***Suicidal Nick***

“We’re all off now,” Molly the office manager called as she and the secretarial staff filed from the probation office.

A minute later there was a tap on my office door. and Graham, a colleague, stuck his head round it. Shall I lock the front door behind me? Everyone else has gone.”

“Just pull it to. I’ll be leaving in five minutes.”

*I wish.* I was behind with my court reports and needed to catch up. Graham’s footsteps faded. His car door slammed, the engine roared to life and off he drove. Silence fell over the office. I settled down to write, legal pad at the ready but had to admit defeat. I was way too tired to write a decent report. Promising myself I would come in early on Monday I commenced my leaving-the- office-routine. Filing cabinet locked. Desk drawers locked. A final scan before stepping out of the office into the waiting area. I searched my purse for car keys unaware that a client was standing quietly at the edge of the waiting area. As I turned to switch off the light, I saw him, shoulders hunched, his expression haunted, a man in trouble. “Nick! You gave me a start. What are you doing here? Has something happened”

He nodded. I unlocked my office door. “Come in.”

He sat silently staring at the floor. “Come on, Nick. You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Nick had been my client for six months. He was an intelligent man and a doting dad. Looking at him you wouldn’t think so; his appearance was deceiving. He had been an amateur boxer and sported a crooked nose and a cauliflower ear to prove it. He was covered in tattoos and spoke in a rough gravelly voice. He looked as if he could have been an enforcer for a gangster.

Instead, he was an unemployed laborer struggling to provide for his two young daughters and keep a roof over their heads after his wife left him and the girls facing eviction for not paying the rent for months. In desperation Nick sold the cable company’s rented television set and VCR which led to him appearing in court for theft.

He was placed on probation so we could help him avoid eviction.

We sat in silence until he mumbled, “I tried to hang myself today.”

“What!” I sat up, my attention riveted on him.

He pulled open his shirt collar and showed me a rope mark on his neck. I grabbed hold of his hand and squeezed it, tight. Looking straight into his eyes I firmly said, “There can’t be anything so bad that you need to kill yourself over.”

“Yes, there is and I can’t forgive myself.”

All I knew for sure was that I was afraid of failing him in this situation and I would not allow Nick to leave until I was sure he would be all right.

“Listen, Nick. This is what’s going to happen now. You’re not leaving this office until I’m satisfied you won’t kill yourself. It looks as if we could be talking until late tonight. So, right now, I want you to trust me. I’m going to make us some coffee. I’m going to lock you in my office while I do that and I’m locking the front door so you can’t leave until we’ve worked through this. OK?”.

Staring at the floor, he nodded.

A shiver of fear climbed my spine. *What the hell had he done that could be so awful?* I had no experience in talking people away from being suicidal. We were alone and I was the only scaredy-cat of a resource available to him. In the kitchen I prayed hard. Somehow, I had to get him from suicide as the answer to his problems to a place of hope for the future including the will to live. I wasn’t sure I could do it but the only other help for people feeling suicidal was to phone the Samaritan’s, an organization where volunteers manned the phones to help people in suicidal crisis.

He was still staring at the floor when I returned with coffee. “I’m going to phone my husband so he won’t worry if I’m late home.” I called Peter. I wanted Nick to hear. “Hello, dear. Something came up at the office and I’m concerned for a client’s safety. I’m not letting him leave until I’m sure he’s safe so, it could be a long night, maybe even a long weekend.”

“Are you OK?” Peter asked with concern.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll be home when we’re done.” That satisfied Peter. He knew how dedicated I was to my clients.

Nick finished his coffee and set the empty mug on my desk. Eventually he spoke with hesitancy. “The big guy in a local crime ring knew I was broke and about to be evicted. He paid me £250 to break a man’s legs with a baseball bat.”

Nick rubbed his face with his palms then covered his face with his hands while tears dripped from his chin.

I inhaled sharply. “And *you* did it?” Knowing what I did of Nick with no previous record of violence, his behavior was incomprehensible to me and completely alien to him.

With his hands still covering his face, Nick nodded. “I was in a jam. It seemed to be a way out from under it all.”

“Oh, Nick that was such a vile thing to do. A horrible thing!”

I patted Nick’s shoulder and placed a box of Kleenex beside him while I tried to get my mind around what he’d done and how I should approach him.

The words that came were probably not the best to say but I couldn’t help myself. “I could bash you with a bat myself. This puts you in breach of your probation order meaning I should take you back to court. If I do that, they’ll send you to prison. Why didn’t you tell me how bad thing were?”

Nick stared at me. He had never before seen me so angry.

“What can you do to make things right?” Any ideas?” I asked now that he was calming down. I did a lot for my clients, seemingly pulling rabbits out of a hat at times but I also encouraged them figure out how to solve their own problems.

Nick looked up at me with a glimmer of hope. “I’ll give him the money; I don’t want it.”

“Do you know the man you hurt? Can you reach out to him?”

“I heard he’s still in hospital. I was thinking maybe I could offer to work in his garden or something.”

Nick had stopped sobbing; he was even making plans to right his wrongs. A good sign. After forty-five minutes discussing how he could make amends and move forward from this event and never do anything else that might cause his children to lose the only parent they had, I felt he would be safe to send home. “If I let you out of the office now, will you promise to come and see me Monday?”

“Yes, I promise.”

I arrived home totally wiped out. Peter had a sandwich and a large glass of wine waiting for me. I climbed onto his lap and he held me tight.

“Tough evening?” he asked.

I nodded, not yet ready to talk. I took a large gulp of wine and waited for the tension to ease.

“I’m so scared Peter. My client tonight attempted suicide today. When I thought he was past the crisis, I let him go home with the promise of returning to see me on Monday morning.”

I took another gulp of wine. “What if I was wrong to let him go? What if he doesn’t come back on Monday? I’ll never forgive myself.”

Peter squeezed me tight. “There’s nothing more can be done now.”

I didn’t sleep well that weekend and returned to work on Monday with dark shadows under my eyes. Struggling to finish my court reports helped to distract me from anxiety about Nick. Tears of relief filled my eyes when my phone rang and my secretary’s voice announced, “Nick is here to see you.”

He entered my office with a spring in his step. “You seem happier, today, Nick.”

He looked earnestly at me. “I went to see the man I hurt. I was quaking in me boots. I didn’t know if he would set his brothers onto me. He was surprised I had the guts to face him. He had no idea how petrified I was. When I told him who paid me to hurt him and how broke I was, he understood because the same man who paid me to break his legs had gotten him to do a similar thing a year earlier when he was also desperate. It seems, the man watches out for guys in a jam to do his dirty work for him.”