Snakes and Ladders . . .

A short story by Veronica Heley

‘I have to make a new will,’ said James, shifting in his high-backed chair. He usually found his chair in the retirement home comfortable, but not today. He said, ‘Have you made a will yet, Tod?’

The tall, lively-looking man opposite made quite a contrast to James’ white hair and pallor.

Studying the chess board between them, Tod said, ‘Ages ago. Your move.’

Every Sunday afternoon Tod brought a neighbour of his to the retirement home to visit her son who, like James, was slowly dying of cancer.

Tod’s neighbour stayed for an hour, and in that hour Tod usually dropped in to see if James needed anything. Sometimes they talked about their families and the fortunes of Arsenal football team. Often, they played chess.

James looked at the board. Was his knight in danger? He said, ‘I made a will after my wife died, but that’s nearly fifteen years ago and a lot has happened since. My retirement, the cancer. I’d like to leave the lot to somebody who’d do some good with it. What did you do with yours?’

Tod said, ‘My wife and her sister got into a fight after their mother’s will was read out. All over a china tea set that got smashed when they started throwing things. They didn’t speak for a year after so I wanted to avoid family disagreements. I’ve made sure my wife will be all right, and the boys are all set. I’ve left a few thousands for the grandchildren. The rest goes to charity.’

James said, ‘You know my family. They’re all anxious to be remembered in my will, with the exception of my niece Molly who never mentions it. I’m thinking of leaving everything to her. Now you’ll say she’s no business woman and she isn’t. But she’s about to retire from working at the nursery and is all set to do volunteer work for a charity shop nearby. I reckon she could do something good with the money.’

Tod said, ‘Good idea.’

James studied the board. Tod might present himself as a simple workman who didn’t bother his head with anything other than the price of a pint, but he was a shrewd builder with a thriving business. He seemed to blunder around the chess board without a plan in his head, but James had learned from experience that he could suddenly find himself the victim of a cunning plot . . . and yes, his knight was in jeopardy.

James moved his knight, saying. ‘Molly’s lemon drizzle cake is something to die for. Does your family keep you sweet with gifts?’

‘When they remember, yes. I’ve had a ticket for a football match now and then. And yes, last week there was a pointed remark about the Rolex my wife bought for me for my fiftieth. The bracelet’s broken and I keep meaning to take it in for repair. My grandson says it’s worthless so why not pass it on to him?’

‘He’d better start watching the Antiques Road Show, which often features a Rolex. That’ll give him a good idea of how much the Rolex is worth.’

Both men laughed at that.

Todd moved his bishop. Checkmate.

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Another Sunday.

James pushed his laptop aside when Tod arrived but was irritable, fancied a game of Backgammon for a change.

Tod said, ‘What’s up?’

‘Molly. Stupid woman. I’m not leaving anything to her now.’

‘What’s she done?’

‘A neighbour of hers is desperate to find someone to look after her two teenagers while she’s in hospital for an operation. Her husband disappeared years ago and Molly’s now retired so she’s volunteered to take them in for a while. Can you believe it? The boys are typical teenagers, hardly ever attend school, live on fast food and are glued to their smartphones. I told her she ought to let them go into foster care but she says she’d like to try it. She says the kids have had a bad start in life, which seems to me to be an excellent reason for not going anywhere near them. She says it’s only temporary, but if they hear she’s coming into money, they’ll never leave her alone. So out goes she.’

Todd thought, *Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you do for me.* eHe said nothing. It was up to James what he did with his money.

James watched Tod gallop his counters around the board. That was one of the annoying things about Tod, he never made allowances for James because he was ill.

James said, ‘I’m going to leave everything to my great-nephews. I asked them if they’d like to come into the business, starting from the bottom as you and I did. They don’t like the idea of getting their hands dirty. They want to launch out into the stratosphere, make a million before supper. They remind me of what I was like at their age, full of schemes for this and that. Perhaps a little self-centred.’

Tod was indulgent. ‘That’s the way of the world. My lot are the same.’

James was silent. Because Tod’s family were not the same. They’d gone through state schools to university. One was working as his father’s right hand man in the family firm, and the other was a High School teacher. Both were married with a couple of children each.

James had given his only son a sports car for his eighteenth birthday. He’d crash it that night, killing himself in the process.

Tod said, ‘Another game?’

James shook his head. He was tired. He leaned back in his armchair. ‘Talking to you has cleared my mind. I’ll transfer some money to each of the boys this week. I’ll tell them to think of it as seed money. Whichever does best with it, will be my residual heir. What do you think?’

Tod said, ‘As they sow, so shall they reap. I promised I’d pop in to see the woman at the end of the corridor about her sidelamp before I go. Another game next Sunday?’ With a grin, he added, ‘Perhaps you’ll have more luck if we move on to Dominoes.’

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Another Sunday, another game. Dominoes.

James lost because Tod could add up more quickly than he. He frowned at the board. ‘My luck’s right out. You win, again.’ He sighed. Did I tell you what’s happened to Molly? Only to be expected, oof course.’

Tod nodded. Yes, James had already told him.

James sighed. ‘I thought it was only fair to give her a couple of thousand, nothing like the amount I’ve given the great-nephews, of course, but something. I suggested she might like to take a good holiday but she said she couldn’t leave her pair of homeless kids or they’d run riot and probably end up in court. Which they probably will, anyway. So what do you think Molly’s planning to do with the money? Refurbish the boys’ room and buy them tickets to the next big Arsenal match.’

Todd grinned. ‘Maybe she’s one of the few women who understands the off-side rule. Those tickets sell like hot cakes. Does she realise how much it’s going to cost her?’

‘She thinks it’s worthwhile to “Give them something to remember.” Did I tell you that my great-nephews have already been on to her, suggesting she let them invest the money for her? Now that would be sensible. She refused, more’s the pity.’

Tod looked grave. ‘I thought those two lads were only with her temporarily?’

James shrugged. ‘Complications. Their mother needs a second operation. I was right not to leave her anything. Now my great-nephew Lewis – that’s Lewis the left-handed, could never catch a ball, remember? – he’s got a brilliant idea. He’s hired a studio and bought all the equipment. His girlfriend’s going to teach people how to become an influencer with a million viewers. He said it’s a slam dunk, which I understand to mean that it’s foolproof.’

Tod frowned. Didn’t influencers have their own equipment and not much of that, either? He said, ‘Influencers can do well. The grandkids are into all that.’

James said, ‘You have to invest, to make money nowadays.’ He shifted in

his chair. Perhaps he wasn’t as happy about Lewis’s investment as he pretended to be. He said, ‘Tod, what would you say if I left the money to you?’

Todd raised his hands in horror. ‘Don’t do that. The missus would have me booking a holiday to some resort in the Pacific, where we’d be expected to lie around all day doing nothing. After an hour we’d both be up and wanting to climb a mountain or something. We’re booked to visit the wife’s cousin in Canada this year and that’s enough.’

‘You could give the money to your sons?’

‘We’ve helped them get through uni and onto the property market. Now it’s up to them. No extravagant gifts. They only lead to trouble.’

James closed his eyes. Was he thinking of his son, who’d been given a car too early, and lost it and his life?’

Tod wished he’d held his tongue.

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Another Sunday, and James was on his laptop when Tod arrived.

James said, ‘I didn’t expect you today.’ He twisted his head around to listen to some noises bumps and crashes from the next room. Furniture being moved around?

He said, ‘They woke me in the middle of the night. I don’t sleep well, but this was . . . The lad next door died, hasn’t he? It was expected, of course. They moved the body before breakfast. It’s as if he was never here. I wasn’t sure you’d come today. You didn’t need to. How is his mother?’

‘Sad, but peaceful. She was expecting it. I brought her over to spend some time with him yesterday afternoon. The minister came. There was no pain. The lad was ready to go.’

James was restless. ‘No pain. Yes, I got them to agree to that for me, too. Is it raining? I feel as if it should be. I really wasn’t sure you’d come.’

‘I enjoy our games, and I look forward every week to finding out what’s happened in the family.’

James closed his laptop and pushed it aside. ‘Yes, well. Developments. Reggie’s quit his job. Reggie the redhead. Reggie the hot-head. He’s buying a vinery in the South of France, and plans to import the wine. He says he’s sure to make a fortune.’

‘Good for him.’ Tod didn’t bother to point out the flaws in this scheme. What did Reggie know about farming? He said, ‘Shall we have a game? What shall it be? How about Snakes & Ladders?’

They played and James won. ‘Perhaps my luck has changed.’ He closed his eyes. The sun was shining brightly today and fell across his face. Tod moved the curtain across.

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Next week they tried Dominoes again, but the clack of the pieces being laid down bothered James, so they switched back to Snakes & Ladders.

James won again. He said, ‘I’m beginning to think you’re letting me win. That’s twice in a row.’

‘It’s your lucky day.’

‘There’s luck and there’s bad luck,’ said James, pulling himself up in the chair. ‘Did you hear what’s happened to poor Molly? Exactly what I’d expected.’

‘Did she get the boys tickets for a big match?’

‘Yes, she did. A nice gesture, but the tickets gave them street cred, and they boasted about their good fortune which attracted the attention of some of their old friends. So when Molly was out late one evening, those two idiots had a party at which drink flowed, and they trashed the place. Molly’s so upset. She was going to call in the police, but the boys and their mother – who’s still in hospital and will be for another couple of weeks at least – anyway, they all begged her not to do so. She was stupid enough to give in. They said they’d put everything right which, of course, they can’t. Mark my words, they’ll do it again.’

Tod sighed. ‘I’m really sorry to hear it. She’d wanted to help someone worse off than herself.’

‘She was not wise.’

‘She saw a need and fulfilled it. What’s wrong with the mother?’

‘Her lungs are packing up. There’s not much hope, I fear.’

Todd said, ‘I’ll drop in on Molly later, see if she needs help to clear the mess.’

James thumped his pillows. ‘I’m so angry. If only she’d listened and let Reggie and Lewis handle the money for her, but no. She always thinks she knows best.’

‘How are those two? I remember them coming into the office with you when they were so high. But they never showed any interest in the business.’

James turned his head away and closed his eyes. He said, ‘No pain. They’ve promised me, they’ve got it written down, that there’s to be no pain.’

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It was Snakes and Ladders again. Or rather, the board had been laid out for it, but James was not up to playing today. He was in his chair, but seemed to have shrunk and be held up by pillows.

He said, ‘There’s a new woman moved in next door. I hear her plodding up and down the corridor on a walking frame. Convalescing after a knee operation. They say she won’t be here long.’

Tod nodded. He didn’t think James would be here long, either.

James made an effort to sit more upright. ‘I want you to know I made my final will yesterday. All properly signed and witnessed. Don’t argue. I made you my executor and residual heir. Not that there’s much to leave.’

Todd said, ‘I wish you hadn’t.’

James tried to smile. ‘I knew you’d say that. I read somewhere that the people who don’t want power are the only ones who should have with it.’

Tod was silent. It was a burden he could do without. The business, that that new contract, should they take on more staff or not? Then they were all worried about their youngest grandson, who wasn’t doing well at school.

He could understand why James had wished it on him, and of course he must accept. He said, ‘Do you feel up to a game today?’

‘No. I’m done with all that. I sit and think. The past comes back to visit me. I wonder if the good I’ve done outweighs the bad. It’s too late now to wish I’d done things differently.’ He closed his eyes and sank lower in the chair.

Tod said, softly, ‘I dropped in on Molly. Those two youngsters have been working hard, trying to make up to her for the damage they did. It must have cost them something, but they sold their tickets for the match at a good price and gave her the money for them, so she’s ended up not much worse off than she was before. I’m going to take the elder one on as an apprentice. The other’s promised me he’ll start attending school again.’

Had James heard? Tod wasn’t sure.

There was one of those comfortable silences that happen when old friends get together.

At length Tod said, ‘Have you heard from your great-nephews?’

A negative movement of James’ hand. ‘They both asked for more money. Lewis’s girl-friend has left him and the studio’s lying empty. He’s thinking of using to make adverts for television, but he’s no idea how. All pie in the sky.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Todd.

‘Reggie the Red Head. He planned to import wine from a vineyard he’d bought in France. There’s been some sort of bug, the harvest was poor . . . there’s some new restrictions. He asked me to tide him over, but I can’t help either of them any more.’

Tod said, ‘New ventures need time and a sound base.’

James said, ‘I checked and the money’s all gone. I wish I’d given it to you instead.’

Tod was silent. What James had given him was years of friendship. Love. And respect. And an opportunity to help a couple of youngsters on their way in the world. He’d looked forward to his visits at the retirement home. This might be the last one.

He said, ‘Shall we pray a bit?’

Maybe James nodded. Maybe he just shifted in his chair.

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The day after Easter. A radio in the communal living room was playing ‘Glory, glory, Alleluia’ when Molly and Tod arrived to clear out James’ possessions.

Molly opened a black plastic bag and started emptying drawers. She said, ‘You’ll have to take his laptop and smartphone to tie up the business end. Everything else goes to the charity shop, right? Is there anything you’d like to keep for yourself?’

Tod shook his head. He picked up the chess set and put it down again.

She sniffed, ‘I shall miss him. He was such a good man, who always thought of himself as a failure. Aunt Betty was lovely, too. I think they both stopped wanting to live when their boy died. How long ago is it? Nearly twenty years, now. He let the business go, hardly ever went in. If you hadn’t got stuck in and kept it going, he’d have lost everything. And then what would have happened to him?’

Todd said, ‘It’s a good little business. Doing well.’ He put his hand on the back of the empty chair. It was a good chair and someone else would appreciate it.

Molly said, ‘He told me you worked night and day to save the firm. He said he attempted suicide twice. Is that true?’

‘He wasn’t himself. He soon came round and we worked together from then on. It was good of him to offer me a partnership.’

‘It was the right thing to do. And it was right that you bought him out when he retired. Otherwise he’d never have been able to afford this place.’

Tod opened the box of dominoes. They were all there. Good.

Molly blew her nose again. She slammed empty drawers shut. ‘Is he owing anything here at the home? It’s so expensive, and he’s been here for so long. No wonder he ran out of money.’

Tod could see she was afraid there’d be a shortfall, and knew he’d cover it if there were. He said, ‘If there’s anything over, I’ll get some football tickets for those young lads of yours. You’ve taken on something there, what with their mother still being so frail. Do you think she’ll ever be strong enough to take them back?’

‘I said they could stay with me, whatever happened, and I meant it. They’re good boys, really, but I must admit I’m glad you’re going to keep in touch. You’re good at sorting things, aren’t you?’

Tod picked up a much-used bible from the bedside table. ‘This belonged to his son. Do you think one of his great-nephews will want it?’

‘They said they don’t want anything.’

They’d been furious that James hadn’t been able to go on helping them out financially.

Molly straightened the pile of games. ‘Shall we leave these here for the other residents to enjoy?’

Chess. Backgammon. Dominoes. Snakes & Ladders. Good luck or skill? God would decide. Maybe the great-nephews would make a fortune. Maybe Molly would adopt the two boys who would straighten out and become worthwhile citizens.

She said, ‘You’ll take his bible, won’t you? Or shall I?’

‘You take it,’ he said. ‘I know what it says.’

Jesus came to remind us of his Father’s love for us. He died and rose from the dead. He lives now and forever. He said, Love one another.

Did he leave a fortune? No. His legacy was love.

Your legacy may be money to benefit others, or it might be gifts of everyday kindness which don’t count in terms of money but rate highly in terms of love.

What is your legacy?

Veronica Heley’s next book comes out in May: FALSE GOLD, from Severn House.