

## **A Very Cold Case (that Daniel doesn't solve...)**

"This thing is disgusting. It's too big. It's ancient." Deb jabbed at the freezer with a delicate finger.

Just because a thing is old, or large, thought Eddy, does not make it disgusting, any more than being thin and young makes a person right. "It's fine" he said " it does the job".

"If we wanted to hide a body, it'd be *fine*. For storing desserts in a *restaurant* we need something *modern*." Jab, jab.

"I'll bear it in mind" said Eddy. Be careful with those fingers, he thought.

Eddy was a big man, with surprisingly beautiful blue eyes. His size was a result of his love of cake, pudding, pastry and all things sweet - cinnamon buns for breakfast, a Victoria sponge with morning coffee, apple pie with afternoon tea, Bakewell tart for dinner. Eddy loved them all, and he wasn't ashamed of his love, or of his size.

When it was quiet in the afternoons, Eddy baked. He glided gently around the kitchen, pouring generous dollops of thick cream into his bowl, adding lavish quantities of every kind of sugar, syrup, honey, treacle and molasses to the whitest flour, the darkest chocolate, the freshest nuts and the yellowest butter and the largest eggs. Some days he created 'healthy' desserts with fruit and vegetables - glacé cherries, California sultanas, and candied peel for a rich fruit cake, or courgettes to make a chocolate cake extra moist, or even peeling carrots and parsnips to make a sweeter cake to hold the cream cheese frosting. His custard tarts (served with sugared pecans and ice cream) were a poem in eggy cream and nutmeg, and his lemon and dark chocolate pavlova was a crisp, chewy, tart, sweet delight. He made frozen desserts for the restaurant too: ice cream, chocolate torte, granitas, sorbets, frozen berries dipped in chocolate.

Each week they seemed to need more cream, chocolate, nuts, cherries, sugar and syrup, to create ever greater varieties of dessert. Once there was space in the big dessert freezer, or on the sweet trolley, Eddy felt the urge to fill it.

In a town full of cafes and cake shops, the restaurant where Eddy worked was special. People in the know went there just for dessert. Detective Inspector Daniel Owen and Eddy had been victims of the same school bullies, albeit for different reasons, and it had made them into friends. Eddy would always make Daniel a special cake if he was asked, and never took any money.

People didn't see Eddy moving very often, or very fast. And yet, the trolley and the freezer overflowed with sweet and creamy delights, meals and drinks were served, bills presented, payments taken and the money found its way to the bank.

The bar remained stocked - full bottles appeared and empty ones disappeared.

But Eddy made no profits from his endeavours. Although Eddy was the public face of the restaurant, the proprietor was Lester Lee, an aggressively bald man who owned things and collected the money. He liked to call himself 'Lester the Investor', and bragged about 'taking risks' and 'creating employment'. In fact, the restaurant had been started by his father in law, and his wife Melissa kept the books. Lester spent *his* time boasting, chasing women, avoiding his wife, and leaving the real work for others, which was fine with Eddy.

And so things went on, in cow-like contentment, until the day that Lester brought Deb, his latest conquest, to the restaurant. Tiny, bony, Deb, in her high, high heels and red, red lipstick. She looked at Eddy and saw his size, and her expression said 'loser'. Though she thought he did have rather nice eyes. He looked at her yellow hair, her hard body packed into a tight dress and her stick thin limbs and should have hated her on sight, but his expression said 'welcome'.

"Show her round, Eddy mate," said Lester, "she's going to be spending some time here and she's got some great ideas. She's done up lots of other restaurants." Then his phone buzzed as it always did. "Gotta take this", he said, and waved them off.

Deb was dismissive as she clacked her way around the restaurant on her skinny heels.

"These tables wobble, this kitchen needs updating, the bar is dark, the food is old fashioned, these old carpets hold the dust, more chairs would improve this area, you need candles..." the list went on, and on, and on.

"Lester chose it", said Eddy, even when it wasn't true.

"Well it's all going to change", Deb snapped, "starting with these tiles!"

The tiles (which covered the whole floor) were not beautiful. They were indestructible 1970s mottled brown with cracking grout, and over the years had smashed cups, plates, glasses, bowls, and had shredded mops to bits of soggy string. Bleach left their colour undisturbed, and polish failed to make them shine. They ate the light. But Eddy knew that no one had ever slipped on them, and that might actually be quite important in a restaurant, but he didn't say anything. He thought that there might be something in Shakespeare about smiling and smiling and planning murder.

Deb flew around the restaurant, buzzing with ideas and plans. Eddy floated slowly behind her, unmoved and gentle as a manatee, and as enduring as the tiles.

"Listen sunshine, I've had my own business, and I know that this one is stuck. It

got frozen twenty years ago. It needs shaking up." Hmm, thought Eddy, all that *energy*...

Eddy listened quietly to Deb's ideas for the restaurant, which involved stripping out everything from the furniture to the food mixers and starting afresh. He knew that there are many unkind descriptions of larger people, and that Deb was prepared to use them all, even as she worked her way through a plate of his *pains au chocolat*, fresh from the oven.

Eddy consoled himself with the results of his afternoon baking, the size of the weekly order of sugar, cream, chocolate and eggs, increasing along with his waistline. He ate even more after Lester came to thank him for 'looking after Deb'.

But he expected that Lester would get bored with Deb's endless sniping, or that Melissa would suggest that Lester was spending too much time with his 'restaurant design consultant.' He was wrong. And right.

"Eddy mate," said Lester, "Deb's on my case about leaving the wife, and that isn't happening. Don't want to lose her though, so I thought if I made her manager here? Sort it out will you? And put up a notice saying we are closing for a couple of weeks, yes?" Lester's phone buzzed, and the 'conversation' was over. That evening Eddy ate two cheesecakes over the course of the dinner service and an apple pie for supper.

The next morning Deb turned up in overalls with her hair tied back ruthlessly (showing your black roots, like a cheap tart, Eddy didn't say. Although he did think that she would look better with dark hair).

"Today we stop talking and get stuck in. Lester's given me the go ahead for a full refurb. We'll start in the kitchen. Let's get this freezer emptied. I've ordered a new one."

Goodbye my old friend, thought Eddy, running his hand along the side of the dessert freezer as he watched Deb bobbing down to pull sweet delights from the depths and popping up again to slide them in with the frozen chips. As the freezer emptied, Eddy noticed that she slipped a package of muffins into the pocket of her tabard, but then, he had already hidden a raspberry pavlova behind the bar.

She poked him in the stomach when the freezer was empty: "No way someone as porky as you can move this monster. The lads can do it."

I could pick you up and shut you up in there forever he thought, pushing her away gently. Deb stumbled, forcing Eddy to put his arm round her, but no one was looking. She was as soft as sponge cake, despite her overbaked exterior. And she melted into his arms like ice cream in the sun.

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A week after The Great Smartening began, with the VAT return looming, Melissa Lee began procrastinate-searching the internet for some new furniture for their holiday cottage in Pembrokeshire. She fancied a retro, shabby chic, vintage, whatever-it-was-called look. Her mother had furnished the cottage in 1980s Marks & Spencer's, and it was time for something new - well, old. She was pleased to find that the Custom Collectibles website had an oak table (genuine 1920s, made locally) with matching chairs and a dresser for under £1,000. Not much under, but who's counting? The picture showed the furniture painted a fashionable grey, but 'Custom Collectibles will meet your exact specifications - see our colour palette below for ideas!' There appeared to be a warehouse full of tables, chairs, dressers, side tables and so on, painted in a variety of tasteful colours, the majority marked 'sold'. Some of the furniture looked vaguely familiar.

Clicking round the site, Melissa saw that she could also acquire 'genuine vintage kitchen equipment' as well as some that just looked a bit used. When she saw the 'Why not style your home with a retro-look bar!' page, an awful suspicion began to form in her mind, so she called her husband.

"What happened to all the furniture from the restaurant?" she asked in a steely tone.

"Skipped" he replied "we got a good deal from this company Deb found to get rid of it all and it hardly cost us anything, honestly love, it's a nightmare trying to find people who will take the old stuff away..."

"Lester, *love*, I think you'd better come home. There's something you need to see."

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The next morning Eddy was stocking the bar when Lester arrived. Eddy noticed that Lester was unshaven, wearing yesterday's shirt, and smelling of sweat rather than expensive aftershave. Despite the early hour, Lester poured himself a large gin and tonic and gulped it down like water. As he went to make another, Eddy put his large hand on Lester's arm.

"Steady on there my friend, what's happened?" he said. "Take a deep breath..."

"Melissa...Deb...". Lester took a juddering breath.

"Melissa's found out about you and Deb?"

"No! Well, yes..sort of...". Lester took another breath and some of his bullishness returned. "Eddy mate, I need help, big time. I have to get rid of Deb, or Melissa

will call the police. And if Deb finds out I'm trying to get rid of her, she'll tell Melissa and then I am totally screwed."

"*Why* does Deb have to go? What have the police got to do with anything?" Eddy was thoroughly confused.

Slowly the story of Melissa discovering the re-purposed furniture came out.

"She was lying to me all along! The evil bitch was *using me*."

Hmmm. Thought Eddy. Truth hurts. But what he said was

"You mean that last week you wanted to make her the manager, and today you want me to make her go away? Just to be clear..."

Lester's tone changed "I'll see you right Eddy mate, it'll be worth your while if she is Gone, Disappeared, before Melissa...I won't let you down...I think we understand each other."

"No problem." said Eddy, "She'll be gone by tonight."

Just then the two youngest and strongest kitchen porters came to ask if it was OK to move the big chest freezer out into the yard.

"Sure" said Eddy, and they all went into the kitchen and gathered round the freezer. "It's been here as long as I have" said Eddy lifting the lid and looking in. "You know, if we're going to sell this, the inside really needs a good scrub..."

Deb peered over the edge "Well, you won't fit in there fatso, I'll do it later"

The kitchen porters were becoming used to Deb's rudeness to Eddy, but were gratified to see him miming strangulation behind her back.

"She needs to watch her step" one murmured to the other as they shuffled the freezer through the kitchen and into the yard "Eddy might look like a blob, but have you seen him shift crates of beer? Dark horse I'm telling you."

Lester watched for a moment, then turned away and left the kitchen when it seemed that Deb was going to talk to him.

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Tiny Deb had needed the step stool to get into the freezer to clean it. When Lester came into the yard that afternoon, Eddy was moving the step stool out of the way. The lid was closed and Eddy was fixing a shiny new padlock to keep it shut.

Eddy smiled at Lester "Better safe than sorry, people can so easily get trapped in these things." He dropped the padlock key into the drain. "We don't want anyone opening it up by mistake do we?"

Lester still smelled of booze, but he had changed his shirt. "Deb's gone then?"

"Gone." said Eddy. "Never to be seen again". He banged the top of the freezer, and tuned to go back into the kitchen. Which is when Lester noticed that Eddy's chef's jacket seemed to be covered in spots of blood.

Lester swayed slightly and began to sweat. "What's that on your jacket?" he asked.

"Oh, this?" Eddy replied stripping off the jacket, "just sorting out the meat fridge". He put the jacket in the laundry, and pretended not to notice as Lester pushed it down to the bottom, out of sight.

Lester tried to avoid the yard with the big freezer, but the thought of it seemed to haunt him. Most days he found himself in the yard telling himself that if there *was* a smell, it was just the rubbish. One day when the kitchen door was open, he saw two of the waiters with using it to hold their ashtray and mugs of tea and couldn't help shivering. But Eddy was as calm as always.

"Shall I arrange for the Council to take that old freezer?" he asked.

"Leave it where it is." said Lester, and walked off.

After a couple of weeks had gone by with no one looking for Deb, Eddy sought an interview with Lester, and gave in his notice.

"You know what, with all that's happened, I think it's time I had a fresh start somewhere different," he said.

"Of course" replied Lester, failing completely to conceal his relief. "How about a month's money in lieu of notice? And a bonus. Cash. Go today if you like."

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Melissa couldn't let things go. Without Eddy, and his baking, the restaurant's takings began to decline, and although the Custom Collectibles website had disappeared without trace, so had all their furniture. Bills for the refurbishment added up to a big number, and an increasingly angry Melissa. She started spending more time at the restaurant, listening to people talk, staff and customers. She noticed that her husband didn't have many friends amongst the staff. She noticed that Lester didn't like to go into the back yard where the big freezer still

stood, and that the kitchen staff knew it and thought it was funny.

“He behaves as if there’s a body in that freezer, won’t let anyone move it,” one of the chefs told her with a smirk. The staff had begun to see that the writing was on the wall for Lester. Melissa decided to test her husband.

“We need to clear out the yard,” she said, “I’m worried that we’ll have Environmental Health on our case. We should shift that old freezer. It stinks.” On a hot day, there was an unpleasant odour in the back yard, and it wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility that someone would complain.

“No! I mean yes, I’ll get on to it. Straight away.” Lester said, panic all over his face.

And Melissa’s thoughts became dark enough to keep her awake at night. She was sorry that Eddy had gone, because she could have asked him about it all, but she remembered that Eddy had a policeman friend. It took her a while to find the friend’s name, and a while longer to get up the courage to call him.

“So,” said Daniel, “you think your husband may have murdered this Debs, and hidden her body in the freezer?”

“It sounds crazy,” Melissa said, “I know it does. But he’s so weird about the freezer, and it does smell...”

“There is a very easy way to find out,” Daniel said, and he called downstairs for a PC with a set of bolt cutters.

It was a warm day, and Daniel thought that the freezer *did* smell. When they lifted the lid, he and PC Morgan gagged at the putrid air escaping from the enclosed space. Neither of them dared to look inside until the worst had cleared. Then they peered over the edge together, with a pretty good idea of what they would find.

They called Melissa, from her spot by the kitchen door, face covered by her scarf.

“I’m still going to divorce him.” she said, looking at the dead fish at the bottom of the empty freezer.

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Meanwhile, somewhere on the English Riviera, a tiny dark-haired woman served a long queue of customers at the *Sweet Freeze Cafe - ice cream and home made cakes*. In the kitchen at the back, a big, gentle, man with rather lovely blue eyes, baked the cakes and desserts that the cafe was becoming famous for.