So now, she thought, she would be under inspection, assessed for suitability for a shared flat, weighed up to see whether she was likely to play music too loudly or have friends who would damage the furniture. Or, she supposed, whether she would jar on anybody’s nerves.

She pressed the bell and waited. After a few moments some- thing buzzed and she pushed open the large black door with its numerals, 44, its lion’s head knocker, and its tarnished brass plate above the handle. The door was somewhat shabby, needing a coat of paint to cover the places where the paintwork had been scratched or chipped away. Well, this was Scotland Street, not Moray Place or Doune Terrace; not even Drummond Place, the handsome square from which Scotland Street descended in a steep slope. This street was on the edge of the Bohemian part of the Edinburgh New Town, the part where lawyers and accountants were outnumbered – just – by others.

She climbed up four flights of stairs to reach the top landing. Two flats led off this, one with a dark green door and no nameplate in sight, and another, painted blue, with a piece of paper on which three names had been written in large lettering. As she stepped onto the landing, the blue door was opened and she found herself face-to-face with a tall young man, probably three or four years older than herself and wearing a rugby jersey, his dark hair *en brosse. Triple Crown*, she read. *Next year.* And after that, in parenthesis, the word: *Maybe*.

“I’m Bruce,” he said. “And I take it you’re Pat.”

He smiled at her, and gestured for her to come into the flat.

“I like the street,” she said. “I like this part of town.”

He nodded. “So do I. I lived up in Marchmont until a year ago and now I’m over here. It’s central. It’s quiet. Marchmont got a bit too studenty.”

She followed him into a living room, a large room with a black marble fireplace on one side and a rickety bookcase against the facing wall.

“This is the sitting room,” he said. “It’s nothing great, but it gets the sun.”

She glanced at the sofa, which was covered with a faded chintzy material stained in one or two places with spills of tea or coffee. It was typical of the sofas which one found in shared flats as a student; sofas that had been battered and humiliated, slept on by drunken and sober friends alike, and which would, on cleaning, disgorge copious sums in change, and ballpoint pens, and other bits and pieces dropped from generations of pockets.

She looked at Bruce. He was good-looking in a way which one might describe as . . . well, how might one describe it? Fresh-faced? Open? Of course, the rugby shirt gave it away: he was the sort that one saw by the hundred, by the thousand, streaming out of Murrayfield after a rugby international. Wholesome was the word which her mother would have used, and which Pat would have derided. But it was a useful word when it came to describe Bruce. Wholesome.

Bruce was returning her gaze. Twenty, he thought. Quite expensively dressed. Tanned in a way which suggested outside pursuits. Average height. Attractive enough, in a rather willowy way. Not my type (this last conclusion, with a slight tinge of regret).

“What do you do?” he asked. Occasions like this, he thought, were times for bluntness. One might as well find out as much as one could before deciding to take her, and it was he who would have to make the decision because Ian and Sarah were off travelling for a few months and they were relying on him to find someone.

Pat looked up at the cornice. “I’m on a gap year,” she said, and added, because truth required it after all: “It’s my second gap year, actually.”

Bruce stared at her, and then burst out laughing. “Your second gap year?”

Pat nodded. She felt miserable. Everybody said that. Everybody said that because they had no idea of what had happened.

“My first one was a disaster,” she said. “So I started again.”

Bruce picked up a matchbox and rattled it absent-mindedly.

“What went wrong?” he asked.

“Do you mind if I don’t tell you? Or just not yet.”

He shrugged. “Stuff happens,” he said. “It really does.”

 Extract by Alexander McCall Smith, *44 Scotland Street* (2005)

http://www.alexandermccallsmith.co.uk/books/extracts/extracts-from-the-44-scotland-street-series/an-extract-from-44-scotland-street/