

WORDS WORTH

Issue FIVE

October 2025

READING

A quarterly fiction
magazine:
short stories, serials,
novellas, novels



DIANE WORDSWORTH

THE HAUNTED
HOUSE HOTEL

Words Worth Reading
Issue 5 | October 2025

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Diane Wordsworth



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welcome

A warm welcome to Issue Five of *Words Worth Reading*.

You'll find only the one brand-new, complete and exclusive short story in this issue, *Fireworks at Killiecrankie*. You'll find Part 2 of *Catch the Rainbow* in here too.

There are three short stories from the archives this time, two of which were published in 2021. *Burn* was the first short story to feature Marcie Craig but the second to be reproduced in *Words Worth Reading*. *Trick or Treat* features children Thomas and Ellie on their second adventure. The third story from the archives, *Bonfire Surprise*, was first published in an Indian magazine but has yet to be published as a standalone.

There's also a brand-new, complete and exclusive novelette that features community journalist Stevie Beck: *Stevie Beck and the Haunted House Hotel*.

Have fun reading the stories. I hope you enjoy them.



Wordsworth Shorts



– Diane Wordsworth –

bonfire surprise

bonfire surprise

I read a genuine news story in a newspaper a long time ago that inspired me to write this short story. Once it was finished, it did do the rounds of all the usual UK markets, but none took it on. I'd just about given up on it when Women's Era in India bought and published it.

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The barn had been icy cold. Susan remembered it as though it were yesterday.

She had been dragged awake by the drop in temperature, the last few hours like a bad dream. She was exhausted and sore but at least the bleeding had stopped.

Susan looked down at the sleeping bundle in the straw and realised again that it hadn't been a bad dream at all. She was fifteen years old and had just had a baby – a boy – in a farmer's barn in the middle of nowhere. How was she going to tell her mam?

Susan hadn't even realised she was pregnant at first and then, when the symptoms became more obvious, she pushed the possibility out of her mind, blocked it, until she didn't even think about it herself. Her ever expanding waistline was blamed on too much food and she disguised her increasing size with baggy sweatshirts and jogging bottoms. And she never breathed a word to anyone.

She should have at least told her mam.

Now there was a baby. A beautiful little boy. A child. Flesh and blood. She couldn't deny it any more. She'd read about newborn babies being abandoned in dustbins or on doorsteps, but she could never do that. She had to get them both to civilisation. They both might need medical attention and she needed food. She was very weak.

Susan had already found some discarded hessian to wrap the baby in, but when she started to walk with him swaddled in her arms, she realised she couldn't do it, she didn't have the strength, the balance or the energy. He stayed sleeping as she nestled him in another bed of straw. He was warm, he would be safe, nothing was going to happen to him here. She had a vague recollection of feeding him during her fevered state – for that had been what she had suffered with, that was how she had ended up here. He had a soft bed and a roof over his head. She would head back to the pub she'd left last night and get help.

As Susan left the barn through the wide opening, she noticed a sheepdog watching her from a few yards away. She made a kissing sound with her mouth and said, "Hello, boy."

The dog blinked at her – one pale blue eye and one dark brown one – but stayed where he was.

She looked along the lane from where she'd come the night before. No traffic. She would have to walk again. "Look after my baby," she said to the dog.

The dog simply blinked those odd eyes at her, but this time he sat, as though he understood every word.

She breathed in the cold air still laced with the smell of gunpowder from the previous evening as she began her journey retracing her steps. It had been Bonfire Night, which was why she and her friends had come all this way.

The Robin Hood, in the middle of nowhere, was hosting a fireworks party. There was a rock band on inside, a massive bonfire outside, and a fireworks extravaganza at nine o'clock. Karen's dad had dropped them off, Linsey's dad was picking them up, and Susan was contributing petrol money. She didn't have a dad, he'd died in a pit accident, and her mam didn't drive. But Susan's mam always insisted on paying petrol money so that none of her kids was ever left out.

The girls were all having such a good time but it was when the fireworks began that Susan started to feel quite poorly. She thought perhaps she was having a reaction to a dodgy hot dog, but she didn't feel sick. Instead she got bad pains in her stomach that made her think she needed the toilet. When she got there, however, her waters broke and she realised and finally accepted that she was in labour. She couldn't tell anyone, didn't know what to say, couldn't face the shame.

She told her friends that she felt ill and was going to call a taxi and go home. Her mam would pay at the other end. There was no point in calling home when Mam didn't drive.

Susan found a pay phone in the pub lobby, but there were no taxis available to come all the way out there. It was Bonfire Night, they were already busy. Thinking gradually became more difficult and Susan found a growing urge to just walk almost impossible to ignore.

There was a small town not far away – they'd passed it on the way in – she'd walk there and perhaps try again for a taxi from there. The next half hour or so had passed in a blur until she stumbled upon the barn and stopped to rest.

Now the walk back to the pub took less than twenty-five minutes. Not a single vehicle passed her. She needed to call her mam to let her know she was okay. It was early, though, and she wasn't sure the pub would even be open.

What she didn't expect to see was a police panda car outside flashing its blue light, and two officers speaking with the pub landlady.

The woman was standing in the entrance pulling a terry towelling dressing gown tight around her against the chill. She caught sight of Susan over the policemen's shoulders and said: "This looks like her."

Susan froze to the spot as the two men turned around, then she saw the relief cross their faces as they walked towards her.

"Are you Susan Potts?" asked the blond one.

Unable to speak for fear, she simply nodded.

"You do know your mother's worried sick about you?" His face became stern as his dark-haired partner spoke into his radio. Susan broke down into hysterical sobs as the whole story tumbled out in gulps.

"Should we get her inside?" asked the landlady.

"B-b-but m-m-my b-b-baby," stammered Susan.

“I think we’d best go and find the child first,” said the policeman while his partner alternated between the radio and making notes. “Put the kettle on. We should be back soon enough, if you could mash some tea.”

And so Susan Potts had her first ever ride in a police car. It took them no time at all to get back to the barn. She ran in to be reunited with her child.

But he was gone...

“Where is he?” asked the blond policeman as his mate muttered some more into his radio.

“He was there,” said Susan, pointing at the makeshift nest she’d created, now empty. There was blood-stained straw over to one side but she assured the policemen that this was where she had given birth, and indeed there was other evidence to support this.

“What’s going on?” boomed a voice from behind them. They all spun around to see what was obviously the barn owner standing in the doorway pointing a shotgun at them. “Oh, I’m sorry, officer,” he said when he saw they were policemen. He dropped the gun and disarmed it.

“Who are you?” asked the blond one.

“Ben Richardson. This is my farm.”

“Have you seen this girl before?”

He looked at Susan who was by now weeping silently. “No, never.”

“Have you seen a baby in this barn?”

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. This isn’t Bethlehem. I came looking for my dog—”

“I saw him,” said Susan quietly. “Does he have odd eyes?”

“Yes,” said the farmer.

“He watched me leave. I asked him to look after the baby.”

The farmer looked behind him, then back at the little gathering.

“Come with me,” he said, and they all trooped out after him and into the next field just beyond where Susan had seen the dog. “It’s the fireworks,” Ben Richardson explained. “Dogs don’t like the noise.”

They passed through a muddy gateway to see a low corrugated shelter against the other side of the hedge. The farmer looked in, then grinned back at them.

“Bess is a she not a he. Looks like she came up here to have her own puppies away from all the fuss. She’s had them here before.”

Susan and the two men peered into the shelter. Sure enough, there was Bess panting happily, one pale blue eye and one dark brown one blinking at them, and around her were eight or nine brand new puppies...amongst them a pink, yawning boy-pup wrapped in tightly secure hessian.

“You asked her to look after the baby?” winked the farmer. “Looks like she did exactly that. She’s a good dog.”

By the time they got back to the pub another police car had arrived and Susan’s mam ran out to greet her. The police had filled her in but she didn’t care, she was simply happy to have her own child back safe and well, and a brand new grandson.



Susan wanted to name the child for the dog that took good care of him, but 'Bess' didn't really suit him and 'Romulus' or 'Remus' seemed a bit, well, silly. So instead she named him for the farmer that owned the dog.

Baby Ben's father was finally told what he should have been told months earlier, but once he knew he did what everyone agreed was the right thing. He and Susan were married and went on to have three more children.

Every ten or twelve years or so there was another new addition to the family in the shape of one of the lovely Bess's lovely descendants.

This year, though, they were to have *two* border collie pups. One was for Ben himself who, thirty-one years later, was about to become a proud father for the first time.

And these puppies *were* to be called Romulus and Remus.

the end



# Wordsworth Shorts

– Diane Wordsworth –

fireworks  
at killiecrankie

## fireworks at killiecrankie

*When I read about the original Battle of Killiecrankie, I was inspired to write a story of the same name. I created a community and a cast of characters that I really liked, and I decided I'd like to carry on writing about them all in a series of short stories.*

*In 2023, I started a writing challenge. The challenge was to write 12 short stories in 12 months. I joined again in 2024 when we were given the prompt 'trial' and a target of 750 words exactly. We could choose whatever we liked and we didn't even need to use the prompt. I decided to write the first sequel to The Battle of Killiecrankie. This is an extended version.*

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The half-term school holiday was over, the clocks had gone back, and the cool, sunny days of a late Indian summer had finally given way to misty mornings, frosty patterns left on windows, and autumn leaves crunching underfoot. As Jessie Mackenzie carefully made her way back up the icy path after waving the kids off, the smell of wood smoke tickled her nostrils.

Bonfire Night was coming, Jessie's favourite time of year. She loved to feel the heat from the bonfire on her cold cheeks, the taste of crunchy toffee apples, the sight of colourful fireworks shooting into the sky or dancing in patterns on the floor.

A curtain next door twitched and Jessie sighed. Moving to a new area was always going to be a trial for a single mother and her family, but Jessie Mackenzie had a teenage daughter and a pre-adolescent son. With that many hormones flying around the place, plus a loopy dog, a little friction from a grumpy neighbour was nothing to worry about.

And, gosh, he'd turned out to be a right misery. She shook her head, preferring not to think about it. She had an idea and wanted to work out the details without worrying about Mister Bolshy next door, Mr Sinclair.

Mungo was sat waiting for her in the doorway, thumping his tail on the mat. He wasn't as fond of the cold and much preferred to sleep in front of a roaring fire, but the mongrel took his guardian duties very seriously. Fireworks didn't really bother him, so Jessie decided to host a bonfire in her garden as a way to get to know some of the neighbours a bit more.

After arranging for flyers to go up all around the village, Jessie thought it might be wise to invite Mr Sinclair as well. He didn't have to come, and he probably wouldn't. But at least she'd invite him.

When he opened his door to her knock, he scowled at her without even saying hello. She'd pegged him at roughly the same age as her, mid-forties, but his countenance always made him look twenty years older.

"Hi, Mr Sinclair," said Jessie, with a big, bright smile. His frown just got darker. "Um... We're having a bonfire party in our garden, for Bonfire Night, and we'd love it if you could come too."

His brown eyes turned even darker. "Fireworks?" he grunted.

"Yes, fireworks too—"

“Hrmph!” he grumbled. “It’s against the law to light fireworks in Scotland.” And he slammed the door in her face.

“That’ll be a no, then,” she said to the brass door knocker.

While she was certain that it wasn’t against the law to light fireworks in Scotland, she did some research anyway, just in case, and was delighted to find out that she was right and Mr Sinclair was wrong.

A number of villagers turned up for the party, some of them bringing food – jacket potatoes, sausages, white puddings, haggis – and others adding to the drinks table. And just as Tavis McCully, the local beat bobby, started to light the fireworks for her, the doorbell went.

“Good evening!” said an official looking chap thrusting an ID card towards her. “Inspector Ironside, animal welfare.”

Jessie assumed he was one of the villagers and opened the door wider. “Come on in!” she said.

“We’ve received a complaint, said the inspector, removing his cap as he ducked into her tiny hall. “Apparently you have a dog here that’s barking at the fireworks.”

Jessie pressed her lips together. She knew where that had come from. “Come and meet Mungo,” she said, leading the gentleman into her front room. Mungo lifted his head, thumped his tail, and lay back down again.

“Is he deaf?” asked the inspector, bending down to rub the dog on his head.

“No,” said Jessie, calling the dog by his name. Mungo lifted his head again and cocked it to one side. “As you can see, Inspector,” said Jessie, “Mungo isn’t at all bothered by the fireworks. It appears you’ve had a wasted journey.”

“I’m sorry for wasting your time,” he said, standing up straight again.

“Would you like to stay?” she asked.

He checked his watch. “Yes, why not?” he replied. “Thank you.”

A triumphant Jessie led him to the back of the cottage, where he helped himself to a sandwich and a glass of pop. “Still on duty,” he added with an apologetic look.

Suddenly, Jessie’s teenage daughter Blythe appeared with her friend Jamie from the local shop. “Mum, the police are at the door,” she said.

Jessie, about to take a bite out of a sausage roll, sighed and went to the door.

“We’ve had a complaint, Madam,” said the young woman constable, putting her ID back in her pocket and eyeing the half-eaten sausage roll.

“Let me guess,” said Jessie, opening the door wider to let her in. “Mr Sinclair next door has called you.”

The police officer licked her lips and followed. “I’m afraid we aren’t able to disclose that kind of information.”

“What is the complaint then?”

“Apparently you are having a party and the music is too loud,” replied the constable.

Jessie came to a halt, cocked her head to one side, just like Mungo, and pointed at the ceiling. “I can’t hear any music, can you?”

The young woman pulled a face. "We do have to investigate," she said.

"Well, come on through. The local constabulary is already represented here." She pointed at PC McTully through the garden door, who had just stepped back from lighting a Catherine wheel. "Do you two know each other?"

"Yes," grinned the constable going to join him. "I can't stay long, though."

"I know," said Jessie. "You're on duty."

Just as Jessie was about to finish her sausage roll, the doorbell went again. "Mr Sinclair!" she declared when she saw her cross-looking neighbour standing there. "Did you change your mind and decide to join us after all?"

"Hrmph!" he said, at least waiting on the doorstep until she invited him in. "I've just come to keep an eye on things."

Jessie led him through the house and into the garden, where he went to the farthest corner, checked how wet the wall was, and sat down. Alone.

A little later Jessie saw her neighbour tucking into a jacket potato, still sitting alone. She started to go over, to see if he was all right, when suddenly her 11-year-old son Donald ran up to him, presented him with a sparkler, and trotted away again.

The man stared at the sparkler for all of two seconds, then he started to wave it about and make patterns in the air before it went out.

Was that a smile Jessie saw tugging at the man's lips...?

the end



DIANE
WORDSWORTH

stevie beck and

**the haunted
house hotel**

a horvale cosy mystery

stevie beck and the haunted house hotel

I had an idea to write a novel about a woman in hiding in an obscure village that no one had heard of, and then she stumbles upon a crime. Once I started to write this story, more story ideas popped into my head. So I made her into a series, and after a few false starts, Stevie Beck and the community of Horvale were born.

This is Stevie's third story in the series. The first, Stevie Beck and the Body in the Lake, was in the last issue of this bookazine. The second, Stevie Beck and the Secret of the Old Annexe, was in Issue Two. The current Book Four in the series, Stevie Beck and the Christmas Tree Mystery, will be in the next issue.

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### Chapter 1

It was a crisp, clear autumn day and signs of Halloween, still a week away, were starting to appear along the High Street. Cobwebs were being added to shop windows, pumpkin lanterns were turning up on doorsteps. There were even skeletons or witches on broomsticks being hung from lampposts and trees.

As she waited in the newsagent queue to be served, community reporter Stevie Beck glanced out of the plate glass window at the house in the distance, as she always did. There was obviously some news about the house, because gossip in the shop was rife and her journalistic spidey senses were tingling in anticipation.

The old Gothic mansion loomed over the sleepy town from its perch that seemed, on first sight, to be atop an ancient, hilly graveyard. In actual fact, the house was atop *another* grassy knoll *behind* the hilly graveyard. But the effect was still the same.

The Victorian property, with its wonky windows that looked like dark and rheumy eyes in a stern and rugged face, glared at all who ventured along the gnarled and overgrown path that led up to the heavy, oak front door. Those eyes dared them to even think of lifting the aged brass knocker shaped like an angry gargoyle whose head hurt every time someone used it.

Out of morbid curiosity, Stevie had once made it her business to go and have a closer look at the house after she'd been assured it was empty. Stevie was always looking for the next interesting story somewhere and a haunted house in her very own town was too alluring to resist.

She hadn't lived in Horton Magna for very long but as far as she could tell nobody knew who owned the house and everyone avoided it for fear of what they might find inside. The house was haunted, everyone she knew had told her that. But no one knew its history. No one was old enough.

For the past month or so there had been activity up at the old haunted house too. First of all a skip had been delivered, and every day for two weeks a lorry

returned to replace the full one with an empty one, leaving a dusty cloud behind it on every visit.

The uneven slate roof was repaired with reclaimed tiles that matched the old ones. The old windows were replaced with new windows that looked just like the old ones. And the wild and overgrown field surrounding it was turned into a garden. Of sorts. It still looked wild and overgrown to Stevie.

Along with everyone else who lived or worked within sight of the old haunted house, Stevie watched the comings and goings with curiosity, although fear still prickled the back of her neck and a shiver ran down her spine every time she thought about it. Now she listened carefully as the other customers in the shop speculated about what might be going on up there.

"There must be a new owner," said one.

"It will be nice to have someone living there," said another.

"It's being turned into a hotel," said a third.

"That house has been empty for far too long," they all continued.

"Perhaps it will be a theme park."

"Nasty, horrible place. They should rip it down."

"Imagine how many houses they could have built on that plot of land."

"Prime real estate, as the Americans would say."

Stevie smiled, shook her head, and paid for her magazines as the other customers left.

"You're with the paper," said Kath Grimshaw, in her Birmingham twang, from behind the counter. Kath was the shop keeper and also the post mistress. "Surely you know what's bin goin' on?"

Stevie laughed. "And you're with the Post Office," she replied. "Where do you think I find all of my community stories?"

The door jangled and the postie came in clutching a handful of post. She beamed with recognition. "As you're in here," she said to Stevie, "I may as well give you this." She handed over a large, white envelope that had Stevie's name and home address neatly typed on the front and the head office address of a hospitality organisation in smaller letters on the other side. "There's one for you as well, Kath," said the postie.

"Ooh," said Kath. "This looks excitin'. Thank you, Lauren."

Lauren left them to it as Kath tore open her envelope.

"Ah," said the post mistress, glancing down at the card. She added in a mysterious voice, "All is about to be revealed."

Stevie frowned and turned the envelope over in her hand again, examining both sides. "It looks work-related. I wonder why they didn't send it to the newspaper."

"It's a small town," said Kath. "They must know where you live."

"Nobody knows where I live," said Stevie quietly. "Apart from you," she added.

"And Lauren the postie," said Kath. "And the vicar."

“Apart from them,” Stevie agreed. She opened the envelope and pulled out the card. “It’s an invitation!”

“Yeah,” said Kath, stuffing her own invitation back into its envelope. She pointed at Stevie’s. “Carry on readin’.”

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YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED
TO THE GRAND REOPENING
OF THE
HAUNTED HOUSE HOTEL
ON THE NIGHT BEFORE HALLOWE’EN
(PRE-EVENT)

RSVP

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In smaller letters along the bottom was a phone number and an email address for people to reply to.

“So it *\*is\** going to be a hotel?” mused Stevie trying to remember which one of the other customers had said that. “They’re cutting it a bit fine with their invitations.”

“What’s a ‘pre-event’?” asked Kath.

Stevie shrugged. “It’s usually a press event, or a smaller event ahead of the main event for members of the press and esteemed members of the local community.”

“Ooh, ‘esteemed’ are we?” asked Kath, preening.

“You are!” said Stevie. “I’m just the press.” She stowed her purchases and her invitation into her shoulder bag, an old leather satchel that had seen her through school. It was one of the few things she’d brought with her from her previous life. “I’d best be off. I’ve not checked in at work yet and the honey monster will be tapping her foot. See you later.”

‘See you later’ was a Yorkshire expression for ‘goodbye’ she’d picked up in her short time in Horton Magna.

“Tarrar,” said Kath, who stubbornly hung on to her own Brummie dialect.

Stevie climbed into her little blue Citroen car, looked up at the old haunted house once again, and shuddered. Who’d want to stay in a haunted hotel? she wondered. She certainly wouldn’t. But there were some real-life ghouls about.

## Chapter 2

As usual, the surface-level car park behind the newspaper building was a jumble of badly parked vehicles, but Stevie found a spot and left her car at a jaunty angle so she could drive straight out again later on.

She already loved the old, listed building that housed *The Midnight Bugle*, even though she hadn’t worked there for very long.

It was four storeys of soot-marked red brick with vertical blinds at the windows, a tall pointy red-tiled roof with turrets at two of the corners, high ceilings decorated with ornate plaster-work, and a basement. That's where the newsroom was, right in the bowels of the building where the strip lights that worked buzzed annoyingly and the ones that didn't flickered, also annoyingly. The basement opened out onto the car park at the back, but the front doors, a storey up, opened onto the main road.

*The Midnight Bugle* used to be called *The Evening Star*, but the paper-boys and girls used to deliver it so late in the evening the locals started to call it *The Midnight Bugle* instead, and the name stuck. A smile tugged at Stevie's lips every time she thought about it.

She made her way into the small rear foyer and caught a whiff of the blokes' toilets. Both lots of toilets were off this vestibule, but it was always the blokes' toilets she could smell whenever she set foot across the threshold.

When she'd first joined the paper she often got lost in the rabbit warren of corridors, but she soon learned how to find her way along the shiny red lino floors because the walls were all painted slightly differently to each other in old school greens, yellows, pinks, blues and creams.

Stevie pushed open a pair of wooden swing doors with 'NEWS ROOM' picked out in lead in the windows. The room was a bustle of activity as reporters chatted on phones or clattered away on keyboards.

A small head surrounded by a cap of tight yellow curls popped up over the divider between Stevie's desk and the chief reporter's.

Vanessa Vickers had a chubby face, no neck, and round shoulders, and she really did look like the honey monster from the Sugar Puffs advert on the telly. Stevie knew it wasn't just her who thought so because plenty of other people seemed to know exactly who she meant whenever she used the term.

"Where 'av you been?" asked Vanessa, not quite tapping her foot but clearly unhappy at Stevie's shoddy time-keeping.

"Working!" said Stevie, getting the envelope out of her bag and waving it at her.

Vanessa scowled, making her little blue eyes almost disappear in the folds of her face. "What's that then?"

"Didn't you get one?" asked Stevie, raising her eyebrows.

She tossed her bag on the floor next to her desk, sat in her wheelie chair, and logged in on the dongle. They all had laptops that connected to the server so they could work away from the office, but the dongles were where they filed their stories when they were in the newsroom.

She passed the invitation across the divider and Vanessa snatched it from her before disappearing down behind the divider again to read it.

"Esme O'Brien said it was going to be a hotel," mumbled Vanessa from the other side of the console. She nodded recognition towards the doors as they opened and someone walked in.

"Esme?" said Stevie with a frown.

Vanessa handed the invitation back. "Yes, she's the driver who sometimes couriers the papers over when the van breaks down."

"Did someone mention my name?" asked a gruff voice as the courier herself stomped into the newsroom and dumped a pile of papers on the floor outside the editor's office.

Stevie recognised her from earlier. A butch-looking woman with lined skin and short highlighted hair.

"Ah, hello," said Stevie. "You were in the newsagent's." She remembered Esme saying it was going to be a hotel but thought she was merely speculating, just like everyone else. She held out a hand for Esme to shake and introduced herself. Stephanie Beck, community reporter."

"*Junior* reporter," said Vanessa, correcting her. As usual.

Esme had a strong grip but a nice smile that lit up her sallow complexion, despite crooked, stained teeth. Stevie pegged her as a smoker. Or a tea-drinker. Or both.

When the courier had gone, Stevie heard Vanessa tap at her keyboard a few times before she grumbled, "And no, I didn't."

"Didn't what?" asked Stevie, puzzled.

"I didn't get an invitation."

"Perhaps it's waiting for you at home," suggested Stevie, riffling through the press releases in the basket on her desk. These were usually all the ones Vanessa didn't fancy for herself. Stevie didn't mind the mundane stuff. It was a great way for her to learn about the area and meet some of the stalwarts of the community.

*Tap-tap-tappity-tap.* "Nah," said Vanessa with a sniff. "I saw the postie on my way out of the house. She didn't have anything for me."

"I expect it will come tomorrow," said Stevie, not knowing where the thought had come from but believing it all the same.

She selected a handful of press releases that were easy enough to write up into stories before going through them again to see if there was anything meaty she could get her teeth into. What she really wanted was a nice piece of investigative journalism, but so far Vanessa usually nicked all of those for herself.

One of the press releases was in the form of a letter, but it was addressed to Stevie personally.

"This looks interesting," she said out loud.

The little head popped up over the divider again. "Came in an envelope with your name on as well," said Vanessa. "Looks right up your street," she added with a smirk. She knew full well about Stevie's ambition to be a serious reporter, but often accused her of having ideas above her station.

A dog trainer had won a record number of awards but the note hinted at an imminent announcement as well. Thinking a story about dog shows might be worthwhile, she did a quick search and found the local vet and a poodle parlour owner. There was only one of each in the entire area.

Another story that caught her eye was from a local author who had just had her latest novel published, a cosy mystery featuring a psychic dog, of all things.

She made the phone calls, booked appointments for the rest of the day, and closed down her dongle.

“See you later!” she said across the divider and grabbed her bag.

*Tap-tap-tappity-tap*, said Vanessa.

### Chapter 3

Angela Quinn lived on a modern housing estate just outside the town.

The box-like terraced houses were all identical to each other, two-up two-down, with tiny postage stamp-sized gardens at the front. She almost entirely filled her open doorway, taking Stevie completely by surprise. From the sound of her voice on the phone, Stevie had the impression that Ms Quinn was a bit of a frothy blonde. But this woman was tall, much taller than Stevie, almost six feet tall in fact, and she was very, very large.

She wore a scruffy tracksuit that had faded with age but looked as though it had once been emerald green. It also looked as though it was once made of crushed velvet, but now there were shiny spots where the fabric had been worn. Very nineteen-eighties. And it looked two sizes too small as it stretched across the woman’s voluminous chest.

“Come on in!” said Ms Quinn breathlessly. “Stephanie Beck, I presume?” Stevie nodded and Ms Quinn glanced at the palms of her hands, blushing slightly as she rubbed them on her tracky bottoms. “It’s a bit of a mess but there’s room still in the lounge.”

Stevie followed her along a tiled hall between piles of brown cardboard boxes that had words like ‘kitchen’ and ‘bedroom’ scrawled across them in blue marker pen. She could smell the dogs, but she couldn’t see any. Or hear them. She assumed there was more than one, judging from the number of rosettes they’d won for their owner, many samples of which were stuffed into a half-open cardboard box in a corner of the room.

“Are you just moving out or just moving in, Ms Quinn?” asked Stevie, shifting a pile of dog paraphernalia from a brown leather armchair onto the floor, squeezing it all in between a pile of old newspapers and another open box.

“Moving out,” said Ms Quinn. “But please, call me Angela.”

“Are you going far?”

Angela surveyed Stevie from head to toe for a moment. “I’ll make us a nice cup of tea and then tell you all about it.”

“Okay,” said Stevie with a smile. She sat down and made herself as comfortable as she could in a room so clearly in the throes of relocation.

While Angela was making their tea, Stevie had a nose around the room from her perch on the edge of the armchair. It looked stripped bare, apart from odds and ends that were slowly being packed away. She leaned over and looked in the open cardboard box closest to her. It seemed to be assigned to photographs.



“Is that your daughter?” she asked when Angela returned. Stevie pointed at a photograph of a svelte and gorgeous young woman who resembled Angela a bit. She had the same short, light brown, curly bob, but she looked like a model on the catwalk.

“That’s me!” said Angela proudly. She put the tea tray she was carrying on a brown leather pouffe and smoothed the wrinkles out of her tracksuit, as though preening.

Stevie did a quick double take but hoped that her face didn’t betray what she was thinking. Was she supposed to say she looked exactly the same?

“Of course, I’ve put on a bit of weight since then,” said Angela, saving Stevie the bother. “But it will come off again easy enough when we start the agility training again.” She turned her attention to the tea tray. “Milk and sugar?”

“Yes, please,” said Stevie. She waited a beat, looked around, and said, “Where are the dogs?”

“I only have one dog at the moment,” she said sadly. “My little Wolfie. My partner’s looking after him while I move.”

“Where was it you said you were moving to?” asked Stevie.

Angela gave her a look that said ‘I didn’t’. “I’m the new owner of the Haunted House Hotel.”

“Really?!” said Stevie, feeling her eyebrows shoot up into her hair.

“Did you get your invitation to the party?” asked Angela slyly, again taking Stevie by surprise.

“I...er...yes, thank you...I did. Um...How did you know my address? I mean, I know it came from an events organisation, but you must have given them their information.”

Angela took two sips from her china tea cup and smacked her lips. “I make it my business to know everything about everyone who lives in our small town,” she said.

“But why would you do that?” asked Stevie. “Are you the mayor?”

Angela laughed, a tinkling, girlish sound that didn’t at all match her appearance. “Oh, you are funny,” she said, leaning forward and flapping a hand at her flirtatiously. Then she leaned back, drew her eyebrows together, and said: “We all have our secrets, my dear.”

The hairs on the back of Stevie’s neck all stood to attention as prickles trickled down her spine. Who was this woman and what did she know about Stevie?

“Um,” said Stevie, placing her cup and saucer on a corner of the table untouched and looking at a wall clock whose long, heavy pendulum slowly swung from side to side, “is that the time?” She stood up and clutched her satchel close to her body.

“You’re not going already, are you?” asked Angela, putting her own cup and saucer back on the tray. “You’ve hardly been here a moment, and you haven’t asked about my awards or the hotel.”

“I’m sorry, Ms Quinn – Angela. I have another interview and I don’t know yet how to get there.”

Stevie practically ran out of the house, jumped in her car, and drove off without fastening her seatbelt. When she was out of sight of Angela Quinn’s house, she pulled into the kerb and took a few deep calming breaths.

Still clutching the steering wheel, she closed her eyes and momentarily rested her face gently across the horn in the middle. When she had calmed herself, she jabbed the post code of her next interview into the maps app on her phone, jammed her seatbelt on, and drove off.

## **Chapter 4**

The door to Pampered Pompadours jingled as it hit an old-fashioned bell fixed just above it. The smell of wet dog mixed with warm fur greeted Stevie. A white, long-haired cat snaked around her ankles, leaving hairs on her black jeans. She bent down and chucked it behind the ears.

“Hello, kitty. Are you friendly?”

“Miaow!” said the cat, closing its eyes in ecstasy and arching its back before kneading the blue-tiled floor with its front paws.

“Be with you in a moment!” said a head that popped briefly around a corner.

“No rush!” Stevie called back, looking around her.

Three shiny blue plastic seats that were joined at the feet had their backs against the large window where various grooming tools and bottles of dog shampoo and conditioner were displayed on blocks of blue-painted wood that were different sizes.

In the middle of the shop was a regular shop counter painted in blue and white candy stripes. Atop a pale blue marbled worktop was a laptop computer inadequately hidden behind a little console unit.

Pegboards lined the two flanking walls, on which hung collections of yet more brushes, combs, and what looked like implements of torture for the poor little doggies.

Stevie thought briefly about the little dog she and her police pal Fal had recently adopted between them, Ralph. They took turns looking after him in their respective homes, but he’d settled down well enough. He was a wire-haired dachshund, or a teckel, and he’d hate almost every single one of the grooming items on the walls. Stevie shuddered on his behalf.

A display unit on wheels to the left of Stevie held stuffed toys of various shapes and sizes on one side and hard plastic bones and balls on the other. Ralph would systematically destroy every single one if she took any home for him.

A matching unit on the right, and partially blocking the entrance to the back part of the shop, held leads, collars, harnesses and...she looked closer.

“Are these boots?” she called out to the back of the shop.

The head appeared again. "They are!" replied the woman, who must have been seated on a chair her head was so far down the wall. "Great for hot pavements in the summer or mud and puddles in the winter." She gave a quick grin and ducked back behind the wall again, calling, "A lady in the village makes them and I sell them for her. Raincoats too!"

Stevie laughed and shook her head, trying to imagine dogs in wellies and macs.

"You must give me her name," she called back, thinking as ever about potential story fodder.

Up against the wall behind which the woman kept on appearing and disappearing were what looked like children's fancy dress outfits. It took Stevie a split second to realise that the clothes weren't for children. They were for dogs.

Yeah, she could just see Ralph putting up with one of those too. Not.

"Sorry about that," said the woman, rubbing her hands with a royal blue towel as she emerged once again from around the counter. She hadn't been sitting on a chair at all, she really was that short. Stevie momentarily thought back to Angela Quinn. The women could be sisters if there wasn't such disparity in their heights.

"Polio," said the woman holding out her hand, reading Stevie's thoughts. "I'm Yvette Watson."

"Apologies," said Stevie, shaking Yvette by the hand. "Stephanie Beck, *Midnight Bugle*. It was rude of me to stare."

"I'm used to it," said Yvette. She looked at a delicate gold watch on her left wrist.

Yvette turned briefly, indicating two tiers of pet cages at the very back of the shop. Two were occupied, one with a grey and white cockerpoo that looked like a little sheep, the other a jet-black cocker spaniel that looked like it was chomping at the bit for a good run. All the other cages were empty.

"Forgive me, I'm expecting the spaniel's owner at any moment...Ah, here she is..."

The door jangled and Stevie turned to see an elegant looking woman with long blonde hair. One of her arms was bent and she carried a designer handbag in the crook of her elbow. Her other hand continually pushed her designer glasses further up her nose. The spaniel started to race round and round in circles inside its cage with excitement at seeing its human.

"Carol-Anne!" exclaimed the dog groomer. "I was just talking about you."

"All good, I hope," said Carol-Anne, peering over the top of her glasses at Stevie before pushing them back up her nose. "I don't think we've met." she said, holding out her hand.

Stevie wiped her palm on her leg and took the woman's hand. "Stephanie Beck," she said.

"This is the new reporter at the *Midnight Bugle*," said Yvette starting to preen. "She's come to do an interview with me."

“Really?” said Carol-Anne, two blonde eyebrows shooting up above her glasses.

“This is Carol-Anne Treadgold,” explained Yvette to Stevie. “She’s an estate agent.”

Stevie smiled and nodded her head.

“Oh,” said Yvette to Carol-Anne. “You must know who the new owner of the old haunted house is.”

Stevie opened her mouth to reply just as Carol-Anne said, “I do, of course. But I’m not yet at liberty to say who it is.” She glanced at Stevie, who clamped her mouth shut again. “I don’t want to spoil the new owner’s big surprise.” She held out her phone to pay for her dog’s grooming and said to Stevie, “If you’re doing a piece on the poodle parlour, I can let you have a quote or two, from a satisfied client’s point of view. My Jasper loves coming to see Yvette.”

At the sound of his name, the cocker spaniel ran in circles in the opposite direction, letting out a little yelp of glee.

“Actually,” said Stevie, “I’m doing a piece on Angela Quinn’s dog show success. Yvette is one of my expert interviewees for that.”

Carol-Anne’s face dropped and her mouth drooped. “I see,” was all she said, with a sniff.

Yvette collected the dog for her, and the dog went wilder than ever, jumping as high as his human’s head. But as soon as she slipped his lead on him, he hunkered down to heel and was good as gold once they walked out through the door.

“What a lovely dog,” said Stevie.

Yvette beamed at her and looked at the clock.

“Oh!” she said. “Will this take very long? Horatio’s owner will be coming to collect him soon. I hadn’t realised the time!”

Assuming Horatio to be the cockerpoo, Stevie gave her a bright smile and said, “Why don’t I come back another time, when you’re less busy?”

“Would you mind?” asked Yvette, the relief on her face almost tangible.

They made another appointment for later in the week, and Stevie started to leave just as a tall brunette, Horatio’s human Stevie presumed, came in. The newcomer completely blanked Stevie, letting the door close before Stevie had time to go out through it.

“Thanks!” said Stevie sarcastically.

And still the tall brunette completely ignored her.

## **Chapter 5**

The door to the poodle parlour jangled behind Stevie as it closed and she looked along the street. She wanted to stick her head in at the vet’s to arrange a mutually convenient appointment and the post code was the same as the poodle parlour. She glanced at her car on the other side of the road, parked diagonally in the designated car parking area, and decided to walk.

Horton Magna really was in a time warp. The shop fronts were all the same, made of blonde-coloured wood and with the same plate glass windows. Instead of the familiar chain shop signs that looked the same everywhere else, here only the name or type of shop was picked out in heritage paint colours that were all clearly from the same palette.

There was a butcher, a baker, a chemist, the newsagent-come-post office where Kath worked, a small convenience store, a greengrocer, a pet shop. Stevie made a mental note of the pet shop in case she needed it for her article. She also thought again about Ralph, the dachshund she shared with Fal, and a smile tugged at her lips. She should bring them both back here at the weekend.

She passed a dental surgery, a card shop and a florist before noticing that the address she was looking for was on the other side of the road, at the end of the little car parking area, right on a zebra crossing. There was no traffic to speak of, so she dashed across the road and pushed her way into the veterinary surgery.

The smell of disinfectant hit her as she opened the door. There was a woman waiting on one of the chairs, next to a small child who balanced a gerbil cage on his lap. Stevie acknowledged them with a friendly smile and waited at the reception desk.

“Can I help you?” called a young, bright voice from one of the consultation rooms.

“Yes!” said Stevie, spinning around to face the young nurse. “I’d like to make an appointment to see Ms Nuala Ironside—”

The girl opened her mouth to say something when another, older voice said from behind, “I’m Nuala.”

Stevie turned back to the reception desk. An older woman with thinning blonde hair, pale blue eyes, and deep lines around her lips closed the file she was consulting and smiled at Stevie, revealing yet more evidence between her teeth of a smoker.

“Stephanie Beck, *Midnight Bugle*,” said Stevie, holding out her hand.

Nuala’s cold hand clasped hers as she placed the file on the counter. “How can I help?”

“I’m writing a piece on Angela Quinn and her award winning dogs,” said Stevie.

Like Carol-Anne Treadgold’s earlier, Nuala Ironside’s face also dropped momentarily. But she recovered quickly and pasted a querying expression on.

“I’m talking to other experts in the field of all things dogs,” Stevie explained. “And I wondered if you’d be interested in taking part.”

Nuala pulled an agreeable face and tapped at the keyboard of a computer behind the counter.

“There’s a dog show up at the show ground next month,” she said, her eyes scanning the screen.

Thinking on her feet, Stevie’s ears pricked up. Tying the Angela Quinn story in with an actual dog show would be better for the multi-award-winning dog

story. She could still do something on the grand hotel opening now. It would be great if she got a scoop on that before everyone knew the identity of the new owner, and she'd still have time to contact some of the dog magazines and newspapers ahead of the show.

"I'm judging a pet contest," said the vet. "Will that be too late for your newspaper story?"

"I think that gives me a better angle," said Stevie, getting her pad and pen out of her satchel and making a note of the date.

They agreed a time slot between them while Stevie tried to quieten the cogs that were now turning in her brain, then Stevie thanked Nuala for her time and headed off.

Debbie Forster the novelist might have to wait until another time. Stevie had more work to do now on the dog show, with the other markets she'd be able to connect with. Her boss, Terri Stringer, was really good about letting her sell stories not suitable for the newspaper elsewhere, so long as Stevie gave the *Midnight Bugle* first refusal plus any exclusives.

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Back in her car, Stevie called Angela Quinn. But there was no answer. She tried both the mobile number and the land line number she'd jotted down. She wanted to let Angela know the change of plan.

When there was still no reply, Stevie headed out to the housing estate again so she could see Angela face to face. But she wasn't in.

She was about to head back to the office when she remembered the Haunted House Hotel. With the grand opening that week, it was likely Angela might be up there. A visit would give Stevie a good excuse to case it out ahead of the party too.

Stevie turned the car around and headed towards the hotel.

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Considering the recent activity up at the old hotel, the grounds were surprisingly neat and tidy. Trees had been surgeoned, bushes clipped, edges trimmed. The drive that led up to the hotel was one-way only, so Stevie didn't pass any vehicles on their way back down the hill.

A newly tarmacked car park with brand-new painted white lines gleamed in the winter sunlight. Small round blue and white arrows reminded visitors of the one-way system, and a big square blue and white sign indicated the way out.

There was only one car parked in the car park, a red Mini Cooper. Far too small for someone the size of Angela Quinn to squeeze into, but Stevie had been surprised before and didn't rule anything out.

She parked the Citroen next to the Mini and followed the newly slabbed path to the big front door, which stood ajar.

"Hello!" she called through the gap before lifting the great iron door knocker and tapping it twice against the door.

No answer. But there was someone there. Perhaps it wasn't Angela Quinn after all.



Stevie pushed the door open and would have marvelled at the recently finished decor had she not seen a woman lying face down on the thick red-patterned carpet at the foot of the red-carpeted staircase...

## Chapter 6

Despite only meeting her the once, Stevie knew straight away that it was Angela Quinn. The woman's large bulk, clad in another velour tracksuit, purple this time, was difficult to mistake for anyone else. Plus, the faint whiff of dogs floated up Stevie's nose. She dashed to Angela's side and knelt on the floor, moving the woman's wavy blonde hair off her face.

"Ms Quinn?" she said. "Angela!" she said, louder, touching her carefully on the arm.

Nothing.

She felt around the woman's soft and flabby neck for a pulse, gave up and tried a wrist instead.

Still nothing.

Stevie pressed her lips together and took in the situation, allowing her eyes to scan the area. Then she noticed that it was not a red-patterned carpet on the floor at all but a cream-coloured carpet spotted with blood, and she started to gag.

She jumped to her feet and practically ran back to the front door.

Glad she'd left the door open, Stevie went back outside, stepped right away from the front of the old house and gulped in lungful's of fresh air.

Don't be sick, don't be sick, don't be sick! she told herself.

What had happened to Angela? How long had she lain there? Not long, Stevie reasoned. The woman's flesh was still warm to the touch. She might even still be alive!

Coming to her senses, Stevie pulled out her phone and dialled nine-nine-nine, asking for an ambulance. She answered the operator's questions as best she could before hanging up. Then she called Fal, her policeman pal.

"Yo!" he said from the other end, which indicated to Stevie that he was in a good mood.

"I think I'm about to spoil your day," she said to him as the distant sound of a siren drifted towards her.

"Why? What's up?" he asked.

"Something has happened to Angela Quinn," she said.

"Who's Angela Quinn?" he replied.

She explained to him who the woman was and that she was the new owner of the old Haunted House Hotel. Stevie sometimes forgot that Fal was almost as new to the town as she was.

"That's where we are now. And I think she's fallen down the stairs," she said when she'd finished filling in him.

“I presume that’s an ambulance I can hear at your end getting closer?” he said.

“That’s right. I would have called you first, but if there’s a chance she’s still alive...”

“You did the right thing,” he assured her. “Where are you now?” he asked. “Are you still with her?”

“I’m outside.” She could see the ambulance bumping up the hill towards her, its siren growing louder and stronger by the second. “I’d better go, they’re here,” she said.

“I’m on my way!” he replied, and hung up.

Stevie answered the paramedics’ questions as far as she could, but she didn’t really know anything about Angela Quinn and was only able to pass on how she’d found her. The two uniformed women pushed past her and fussed around the woman on the floor while Stevie waited for Fal.

Moments later he pulled up behind the ambulance and got out of the car, plopping his hat on his head as he walked towards Stevie with a reassuring but serious smile.

“Are you all right?” he asked her. She nodded and smiled. “Good. I’d best go in and see what they have to say,” he continued as he pulled a small notepad from one of the many pockets in his stab vest beneath his hi-vis coat. Seeing him in his uniform always made Stevie feel safe. He looked fit wearing it too.

She folded her arms and stepped from foot to foot to keep warm, before going to Fal’s car to say hello to Ralph through the window. The dog happily jumped up and down twice and thumped his tail on the back seat. There was a woollen coat on the back seat of her own car, but she hung around knowing Fal would want to speak to her.

A frantic breeze whipped at the autumn leaves on the ground, making them swirl and drop and skitter a few feet before coming to land. She could smell rain in the air and she shivered.

Hark at her! Smelling rain? She’d been living in the sticks for far too long. Never in a million years in the city where she used to live would she have even noticed such a thing. Back then she would have left it to a weather presenter to tell her what was in store.

Five minutes later Fal came back out of the house and was talking to the driver of the two paramedics, who was shaking her head sadly.

“Oh...” said Stevie, meeting him halfway as he came back towards the car. “Is she...?”

Fal pressed his lips together and nodded. “Penny here has called for the coroner’s van.”

Stevie nodded a hello to Penny, who returned the gesture and retraced her steps to the ambulance with him and her partner.

When they had gone, Fal asked Stevie to tell him everything she knew about Angela Quinn.

“You don’t think it was an accident, then?” she replied.

He pulled a face. "I can't say just yet. I'll have to get Scenes of Crime here. We can sit in the car while we wait. Make sure no one else tries to access the place." He looked her up and down. "Besides, you look frozen."

"I am," she admitted. Hmm, she thought. If he'd already contacted Scenes of Crime, then he already had a good idea of whether it was an accident or not.

She followed him back to the car, climbing into the passenger side without waiting for him to open his own door.

It briefly crossed her mind that a death would make a much spicier story than someone merely falling down the stairs, especially if there were mysterious circumstances. But then she remembered that a woman had died and she sobered up.

## Chapter 7

Stevie made a fuss of the dog on the back seat, passing him a chew from the stash Fal kept in the glove compartment, and then recounted everything she knew about Angela Quinn.

When she'd finished, Fal blew a load of hot air out, as though he'd been holding his breath, and the windscreen of his car steamed up. "That doesn't give us very much to go on if it turns out to be a murder," he said, wiping at the screen with the back of his hand.

"No," agreed Stevie. "But I'm a bit concerned about what she knows about... people." She didn't want Fal to think she had anything to hide herself.

"Well, hopefully, the scene investigator will say it was just an accident and we won't need any motives," said Fal, watching a white van pull up and spill personnel out into the car park in a flurry of activity.

"Hmm," said Stevie without conviction. She wasn't convinced. Fal was an experienced officer. He'd know already that it wasn't 'just an accident'. And anyway, on the one hand an accident would be less worrying than murder. But murder would make a far better story for her...

Ralph got up on his back legs to look out the window, 'wuffing' softly at the strange people in white hooded overalls and blue over-shoes who were now tramping towards the house.

"I'd best go and have a word," Fal told Stevie, scratching his head before grabbing his hat again and stepping out of the car.

Ralph 'wuffed' and whined, then lay down on the back seat and looked at Fal with the saddest big brown eyes.

"Keep an eye on Stevie," he told the dog, who thumped his tail and shifted his gaze.

"Anyone would think he knows exactly what we're saying!" said Stevie with a laugh.

"He does!" said Fal, looking wounded. "Can you hang around?" he asked her.

She looked at her watch and nodded. "I can, for a bit. But there's a novelist I have to go and interview at some point in the day, plus the honey monster will be wondering what I'm up to."

Fal grinned at her. "I'll be as quick as I can."

And off he scooted, tucking his shirt into his trousers beneath what Stevie called his battle armour.

Stevie watched him disappear inside the house before closing her eyes and resting her head against the head-rest. Fal's police car was so comfortable, she could just nod off...

"Wuff!" said Ralph, startling her. She looked over her shoulder to see him sitting up now and looking from her to the glove compartment to her again, head cocked to one side and twitching slightly.

Stevie pressed her lips together, mimicking Fal earlier, and sighed. "You'll get me in trouble!" she said, getting him another chew out of the glove compartment anyway.

He took it ever so nicely from her and went right to the back of the seat, as far as he could go, and proceeded to gnaw on the treat at leisure.

Stevie sat back in the passenger seat again and watched big black clouds start to roll in over the hills.

"Looks like it's going to rain, boy," she said to the dog.

The dog ignored her.

After about twenty minutes, Fal came trotting back to the car, tossed his hat in the back with Ralph, who jumped and stared at it for a moment, and climbed in.

"I haven't got long," he said with a grimace. "I've just come off the phone to Sheffield CID."

"The scene investigator suspects foul play?" asked Stevie unnecessarily. She didn't mind playing along if it made him feel better.

He nodded.

"Interesting..." mused Stevie.

His head snapped around. "Don't you get poking your nose in where it's not wanted," he warned.

"I'm a journalist," she said. "It's my job."

"Your job is *community* journalist," he reminded her. "Not *investigative* journalist."

"*Junior reporter*, if the honey monster has anything to do with it," she reminded him right back.

"Well, you know you'll be getting first dibs on everything," he continued. "But I do need you to back off, for now at least. We don't know yet whether there's danger or not. I don't want another body on my patch."

Like she ever did as she was asked. "I know," she sighed. "It's a nice juicy story, though..." she drifted off as he scowled at her.

"They've given me forty-eight hours before they send in the flying squad," he said.

“You’re in charge?” she asked, delighted for him.

“Acting Detective Sergeant,” he said proudly.

Stevie waved at his uniform. “Will you be going home to get changed?”

He looked down at himself, shook his head and said, “If I don’t have anything in two days, they’ll send a more experienced officer over.”

“But you are experienced,” she said. Fal had been a naughty boy in the past. He hadn’t told her yet all the details, but it resulted in him being knocked down from something in CID back to uniform. It can’t have been that bad, she reasoned. They hadn’t sacked him. “Two days, eh?” she said.

“Can you hang on until then?”

“Okay, I’ll try not to ask too many questions,” she promised him. “But I want the good stuff as soon as I can get it. This is the kind of story that will help my career no end.”

Then again, she thought to herself, she’d been warned to keep her head down if she wanted to remain safe in her new life. “Maybe, if you solve the case, it’ll get you back into CID too,” she pointed out.

“I know,” he replied. “But am I ready?” he added.

Stevie shrugged. “Only you can know that,” she said. “Just think, though,” said Fal, staring off into the distance, as though imagining it already, and making a spreading gesture with his hands. “Your byline and mugshot splashed across the nationals.”

Hmm, thought Stevie. That was precisely what she *didn’t* want...

## Chapter 8

Leaving Fal to his crime scene, Stevie sat in her car and stared as big plops of rain started to splatter her windscreen. Ignoring the weather, she gripped the steering wheel and wondered where to go first.

She should have been researching four community stories by now. She mentally ticked each of them off.

The original story about the grand reopening of the haunted house hotel, including the mystery around its new owner (now deceased).

The new feature about the multi-award winning dog trainer (also deceased) (same deceased, in fact).

The upcoming dog show the vet, Nuala Ironside, had told her about.

And the local novelist and her new book.

At least the vet and the writer were both still alive and kicking, as far as Stevie was aware. But Nuala Ironside had specifically arranged an interview further down the line. As had the dog groomer, Yvette Watson. She could definitely do those two together. Just not today, perhaps.

Stevie shivered and turned the engine over, hoping it would warm up quickly.

She couldn’t touch the sudden death story until Fal gave her the go ahead.

That left the writer.

As the rain grew heavier, she flicked her windscreen wipers once, turned on the heater, and tried to get excited about calling Debbie Forster.

She should also really go into the office to see if there was anything there to pick up.

She couldn't get excited about that either.

What she really wanted to do was talk to Fal Bashir about Angela Quinn.

With a sigh, she pulled out her phone, rang a number, and reluctantly agreed her next interview.

Stevie plugged the postcode into the map app on her phone, switched to hands-free, and pulled out of the car park and away from the hotel, past the blue and white EXIT sign and down the other side.

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After swinging by the office to check there was nothing pressing, Stevie continued on to her appointment with the novelist. When she'd seen that the chief reporter wasn't there to scowl at her across their desks, Stevie had done a quick search on her computer to see what she could find out about Debbie Forster. It hadn't taken long. She didn't find a thing.

Debbie Forster lived in a scruffy three-storey block of 1970s flats on the outskirts of the town with a patch of packed dirt at the front barely big enough for less than a dozen cars. There weren't even any weeds growing through, it was that solid. The now pouring rain only made it all the more bleak and dismal.

Debbie's block was one of three identical blocks on the small estate tucked up against a green plastic-coated wire-mesh fence, behind which was a large industrial estate. All the flats were served by the same dingy car park.

If she didn't know any better, she would have thought they were offices or commercial buildings. Not dwellings.

The industrial estate at the back was called Horton Ravine, and Stevie realised that the current quarry must be over this side of town somewhere, confirmed by the huge red sign, as tall as the flats, advertising Horton Ravine as the home of Horvale Aggregates.

The former quarry, on the other side of town, Stevie knew well. Her very first job on the newspaper was to assist the chief reporter on a murder up there. But that old quarry was flooded now and had been for years. By the amount of heavy plant on the roads in this neighbourhood, the new quarry was very much still in commission.

She parked her car on the packed dirt between an old and rusted grey Ford Mondeo and a white Renault Clio, not quite as old but with its front bumper hanging off. As soon as she stepped outside her own car her foot skidded on the ground and the smell of wet dust hit her in the face. Brick dust and clay dust. And the smell of mud beneath her feet. The Clio made a ticking sound beneath the bonnet. It hadn't been parked there for very long.

She briefly glanced up at the rain falling out of the sky and dashed as quickly as she could without slipping to the canopy outside the first block of flats, 13 –

24 Gentian Court. A sign fastened to the modern but dusty red-brick wall told her that 1 – 12 Campion Court was to the left and 25 – 32 Periwinkle Court was to the right. Each block clearly consisted of twelve flats, Stevie assumed there were four flats on each floor.

What pretty names for such ugly buildings, she thought to herself, looking around at the squat housing development. It looked more like a building site than a residential complex, and the November rain didn't help.

There were no advance halloween decorations here. Instead the apartment houses were surrounded by wheelie bins in various colours – grey, purple, brown and blue – and various states of repair, and each bin had a black and white adhesive house number glued to the front. The flats on the ground floor had bars across the windows and grubby net curtains hanging behind the dirty glass. Apart from one window that had a candy-striped bed sheet nailed to the inside of the window frame.

Stevie frowned and wondered if she should have let someone know where she was going.

An aluminium intercom had been cemented into the red bricks and she pressed the button for number twenty-two. The speaker crackled into life and a woman's voice said "Hello?"

Not wanting to put her mouth too close to the intercom, Stevie yelled. "I've come to see Debbie Forster!"

The intercom crackled again, but the woman didn't say anything more. Instead there was a *beep!* and the door lock clicked.

Eager to catch it before it timed out, Stevie grabbed the handle and pulled the door open, calling "Thank you!" into the intercom.

Almost immediately the sour smell of urine invaded her nostrils and she chose instead to breathe through her mouth.

There was no lift. Just two doors on each side of a wide concrete-floored foyer, numbered thirteen to sixteen and painted dismal colours of dirty brown and dish-water grey, and a concrete staircase at the back. Number twenty-two would be on the top floor.

Not knowing what to expect, Stevie started to climb, making sure to avoid holding on to the metal hand rail. The staircase was where the smell of urine was at its most concentrated and she felt her nostrils curl in distaste.

At the top of the first short double flight of steps she paused, held her breath, and sent a quick text to Fal. Just the post code and the flat number were sufficient. He was a policeman. He'd know what she was doing.

She hauled herself up the second double flight of steps and emerged on the top floor. The doors here were numbered twenty-one to twenty-four, odd numbers one side, even numbers the other, these ones painted sludge blue and swamp green. The concrete floor between these was highly polished, and each door had a small doormat outside. And the smell here was of bacon frying.

The door to number twenty-two swung inwards to the sound of a little dog barking, and Stevie was surprised to see a tall brunette standing there. The same tall brunette who had so rudely ignored her in the poodle parlour.

Chapter 9

The inside of twenty-two Gentian Court was nothing like what the outside of the building suggested it might be. Stevie followed Debbie Forster along a plushly carpeted surprisingly well-illuminated hallway with two doors off to the left and two doors off to the right, all in various tasteful shades of green. Behind one of the doors on the right she could make out the soft whine and sniffs of a dog on the other side.

“That’s the bathroom, if you need it,” said Stevie’s host as they passed one of the doors on the left.

Stevie nodded her thanks but was more interested in the pictures that lined the walls, all framed book jackets depicting heroines through history in the arms of scantily clad, long-haired heroes who wore kilts or army uniforms or pirate outfits or even just a very small sheet. The ladies all wore period costumes, brightly coloured corsets and bodices galore, with with what Stevie presumed to be heaving breasts almost bulging out of the tops. The name Darcey D’Amour was splashed across each and every one of them.

“You don’t write under your own name, then?” she ventured, realising now why she hadn’t found anything about a writer called Debbie Forster on the internet.

“Good lord, no,” she replied over her shoulder. She waved a well-manicured hand at one of the walls. “These are my period romances.”

“Wow!” said Stevie. “So you’re a real author, then?”

Debbie Forster cocked a dark brown eyebrow at her and said, “As opposed to a pretend one?”

Stevie felt her face glow. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I expect you get that all the time.”

“No,” said Debbie Forster with a slight shake of her head, brown shiny curls gently lilting from one side to the other. “Actually, I don’t.”

Now Stevie’s face was burning with embarrassment and she bit back another apology.

At the end of the hallway was a half-paned door, the obscure glass at the top allowing light to spill in from whatever was beyond. Debbie Forster pushed it open and the room opened out into a large living space with a kitchen-diner to the left, behind an opaque glass wall, a built-in gas fire straight ahead, and a wall-to-wall balcony to the right. The shades of green from the hallway continued into the lounge, mimicked by the plant-filled balcony on the other side of the french doors.

Realising her mouth was hanging open, Stevie clamped it closed again, and she breathed in the aroma of coffee percolating in the kitchen next door

It was like an oasis in here. Especially when she considered what surrounded it on the outside.

"This is lovely," said Stevie, obeying Debbie Forster's indication that she sit. And as she nearly disappeared down into the back of the soft, squishy armchair, she almost didn't notice the sneer on her host's face.

Almost.

"Would you like a drink?" asked Debbie Forster. "Tea, coffee, pop?"

"Yes, please," said Stevie, trying and failing to sit upright in the chair.

"Whatever's easiest."

When a mug of steaming coffee appeared on the table in front of her, Stevie was delighted. The smell from the percolator in the other room was making her mouth water.

Armed with her phone on record and a notepad and pen, Stevie pointed at a card propped up on the mantelpiece over the fire, delighted to find such a quick way to break the ice.

"I see you've been invited to the grand opening of the Haunted House Hotel, Ms Forster," she said.

Ms Forster didn't tell Stevie to call her Debbie and a look of annoyance crossed her face.

"Haven't we all?" she asked in reply. But before Stevie had time to even open her mouth again, Ms Forster continued. "And it's *Mrs* Forster. You're here to ask about my latest book?"

"Um..." said Stevie, covering her awkwardness by taking a mouthful of hot coffee. Very hot coffee! "Um, yes. I was under the impression that you'd written a cosy mystery featuring a, er..." she looked down at her blank notepad as though she had prompts right there in front of her. Gosh, this woman made her feel uncomfortable. "Er, a psychic dog?"

"I have," said Mrs Forster.

"But all of your books are, um, period romances?" Stevie asked, pointing at the door that led to the hallway.

"Those are the books I've written until now," said Mrs Forster.

"Oh, I see," said Stevie. "And will you be using the same pen name?"

"No, the new books are written by Darcey Love."

"What made you change direction with your writing?"

"I have a cockerpoo, his name is Horatio—"

"Oh yes," said Stevie. "I think I met him at Pampered Pompadours this morning." Gosh, was it really only that morning? It seemed like a very long day already.

Mrs Forster simply nodded and didn't show any signs of recognition.

Stevie started again. "You were telling me about...Horatio?"

"That's right," said Mrs Forster. "Do you have a dog, Ms Beck?"

"Stephanie, please. Or Miss Beck," she added snarkily. She couldn't help it... "And yes. He's a—"

“Then you must know that they have personalities all of their own,” she said, interrupting. Not really in the least bit interested in whether or not Stevie had a dog. “I swear he’s psychic, so I decided to write about a psychic dog, and my editor loved the idea, of course.”

“Perhaps I could read it?” suggested Stevie. “I could write a review.”

“It’s available for pre-order on Amazon,” said Mrs Forster snootily, not even offering Stevie an advance review copy. “You’ll love it, you’ll want to give it five stars.”

“Will I?” said Stevie, eyebrows shooting up behind her fringe. “And if I don’t?”

“Then I’d prefer it if you didn’t bother,” said Mrs Forster. “And I’ll report it as a fake review.”

Like that, was it? Stevie jotted down Mrs Forster’s two pen names and asterisked them both. She was intrigued to find out if Darcey whatever-her-name-was was as good a writer as she believed herself to be.

“Where do you get your ideas?” asked Stevie, resorting to stock questions.

“I can’t tell you that,” said Mrs Forster. “You might try it yourself.”

“I’m a journalist, Mrs Forster, not an author.”

“Ah, but are you a *real* journalist?” asked Mrs Forster, raising that eyebrow again. “Or are you just pretending, biding your time until you write your own great novel?” She sighed. “I do wish people would stick to their own jobs and stop trying to steal mine.”

Stevie felt her mouth drop open again and covered it by taking another gulp of her coffee. At least it had cooled down a little by now.

The interview was going nowhere and Stevie was about ready to call it a day when Mrs Forster suddenly waved at the invitation on the mantelpiece.

“Are you going?” she asked Stevie.

Stevie couldn’t help herself as she started to pack her things away. “Aren’t we all?”

Mrs Forster didn’t even blink.

“Ah, but do you know who the new owner is?”

“Don’t we all?” said Stevie. She didn’t know why she was trying to needle Mrs Forster, other than the woman seemed to be brushing Stevie up the wrong way and she wanted to get her own back. But it didn’t seem to be working.

She also didn’t know if Mrs Forster knew the new owner was Angela Quinn or if she was trying to wheedle it out of Stevie. Of course, it was mute now, with what Stevie also knew. But she wasn’t going to mention that either.

“An estate agent wanted it,” continued Mrs Forster. “Her name’s Treadgold.”

“Carol-Anne Treadgold?” asked Stevie, surprised.

“Yes. She takes her dog to Pampered Pompadours too.”

“Jasper!” said Stevie with a grin, remembering the name of the estate agent’s dog.

“That’s right,” said Mrs Forster. “He’s only a cocker spaniel, though. Not a cockerpoo like my Horatio.”

Stevie felt her eyes cross at the woman's strange perception of pedigrees, but pushed on. "And she was hoping to get the Haunted House Hotel?"

Mrs Forster snorted. "Haunted my arse."

"But if she's an estate agent, how come An...er...an *other* buyer got it?"

Stevie mentally kicked herself for almost revealing the new – *late* – owner's identity.

"She was gazumped. By that awful dog training woman." So she did know who the successful buyer was. "Threatened to kill her, she did."

"Wait, what? Who?" said Stevie, her spidey senses starting to tingle. "The estate agent threatened to kill the dog trainer or the other way around?"

Mrs Forster tutted and rolled her eyes. "The estate agent, Carol-Anne Treadgold, threatened to kill Angela Quinn, of course. That's the dog trainer."

Chapter 10

While she waited for the engine to warm up and the windows to de-mist, Stevie pulled out her mobile phone and scrolled through the internet search pages. There was no estate agent listed in Horton Magna, but there was one in Horton Parva.

That was strange. Horton Parva, otherwise known as Little Horton, was exactly that. Little. Stevie couldn't imagine any shops being in Horton Parva other than perhaps a corner shop or a newsagent, let alone an estate agent. She certainly didn't remember ever seeing any in her short time in the area. Perhaps there were parts of Horton she was still yet to discover.

She tried to envisage the small village in her mind's eye, trying to remember if there were roads leading off the main road or if it was just the main road. No, it was definitely one of those places that was strung out in a long line, rather than one that had little lanes leading here and there to secret nooks and crannies.

Church Horton Estate Agents was located on that main, single Sheffield Road. Stevie knew the road, but she didn't know the property. And Church Horton was a place out at Horton Edge anyway. Miles away from Horton Magna. So what were they doing in Horton Parva?

She shook her head and got her laptop out of its bag, opened it up and used her phone as a hotspot so she could access the database at the newspaper.

There used to be a Jarrow and Sons estate agent in Horton Magna itself, but that was now apparently the card shop. And there was once one called Homes R Us, with the R the wrong way round, like the toy shop. But Stevie couldn't identify what that shop was called now. She had a fancy it might be the florist. Church Horton Estate Agents was the only current one listed on the database, but there was no contact name. Only a phone number. A landline number.

She called the number, but a female robot answered the phone saying there was no one who could take her call at the moment and could she please try again later. Not even the option to leave a message. Stevie didn't think that was a great way to run a business, but what did she know?

She tapped her phone against her lips as she tried to think who might know where Carol-Anne Treadgold worked.

Yvette Watson in the poodle parlour would know, but Stevie already knew that she was likely to be busy. In any case, she may not be happy to share a customer's contact details with a reporter she'd only just met.

Stevie's friend Maddy would probably know too, but Stevie tried not to contact her too often during work hours. Maddy had done a lot for her already. Stevie didn't want to keep relying on the vicar, best mate or not.

Kath Grimshaw at the post office-come-newsagent would know too.

But whoever she asked, they'd all want to know why she was looking for Carol-Anne. Stevie couldn't very well tell her she wanted to speak to the estate agent in connection with a murder. Nobody officially knew about the murder yet, and besides, she'd promised Fal that she'd keep it to herself until he gave her the go ahead. If she blabbed too soon, he may not trust her again and, aside from also being a friend, he was a useful contact to keep sweet.

The car windows had de-misted now so Stevie put her laptop away again and connected her phone to the hands free. She was just reversing onto the main road, less busy now than it was earlier, when the phone started to ring.

A local number came up on the screen that looked familiar, but she couldn't place it.

She pressed the button on her steering wheel to answer the call at the same time that she manoeuvred the car onto the road and in the direction of home. It had already been a long day and the light was waning.

"Hello?" she shouted at the dashboard.

"Oh, hello," said a clipped voice she vaguely recognised. "This is Church Horton Estate Agents. I believe I just missed a call from you?"

"Oh, hi," said Stevie. "Thanks so much for calling back. My name's Stephanie Beck. I'm a reporter with the *Midnight Bugle*, and I'm after a Ms Treadgold?"

"Hello, Stephanie!" said the voice. "We met at the dog groomer's this morning? This is Carol-Anne. How can I help?"

Stevie punched the air with her hand, placed it back on the steering wheel, and mouthed a thank you at the roof of her car. She pulled over to the side of the road so she could concentrate on the conversation rather than risk causing an accident.

"I wanted to talk to you about, er..."

"Pampered Pompadours?" queried Carol-Anne. "As I said earlier, I can highly recommend Yvette and her team. My Jasper loves going to see them and always comes back feeling so chilled."

Stevie remembered the hyperactive spaniel and smiled. He didn't look very chilled.

"Well, yes. That's certainly an angle we can include," she said quickly, thinking on her feet. Or on her bottom, as she was sitting in her car. "But I'm

actually working on several stories I'd love your input on and I wondered if we could have a chat?"

"I've got a free hour now, if you'd like to pop over?" said Carol-Anne.

That pleased Stevie no end. She didn't mind doing interviews over the phone at all, but she much preferred to do them face to face. She liked to get more of a feel for her subject, read any body language, go wherever the interviewee would take her.

"That would be great. I'm about ten minutes away from Horton Parva."

"Great!" said Carol-Anne. "I'll text you the postcode. It's the last house on the Sheffield Road before you hit open countryside."

"You work from your house?" said Stevie. No wonder she couldn't recall seeing an estate agent.

"Everything's done online these days," said Carol-Anne. "I could be in Timbuktu and sell you a house anywhere in the world. See you in ten."

Chapter 11

Carol-Anne Treadgold's house, indeed the last house on the Sheffield Road in Horton Parva before open countryside, was a Georgian mini-mansion made of soft Yorkshire stone, with a gated forecourt, landscaped gardens, and mock-streetlights, with old-fashioned lanterns, that were just starting to come on. A far cry from the sleazy flats Stevie had just come from. Although Debbie Forster's flat had been very nice on the inside. The electric gate opened automatically the instant Stevie's little blue car drove up, and she parked on a gravel driveway next to a brand-new BMW. She didn't know the model, but it was either a saloon or a coupe in burnished gold. Did BMW even do coupes, Stevie wondered?

A grand front door made of solid varnished oak opened inwards and a black cocker spaniel bounced out to greet Stevie as she climbed out of her car.

"Hello, Jasper!" she said, chucking him behind the ears. He jumped up and gambolled and rolled over for her to tickle his belly. "Can he have a treat?" she called to his human, who was laughing at his antics.

"One won't hurt him," replied Carol-Anne, looking just as glamorous as she had the that morning, with her long blonde hair falling soft, shiny and straight down her back. The glasses looked the same, but these were plain, tinted glass, not sunglasses, yet they still kept being pushed up Carol-Anne's nose by a long, elegant finger.

Stevie reached back into her car and opened the glove compartment where she always kept a stash of dog chews for Ralph, just like Fal did in his car.

The cocker spaniel sat down and gave her a paw, thought very carefully before taking it from her, then ran back into the house with it clenched between his teeth.

Stevie followed Carol-Anne along a marble corridor into a front room that had wooden horizontal shutters against the bottom half of the large sash window, tilted to let the light in but not so every passer-by could gawp indoors.

Seeing Stevie glance at the shutters, Carol-Anne explained. "We used to display the photographs in that window and the one in the other room across the corridor and the front was tarmacked so customers had somewhere to park their cars." She pointed in the direction of the Sheffield Road. "We had a bus stop right outside too, back when buses were plentiful, reliable and cheap."

She indicated a burgundy leather Chesterfield sofa and they both sat down. The Chesterfield looked swish, but it wasn't as comfortable as Debbie Forster's squidgy armchair, thought Stevie. It was far more suited for a business meeting, however, and she was better able to take notes.

"You're a long way from Church Horton," said Stevie as she got her stuff out of her bag.

"I used to work for Homes R Us, but they were bought out by Church Horton. The new owners encouraged us to work from home and closed down all of the business premises. When they no longer had any unnecessary overheads, they offered us all the chance to buy a franchise. It's really my company now, but I've got the benefit of a bigger firm at my back with all the benefits that includes. Livery, advertising, insurance, that kind of thing."

Stevie pulled a face, impressed.

She half expected a maid in a black and white outfit to come and curtsy and ask if they wanted a drink, but Carol-Anne didn't offer her anything.

"How can I help?" asked Carol-Anne, draping a long arm across the back of the settee. "Will you be writing a piece on Yvette's business?"

"Yes and no," said Stevie. "I was going to do a full page splash on Angela Quinn and her dog show awards and I wanted to include something from the poodle parlour as well as a vet to add colour." As before, Carol-Anne's expression flickered slightly and she pressed her lips together in a tight line.

Stevie pressed on. "Then I discovered that the vet is judging a pet show next month. An event like that always increases a story's attraction. We can write about it when it's coming up, we can write about it when it's happening, and we can write about it when it's gone. And we can link it to other stories in the region on the same topic."

She paused to gather her thoughts.

"You said you were going to do a full page splash," said Carol-Anne. Stevie nodded and the estate agent continued. "Aren't you doing that now?"

"I don't know," said Stevie, not wanting to say how much bigger that story now was. On the one hand, where it wasn't yet common knowledge that Angela Quinn had bought the old hotel, and Stevie didn't want to rain on that particular parade, Debbie Forster had told her that Angela had bought the hotel out from under Carol-Anne, so was she really betraying a confidence?

Really, she should have done more research, rather than take the novelist's word for it.

And on the other hand, the Angela Quinn story was about to blow up out of all proportion anyway, and for a different reason, and Stevie was certainly collecting a lot of background on the woman that would make it all a very interesting read.

In the end, she decided to just come out with it.

“While I was interviewing Angela Quinn about the awards, I found out that she is the proud new owner of the old Haunted House Hotel.” She waited a beat to gauge Carol-Anne’s reaction, and when the other woman frowned and looked towards the window, she carried on. “I’m already doing a story about the grand reopening ceremony, but I found out that someone else wanted that hotel and that Angela Quinn gazumped them...”

Carol-Anne took a deep breath and removed her glasses, placing them on the arm of the sofa next to her.

“Angela Quinn is a spiteful cow,” spat Carol-Anne suddenly, shocking Stevie with her vehemence. “She’s a nasty blackmailer who goes out of her way to find out the dirt on people and, believe me, there’s a lot of dirt on a lot of people who live in Horton Magna. And not just dirt. She digs up people’s secrets, things they’d far rather were left hidden, personal things. You know?”

Stevie knew. Angela had hinted as much to herself on the one occasion she’d spoken to her.

“She didn’t gazump me. I was the agent selling it! She blackmailed the owners to sell it to her at a rock bottom price. Prime development land and she got it for peanuts. She even diddled me out of the commission that was rightly mine, buying it for such a low price.”

Stevie shifted uncomfortably on the leather settee. The cold was seeping through her jeans into her legs and she could swear her buttock bones were developing bruises.

“You, er, didn’t like her, then?”

“I don’t like her at all, no,” replied Carol-Anne, and Stevie bit her lip. She’d almost given the game away again!

But one thing was for sure. Carol-Anne was speaking about Angela Quinn in the present tense, not the past tense, like Stevie almost just did.

Unless she was a very good actor, Carol-Anne Treadgold didn’t know that Angela Quinn was dead.

Chapter 12

Stevie didn’t know what to do next. She had nobody left to interview, she didn’t know which story she’d be going with, if any, and all she’d learned was that Carol-Anne Treadgold wasn’t the likely killer. Nevertheless, she was frustrated. As soon as it became common knowledge that Angela Quinn was dead she could go for it. Until then, her hands and her tongue were tied.

She pulled out of Carol-Anne’s driveway with a wave of her hand and turned the car towards Horton Magna as the electric gate slid shut behind her. Should

she go back and speak with Yvette Watson and Nuala Ironside? Both of them had put their interviews off until another day, and while Yvette seemed to be a friend of Angela Quinn's, Nuala had pulled a similar face to the one Carol-Anne had pulled when Stevie mentioned the dog trainer's name.

Why didn't they seem to like her? Was it because of what Carol-Anne had said about her being a blackmailer? Was Angela Quinn blackmailing any of them?

Stevie shuddered. What had Angela Quinn found out about her? She'd certainly hinted at something.

The closer she got to Horton Magna the darker the sky grew. Everywhere, the fields and trees were covered with golden autumn leaves, but this heavy purple sky caused a dark and purple glow. Night was also drawing in. Quickly.

One of the first things she'd noticed when she moved to Yorkshire was the big sky. Now, as daylight turned to night, she spotted the belt of Venus beginning to form, a phenomenon that amazed her every time she saw its pale pink radiance.

And in the distance, beyond the town, was the Haunted House Hotel on its hill, silhouetted against the darkening sky. There were no lights up there. Stevie expected to see arc lights at least, to help the scene investigators continue their work through the night. But the whole place was in darkness. Did that mean they'd finished their work?

When she reached the junction, she turned towards the police house where Fal lived. It was attached to the small police station, the two properties joined by an interconnecting door, which meant Fal was always on duty, even when he wasn't.

She pulled onto the concrete apron in front of the building and got out of her car just as it started to rain again. A security light flashed on, and Ralph began to bark.

"It's only me!" she called out as she made her way to the door to the house.

There was a pause, then the dog started to whimper and the door was yanked open and Fal was framed against the light from the room beyond, now out of his uniform and in his casual clothes.

"I was just about to call you," he said, shooing her into the warm and closing the door behind her.

Ralph and Stevie made a huge fuss of each other before she plonked herself down at the kitchen table. She started to spread out her laptop, her note pad and her mobile phone while Fal dropped a heavy hard-backed book onto the table top beside her.

"What's that?" she asked him, staring at it as though it would burn her if she picked it up.

The book was A5 with a red polka-dot cover stuffed full of well used pages with scraps of paper sticking out here and there as well.

"It's Angela Quinn's diary," he said.

"Do you know she was blackmailing people?" said Stevie.

At the same time, Fal said, "She was blackmailing the entire town."
They laughed, causing the dog to jump up at them. Then Fal said, "You first."
"I interviewed a novelist this morning," she told him.
"Darcey D'Amour?" said Fal.
Stevie nodded. "How did you know?"
He pointed at the book. "She's in there."
"Does it mention her real name?" asked Stevie.
Fal picked up the book, flicked through it, and placed it open in front of her.
"And her various other pseudonyms."
"She has more than two pseudonyms?" asked Stevie.
Fal nodded. "She has about half a dozen different writing names."
"Well, she suggested that an estate agent might have threatened to kill Angela," said Stevie.
"What's his name?" asked Fal.
"There are men in there too?" she replied.
"I'm in there," he said.
"Did you kill her?" she asked him with a laugh.
He shook his head. "No, but I'd be a suspect if anyone else saw it."
"That bad, eh?" she asked.
He nodded. "What's the name of this estate agent?"
"Carol-Anne Treadgold."
"Yup, she's in there too."
"Wow," said Stevie. Then cautiously she asked, "Am I in there?"
He reached over and riffled through the book again and she looked down.
"There's only my name at the top of the page," said Stevie, staring down at the otherwise blank sheet of paper.
"Looks like she was only just getting started with you."
Stevie pulled the book a bit closer and started to leaf through the pages, shocked to see that she actually recognised so many names.
"Esme O'Brien, the taxi driver," she read out loud, not wishing to read Angela Quinn's notes. It felt like an invasion of privacy. "Yvette Watson, the dog groomer? I thought they were friends. Nuala Ironside..."
"Who's she?" asked Fal.
"She's the vet. Kath Grimshaw from the post office. Carol-Anne, the estate agent. Even Lauren the postie is in here!" Stevie couldn't believe it, but nor could she bring herself to read any of the writing scrawled across the pages in different coloured pens.
"Looks like we have some trawling to do," said Fal.
"Don't you have to hand it over to CID?" she asked him.
"Not if I can help it," he said. When he saw the shocked look on her face he added, "I don't know if I want all of Sheffield CID to know anything about my past."
"But won't they need it if it goes to court?"
Fal shrugged. "Maybe.."

Stevie gave him what she hoped was a stern stare. She didn't know the details of how he'd been knocked down to uniform, or why he was banished to a sleepy backwater. But surely it was on his record somewhere, and if anyone wanted to know, all they had to do was look.

"You'll get in trouble again if you tamper with evidence," she warned him.

"Don't remind me," he said with a grimace. "Let's play it by ear. If we need to disclose it all, then we will. But if I don't have to..."

Stevie picked the book up and fanned through the pages. "Looks like we have a long night ahead," she said. "I hope you have food."

"I'll order pizza," he replied.

Chapter 13

After an hour Fal sat up, rubbed his eyes and stretched.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," he complained. "It could be anyone in this book who killed her, the stuff she had on them."

"I think we can rule out the domestic abuse victims," said Stevie. "I can't see anything there that's worth killing over."

"Unless it was something else," suggested Fal.

"Do you know," said Stevie, also sitting up and stretching now. "I thought it was a bit odd when I moved here. Almost every single resident is a woman." She waved a hand at the book. "Now I see that most of them are either domestic abuse victims hiding from their abusers, or they're in witness protection programmes of one sort or another."

"We're a town of damaged people," said Fal. "Did Maddy never tell you?"

Maddy was the one who had rescued Stevie and moved her to Horton Magna. "She gave me a new identity, found me a job, moved me into my house, and promised I'd be safe," she said.

Fal nodded. "I think you'll find that she did that for a lot of people."

"Did she do that for you?" she asked him.

"No. My boss did that for me. But he didn't give me a new identity. He gave me my old one back." Stevie frowned at him in confusion. "My undercover persona was the one that was in danger. Fal Bashir is quite safe. Mitch Mitchell, on the other hand, isn't."

"I see," said Stevie softly, trying to imagine calling him Mitch. "So you're really you and Maddy is really Maddy. Mind you, she changed her name a long time ago when we were children, after she was adopted." She wouldn't have told anyone else that her best friend was adopted. It wasn't her story to tell. But somehow she knew Maddy wouldn't mind her telling Fal, her other best friend.

"The question is," said Fal. "Which one of these other damaged people is responsible for Angela Quinn's death?"

"Well, we know who it wasn't." He looked at her. "It wasn't me," she laughed.

"She didn't have anything on you yet," he replied.

“Exactly! And it wasn’t you.”

“No,” he said.

“It wasn’t Carol-Anne Treadgold either.”

“How do you know?”

“She might have hated the woman, but she kept referring to her in the present tense.”

He nodded, conceding. Then his face lit up as though a lightbulb had gone on inside his head.

“What?” she asked him.

“Who was it who pointed you towards Carol-Anne?”

“Debbie Forster,” she replied.

“That’s the novelist?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s see what Angela Quinn knew about her...” He flicked through the book until he found the right page. “Here,” he said. “She has six different writing names here.”

“But she only mentioned two of them to me,” said Stevie. “Darcey D’Amour and Darcey Love.”

“There’s a Horatio Forster here,” he said.

“That’s her dog.”

“A Deborah Bolan...”

“Marc Bolan sang a song about a Deborah,” said Stevie, helpfully.

“And a Jonathan Forster.”

“But nothing by Debbie Forster?” she asked him.

He shook his head.

“And what does she say about her. What has Angela written?”

Fal scanned the page. “It says here that she didn’t write a word of any of her novels, listing the names of writers she’s plagiarised... Looks like she scraped a load of ebooks, changed the details, and then released the books with one of her pen names on them.”

“I think that would do it,” said Stevie, her spidey senses starting to tingle. “What else does it say?”

“There’s a lot,” said Fal.

“Go on,” said Stevie.

“Well, it says she cheated on her husband, Jonathan, and that he cheated on her too, with a slip of a girl, only eighteen years old. He’s giving the girl money, stud money from his wife’s cockerpoo Horatio.”

Stevie nodded. “He’s a fine cockerpoo. Does it say why Debbie is in Horton Magna?”

“She did write a novel once, based on someone she was sleeping with. He was mafia, and since then he’s been out to kill her. She’s in witness protection because they’re trying to convict the man she wrote about.”

Stevie nodded again, excited now. “She did it.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I don’t know, I just know.”

“She is the one who pointed the finger at the estate agent,” he agreed.

Stevie clapped her hands. “And, and...she told me, completely unbidden, that Carol-Anne had threatened to kill Angela. Why would she tell me that?”

“To deflect your interest from her,” said Fal.

“And yet she still needed to feed her own ego,” said Stevie.

“What do you mean?”

“Who do you think sent in the press release about her new book? She didn’t have to see me. And there was a car outside her flat that was cooling down. I’d bet, if you check, she has a white Renault Clio and she’d not long got home before I arrived. She could have quite easily been leaving via the way out drive at the hotel as I was driving via the way in.”

Fal’s eyes were wide. “We make a good team, don’t we?” he said.

“We do when you share your knowledge with me,” she replied.

He jumped up from the table. “We need to go and bring her in.”

“But what about our pizza?” said Stevie. “It hasn’t even arrived yet.”

“I have a microwave,” he replied. “And we’ll be bringing her back here in any case.”

Chapter 14

After three days of almost constant rain, a thick fog settled over the town of Horton Magna, making the twilight even more scary than ever. There was no belt of Venus on display today. Thanks to the fog, there was nothing much on display at all, including all of the spooky decorations so carefully assembled a week ago. Even the street lights were coddled in the gloom. It was very atmospheric.

Halloween was upon them and excited children dressed as witches, vampires and monsters chattered to each other as they waited with their parents in the queue to spend the shiny pennies given to them in their plastic buckets in lieu of sweets and chocolate. The newsagent-come-post office had stayed open late especially, as they’d all be on their way to school in the morning when there was a strict two-children-at-a-time rule. It would take them all day to spend their treat money if Kath Grimshaw didn’t throw the doors open to them now.

Of course, the trick-or-treaters had been given sweets and chocolates too. Stevie knew that because they’d knocked on her door for most of the evening and she’d got through not three but four giant tubs of lollies, sherbet and sweeties.

As she waited patiently behind the children in the newsagent queue Stevie glanced out of the plate glass window towards where she knew the Haunted House Hotel should be, on the hill in the distance, as she always did. Only this time it was swathed in fog and she couldn’t even see the silhouette against the night sky.

“It’s a shame the grand reopening party was cancelled,” said Kath when it was Stevie’s turn to be served. “But I understand there’s a new owner in the wings already,” she added with a wink.

Stevie knew who it was, but she was sworn to secrecy. “I think it will be opening soon,” she said.

“I heard it was being redeveloped,” said a gruff voice from behind. Stevie turned to see Esme O’Brien, the taxi-driver and courier, waiting in the queue.

“Well, you were right the last time,” said Kath with a raised eyebrow and a knowing nod.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean that she’s right this time,” said Stevie, grabbing her purchases and starting to leave.

“Such a shame, what happened to Angela Quinn,” said Kath, folding her arms across her bosom.

You wouldn’t say that if you knew what she’d written down about you, thought Stevie to herself. She had no intention of saying it out loud. She hadn’t read what Angela had written down about the post mistress, nor anyone else for that matter. Aside from the killer. But she also didn’t want the lovely lady knowing that someone had not only discovered her deepest darkest secrets, she’d also planned to blackmail her about it.

“I’m glad that the dog groomer took her dog in,” said Stevie instead. Then, changing the subject, she asked, “What are we all doing for Bonfire Night?”

Kath opened her mouth but it was Esme who answered. “There’s a big bonfire extravaganza down at the sports field every year, with fireworks, sparklers, hot dogs and jacket potatoes.”

“They open up the clubhouse and put a disco on for the kids too,” added Kath.

“That paper of yours normally covers it,” said Esme.

“I can hardly wait!” said Stevie.

She elbowed the door open with a tinkle of the overhead bell, only to be helped by a mini-Dracula tucking into a foot-long inch-wide strawberry liquorice belt.

the end

a marcie craig short story

Wordsworth Shorts



— Pione Wordsworth —

burn

burn

Before moving to Yorkshire I lived in the midlands and was a founding member of the Birmingham Writers' Workshop. One of the first competitions we ran was for a short story with only the word 'dark' as a theme. I was already writing Night Crawler, a story and a main character fellow members of the group were already familiar with. The competition judge, however, was not. And she awarded me second prize.

Burn was the first short story I wrote featuring Marcie Craig.

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When Marcie Craig arrived home in the early hours of the morning, the last thing she expected to find was a dead body. Well, not really a body. More a smouldering mass with two skinny legs sticking out.

Obligatory vomiting over, Marcie called the police.

The body turned out to be Ivy Dennis, an old friend of Marcie's – and a somewhat older resident of the caravan site they both lived on. After the inquest, Marcie couldn't believe the verdict.

"Spontaneous human combustion?" she scoffed over a pint at her local. "No such thing."

"It's what the coroner thinks," explained her mate Reefer, a policeman. "And let's face it," he continued, "what else could it be?"

"Could've been murder. Could've wanted to hide the evidence."

"Who'd want to murder an old biddy like that?" He finished his own pint and signalled for another round.

"Could've been a robbery gone wrong—"

"Robbery!" Now it was Reefer's turn to laugh. "What did she have to rob? No money, a rented caravan, no relatives—"

"Actually," said Marcie getting excited, "she had a niece – and she must've had money somewhere...I witnessed her will."

Reefer paid for the drinks. "Who was the main beneficiary?"

"The Cats Protection League."

He shrugged. "So where's the motive? I can't see them murdering an old woman just to get their hands on her cash. Can you?"

Marcie paused and took advantage of her new pint. "I dunno...I haven't thought that far ahead."

Reefer laughed again, downed his pint and stood up to leave. "Marcie, leave the sleuthing to the professionals and get on with being a DJ."

That was the trouble with Marcie Craig; she couldn't keep her nose out of anything. And besides, Ivy was a friend.

Marcie had lived on the site for more than fifteen years, although Ivy had been there a lot longer. She was a pensioner and had lived in her caravan for most of her life. Cutler had inherited Ivy as a sitting tenant when he bought the place, so was she paying a peppercorn rent? Marcie wondered. How about that for a motive?

She decided to have tea with the delightful chap to find out what he'd been doing all those Saturdays ago.

~~~~~

Cutler mused, rubbing his bristly chin with a hairy finger. "Wasn't that the night you found Ivy Dennis in your garage?" Marcie nodded encouragement and stirred three sugars into the tea that was too strong. "What's it to you anyway?"

"Nothing really," she shrugged. "It just seems strange, I wondered if anyone noticed anything unusual. Like what was she doing there anyway?"

"I see what you mean." He scratched noisily at his chin again and dunked (and dropped) a chocolate biscuit in his tea. "It's no good," he announced finally, fishing out the soggy biscuit with a teaspoon. "I'll have to check the dates."

To save time, Marcie furnished him with them and, to her dismay, his face lit up.

"We had a little competition at the golf club. I won and had all my drinks bought for me." He chuckled at the memory. "I was well-oiled. They had to put me up for the night."

She gave up on the tea, thanked him warmly for his hospitality and left. On her way home, Marcie noticed a girl leaving Ivy's ancient caravan.

"Hallo," she called out. "It's Angela, isn't it? Ivy's niece?"

The girl nodded and reluctantly made her way towards Marcie.

"Marcie Craig—"

"Aunty used to talk about you."

The two women stood awkwardly in the middle of the park, the visitor seeming eager to get away.

Marcie said, "You been tidying up?"

"No. The place is locked. I don't think I could face it anyway."

"I'm really very sorry about your aunt."

"Thank you. I just wish I'd seen her, you know, before it happened."

"It's been a while then?"

Angela sighed. "About three months."

"Well, I won't keep you. I can see you're dying to get away—"

Marcie could have kicked herself at her choice of words. Nevertheless, they made leaving noises and went in different directions.

Marcie had a key.

Not that Ivy locked the place that often. However, she had entrusted her friend with a key rather than her only surviving relative, and that started alarm bells ringing. Unable to stop herself, Marcie let herself in.

Ivy's van smelled musty and airless but there was still a faint reminder of the old lady's favourite perfume. Ornaments were neatly in place covered with a fine layer of dust. Marcie started bagging clothes and rubbish. She came across a pile of diaries dating back to the 1950s. Marcie kept those for herself – they might make interesting reading and had been kept right up until Ivy's death.

Out of some morbid interest, she dipped into the past few weeks leading up to the ‘accident’ and discovered a startling fact.

Ivy was spying on the neighbours and keeping detailed records of all their comings and goings – even Marcie was there.

She found it quite amusing reading about herself from an outsider’s point of view, but the second startling fact was that Mr Mills, the friendly, loveable site manager, was having a sordid affair behind his crippled wife’s back with the sixteen-year-old at number twenty.

Time for another invite to tea, she thought.

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“It’s good to see you, Marcie,” said Mr Mills. Everyone called him that and she had no idea what his first name was.

He shifted around the kitchen making much nicer coffee than Cutler’s tea had been, and took one through to his invalid wife who called hello to Marcie through the door. “We were away,” he replied finally, after Marcie had explained her visit. “Jenny gets Respite care and I often go with her.”

Marcie lowered her voice so that Jenny wouldn’t hear what she had to say. “Did you know Ivy was spying on us all?”

Mr Mills threw back his head and laughed. “Yes. The daft old bat accused me of seeing young Gillian across the way,” he indicated with his finger. “Jenny thought it was hilarious – particularly as the girl’s parents were there every time I went. I’ve been teaching her French, you know. A bit of extra help before her exams.”

Marcie didn’t know whether to feel frustrated or relieved, but she settled on the latter because it was the thing to do. When she returned to her own van, she continued reading Ivy’s diaries until the day of her death.

In between those pages was a letter from Angela demanding that Ivy change her will back, otherwise she would contest the thing, citing senility or something. Ivy had apparently found this quite amusing, but had agreed to see her niece nonetheless...on the evening that she died...

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Marcie was very impressed with Reefer’s ability to get the case re-examined. “You’ve done a grand job,” she congratulated him.

“You didn’t do so badly yourself,” he grinned, over the top of one of their endless pints.

“Of course, I don’t believe Angela really meant her aunt any harm,” she said. “Ivy was frail and possibly did fall. But to do something like that? Ugh.”

“Frightened,” Reefer stated. “Imagine the strength she would have needed to drag the body down to the garage? She probably didn’t expect it to burn all night.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Marcie. “Spontaneous human combustion? I told you there was no such thing.”

the end

**DIANE
WORDSWORTH**



**Catch the
Rainbow**

Rainbow Chronicles Book 1

catch the rainbow: part 2 of 4

Part 2 of my novel based against the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974.

warning: strong and explicit language

Chapter 16 Friday evening

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

The man they called Cóilín Maguire had a quick read of the paper before getting ready to go out. He was mostly looking to see what news there was about the bombings. The journalists had all been on strike recently, but now they were falling over themselves to cover it all. Cóilín snorted at the hypocrisy, but pulled himself up.

He clipped the latest news story out of the newspaper and put it with the others. Then he noticed a small item headed 'News in Brief'. The deputy chief constable and the assistant chief constable for crime, two senior police officers from Lloyd House, which was the West Midlands Police headquarters in Birmingham, had told reporters that the police had got the men primarily responsible for the previous evening's bombings.

"Really?" said Cóilín out loud. "I'd like to meet the men primarily responsible too." He shook his head but clipped it out regardless and added it to the pile.

Glancing at the clock, he realised he had to leave soon or he'd risk missing Frankie. He bundled all of his cuttings together and shoved them into the back of a scrapbook he'd bought from Woolworth's. He didn't have the time to stick them all in now. That would be a job for the weekend, if he was still holed up in the bedsit.

He stashed the scrapbook into the back of his album case and hid the box in the cavity in the wall above the gas fire, where the flue should be. His flat might be at the top of a very old Victorian house, but he wouldn't put it past any of his co-tenants to break in and steal all the worldly goods he chose to leave there. The Yale lock on the flat door was very flimsy and already showing signs of being jimmied before. Cóilín had discovered the cavity when he noticed that the gas fire wasn't even connected.

"There should be a law against that," he'd muttered at the time. But he'd used the cavity ever since to hide his few valuables.

He had a very quick strip-wash in the communal bathroom before heading off to catch his bus to the Maypole. Fortunately, there was a bus that would take him straight there.

Brenda

Good Hope General Hospital, Birmingham City Centre

When Brenda came to she was aware of voices in the background. She recognised her mother's instantly.

"What does it mean, doctor?" asked Hattie Rainbow.

"It means," said the heavily accented Asian, "that your daughter may not be able to give you any grandchildren."

"But science is always moving on, isn't it?" said Hattie.

"Oh yes. We can freeze your son-in-law's sperm and I am sure they will very quickly come up with some kind of fertility treatment. They are advancing all the time and every week we get closer to the world's first test-tube baby..."

Brenda slowly realised that she was lying on a couch in a medical booth and no longer in the television room. As she stirred, her mother rushed to her side.

"Oh, Brenda, love. I'm so sorry."

"Should he be telling you private stuff like that?" she asked, affronted. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long after you fainted. We were already on our way here--"

"We?" snapped Brenda, sitting up and swinging her legs over the edge of the couch. "Who else is with you?"

"Only our Elaine--"

"Elaine?" said Brenda, her voice rising. "I don't want Elaine knowing too!" She folded her arms across her chest.

"Er..." said the doctor, clearing his throat.

"Yes, sorry, doctor," said Hattie. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

He shook his head. "But I do have other patients to see..."

"Yes, of course. Thank you. I'll stay with her now. Thank you."

The urologist bowed his head and left the room.

As soon as he had gone, Brenda's resolve deserted her and she broke down. In between sobs she reminded her mother of the baby they'd lost and how they'd got the house because she was already pregnant.

"He won't want to stay with me now," she wailed.

"He'll need you to be stronger than ever," scolded Hattie.

"But we'll lose the house!"

"And with this new injury of his, you'll likely get another. But they'll no doubt leave you where you are, especially under the circumstances."

"Oh, Mom! We so wanted a baby. And I lost it!"

"There's still hope," assured her mother. "As the doctor said. But we don't want to be worrying about that at the moment. You need to be strong now. For Dennis's sake. You need to help him get through this. You have to be there for him and stop worrying about what might have been."

Just then the curtain was pulled aside and Lenny joined them. Her face was as white as a sheet.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

Brenda looked pleadingly at her mother.

"Your sister's had a nasty shock and she's had a lot to deal with." Hattie patted her older daughter's hand. "We'll get through this."

"I hate the Irish for doing this to us!" spat Brenda.

Chapter 17

Seamus

Deritend, Birmingham City Centre

The man they called Seamus Quinn had been given his orders and now he had to carry them out. Until he'd finished this, he wouldn't be getting another assignment. He wouldn't ask for another assignment either. In fact, he wouldn't be contacting anyone now until he could report job done. He didn't care. That was the way he worked. The way he'd always worked. You didn't give Seamus Quinn a job to do if you were going to change your mind.

Seamus had no idea where the boy lived, so he started in the pub where they'd met. A pub on the edge of the city centre that was popular with the Irish community, even tonight, although there were far fewer people in than usual.

"I don't want to know your name," Seamus had hissed at him through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Not your real name."

The boy had very quickly suggested his code name, but he'd clearly already given it some thought because he'd chosen a very old Gaelic name and one that Seamus hadn't heard in a very long time.

That was six months ago and Seamus had recruited three other men in that time. The other regulars knew him now and always nodded at him in greeting.

"Pint o' Guinness, mate," he said to the barman, striking a match on the Swan Vestas box and lighting his fag. His eyes smarted as the cigarette smoke drifted upwards. He picked up his pint mug by the handle and took a long swallow before turning to the room. Recognising several patrons, he asked each of them in turn if they had any idea where the boy was from. He couldn't use his code name, that would be breaking the rules. He couldn't use his real name, because he didn't know it. The lad was easy to describe, though. "He looks like that Richard O'Sullivan in Man About the House on the television."

If it took him all night, Seamus would find out what he wanted to know. And after far too many tries, he finally got a solid response.

"He has a bedsit out Moseley way," said one of the regulars over a pint of stout, courtesy of Quinn.

That's a big place, to be sure," Seamus replied.

"You can't miss it. The bus stops right opposite those big old houses, not far from the hospital. The maternity hospital."

Seamus nodded. "I know the hospital."

"Flats look just like it," said his companion.

"Which bus?" asked Seamus.

"The number forty-nine. You can catch it outside the Odeon, I think. Or the back of the coach station. Then it's about half-an-hour away. Tell the ticket

inspector to throw you off at the maternity hospital and you won't go far wrong." He took a swig from his glass and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

Aye, it was a number forty-nine bus he'd seen C  il  n leave town on.

"The flats are in a row of old houses up a side street on the other side of the road," continued the man. "But it all looks like the same complex. Lots of kids rent the bedsits there." He gave Seamus the directions and accepted another pint from him.

Seamus glanced at the clock behind the bar, wondering if it was too late now for him to find the right bus stop. Deciding it wasn't, he thanked the man, swigged the last of his Guinness, and left.

Outside the pub he pulled his collar up and lit a fresh fag from the nub end of the one he'd just finished, flicking the spent filter tip into the gutter. He looked left towards St Martin's and right towards the coach station. A Midland Red bus was coming towards him. It was out of service so of no use to Seamus Quinn. It did suggest, however, that the coach station might still be open. If he'd missed the last forty-nine bus he might still be able to get a hot drink and a bus ride home.

C  il  n

The Maypole, Birmingham

The roads were eerily empty. Not just some of them, but all of them. That meant the buses were miraculously on time. People were staying home and C  il  n didn't blame them. If he wasn't desperate, he'd stay home too. But in his proper home. Or with his girlfriend. He was lying low for the time being but knew he'd have some explaining to do when he finally crawled out from beneath his stone. His family would be worried about him and it dawned on him then that they wouldn't know whether or not he was one of the casualties.

Shit! He was selfish. His mom and dad must be worried sick.

He made a detour towards the little shopping centre where he hoped to find a phone box that hadn't been vandalised.

"Hello, Mom," he said sheepishly into the mouthpiece. "It's me--" He held the phone away from his ear as his mother launched into an onslaught of Irish abuse he hadn't heard in a long time. When he thought it was safe to do so, he gingerly brought the phone back to his ear.

"Yes, Mom. I'm sorry," he said. "I should have called you last night."

"Have you spoken to your brother?" she asked, calming down a little.

"No. Is he all right?" asked C  il  n.

"He's worried about you," she replied.

"I'm sorry," he repeated as he kicked at the uneven concrete that passed for a floor in the phone box.

She asked him more questions: Where had he been? Who had he been with? Where was he the night before? What was he doing now? Who was he staying with? He answered in short monosyllables where he could.

"When will you be home?" she said.

"I don't know." He shrugged at his reflection in the cloudy windows. "Soon."

"Are you in trouble?"

"I'll be fine," he said quickly. "I'll see you soon."

He hung up the phone before she had a chance to ask him anything else. Now he had to catch Frankie.

Cóilín made his way to the pub. Four motorbikes were parked outside and he recognised Frankie's BSA, his 'Beezer'. Frankie was just leaving and had one arm through his crash helmet.

"Hey, man," said Frankie, sucking deeply on a joint he'd just lit in the doorway. "I was just leaving."

"You got time for a quick one?" Cóilín asked him.

Frankie checked his watch, an ancient timepiece he kept in a pocket in the leather waistcoat he wore beneath a leather biker's jacket. He had another quick drag of his roll-up before pinching the end between his spit-wetted finger and thumb. "Okay, man. But make it quick. I got a run tonight," he said as he placed the fag safely in another waistcoat pocket.

Cóilín followed Frankie back into the pub and ordered two pints of mild. He knew Frankie was itching to get going so he got straight to the point.

"Can I borrow your bike for a few days?" he said. "I could do with some wheels and mine are in the garage."

Frankie sank half of his pint in one go, smacked his lips and gave it all of three seconds' thought.

"I'll need it back by Wednesday, man. Teatime."

"That's all right," said Cóilín. "I can fetch it back then."

"Nah, let me know where you'll be and I'll come and get it. I gotta get back to the caravan, close it up for Christmas, so I may as well go straight there."

"You can collect it from my bird's house, then. You know where that is?"

Frankie didn't, so Cóilín split open a beer mat, cadged a pencil from behind the bar, and wrote the address down. Frankie tucked it into yet another pocket in the leather waistcoat, zipped up his biker's jacket, and picked his helmet back up off the bar.

"C'mon, you can ride us back to mine an' drop me off," said Frankie, finishing his pint and pushing his helmet towards Cóilín.

"I ain't wearing that!" Cóilín snorted.

"Then wear it on your elbow," said Frankie. "So long as you're wearing it somewhere they might just caution you."

Cóilín finished his pint and ran Frankie home. His mate only lived a few hundred yards from the pub and probably would've left it there for now had Cóilín not wanted it.

"Thanks, pal," he said, dropping Frankie off at the kerb.

"No worries, man," said Frankie giving the tank a pat. "Look after her."

Cóilín put the helmet on his elbow and made his way back to the main road.

Enjoying the sensation of having a motorbike between his legs, instead of turning right and heading towards his flat, he turned left and carried on down

the Alcester Road towards Studley. His own bike had been 'in the garage' for far too long. In fact, it was in pieces all over his parents' front room and had been for almost a year.

Chapter 18

Seamus

Digbeth, Birmingham City Centre

There was a number forty-nine waiting at the bus stop at the back of Digbeth Coach Station. One of the drivers had told him where to go but, checking his watch, warned him to be quick. "The next one will be along in about ten minutes, but if yer quick, yer should catch one right away."

Seamus broke into a trot. The driver waited until he was almost level with the doors, but closed the doors and pulled away without him, followed by some pretty colourful language from Seamus. Through the grimy window he could see the driver share a laugh with the ticket inspector, who was sitting in the side seat right at the front.

"Bastards!" shouted Seamus at the back end of the bus. He lit another cigarette and paced up and down, wondering if it was worth waiting for the next one or if the Midland Red bus driver had lied to him about them coming along every ten minutes. He'd been careful to disguise his Irish accent as feelings were running very high now everyone knew about the pub bombings, so he couldn't see any reason for the man to lie. Then again, nor could he see any reason for the driver of the number forty-nine to drive off without him at the last moment.

As he huffed and muttered, another double-decker bus came around the corner, slowing right down when it reached Seamus's bus stop. The doors opened and Seamus jumped aboard, sitting down in the side seat at the front of the bus. He paid for his ticket and asked the inspector to let him know when they reached the maternity hospital, again disguising his accent.

Less than thirty minutes later Seamus was standing outside several big old houses in a street on the other side of the main road to the hospital. They were obviously all converted to bedsits. Flea-Pit City by the look of them.

There were multiple doorbells on the outsides of the houses, but no names. Just flat numbers. He pressed one that said '1' on it as those usually belonged to a caretaker. Or they did in purpose-built blocks of flats that were popping up all over the city. That turned out not to be the case here, and nobody seemed to know anybody else's names. And that was just the ones who bothered to come to the door.

"Fuck off you Irish bastard," spat the last scruff who came to the door. Seamus realised he'd let his guard slip and that he wouldn't get anywhere. He'd just have to camp out and wait for Maguire to come home. Or go out.

He lit another cigarette and loitered in between the bus stop on the main road and a vandalised phone box. Instead of just one rambling old Victorian mansion converted into flats, there were three of them, all next to each other. It was dark

and dank, though, and it looked like the council were saving money by not using the streetlights. Seamus didn't care. It all helped to keep him hidden and he had a clear view of the houses opposite, even if it was very dark by now.

Waiting in the shadows, he chain-smoked an entire packet of cigarettes. He had to replenish his supplies and he remembered seeing an outdoor attached to a dimly lit pub he'd passed earlier, on the bus. It wasn't far. Close enough to walk.

The man he knew as C  il  n Maguire probably wasn't going anywhere just now. He'd keep.

Seamus slowly turned and contemplated the walk before quickly heading towards the pub. It was at the traffic lights that the loud motorbike exhaust caught his attention. But the silly fecker wasn't even wearing a helmet.

Maguire was unmistakable with his shaggy mane of dark hair and a few days' growth of beard. A solitary streetlight caught him just right and Seamus was able to memorise the bike's registration as both he and the bike slowly moved away in opposite directions. He'd never catch up with the bike now and see which house Maguire went into. But he'd be easier to find now he knew the bike registration.

The motorbike gave Seamus an idea of how to dispose of Maguire when the time came, and a bike accident could be so much more easily covered up. He'd set someone on tracing the bike just as soon as he could.

Aye, C  il  n Maguire would keep for now. Seamus Maguire was content.

Chapter 19

Saturday

Lenny

Elmdon Town Football Club

"This game should have been cancelled," Lenny hissed at her mother as they drove to the match.

"What for?" asked Hattie Rainbow with a frown.

"Out of respect," said Lenny, rolling her eyes.

"And show them that they've won?" replied her mother. "That's not the way we do things in this country."

"I think it's disrespectful," Lenny persisted. "So many people were killed and injured. It was only two nights ago. But nothing must stop the football fixtures, eh?"

"The whole country can't just grind to a halt--"

"But it was two days ago!" said Lenny.

"We have to show them that they can't dictate to us how we run our lives. None of the other local games have been cancelled. Let alone national and away games. But we will hold a minute's silence before kick-off as a show of respect."

"Well, wow!" said Lenny, the words dripping heavily with sarcasm. It would have been much better, in her opinion, to just stay at home and pay their respects in private.

And when they got there they didn't even have a full team playing for them.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked Shaun, who was sitting with her in the old pavilion now instead of at the side of the pitch.

"Mrs Rainbow didn't think it was a good idea for me to play today," he said, adding, "or Damien."

"Why not?" said Lenny.

Shaun shrugged his shoulders and turned to look across the football field at the players. "Because we're Irish--"

"But you're NOT Irish."

"Damien is, and I have an Irish name--"

"Your name is spelt the English way, not the Irish way," she argued.

"That doesn't matter. It still sounds the same And you can't really get away with claiming O'Flaherty is a good old-fashioned Brummie name."

"But you were born in Birmingham, the same as me."

"I know. But your mom thinks it's for the best--"

"Well, I think that's rubbish and I'm going to tell her so," Lenny said, indignantly springing to her feet.

"Laine," said Shaun. "It really doesn't matter." He stood up with her anyway.

"It matters to me," said Lenny. "She's got a Kraut playing for her, and a Jew. How dare she stop you from playing just because you've got an Irish surname? She's being a complete hypocrite."

"She's being a good football manager who wants to get the best performance possible out of her team."

"But you and Nick were mascots before most of this lot had even heard of Elmdon Town Football Club, let alone started playing with them."

A groan went up from the smattering of home-side supporters as the visiting team scored a goal. The tourists hadn't brought much of a crowd with them either.

"To be honest," said Shaun. "I don't really feel much like playing anyway, so I didn't bother arguing with her."

"And I didn't really feel much like coming," said Lenny. "And I did argue with her."

Shaun sat down too. "And yet, here you are."

"I suppose it's better than being stuck indoors with Miss Martyr 1974," grumbled Lenny.

Shaun's head slowly swivelled on his shoulders as he gaped at her. "You don't mean Brenda?" he said.

"Well I don't mean Vicky, do I?" she replied.

"Cut her some slack, Laine. It's not even been two days. She's probably still in shock."

"She's milking it for everything she can get, more like."

"That's quite a spiteful thing to say about your own sister," said Shaun, turning back to watch the game. "Don't you care about her or your brother-in-law?"

"Of course I do," snapped Lenny. "But at least he's still alive. She should be grateful for that."

"And he's missing a leg. I wouldn't be able to play football if I lost a leg. And who knows what other damage has been done?"

"Like what?" asked Lenny.

"There's the emotional damage for a start. He could have brain damage or anything. And Brenda has to deal with that."

"She married him in sickness and in health, remember."

"Maybe so. But she's still only twenty-four years old. She probably wasn't expecting to have to do that so soon."

Lenny blinked at her friend. She'd known him and his brother all her life, yet she'd never noticed how thoughtful, sensible and sensitive Shaun was.

"You're wasted at County Hall," she said smiling. "You should have been a psychiatrist or a diplomat. Or it should be you going into politics instead of your brother."

"I prefer to leave all of that sort of thing to him." He blushed slightly and smiled back at her, which reminded her that they shouldn't be smiling. They should be sad. A very bad thing had happened and a lot of people had been hurt or killed, including two of their own.

"I miss Jax so much," said Lenny at last, annoyed to hear her voice crack a little.

"Me too," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders and hugging her to him, which only made her want to cry all the more.

Chapter 20

Lenny

The ball came flying into the old pavilion and one of the Elmdon Town players came to retrieve it and throw it back. Shaun let go of Lenny, picked the ball up and tossed it to his team-mate, who totally ignored him and let the ball land at his feet. He stooped to pick it up himself, threw it back into play, and trotted back onto the pitch without even a backward glance of acknowledgement or anything.

Shaun laughed bitterly.

"The cheeky, ignorant..." said a shocked and disappointed Lenny, stunned at the footballer's attitude.

It had started.

"Looks like your mom was right to stand me down today," Shaun said.

"I can't believe people can be so narrow-minded. How did they treat you at work yesterday?"

"I didn't go in," he replied.

Of course. Lenny hadn't gone to work either. No one had.

"Nor did Nick," added Shaun.

"Where is Nick?" asked Lenny, keeping her voice as steady as she could.

"Did Mom ban him from the touchline too? I thought he must have been hurt on Thursday night."

"No, he wasn't hurt, or he didn't say he was. He said he wasn't anywhere near either pub at the time. I don't know where he is. I've not seen him for days. He called Mom yesterday, told her he was all right. They had a bit of a chat. He mentioned some friends, Irish friends. That's all I know."

Lenny tried to imagine her parents letting her stay for just one night with friends, let alone several days. They'd be on the doorstep before midnight to pick her up and take her home with them. With Vicky in the car too. Vicky's friend Marcella as well, no doubt.

"Didn't he want to come home?" Lenny said at last.

Shaun shrugged again. "I don't know. Probably not. I don't think anyone truly knows what they want to do at the moment."

Lenny glanced across the pitch towards the dugout opposite the old pavilion where the substitutes sat. She saw the dirty looks coming their way, and the whispering behind hands, and she tutted. Another goal was conceded and it started to spit with rain.

"I've got to get away from this place," she muttered, meaning the Midland Combination football game. She got to her feet and dusted down the back of her corduroy trousers, the knees of which each had an ironed-on smiley-face patch she'd got as a free gift in the weekly magazine her dad always bought her on his way home from work.

"Me too," agreed Shaun standing up again.

"Fancy a walk?" she asked him.

"Where to?" he replied.

"Elmdon Park. We can sit on the crocodile, maybe wander around the churchyard."

He looked up at the sky. The clouds weren't threatening enough for more than a spot of drizzle.

"Yeah," he said. "Come on."

They left the football ground via the main gates to the sound of slow clapping from the subs' bench. They crossed the main Coventry Road and turned into the lane from where they could see aeroplanes waiting in the airport, and entered the park through a private stable yard that had a public footpath right across the middle of it. The path brought them out at the parish church of St Nicholas.

As they picked their way between the headstones, Shaun wondered out loud if Jax would be buried here or taken to the crematorium in Shirley. Because they lived in Solihull now it was unlikely that she would be taken to Yardley Crematorium.

"I think the family have a plot here," she replied, looking around them at the rows and rows of higgledy-piggledy headstones. "But there might only be room

now for her mom and dad. They won't have thought they'd be burying their daughter in their own lifetimes, so I imagine she'll be cremated and they'll put a plaque in the memorial garden here." She nodded towards the relatively new part of the graveyard where small trees were planted that had memorial plaques at their feet.

Lenny felt so very sad, and suddenly so very old for her young years. So many children were commemorated in the memorial garden. Parents never expected to bury their own kids.

They crossed to the lychgate, into the park, down the hill past the ancient hollow oak to another tree that had fallen down a long time ago. They'd always called it the crocodile because that's what it looked like from a distance.

"Do you think the funeral will be next week?" asked Lenny, climbing up onto the crocodile's back and settling down in one of the hollows where a branch once was.

Shaun sat down next to her and they both looked down towards the lake. "I don't see why not," he said.

But it was to take quite a bit longer than just a week.

Chapter 21

Sunday

Lenny

Elmdon Old Village

"They're having a memorial service at the cathedral in town today," said Tom Rainbow over his Sunday newspaper at breakfast time.

Sunday in the Rainbow household was always a family event, starting with a proper breakfast at the dining table in the dining room. And if anyone wanted to be excused from the table, they asked first.

Only Lenny and her little sister Vicky lived with their parents now, and there was a big age gap between them - eleven years. The older children, Tommy, Timmy and Brenda, had all left home and were starting their own families and lives.

There had been another sister, Pamela, between Lenny and Vicky, but she'd died during a freak German Measles epidemic in the early 1960s and Vicky had been a bit of an afterthought. Not that she was treated any differently to any of the others, and the older kids were all half-siblings as Tom Rainbow had been married before. His previous wife had died. But they were all treated exactly the same and Brenda had only ever known Hattie as her mother while the twins, being slightly older, had a dim and distant recollection of theirs.

Sunday breakfast was newspaper, a hearty fry-up, toast with marmalade or jam, and cereal, accompanied by orange juice and a big pot of tea. Nothing else interfered with the routine.

Today, however, no one was very hungry. Apart from Vicky, who was always hungry. And no one was very talkative. Apart from Vicky, who was always talkative.

"Are they, dear?" asked Hattie, more out of good manners than actual interest. Then she seemed to realise what the service would be for. "Oh," she said. "For the youngsters who were killed on Thursday?" Tom nodded, grunted agreement, and drank some of his tea, all at the same time. "That's a nice idea," said Hattie.

They'd observed a minute's silence at the football match the previous day, before kick-off, to show respect. Lenny tried not to think of the players who hadn't even turned up for the game, telling herself that no news was good news and perhaps they simply didn't feel like playing football rather than being lost beneath the rubble.

Lenny pushed a sausage around her plate.

"Elaine, will you eat that or take it through to the kitchen?" said her mother. Hattie had made it clear they should act as natural as possible.

Vicky wasn't so bothered. "I'll have it if you don't want it," she said, helping herself anyway. "Sausages are my favourite."

Lenny didn't stop her. "Are you going?" she asked her dad.

"I don't think so," said Tom. "It's not as if we usually would."

Hattie fussed around, clearing the table and clattering dishes into the sink in the kitchen. Vicky helped herself to seconds. and Lenny placed her knife and fork on her plate the way they'd always been told to do, to indicate that they'd finished eating.

Lenny pondered and tried to process all of the news so far, which hadn't been good.

Jacqueline had somehow been caught up in the blast, they assumed, and was one of the reported fatalities. That was awful enough. Her father, Mr Hardy, the MP, had been allowed home from London for a few days compassionate leave, but had to be back by the following week. They'd apparently allow him to come home again for the inquest and again for the funeral, but with these latest and most horrendous circumstances, they also wanted him in Whitehall.

Dennis had been horrifically injured and had lost a leg. Time would tell if he'd ever father any children. But they didn't really discuss such private matters in the Rainbow household, particularly as it wasn't really their news. Brenda spent as much time as they'd let her at his bedside. But no one else was allowed to see him. He was apparently very heavily sedated and very, very poorly.

Lenny was quite disappointed that she hadn't heard from Nick, but at least he was safe.

Twenty-one people had been killed and over a hundred had been injured. Rumour had it that six Irishmen who had been in Birmingham that night had been arrested on their way back to Ireland. Some said they had tried to escape. Others said they wanted to be at the funeral of a friend who had accidentally

killed himself a few weeks before in Coventry. He'd managed to blow himself up instead of whatever it was he was wanting to blow up.

There was hardly any traffic on the streets. There weren't even many pedestrians. And Lenny couldn't remember the last time she'd seen or heard from any of her Irish friends. Apart from Shaun, who wasn't even properly Irish anyway as he'd been born in Birmingham, the same as the rest of them.

On the news and in the papers there was something about the bombing every day. But no more official information seemed to be available. The judicial cogs were turning and there was nothing more Joe Bloggs on the street could do.

"What time does it say the service starts?" Lenny asked her dad.

He turned back to the news-in-briefs in the paper. "Eleven o'clock."

"Will you go?" asked her mother.

"I don't think so. I don't feel like doing much without Jax." Or Nick, she added to herself.

And on everything went as normal, when Lenny just wanted to scream at everyone that this terrible thing had happened and that terrible things had happened to their friends and loved ones. Why was everyone carrying on as if nothing had happened?

"Why is everyone carrying on as if nothing has happened?" she said out loud.

There was a beat, and then ten-year-old Vicky replied.

"Because if we didn't, then they've won."

Monday

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

Across town, in a shabby bedsit in Moseley, Cóilín was packing. He didn't have very many belongings at the flat so it didn't take him long. He wasn't ready to leave just yet. But it would be in the next day or so.

He paused in his packing to flick through the Post & Mail. There was a news story about a memorial service at the cathedral that had been held in town at the weekend, led by the Bishop of Birmingham, in memory of all those who had lost their lives during Thursday's atrocity. Cóilín checked there was nothing of interest on the following page and he carefully clipped the story out.

He riffled through the rest of the paper and spotted another interesting item. The men that had been picked up in the early hours of Friday morning and brought back to Birmingham were probably going to be charged, along with a sixth man.

Very carefully, he clipped that story out too and he pasted both items into his scrapbook before stowing it away again in his hiding place. It would be perfectly safe there until he was ready to leave.

Chapter 22

Wednesday

Lenny

Coroner's Court, Birmingham City Centre

In a part of town that normal folk very rarely venture can be found the county coroner's court.

Lenny reeled at what she had just heard. "Jax is getting her own inquest?" she said, stunned almost speechless.

"That's what they said," said her mother beside her.

"But...but...what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure," said Hattie Rainbow, getting her gloves out of her handbag and pulling them on, one by one. "We'll wait for Mr and Mrs Hardy when we leave. If anyone will know, Mr Hardy will."

They stood up and started to make their way out of the building, but were pushed aside by two men who were clearly in more of a hurry.

"Huh!" muttered one of the men to the other. "That Jacqueline Hardy one'll be getting special treatment just cos her dad's an MP." He pushed his National Health glasses up his nose.

"One rule for us, another for them," agreed his companion.

Lenny blinked at their backs as she and her mother followed them out. She didn't know what to say, but it appeared the men had more than that to say on the matter.

"Can't believe they closed the inquest already," said NHS specs.

"Nah," agreed his pal. "People of Brum aren't important enough, obviously."

Hattie Rainbow tapped the one with the glasses on the shoulder as they were all pulled along by the crowd leaving the courtroom.

"If you were listening," she said, in her best telephone voice, "there is apparently a separate enquiry already under way."

The man looked her up and down, turned away again and sniffed. Then he said to his friend, "What do yer think of Villa's chances on Friday?"

"Who they playin'?" asked the other man.

"Oxford," said the first.

His mate turned up his nose. "Three - nil to Villa," he said.

"It will more likely be a draw," Hattie said to Lenny, which earned her another sneer from the men in front.

They all spilled out of the courtroom into the tiled foyer and the two men made a fast getaway, but Hattie and Lenny waited for Jax's parents to catch up with them. They both looked pale and Mrs Hardy seemed tranquillised as she kept her tears at bay. Mr Hardy placed a protective arm around his wife's shoulder and gave Lenny and her mom a weak smile.

After the usual condolences, Hattie said, "We didn't really understand why they won't be including Jacqueline with the others."

Mr Hardy shook his head. "I'm not sure what we can say at this stage, but it seems they don't believe Jacqueline was killed by the bombs."

"Then what...?" said Lenny. "How?"

"That's what we hope to find out," he said.

Thursday

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

Across town, in a shabby bedsit in Moseley, Cóilín saw a news story in the paper about the inquest closing at the coroner's court. It didn't say very much, just that the inquest into the pub bombings had been closed and was due to be superseded by another enquiry.

However, the inquest into the death of Jacqueline Hardy, the daughter of the Right Honourable Roger Hardy, MP, would be opened the following week.

Very carefully, Cóilín cut the item out and pasted it into his scrapbook before hiding the book at the back of his album case. Then he carefully pushed the whole lot back into his secret hidey hole.

Lenny

Elmdon Old Village

Mr Hardy, Jax's famous dad - the Right Honourable Roger Hardy MP, to give him his full and correct title - went back to London to do his job. Lenny and her friends went back to work. But until Jax could be properly laid to rest, Lenny found herself remembering things, both with happiness and with sadness. And every time she felt happy, she promptly felt guilty.

She remembered the first time they had ever met at dance school aged five. Jacqueline Hardy was the new girl to be made friends with by the slightly older Elaine Rainbow, who loaned the frightened newcomer her baby pink hand-knitted cardigan to stop her shivering. But the girl was shivering from nerves rather than the cold and the cardigan was next to useless. Apart from on the odd occasions that Jax held it to her face and sniffed in the softness of the wool.

Lenny remembered the day they both decided their names were far too girly and fancy for the football-loving tomboys they were both turning into, despite having to dress up in pink or pale blue frothy tutus at dance class when they pranced around the studio.

And she remembered the day that Lenny had proudly introduced her new friend to the cute-looking twin mascots at her mother's football club, Nick and Shaun O'Flaherty.

The four of them became inseparable, always out on their bikes when they weren't at dance class or football games. Their favourite spot was Jubilee Park at Hobs Moat, a park made for cycle racers and young tearaways. There was a hut opposite the park that had a youth club every Friday night that they had all sneaked into one night and been thrown out of for being under age.

The girls always turned out for football training and for games, home and away, but the boys much preferred to watch the tap-dancing rather than the ballet when they supported the girls at a show or a competition.

They'd all grown up together through the growing pains and gangling adolescence, and when the dance school told Lenny she was growing too tall too quickly to stay, it took her and the boys to convince Jax to stay on.

"It won't be the same without Lenny," she had complained.

"But you're going to be a prima ballerina," said Nick with a wink, reminding them all about the number of times she'd said it.

Chapter 23

Lenny

Lenny smiled to herself as she recalled almost each and every time Jax had told them all that she was going to be a prima ballerina. Then the horrible gnawing guilt once again immediately tripped along behind the remembered happiness.

She remembered the time they had all convinced Jax to stay at the dance school without her. Her memory wandered again and she remembered something else.

Lenny had, of course, promised that they'd all still go along to watch Jax dance and that they'd all wait downstairs in the foyer or outside for her to finish and join them.

"Would you really?" Jax asked.

"Of course," Nick said. "To be sure. You come and watch us play football, don't you?"

Lenny thought that Nick was putting the accent on at first, for a joke. But as the years passed and the accent grew stronger, she had mulled over this strange phenomenon with her friend.

"Have you noticed the way Nick talks, Jax?"

"No," Jax replied. "Is he getting a lisp? Is his voice breaking?"

Both girls laughed.

"Jax, he's almost seventeen. I think his voice broke at about the same time they were both chucked out of the school choir."

"Then I don't know what you mean," Jax admitted.

"Well..." Lenny wondered how best to frame it. "He talks with an Irish accent. He says the same things an Irish person would say, the same expressions and sayings."

"But they are Irish, aren't they?" Jax asked. "O'Flaherty's an Irish name and they both went to the same Irish schools as you."

"They're not Irish schools, they're Catholic schools," Lenny argued. "There are just a lot of Irish people who also happen to be Catholic. I'm not Irish."

"No, but you don't have an Irish name either. Rainbow is an old English name, apparently. It came to this country with William the Conqueror."

Lenny frowned and wondered how Jax would even know such a thing when she didn't. But she pushed it to one side for now and persisted with her subject.

"No, they're both Brummies - they're twins, for goodness sake. I don't know why I keep saying 'both'! Their parents were born here too, and they don't have

Irish accents either. Not like some of the kids I did know at school. You can visit their houses and it's like visiting Little Ireland. But Shaun and Nick and their family talk just like you and me...only a bit less posh than you do."

Now, as she recollected the words, Lenny had no idea how this long-ago conversation was suddenly so fresh in her memory. Perhaps Nick was playing on her mind. She'd not seen him since before the explosions. Or maybe it was the conversation she'd had with Shaun at the football game at the weekend about how un-Irish he is and so, therefore, he shouldn't be tarred with the same brush as the men the police had arrested and charged almost immediately.

Jax thought that perhaps it was the new people Nick had started to work with since leaving school. Perhaps they were broad Irish and perhaps what had begun as lighthearted mimicking had stuck.

There were a lot of perhapses in there.

Lots of things had changed since they were very young children, apart from Lenny's mother still not allowing girls onto her team. Jax had left dance school after all when she finished secondary school, after failing to win a place at the Royal Ballet in London. Mr Hardy, already a very busy and well-established MP, had offered to buy her a place in another private dance school. But the light had gone out and Jax decided she had a different vocation in life now. If she couldn't be a dancer on merit, there was no way she was going to buy her way in. No, Jax was going to be a nurse now and, in fact, she was already in her third year of training to be state registered.

Only she was dead.

"She would have made a good nurse," Lenny mused to Shaun one day.

"She would have made a better dancer," he replied. "If she hadn't deliberately flunked her audition, she'd still be alive."

"What do you mean?" asked Lenny, her head snapping around to face him. "Deliberately flunked it?"

"She didn't want to go to London, Laine," said Shaun. "Didn't you know that? There's been talk of the ballet moving to the Birmingham Hippodrome, but as that doesn't seem to have materialised yet...I can't believe you didn't know."

"But it was her lifelong dream--"

"She didn't want to leave her family and friends behind."

It made sense, but Lenny couldn't help feeling hurt that Shaun knew and she didn't.

Dear Shaun.

With Jax gone and Nick missing, the younger twin was fast becoming Lenny's constant companion of choice, even at work, even though they were both in different departments at the council offices opposite the fire station at Lancaster Circus. They sometimes managed to catch the same bus into work in the mornings. They started to meet up for their dinner in the basement canteen. And they'd often travel home on the same bus too. County Hall was far enough away from the carnage that they didn't have to endure a constant daily reminder, beyond their own guilt at having escaped injury-free.

"Have you heard from your brother?" she asked him over a sandwich.

"He calls home every night now. We all get to chat to him if we're in."

"Do you think he'll come to the funeral?"

"No. Not even if he wanted to..." As though realising what he'd said, he left the sentence hanging in the air.

Lenny wasn't letting him off so lightly. "Are you saying he doesn't want to go to the funeral?"

Shaun shrugged. "That's what he said."

"But even if he did..." she prompted him.

"We're too Irish."

Lenny sighed. She was starting to tire of this exact same conversation every time. "But you're not Irish," she said firmly.

"There are many who would disagree," replied Shaun. "Too many."

"Does that mean you're not going to the funeral either?" Shaun shrugged again. "She was one of your oldest and best friends!"

But Shaun didn't want to discuss it.

December 1974

Chapter 24

Thursday 5 December 1974

The Right Honourable Roger Hardy, MP

Westminster, London

Roger Hardy MP was in a hurry. He'd been allowed to take several days off work as compassionate leave following the sudden and tragic death of his only and beloved daughter Jacqueline. But he had to come to work for a few days too. Everything was all such a mess. Now he needed - wanted - to get home to his wife as quickly as possible.

As he slammed the car door, he played in his head Jimmy Saville's 'clunk, click every trip', and he fastened his seatbelt. The black saloon glided almost silently from his designated parking space in the underground car park.

But just as it emerged into the early Christmas traffic, he heard another click. What he didn't hear was the massive explosion that followed as the car bomb ripped him and the car apart.

Roger Hardy MP wouldn't be going anywhere else ever again.

Lenny

Elmdon Old Village

For the first time since the explosion, since Jacqueline's death and Nick's disappearance, that constant knot of nauseous pain was missing from Lenny's gut. Oh, it was still there at times, like first thing in the morning or last thing at night. But generally it had started to ease off.

Focus at work had shifted back to work. There were fewer horror stories concerning anyone with an Irish name or an Irish accent. They were still banned

from pubs and shops, but even there the trouble was starting to die down again. The hate talk was also dying down. Lenny's mom was going to let the Irish lads play football again, and the so-called Irish lads too.

Her dad was right. It would all blow over eventually.

Lenny was laying the table for their evening meal, Vicky was helping, when their dad wandered in through the front door, white as a sheet and missing his usual gusto.

"Dad?" asked Lenny, pausing in her chore. Even Vicky knew not to run and greet him like she usually did.

It was Thursday. There was no Mandy comic for her, and no Jackie for Lenny. Their dad always picked up their magazines from the NSS newsagent on his way home from work when he collected his evening paper. When there was a paper to pick up, that is.

"Put the wireless on, Elaine," he ordered, as he shrugged out of his heavy car coat. She did as she was told and by the time the radio had warmed up, he'd changed his shoes for his slippers.

The news flash had already interrupted the regular radio programme and was part-way through.

"...The explosion happened outside Westminster as the local member of parliament began his drive home to his constituency for the weekend..."

Oh no! The radio was always tuned in to the local BBC channel. They heard the television burst into life in the front room. Hattie emerged through the door, wringing her apron between her hands. "It's on the television too," she said, and they all piled in to watch.

"That's Jax's house," exclaimed Lenny as she recognised the familiar building. "That's her dad's picture! It's...Mr Hardy..."

It was all starting again, but the information filtered through to Lenny's consciousness in fits and starts.

"Roger Hardy, MP for Yardley and Elmdon South," said the news reporter, "was leaving Parliament for the weekend when his car exploded. It is believed the Unofficial Liberation of Ireland Movement, a splinter group no longer associated with the IRA, is claiming responsibility."

The story went on to say that Mr Hardy, who was killed instantly, had recently lost his daughter to the Birmingham pub bombings that had taken place the previous month. And then they switched to the MP's rise to fame over the years. No one else had been injured.

"They're upping their game," said Tom Rainbow.

"But why aren't they admitting it?" asked Hattie.

"They still haven't claimed the pubs either," said Lenny.

The three adults alternated between looking at each other and at the black and white television set.

Then Vicky, aged ten, piped up. "Because it isn't them."

"You shouldn't even be watching this, Victoria Rainbow," said Hattie, bundling her youngest child back through the kitchen and into the dining room.

"But they said it was someone else!" said the girl.

"Finish laying the table like a good girl," Lenny heard her mother say. She heard the radio flick off too.

"But it smells burnt now," complained Vicky.

"That doesn't matter," said Hattie. "It's the same underneath. The burnt bits will scrape off easily enough."

Lenny turned her nose up at the thought as she continued to half listen to the conversation in the other room and half watch the news programme on the telly. Vicky was right. The news reader had said someone else had claimed responsibility for the outrage.

"I don't think I could eat anything else now anyway," she said to her dad.

"Rubbish," he snorted. "It's a bad business but we can't let them dictate our lives like that. Whoever they are," he added as an afterthought. "I've not even heard of this unofficial whatever it is."

"Poor Mrs Hardy," said Hattie, coming back into the front room.

"It probably goes with the job these days," said Tom.

"Maybe. But that doesn't make it acceptable. And young Jacqueline had nothing to do with any of it. That poor woman has lost her entire family in two separate incidents within weeks of each other."

They watched the television a while longer before Hattie went to rescue their tea. Tom Rainbow switched the set off and Lenny sighed at the thought of having to let it warm up again after tea. Her dad and his economy drive.

"She'll not let those lads play now," he said sadly, shaking his head.

And the two of them followed after Hattie and joined Vicky at the back of the house.

Friday

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

In a shabby bedsit in Moseley, Cóilín saw a news story in the evening newspaper about Roger Hardy's death.

"Shit!" he said out loud. "Shit! Bastards!"

Hadn't that family suffered enough?

He followed the story from the front page through to the bottom of page 4, where it continued and concluded. Then, very carefully, he cut the items out and pasted them into his scrapbook with the others.

Minutes later, Cóilín paced the floor of his shabby bedsit again, holding the phone to his ear and practically frothing at the mouth.

"Kay! The fucking car was supposed to be empty. The bomb was supposed to go off in the middle of the night. We discussed this! Ages ago."

Sergeant Kay's sigh was audible down the phone. He was clearly losing patience, but with whom Cóilín wasn't sure. And for the first time he wondered if they were screwing Kay too.

"You didn't know, did you?" C  il  n said quietly.

"The order must have been changed at the last moment," was all Sergeant Kay could muster.

"Hasn't that family suffered enough?" C  il  n was feeling his own guilt here too.

"They won't know the girl was murdered--"

"She wasn't murdered. It was an accident!"

"Well, her death wasn't in the plan--"

"And her father's was?" snarled C  il  n. "I don't remember it that way at all."

"My understanding was the same as yours," said Sergeant Kay.

"They must have used some kind of timer or remote control. Why couldn't they just blow up the damn car, like they were supposed to?"

Sergeant Kay was quiet again at the other end of the phone, but C  il  n could hear him sucking on a cigarette or a pipe or something.

"I've had enough," said C  il  n. "I'm going to turn myself in. I can't have any more deaths on my conscience."

"You do that and you're a dead man," warned Kay.

"I'm a dead man anyway," said C  il  n quietly.

"Look, don't do anything hasty," the voice at the other end of the phone cajoled. "I'll see what I can do at our end."

"Forget it. I'm going to the coppers. You can't do anything. The order to kill me has probably already been made."

"But I can help you, son."

C  il  n could hear a slight note of panic in the other man's voice. Well, good. He was glad. If he went down, Sergeant Kay was more than likely going down with him.

"It's too late, Sergeant," he said.

C  il  n put the phone down and thought about his options. He had Frankie's motorbike. If necessary, he could disappear. There were places he could go, people who could help. And his girlfriend would probably go with him, or know where he could go.

C  il  n stashed his stash and left the flat.

Chapter 25

Monday 16 December 1974, 10:00am

Birmingham Coroner's Court

Coroner's Court, Birmingham City Centre

On Monday 16 December 1974, the inquest opened into the death of Jacqueline Hardy, aged twenty, from Solihull in Warwickshire - or in the West Midlands as it had recently been moved to. It was a closed court with only close family and the press invited. But with the sudden death of the girl's father only a few days before, the poor thing didn't even have her parents there.

A policeman was questioned, a civilian who had helped at the scene, a medical professional - presumably an ambulance driver - a doctor from the hospital, and Miss Hardy's GP. All gave evidence. But it didn't take long to sum up the girl's life, or her death.

Dr Lionel Fisher, one of the coroner Dr Billington's assistants, ruled that the death of Jacqueline Hardy was murder by person or persons unknown and that the killer had tried to cover her death up with the Birmingham pub bombings of the previous month, as they were fast becoming known. But her body hadn't been found inside either of the two buildings, she hadn't been crushed, she hadn't been buried or burned, and she hadn't lost any of her limbs.

Jacqueline Hardy had died as a result of a scarf being pulled tightly around her throat. She had also suffered a blow to the head, caused following or during a struggle with the aforementioned person or persons unknown. But she had been still alive, if unconscious.

Bruises on her shoulders indicated that she had been pushed. Finger marks on her upper arms suggested that she had been held. The blow to the head was caused by striking the corner of a steel object, probably one of the industrial dustbins she had been found beside at the rear of the properties on New Street.

The scarf had been still at the scene. It was a scarf in the colours of the Irish flag. White, gold and green.

The court was adjourned so that the family could be informed, so that they may start plans for burying their loved one, and pending further enquiries. It was reiterated that the inquest into the death of Jacqueline Hardy was not to be included with that of the other victims of the Birmingham pub bombings.

Sergeant Kay

Hagley Road, Birmingham City Centre

"Jacqueline Hardy," said the man they called Sergeant Kay into the phone.

"What about her?" asked Seamus Quinn.

"Her inquest said that she wasn't killed by any of the bombs."

"What of it?"

"You were supposed to take her alive."

"And?"

"They said she was strangled." Kay sighed. The whole thing had been a cock-up from start to finish.

"That's very sad," said Seamus without any intonation in his voice.

"With an Irish flag."

Seamus said nothing.

Kay was fed up of the whole bloody mess.

"You strangled her with a scarf."

"I did?"

"Well I know I bloody didn't."

"Look, Sarge," said Seamus through lungs full of cigarette smoke. "What's your point?"

"You weren't supposed to kill her!"

"What were we supposed to do with her?"

"You were supposed to kidnap her to get a ransom off her dad. You promised she'd be looked after."

"Her dad's already dead," Seamus reminded him in that same flat tone.

"But he wasn't supposed to be!" hissed Sergeant Kay through gritted teeth.

"She was already unconscious when I reached her, Sarge. She and that stupid Maguire had a fight. She knew who he was. It would have taken too long to get her out of there and people would have noticed. It was safer that she wouldn't be able to talk whenever she woke up."

"You said she'd be safe," said Kay.

"Look, Sergeant Kay. The girl died. It was an accident. I just helped her along the way. We can't bring her back. We have to move on. You have to move on. As you're so fond of saying yourself, this is war. People die in war. What's one more?"

He hung up before Kay could reply.

Sergeant Kay blew out a sigh of frustration. Either wires had been crossed very badly or this had been a set-up from the start.

His bombs weren't supposed to go off. They weren't supposed to blow up the Tavern in the Town or The Mulberry Bush. The Rotunda and the tax office were the original targets. The code he'd been given and had passed along to C  il  n Maguire should have alerted the police, given them time to evacuate, locate and discover the bombs were dummies. It was supposed to be a scare. No one was supposed to die. It was supposed to be a massive waste of police resources.

Now he had found out that another bomb had failed to go off on the Hagley Road. Kay didn't even have a target on the Hagley Road. And within hours of the bombs going off, police in Morecambe had arrested five men he'd never even heard of. All in connection to what was supposed to have been just a hoax.

It seemed the girl had been a genuine mistake, an accident gone wrong. But what could he do? It had happened and he was sorry. Perhaps it would help the overall cause, the cause of instilling hatred of the Irish into the British public. Although no one had actually admitted responsibility for the pub bombings in Birmingham, everybody assumed it was the IRA. Kay thought he knew different, but now he wasn't so sure.

Soon it would be time for him to go home. He hoped Seamus Quinn didn't become too much of a loose canon. He hoped that C  il  n Maguire would disappear from the face of the earth too, for his own safety. He quite liked the boy, and now he was starting to find out how Maguire might be feeling.

It wasn't nice to be double-crossed, especially from people you knew, respected and trusted.

Tuesday

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

Across town, in a shabby bedsit in Moseley, Cóilín saw the news story in the paper about Jacqueline Hardy's inquest.

He paused a moment to think of the girl whose life he'd helped to snuff out. She was still alive when he'd abandoned her. It was an accident, but had he not run away, she might still be alive.

Very carefully, he cut the item out of the newspaper and pasted it into his scrapbook with the others. Then he wrote his own account of what had happened in the diary.

Chapter 26

Friday 20 December 1974

Cóilín

Moseley, Birmingham

It was Friday by the time Cóilín returned to his flat. And dark. He didn't intend to stay, he just wanted to collect the rest of his stuff before going back to his girlfriend's flat. They were moving in with her family for the Christmas holiday.

The motorbike made a lot of noise. That was because there were no baffles on the exhaust. He'd already been moaned at by some of his neighbours for coming home late and waking them up. That was about the only time they spoke to one another, when they had something to complain about. Frankie had let him keep the bike a bit longer as he'd picked up a few extra runs for Christmas. So long as he put his own petrol in, Frankie was glad it was being used.

It was fucking cold, though, at this time of the year. And it got dark way too early.

Cóilín parked the bike at the newsagent's on the corner and nipped in before it closed to get some cigarettes and matches. Then he walked the short distance to the flat, hunching inside his battered biker's jacket against the cold and damp, hands thrust deep inside his jeans pockets. He'd pick up his donkey jacket while he was at the flat and wear it over the top of the leather for extra warmth.

As he drew nearer to his road, he saw a flare in the bus stop as someone lit up a cigarette, and he paused as he recognised the face in the glow from the lighter. He was having trouble getting it to light. Perhaps the wick was damp or he was out of lighter fuel. But when the flame finally illuminated the man's face, intent on the task in hand, he was instantly visible.

Seamus Quinn.

What was he doing here? How did he even know where Cóilín lived? Cóilín was sure he'd never given him the address. Never given anyone the address, in fact. Not even his bird. This could only mean one thing. Seamus hadn't come to be sociable. He'd found out where Cóilín lived, in no doubt an underhand manner, and was here now to take Cóilín by surprise.

Seamus was going to kill him.

Fuck! All of his stuff was up in that bedsit. All of his cuttings. His accounts of what had gone one. His insurance! Even some of his records were up there.

And the donkey jacket.

Well, it was tough. He'd have to leave it there now. At least it was safely stashed away. If anyone found it, they would have to strip the walls down first. C  il  n decided to risk leaving it. He could always come back another day, after this mess was all over.

C  il  n took one last look up at the flats, glanced again at Seamus, who was now smoking, huddled in the darkened corner of the bus shelter with only the glowing tip of his fag giving him away, and walked back to collect Frankie's bike.

He usually wore the old open-faced helmet over his arm, but this time he put it on. It would do to hide his hair at least, and possibly some of his face. He revved on the throttle and passed the bus stop where Seamus was lurking, looking the wrong way. The noise alerted him, though, and he turned to look at the bike and watched as C  il  n rode by.

Seamus had definitely seen him, but C  il  n was careful to make sure he didn't notice C  il  n looking at him too.

It didn't take him long to get to Frankie's, but Frankie wasn't in. So he let himself into the garden through the side gate, wheeling the bike with him.

There was an old line post there that Frankie didn't use any more. If he wanted any washing drying, he'd either take it to the laundrette or leave it hanging around the house. The pebbly concrete around the base of the post had started to erode long ago, revealing the steel reinforcement inside. The post still had its pegs sticking out at the top, but one was bent and pointing down to the ground. Nevertheless, it was as good a place as any to chain the bike to and C  il  n knew it would be safe and secure.

He strapped the helmet to the side of the bike and immobilised the engine. Leaving the garden, he reached over the top of the gate to bolt it, then walked around to the front of the house and pushed the ignition key through the letterbox. Some time over Christmas he'd pay his parents a visit and get his own bike put back together and running again, and worry about getting it taxed later. He was sure they'd be delighted to get their front room back, and he'd be over the moon to be independent again.

He lit a cigarette, blowing smoke out of his eyes, and started walking towards the Maypole. His girlfriend lived in one of the posher, leafier suburbs on the other side of Birmingham. He could get a bus to the city centre and another one out again.

Chapter 27

Saturday 21 December 1974

Lenny

Birmingham City Centre

Christmas was coming. It was strange to walk through town and see fairy lights in one street full of shop windows when they were still clearing up some of the shops in New Street. Lenny caught her usual bus every morning and climbed off at the Bull Ring to skirt around town and get to work at Lancaster Circus. That's how she managed to avoid so many daily reminders.

Today was Saturday, though, and she'd finally made an effort to go into the city centre to do her Christmas shopping. The walk was too far there and back to do in her dinner break, and it was so dark when she clocked off that all she wanted to do was get home. So Saturday it had to be, and the last Saturday before Christmas was cutting it as fine as she dared.

What a difference to when it was her birthday only a few short weeks before. As the bus drove past the Irish Centre and the Barrel Organ in Digbeth, Lenny was surprised at the lack of people usually bustling around on a Saturday morning. Christmas was only days away, and even Birmingham City Football Club were at home to Liverpool. But she supposed the traffic might build up later in the day, closer to kick-off.

As usual, Lenny got off at the Bull Ring. She would have got off in the High Street as it was much closer to the shops she wanted to visit. But it was also closer to New Street and the Mulberry Bush and she wasn't sure she was ready yet to face what was left of the carnage. What if they'd completely cleared it by now and looked as though nothing had happened? No, she wasn't ready for that yet either.

So she got off at the Bull Ring and joined the crowds passing around the side of St Martin's to the markets. Rummaging through the stalls there made her feel closer to Jax, helped her remember the countless times they'd done this on their many jaunts into town. She was glad to see all the markets here as busy as ever. All three of them.

At one stall she called out a cheery 'Good morning!' to the middle-aged man who ran it and who nodded back in happy recognition. He specialised in rare secondhand records that were out of her price range, but she and Jax had still flicked through the albums to see what he had anyway.

She bought a Deep Purple patch to sew onto the back of her denim jacket. At another stall she bought a packet of rosewood-scented joss sticks and a small bottle of patchouli oil. From another stall she bought herself a pair of flared jeans and an Indian-print hippy top. And from another she bought herself a dozen silver-coloured bangles.

Then she realised that all of her purchases so far had been for herself, apart from the patchouli oil. That had been for Jax who loved it even though Lenny hated it. The smell would remind her of her friend for many years to come.

But she was supposed to be Christmas shopping.

She had her parents to buy for, her brothers and sisters, her grandmother, Shaun and Nick. She almost added Jax to the list too, but then decided she'd quite like to get something for the grave once the headstone was in place.

On her way out of the indoor part of the market she almost collided with who she thought might be Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi, who could often be seen shopping in the markets in town. Another was Roy Wood of Wizzard and The Move, who drank in the city centre pubs when he was home.

"Sorry," she muttered, and felt tingles in her tummy when 'Toni Iommi' nodded his acknowledgement. Mmm, he was nice.

She pulled herself together, pushed her way into the cold December air and made her way to Moor Street, where she could walk into town up the side of Marks & Spencer's and still avoid the Rotunda and New Street. There weren't as many shoppers as usual in the permanent shops she passed, and many had security guards outside checking shopping bags and handbags before letting shoppers in.

Lenny eventually wanted Woolworth's, which was at the top end of New Street, and she knew she could get there along the cobbled alleyways that littered the city centre. Outside the rear entrance of C&A, the Salvation Army band stoically pumped out Christmas carols. She paused long enough to listen to one of her favourites, Once in Royal David's City, which took her back to the Nativity plays at primary school. The band began another festive tune, Silent Night, their warm breaths misting white in the cold winter air.

She dropped a few shiny new pennies into the collection plate and pressed on through the doors into C&A. Here she bought a few pairs of socks, underwear and handkerchiefs for stocking-fillers for all the family. As she came out into the cobbled alley again, she saw one of the little newsagents tucked away in a recess.

In the window the shop had a handwritten note that made Lenny feel sick: NO IRISH ALLOWED. So much for forgetting everything for an hour or so. And as she made her way towards New Street, she saw other small independent shops displaying similar notices and signs.

She came out opposite the ramp that led into the shopping precinct and back to the Bull Ring and New Street Station. She could smell jacket potatoes and roasting chestnuts and she knew that was the street vendors selling food from hot carts. Even the smell of frying onions didn't stop her from feeling peckish, and she couldn't even stand the taste of fried onions.

As she crossed over, careful to avoid the buses pulling in or driving away, she couldn't stop herself from glancing to her left, downhill towards the Tavern in the Town and the Mulberry Bush. She was roughly just below the middle of New Street. Woolworth's, where she was heading next, was uphill to her right, across from Bogart's actually.

Apart from the occasional first-storey window boarded up, everything looked very...normal. The shops had already had their frontages repaired, and as the Tavern in the Town was just a door that led to a staircase, there was nothing Lenny could see from where she stood. The Mulberry Bush would be a different story.

Lenny took a deep breath and joined the queue for the hot potato seller at the bottom of the ramp. He chucked about half a dozen baby potatoes into a bag for her.

"Happy Christmas!" he said cheerfully, which brought her up a bit sharp. It was the first time anyone had said that to her so far this year.

Chapter 28

Lenny

"Happy Christmas to you too," Lenny replied, forcing a smile to reach her eyes.

"You should smile more often," he said, sprinkling salt on the baby potatoes. He twisted the bag and handed it to her, squirrelling away the coins she gave him into a pouch around his waist. As she walked away from him she opened the bag and popped potatoes one at a time into her mouth, playing the don't-let-it-touch-the-sides game. They weren't called hot potatoes for nothing and they tasted delicious.

She turned her back towards the Tavern in the Town and the Mulberry Bush and headed up the hill towards Woolworth's, where she bought all the sweets and chocolates, all the cards, wrapping paper and Sellotape. At Boots the Chemist she bought perfumes and aftershaves. And so she wandered up and down New Street buying her gifts.

After the salty potatoes, Lenny could have killed for a nice cup of tea, so she headed for the Wimpy.

"Excuse me, miss," said a deep voice as she automatically walked through the doorway of the fast food restaurant. She looked up to see two burly security men blocking her way. And that was when she noticed the thick ropes placed across the entrance. "Can you tell us why you're in the city centre today, love?"

"What?" She held up the armloads of carrier bags she'd accumulated. "Christmas shopping," she said, unnecessarily she thought.

"I'm afraid we'll have to take a look through the bags." He indicated his colleague. "We'll also have to search you, miss," he added.

"Pardon?" She looked at her bags and packages with despair. She didn't want these strangers rummaging through her things and she certainly didn't want anyone patting her down.

The first security guard pointed at a sandwich board propped up on the pavement that she also hadn't seen. "It's the bombs, love."

Lenny didn't want to be searched at all. How badly did she want that cup of tea? Not badly enough. She could get one at home and still have time to get to today's football game.

"Thanks," she said at last, licking her dry lips. "But I don't think I'll bother."

"Okay, love. We're just taking precautions."

"I know," she assured them, but she headed on around to the bus stop anyway. She'd soon be wishing she'd stayed at the Wimpy after all.

As she arrived on the corner of New Street and High Street, still keeping her eyes firmly left, she stopped short and caught her breath in her throat.

It was him! It was Nick! He was here! In town!

She stepped forward, opened her mouth to call out a greeting, but pulled herself up again, just in time.

Nick wasn't alone. He was with someone. A woman. A beautiful woman. The way he smiled down at her and looked into her eyes this wasn't any casual encounter. This was very personal, someone he knew very well. They laughed at something private, unaware of anyone or anything outside of their own little bubble. He placed a territorial arm around her waist and they both turned their faces to the shop window they were standing outside. And Lenny suddenly felt very faint.

The shop was H Samuel, the jeweller.

The window display was engagement rings.

Lenny wished she hadn't wolfed down those potatoes, wished she'd just gone for the bloody cup of tea. She was frozen to the spot, and busy passers-by jostled her in their rush to get where they were going.

Nick glanced up, looked over the top of the woman's platinum blonde head, spotted Lenny, did a quick double-take before fixing his eyes onto Lenny's. He started to smile, then hesitated, and the woman turned her lovely face too, to see who he was looking at. Nick glanced down at his companion, said something to her that made her smile and nod at Lenny too before turning back to the dazzling, sparkling, golden display.

Lenny finally moved away, held his gaze for a moment, then ran past them towards one of the buses already waiting at the other end of the High Street. She jumped onto the bus without even checking the number on the front, and ran upstairs.

She'd seen quite enough for one day.

Nick had clearly moved on. It was time for her to do the same.

Chapter 29

Monday 23 December 1974

Lenny

St Nicholas's Church, Elmdon Park

It wasn't so much a funeral as a memorial service. Yes, there was a coffin there, for Jax. But there was also a coffin missing. For Mr Hardy.

Jacqueline 'Jax' Hardy and Elaine 'Lenny' Rainbow had been friends for as long as forever. They'd grown up together and they had been inseparable.

Until now.

Lenny didn't want to cry. She didn't know why other than she didn't want a bunch of strangers, and posh ones at that, to see how ugly she looked when she did. Her nose would blow up like a big red balloon, her lips - already fairly thick - seemed to spread even further across her face and blend with her skin.

And her eyes didn't just turn red around the rims, but they puffed up like an allergic reaction to a wasp sting.

And then there were the big fat red blotches that broke out all over her face and down her neck. She didn't like to think about the bubbles of snot she always seemed to blow out of her nose too. Lenny had never been a pretty, delicate little weeper like Jax was, but a honking great bawler-come-snot-monster.

No, it was far too embarrassing, and much safer all around, to not bother. Better to be considered a heartless ice queen than to make such a horrible show of herself.

This was Lenny's first ever funeral, which made it all the more strange. She did know, however, that there was usually a coffin and there weren't usually two people being remembered.

She hardly knew anyone either, which was a mixed blessing. It was easy enough to avoid Mrs Hardy because the woman was busy, although Lenny knew she'd have to at least pay her respects, which would no doubt start her off blubbing anyway. So later she could leave that the better. In fact, she knew that the moment she uttered a word to anyone would be the moment she'd also start to cry.

It wouldn't be fair to break down in front of Mrs Hardy, though. She'd lost her husband and her only daughter within days of each other, and in the most horrific of manners, and here was Lenny worrying about a snotty nose.

Lenny's mum Hattie Rainbow had come with her to the memorial service, both to represent the family and to support her daughter.

Lenny's dad, Tom Rainbow, had gone into work.

Her brothers had never had much to do with Jax and her family, with them being so much older than the girls.

Lenny's older sister Brenda was at the hospital with her husband Dennis, again, who'd had his leg blown off in the Birmingham pub bombings the previous month.

And Vicky, Lenny's little sister, was at their grandmother's for the day. School had broken up over a week before, but Hattie decided that Vicky was too young to go to a funeral.

Local parents had pretty much managed to shield their primary school-age children from a lot of the recent coverage and, anyway, the Roman Catholic junior and infant school was still predominantly Irish.

The O'Flaherty twins, Shaun and Nick, weren't there either. Shaun had stayed away on purpose, and Nick was who-knew-where with who-knew-who. Lenny was disappointed with them both. They'd all been the best of friends with Jax for as long as they'd all known each other.

Shaun had deliberately chosen not to be there in order to avoid further conflict. It didn't matter that he was a Brummie born and bred. He had an Irish name, and that was enough for some. Lenny tried to understand how he felt, but failed.

Lenny used the time to let memories fill her mind so she didn't have to concentrate on the service or the coffins, missing or otherwise.

She pictured herself and her three friends riding off on their bikes around Elmdon Park or down to Hobs Moat. Both parks had woods and were hilly and they'd all speed along, just cycling up and down the dips and bumps.

Or they'd go conkering in September and fall out over whose conker was the biggest.

Or they'd argue over who had the best bruises, caused by falling off their bikes or being hit by the giant conkers.

There were the times they'd played cowboys and indians or war games or witch hunts in the fields that surrounded their homes, with other groups of friends. But the four of them always ended up in the same team or the same army or on the same side.

The four of them.

Shaun and Nick should have been there.

Chapter 30

Lenny

"I don't want to go to the crematorium, Mom," Lenny said to Hattie after the service had finished.

"Why ever not?" asked Hattie.

"I don't want to see all those flames," said Lenny.

"Don't be daft," said Hattie. "The coffin will either go down into a chamber beneath the building, or a conveyor belt will take it through a pair of curtains. Sometimes they close the curtains first. And sometimes they don't do anything until everyone has left. I don't know how they do it at the Robin Hood crematorium, but the fire itself will no doubt be in a different part of the building."

Lenny wrinkled up her nose. "I think any of those might be just as bad. No, I think I want to go home. Or even back to work."

"But what about the wake?" asked Hattie.

After the cremation at Robin Hood Crematorium, which was on the border between Shirley in Solihull and Hall Green in Birmingham, everyone was going to the Saracen's Head on the Stratford Road in Shirley, where there would probably be a running buffet.

Mrs Hardy had decided against South Yardley Crematorium because Robin Hood was closer to where they lived now. South Yardley was closer to Elmdon Town, where Lenny and her family and the O'Flahertys still lived.

"It's not the same without Shaun and Nick here," said Lenny, noticing her mother's lips tighten as she mentioned their names. She wasn't wholly sure what it was her mother disapproved of. But she didn't have the energy for an argument and, to be honest, she'd been feeling a little unwell all morning and didn't want to be sick over Christmas.

"I'd like to go home," she said firmly. "I've paid my respects. But I want to remember Jax in my own way. She's inside my heart and she's inside my head. We still have conversations all the time. I just want to go home. Please?"

"All right, then," conceded her mother.

"You can still go if you want," added Lenny. "I can catch a bus home. You can keep the taxi.

"No," said Hattie. "I only really came to be with you. I'm glad of the excuse myself. They're not very nice, are they? Funerals."

"No," said Lenny.

Mother and daughter went to rejoin their taxi, and they headed home.

"Will Shaun be playing football on Saturday?" Lenny asked, for want of conversation when they got in. But she'd also been wondering why he hadn't been on the team sheet these past couple of games.

Hattie Rainbow managed the very successful Elmdon Town Football Club and she decided who played and who didn't. Slowly, realisation was dawning on Lenny.

Her mother made a great show of taking her coat off, changing her shoes for a pair of slippers, putting a pinny on over her dress, switching the kettle on, making tea...

"Mom...?"

"No," said Hattie.

"Why not?" asked Lenny. "He's been a member of that football team for as long as I have. Longer. Just because Nick can't be bothered to show his face doesn't mean you have to keep his brother from the team--"

"Nick's a better player," interrupted Hattie, but her daughter carried on anyway.

"He's as Brummie as me. As English as our Tommy and Timmy. More British than Peter bloody Krull or Samuel blinkin' Cohen. I can't believe you're being such a narrow-minded bigot--"

"Careful now, Elaine," warned her mother.

"Shaun O'Flaherty is NOT Irish. He did NOT plant those bombs. He did NOT blow one of his best friends to Kingdom Come. He did NOT take our Den's leg away. And nor did his brother."

Hattie calmly allowed her daughter to catch her breath before quietly and firmly replying.

"When you're quite finished, madam. For your information, Shaun asked for some time off. He doesn't feel like playing football and some of the others are a bit uncomfortable with him in the team at the moment in any case. But they wanted to play on. It was Shaun's decision, Shaun's request. He also thinks it might be for the best, for now, and I happen to agree with him. So he's off the team. For now. Until he is ready to come back.

"And before you sit down to drink this tea," she continued. "I suggest you go and wash your mouth out with soap and water. You do NOT speak to me like that, under ANY circumstances. Are we clear?"

"Um, yes," Lenny mumbled. "Sorry."
"Good!"

to be continued...

a thomas & ellie short story

Wordsworth Shorts



– Diane Wordsworth –

trick or treat

trick or treat

The character of Thomas first came to me overnight. By morning he had an entire short story and I spent the day writing it up. At the end of the day, I sent him off to market. The very next morning, an acceptance was waiting for me in my in box. It was the fastest I'd ever written a successful short story, from initial idea to sale. It still is.

Thomas made a new friend in his little story, Ellie. And for Halloween, I gave them another story, this time featuring both of them large.

~~~

Thomas stood at his new bedroom window staring across the village green towards the small parish church and its graveyard beyond. He couldn't actually see it from where he was standing, apart from a corner of the church's Norman tower (he knew it was Norman because they'd told them in class), but he knew it was there and, more importantly, *they* knew that he was there. They'd woken him up in the night...

"What happened this time?" asked his mum as she sorted out some clothes for him to wear.

"Dead mummies," he said, shuddering at the memory. "All the old graves opened and out came a load of dead mummies looking for children who weren't asleep."

"You're doing Ancient Egypt at school now, then?" asked his mum.

He turned and looked at her in surprise, eyes wide. His mum seemed to know everything. "How did you know that?" he said. "We only started yesterday."

"Because we don't have mummies in England, let alone any dead ones. But they do in Ancient Egypt."

"Oh," he said, turning back to the window. "So how did they get into our graveyard? Did they dig a tunnel all the way from Egypt?"

"No they didn't. It was just another bad dream. I'll have to see about finding you a dreamcatcher. That imagination of yours is amazing."

Thomas dressed himself while his mum straightened the bed clothes. "Ellie's going Trick or Treating on Thursday and she says I'm to go with her. "Can I please, Mummy?"

"You must be joking," she laughed. "You'll have nightmares about monsters for weeks if you do that."

"Don't be silly, Mummy. It'll only be us dressed up as monsters. There won't be any *real* monsters. And Ellie says that the villagers will be so scared of us that they'll give us sweets and chocolates just to go away. And some will even give us 20p. How can I have nightmares about children dressed up in silly costumes and sweets and chocolates and 20ps?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

He knew his mum was thinking about it. He'd never been Trick or Treating before and it sounded like fun. Everything here was still new to him and everything here was fun.

“Some of the older children will take us around if you’re too scared to,” he continued. “But it’s only the village. It’s not like where we used to live.

“Can I please, Mum? Can I?”

~~~~~

“There’s no such thing as dead mummies,” said Ellie at school later that day. “Or ghosties and ghoulies or proper monsters. They’re always just people dressed up in silly costumes trying to scare other people. I bet if you punched one of your mummies in your dream on the nose, it would just disappear in a cloud of dust. Poof!”

“But why do people want to scare other people if it isn’t Trick or Treat night?” asked Thomas, before taking a bite from his apple and then munching noisily.

“For fun. Because they’re nasty bullies and like to frighten people. Because they’re greedy and want to steal or keep something valuable to themselves. To make little children do as they’re told. Lots of reasons. Haven’t you ever seen Scooby Doo?”

Thomas had his mouth full so just shook his head sadly.

“You can watch it at mine. I have loads on DVD. And if you still don’t believe me, I’ll prove it to you when we go Trick or Treating. There will be lots of us.”

Thomas could hardly wait. It all sounded very exciting.

~~~~~

After watching several Scooby Doos at Ellie’s, the two of them spent a couple of days pretending they were solving mysteries, just like those ‘pesky kids’. Thomas was Shaggy, because he thought he was funny, and Ellie played Velma, because they had the same hair colour.

They also had some ideas for their Halloween costumes. Ellie was going to be a mummy, but not a dead one, to prove her point to Thomas. She raided her mum’s industrial-sized first aid box for bandages of all sizes. Thomas was going to be a skeleton. His mum was making the costume for him.

On Halloween night they were teamed up with a couple of older sisters, Kitty (a witch) and Claire (a lady vampire), whose parents were on the village committee.

Armed with water pistols and buckets for goodies, off they went, along with most of the other village children in their little clusters. It was a like a big outdoor party.

“Trick or Treat!” they shouted, or they roared or growled whenever someone opened a door.

Thomas was delighted when all of the villagers they visited were genuinely frightened to see them standing on their doorsteps and only too eager to fill their buckets with chewy sweets and lollipops to make them go away.

A few householders ignored them, but the older girls had warned them that some might. So they squirted their front windows with their water pistols. Other houses were in total darkness.

They passed a lot of their friends in the lanes and had fun guessing who they were and what they were dressed up as. And all around, the darkened village was illuminated by pumpkin lanterns of various shapes and sizes, glowing like fairy lights at Christmas.

“See,” said Ellie. “Just people dressed up in silly costumes, just like us. There’s no such thing as ghosties and ghoulies and monsters and mummies.”

“But we haven’t been anywhere near the graveyard yet,” protested Thomas. He wanted to see it in the dark to see if it was as scary as in his dreams. “That’s where the real dead mummies keep coming from.”

“We can go back that way if you want,” said Kitty the witch.

“Some of us are meeting there later,” said Claire the lady vampire. “When we’ve finished at your party, at the welfare hall, the rest of us have a party in the church yard.”

“We can go that way if you want,” agreed Ellie, the live mummy.

Thomas felt butterflies in his tummy. It was dark and damp and a little bit foggy by now, muffling their footsteps and making the other children sound further away. He imagined all sorts of beasties lurking in the graveyard at night, but he was supposed to be his mummy’s brave little soldier...

“Look,” said Kitty. “If anything jumps out at you, just yell as loud as you can. It’ll soon run away.”

“Or punch it on the nose,” reminded Ellie.

And so the four of them turned towards the church yard to take a shortcut to the miners’ welfare hall. Thomas noticed that Ellie was clinging to him as tightly as he was clinging to her. But they were both awestruck when they did reach the graveyard.

The old church building was illuminated from below by soft, orange lighting, picking out all of the shadows and carvings. There were more pumpkin lanterns casting mini pools of light along the footpath that wound around the old building and into the yard itself, with some hanging from the old lychgate roof, and up the steps leading to the church main door. But aside from that some of the graves and tombs had tiny solar-powered lights of their own twinkling in the darkness, and a wind chime hanging from a tree tinkled softly.

It didn’t look like a graveyard where monsters and mummies lived. It looked like a magical fairyland. And nothing jumped out at them from behind any headstones.



The older kids helped to supervise the youngsters at their village Halloween party back at the welfare hall.

There was a disco with coloured and silver balls swinging from the ceiling, dancing, a soft drinks table, a running buffet, and lots of seasonal games contests, like apple bobbing (in water and in flour), blind man’s bluff, charades and conkers. And they had toffee apples and hotdogs to eat.





Thomas slept surprisingly well that night without a single nightmare. The next time he did dream about dead mummies coming to take him underground, all the way back to Egypt, he tried yelling at them in his dream, as loudly as he could, but nothing came out.

He panicked momentarily, but then punched one of the mummies right on the nose.

It disappeared in a cloud of dust. Poof!

Oh, he liked that one. But he was never troubled by nightmares ever again, which disappointed him because he wanted to punch them all on the nose...

the end

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brand-new Marcie Craig short story: *A Day at the Races*

brand-new flash fiction: *Valentine's Date*

a complete brand-new novella: *Stevie Beck and the Christmas Tree Mystery*

brand-new Mavis Braithwaite short story: *Deadly Deeds in Morecambe Bay*

part 3 (novel excerpt): *Catch the Rainbow*

short story from the archives: *New Year's Revolution*

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