

Just Like Fred

by Pam Weaver (c)2015

At the block of flats where Fran and Mike lived, they were in the middle of re-decorating the communal walkways. Sally staggered out of the taxi with the big teddy under one arm and her suitcase in the other hand. A white van was parked in the road, a ladder leaned against the railings and there was a pile of dustsheets at the top of the stone steps. The front door leading to the flats was wide open and the hall and stairs were without carpet. A pimply-faced teenager was mixing paint at the foot of the stairs. Somebody else was whistling somewhere above.

Sally put down her suitcase, paid off the taxi driver and looked up at the window. Her sister's children were waving excitedly from the sitting room of their first floor flat. Sally waved back and hurried inside.

'Ere Gary,' shouted the upstairs workman, 'chuck this in the van for me.'

A paint splattered, still warm shirt hit Sally on the shoulder and she automatically reached out and caught it. 'Oh!'

'Blimey, Luv. I'm sorry.' The owner of the shirt was already halfway down the stairs. 'I never saw you.'

It had been a long time since Sally had smelled a shirt like that. Perhaps it was even the first time. The men in her circle of friends were well groomed and took a pride in their appearance. The owner of the shirt was altogether something else. He was about her own age, good looking but

unshaven, his body glistened with sweat, his blonde hair was splattered with white paint and his vest was a whiter shade of grey. As he came closer to apologise and relieve her of his shirt, Sally couldn't help wrinkling her nose.

A tousled head appeared through the upstairs banister. 'Auntie Sally, Auntie Sally's here.' And a second or two later, Sally was almost totally bowled over as Henry and Daisy rushed down the stairs and into her arms.

'This is my Auntie, Stan,' Henry told the painter proudly.

'And she'll do very nicely, Daisy,' Stan smiled.

Fran, Sally's sister, leaned over the railing looking as big as a house and glowing with health. 'Come on up, darling. I've put the kettle on.'

The painter stepped aside and they all went up to the flat.

Sally was really looking forward to the next couple of weeks. As a children's nanny, she was used to mixing in very different surroundings, but looking after her nephew and niece, twins aged six, while Fran went in for her third child would be a real pleasure.

'Is that for the baby?' asked Daisy as Sally staggered in with the teddy.

'A moment of madness,' Sally apologise to her sister.

'Can I put it in the baby's room?' asked Henry.

Sally and Fran laughed as he manhandled it into the bedroom. The bear was nearly as big as he was.

The excited children took her to her room and insisted on helping her to unpack. They were suitably 'surprised' when they each found a packet marked Henry and Daisy, even though everyone knew Sally wouldn't come to

stay without bringing each of them a present. As the children unwrapped their gifts, Fran and Sally finally got to hug each other.

‘It so good to see you again.’

‘And it’s good to see you... both of you,’ Sally patted her sister’s stomach. ‘Have you got the pram in there as well?’

Laughing, Fran eased herself down in a chair. ‘I’ll tell you what. This one feels more like an elephant.’

‘Do you think it’s twins again?’

Fran shook her head. ‘Not unless they’re standing one behind the other.’

Sally giggled. ‘Just think, by this time tomorrow, you’ll be a Mum again.’

Fran pushed a cup of tea across the table towards her sister. ‘There’s a letter for you on the mantelpiece in the lounge.’

‘I’ll get it Mummy,’ cried Henry.

‘No, I’ll get it.’

‘No, me.’

Sally laughed. The warm, familiar, family bickering made her feel at home.

The letter was an invitation to a Charity Ball run by the agency she’d used to find her last job.

‘How exciting,’ cried Fran. ‘You must go.’

Sally shook her head. ‘I’m here to look after you.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Fran. ‘The baby will be nearly three weeks old by then. Even if Mike is too tied up with work, by that time, I shall be perfectly

capable of coping on my own. I'm sure Henry and Daisy will be extra specially good that day, won't you?'

The twins nodded. Daisy was starry eyed. 'A Ball. Will you look like a princess?'

'Even if I do,' laughed Sally. 'I don't have anyone to go with.'

'You could ask your fairy godmother,' said Daisy.

'What about Louis?' Fran blurted out.

Sally shook her head dismissively and asked the twins if they'd done any painting since the last time she was here. Luckily Fran took the hint and didn't probe anymore. It wasn't until later that evening, over dinner that the sisters caught up with their news.

'Mike works too hard,' Fran reflected, 'but he says given one more year, the business will be firmly on its feet. He plans to take on more staff soon which means he won't have to put in the long hours.'

'I'll believe that when I see it,' Sally teased. 'That man's a workaholic.'

'He does pop home sometimes,' said Fran smoothing her bump suggestively and they both laughed. Mike was a devoted husband and father.

'What happened to Louis?'

The question hung in the air between them for several seconds before Sally answered. How much should she tell her sister? She'd had high hopes of Louis, personal assistant to the Count.

They'd met when Sally had been the Count's nanny at the family

Chateau deep in the Italian countryside. She'd enjoyed that job very much. Lilians had been a liberal employer and the children were manageable even if a little spoiled by their privileged background.

When she'd fallen for Louis, everyone in the household was excited at the prospect of romance but after a while, certain things began to niggle her. She was uncomfortable with the way Louis liked to use the family rooms whenever their employers were away. He drank their whiskey and made long and expensive phone calls to someone in New York. His light diminished the day Sally found him strutting around wearing the Count's favourite smoking jacket and his signet ring. A little later that month, when she heard the Count telling Louis that he couldn't find his jacket, she was surprised to hear lover suggested that it may have been lost during one of their frequent trips abroad. Sally remembered it was still hanging on the hook on the back of the door in Louis room.

The light finally went out on their relationship the day Louis gave her a beautiful opal ring and asked her to marry him. The setting was romantic enough, beside a lake on a beautiful still Italian night, but the ring looked too much like one she'd seen the children's grandmother wearing. Sally refused his offer and it was time to move on. Louis was devastated. He begged her forgiveness. He even came to the airport with her. She smiled. He certainly looked ridiculous carrying that bear, but he didn't seem to care.

There were tears in his eyes. 'Don't leave me, darling...'

'What is it, Sis?' Fran reached out to squeeze Sally's hand. 'Is everything all right? Can I do anything to help?'

'It just didn't work out between Louis and me, that's all,' she said.

There was the sound of a key in the front door and Mike walked in.

Mike took Fran to the hospital the next day. Her Caesarean Section was booked for 3 p.m. Sally and the children waved her goodbye from the top of the stairs.

'Looks like she's off then,' said a voice behind them.

Sally swung round and there was Stan. He'd given her such a shock, he had to grab her arm to stop her over balancing down the stairs.

'Steady on, Luv.'

'I... I... I thought you'd finished painting,' she spluttered.

'Doing the top floor now,' he said pointing upwards. 'Just having me break.'

As their mother left, Daisy was beginning to look tearful.

'Like my new belt?' Stan asked Daisy. Sally stared at him somewhere between his vest, his belt and his trousers. The belt was across the middle of his vest, nowhere near his trousers. He scratched his stomach lazily. 'It holds my trousers up.'

The children giggled with delight.

'What?' he asked feigning surprise, and for the first time, Sally warmed to him.

Upstairs the phone was ringing.

'Quickly,' she said to the children shooing them back upstairs. 'I must answer the phone and then it's time for school.' At the door of the flat she turned and mouthed a silent, 'Thank you.'

There was nobody on the phone, or at least, nobody spoke. Sally spent the morning tidying the flat and then she set off for the supermarket. Anything to keep her mind off Fran and the baby. When she got back to the flat there were some scratch marks on the newly painted door. What a pity. She'd have to tell Stan to redo it.

At 3.30 she collected her excited niece and nephew from school.

'Has Mummy had the baby yet?'

'I expect so,' said Sally. 'Let's get home and see if there's an answer on the answer-phone. They were half way up the stairs when Sally's mobile rang.

'Hello?'

'Sally?' It was Mike. 'It's a boy. Seven pounds.' Sally put her hand over the mouthpiece and told the twins. They began whooping up and down the stairs until Stan's head appeared from the next floor up.

'What's she got?'

'A boy.'

'A boy!' Stan immediately broke into song, 'It's a boy, it's a boy, it's a bonny bouncing boy...' He stopped and said, 'They tell me I sing like Fred Astaire you know...'

Laughing Sally put her ear back to the phone. 'Is everything all right?'

There was a pause on the line. 'Franny is fine,' said Mike, 'but they've taken the baby to the special care unit.'

The children were watching TV when the doorbell rang.

'Forgotten your key...?' The words died on her lips as Sally opened the door and saw, not Mike but Louis looking tanned and handsome in a long navy coat and exquisitely cut suit.

'I've missed you, darling,' he said smoothly. He thrust a bunch of bright red roses into her arms and she was so taken by surprise, that he was inside the flat before she could say anything. 'We need to talk.'

'No we don't,' said Sally, mustering all her courage. 'I've said all I wanted to say and now I want you to go.'

'But darling,' he began again.

Sally kept the door open. 'This is my sister's house and I want you to go.'

'This is really important, Sally,' his tone was harsher now. 'My whole life is on the line here.'

'I don't want an argument,' she insisted, 'especially not tonight.'

Stan walked by with a pot of paint. 'Everything all right?' he said anxiously.

'This gentleman is just leaving,' said Sally, hoping that Louis wouldn't notice the wobble in her voice. 'Could you show him the way out, Stan?'

'Sally,' Louis cried, 'please...'

For a second, no one moved.

'I don't know why you're making such a fuss,' Louis cajoled. 'It isn't as if they couldn't afford it.'

‘Stealing is stealing,’ she said coldly.

‘This way, Squire,’ said Stan firmly.

Louis walked outside, his fists clenched. She thrust his roses back at him and her heart was thumping as she closed the door.

The next day was difficult for Sally. She couldn’t stop thinking about Louis. Guiltily she wondered if she should have given him another chance. He did seem genuinely sorry and he had travelled a long way to see her. She had two more silent phone calls and when she came out to collect the children at 3p.m. she realised she’d forgotten to tell Stan about the door.

She called up the stairs. He was working on the floor above and came right away. ‘That’s funny,’ he frowned. ‘How did that that happen?’

‘Can’t stop,’ she said looking at her watch. ‘Got to collect Henry and Daisy.’

She thought she’d be all right but she’d misjudged the traffic and was five minutes late. They were waiting by the gate.

‘We’re going to see Mummy,’ she told them as they clambered into the car.

They were very excited and as soon as she’d reunited them with Fran, Sally took herself off to the Special Care Unit.

The baby was in an incubator. He had a feeding tube in his nose and a heart monitor on his chest. Sally could see a plaster on his heel where they had obviously taken blood and he was being nursed naked apart from his nappy and a knitted cloche hat on his head. During her stint in premature

baby units a couple of years before, Sally had seen dozens of babies like that. She knew it was nothing to worry about but it felt so different when the baby belonged to her own family. George, (that was his name) looked very vulnerable. On the other hand, Fran, looked the picture of health. Daisy and Henry sat either side of her showing their mother some pictures they'd drawn.

When Sally walked in, Fran looked up. 'Have you seen him?'

'He's gorgeous,' said Sally, kissing her cheek.

'The sister tells me that all being well, he'll be out of the incubator tomorrow.'

They spent some time chatting about all things domestic and then it was time to take Daisy and Henry home.

'Mummy,' Daisy said. 'I saw the handsome prince.'

Sally groaned inwardly. They must have seen Louis when he'd invited himself in the flat. She'd thought they were glued to their favourite show.

'Louis,' Sally explained.

'He gave me this,' said Daisy. She held up a bar of Italian chocolate.

Sally's heart almost stopped. When had Louis been alone with Daisy? Her head was telling her keep calm, keep calm, don't alarm any of them.

'Sally?' said Fran. 'Did you know about this?'

'Louis is in town for a while,' she said brightly, 'and he came to look me up. He couldn't stay long. Had to get back and all that.'

Fran shook her head. 'Pity.'

Outside in the car Sally turned to Daisy again.

'When did Louis give you the chocolate, darling?' she said, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

'He came to my school,' said Daisy. 'And I said, are you taking Auntie Sally to the Ball and he gave me the chocolate.'

'I told her she shouldn't take it,' Henry declared. 'He's a stranger.'

'He's not a stranger,' Daisy insisted. 'He's the handsome prince.'

Sally was very concerned. Louis must be following her. He must have got to the school before she did and yet he hadn't waited for her. Why?

'That poncy bloke was hanging around again,' said Stan when pressed the security panel to get into the block of flats. He was heading out to his van with some old sheeting he used as dustcovers. He said it quietly so that Henry and Daisy didn't hear. They raced each other up the stairs. 'The security door was open and I caught him trying to get in the flat.'

'Louis?'

Stan nodded. 'I told him I'd get the cops if he didn't push off.'

Sally felt sick. She never should have come here. What did Louis want anyway? And why was he skulking about behind her back like this?

'If you don't mind me saying so,' Stan said, still speaking in low tones, 'you've gone very pale.'

She hesitated. She needed to talk to someone, but who? She didn't want to worry Fran or Mike right now. They had enough to cope with and besides it could be something and nothing. The one thing she didn't want to do was put the children at risk.

‘Look,’ said Stan, ‘if you want to talk to me, I promise it will be in the strictest confidence, if it helps.’

She nodded and for the sake of the children said in a loud voice, ‘Of course, Stan. If you bring your flask up, I’ll fill it with hot water for you.’

A few minutes later, the children were happily watching their favourite CBB’s and they were alone in the kitchen. She felt safe with Stan. He was a nice man; a good listener too. Sally told him the whole story.

‘You say he came with you to the airport?’

‘Yes but what’s that got...’

‘Can I see your luggage?’

‘My luggage...’ Her voice trailed as the full import of what he was implying sank in. ‘You can’t possibly think...’

‘He turns up here,’ Stan said, rehearsing her story, ‘makes friends with the kids behind your back, you’re getting silent phone calls, and he’s very persistent. Now I come to think about it, those scratch marks on the paintwork could have been made by somebody picking the lock.’

Sally felt her knees buckle. ‘Oh Stan,’ she whispered. ‘What have I done?’

‘You’ve done nothing wrong,’ he said firmly, ‘and all you’re doing right now, is protecting the kids.’

The children were now busily drawing pictures for George so Sally and Stan went into her bedroom. Stan felt along the empty suitcase.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Hidden compartments, anywhere where something could be stashed.’

Thankfully, nothing was found and she was beginning to think this was all a bit dramatic.

‘Did he say anything else to Daisy?’

Sally shrugged. ‘I didn’t ask her.’

Ten minutes later, after she’d spoken to Daisy, Stan kept an eye on the children while Sally telephoned her ex-employer in Italy.

In the morning, after Mike left, Sally had another silent phone call.

Soon after, she went out of the flat, calling out to Stan as she left.

‘I’m off to the hospital now, Stan. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.’

‘Ok. See ya,’ Stan called and as she closed the door she could hear him whistling.

It only took a little while. From the safety of the unmarked police car around the corner, she heard the shout and by the time she’d reached the front door of the flat, the policeman was saying, ‘I’m arresting you, Louis Loire for the theft of a valuable Rolex watch and other items of jewellery from Madame la Contessa. You not have to say anything...’

Behind him, Sally could see the big teddy with a long slash across its back and most of its stuffing removed. A policeman was bagging a Rolex watch and several rings.

‘How on earth would I have explained that if I had been asked to go through the scanner at the airport?’ Sally whispered faintly.

Stan reached for her hand and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. ‘Looks like your fairy godmother must have been watching over you,’ he smiled.

There was great excitement when George came home. The family planned a big party. The children couldn't wait to invite Stan to join them.

'I'll put on me best bib and tucker,' he laughed.

Daisy looked puzzled.

'He means he'll be wearing his best clothes,' Sally explained.

Daisy took in her breath noisily. 'Does that mean he'll take you to the Ball?'

Sally put her finger to her lips. 'Shhh, Daisy.'

'What's this?' asked Stan.

'Auntie Sally has been invited to the Ball,' said Daisy completely undaunted by Sally's frown. 'But she hasn't got a prince to dance with. Can you dance, Stan?'

'Can I dance? Can I dance?' Stan boomed. And sweeping Sally into his arms he whirled her around the hallway until, totally out of breath, and helpless with laughter she begged him to stop.

Henry and Daisy jumped up and down and clapped their hands. 'He's the prince, Auntie Sally. Stan's the prince.'

As they came to a halt, Stan held her gaze as he said, 'I'd love to take her, but I'm sure a lovely lady like your Auntie could easily find herself a real prince to take her to the Ball.'

Sally looked up at his paint-splattered face. 'But on the other hand, 14 Stan,' she smiled, 'why should I look for a prince when I've found someone who not only sings like Fred Astaire but dances just like him too?'