

# AS THE CLOCK STRUCK TEN

by

**Gill Mather**

This mystery novel, set in 2016, is available on Amazon as an ebook and a paperback and under the Kindle Unlimited program.

Don Morrison, has a new live-in girlfriend, Grace Bennett. His eighteen year old daughter, Emma, newly arrived home from university for her first summer vacation, isn't happy to have her home invaded, as she sees it, by this other woman, especially so soon after the death of her mother, Carol, who was very ill for many years and was cared for by Don. Grace's twenty year old son, Luke, lives at home with his father, Greg, Grace's husband.

The five main characters progress through the hot, rural East Anglian summer, some rather haphazardly, others with a more definite purpose. A young woman, Alex, known to some of them helps things along. The law takes over at one point, its effects quite devastating for the unprepared.

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In this extract from Chapter 10, Don, who is a website designer and is having a hard time with a client, learns that Grace's son, Luke, is going to come and live with them, a development which he rather dreads. As Luke walks to Don's house, he mulls over the scene which led to him leaving home.

## 010 The Unpleasant Shock

DON WAS grappling with the solicitors' website. Though Martin had appeared pretty reasonable, the firm as a whole were not, and Martin turned out to be absent from the office a great deal or otherwise engaged on cases. It was quite a large firm with about eight partners, many other fee earners not to mention support staff, various different services on offer and several smaller branch offices. They wanted a lot of inter-activity, as much SEO as possible, links to Facebook pages, they wanted to know about tweets and blogs. They thought he would arrange the photos and go to their offices and interview staff and find out for himself what was needed for the site.

After receiving the initial information from Martin, Don had tried several times to get hold of him but wasn't able to, therefore he was still dealing with the corporate partner Ken, a self-important, aggressive little man who made light of any issues Don raised and was dismissive when Don asked for information saying he should speak to Ken's secretary or assistant!

They'd already fixed the price by now. The solicitors assumed that he would, for the price being charged, make regular future updates to the site and deal with any problems they had without paying a maintenance fee. Don was glad that he'd made clear in advance in writing what he would do within the price agreed because it didn't seem to have sunk in with the solicitors. When he'd rung Ken back the day after his and Grace's trip to Cambridge, Ken had said that they'd now accept and pay the price he'd wanted. Four and a half thousand wasn't it? This was such a cheap trick that Don had nearly put the phone down there and then,

but he'd taken a deep breath and said with as much patience as he could muster that no, it wasn't. It was five thousand pounds.

"Oh!" Ken, had seemed surprised. Don had shaken his head and rolled his eyes at the other end of the line. Maybe Ken thought that his ace negotiating tactic of staying out of touch for several days would have been bound to have worn Don down. Don took another deep breath.

"Oh yes, sorry. I was looking at the wrong note," said Ken.

*Really?* Don had muttered under this breath.

It was now the middle of the following week, and Don was constructing the site and testing various search engine optimisation phrases. This took ages. It didn't improve his mood when Ken had called that morning and asked wasn't the site ready yet. Don was also glad that he'd included a time estimate in his information to the solicitors but they were seriously undermining that by being so uncooperative and making everything so difficult.

However Grace was due home soon and this always cheered him. In fact he heard her car drawing up now and went to the window. She didn't get out though. She was having a conversation with someone on her mobile. He took a bottle of wine out of the fridge and reached for two glasses. Heaven knew he needed one himself.

Grace had been shopping, and she was angling herself through the kitchen door with bags in both hands, trying not to knock the paintwork as she came through. Don hurried to take the bags from her.

"Sit down and have a drink," he said.

"OK, but you might need a drink too!"

"Oh. Why would that be?" he said affably.

"I've just had Greg on the telephone. He's chucked Luke out. Apparently Greg was away again last week and he said the house was in an appalling mess when he got back."

"Surely it couldn't have been that bad."

"Well, boys can be pretty messy you know. He said filthy dishes and food wrappers left out everywhere, half-eaten plates of food, bins overflowing, furniture re-arranged, seat cushions on the floor, dirty washing and towels in the bathroom and utility room, lights on all over the house, tide marks round the bath. And one of the toilets was blocked. Very smelly. And he still can't find the TV remote."

"Yes, I think I get the picture."

"He said he let Luke have the car so he could give Greg a lift to Stansted and collect him and that was a mess too. Though at least the car was OK. I mean it was working. Oh, and he thinks Luke had a girl to stay while he was away without telling him. Anyway they had a blazing row when Greg got home from work. He took Luke's keys, threw his stuff out in the garden and locked the doors and Luke stormed off."

"Oh dear." Don couldn't help feeling pleased at the troubles now being visited on the over-confident glorified salesman who had been here a few weeks before and nearly wrecked his relationship with Grace.

"Yes, but when I looked, a text had come through from Luke saying he was on his way here."

"What?" said Don looking up sharply.

"He's asked to come and stay here for a bit."

Don felt weak. He thought of the photos he'd seen of the tall, well-built, dark-haired, younger of the two brothers. To have another male staying here! He'd only mainly, and certainly in adult life, lived in households with females. Even during his childhood, the household could have been described as matriarchal. His father had been away a lot working, and a rather shadowy figure when he was at home, retiring to his study to mount butterflies and generally study entomology, his great hobby in which Don had been totally disinterested.

So it had largely been him, his mother and two sisters. Even at university, he'd shared houses with mostly girls, though how or why this had come about, he wasn't now sure.

Another male here! He could imagine the air humming with pheromones, the smell of alien male body odour, the loud deep male voice, the build-up of testosterone and consequent aggressive behaviour. Other impressions also bombarded him from the description Grace had given of the turmoil Luke could apparently produce in a house after a few days on his own.

"Oh well," he said weakly. *Perhaps Greg was exaggerating, he told himself.* "I'm sure we'll manage OK."

"Oh, good. You don't mind then?" said Grace, apparently relieved.

Side-stepping, he said: "Where'll we put him?"

Grace had laughed at this. "What had you in mind? The coal shed? Greenhouse? The old outside privy or chicken coop perhaps?"

Don had laughed too. He was of course being over-fussy. If the young man was a little untidy, well, that probably wasn't at all abnormal. Although thinking about it, where *would* they put him? It would have to be one of the bedrooms upstairs, as Emma had moved into the only suitable room downstairs. In fact it would probably have to be Emma's old room, separated by only a bathroom from their own bedroom. Another male, a young male, only a room away, there every night snoring and ... no doubt farting and ... *doing* things to himself! Oh, God, no!

"I suppose for tonight it'll have to be Emma's old room. But," he pleaded, "do you think we could find another room for him after that?"

Grace had come over and pulled a chair up, right next to him, and put her arms around his neck. She smiled.

"Course we can."

AS HE plodded along with his bulging festival rucksack on his back, filled mainly with his precious art equipment plus his laptop and a few toiletries, with his clothes and shoes hanging over or tied to the outside and his tent and sleeping bag bungeed on the back of it, Luke had tried calling Emma to tell her he was coming to stay, but she didn't pick up so he sent a text.

He was quite pleased really at the turn of events. Living in her house would make things easier in one direction, he hoped. Since she'd spent the night at his home with him, he hadn't seen her again. He'd suggested they meet at the pub on the Sunday, and then he thought maybe they could take a walk together, somewhere quiet and out of the way as it was still blisteringly hot, since neither his house nor hers were expected to be reliably free of parents that day. Frustratingly, Emma hadn't been keen.

He'd been very disappointed and, as a result, probably distinctly grouchy at home. In the end he'd picked a row with his dad the night before, telling him that if he hadn't been such an arsehole, his mother would never have left. This of course got up his father's nose no end. The row had escalated and they'd almost come to blows. His father had said that night that Luke wouldn't be welcome here any longer unless he cleared up the mess he'd made while he, Greg, had been away. He expected that by the time he got home from work the following day that Luke would have dealt with it. Otherwise he'd be out on his ear.

"Wanker!" Luke had said at which his father had come at him.

"Just you try it," Luke had said towering above his father. Greg had had to back down which hadn't improved his temper and he'd stormed off upstairs yelling:

"You get this fucking mess cleaned up or you're out and that's final. You can go crawling to your mother and that pansy she's gone off with!"

Luke had got a beer out of the fridge and sat thinking about his options. He decided he'd better have a go at tidying up the next day and went to bed.

Though somehow, when it came to it the next morning, he kept putting it off. At about four in the afternoon, he finally worked up the initiative to make a start. But after ten minutes, his father had arrived home early. Luke, still in his boxers and a T shirt, had happened to sit down for five minutes, so of course his father thought he hadn't done anything and wasn't going to and the scene had started again.

Greg had jangled a set of keys in front of Luke's face. "These are *yours*, Sunshine, and you're *not* getting them back."

Then he'd raced upstairs and Luke had heard a load of crashing and banging and watched, fascinated, as his rucksack, tent and sleeping bag, followed by what looked like at least half his clothes, flew past the sitting room window. He'd charged upstairs himself then to save his laptop and other breakables from the same fate, not to mention some, at least, of his precious painting equipment.

Luke started to gather up his things.

"You're a bloody lunatic," he yelled at Greg who was at the window still hurling items down to the front garden.

"Yes. A bloody lunatic who owns this house. If you don't leave, I'm calling the police."

"You're out of your mind!" Luke had reverted to his posh public school voice, which he knew always needled his father, who had a Brummie accent himself and hated it that his son might be superior in any way to himself.

"You little twat! Get out! And for your information, I don't have to have you here. You're twenty, you're an adult. I don't have any fucking responsibility for you."

"Don't worry! I don't want *anything* from you, you cunt. Why should I? I have reason to believe you're not my father anyway!"

Greg turned back towards the room. "What? What did you say? You ungrateful little toerag!"

And, with a roar, Greg had heaved himself from the window sill and, his face crazed, was advancing on Luke. Luke knew he'd gone too far and that his superior size was probably no match for his father's temper. He grabbed his laptop and some art equipment and raced downstairs three at a time and out of the front door. He threw his things into his rucksack, and what wouldn't go in he hung from the outside of it. His father stood watching at the front door panting and swearing loudly.

"You come anywhere near me," Luke said at a reasonable volume, "and *I'll* call the police. Assault is a crime you know. So, incidentally, is breach of the peace." He wasn't so sure about this last assertion, but what the hell. "You're showing yourself up. I suggest you stop before someone else calls the police."

Greg had slammed the door and Luke could hear him bolting it.

Luke's anger sustained him for a large part of the journey to Mayfield Cottages though, as he neared the house, he started to have doubts. However, Emma's dad couldn't possibly be so headstrong or unreasonable as his own father. Could he?

Note – In this particular extract, there is some swearing, however that is not a common feature of the book throughout.