***Music . . .***

 ***A short story by Veronica Heley***

Oliver’s sister knew how everything should be done. ‘Leave it all to me,’ she said.

The widow was in shock. The minister at the church they’d attended now

and then had recently died, so it was easiest to say, ‘Thank you, Julia. So kind.’

In consequence only three people attended the service at the crematorium;

the minister appointed for the day, Oliver’s widow and his sister, Julia.

Julia said, ‘We can’t have a service at my church. Oliver stopped going ages ago and it would be wrong to pretend that he was a Christian. He had no respect. H

e told me once that he’d like to go to his grave wearing a Brentford Football T-shirt!’

 Sarah almost laughed because she knew Oliver had been teasing his sister. And he did go to church. Not very often, but he did go. Not to Julia’s church, though.

Julia arranged a lift to the crematorium. ‘No need to waste money on a taxi, and you won’t want to drive that flashy car of yours today.’

Sarah told herself to pay attention to the music being played when they reached the crematorium, but didn’t recognise any of it. It didn’t matter, did it? Oliver wasn’t here to listen to it.

 It was a fine morning; the sort of morning where he’d have got up early and said he’d just look at the tomatoes/seedlings/whatever before breakfast. He liked to potter in the garden after he’d retired.

 Well, he might have retired officially but he’d always worked and did so till the end. A summer cold and Covid . . .

 Today Sarah wore a severely plain green dress that he’d always liked, and a hat with two silk roses pinned to the brim.

 Julia sniffed. ‘Surely you could have found something more suitable than that to wear? That hat!’ She herself was dressed completely clad in black.

 Sarah said, dreamily, ‘I was wearing these roses on the shoulder of my jacket when we met. We were in the pub, celebrating a win in court. One of the roses fell off and he picked it up. His friends joked that I could have it back if I gave him a kiss.’

‘Disgusting! Expecting you to sell yourself for a kiss!’

The widow smiled, remembering . . . the big, good natured man out for an evening at the pub with friends, picking up the rose and presenting it to her while his friends sniggered.

Only, the gentle giant had met her eyes and she’d met his and she’d looked at him and seen . . . what? A small-time businessman who earned about a tenth of what she did?

Or a big-hearted man who thought little of himself but who would never

let her down?

 And he’d seen what? A handsome woman with an air of authority, at ease in a group of expensively-clad professional men. Did he also see that although she was surrounded by their admiration, she might possibly be a little tired of it?

 She’d said, ‘My kisses are not for sale.’

 He said, ‘I apologise for my friends. Unfortunately I’m responsible for seeing them safely back home tonight or I’d try to make it up to you.’

 So he had a car. But it wouldn’t be a Mercedes, which is what she was driving. She saw the interest in his eyes and for a moment or two she wished that she were not out of his league. She thought of saying something like, ‘Do you come here often?’ or, ‘Another night, perhaps?’

 But no. that would be cheap. Also, he was with friends who’d label her an easy lay if she encouraged him. So she shook her head, took out her smartphone saying, ‘Excuse me. I’d better answer this,’ and went out into the street, pretending to answer a call.

 He followed her after a count of ten, just as she’d hoped he would.

 He said, ‘You forgot your rose.’

 ‘Give it back to me tomorrow?’

 There were smile lines around his eyes. ‘Here? Or somewhere quieter. MacDonalds? The Greek restaurant on the corner, or the Ritz?’

 She didn’t think he’d ever dined at the Ritz, though she’d been there only that week. She said, ‘Don’t they have a Karaoke night here tomorrow?’

That way she could avoid giving hm her phone number. Just in case.

 They’d gone to the Ritz for lunch on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He’d said it had been on his bucket list for so long they’d better do it before he stopped eating altogether.

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The crematorium. Sarah jerked back to the present as the music stopped and the minister looked at his watch. Dead on time. He hadn’t known the deceased and had rattled through the service without meaning a word of it.

 More music as the coffin slid out of sight. Bach? Possibly. Her sister-in-law would say that only Bach was appropriate.

Sarah bit back a smile. Suppose she’d asked for some music that he’d liked? ‘True Love,’ for instance.

 Jullia hissed at her. ‘What are you grinning for? Remember where you are.’

The widow had an impulse to rush forward and place one of her roses on the coffin before it disappeared. She would throw herself on the coffin and scream and they would have to bring in some staff to restrain her. Oliver would have cheered her on, wouldn’t he?

No, she mustn’t make a scene. Julia would be so shocked! Poor Julia! It took so little to upset her.

They got back in the car. Julia was fidgeting. ‘He did make a will, didn’t he? I gave him a list of suitable charities the church likes to support.’

Sarah said, ‘He left his house to you. Sell it or live in it; it’s yours.’

Julia relaxed. ‘I’ll sell it and give the money to the church for a new

window behind the altar. I can always live on my pension.’

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Julia had arranged for the wake to be held in the hall of the church she attended. She’d said that it was cheap and that the church had a team of faithful Christians who didn’t mind catering for outsiders and were much less expensive than the firm that Oliver and Sarah had used for all their big parties.

‘There’ll be no raucous music either,’ said Julia. ‘I’m not asking the choir to come because Oliver never set foot inside the church. I’m told someone’s teenager wants to set up as a DJ. You can give him a tenner and I’ll make sure he only plays appropriate music.’

Sarah said that Oliver had enjoyed a good tune and was especially fond of the old Broadway musicals. Julia said this wasn’t a question of what Sarah liked, but of what was suitable. Tiredly, Sarah had agreed.

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On their first date at the Karaoke evening in the pub, they exchanged basic information. She was a barrister who was making a name for herself, winning case after case. She took holidays in far-flung parts of the world and owned a big modern house on the hill.

He ran a small electrical firm but spent most of his time volunteering at a small charity which ran a Refuge for women fleeing abuse.

The gap between them was huge and she was something of a snob. She liked the look of him but couldn’t help thinking of the countless women who’d been taken to the cleaners by charming men they’d met on the internet. Was he yet another scam artist?

But no, she thought not. He was not a scam artist. He was that rare thing, a good man.

 To her surprise and amusement, Oliver got up in the pub and sang ‘True love.’ He sung it beautifully with his eyes on her, and everyone clapped and cheered him on. Afterwards, he’d said to her, ‘Would you laugh if I said I loved you?’

In her twenties she might well have laughed. But not now. Now, she said, ‘We haven’t even . . .’ and stopped herself, because she realised she was blushing. Ice Queen Sarah, blushing!

He took her hand, smiling. ‘Ready when you are. Am I going too fast for you? I know what I’m doing, but do you feel the same?’

She said, ‘This can’t possibly work.’

She thought, *I can’t introduce him to my colleague. They’d make*

*fun of him, and of me. If he asked me out for a meal at my favourite restaurant, he wouldn’t be able to afford the bill. I want to believe that it’s possible for us to get together but . . . I don’t see how.*

She said, ‘Both my parents died last year. How about you?’

‘The same. I have a house which I share with my sister Julia. If I move out, she could let a couple of the rooms to make ends meet. Do you go to church?’

‘What? Well, as a child, yes. I used to sing in the choir, but then I went to uni and moved away and I haven’t thought about it much since. I go at Christmas sometimes. Why?’

‘Julia attends the local church. She finds fulfilment in worship and following the ten commandments. She believes there is only one narrow path to heaven.’ His tone was matter-of-fact.

‘And you?’

He said, ‘I go every now and then, but not to Julia’s place of worship. Like you, I was taken to church as a child every Sunday. But when I was growing up I thought a lot about what Christianity meant. It seemed to me that there are many ways to worship and that what suits one may not be right for another. Some people find it easy to accept everything they’re taught and others have a struggle to overcome doubt and find their way to the Truth. It took me a long time to discover the role He wanted me to play in His world.’

She was quiet, thinking through what he’d said. He waited for her to catch up. That’s when she realised that in worldly goods he might be far behind her, but that in everything else he was way ahead. It was a humbling thought.

She guessed, ‘Your sister will dislike me on sight?’

‘She’s a sad and lonely person. Her husband died young and she never really got over it. She buried him with appropriate music and prayers. She fasts every Friday. She will try to convert you to her way of worshipping. If I read you aright, you will be kind to her.’

She was not noted for being kind. But she said, ‘I understand.’

He smiled. ‘If I asked you to marry me next week, would you laugh ?’

Through unexpected tears, she said, ‘Give me some time . . . but probably, yes.’

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The next time they met, Sarah asked him what church he went to. He said he didn’t often manage it because he liked to stand in for the staff at the Refuge who worked six days a week and took Sunday off. When he did go, it was to a small church on the other side of town. It was in a run-down area and the people who went there were mostly poor and the desperate.

He said that he’d fallen into the habit of reading a few verses of the Bible every day. Sometimes he felt overwhelmed by what he saw and heard at the Refuge but the chances are that then he’d come across a verse that gave him an insight into a particular problem, or helped him to carry on.

 He said that if he was distressed by something he could always take it Upstairs for advice. Oliver said that he didn’t mean that God was only in the sky because He was everywhere. In the midst of a battle, a hospital, a school classroom, a pub, on the bus. In church. Anywhere.

Occasionally he’d drop in on the Bible Study Group which an elderly minister ran in his church. He said that always gave him food for thought.

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To Julia it was clear that Sarah was yet another difficult task sent to her by the Lord for conversion. She strove mightily to put her brother’s new girl-friend on the straight and narrow path. She pointed out the wastefulness of her extravagant way of living; of having a top-of-the-range car, of wearing silk clothing and of indulging in the Demon Drink almost every night of the year.

Sarah listened. She agreed it was all wrong but, oh dear, it was necessary in her line of work. That went down reasonably well.

Her extravagant holidays were fair target. How could Oliver justify loving a woman who flew off every now and then for a party or a meeting by private jet? No, impossible. Sarah sighed and said Julia was in the right of it, and she would see if this extravagance could be cut back here and there . . .

To give Sarah her due, she did suggest quieter holidays in future and gave Oliver a tithe (after tax) of what she earned.

He worked four long days a week on the electrical fitting firm which his

father had started, but the rest of his time was spent helping at the local Refuge. He listened to people’s troubles, he helped them fill out forms, he accompanied them to court when necessary, he recycled good furniture, and he held the door against men who came looking for their victims, tanked up with alcohol and drugs.

He moved in with Sarah to reorganise her life. He mended everything that needed attention, and took over the garden. He massaged her shoulders when she worked long hours on a difficult brief and created an oasis of calm around her which she valued beyond rubies.

They were married quietly in the church where his elderly minister friend officiated, with only a few friends as witnesses. They did ask Julia to attend but she said she would be on retreat that week and declined the invitation.

Sarah’s friends thought at first to mock her strange obsession with this nobody, but instead found themselves telling him their worries. No, he didn’t understood points of law, but he had an understanding of human nature that solicitors and barristers didn’t always possess themselves.

He sold the electrical firm and invested the money in the charity to open a second Refuge some distance away. The need was great. Sarah bought him a reliable workhorse of an estate car to replace his old vehicle which was calling for the attention of the AA far too often.

 They were blessed with one child, who died young. That had been a sorrow, but Oliver had coaxed her back to work soon after the little boy died. Oliver said that some people were given children to look after and others had jobs given them that no one else could do. He said they both had work to do and had better get on with it before they went to live with the Big Man in the Sky.

 Sarah was not gifted with culinary skills, and they soon agreed that it would be better for them to dine off bread and cheese than to eat what she’d managed to ruin. He was a decent cook but he worked long hours and was soon involved in opening a third Refuge even further away, so he organised meals to be delivered from local restaurants.

 He did good by stealth, mending lives.

He loved kippers and dark chocolate. She preferred smoked salmon and truffles. Their parties were always the Go To event of the year. They had a big party when she retired from work but they hadn’t planned a party to celebrate his leaving life.

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The church hall was well enough on a bright sunny afternoon. No frills, no special touches, but a crowd of people all wanting to kiss and hug and touch the widow. She wept and so did they.

 They came from the electrical firm, remembering how he’d built it up and sold it to a larger firm who’d retained the work force.

Three women and two men came from the Refuges, apologising that not everyone could make it as they never left the places without cover.

Three members of the girls’ football team that he’d started and supported came with their coach, to thank Sarah for his funding their new strip.

An awkward-looking lad came who’d got into wrong company when he

left school but had been given a second chance by Oliver and now organised playtimes with the children at the first Refuge. He said he was planning to go on to college with another lad who hadn’t been able to see a locked door without trying to open it, until Oliver challenged him to do something constructive with his gift – such as become a locksmith.

Friends came, her colleagues and his. Some he’d cajoled into giving him money or equipment for the Refuges. Some had helped him find work for his proteges.

Women came whom he’d helped to shelter and comfort before they returned to live in the world with renewed hope.

 The helpers started to serve the food, and the Karaoke Kid to play some background music. Julia looked disapproving so it probably wasn’t Bach. A colleague was having a word with the lad and the music changed to . . . ‘I’ve got rhythm.’ Why not? Oliver would have loved that.

Their neighbours on the hill came, with some flowers from their garden which Sarah didn’t know what to do with. Someone took them off her so that she could greet a woman in a wheelchair whom Oliver had been accustomed to visit. Sarah promised to visit her instead.

The Karaoke Kid played ‘True Love.’ Everyone knew it was Oliver’s favourite song. He’d said it was the only one he could remember the words for.

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When it was all over she returned to her quiet house. She asked Alexa to play – not anything from the musicals – but a spare melody by Arvo Pert for cello and piano. Spiegel im Spiegel. Mirror in the mirror. Oliver had had that on a loop during his last illness.

 She walked out into the garden in the flickering light of the dusk. The Led lights which he’d installed in the trees came to life, leading her to the wooden seat he’d made for her by the pond.

 His cat came and twined itself round her ankles . . . and departed, leaping up a tree in search of . . . who knew what? He’d said, ‘Look after Molly for me, won’t you?’ Molly was a stray whom he’d adopted, but who had never taken the slightest bit of notice of Sarah. Maybe the cat would have a change of heart now he’d gone.

At his bedside she’d said, ‘Don’t go. I need you.’

 He’d said, ‘You know where to get help.’

 A breeze ruffled the leaves of the tree he’d planted that spring, and brushed her cheek. Some leaves swirled down to the ground. He’d arranged for someone attached to the Refuge to look after the garden for her in future.

 She picked a rose. A real rose with a scent. She said aloud, ‘I know that in this life I’ll never be loved as he was loved, but that doesn’t matter. I promise to take over the work he left unfinished. I can’t talk with people as he could. That’s not my gift. But I can raise money and find people who know how to look after others. God be with me.’

*I give you a new commandment. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples. John 13, v 34.*

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*Veronica’s latest book is ‘False Gold’ published by Severn House.*