

WORDS WORTH

Issue SIX

January 2026

READING

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



DIANE WORDSWORTH

THE CHRISTMAS
TREE MYSTERY

Words Worth Reading
Issue 6 | January 2026

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Diane Wordsworth



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welcome

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

In this issue there are two brand-new, complete and exclusive short stories: *A Day at the Races* featuring Brummie favourite Marcie Craig, and *Deadly Deeds in Morecambe Bay*, starring retired ninja assassin Mavis Braithwaite. Part 3 of *Catch the Rainbow* is in here too.

There are two short stories from the archives this time. *Valentine's Date* has been published in *Twee Tales Twee* and *Twee Tales More* but is yet to be published as a standalone short story. *New Year's Revolution* introduces Molly and her family.

There's also a brand-new, complete and exclusive novelette that features community journalist Stevie Beck: *Stevie Beck and the Christmas Tree Mystery*. Have fun reading the stories. I hope you enjoy them.

a marcie craig short story

Wordsworth Shorts



– Diane Wordsworth –

a day at the races

a day at the races

In 2023, I started a writing challenge. The challenge was to write 12 short stories in 12 months. We were given the prompt 'cheers' and a target of 1,500 words exactly. We could choose whatever we liked and we didn't even need to use the prompt. I decided to write a new short story for Marcie Craig.



Marcie Craig lay on her hotel bed gazing through the window at the Perseid meteor shower. Living halfway between Coventry and Birmingham, she didn't often get the chance to see such spectacles. But out here in the sticks, she had a front row seat. Or bed as it happened. Even a cheap bed in a cheap two-storey hotel – Marcie lived cheaply in a single unit static caravan on a former gypsy site, so she wasn't about to fritter her hard-earned cash away on a fancy hotel.

She didn't like being away from home, but the race course had offered her such a generous fee to come and DJ before the main event she could barely bring herself to resist. The Harley Davidson she rode to local gigs needed a new tyre and the Jeep was coming up for its annual service. Seven hundred and fifty quid would go a long way towards both.

Marcie's gig was to bridge the gap between the races and the rock concert and she probably could have made her way to rural Warwickshire on Saturday morning to be there in time for the tea-time gig. But the Jeep was playing up and she preferred to get there the day before so she'd be in good time without having to worry about the traffic. She'd managed to cover both of her local gigs by swapping with two of her DJ mates, which meant she wouldn't lose those wages in order to earn these wages.

Marcie much preferred the local gigs with the local crowd to these parties and special occasions. She knew what to play and who would like it or hate it at home. Strangers were a different breed all together.

Suddenly, a strange purple glow started to light up the night sky, making her sit up on the bed and stare out of the window. It seemed to be coming from the direction of the stables. Her Jeep was parked over there too. She pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans, and stuffed her bare feet into her cowboy boots, wincing at the cold insoles.

Outside, despite it being almost dawn, it was still muggy and humid. The whole country was in the grip of an uncommon heatwave. Marcie sniffed at the air, half-expecting to smell fire. But all she could smell was horse hair and manure, the humidity emphasising the horsey aromas. Her boots clapped along the tarmacked track towards the car park. She heard an owl screech and a horse whinny softly. No sound of a fire.

She looked up at the sky, which was glowing brighter and brighter with each step she took. It was almost like daylight, but with that strange violet bloom.

As she reached the Jeep, she caught movement over towards the stable. Two people were arguing about something, waving their arms around, only just out of earshot. One was tall and stocky, the other was small and almost girl-like.

What were they doing out at this time of night? Marcie wondered. They could ask the same about you! chirped her sub-conscious.

The taller of the two people cursed loudly and turned towards the car park before stomping towards her. Almost immediately afterwards, the smaller one started to follow, still waving their arms. Instinct made Marcie duck down behind the roof of the Jeep and hold her breath. When she was sure they'd both gone, she checked the door handle of the Jeep one final time and rushed back to the hotel.

A man was just outside the main entrance of the hotel, puffing on a vape. He was a good head and shoulders shorter than Marcie, with a wiry frame.

"Are you one of the jockeys?" she asked him.

Nodding, he said, "Retired now, but I work for one of the trainers," and he promptly started to cough. "Nice night for a walk," he added, in between chesty barks. Out of politeness, he covered his mouth with a curled fist.

"I thought there was a fire," she replied, waving a hand towards the purple sky.

"That's the northern lights," said the retired jockey, taking another puff of his vape.

Marcie's mouth dropped open. "This far south?"

"This far south," agreed the man with a tight smile.

"I'd heard we were having a double phenomenon," said Marcie with a wave, "but I didn't expect to see them both!"

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The following morning, Marcie set up her decks in good time, impressed that she didn't even have to do her own sound check, and found herself twiddling her thumbs. Despite not being a massive horse racing fan, she made her way to the edge of the race course just to have a look. She hoped no horses would fall in front of her or, worse, have a big screen pulled around them.

She'd missed the first race, but by the third one she was buying a race card. Not to place any bets, just to see the names of the horses running. By the fourth race, she was having a little flutter. She knew nothing about race horses and their form but chose her winners if she liked the name: Harley Rebel (for her Harley Davidson); Greyfriar's Bonnie (Triumph Bonneville); Beezer McBeezerson (BSA). None of her horses won, but Beezer did come third in his race.

The sixth race of the meeting was the big one, apparently. Suddenly there were very many more spectators clamouring at the rails that ran parallel with the final length of the course, but from what Marcie could gather, the favourite, Cheers M'Dear, came in last. Marcie thought that was just the way it went; others, too many others, threw their arms in the air and demanded a steward's enquiry. And that, announced the announcer, meant a slight delay before the last three races of the day.

Frowning, Marcie tugged at the sleeve of a young woman wearing overalls with the race course logo on who was passing by. The woman smiled at her, her whole face beaming.

"How long will they delay the rest of the races?" asked Marcie.

The woman shrugged. "A steward's enquiry only takes a few minutes, but they'll need to gather as much information as they can before continuing with the program." She started to turn away.

"My set starts at four o'clock," said Marcie, starting to panic that she wouldn't make it back home tonight.

The official turned back to her and looked her up and down. "Are you the DJ?" she asked, not even trying to hide her surprise.

It was a reaction Marcie was used to. "That's me!" she replied with a bright and cocky smile.

The young woman pulled an appreciative face and nodded. She pointed towards the grandstand where a crowd was clustering around a ring, shielding her eyes from the sun with her other hand. "You'll find the organisers over there in the paddock, where the horses are cooling down. Tell them Jane sent you and one of them will tell you what you need to know."

"Thanks," said Marcie, clomping across the sun-hardened ground towards the paddock.

There was a lot of activity around two of the horses, one that had won the race and whose rider wore checkered black and red colours (Jane's Lover Boy, if memory served Marcie correctly), the other whose jockey wore plain white with a black trim (Cheers M'Dear – the favourite who'd come in last), both familiar.

Marcie watched until all the riders had dismounted, but she was surprised to see that she recognised these two, one of whom was apparently retired.

She found another official and after telling him that Jane had sent her asked to be directed towards one of the organisers. Marcie was surprised again, this time to see that the chap she was referred to was none other than the tall, stocky bloke from the night before, and the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood upright.

"Is there another organiser I can speak to?" she asked, keeping a wary eye on Stocky. "Or a steward?"

The young man looked around him and consulted a clipboard he carried. "The stewards won't appreciate being disturbed, unless it's urgent."

"Will they be interested to know about any unusual nocturnal activity?" asked Marcie.

The official scratched his head with the end of his pencil. "I expect they will."

Marcie nodded and made her way towards the main stand where she guessed the stewards' board room might be located.

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Thirty minutes later than scheduled, as the sun started to dip below the horizon, Marcie began.

The stewards had been VERY interested in what she had to tell them, when they finally let her in the room, and soon afterwards, one organiser and two jockeys (one retired) were arrested for fixing a race.

Marcie queued the first track and announced: "Hello Warwickshire! In honour of our top prizewinner today, here's *Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy* by Queen, from their album *A Day at the Races...*"

the end

wordsworth flash fiction



valentine's date

valentine's date

Valentine's Date was one of the first short stories I ever wrote. I wrote several different versions of it, and sold one under a different name to a UK women's weekly magazine. It's short and a bit of fun.

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Linda started as she realised she'd missed her stop. She jumped up from her seat and rushed to the front of the bus. The driver refused to let her off between stages. When he did stop, she had to walk all the way back in the pouring rain.

"I'm going to be late again," she mused out loud. And she was, for the third time that week. It was only Wednesday...

Linda really enjoyed her job, but lately things had been getting her down. She didn't know what, but there was something.

"It's a man you need," her friend Penny had told her. "How long's it been since John left?"

"I don't need any man."

"It must be over a year, Linda."

Did she need a man? Wasn't she happy pottering around in her own little flat in her own little way? Of course she was.

As Linda arrived at her desk, Penny came running over to meet her. "Quick Lin," she cried. "Old Curly wants to see you."

"What for? Do you know?"

Penny shook her head. "But he was over here a while ago so you'd better hurry."

Linda ran a brush through her thick, damp hair, smoothed her skirt flat and quickly went over to Mr Jones' office. She tapped on the door and walked through.

Karl Jones looked up from his desk and smiled. "Sit down," he said gently. Linda shuddered. When Old Curly was being nice, he was about to sack you. She perched on the edge of the chair while he reprimanded her for her poor time-keeping and lack of concentration. He hoped it was only temporary, as he would hate to lose someone of Linda's capability.

Linda was gazing through the smoked glass panelling between Karl Jones' office and the rest of the department. Some new guy, who she hadn't seen before, was chatting to Daphne, the office siren. He wasn't handsome or anything, but he was nice. Linda was smitten. A wave of jealousy swept through her. There wasn't a single male in the whole building who wasn't attracted to Daphne – though Linda had to admit, she was lovely.

She forced her attention back to the bald-headed, red-faced man who was glaring at her now.

"I'm sorry sir. What was that?"

"I said you can go now," he replied impatiently. "But please, Linda, try to keep your mind on your work."

"Yes sir." She left his office making her way back to her own desk where Penny was waiting. "Thank God that's over," she exclaimed with relief.

"What did he want?" Linda told her. Then Penny announced, "I've registered you at a dating agency—"

"What?"

"You heard."

"Why?"

"So you can learn to cook. What do you think?"

"But I don't want to join a dating agency."

"Oh come on. It'll be a laugh."

"Really? And have you joined this agency too?"

Penny blushed. "I have actually."

Linda burst out laughing. "So all this business about me getting a man was really you getting one yourself. I don't need an agency."

"Have you found yourself a man?"

"I don't know. Do you know anything about that bloke chatting Daphne up?"

Penny turned to follow Linda's gaze. She shrugged her shoulders. "I think his name's Rodney." She turned back. "You're wasting your time if Daphne's already got to him."

"He might be married anyway," mused Linda.

"Nah. Doesn't look the sort. So, about this agency...?"

"Oh, go on then. Maybe it won't be such a bad idea after all."

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The following Monday Linda came to work feeling sick. She hadn't been late once since her interview with Old Curly, but today she came very close.

"What's up with you?" asked Penny.

"I've got a date," she mumbled.

"With the agency?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Brilliant."

"I don't think so. I've changed my mind."

"Why? Where's it at?"

"Ruby's, the wine bar. I have to wear a white carnation, but I don't want to go. He might be awful—"

"And he might be Tom Cruise or someone. Imagine, Ruby's on Valentine's night. How romantic. You're lucky. I haven't heard anything yet. What's his name?"

Linda thought for a second and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I never thought to ask."

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It was still pouring with rain as Linda made her way to the wine bar. She arrived five minutes too early. While she waited outside she peered through the window

to see if anyone was wearing a white carnation. They weren't, but Rodney, the new guy at work, was sitting at one of the tables checking his watch.

Linda froze. She couldn't possibly go in there now, couldn't let him see her with a really ugly date. She decided, too late, to go home. Too late, because Rodney had already seen her and was beckoning for her to join him. It would be rude not to, but as she walked in, she glanced around to see if her date was there.

"Hi," said Rodney. "It's Linda, isn't it?"

"Yes. Hello Rodney."

"Rod, please," he grimaced. "Fancy seeing you here. Do you want a drink?" He poured some wine into a spare glass. "You meeting someone?"

"Yes, but he isn't here yet. I didn't know anyone from work came in here," she said, taking off her mac and sitting down.

"I don't usually."

"Then you must be meeting someone too." Her heart dropped. It was probably Daphne.

"Yes..." Rod was saying. "Actually I'm meeting a blind date. That's what the carnation's for—"

"But I'm meeting a blind date too," she pointed to her own carnation. His was red but that didn't matter. They were on the same date.

"I'm glad it's you," said Rod. "I almost didn't come in case it was someone awful."

"Me too. What changed your mind?"

"I thought maybe Kate Moss might show instead."

"I hope you're not disappointed."

"I'm not."

The couple got on so well that they finished their wine and decided to move on.

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Meanwhile, at the bar, stood a short dark-haired hunk. He had in his buttonhole a slightly wilted white carnation and was just about to leave, believing he'd been stood up. As he turned to go he noticed a tall, fair Amazon. She was wearing a red carnation.

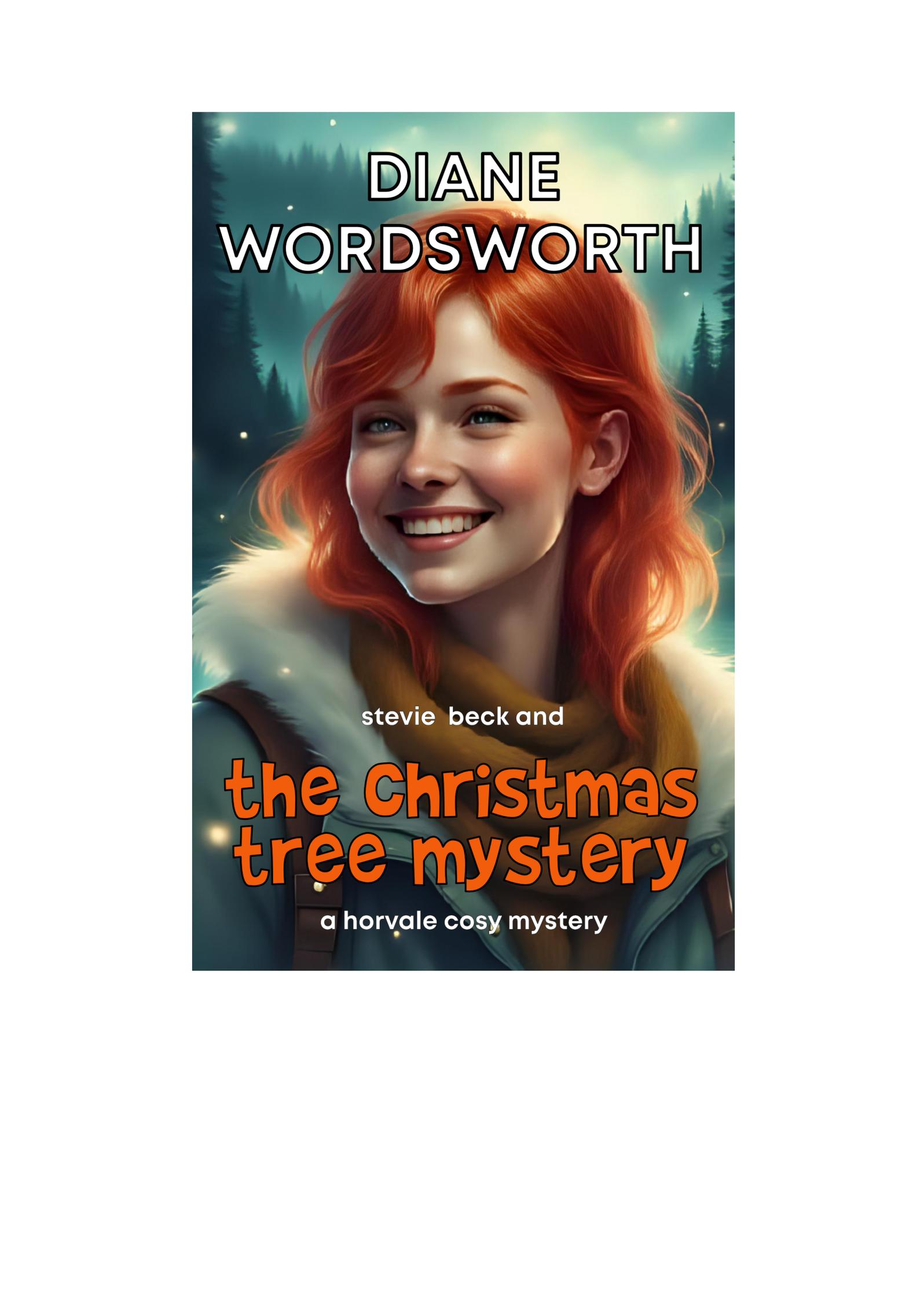
"Are you alone?" he asked and she nodded. He knew she wasn't his date because of the flower. But if they'd both been stood up, they may as well get together. "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes please."

"The name's Tom by the way," he added. "What's yours?"

"Kate," she replied...

the end



DIANE
WORDSWORTH

stevie beck and

**the Christmas
tree mystery**

a horvale cosy mystery

stevie beck and the christmas tree mystery

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 fourth story in the series. Stevie Beck and the Body in the Lake, Stevie Beck and the Secret of the Old Annexe, and Stevie Beck and the Haunted House Hotel have all appeared in previous issues of Words Worth Reading.

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### Chapter 1

*The Midnight Bugle* newsroom was as quiet as the grave. It always was on a Friday, after a busy week. Some of the reporters hung around, catching up on admin, while others clocked off early or ensured they had somewhere else to be,

Stevie Beck was slumped in front of her terminal, chin resting on her hand, wishing she had a window to gaze out of at least. She'd already ploughed through the press release basket and filed a few NIBs, also known as news in briefs, but nothing in the pile grabbed her interest enough to arrange any follow-up interviews. A lot of the press release stories wrote themselves anyway. It was simply down to Stevie and her colleagues to pick out the chaff and find something intriguing enough to build a bigger story out of.

Stevie hadn't been at the *Midnight Bugle* newspaper for long, which was why she was still only the junior community reporter, despite her previous extensive experience. What she really wanted to be was an investigative reporter, and every time the editor sent her on a relatively lame community reporting job, she managed to find out enough interesting stuff for two or three more articles.

She already loved the old, listed building that housed *The Midnight Bugle*. 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. It made Stevie smile every time she thought about it.

"Stephanie!" bellowed the editor from behind her office doors, making Stevie jump.

A curly-haired head popped up on the other side of the screen behind Stevie's monitor and two piggy little eyes crinkled up as their owner smirked at her. Stevie rolled her eyes at her co-worker and supervisor, Vanessa Vickers, before grinning back at her. Vanessa's curly head nodded ever so slightly and she ducked back down behind the screen.

Behind her back, Stevie referred to Vanessa as the honey monster off the old Sugar Puffs adverts on the telly. Her hair looked like a bright yellow hat, her features sank into pudgy cheeks, her head sank into her hunched, rounded shoulders, she had no figure to speak of, just a straight up-and-down on both sides, and there was the man's voice as well.

It was a bit cruel, Stevie admitted. But the woman hadn't been very nice to her when Stevie had first joined the newspaper, and everyone knew who she meant whenever she said it anyway. She was just very careful not to say it to her face.

Stevie got to her feet and slowly made her way to the editor's office, pushing one of the swing doors open.

Terri Stringer was the owner of the newspaper as well as the editor. She knew all about Stevie's ambition and encouraged her as far as she could. She simply didn't have an opening at the moment for an investigative reporter. From behind her big, ornate desk, the snowy haired woman peered at Stevie over the top of her black, thick-rimmed glasses.

"I want you to go and visit the Christmas tree farm," said the editor, and Stevie sighed. "Yes, yes, I know it's not quite the gripping subject you prefer," continued Terri. "But the owner's paying us for an advertising feature and I want you to write the editorial."

"Isn't this something Vanessa would normally cover, boss?" asked Stevie. The senior reporter had felt her nose pushed out more than once before and Stevie didn't want to antagonise her any more than she had to.

"It is," agreed Terri. "But Vanessa's booked a few days' annual leave and I want this for the Tuesday edition. Plus, you're much better at bringing the interviewees out of their shells and if we make a good job with this one, there will be some repeat business."

Stevie pressed her lips together and nodded, her brain already running through the additional slants a Christmas tree farm might spawn. Types of tree for a horticultural magazine; good growing conditions for a gardening mag; how to make a stand for a woodworking magazine; the best tree decorations - ethical, environmentally friendly, buying on a budget. For the advertorial it would be a spotlight piece on the owner, how to care for the trees once they've been taken home, and Stevie would ask for a money-off coupon code for readers to use too.

The editor scribbled some details on a Post-it note and handed it to Stevie.

"Give her a ring or just go out there," she said. "She's expecting us and she lives on site, so she'll be there any time."

Stevie glanced down at the bright pink sticky and felt her eyes almost pop out.

"That isn't really her name, is it?" she asked.

But Terri wasn't listening and Stevie had already been dismissed.

"What has she given you?" asked Vanessa in her deep, man-like voice, when Stevie returned to their work station. The senior reporter was sitting upright now and trying to read what was on the note.

"She wants me to go out to the Christmas tree farm and interview the owner," said Stevie, gathering her stuff together and powering her terminal down. All of the reporters had laptops that connected to the server so they could all work from anywhere. But in the office there were these dongles they had to log into.

"Carole Christmas?" said Vanessa with a nod.

"Is that really her name?" Stevie hissed back at her.

"That's for you to find out!" said Vanessa, and she smirked again.

"Thanks," said Stevie sarcastically, punching the phone number into her mobile phone.

"Always a pleasure," returned the senior reporter. Vanessa glanced up at a long, narrow window that ran along the ceiling on the one outside wall. It was the only daylight they had in the newsroom, but outside it was level with the ground. "Looks like it's started to snow," she said as fat snowflakes drifted past the grimy glass. "Pity neither of the photographers are in. But take a camera, the trees will look nice."

"Thanks," said Stevie, meaning it this time. She was always surprised whenever the senior reporter tried to be helpful.

## Chapter 2

Stevie pulled the furry hood of her Parka up over her head. Big fat snowflakes floated down from a flat grey sky. Too wet to settle, as soon as the snow hit the ground it melted in a blur. Stevie was grateful for that, for now. She did like to look at the snow, but she hated to drive in it. Her little Citroën was rubbish in the snow and ice, crabbing all over the place.

Once when it had just started to snow, the car has surprised her, and everyone else on the road, when it suddenly span round to face the direction she'd just come from. Now that was scary, but Stevie had since learned how to steer out of the skid if it ever happened again.

"I hope I don't get to try out my new skills today," she muttered to herself.

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

She crossed her fingers that it didn't freeze too quickly as she undid her coat and climbed into the driving seat. The smell from the Christmas air freshener hit her and she breathed in the spicy cinnamon aroma.

"You can snow later on this evening, when I'm safely tucked up inside," she told the weather.

The car was icy cold inside but there was no frost on the windows. Or not yet. Stevie turned the engine over and put the heater onto full blast, full fan to clear the glass from the condensation that was very quickly forming. And while the car warmed up, she plugged the postcode of the Christmas tree farm into the map app on her phone and clipped the phone into the hands-free cradle on the dashboard.

Carole Christmas sounded really nice on the phone with her sing-song voice. It was as though she was smiling down the airwaves. Exactly the kind of person you needed in charge of a Christmas tree farm. Aside from the postcode, Carole had given Stevie some end-of-route directions too, for where the track apparently veered away from the main road. Stevie added those to the bright pink sticky Terri had given her and stuck it to the dashboard, on a smooth bit in the hope it wouldn't fall off.

She nosed the Citroën through the narrow gap between the newspaper building and the publishing house next door and crept into the flow of traffic. At the first set of traffic lights she glanced to the side to see the glorious window display the small department store had made for the festive season.

Bright white mannequins dressed in polar Parkas with furry hoods over thick off-white corduroy trousers and warm winter boots stared with unseeing eyes at some vision in the darkening night sky outside the window. A painted fire roared in a hearth that was surrounded by an example of every piece of white furniture the shop sold. In a corner twinkled a white tinsel Christmas tree with blue and white fairy lights.

Stevie loved Christmas. It was her favourite time of year. But this year would be the first year she'd be spending it alone, without her friends and family around her. Because Stevie had chosen to leave all of that behind, in her old life.

A car horn honked from behind, making Stevie jump. The traffic lights were on green and she was just sitting there, day dreaming. She waved a hand in the air so the person behind could see her apology and pulled away again just as the Christmas light displays attached to the lampposts on either side of the road were starting to blink on. Behind those, every shop front glowed with festive displays.

Stevie sighed and concentrated on the road. The snow was getting thicker and the traffic was growing heavier. She drove along the main High Street, her head turning this way and that as she recognised places that were becoming familiar to her.

Horton Magna 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 Grimshaw worked, a small convenience store, a greengrocer, a pet shop.

Every one was lit up for Christmas, every one spilling cheerful customers out onto the pavement.

There was a zebra crossing at the end of the High Street with bright orange Belisha beacons on either side atop gaily striped poles. Then there was a large green, a patch of manicured grass, that looked like it had been prepared for a Christmas tree. There was no tree erected yet. Beyond that was nothing. No street lights, no traffic lights. Only side lights coming on towards her or tail lights disappearing around a corner in the distance. And trees.

"Stay on this road for five miles," said the map app through the car stereo system. On a straight stretch she allowed herself to glance at the screen. There were no buildings on the screen, only green areas. Dark green now the light was almost gone.

Snowflakes, fatter now, drifted in the beam of her lights. "I should have arranged to go in the morning," she scolded herself, "in daylight." But then she reminded herself that she'd already run out of jobs for the day and there were still two working hours to go.

The map app told her to turn right in a few hundred yards and Stevie bumped the car down an ill-maintained track. She remembered she was to ignore the first turning, which was a potato farm, go over a small bridge, pass a car parking area next to a fishing lake, then take the next right.

Nevertheless, it was still dark and creepy and Stevie didn't like not being able to see what was on either side of the track.

### **Chapter 3**

Stevie was starting to wonder if she'd taken a wrong turn or if there was something Carole had told her that she'd forgotten when the narrow track turned a corner before opening out into two tracks, and suddenly all was brightly illuminated. Now she could clearly see red, white and green signs all along the track that lit up in her headlights, with big arrows pointing her towards the 'tree farm'.

"Well," she muttered. "Those are easy enough to follow." And she wondered how many had taken a wrong turning for Carole to tell her specifically where to go.

The double track turned another corner and into a well-defined car park that had a giant WELCOME TO THE CHRISTMAS TREE FARM sign, picked out in gold on a dark green background and with painted snowflakes and snowdrifts atop the letters.

There were about twenty properly designated car parking bays, well-lit with strong, bright arc lights. The car park was surrounded by fir trees as far as Stevie could see, all of various sizes, with rows and rows of tiny fairy lights strung up along gravel paths between the rows and rows of trees.

She parked up and got out of the car, careful not to slip on the snow. She needn't have worried. The car park was well-grittled so it was just wet underfoot, not even any slush. The first thing to hit her was the strong smell of spruce and she smiled happily at the memories invoked.

Along one side of the car park was the Christmas shop, elevated on a wooden deck. Stevie knew it was the Christmas shop because a sign the entire length of the wooden building over the Georgian bullseye windows had THE CHRISTMAS SHOP spelled out in the same gold and snowy letters on the dark green background as in the car park. Attached to the fence that surrounded the deck was a donation box. And at one end of the shop was a large crowd of children.

A bell tinkled when the door to the shop opened, alerting the two women who were working there of Stevie's arrival. One was tall and blonde, the other was shorter and brunette. They were both slim, both in their early forties, Stevie guessed. And they were both dressed in elf costumes.

As jolly Christmas music played, Stevie gazed around at the hundreds and hundreds of tree ornaments, Christmas decorations, wreaths, blow-up illuminated snowmen, Santa hats, reindeer-ear bobble headbands. She couldn't possibly take it all in at once. She could smell a Christmas candle burning too. A tree-wrapping machine stood next to the counter and behind the counter were all sorts of party poppers, streamers, party hats, gift wrap, greetings cards, gift tags...

"You look like all your Christmases just came at once!" said the blonde lady with a laugh.

Stevie blinked, snapped back to attention, and smiled at the woman. "This is wonderful," she said. She flicked a look at the other woman, who was serving someone who had just spent more than a hundred pounds on tree baubles.

Stevie held a hand out to the blonde lady, unzipping her coat with her other hand as she did so. "Hi, I'm Stephanie Beck, from the *Midnight Bugle*. I have an appointment."

The woman's grin grew even bigger. "Nice to meet you," she said, shaking Stevie's hand. "I'm Carole Christmas, and this," she flicked her free hand towards her colleague. "This is my cousin, Hollie Christmas."

"Carole Christmas and Hollie Christmas?" asked Stevie. Carole nodded. "Wow. That's amazing." The two women exchanged a resigned smile. "Oh," said Stevie. "I expect you get that all the time."

"We do," admitted the blonde elf. "But we don't mind, do we Hol?" She didn't wait for a reply from Hollie. "All part of the fun." She started to walk towards a door that said PRIVATE. "We can talk in here." And to Hollie she added, "Will you be okay?"

Hollie nodded, but Stevie noticed that the smile on her face momentarily froze. Realising Stevie was watching her, Hollie Christmas dragged the smile back to her eyes, and Stevie followed Carole into an office where they both sat down on a cherry-red Chesterfield sofa.

A lot of the businesses Stevie visited in her work had these Chesterfield sofas, and she wondered if the town had taken a job lot. They weren't even the most comfortable of settees, but she supposed they looked the part.

She shrugged out of her Parka, leaving it in a puddle around her, got her pen and notepad out of her bag and waved her phone. "Do you mind if I record this?" she asked, balancing it on the arm of the Chesterfield.

"Not at all," said Carole.

"So, tell me about yourself. How did you come to start up the business?"

"Well, we had to do something about Christmas, with it being our name, and the farm came up for sale at around the time we came into a very large sum of money. It was as though the universe was trying to tell us something."

The two of them talked for about twenty minutes with Stevie making notes and jotting down additional questions.

"And how do you and your cousin work together?" asked Stevie as she came to the end of her list.

She always watched carefully whenever she asked any questions, but she was able to hide too much inquisitiveness behind a friendly veneer. Carole maintained her bright and cheerful smile, but Stevie did spot a flicker of something in her eyes that was quickly covered up.

Interesting, she thought. All was perhaps not as it seemed in Christmasland.

"I should have offered you a drink," said Carole with a faint blush when Stevie finished asking her questions. "So rude. I can offer you hot chocolate, coffee, tea, eggnog...?"

Eggnog? Stevie hadn't had an eggnog in years! "I'd love an eggnog," she said, adding sadly, "but I'm driving."

Carole tutted with animation and rolled her eyes. "Sorry," she smiled. "I keep forgetting. Would you like anything else?"

Stevie looked at her watch. It was almost the end of her shift. "You'll be closing soon," she said. "It's almost five o'clock. It gets dark so early at this time of the year, I lose all track of time."

"Oh, we're open until eight," said Carole.

"Really?" said Stevie. "But it's so dark outside."

"That's why we have all the lights. Most of our customers are at work all day and they come in the evening after they've fed the kids."

"Of course," said Stevie. Now it was her turn to roll her eyes at herself.

"But if you have time, I can show you around?" ventured Carole.

"I'd love that," said Stevie, grabbing her things and following the elf back into the shop.

Carole checked in with Hollie on the way out. "If you need me, give me a shout," she said, taking a walkie-talkie off a shelf.

"You don't use mobile phones?" asked Stevie, pushing her arms into her coat. "These are free to use," said Carole with a wave at her colleague.

## Chapter 4

It was much warmer inside the shop than Stevie had thought. The moment they stepped through the door, a blast of cold air hit her in the face making her cheeks sting. It was still snowing too, still not sticking. As she pulled the hood of her Parka up over her head again, she turned her face skywards and tentatively touched the snowflakes on her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"What's that over there?" she asked her host, nodding at where the crowd of children she'd seen on her way in were gathered.

"Come and have a look," she said with a grin.

Their feet made a stomping noise on the wooden deck and as they drew nearer to the children she could hear their 'Ooh's and 'Ahh's. And then she heard a small bell tinkling.

"Reindeer?" Stevie said as soon as she saw the antlers on one of the animals' heads.

"Do you have any more reindeer food, miss?" one of the children asked Carole.

"You've already had three bags," she replied with a laugh.

"Reindeer food?" said Stevie.

From a pocket in her elf outfit Carole produced a small but crumpled paper bag.

"Here," she said, whispering, "on the house, but don't tell this lot."

Stevie tipped some of the food into the palm of her hand and held it out towards the closest of the four reindeer. The bell on its collar tinkled and she felt its velvety muzzle against her skin. Then so carefully and delicately, it took the food, snaffling it and snorting out of its nostrils.

"How long have you had these?" Stevie asked Carole.

"They're not ours," she admitted. "There's a deer park on the outskirts of Sheffield. Do you know it?" Stevie shook her head. "The wardens bring them over every Christmas." She pointed at a small stable-like building tucked away in a corner against some of the trees. "The stable is permanent, it saves them building a new one every time. The kids love the animals. They're a great attraction."

"Who looks after them?" asked Stevie. "Do the wardens stay?"

"No, Hollie and I both live on site. So one of us is here all the time. During opening hours, the customers pretty much do all the looking after they need. Some visitors only come to see the deer, pay for their feed, and go again. If we sold a tree to every person who came just to see the reindeer, we'd be millionaires!"

Stevie patted the reindeer that had taken her food on the nose and rubbed her palm against her coat. Carole led the way through the car park to a gateway in the Christmas-green-painted ranch-type fencing.

"We have five fields of trees plus one that's fallow," explained Carole as they walked along the paths, gravel crunching beneath their feet. "We let the fallow field recover for a year before planting a new batch, which we grow from young trees. They grow very quickly. We don't always empty a field completely, until it's due its break. But that means we have some tall trees left over that nobody has room for at home."

"What do you do with those?" asked Stevie, stretching her neck as she looked at all the different coloured trees.

"Those are the ones the authorities buy for their town squares or in the middle of their traffic roundabouts, and other organisations and businesses buy them for their Reception areas." She pulled a face. "Or they used to."

"Don't they buy them anymore?" said Stevie.

"They don't have the budgets anymore," said Carole sadly. "We used to sell a lot to the schools and hospitals too. But even that's slowed down."

Stevie frowned. "I noticed on my way over from the town that the traffic island doesn't have a tree in the middle of it yet."

"Yes," said Carole. "That's where one of ours usually goes. They haven't been in to buy one yet, so I doubt very much that they're getting one this year."

"Oh, that's so sad," said Stevie. "How many different kinds of tree do you grow?"

"We grow blue and green trees, and we grow regular trees that moult their needles everywhere plus the treated trees that don't."

"I've seen lots of little pop-up tree-sellers, er, pop up outside supermarkets and garden centres in the past," said Stevie. "Do they come here for their stock?"

"Some do," said Carole. "There's a Christmas tree farm up at the deer park too that sells them to the dealers as well. They have much more land than we do, though, so they have more kinds of tree, different sizes. In the summer they sell pick-your-own soft fruit, and in the autumn they grow and sell pumpkins for halloween. Unfortunately, we don't have the resources here to do all of that."

Stevie continued to make mental notes as she asked her questions. She was gathering a lot of information from just one short visit, and the business had so many different aspects, she should be able to come up with at least two more slants to sell outside of her newspaper advertorial. Ah, but Carole Christmas was paying for the editorial. Stevie would have to check with Terri if it was still all right for her to do that, or if Carole owned everything Stevie came up with.

"This is our oldest field at the moment," Carole was saying after they'd already walked for what felt like a mile. "This is where the tall trees are. We have a lot more left than we usually do when they reach this age...Oh..." she added, and came to an abrupt halt.

Stevie just about managed not to run into the back of her. "Is there something the matter?" she asked her host, who was staring into the trees.

Carole lifted a hand and pointed at a stump. "We haven't sold any trees from this field this season," she said, getting closer to the stump, crouching down and examining it, touching it.

"That stump looks fresh," said Stevie, peering at the offending item. She turned and looked at the other trees. "There's another one there," she said.

Carole sprung upright again and went to where Stevie was pointing. She bent down and touched the ragged edges. "We definitely haven't sold any of these trees."

"Perhaps Hollie...?" suggested Stevie.

"No. We record everything carefully in a ledger. We definitely haven't sold any of these trees."

She turned to Stevie and raised an eyebrow.

"Someone is stealing my trees!"

## Chapter 5

"What's happened?" asked Hollie as Carole rushed into the shop, with Stevie hot on her heels. The other elf froze behind the counter in the middle of putting some gift cards a customer had bought into a gaily decorated paper bag.

Carole opened her mouth and closed it again like a fish, looking from her colleague to the shopper to Stevie.

Stevie smiled at Hollie and stepped to one side as the customer left the shop.

"Your cousin has had a bit of a shock," she said when the door closed behind the shopper.

Hollie dashed out from behind the counter to Carole's side and grabbed both of Carole's hands in her own. "What is it?" she asked, worried brown eyes staring into blue ones.

"Some of the Number Five trees have gone," said Carole.

Hollie frowned. "Number Five? But—"

"I know!" said Carole.

"We haven't sold any trees from Number Five field," said Hollie unnecessarily.

"I know!" Carole repeated.

"Then what are you talking about?"

"Do you have any of that eggnog left?" asked Stevie tactfully, placing her bag on the counter and undoing her big coat again. "Or perhaps even a drop of whatever it is you put in it?"

"Sure!" said Hollie, disappearing into the office and coming back with a tumbler, an inch of brown liquid in the bottom.

Carole took the glass and glugged at the whiskey gratefully.

"Now come and sit down," said Hollie, dragging her to a seat behind the counter. "And tell me again, slowly."

Carole did as she was ordered and related what she and Stevie had just discovered.

"So if we haven't sold any," said Hollie when Carole had finished...

"Someone has stolen them," said Carole with a nod. She finished off the whiskey and held the glass out for a refill.

"But who would do such a thing?" asked Hollie, topping up the glass, putting the lid on and stowing the bottle under the counter.

Carole looked at Stevie as though for divine intervention.

Stevie shrugged. "A competitor, perhaps? Someone who has a grudge? Even a practical joker?"

"We've been here for six years," said Carole, sipping the whiskey slowly now and savouring the effect it was having on her. "I don't know any pranksters, do you?" she asked her cousin, who shook her head. "We only have the one competitor," she continued. "I already told you about them, but they're a lot bigger than we are."

"And what about anyone who might have a grudge?" prompted Stevie.

Carole started to shake her head, but then remembered something. "There was that property developer," she said to Hollie, who opened her mouth in a round O.

"What property developer is that?" asked Stevie. She knew that if she asked the right questions she'd get the right responses. It never ceased to amaze her how many people felt so at ease in her company that they ended up telling her their life stories in some cases.

"Some estate agent who came sniffing around about a year ago," said Carole.

"Offered us what she thought was a price we couldn't refuse," agreed Hollie.

"But you said no?" said Stevie. They both nodded. "Always a possibility, then. How about anyone else?"

The two women stared at each other looking for inspiration.

"There was that treasure hunter," said Carole, holding a finger in the air.

"Treasure hunter?" asked Stevie.

"From the local metal detector society," Hollie explained.

"And what did he want?" said Stevie.

"She," said Carole.

"They found a hoard not far from here," continued Hollie.

"They think it may have been hidden during the civil war, or something like that," said Carole.

"And this woman, this metal detectorist, she's done some research and she reckons there are tunnels that go under our land," said Hollie.

Stevie's journalistic antennae were doing their thing and she was thinking ahead to those other possible stories.

"And she thinks there might be another hoard under your land?" she asked them, dragging her attention back to the present. They nodded again. "Did you believe her?"

"I think we filed it away in for when we have time to look into it," said Carole.

"But I can't imagine someone like that stealing trees to make her point," said Hollie.

"Honestly?" said Stevie. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to steal trees anyway, especially when they don't even have any roots. And even then, they'd have to be pretty desperate."

"Me too," said Carole. "But you did ask, and, really, that's the only other person I could think of who's shown any interest in the property."

"And there's no one else? Nothing more you can think of?"

The women shook their heads, although Stevie did think Hollie may have paused ever so slightly before she shook hers.

"I suppose we ought to call the police," said Hollie.

"We don't need that kind of publicity," said a shocked Carole.

"You'll need to report it to the police just for any insurance claim," Stevie quietly pointed out.

Hollie's eyebrows pulled together in an unpleasant frown that didn't become her at all.

"They might not have been stolen!" said Carole.

"Where else can they have gone?" asked Hollie, recovering herself.

"Are you sure you didn't sell any?" Carole beseeched her.

"Of course I'm sure," snapped Hollie. "Check the ledger if you don't believe me."

Carole pressed her lips together and frowned again.

Hmm, thought Stevie, confirming her earlier suspicion. Things were definitely not great in the Christmas household.

"Well, I'm calling the police," said Hollie, getting a phone out of a pocket in her outfit. "Do we dial nine-nine-nine for this or one-oh-one?"

"One-oh-one," said Stevie. "But—"

She was going to tell her that Horton Magna's only policeman was on a training course at the moment, but Hollie held up a finger, letting her know she'd been connected. She gave the operator all of the information she knew and recited a reference number for Carole to jot down before hanging up.

"What did she say?" asked Carole when Hollie replaced the phone in her pocket.

"Just that it wasn't an emergency and that someone would be in touch," Hollie replied.

"Hello?" called a voice from outside. "Is there anybody serving?"

Carole jumped up. "Come on in!" she called back. She gave her empty glass to her cousin and smoothed down her elf costume.

"Looks like you just sold another tree," said Stevie with a grin, making her way to the door.

It was time she was leaving anyway.

## Chapter 6

As she clomped over the wooden deck, Stevie rummaged in her bag for her car keys. Unable to find them, at the bottom of the three steps she stopped and searched through the pockets of her coat instead. There they were! It was still snowing, but now it was starting to settle a bit. Stevie could feel the nip in the air and thought it must have dropped a couple of degrees very quickly.

"Ms Beck?" called a voice from behind. "You forgot your gloves!"

Stevie turned to see Hollie running after her, pulling a chunky cardigan on over her elf outfit. She hadn't brought any gloves with her.

"Stephanie's fine," she said with a smile, wondering if she'd bought a pair by accident. She pressed the button on her key fob and unlocked the car door.

"Could you wait just a moment?" Hollie said, keeping half an eye on the shop door. She wasn't carrying any gloves and Stevie realised it was a ploy. As soon as Hollie was beside Stevie, she lowered her voice and huddled in as though about to share a secret. "There's something I want to tell you."

"Okay," said Stevie, opening the car door and tossing her things across the driver's seat onto the passenger side. She bent down and stuck the key in the ignition.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of Carole," said Hollie quietly. "And I don't know whether I ought to tell the police when they get here..."

"Go on," said Stevie, wondering why the woman suddenly felt the need to confide in her.

"Carole, well, she's had trouble with money in the past and, she, er, stole from someone we both know."

"Okay," Stevie repeated with a puzzled look.

"Not long after we first started this venture, we had a few money troubles. And she said it would probably be worth more if someone robbed the place."

"I see," said Stevie, waiting for the punchline.

"Well, is it possible that's what's happened now?" asked Hollie, casting another cautious glance back towards the shop.

Stevie pushed her bottom lip out and thought for a moment. "I suppose it's possible—"

The shop door opened and Carole followed the customer out, leading the way along the deck to another short flight of steps and into the nearest field. She looked over at Hollie and Stevie and smiled.

Hollie waved, then pressed something into Stevie's hand. "A gingerbread man, on the house," she said. She backed away from Stevie, who climbed into her car and started up the engine, adding the gift to the pile of stuff already on the passenger seat.

As she drove around the car park and out, she watched Hollie in her mirrors go back into the shop with one of the kids, no doubt asking if he could buy some more reindeer food.

"I wonder why Hollie felt the need to tell me that about her cousin," she mused out loud, her hot breath causing her windscreen to fog up. In fact, there was something 'off' about both women in their cute little elven outfits. Stevie couldn't quite put her finger on it, but her spidey senses were tingling. And she always paid attention to her spidey senses.

She turned the heater up again to full blast, put the blower on her windscreen to clear the mist, and bumped along the track.

Another vehicle was coming towards her from the opposite direction, so she pulled over to the side to let it pass. It was a dark-coloured pick-up truck with a chest of gold coins painted on the driver's door. It was too dark to read the writing on the side of the truck, but she had a feeling it might be that metal detectorist the two women had been telling her about.

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It was way past the end of the working day by now, but Stevie didn't go straight home after the Christmas tree farm.

Like most people Stevie interviewed, Carole and Hollie Christmas had seemed quite comfortable answering her questions. It was just one of the things that made Stevie a good reporter. Even so, some of the looks she'd caught between the two cousins topped with Hollie dashing out after her and literally offering Carole up to Stevie didn't sit right with the journalist. And then, of course, there were those unlikely names...

There was one person who could confirm what Stevie suspected.

She made a detour to the old rectory, keeping her fingers crossed that her good friend the vicar was home. It was Maddy Kendrick who'd arranged for Stevie's new identity, new home and new job. In fact, the entire programme Stevie had been fast-tracked through was Maddy's baby.

Fortunately, the vicar was at home and she was delighted to see Stevie.

"Come in!" she said with a wide grin. "Did you smell the teapot? I was just making a cuppa."

"Carole and Hollie Christmas," said Stevie once they'd settled down to drinking their tea. "Are they in your programme?"

Maddy took a deep breath and a long sip of tea, looking thoughtful.

"Why do you ask?" said Maddy. She picked up an iced party ring biscuit and nibbled at the edges.

Stevie just dunked her biscuit into her tea until all the icing disintegrated into holes.

"I've just been to interview them for the paper... Well, I went to interview Carole." She popped the biscuit whole into her mouth and went on to tell Maddy about the advertorial Carole Christmas had commissioned, and about how they'd discovered the mystery of the disappearing Christmas trees.

Only then did it occur to Stevie that Carole may have contrived the whole thing. She pushed that to one side for now, though, keen to hear what Maddy might have to say.

"That would make a nice double-page spread," said Maddy, nodding.

"You're avoiding the question," said Stevie with a laugh.

"I can't just tell everyone and his dog who's in the programme," said Maddy. "That would defeat the object of them coming into hiding."

"So they are in hiding," said Stevie triumphantly.

"I didn't say that," said Maddy.

"No, but you didn't say they weren't either," replied Stevie. "If they weren't in your programme, you would have just said no."

Maddy sighed and swallowed the rest of her biscuit in one piece.

"Come on, Kenny," said Stevie, using the nickname she'd been calling Maddy since they were childhood friends. "You know me. We've known each other for forever. You know you can trust me with something as sensitive as this."

"And you're a newspaper journalist," said Maddy, as if that was every reason not to tell her friend anything.

"Pah!" said Stevie, flapping a hand at the vicar. "I'm only the community reporter, and only the *junior* reporter according to the honey monster."

"Yes, but you have a penchant for being an *investigative* reporter," Maddy reminded her.

"Look," continued Stevie. "You know I wouldn't risk a future source. If I blabbed everywhere who these two women really are, you'd never trust me again. Give me some credit."

Maddy paused again just long enough to drain her mug of tea. And then she launched into the true story of Carole and Hollie Christmas.

Chapter 7

The following day was Saturday and while Stevie didn't need to be in the office, she still worked if a story required her to and, like all the others, she'd also go into the office to do a shift if it was her turn. It wasn't her turn, but Saturdays were busy reporting days, regardless of whether or not it was Christmas, and as good a day as any to arrange an interview for. The snow from the day before had eased, leaving behind a lingering wet on the roads and pavements. At least it hadn't frozen over.

She drove over to the Horvale Deer and Country Park near Sheffield that Carole Christmas had told her about. If Stevie could find a third farm in the area, she could write a wonderful human interest story for one of the magazines, looking at the people who ran the seasonable businesses. And if that third farm was also owned by a woman, all the better. What a story that would be.

This was the ruse under which she'd arranged the interview with Pru Anderson, owner of the park, and if the worst came to the worst and she couldn't find a third to spotlight for a magazine, Stevie reckoned Terri Stringer might take it anyway, for the *Midnight Bugle*, especially if Stevie could get another advertising feature out of it. The newspaper was all for bringing local news to local readers, but it was also a business and businesses needed to earn money in order to survive.

It wasn't a long drive, but on the way Stevie chewed over what Maddy had told her about the Christmas cousins. Maddy wasn't convinced that either Carole or Hollie would sink as low as stealing their own Christmas trees and, to be frank, neither was Stevie. Granted, Stevie didn't know them as well as Maddy did. But she had a good sense for such things and, anyway, the cousins' past was too similar to her own for comfort and Stevie knew that *she* didn't go around stealing trees.

The fact that they *had* stolen a lot of money from their pimp before running away to Horton Magna gnawed at Stevie. What if he'd found out where they were? Had he discovered their new identities? Was it possible that he had come after them both and wanted his money back?

She shook her head at the windscreen. No, he was a pimp, and pimps were generally of a violent nature. He wouldn't be happy stealing a few trees. He'd want blood. And his money back. With interest. Especially as the two women had also apparently left him in hospital between them and drinking through a straw. Stevie wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of those two. They'd seemed so nice too.

But there was something about the Christmas cousins Stevie couldn't quite put her finger on, something on the edge of her subconscious. However, she couldn't grasp what it was. So she decided to leave it to percolate over the weekend, see what came up.

A big green sign indicated that the Horvale Deer and Country Park was the next on the left. Stevie manoeuvred the little Citroën through the ornate gateway and her eyes popped out on stalks as she saw an entire estate open out before her.

"Phew" she said out loud. Carole had told her it was bigger than her Christmas tree farm, but what an understatement! It was the size of a landed estate with its own roads and everything.

She slowed down and looked between the many trees for evidence of red deer, but couldn't see any.

It took her several minutes to wind through the parkland until eventually she could park outside a glamorous stately home, where the signs told her the main Reception could be found, and would visitors please report there first.

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Prudence ('call me Pru') Anderson looked even more like a gangster's moll than either Carole or Hollie Christmas did, but Stevie thought she was just as likely to be part of Maddy Kendrick's protection programme as anyone else she'd come across since moving to the area.

She was younger than Stevie expected her to be, with long, thin brown hair that seemed to be receding at the front, and a plain but not unpleasant face. Nondescript was probably how Stevie would describe her to her police officer pal Fal if she ever had to. Unremarkable. Unmemorable. And yet she had a firm set to her jaw, a determined look in her brown eyes. She was shorter than Stevie too, much more petite.

They rattled through the pleasantries as Pru led Stevie through grand hallways to a functional office with an uninspiring view of a row of bins in an even more uninspiring paved yard. There were no Chesterfields in here, but the low, armless chair Pru indicated Stevie sit in was comfortable enough.

"This is a wonderful location," said Stevie as she got her notepad and pen out of her back. She waved her mobile phone at her hostess, who sat down in a chair opposite, and asked if it was okay to record the interview.

"I've worked in worse locations," said Pru with a laugh, and a nod of the head at the phone.

Stevie explained that she was writing a feature for the newspaper about Christmas tree farms, omitting the part about Carole Christmas paying for an advertising feature for now. Although she did tell her that Carole had mentioned there was a tree farm at the park and that was why Stevie thought it was worth the interview, for extra depth.

She asked her the same questions she'd asked Carole, adding, "How long have you been here?"

"My family have owned this estate for generations," Pru replied.

Ah, so perhaps she wasn't one of Maddy's waifs and strays after all.

"But I left when I was eighteen," she continued. "I went to university in Leeds, where I got into a spot of bother."

This sounded interesting, thought Stevie. She leaned forward and said, "What happened? If you don't mind me asking..."

## Chapter 8

"I was singing in a night club to earn a bit of extra cash," Pru Anderson explained. "But I became involved with the wrong crowd. I dabbled in drugs, ended up owing people a lot of money, and I got into quite a lot of debt."

She really didn't seem the type to Stevie. It took all sorts.

"My father bailed me out," Pru continued. "But only on the provision that I came home and helped him run the estate." She shrugged her shoulders. "And I've been here ever since."

"How long ago was that?" asked Stevie.

Pru did a mental calculation. "I came home seven years ago."

"What aspects of the business are you responsible for?" said Stevie.

"I look after the Christmas tree farm, the deer farm, the pumpkin farm, and the pick-your-own fruit."

"I didn't see the Christmas tree farm on my way in," continued Stevie.

"It's on another part of the estate, easily accessed from the Sheffield side of the town," said Pru.

"Was the business already underway when you came back to run it?"

"No. My family were looking for ways to keep the estate without having to sell off pockets of land. I suggested they buy the Christmas tree farm in Horton

Magna, but Carole got there first. She closed the deal really quickly. I think she rushed it through, as it was up for a bargain price."

"She bought it with her cousin," Stevie stated.

"Hollie?" said Pru. "I don't think so. Hollie wasn't here yet, didn't turn up for a good few months. I don't know much about their personal business, but it was Carole who made all the arrangements for the tree farm."

Hmm, that was interesting too. Stevie was of the impression that the Christmas cousins had arrived at the same time.

"How did you feel when you lost out to them...her?"

Pru shrugged her shoulders again. "I was disappointed. It would have been a good asset to the firm. Instead, I convinced my father to allocate an area of land to Christmas trees and it just went from strength to strength from there. But yes, it would have been much easier to just buy a tree farm off the shelf, so to speak."

"You had to build the new business up from scratch?" asked Stevie.

"Yes. Whereas the Horton Magna farm was already up and running."

Stevie gave a conspiratorial wink. "Bit of competition there, then."

Pru laughed. "Of course. But it worked out much better in the end. We were able to use a plot of land that was otherwise under utilised, and then I fit the other aspects in around the farm."

"So if anything," continued Stevie, "Carole getting the Horton Magna farm helped the family business here?"

"That's right!" said Pru with a smile.

So no reason to cut down their trees, Stevie thought to herself, ruling Pru Anderson out of the mystery.



With no more interviews planned for the day, Stevie went home to work on her feature so far. She could have gone into the office, but she knew if the phones started to ring, she'd be expected to answer them. She knew the honey monster wasn't in today because she'd broken up for a few days holiday, and it probably wasn't her shift anyway. One of the other reporters would be holding the fort. Stevie just didn't know who was on duty, and without that knowledge, she didn't know if she'd be allowed to get on with her own work or not.

So she headed home to work on her story in the relative peace and quiet there.

The house was a little two-up two-down that her friend Maddy had arranged for her. The first time Stevie saw it, she thought it was tiny. From the street it looked like two rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs with the front door going straight into the downstairs room. The front door did go into the downstairs room, but there was another room towards the back of the property big enough for a breakfast-kitchen. There was also a small under-stairs cupboard in this room as well as a staircase that went up to the next floor.

There were three rooms upstairs, two at the back - the second bedroom and a bathroom - and one at the front, which was big enough for Stevie to use as a home office as well as her own bedroom.

She made herself a cup of tea and carried that and her work bag up the stairs to the small office. She'd just turned everything on and settled down at her desk when the phone rang. She was tempted to ignore it and let it ring, but a quick glance at the screen told her it was Carole Christmas.

"Carole!" she said brightly, waiting for the laptop to boot up completely. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks," said Carole at the other end.

"What can I do you for?" asked Stevie, when it was clear Carole was not going to ask about her own health.

"I thought you might be interested to know that I've done a stock take."

"Okay..." said Stevie, wondering where this was going.

"Three trees are unaccounted for," said Carole.

"Only three?" said Stevie. "That's good." But when Carole didn't respond, she added, "Isn't it?"

"Well yes, I suppose it is," said Carole, but she didn't sound convinced.

"Look," said Stevie. "That's only one more than we thought yesterday. There could have been loads missing. You're lucky there are only three."

"I suppose so," agreed Carole reluctantly.

"But thanks for letting me know," said Stevie, when Carole didn't say anything else. She was still perplexed as to why Carole had called her to tell her. "Look," she said again. "I don't suppose you have the details for that treasure hunter, do you?"

"Her name's Jo," said Carole. "Why do you ask?"

"On my way out yesterday, I think I passed her coming in. Does she drive a truck with a chest of gold on the door?"

"Yes, she did come into the shop after you'd gone and yes, she drives a truck. I've loaded it with trees a few times," said Carole. "But I didn't notice anything on the door."

"I think I'd like to have a chat with her about her metal detecting," said Stevie. "While I'm at it, I could pump her for information on that treasure trove you mentioned."

"Good idea!" said Carole, and Stevie could hear her rummaging for the information she'd asked her for.

## Chapter 9

Stevie arrived early at the coffee shop in the middle of the High Street. It was sandwiched between a poodle parlour on one side, and a laundrette on the other. Stevie couldn't decide if she could smell the shampoo from Pampered Pompadours or the washing detergent from Suds R Us. Perhaps it was a combination of the two.

Alongside the row of shops was a fairly busy main road, with parking at the roadside. Stevie had managed to nip into a space outside Kath Grimshaw's newsagent-come-post-office and walked the few hundred yards to the café. Through the condensation on the plate glass window, she saw a car right outside pull away and immediately a dark blue pick-up truck with a chest of gold coins on the driver's door replaced it.

Jammy devil, thought Stevie with a wry grin.

A burst of cold air accompanied the tall treasure hunter as she entered the steamy coffee house. Stevie raised a hand and smiled to attract the blonde woman's attention. As soon as the newcomer saw her, a pretty smile spread across her pretty face, causing her blue eyes to crinkle around the edges and her rosy cheeks to dimple.

"You must be Stephanie Beck," said the woman, still smiling.

Stevie stood up to greet her and they shook hands. Close up, she could see that her guest was on the chunky side but hid it well beneath stylish grey woollen trousers and burgundy tweed jacket.

"And you must be Joanne Willett. Thanks so much for coming to meet me."

Joanne sat down opposite her, shrugged out of her jacket, hung it on the back of her chair and said, "I'm intrigued. It isn't often a newspaper reporter calls me out of the blue."

"Ah, well, as I said on the phone," said Stevie, "I understand you're a bit of a treasure hunter, and I thought my paper might be interested in a story on the topic of metal detecting and the like."

A waitress came and took their order. Stevie ordered tea, as usual. Joanne ordered a latte.

"I'd love to know how you found out about me," said Joanne when the waitress had gone.

"I was at the Christmas tree farm yesterday and we passed on the drive. I was on the way out, your truck was on the way in. So I called Carole Christmas and asked her if she could tell me your name. I hope you don't mind her giving me your details."

"She gave you my business phone number," said Joanne. "It's painted on the side of my truck as well, so she wasn't really doing anything I wouldn't have done myself."

Stevie was relieved about that, although being a journalist, she had other ways and means of finding out people's contact details if she needed them badly enough. At least being able to use Carole's name, she'd had an easier 'in' than calling completely cold.

"I didn't notice a number on your truck," admitted Stevie.

The waitress brought a tray with their order on and Stevie arranged her stuff in the available space on the table, which wasn't much by the time there were two cups, a pot of tea, two jugs and a sugar bowl.

Joanne got her purse out, but Stevie waved it away. "My treat," she said.

They talked about the joys and woes of metal detecting, the equipment required, the kinds of finds Joanne and her friends had discovered, until Stevie turned the discussion, quite skilfully, she thought, to where to find treasure.

"I understand you think there's an interesting hoard quite close by?" she said.

Joanne's pretty face became even more animated as she warmed to her topic.

"Oh yes," she said. "We have evidence of tunnels in this area, used by Royalists and other sympathisers of the king to hide in, escape the Roundheads, and stash their valuables. A lot of the tunnels have caved in or been filled in, but there's one that was rumoured to run from Horton Manor, all the way to Horby on the coast."

"I know Horby!" said Stevie. Of course, Joanne wouldn't know how new Stevie was to the area but, even so, she always got excited when she knew where people actually meant when they were talking. Stevie had followed Fal's football team to Horby when the sports reporter couldn't make it.

"I've tried to convince Carole to let us at least take our metal detectors onto her land, but so far she's said no," continued Joanne.

"I bet that's annoying," said Stevie, jotting down notes on her pad in shorthand. "Do you feel like sneaking onto the property and doing it anyway?"

"It's frustrating, we'd love to find a big haul. But we can't force people to do something against their will. We also wouldn't be so disrespectful to ignore a person's wishes like that. Word gets around. We want people on our side not resenting us. And besides, there are plenty of other places to keep us busy. All we can do is hope they have a change of heart in the future."

Stevie nodded, not revealing that it was also frustrating to her that Joanne was such a nice person and quite clearly neither a tree thief nor a saboteur.

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Without even trying, Stevie had once again become embroiled in a local mystery. It really wasn't her concern, yet she'd still been bitten by the bug. And now she wanted to know the answer just as much as Carole and Hollie probably did.

Who was stealing their Christmas trees?

More importantly, why?

At least people weren't dying this time, getting themselves killed. Or not so far. Stevie could hear Fal, always telling her not to get involved and to leave things to the police. She'd put money on him saying the exact same thing now, if he wasn't away on his training course.

She wondered if he'd enjoyed his police course. He'd sent her a text to let her know he'd arrived safely at the police conference centre in Bradford, two days ago, on Wednesday evening, ahead of the course start of Thursday morning. They'd exchanged a couple of 'how are you' texts since.

Fal had told her he'd be on his way home again on Saturday afternoon, and she wondered what time he'd be back. They were only friends, but they did keep in touch with one another, just like Stevie and Maddy did. Maddy didn't often

go away, but Stevie did, for work. Maddy's work was in and around Horton Magna.

But Fal wasn't here. Stevie was. She'd already brought Maddy into the loop. She couldn't really wait for Fal to get home just so she could include him too.

Chapter 10

There was only one person left that Carole and Hollie suspected might be involved in the Christmas tree thefts, but she was a property developer, apparently. Her name was Denise Nixon, but Stevie couldn't think of a single reason to contact her. She racked her brains for a plausible excuse to no avail.

The *Midnight Bugle* had a property reporter, anyway. Stevie could ask her for ideas. It was the weekend, though, and it wasn't the property reporter's shift in the office. Stevie had no intention of interrupting her personal time when there wasn't even a story. Without a topical or community angle, Stevie had no reason whatsoever to get in touch with her.

Another Christmas tree farm, yes. Especially one that had a deer park attached to it. A metal detector society too. Especially if she could get Joanne to send her details of their weekly meetings so Stevie could add them to the community round-up.

But a property developer?

Nope. Stevie had hit a brick wall.

Anyway, it was a Saturday. How many property developers worked on a Saturday? And seriously? Would Denise Nixon really want to steal Christmas trees? Stevie thought not.

With nothing else to do other than go home and carry on working on her feature, Stevie pointed the car towards home. Her little house wasn't far away.

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Stevie transcribed her interviews with Joanne Willett and Pru Anderson. They were both interesting people who Stevie wanted to nurture in case she should ever need their help. She could see features and articles on pumpkins and deer in her future, treasure and metal detecting.

She wondered if Joanne had an intriguing personal story too. If so, she could write that up one day, along with Pru's, Carole's and Hollie's. Even her own if she ever felt able to share. That would make five of them. Magazine editors always seemed to like personal interest stories about people in multiples of three and five. She could even ask Maddy for her story.

It was strange that all the interesting people in the town were women. The longer she lived there, the more Stevie came to realise how many damaged women there were in the world, and particularly how many lived in or close to Horton Magna.

They all had their own business too. Or they seemed to.

The more she thought about it, the more she realised how nearly everyone she ever dealt with was female. The courier was female. The postie was female.

The dog groomer, the vet, the news agent. Maddy Kendrick was a female vicar. Terri Stringer was a female newspaper boss.

Did they all have mysterious backgrounds?

If the Christmas cousins had changed their names to suit their new lives, did Terri Stringer?

Maddy was Maddy's real name, and Stevie's new name was a reversal of her old name: Stephanie Beck from Rebecca Stevens. When they were growing up, Maddy's nickname was Kenny and Stevie's nickname was Steve. That's how Maddy had come up with her new identity. Stevie only hoped it wasn't so obvious to anyone else she'd left behind.

There was only one adult male who Stevie regularly interacted with and that was Fal, and he was the only copper in the village. Was he damaged too? Was Fal Bashir another fake identity?

Stevie opened up a new folder on her laptop called 'Horton Magna' and password protected it. Then she created folders with everyone's names, and she jotted down everything she knew about them in individual word processing documents.

The laptop was newspaper property, but Terri Stringer had always been open about letting the staff use the computers for their own work too, so long as they weren't breaking the law or undercutting her. Anything any of the reporters did, whether as a result of a newspaper lead or something else, they had to offer it to Terri first. Only when she rejected the idea, for whatever reason, could they offer it elsewhere. But at least they got to keep all of the revenue too for anything they sold to another market.

Stevie tutted, got up and stretched, and went to make herself a cuppa. She was allowing her imagination to wander when she had this advertising feature to write. A break would be good and she could come back to it almost fresh again.

Through her kitchen window Stevie could see the holly bush, its fleshy leaves dark green, the berries bright red. A little robin flitted between the branches, its breast much duller than the fruit in the bush to keep it safe from predators during the winter months.

As Stevie flicked the kettle on, she registered something Pru Anderson had told her about Hollie Christmas.

Hollie wasn't here yet when Carole bought the Christmas tree farm. Surely she would have needed to be to sign any documentation?

Unless they did it all by email and secure transaction? That was becoming a thing these days, wasn't it?

But Horton Magna was in a time warp, wasn't it? Had they caught up with technology like that yet?

Stevie made a phone call and within minutes she was in her car again. There was only one way to find out if Hollie was actually a partner in the Christmas tree farm or if she was simply an employee, and that was to ask her outright. She'd certainly not thought twice about potentially dropping her cousin in it with the insurance scam suggestion.

It was still daylight at least, but with the day drawing in, Christmas lights were starting to flicker on all along the route.

Stevie took her time so she could admire the Christmas trees in front rooms or outside on porches or in gardens. She'd heard about a so-called Christmas house where the resident lit it up like a grotto and asked for donations, which they passed along to a children's charity, a hospice on the outskirts of the town. The Christmas house was slightly out of her way, but she wanted to see it and maybe do a report on it for Terri.

Instead of going straight on at the zebra crossing, Stevie turned left towards Horton Parva. Her head swivelled to the right, though, as she noticed a tree had gone up after all on the green, where before there hadn't been one, and a group of people were decorating it.

That was interesting.

She turned around and went back, parked at the side of the road, and made her way towards the tree in the middle of the grass.

"Halloo!" she called.

A happy chappy with a round, rosy face, wearing a thick red woolly jumper over brown corduroy trousers came to meet her.

"Ey up!" he said, waving two giant baubles at her. One was silver glitter, the other was gold.

"This is a great tree!" she said, pointing behind him.

He turned to look at the tree before focusing back on her face again. His eyes behind round wire-rimmed glasses were pale blue.

"We didn't think we'd be getting a tree this year," he said to her. "After the budget was cut. But when I drove past this morning I saw that this fine specimen had been left lying on the grass."

"Just like that?" asked Stevie.

"Just like that," he replied, with another cheery smile.

## Chapter 11

Stevie's eyes almost popped out of her head. "It's a big tree!" she said. "Where did it come from?"

The man, who Stevie thought was resembling a certain Christmas toy maker and deliverer more and more the longer she spoke to him, looked at the tree again and put both baubles in one hand so he could gesticulate at the tree with the other.

"We don't know!" he admitted, the two shiny, glittery balls now dangling from their shiny, golden strings. "But one turned up at the children's hospice too, apparently. And another at the children's hospital."

"Also just like that?" asked Stevie.

"Also just like that!" he agreed.

"Wow!" she replied. "And you don't know where they came from?" He shook his head. "What a kind benefactor you all must have."

"It certainly makes you believe in the Christmas spirit," he said. "There we all were, thinking we wouldn't be getting any trees this year. Then these fine specimens all turned up."

"Anyone would think it was Christmas!" said Stevie, for which he rewarded her with a booming laugh.

He waved his baubles at the others behind him. "I'd best get back," he said, glancing up at the sky. "We've been lucky with the weather today, but it will soon be dark." He wiped his free hand on his trousers and held it out. "Nick Jolly," he said. "Community volunteer."

"Stephanie Beck," she replied. "Community reporter at the *Midnight Bugle*." And for once she wasn't quick to add that she wanted to be an investigative journalist really.

He gave Stevie a cheery wave, and he went one way while she went the other. She turned the car round again and continued on with her journey. There was a traffic island at the end of this road where, if she turned right, she could get back on track. It really was only a very short detour.

A small, modern housing estate appeared on the right-hand side of the road. Much of the Horvale residences, like Stevie's, were old farm- or pit-workers' cottages, built from the early 1900s to the 1950s. But every so often a brand-new complex popped up where the developer had bought, say, an old disused public house and built sixteen to twenty small houses or blocks of flats on the same plot. Or an old working men's club that was converted into residential housing for the elderly or the disabled.

Only being new to the area herself, Stevie had no idea what used to stand where these houses now clustered together, but it had the look of an old pub about it. The Christmas house was on the corner of a junction, so you couldn't miss it if you were coming from the Horton Magna end.

The afternoon light didn't really do it any justice, so Stevie decided to come back this way after she'd been to see Hollie.

As she arrived at the Christmas shop, she could see Hollie standing at the end of the wooden railings around the deck, next to the donation box, staring at a bundle of papers in her hand. Looking extremely perplexed, she came to greet Stevie, waving the twenty-pound notes in her face.

"What's this?" asked Stevie, her turn now to stare at the money.

"I found it," said Hollie.

Stevie's mouth dropped open and she gave the notes a double take before looking back at Hollie in shock.

"Found it where?"

"In the donation box," said Hollie, stuffing the money into Stevie's hands and pulling her Christmas-tree-green cardigan tight across the front of her elf costume.

Stevie pushed it back towards her. "I don't want it!" But Hollie wouldn't take it from her. "And what do you mean, in the donation box? Isn't that what it's for?"

"Yes! But there must be more than a hundred pounds there," said the elf, nodding her head towards Stevie's hands.

Stevie pulled what she thought was an impressed face. "Over two hundred pounds, more like. That's a great donation."

"That's the point!" said Hollie, almost wailing. "We're usually lucky if we find a fifty pence piece in there. Or a few Euros." She nodded her head at the money again. "We don't usually get notes of any sort."

"Well, look," said Stevie, indicating the door to the shop with the notes in her hand. "Shall we go inside? We can count the money in the warm and talk about it in comfort."

"Yes, yes, you're right," said Hollie leading the way. But she still wouldn't take the money back from Stevie.

"Do you usually check the donation box at this time of day?" Stevie asked Hollie's back.

The door tinkled as they passed through and Stevie was surprised to see there was no sign of Carole.

"No, I saw someone put some change in and thought I'd just come out and collect it. Honestly, it's so rare we get anything worthwhile." She went through to the back room and came back with a bottle and two glasses. "Unless you'd prefer something less strong?" she asked Stevie as an afterthought.

Stevie shook her head. A wee tot would warm her cockles, and one wouldn't be any harm.

Hollie poured herself a glass of whiskey, knocked it back in one go, then filled both glasses. Stevie picked hers up, chinked Hollie's, and said, "Cheers!" She took a sip and placed the tumbler down on the counter as the fiery liquid warmed her cockles.

"When was the last time you checked the box?" asked Stevie, beginning to count the notes out.

Hollie pursed her lips and shrugged. "I don't know. I don't usually do it, and I don't know when Carole last did."

"So this money could have been put into the box any time?" asked Stevie. Hollie nodded. She finished counting the money. "There's two hundred and fifty-five pounds here," she said, patting down the pile of notes with her hand and taking another sip of her whiskey.

Now it was Hollie's turn to open her mouth wide. When she spoke, it came out as a squeak. "Two hundred and fifty-five pounds?"

"That's a lot of money to not know about," said Stevie.

Hollie sat down on a stool behind the counter and finished her whiskey. "Perhaps Carole put it in there for safe keeping," she said.

Stevie looked around the Christmassy shop. "Where is Carole?" It was a Saturday afternoon fairly close to Christmas. Stevie would have thought it was one of the shop and farm's busiest periods.

"She's showing a family the eighty-five pound trees," said Hollie, almost on auto-pilot.

"Eighty-five pounds?" said Stevie, her brain working overtime.

"I know!" said Hollie, pulling a face. "Who can afford to spend that much on a tree?"

"Well, yes," said Stevie. "But that isn't what I meant." Hollie gave her a quizzical look, one brown eyebrow shooting up above one brown eye. "Are those your biggest trees? The five-year old trees?"

"The eighty-five pound trees, you mean?" said Hollie. "Yes. They're thirty-five, fifty-five and eighty-five."

"And how many trees have gone missing?" asked Stevie.

"Three..." said Hollie, and Stevie could see the cogs starting to work inside her head too. "Three times eighty-five is..."

"Two hundred and fifty-five pounds," Stevie finished.

Hollie poured herself another drink and knocked it back in one again. Stevie raised her own eyebrows. If she'd had that many glasses of whiskey in such short succession, she'd be on her back by now.

Hollie slammed the glass down on the counter and stifled a hiccup. "The trees weren't stolen!"

"Unless Carole put it there for safe keeping..." Stevie reminded her.

Hollie checked the ledger where they recorded all the tree sales. "Nope," she said. "She sold a twenty-five pound tinsel tree and some silver baubles."

"Even so," said Stevie. "It might be worth checking with her when she gets back with her wealthy family."

Hollie nodded, then opened her eyes wide. "I'm sorry," she said. "You wanted to ask me something?"

For a moment Stevie stared at her blankly, trying to remember what it was she'd come to see Hollie about. Then it came back to her.

"Oh yes. I know I could have asked you over the phone, but I do love this shop and I wanted to see the Christmas house too. So I used you as an excuse."

Hollie stared happily around the shop, her eyes shining perhaps a little more brightly than usual. Then she looked at Stevie, an expectant look on her face.

What she was going to ask was potentially offensive, but she took a deep breath and asked it anyway. "Do you both own the Christmas tree farm?"

Hollie frowned at her. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm really sorry for asking, but I was just wondering...Do you and Carole both own the business? Or does just one of you own it?"

Hollie pressed her lips together with annoyance and Stevie knew she'd gone too far.

## Chapter 12

Suddenly, Hollie the elf leaned across the counter, that conspiratorial look on her face again. "Who told you?" she asked quietly.

"No one told me," said Stevie truthfully, holding her hands up in defence. "It was just something someone said."

"Who said it?" asked Hollie urgently. "What did they say?"

"Just that you weren't here when Carole gazumped her, I suppose, on the tree farm."

Hollie's eyes narrowed and she nodded her head. "Pru Anderson."

Stevie was about to claim her usual source confidentiality when Hollie spoke again.

"I wasn't here, no. I was in hospital having my face stitched up and minus my spleen."

"Oh," said Stevie, "I thought that was..." she stopped herself from revealing too much again.

"Don't worry," said Hollie with a wicked grin. "You should've seen the other guy!" She chuckled as she remembered what looked like the dim and distant past. "But yes, Pru's right. I wasn't here and I didn't sign any paperwork. The business is Carole's. It should have been both of ours." She looked around the shop again. "But she was tied up in a fixed mortgage and couldn't change any details for five years, so she let me have the shop instead."

"So you both do own the business, essentially?" asked Stevie.

"I suppose so," said Hollie. She's the trees, I'm the baubles. They go hand in hand. But no, I don't own any of the tree farm, and she doesn't own any of the shop."

"I see..." said Stevie.

"And you thought perhaps I'd sabotaged those trees out of some kind of vengeance?" asked Hollie.

Stevie held her hands up again. "I'm only human!"

Hollie threw back her head and laughed. "Aren't we all?" she said. "But don't worry about it. I pointed the finger at Carole too," she said. "At least it wasn't Carole pointing a finger at me."

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Ten minutes later Stevie was on her way back out of the farm and on her way home again. It was just starting to get dark, which meant the Christmas house would be well lit by now. This time she could see it in the distance, glowing like a beacon in the waning light.

She slowed down so she could see the inflatable snowman and reindeer more clearly. They were both lit up from the inside and were surrounded by fairy lights of all different shapes and sizes. There were elves on the roof, a Father Christmas by the front door, a gaily lit tree next to the drive.

She slammed the brakes on when she saw a dark-blue pick up truck parked in the drive, with a treasure chest painted on the door.

That was the treasure hunter's truck. What was she doing here?

Stevie parked across the end of the drive and got out. If anyone questioned her, she could just say she was taking a closer look at the lights.

She sneaked up the side of the truck and peered into the back to see lots and lots of pine needles.

Creeping to the top of the drive, she examined the tree there more closely. This one had roots, was firmly growing out of the ground, and had been for years by the look of it. She stared around the front garden. In among all the ornaments and lights there were no recently cut Christmas trees anywhere.

Her phone burst into life, scaring the living daylights out of Stevie. She hit the mute button at the same time as seeing the caller ID lit up on the screen. She rushed to the end of the drive, climbed back into her car, and drove a few yards up the road before pulling over again beneath a street light.

The caller had already hung up, but Stevie called her back.

"Carole! Hi! Sorry I missed your call. I was driving and didn't have hands-free on yet."

"That's okay," said the voice at the other end.

"What can I do you for?" asked Stevie, catching her breath and glancing behind her to see if she'd been spotted by anyone at the Christmas house.

"Hollie said you'd dropped by," said Carole.

"Yes! I wanted an excuse to come and see your lovely shop again. Did she tell you why I dropped by?"

"She did!" said Carole. "But she also asked me about the money."

"The money in the donation box?" asked Stevie.

"Yes. She asked if I put it there."

"Did you?" said Stevie.

"No."

"Do you remember the last time you checked the donation box?" asked Stevie.

"It was more than a week ago," said Carole.

"So that money could have been put in there any time in the last week?" said Stevie.

"Yes," said Carole.

"And you don't have any idea who it's from?"

"No. We usually just get shrapnel. I don't even remember the last time we had a note. Or even a pound coin."

"Did Hollie tell you my theory?"

"She did..."

"What do you think?" asked Stevie.

"I think it's more than possible that whoever took the trees paid for them."

Stevie found herself nodding at her phone. "The question is, though," she continued. "Who?"

"I have no idea," Carole admitted. "But it wasn't me and it wasn't Hollie."

"It wasn't me either," said Stevie. "Do you know Nick Jolly?"

"Oh yes," said Carole. "He usually comes and gets the tree for the green. But I think I mentioned they couldn't afford one this time because they didn't have the money."

"Well, some good samaritan donated a tree to Nick Jolly and his volunteers," said Stevie. She heard Carole's sharp intake of breath at the other end of the

line. "Yes, and the children's hospice received one too, and so did the children's hospital." Still Carole didn't respond. "I'm no expert," continued Stevie. "And I'll need you to confirm it. But..."

"You think they're our trees?" she said at last.

"I do."

"And whoever it was paid for them after all?"

"Yup!" said Stevie.

"But who would do such a thing?" said Carole. "More importantly, why?"

"I have my suspicions," said Stevie. "But first I need you or Hollie to confirm that these trees are your missing trees.

"Where are you now?" asked Carole.

"Creeping around the Christmas house. Do you know it?"

"The one that asks people for donations?"

"Yes," said Stevie. "Do you know who lives there?"

"No, do you?" she asked.

"No. But I know who's currently visiting at least."

"I'll meet you at the green in Horton Magna," said Carole.

Ten minutes later, Stevie and Carole were standing with Nick Jolly admiring the large Christmas tree.

"And you don't know where it came from?" said Carole, craning her neck to look up at the deep green tree now prettily decorated with giant glittery baubles and equally giant colourful lights.

Nick Jolly pushed his belly out and put his hands on his hips. By now he was wearing a red duffle coat with off-white fur around the hood and the cuffs over his red jumper and brown cords.

"No idea," he said. "One minute we didn't have a tree. The next..." He gave both women the full benefit of his cheerful smile, his pale blue eyes crinkling at the edges behind his metal-framed glasses.

Carole turned to Stevie. "It certainly looks like one of our regular greens."

"The ones that shed?" said Stevie. Carole nodded. She grinned at Nick Jolly, thanked him for his time, and said to Carole, "Come on. Let's go."

In a convoy of two cars, one blue Citroën and one white Fiesta, Stevie and Carole drove back to the Christmas house. The blue pick-up truck was still on the drive, but fake snow had been added to the garden at the front.

Carole put her hand in the back of the truck and picked up a handful of green and blue pine needles.

"Yes," she said. "It's likely that those are from our trees too." She dusted the needles off her hands and turned towards the main front door of the house.

When Joanne Willett opened the front door to their knock, Carole said simply, "I'm very cross with you."

Chapter 13

The look on Joanne Willett's face was priceless.

"I'm so sorry, Carole," she said, glancing from her to Stevie and back again.

"Why?" was all Carole said in return.

"I've been so busy," said Joanne, waving her arms at the garden behind them. "And then there's the secret stash of treasure we found out at Horby. And work, of course." She pulled a face. "And every time I thought about coming up to the Christmas tree farm, you were already closed or it was likely you were about to close." She gave them both a guilty look. "But don't stand out here on the step, come on in."

Stevie and Carole reluctantly let her lead them through a short, square lobby with a thick blue pile carpet on the floor and stairs, and pale blue matt-painted walls, into a large yet cosy living room that looked all by itself like a Santa's grotto. There were gnomes, elves, Santas, snowmen, penguins, lights, baubles, tinsel, everything except a tree on almost every surface. Two nutcracker soldiers guarded an open fireplace where embers glowed orange. Table, ceiling and wall lights were adorned with red or green shades with little bells hanging from them. And hundreds of Christmas cards were strung across the walls.

"What a lot of lovely cards you have," said Stevie.

Joanne waved a hand at one wall. "I save them every year, and add to them each Christmas." She indicated a red and black patterned settee for them to sit down on, but before taking a matching fireside chair herself she asked if they'd like a cup of tea or coffee. When they both said no, she perched on the edge of the chair with her knees together in those stylish grey trousers of hers.

"Did you steal three of my trees?" asked Carole, getting straight to the point.

"I didn't *steal* them," said Joanne, having the good grace to blush. "But yes, I did take them. I put the money in the box, though!" she added brightly.

"But when? How?" asked Carole.

"I just drove in, cut one down, and put it in the back of the truck," said Joanne. "I could only take one at a time because the wrapping machine is always locked away or inside the shop, and the shop was closed."

"So you went to Carole's Christmas tree farm three times and helped yourself to one of her best trees?" said Stevie.

Joanne took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Why?" asked Carole.

"Because everyone was having their budget cut and everywhere was looking so miserable." She waved a hand around her. "The donations from people coming to see this lot more than covered it, but I can give you more if I didn't pay enough."

"Didn't pay enough?" said Carole. "Didn't pay enough? I wish you'd told me, or got in touch with me or something."

"Yes, you're right. It was completely wrong of me," said Joanne, looking down at her hands, now clasped together on her knees. "But I can pay more if I owe more."

Carole shook her head and looked at Stevie. "And this is why I'm so cross with her." Without giving Stevie time to respond, she turned back to Joanne. "I

always give the parish council a discount. I always give the hospice and the children's home a discount. They never, ever pay the full retail price." She pulled a wad of notes out of her coat pocket. "I've brought you your change..."

Joanne looked at the cash in disgust almost. "I don't want that!" she said. "I don't mind paying the full price at all."

"Then give this to one of your other charities," said Carole, picking up one of Joanne's hands and pushing the money into it. "Call it my contribution to your wonderful display each year." Joanne and Stevie were now staring at her with mouths wide open. "In fact, we'll give you a discount on anything you buy from the Christmas shop as well."

Joanne stared at Carole and opened and closed her mouth. Then her bottom lip started to quiver and her pretty blue eyes filled with tears.

"That is so kind of you." she said.



A week later, Stevie dragged Fal and Maddy to the Christmas tree farm. Carole and Hollie were throwing a huge Christmas party to thank everyone for their custom over the past year. The car park was festooned with fairy lights and Christmas trees, glass baubles even bigger than the ones on the tree on the green, and even the reindeer had little bells on their antlers. The children loved the animals, especially when they could give them some food out of their own hands.

Street food vendors were dotted around the place, dishing out mulled wine, toasted marshmallows on sticks, hot chocolate drinks, spiced fruit cake, warm egg nog, mince pies. Nick Jolly sat on a painted red, green and white sleigh, dressed like Father Christmas, in what looked to Stevie like his own clothes, handing out gifts to the children. Even a small brass band had turned up and were playing Christmas carols everyone could sing along with.

"This is great," Stevie said to her friends. "I'm so glad you were both able to come."

"And miss all this?" said Maddy, eyes wide as she took it all in.

"I can't wait to speak to the Christmases and find out how you solved their mystery for them," said Fal with a laugh.

Stevie pointed out everyone she knew, from Pru Anderson to Hollie Christmas, only to find that Maddy knew them all already. Carole Christmas appeared at their elbow, with a woman who looked remarkably like a drag queen in tow.

"This is Denise Nixon," she said to Stevie. "I don't believe the two of you have met?"

"The property developer," said Stevie, shaking the newcomer by the hand.

"By the way," said Maddy to Fal and Stevie, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"What?" they both asked at the same time.

"Look up!"

They both looked up and Stevie felt the blood rush to her cheeks. "It's, er, mistletoe," she stammered.

"Shame to waste it," said Fal with a smile.

the end

a mavis braithwaite adventure

Wordsworth Shorts



– Diane Wordsworth –

**deadly deeds in
morecambe bay**

deadly deeds in morecambe bay

During 2024 I enrolled on a writing workshop I'd 'won' for backing a kickstarter. For the first assignment, I had to come up with a list of specific prompt ideas, choose one from each list, and write a short story of at least 3,000 words, opening with enough depth to drag the reader in and keep them there. I'd already created my retired ninja assassin Mavis Braithwaite in another story and I decided to write her a new story to go with that one. Deadly Deeds in Morecambe Bay is, therefore, book 2 in the Mavis Braithwaite series.



So misleading and deceptive, the smooth golden sand, shimmering softly in the weak, watery sunshine, looked as safe and innocent as virgin snow, stretching as far as the eye could see. Even today, in the depths of a stone-cold winter when visibility was poor, you could still see that the beach ran for miles.

Strung out down a road that ran parallel to the promenade was a long row of shops, restaurants, amusement arcades and pubs. Most of the shops were closed for Christmas. Only those selling essentials, such as food, alcohol and tobacco products, remained open.

On side roads leading off the main Marine Drive, five- and six-storey previously superior Victorian guesthouses still stood, now home to, behind stone-framed square-bayed windows, recovering drug addicts, rehabilitating criminals, former prostitutes, and immigrants – legal and less so.

The council had quite rightly concluded that this was a far better use of its money when the hotels became empty, rather than let the buildings or the residents rot on the streets of Lancashire.

At one end of the prom, to the left of the huge, sandy bay, the elegant, white-painted, three-storey, 44-bedroomed art deco Midland Hotel glistened in the cool, winter sunlight. Saved from closure more than once over the years, it now proudly stood as a fond reminder of the resort's former glorious heyday in the 1920s and 1930s.

However, despite the money that had been thrown at the town and its splendid promenade over the years, there was still an air of neglect and decay to the place.



Mavis Braithwaite stood on the prom next to the famous, life-sized bronze statue of the town's equally famous Eric Morecambe, a comedian who had taken the name of the town for his own and gone on to become a national treasure. Instead of looking out to sea, like Mavis was, the statue forever faced that row of sorry looking shops and hotels.

In huge, satisfying gulps, Mavis breathed in both the briny smell of the sea and the aroma of fish and chips frying in one of the nearby shops. Most of the businesses were closed for the festive period, but chip shops still opened for a few hours every day. Mavis's tummy rumbled and she wondered if the turkey and cranberry sandwiches she'd brought from home for the journey would suffice or if she should buy a bag of chips.

Apart from the coach-load of old-aged pensioners, who had paid to travel across the Pennine Hills from Yorkshire to Lancashire just so they wouldn't be alone for the Christmas-in-between-bit, the promenade was deserted.

The Chapel St Stephens Society for the Over Sixties were in Morecambe on a birdwatching trip to hopefully catch a glimpse of some of the hundreds of thousands of seabirds that flocked to the sand-flats and salt-marshes surrounding the inlet, making the bay a 'special conservation area' and a designated 'site of special scientific interest'.

"Two hundred and ten thousand birds to be precise," their coach driver ('call me Alan!') had informed them over the tannoy on their way here. Mavis believed him. The flats beyond the water line on the beach were teeming with birds, thousands and thousands of them, and she wished she hadn't left her pocket binoculars, bought especially for the trip, in her bag on the bus. Along with her pocket guide to British birds, also bought especially for the trip.

An ice-cold breeze whipped along the sea front. Mavis pulled the collar of her heavy tweed coat tighter, thankful for its warmth, and stamped her feet in her sturdy walking boots. She knew how to dress for a brisk stroll at the seaside.

A cold, windy day on the other side of the country in the middle of winter was not how she thought she'd be spending her retirement. But she'd had to do something to relieve the boredom. Mavis hadn't come on the coach trip out of loneliness, like so many of the others. No, she was itching for something to do, something to get her false teeth into.

When the only choices Mavis was offered were ballroom dancing or birdwatching, she'd gone for what she thought was the more adventurous of the two. After all, a ballroom dancing trip would have been full of old people, Mavis reasoned. She'd hoped the outdoor option of the two might have appealed to a younger audience.

She took another big lungful of sea air and turned to face the same way as the statue so she could watch her fellow travellers. The 32-seater coach had parked in a designated bus stop at the side of the road for twenty minutes, to allow the occupants to stretch their legs, to visit the cockle pickers memorial that commemorated twenty-three Chinese men and women who'd drowned in 2004, to visit the Eric Morecambe statue, and to avail themselves of the facilities on the sea front.

That was thirty minutes ago and still there were stragglers missing.

Two stragglers to be precise.



Mavis tutted and pushed a few stray strands of dyed lilac hair out of her face, tucking them into her thick, woolly hat. At this rate, by the time they all got back, she'd be ready for a visit to the loo again. If she'd known she'd have this much time, she would have climbed aboard the coach and collected her binoculars after all.

She glanced up at the red felt Father Christmas hat someone had placed at a jaunty angle on the statue's head. Fortunately, the sodden fabric was secured by

a length of elastic, or it may have blown away long ago. The elastic was snagged in a couple of places, probably from the sharp edges on parts of the bronze sculpture. But, on the whole, it was standing up to the rigours of a blustery English winter.

“What do you think of it so far?” she asked the statue from the corner of her mouth, half expecting the inanimate object’s lower jaw to move like a ventriloquist’s dummy and say ‘Rubbish’, just like the star himself had done in so many of his comedy sketches.

The statue didn’t reply. Mavis patted it on the arm, feeling the cold of the metal seep through her warm woollen mitten.

“Shall I take your picture?” called Alan the coach driver from the kerb, hands thrust deep inside his pockets, shoulders hunched up around his ears as he too stepped from foot to foot in a bid to keep warm.

He was in his mid-forties with a thin thatch of blond hair above thick bushy eyebrows, blue eyes that twinkled mischievously, and a clean-shaven, unwrinkled face. Mavis had wondered to herself if perhaps he didn’t have any family either with whom to spend the holiday.

She looked up at the statue, pulled off a woollen mitten, and retrieved her mobile phone from the pocket of her coat.

“Yes, please,” she said, stepping down the short flight of stone steps and meeting the driver halfway across the path so she could hand the phone to him. “It’ll kill some time while we wait for the others.”

She showed him where the camera app was on the phone and left him to work it out while she went back up the stairs to stand next to the statue.

At the last moment she decided to mimic the same stance as the statue, a famous pose from the dance he used to do with his partner, Ernie Wise, to the song *Bring Me Sunshine*.

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Mavis was chuckling and still scrolling through the pictures the driver had taken when the last two pensioners finally returned from the toilets. Only they weren’t coming from the direction of the toilets. They were coming from the direction of the stone jetty that jutted out into the bay and one of them, the taller of the two, who Mavis discovered was called Patrick, was frantically scrolling through his expensive-looking phone.

“I tell you it was a white wagtail,” said Patrick.

“Rubbish!” said the other, whose name was Norman. He reminded Mavis of her earlier chat with the Eric Morecambe statue. “It would have been a pied wagtail,” continued Norman. “You need to get your eyes tested, old man.”

They huffed and puffed at each other, their breath turning white as it hit the cold air.

Patrick found the picture he was looking for and jabbed the phone into the other man’s face.

“There you are!” he said. “What do you call that, then?”

“That’s one you took somewhere else,” said Norman, shaking his snowy white head and turning redder in the face.

“Put YOUR glasses on, OLD MAN!” snarled Patrick.

“Er...” said Alan the driver, pointing at his watch. “Can we take this to a room and sort it out later? We have a schedule to keep to and we’re already late.”

The two men grumbled something to each other, but clambered shakily aboard the single-decker bus. Mavis could practically hear the men’s bones creaking at the effort as she followed them.

“Come on, you two,” called Ruby, one of the organisers from the club, who was accompanying the group on their trip. “You can do it.”

Ruby was in her early fifties with dyed blonde hair, false eyelashes, and kohl so thick and dark around her eyes it was difficult to see where the lashes ended and the eyes started.

A loud cheer went up from the rest of the coach when the two men finally made it. Patrick dropped down heavily into his seat in the third row and huffed and puffed as though he’d just climbed Everest.

Mavis wouldn’t have minded, but it was a ‘kneeling’ bus, one that lowered down on hydraulics until it was level with the footpath, so that pushchairs and wheelchairs could easily be manoeuvred on board. An otherwise able and spritely gentleman should have managed it easily.

Norman, on the other hand, a little chubbier than Patrick, struggled to squeeze along the aisle between the seats to his place in the fifth row on the other side. But he was much more agile and he gently lowered himself down onto the chair. He scowled at Mavis, who continued to the back of the bus.

Alan the driver followed Mavis and the men onto the bus, stood at the front, and did a quick head-count. Then he shrugged out of the quilted anorak he’d been wearing and hung it on the back of his chair.

As he started the engine and the bus pulled away from the kerb, the tannoy crackled into life and Ruby the organiser’s voice echoed around the coach.

“Our next stop is Silverdale,” she said. “It’s not far along this stretch of road and it’s where we’ll be spending the night. We could have gone straight there, but we wanted to give you the chance to see the statue. We know how fond many of you are of Eric Morecambe.

“The beach is a bit more wild and rugged at Silverdale than the one we just left in Morecambe. But please don’t venture out onto the sand without someone with you. There are quicksands and fast-turning tides in Morecambe Bay. We’d rather not lose any of you, thank you very much.”

A murmuring of voices rippled through the coach.

“We still have a couple of hours of daylight in front of us,” continued Ruby, “so the representative from the RSPB, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, will be here at two o’clock, after we’ve all checked in, to give a quick slide show and talk about the birds of Morecambe Bay.

“Sandwiches, cakes and hot and cold drinks will be provided. We understand some of you may be tired following today’s journey,” she added, which was followed by some laughter and much agreement. “Let me know as you alight the coach if you already think you won’t be joining us for the talk.

“Dinner is at six o’clock in the hotel dining room, after which we have a speaker to tell us all about the cockle pickers of Morecambe Bay.”

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Less than five minutes later, the coach pulled up beside a small hotel in the centre of the village and everyone trooped out, collected their luggage, and checked into the guest house. Mavis was delighted to see fairy lights still twinkling on the lampposts.

By the time she reached her room, Mavis was starving hungry and her stomach rumbled again. “Must be all that sea air,” she said to herself whilst also stifling a yawn.

The large, pristine bed with its white pristine covers looked very inviting. “Don’t you dare have a nap, Mavis Braithwaite!” she admonished. “That’s what old people do!”

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The next thing she knew there was a hammering at the door and her face was stuck to the pillow, the latter no longer looking as pristine nor as inviting as it had when she’d first arrived.

“Dammit!” she grumbled, staggering to the door, tidying her hair with one hand and turning the knob with the other. “Sorry, sorry,” she said before seeing who it was. “I fell asleep.”

“So long as you’re all right,” said Ruby, who was looking at her with some relief. “Alan’s gone to check on Patrick and Norman. They’re the only other people missing roll call and our speaker is already downstairs and ready to start —”

It was a commotion at the other end of the corridor that cut her short.

“What is it?” she asked, and Alan appeared at the doorway, looking momentarily relieved to see that Mavis was alive and well.

“It’s Patrick,” said the coach driver. “He didn’t answer his door, so I asked the manager to let me in.”

“Is he all right?” asked Mavis, stepping out into the corridor to join them, checking at the last minute that her door was on the catch so she wouldn’t be locked out.

“He’s not there,” said Alan.

“Are you sure he isn’t in the bathroom?” asked Mavis.

The coach driver shook his head. “I checked. He isn’t.”

“Have you tried Norman?” asked Ruby.

Alan shook his head. “Didn’t need to. The desk clerk said she saw them both leave the hotel ten minutes after we got here.”

“We’d better go and find them,” said Ruby, her voice rising an octave. “I should have their phone numbers in my room.”

“Good luck with that,” said Alan. “The signal’s pants around here.”

Mavis told them she would meet them downstairs, but first she had to get her room key, her coat and her own mobile phone.

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They reconvened in the reception area where Mavis found Ruby constantly jabbing the redial on her phone whilst holding it aloft. Mavis assumed that was in order to make the most of any signal she’d managed to find.

“Patrick’s not answering,” said Ruby. “It keeps going to voice mail.”

“What about Norman?” asked Mavis.

Ruby shook her head. “He doesn’t have a mobile phone.”

“Should we call the police?” asked Alan.

“I’m sure they’re only in the village,” said the receptionist, whose auburn hair was pulled into a high, tight ponytail. “They said they were going to one of the shops.”

“All the shops are closed,” said Mavis, reminding everyone that it was still the bit in between Christmas and the New Year.

“The convenience store is still open,” said the receptionist. “People still need to buy food.”

They agreed it was worth a try, but the lady in the shop hadn’t seen them either.

“We should call the police,” said Ruby, fishing her phone out of her pocket.

“You go back to the hotel and do that,” said Mavis. “Alan and I can carry on looking for them.”

Ruby nodded and pulled the collar of her coat up around her ears. “You really ought to come with me,” she said to Mavis. “I don’t want to lose another of our guests.”

“So long as we stay together, you won’t have to worry,” said Mavis. To Alan she said, “Right?”

“Right!” said Alan.

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Mavis and Alan went with Ruby as far as the hotel, just to make sure the two men hadn’t returned while they were checking the shop.

The receptionist assured them they hadn’t, but she’d been joined by a much younger woman who was wearing thick chunky glasses and a sweatshirt that had the RSPB logo on it. She held out her hand and introduced herself to Mavis, having already met Alan and Ruby.

“Jenny Wilkinson,” she said.

“Mavis Braithwaite,” said Mavis, shaking the hand. She turned to the receptionist and said, “Did you hear the men talking about anything in particular? Did they say something that might suggest where they were headed?”

The woman shook her head, swinging the auburn ponytail from side to side. “They were arguing about something,” she mused.

“But what made you think they were going to the shop?” asked Mavis.

“Because the shorter one said something about the Ibis.”

“The Ibis?” said Alan, drawing his bushy fair eyebrows together in a frown.

“That’s the name of the convenience store,” said Ruby.

“It’s also the name of a bird that’s been seen in the estuary,” said Jenny.

Mavis felt as though she was going cross-eyed. “A bird?” she said.

Jenny nodded. “A rare bird. The glossy ibis is a scarce visitor to the UK, but records of sightings have been creeping up.”

“And there’s one here, in Silverdale?” asked Ruby.

“Apparently,” said Jenny. “Though we’ve yet to verify it.”

Alan and Mavis looked at each other.

“Norman and Patrick were arguing about seeing some bird or other earlier,” said Mavis.

Alan nodded, then frowned again. “But that was a wagtail, not an ibis.”

Jenny grinned at them. “There’s a white wagtail down by the stone jetty. A few people have reported that.”

“Is that a rare bird too?” asked Mavis. Jenny nodded. “Well, what are the odds?” said Mavis, looking at each of the others, one by one. “Two rarities in one place.” She turned to Jenny again. “And would one bird trump the other?”

“Oh yes,” said Jenny. “The ibis trumps the wagtail any day of the week.”

“Then that’s where they are,” said Mavis.

The receptionist piped up. “If they’re in the estuary, there’s even less of a phone signal.”

“Then we’d best go and find them,” said Alan.

“I’ll come with you,” said Jenny. “I’m not missing a glossy ibis. I’ll get my coat and catch up with you.”

“And I’ll stay here, to make sure the rest of our guests aren’t wondering what’s going on,” said Ruby.

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Although Silverdale was a small place, it was still big enough to get lost in, with numerous roads leading to who knew where. Alan had been there before with the coach company, but he’d never usually ventured further than the immediate village. Mavis was a complete stranger to the place.

Nevertheless, they found a road sign that pointed to the shore.

“I guess that’s it,” said Mavis.

“It’s what they call the beach round here,” said Alan.

They followed the road for a few minutes before reaching a gated dead end. Half the gate was closed with a burgundy car parked up against it, while the other side was propped open. A narrow track led beyond the gate and towards a row of terraced houses that overlooked the estuary.

The light was waning but the two of them climbed up a small pile of rocks, shaded their eyes against the low-slung sun, and scanned the mudflats for signs of life. Again, there were thousands of birds, but no sign of the two men. A storm was rolling in on the horizon. No doubt a snow storm at this time of year. And yet the weak sunshine continued to struggle through.

Just as they climbed back down again, an out of puff Jenny arrived at the gate, her navy blue fleece with the same RSPB logo on the breast billowing out behind her.

“Any sign?” she asked, bending over and catching her breath.

“Of the bird or the men?” Mavis asked wryly. “There are thousands of birds,” she continued, waving an arm towards the estuary. “Take your pick. But we haven’t seen Norman or Patrick.”

“I hope they haven’t wandered out onto the sand,” said Jenny, standing upright again and removing her glasses. She screwed her eyes up and scanned the mudflats, just as Alan and Mavis had done.

“Quicksand?” said Alan cautiously.

Jenny nodded and replaced her glasses. “You don’t see it until you’re on it. It’s like a great big jelly. Then suddenly, the sand cracks and water starts to seep through. But by then you’re stuck.”

“Should we wait for the police?” asked Mavis. She didn’t want to wait, but nor did she wish for three more people to risk their lives looking for someone who may or may not be out on the sand.

“If we stick to the rocks we’ll be all right,” said Jenny, looking down at the ground now with caution. “And if you must step onto the sand, watch out for a difference in the way it looks.” She looked across the estuary and pointed. “The King’s Guide to the Sands lives over there,” she said. “Or we can call the coastguard or the bay rescue folk. They’d get here quicker than the police. But I already told your organiser, Ruby, to call nine-nine-nine anyway, so they’re probably already on their way.”

“Good thinking,” said Alan. “But let’s see what we can see without putting ourselves in danger while we wait.”

The three of them fanned out over the rocks, making sure that they could all still see each other.

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Mavis spotted them first, just as a police siren approached in the distance. She got as close as she dared, but all she could see were two shapes crouched down on the sand. The light was going now, and the tide was coming in. If the two old men were stuck, they didn’t have long to get them out before they drowned.

“Hellooooo!” she called, waving a hand over her head. “Norman! Patrick!”

“Help!” said the figure that was more upright than the other. He twisted at the waist and waved back at Mavis.

She stepped off the rock and started to edge slowly towards them, taking great care with each step, testing the sand before putting any weight on her foot.

In her time with MI7 she’d received a lot of training. Never, though, had she been taught how to walk on quicksand.

“Keep your feet moving!” someone called. She turned to see two people coming towards her, dressed in Hi Vis overalls, wearing hard hats and carrying lifebelts and coiled up ropes. “And come back to safety. We’re here now. I’ve got the King’s Guide with me. We’ll get them.”

Reluctantly, Mavis took one last look towards the two men, not knowing what shape either of them were in. Then just as cautiously, and keeping her feet moving, although the sand was firm beneath her and not at all jellylike, she slowly returned to the shore.



Sadly, they'd got there too late to save Patrick. But Norman made it back in one piece and was promptly placed in cuffs and taken away to the police station, via a hospital to check he wasn't suffering from hypothermia.

At first he tried to blame a random stranger, claiming one of the junkies housed in Morecambe had lured them onto the sands and then tried to steal Patrick's fancy phone. But Alan and Mavis were not the only people to have heard the two men arguing over who had seen the rarest bird. And one of the other hotel guests had overheard Norman doing the luring with the promise of a glossy ibis to be sighted in the estuary.

Later, much later, medical evidence showed that Patrick had not drowned but had in fact been strangled, with Norman's bare hands when the evidence was compared. And Norman Fraser was charged with the murder of Patrick Thompson. All because of jealousy. Patrick had seen a rare bird before Norman had, and Norman hadn't liked that one bit. Who knew that birdwatching was such a cut-throat business?

In the meantime, on their way home from their birdwatching trip in Silverdale, the surviving members of the Chapel St Stephen's Society for the Over Sixties stopped off once again at Eric Morecambe's statue for a comfort break and photo opportunity. And while she waited for the other pensioners to take their time in the toilets, Mavis took her pocket binoculars to the stone jetty to see what she could spot among the thousands and thousands of birds.

"What's that over there?" asked Alan, sneaking up behind her and making her jump.

"Where?" she asked, turning her binoculars in the direction he was pointing. But she didn't need to consult her pocket guide to British birds. She already knew what the large, white bird was.

"That's an egret," she said proudly. "A little egret."

the end

**DIANE  
WORDSWORTH**



**Catch the  
Rainbow**

Rainbow Chronicles Book 1

## catch the rainbow: part 3 of 4

*Part 3 of my novel based against the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974.*

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*****warning: strong and explicit language*****
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### Chapter 31

**Seamus**

**Moseley, Birmingham**

Over the past few days, the man they called Seamus Quinn had made himself known to some of the locals in the pub down the road from Cólín Maguire's flat. He'd dropped the Irish accent as much as he could, mimicking the Brummies. Familiarity, a few beers and free cigarettes gradually loosened tongues and one of them, who Seamus referred to as Brummie Dave in his head, finally let slip.

"Bloke looks like him off the telly, you say? Richard O'Sullivan?" Seamus nodded. "Ar, he lives at the top of the one in the middle. Turn left at the top of the stairs. I was visiting my mate who lives opposite when I saw him go home one day. Dunno what number it is, but there are only four up there. Right up in the loft space. Landlord's a right rip-off merchant. Whole place is a health hazard."

"Cheers, pal."

Seamus left him a box of matches when he went, after another pint. It wouldn't do to look too eager and he didn't want Brummie Dave to think he'd gone straight to the flat. He didn't know yet what might happen there.

It was already dark by the time he'd got someone to let him in and he found himself in the hallway of the building in the middle. Three old Victorian houses built side by side that had all been converted into bedsits.

The sour smell of stale puke and fags hit him like a wall, and somewhere someone was frying onions. It took him seconds to work out how to operate the push-control light switches and only a little longer to realise he needed to activate the lights on every floor.

There were no windows on the stairs or the landings, so nowhere to borrow light from other than electric lights behind part-glazed bedsit doors, if any were on. And some of those that were on were hidden further behind thick curtains strung across the insides of the doors. Even if there had been windows, all the streetlights weren't even lit due to the fuel shortages and strikes, so he wouldn't get much light from outside anyway.

At the top of the house on the fourth floor, sure enough, there were only four small flatlets and a poky bathroom, also with a part-glazed door, crammed beneath the eaves of the house. The lights were on in three of the four bedsits. He could see that through the bare, or even curtained, windows of the doors. He

could hear a television set in one and a record player in another. The other two rooms were quiet.

The flat with no light on was the one as you turn left at the top of the stairs. Seamus supposed, then, that this was Maguire's.

He pressed the doorbell, but didn't hear a tell-tale ring from the inside.

He knocked. There was no answer.

He knocked harder, longer. Still nothing.

He rapped at the letterbox and heard a door open behind him.

"He ain't in," said a shaggy brown head in a broad Brummie accent before it disappeared again behind a slammed door.

Seamus clattered the letterbox again. This time the shaggy head was quicker and stayed longer.

"I already told you once," said the head as it reappeared.

"Sorry," said Seamus, still minus his natural Irish accent. "He was supposed to be meeting me down the road at the pub. He owes me money. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"No idea, mate," shrugged the neighbour. "I ain't seen him for a few days, or heard him. Reckon he's orfed it."

"Okay, thank you," said Seamus to the once more retreating shaggy head. He made a move as if he was giving up until he was sure the neighbour had scuttled right back inside the flat. As soon as the landing light timed out again, Seamus was back at the door, feeling in the darkness for a string attached to the inside of the letterbox that might have a key on the end.

Nothing.

The door lock was just a cheap Yale-type, and not very well fitted. There was no door handle as such, just a little lip attached to the lock so the door could be pulled to on leaving. It was a very old lock and, making sure he wasn't still being watched, he tried to gently force the door open.

Nope, no do.

It was a shame he didn't have his lock picks with him, or something smooth and flat he could wiggle in between the door jamb and the lock. It was such a rickety old thing he was sure it wouldn't take much persuasion. Then he remembered a membership card they 'd given him at the strip club the other night when he was passing the time. It was small but laminated, and just might do the trick.

The landing light flashed on and Seamus heard someone on the stairs, so while he retrieved the card from his pocket, he made as though he was leaving again, bending down to tie a shoelace in the process. He stood up as the scruffy visitor, or resident, disappeared behind one of the other doors. And as the door closed behind him, the landing light timed out again.

In just a few strides Seamus was back across the landing and at Maguire's door. He waited a short while for his eyes to get used to the dark again, then he jiggled the card into place and popped open the lock.

The door swung inwards and the smell of abandonment hit him. He was in. But it was clear as soon as he flicked the light on that his little bird had flown. Or at least not been there for a few days.

Furious didn't come close.

He'd received his orders and knew better than to disobey. It was a sham. He liked C oil n Maguire, but he'd clearly underestimated him, or got him totally wrong. Seamus had found out where Maguire lived, but now he was at the shabby little bedsit it was clear that Maguire had gone.

Systematically, Seamus tore the flat apart, tipping out drawers and cupboards, slashing cushions and the mattress, lifting floorboards and removing skirting boards. But he couldn't find anything.

There were a few cheap belongings, now smashed. But nothing of any value to Quinn.

Maguire was a step ahead of him, but Seamus would find him. No one made a fool of Seamus Quinn. He had contacts. He knew people.

And he already had that partial registration for the motorbike.

## Chapter 32

Tuesday 24 December 1974

### Nick

#### **Bacchus Gardens, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham**

Every time Nick O'Flaherty visited his girlfriend's flat in the leafy suburb of Handsworth Wood, he could hardly believe that she was going out with *him*, of all people. Not only was she the daughter of Lord Lionel Peregrine, but she also had her own flat right on the edge of the grounds of his lordship's rolling estate.

Nick had been seeing Rowena for about a year, on and off, but recently he'd been thinking that now was as good a time as any to make it official between the two of them.

That was before all this crap blew up in Birmingham.

And he didn't think that now was the time to take things forward after all. He was glad, though, that she'd asked him to stay with her over Christmas. It tied in nicely with his own problems. And it saved him asking if he could stop at hers for a few days.

He didn't intend to stay for very long. Just until this whole mess had blown over. Then they'd get back to where they were before and he'd ask her the question as though he'd always planned he would, and they'd take it from there.

Everywhere he went these days where he knew someone, he felt awkward, embarrassed, guilty. And everyone who knew him seemed to hate him, as they hated all Irish people all over the city.

Staying out of the way with Rowena over Christmas was the best thing just now. She'd call in work sick for him and he'd already given notice at the football club. All he had to do was keep in touch with his family every so often, let them

know he was all right so they didn't have to worry about him. He didn't want anyone to have to worry about him.

Yet, until he'd caught sight of her in town at the weekend, one person had slipped his mind.

Lenny Rainbow hadn't entered his thoughts since that dreadful night. They'd always been such good friends. And he'd assumed he could count on her if ever he needed to. But he'd managed to forget all about her. And when she completely avoided him in town and rushed off like that, he realised that she must hate him too and he pushed her from his mind again.

"Who is it this time?" asked Rowena when he'd settled down on the settee, a pint glass of canned bitter in his hand.

"What do you mean?" he said, flummoxed.

"The only time I ever see you for any length of time is when you've led some other girl on. Who is she? Do I know her? Did you deflower another vulnerable young thing?"

Nick was about to deny anything like that. He really wanted to tell someone all about what had been going on in his life these past few weeks. But was that person Rowena? Maybe. But her talk of deflowering reminded him again of Lenny Rainbow.

Lovely, leggy Lenny Rainbow, so unlike her hen-like sister.

He decided to go where Rowena was pushing him. It was easier to explain, probably easier to admit to, and at least it was a start.

Nick had to talk to someone. Hadn't he already thought he could trust Rowena before considering asking for her help?

"It was Elaine Rainbow," he said at last, waiting for Rowena to eventually make the connection. He even saw the realisation as it dawned across her face.

"Rainbow? Wasn't that that Brenda person's name? The bird-like woman?"

"That's the one," said Nick.

"But I thought her sister was about ten years old!"

"That's the youngest, Victoria. Lenny's twenty-one--"

"Lenny? But you just said Elaine."

"Lenny's what we all call her."

Again, he watched as she made the connection.

"Isn't that the football girl? The one you pointed out in town?"

"Yes."

"But you always said that she was like one of the lads, one of your best friends. Tell me you didn't cross the line with her?"

Nick spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders. Rowena tutted and lit them both a cigarette each.

"Nicholas O'Flaherty, you are disgusting at times."

**Lenny  
Elmdon Old Village**

Twenty miles away, on the other side of town, and despite all of her best intentions, Lenny still thought about Nick all the time. All she could do was glean what information she could from Shaun. Gradually she'd noticed, however, that she was thinking of him less often, which was a little less painful for her too. There was nothing more she could do. He obviously couldn't care a jot about her. She should just move on with her life.

On Christmas Eve the Rainbow household was in very sombre spirits. There wasn't the usual excitement that usually preceded the big day.

Lenny's little sister Vicky was too old to get excited about Father Christmas now anyway. But too much had happened recently for anyone to feel like celebrating properly. Lenny's older sister Brenda was at the hospital. Vicky was up in her room. Hattie Rainbow was busy in the kitchen preparing the bird for the next day's dinner. Lenny sat with her dad, Tom Rainbow, in front of the telly. Tom was reading the *Birmingham Evening Mail* and Lenny was blindly watching *Kidnapped*.

Suddenly there was a ping! And everything went dark, apart from the television screen, which took its usual time to grow dim and then black.

"Damn and blast!" said Tom Rainbow, throwing his paper down in disgust.

"Bloody hell!" came Hattie's voice from the kitchen.

"There's been a power cut!" squealed Vicky, edging carefully from her room.

As everyone felt around looking for candles and matches by the light from the fire, Lenny's mind drifted to the last time she'd been home alone during a power cut.

Only she hadn't been alone for all of it.

It was a black November Saturday afternoon only a few short weeks ago. Lenny had been full of cold and hadn't wanted to stand in the pouring rain watching another cold football match. She'd stayed home drinking hot Ribena, or Oxo crumbled into boiling water, and Nick, who had already stopped playing due to an injury (she hadn't known his decision was permanent then), had dropped by to keep her company.

There was a roaring fire in the hearth, doors and curtains were closed against draughts, and they were playing records on her record player. Jax was working but was coming over later that evening. And Shaun was due back with everyone else after the game.

Lenny was feeling quite grumpy and miserable, but it was nice when Nick put his arms around her to try and cheer her up. Very nice.

Then the lights had gone out, the record player slowed down to a stop, and only the firelight flickered in the darkened room. They pulled a colourfully crocheted blanket off the back of the settee and snuggled together beneath it.

When Nick kissed her, Lenny was overjoyed, and she felt exonerated. All the years she had hero-worshipped him had finally paid off. She knew it was right and one thing led to another. He was such a gentleman, so gentle, so patient, so careful.

He warned her that she might bleed, that it would hurt. But she didn't care. She loved him - yes, Jax had been completely right - and this was what two people who loved each other did.

She didn't bleed, which was just as well since they'd moved from the settee to the rug in front of the fire. He assured her she wouldn't get pregnant the first time, but she didn't care if she did. They were in love, and people in love had babies.

Lenny remembered every detail, every touch. It was only a few weeks ago after all, but it already seemed such a distant memory. She'd hardly seen him since then, and not at all after the explosion. Not even for her birthday.

And not until she'd seen him in town when she was Christmas shopping. He'd been outside the jeweller's shop and he'd been with another girl.

And they were looking at engagement rings.

As she remembered that day, Lenny sighed and dragged herself back to the present. He'd certainly made a fool out of her. Obviously taken what he wanted, and then done a runner.

Tom Rainbow slowly lit one candle from another as he moaned about the Labour government, about the strikes, about the power cuts. Hattie Rainbow carried a candle out into the kitchen and proceeded to move the pans around as noisily as she could. Vicky Rainbow jumped onto the settee and curled up in one corner, dragging the crocheted blanket from the back around her shoulders.

Lenny moved across to the window and peered out into the gloom. The cold glass frosted up from the heat of her breath and she pulled the curtains across to keep the candlelight and the heat from the fire in.

Then she lifted the other end of the crocheted blanket and snuggled under with her little sister, wrapping her arms around the younger girl's bony shoulders.

Their gran had made the blanket out of all the odds and sods of wool left over from numerous jumpers that had been knitted for them all over the years. That was why it was so multi-coloured, but much-loved all the same by the whole family. Gran couldn't crochet or knit now, due to terrible arthritis in her fingers, and that made the blanket all the more special.

### **Chapter 33**

Wednesday 25 December 1974

Christmas Day

**Lenny**

**Elmdon Old Village**

Lenny lay in her bed wide awake, listening to the house noises.

They'd had a late evening, with it being Christmas Eve and she was just as shattered as everyone else. But she wasn't excited. Christmas was her favourite time of year, but even that had lost its sparkle this time with all that had happened.

Two pubs being blown up on her birthday. Her brother-in-law seriously injured and permanently maimed. Her best friend, Jax, dead. The love of her life with another woman. Her big sister back home playing martyr. And their little sister having to give up her own bedroom for her and moving in with Lenny.

No, it wasn't the best of Christmases this year.

Next to her, in the other bed, her little sister Vicky slept soundly. Normally she would have been up by now. But this year she was fast asleep.

Lenny tried to peer at her alarm clock in the dark. It looked like it was around five o'clock. It was unheard of for Vicky to still be in bed, let alone asleep. Yet downstairs, in the front room, Father Christmas had been and left gifts for them all.

But no one was excited.

Lenny felt very sad, for the loss of joy as well as the loss of everything else.

Vicky stirred, muttered something about koala bears in her sleep, then rolled over and started to softly snore. The gentle snuffling woke herself up, however, and she sat bolt upright in bed.

Vicky blinked at her sister lying in the other bed.

"Has he been?" she hissed.

"Has who been?" asked Lenny, going along with it. Her sister was ten now and would soon find out it was all a fantasy. Perhaps she suspected already. But Lenny wasn't going to be the one to spoil it for her, and so she went along with it.

"You know!" whispered Vicky as loud as she could. "HIM! Father Christmas!"

Lenny made some waking up noises, as though Vicky had dragged her from a deep sleep.

"I don't know," she replied. "Why don't you go and see?"

Vicky suppressed a squeal and jumped out of bed.

"But don't wake Mom and Dad!" warned Lenny.

Vicky crept out of their bedroom while Lenny got out of bed and wrapped herself in her dressing gown. It took her little sister only seconds to get down the stairs and come running back, shouting at the top of her voice.

"He's been! He's been! Come on everybody, wake up!"

And so the entire household shuffled out of their respective rooms, even Brenda, to join in with what could possibly be Vicky's last proper Christmas.

When they all reached the front room, Tom Rainbow switched on the fairy lights on the tree while Brenda switched on the electric fire. There were still embers burning in the grate, but the fire was almost out and Brenda wasn't likely to clean it and build a new one at this time of the day.

Hattie Rainbow watched her youngest daughter's face light up before going in to the kitchen and switching on the oven. They had a massive turkey every year and it always needed hours and hours of cooking.

The three sisters sat on the floor and shared out their presents, handing a handful to their parents too.

There were chocolates and perfumes and underwear and socks and records and chocolate selection boxes and cigars and books.

But Vicky's bestest present this year was a camera. One of those new-fangled Kodak pocket instamatic cameras that came with a free Magicube flash, a wrist-strap and a small 110 cassette of film. Vicky had been nagging her parents for one ever since her best friend Marcella showed her hers. For backup, they'd also bought her some spare film and some extra flash cubes.

Vicky didn't seem to care about any of her other presents once she saw the camera, and she promptly loaded it and snapped off a load of pictures of them all opening their presents.

Both Lenny and Vicky had annuals bought for them. Lenny's was a *Jackie* annual and Vicky's was a *Mandy* annual, both for 1975. Brenda, on the other hand, had received a novel, James Herriot's latest, *Vet in Harness*. She loved James Herriot and this was the fourth book of his she had now.

"They're making a film about James Herriot," announced Hattie. "Based on the first book."

"Ooh, are they?" asked Brenda.

"Perhaps we can go and see it together," said Lenny.

Brenda also received a beautiful bookmark as it was a pet peeve of hers if anyone turned down the corners of the pages in a book.

Before long, and with most of her chocolate eaten already, Vicky finally settled down to read her *Mandy*. But by half-past-six, everyone was ready to go back to bed for a couple of hours.

## Chapter 34

### Lenny

When it was time to get up again, it took Lenny an age to wake Vicky up. Her little sister had nodded off reading her new annual and it had fallen to the bedroom floor. Lenny made sure the pages weren't crumpled and put it on Vicky's bedside table. Then she and Vicky got dressed and went downstairs for their Christmas breakfast.

As soon as they were downstairs, Vicky wolfed down her Rice Krispies, then dashed off to show Marcella her new camera. That would keep her out from under everyone's feet until dinner time.

Before long, the turkey had the foil taken off it for the last hour. Pans were filled with potatoes and vegetables on the hob. The stuffing was ready to go in, in a bowl, not in the bird, as not everyone liked it. There were Yorkshire puddings and roast potatoes and roast parsnips. In pans on the hob were potatoes, Brussels sprouts and carrots waiting to be boiled. A Christmas pudding was ready to be steamed. And there was a jug ready with custard waiting to be made.

A proper Christmas dinner the Brummie way, with all the trimmings.

It was Lenny's job to lay the table, but she had to pull out the extension bits first as there were going to be so many of them: Mom, Dad, Vicky, Lenny, Brenda, Timmy and his wife, Tommy and his wife, and Gran. There was no place setting for Dennis, Brenda's husband, who would be spending his Christmas Day in hospital, and that made Lenny sad too. It was as though he'd died as well as Jax, even though he was still, in fact, very much alive.

Lenny felt her shoulders sag. More than anything she wanted to ring Jax and wish her a Happy Christmas, ask if she liked her present, and what else did she get. But she couldn't do that now. What kind of a Christmas would Mrs Hardy be having with both her only child and her husband gone?

Nor would there be a visit from Nick. Shaun might still drop around later. Vicky's friend Marcella would be in and out throughout the day. Some of the footballers would call in to wish everyone a Happy Christmas. And those who were in the house at three o'clock in the afternoon would huddle into the front room to watch the queen on the telly.

There would be more present-giving and exchanging. But not with Jax, or Nick, or Dennis.

What time are you going to see Dennis?" Lenny asked her sister.

Brenda shrugged. "I don't think I'll get there until four o'clock. I have to help out here, same as you. Mom can't do it all."

"It will be dark by then," said Lenny.

"I know," sighed Brenda.

Just then they were blinded by a bright light as Vicky took another picture of them, this time in their lovely new Christmas clothes instead of in their pyjamas.

"Victoria!" yelled Brenda.

"I didn't even know she was back from Marcella's," laughed Lenny, rubbing her eyes.

Vicky ran off to annoy their gran with her new toy.

"It could have been worse," said Lenny, still laughing.

"How?" asked Brenda. It didn't take much to annoy her at the best of times, but since the bombings, she'd been even more short-tempered than ever.

"Someone could have bought her a toy trumpet or something."

At least Brenda laughed with her sister this time. They both would have remembered another Christmas when another sister who was no longer with them had demanded a trumpet and then proceeded to drive them all nuts blowing into it all day.

Something else that made Lenny momentarily sad. Pamela hadn't been with them for much longer than Victoria had.

Lenny shook herself. Didn't she feel sad enough? She certainly didn't want to give her older sister something else to be all maudlin over.

"Did you get him a present? Dennis?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Yes. I bought him some records. I didn't know what else to get him."

"That's a good idea, though," said Lenny. What she didn't add was that Dennis wouldn't need his missing leg to play records. But he might need it if he wanted to dance...

Oh, bugger! So much doom and gloom. Every time she tried to think happy thoughts, another memory popped up to make her sad again.

She finished laying the table. She loved the festive red mats against the dark green tablecloth, and she alternated between dark green and deep red napkins, folded attractively inside a full set of crystal wine glasses that only came out on special occasions.

The Christmas crackers looked a bit gaudy in their bright pinks, blues, silvers, oranges and golds. But Vicky loved them so they still bought them.

Lenny opened a bottle of red wine and left it to breathe in the centre of the table, next to the various condiments that only ever came out at Christmas, but left two bottles of white wine chilling in the fridge.

They didn't have enough of one set of cutlery, so the stainless steel best set from Sheffield went to the 'visitors' and to Tom, as head of the household, and the plainer everyday set went to everyone else.

By the time she'd finished, Lenny had to admit it looked lovely. But she knew it wouldn't take long to mess it all up again. Vicky came running in with her camera and took a picture, then continued to take yet more pictures throughout the meal.

It was a normal family Christmas, but with a tinge of sadness. But everyone put on their brave faces before Tommy took his sister to the hospital after the queen's speech.

## Boxing Day 1974

### **Lenny**

If Shaun wasn't going to the game on Boxing Day, then nor was Lenny. She was still in a massive grump with her mother over this anyway. Hattie Rainbow getting one up on her daughter had left Lenny feeling a bit raw, although a delicate truce seemed to have been called over the Christmas period.

Everyone else had either gone to the game or, in Brenda's case, gone to the hospital to see Dennis. Lenny felt a pang of guilt. She could have gone with her sister to see her brother-in-law instead of moping around the house on her own the day after the worst Christmas Day ever. But maybe he wasn't ready for general visitors yet. All the same, she resolved to talk to Brenda about going with her one of the days.

Vicky wasn't home either. She was either at the football game too, or playing with her best friend Marcella down the road. It was also quite likely that the two of them had gone to the game together.

It felt strange pottering around the house all by herself on a gloomy Thursday afternoon when she would also normally be at the match with everyone else.

She'd tidied her bedroom in a bid to get back in her mother's good books, but was still sharing with Vicky so it needed twice as much work as usual.

She'd washed some crocks that had been left in the kitchen sink, boiling some water in the kettle first because the immersion heater hadn't been switched on yet. When she finished tidying the kitchen, she went into the front room and turned the television on and while she waited for that to warm up, she debated whether or not to build a fire in the hearth or cheat and turn on the little portable electric fire they kept for back-up but which had proved next to useless during the recent power cuts. Dad would moan about the cost of using electricity, but if she wasn't also using coke on the fire she didn't see the problem. They had to pay for all of it.

Despite the weather being quite mild for the time of year, it was still cool, wet and dark and already like night outside, even though it was the middle of the day. It would be quicker to switch on the electric fire for now, and so she did. The sound came on the telly before the picture did and while she was waiting for everything else, Lenny went into the kitchen and switched on the electric kettle again, this time to make a pot of tea.

She'd already watched *Help!* at the pictures with Jax, which was on BBC One now, and she'd seen *Chitty, Chitty Bang, Bang* too, which was on later. *Grandstand* didn't look very exciting either, as it was mostly horse racing. BBC Two wasn't even on at the moment, other than the test card. *Chipperfields Christmas Circus* was almost over, having started on ITV at one o'clock.

Lenny picked up an old copy of the *Birmingham Evening Mail* to see if there was anything on at the pictures. The Sheldon Cinema on the Coventry Road was within walking distance but she'd need to catch a bus for the Olton Cinema on the Warwick Road. She didn't think Solihull Cinema was open again yet, after it had been nail-bombed a few weeks before.

The Rainbow family had one of those new-fangled automatic kettles and she heard it click off just as the lights went out. Lenny sighed and shoved the newspaper from her in frustration as the television blinked off with a ping and the electric bars on the fire began to fade.

Damn! Another power cut.

## Chapter 35

### Lenny

For a split second Lenny wondered if she'd overloaded the fuse board, but a quick glance through the front window showed other houses in semi-darkness, neighbours peering out of windows as they did the same that she was doing. The streetlights hadn't even come on yet, so they weren't fading off. But faces at windows suggested that other televisions had pinged off.

There was still an eerie dusk-like light, so she made the pot of tea before the water went cold. She built the fire anyway, muttering that she should have just

done that in the first place. And she curled up in a corner of the settee where she could either gaze into the flames or out at the winter afternoon.

She pulled the crocheted blanket down from the back of the settee and wrapped herself up in it and the memories it evoked again.

Everyone would be home in a few hours, but she wouldn't start tea until they got there. At least the oven was gas, so it wouldn't matter if the power didn't come back on. And anyway, they were still eating Christmas leftovers from the day before. Maybe she had time for a quick bath. There should be enough hot water by now, thanks to the coal fire being lit.

Lenny took a candle on a saucer into the icy cold bathroom and ran the tap for a while until it ran warm. Her gran, now in sheltered accommodation after years of living with the family - her own decision - had got her some bath cubes for Christmas, off the Avon lady. But Lenny didn't like them very much. It felt as though she were sitting on a layer of gritty chalk in the bath.

Instead, she pinched some of Vicky's Matey bubble-bath. It washed without soap, left the bath clean, and was a bright cherry red. She poured it into the shallow bath.

By the time she was done and quickly dressed in jeans and a hand-knitted jumper, she heard the cars pull up on the long drive and she knew the feeding of the five thousand was about to begin.

"How did we do?" she greeted her mother as Hattie came through the front door and Lenny came down the stairs.

"We won. Four goals to two," grinned her mother. The team had been on a winning streak for the past few games and frequently made it into a full match report in the pink pages of the *Sports Argus*.

"How many are we?" asked Lenny, trying to see behind her mother and up the dark drive. It was pitch black by now outside and what little heat there had been inside the house was escaping through the front door.

"The usual," said Hattie.

Great, that meant Mom, Dad, Vicky, Marcella, Lenny, Tommy, Timmy, Gran, Brenda...

"Just not Dennis," said Lenny.

"No, not Dennis, obviously," agreed Hattie, taking her warm overcoat and scarf off and hanging them on the coat hooks in the hallway behind the front door. "Or Brenda. She decided to go to the hospital this afternoon." Everybody else would pile their coats over the balustrade on their way past.

"And no Shaun," said Lenny.

"Or Nicholas," said Hattie.

So not 'the usual' at all, then, thought Lenny. However, eight was still plenty.

"Turkey and chips, then?" she said, making her way to the kitchen. "I'd best get the chip pan on the hob," she muttered, knowing full well that she'd be frying in batches. "Oh, and we're having another power cut."

However, as she passed the door to the front room the telly buzzed and the lights and the little electric fire flickered back into life, just in time for Tom

Rainbow to come in and moan about Blackpool illuminations and a massive electricity bill.

Sunday 29 December 1974

Lenny's most hated chore was upon them again. Taking the wet washing to the laundrette to be dried in the winter months was always actually Brenda's job, but Lenny often accompanied her sister, at their mother's behest.

With such a large family, they all had to take their turn helping Hattie around the house. The laundrette run was still really Brenda's chore. She and Dennis were saving Co-op stamps off the milkman to buy a new washing machine. But until they could get one, they took their washing to Hattie at the weekend.

"It would probably save money if I carry on doing my washing with the rest of yours anyway," Brenda could oft be heard explaining, when she turned up once again with a big bag of dirty laundry.

Apart from the Co-op stamps, Brenda and Dennis were also saving Green Shield stamps that could be exchanged for goods in town. Dennis smoked as well, so he saved the Embassy coupons from his cigarette packets.

Lenny's mom and dad, Hattie and Tom, had been saving Co-op stamps for as long as she could remember. They paid for the milk and the milkman stuck stamps in a little book. When they had enough books filled, they took them to the Co-operative department store in town where they could spend the stamps on school uniforms, household goods, carpets, furniture, lots of things.

"You still haven't bought a tumble-dryer either?" Lenny reminded her sister on this occasion.

"I'll have to take stock and prioritise now, with an invalid in the house..."

Lenny bit her lip as her sister trailed off. She emptied a black dustbin liner filled with wet clothes into the cavernous drum of the industrial-sized tumble dryer, added Brenda's contribution, and slammed the door. She fed in the coins and the machine started as the first fifty-pence piece hit the bottom of what sounded like an empty box inside the dryer.

"You'll still be wanting a washing machine and a tumble-dryer, though," Lenny finally said as she took her place on the wooden bench. "You'll have more reason for them now."

They watched the washing go around for a moment or two.

"Yes," agreed Brenda at last. "But there are other things that his wages would have paid for normally that I might have to buy with the stamps instead. Like food from the Co-op."

"Have they stopped his wages?" asked Lenny.

"No, not yet. But they will. It's already been six weeks and they won't pay him for ever. He won't be back in work for a long time, if ever again."

The two young women sat in silence for a short while, listening to the other sounds and conversations in the busy laundrette.

"How is he?" asked Lenny at last. When Brenda didn't reply immediately, she thought the question might have been a mistake. But she pressed her point anyway. They had to start talking about it at some point. "Bren?"

"He's so drugged up most of the time he doesn't even know where he is. He keeps on saying he has pins and needles in the foot that isn't there any more. I have to pretend to massage it for him until it goes away. But it doesn't seem to ever go away."

"Can't they do anything for him?" asked Lenny.

"Short of growing him a new leg, you mean?" spat Brenda. Then she laughed, a bitter, hollow laugh. She didn't sound very happy.

"I mean about the pins and needles said Lenny, trying not to sigh. Her sister could be so melodramatic.

"They say he's imagining it, refusing to believe the leg isn't there any more, as if the pins and needles are proof that it is still there and we're all having him on. He thinks we're all making a joke." She laughed again. "A joke!"

"There must be something they can do to make it easier for him," said Lenny. "It's almost nineteen seventy-five now, after all."

"They'll make him a new leg, teach him how to walk again, how to balance. The arm may be useless too, but they're letting him keep that. For now."

"At least he's still alive, sis."

"But at what cost? Dennis, when he realises and understands what has happened to him, will wish he'd been killed with the others."

"You can't say that," Lenny said quietly.

"I think I can."

"Do you wish he'd been killed with the others?" asked Lenny. "He might surprise you," she added, when Brenda too too long to reply.

"And he might not." Brenda frowned as she forced herself to face the reality. "Oh, Elaine! They say he may never be able to have any children."

## Chapter 36

### Lenny

Lenny actually thought that not having children might be the least of her sister and brother-in-law's problems, but everyone knew that Lenny had always professed to be completely unmaternal. Lenny Rainbow was and always would be one of the lads. And lads didn't go off having children, left, right and centre. Or not in the same way.

Brenda, on the other hand, had always dreamed of being a mother. After losing their first baby, she'd been devastated, and everyone knew she'd always wanted twelve children, at least.

"It's probably too soon to tell for certain," said Lenny, sounding like the older sister rather than the younger sister. "Let's get him back on his feet first, for now."

Brenda snorted and a big bubble of snot blew out of her nose. "Bad choice of words, Elaine," she said seriously.

Lenny wondered if now would be a good time to ask about visiting him and carefully said, "I wouldn't mind seeing him."

"He'd probably like that," said Brenda, surprising her. "So far he's just had me and our parents visit."

Well, thought Lenny. That went considerably better than she thought it would. But maybe this was just the calm before the storm. She jumped up, pulled open the door of the tumble-dryer to check how dry the washing was, while it was still going around. But she slammed the door again to let it carry on a while longer.

"I hate them," said Brenda suddenly.

Lenny sat back down on the bench. "Who?"

"All of them," spat her sister. "Paddy Irish bastards."

The words stung Lenny a little. She wasn't used to hearing so much vitriol from her sister. "Not all of them surely?" she said. "They're not even sure it was the Irish."

"Of course it was the Irish," said Brenda. "They've got those six men locked up, haven't they? They won't have done that if they weren't sure it was them."

"But the IRA haven't claimed it," Lenny reminded her.

"That doesn't matter," said Brenda. "Those men have. They're all Irish. It'll be one of those splinter groups you hear about, or whatever they're called. They're still Irish bastards and I hate them. Yes, all of them."

So it *had* been the calm before the storm after all.

"You can't blame them all, Brenda."

"Yes I can. What are they all doing here in the first place? They're taking over. Why don't they all go home?"

Lenny couldn't be bothered to launch into a history recital. Now was hardly the time.

"One of the nurses was Irish," continued Brenda. "I could have killed her with my bare hands when she opened her mouth. I think they've stopped any Irish medical staff looking after the bomb victims now. I hope they all get the sack and they all rot in hell."

"Mom's stopped Shaun playing in the team," said Lenny at last, when she could get a word in.

"Good. I hope she's stopped his brother too."

"But they're not even Irish--"

"With a name like O'Flaherty? They're as Irish as they come."

"But they were born in Birmingham."

"So why do they have Irish accents?" asked Brenda.

"They're as Brummie as you and me, and they don't have accents. Even their parents don't have accents."

"That Nicholas couldn't be more Irish if he tried."

"That's just recently," said Lenny. "I don't know why he started to do that."

Over the past year or so, Nick had started to use an Irish accent when he spoke. Even his twin brother didn't know why he'd started to do it.

"You should stay away from Nicholas anyway," Brenda still went on. "You don't know him like I do. Makes me sick the way you simper every time he comes within a few feet."

"I do not!" said Lenny.

"You do! His brother's not so bad, but at least he doesn't have a secret girlfriend he goes running back to every time another girl gets a bit too close."

"What girlfriend?" Lenny wasn't about to let on to Brenda about the girl she'd seen Nick with in town before Christmas.

"Lady La-Di-Da Rowena Peregrine, that's who," said Brenda, shocking her sister who, until then, had managed quite well leaving the girl with no name. Now she had a name suddenly made her more real. "Anyway," she continued, not even noticing Lenny's discomfort. "It doesn't matter. They can both go back home as far as I'm concerned."

"They are home," Lenny said quietly. "And Shaun talks just like us."

"He's a Paddy Irish bastard and I wish they were all dead. Don't you dare bring either of them to see Dennis."

"But they have to see him one day."

"Not if they piss off back home to Ireland they won't."

Lenny had hardly ever heard her sister swear before, hardly ever heard anyone swear. When they were growing up, and even now, if one of them said even 'bloody', their mother threatened to wash their mouths out with soap and water. Lenny hadn't realised how strongly Brenda felt and it dawned on her that this must be how most of the victims and their families felt.

If the usually mild-mannered woe-is-me Brenda felt so strongly about it all, Lenny didn't want to be in any Irishman's shoes in Birmingham right now, however scant the connection.

No wonder Nick had done a runner. His accent was so pronounced these days. How did it happen? When did it start? He'd always been a broad Brummie, just like his brother, and just like Lenny.

"Nick's already disappeared," Lenny said in the end.

"He usually knows what's good for him," muttered Brenda.

"But no one knows where he is."

"He'll be at that girlfriend's of his."

"He doesn't have a girlfriend," whispered Lenny, but the conversation was already over.

## Chapter 37

Monday 30 December 1974

**Seamus**

**The Maypole, Birmingham**

Seamus Quinn was pleased with his intel.

News of the motorbike's registered keeper had come in from one of his most trusted contacts, a used car salesman as it happened who, for a fiver, would find out if a car you were about to buy was a ringer or not before you handed over any of your hard-earned dosh for a wreck. Seamus had used him before and had found out a car he was considering for a cheap runaround was in fact two previously written off motors welded together to form one dodgy one.

For the same fee of a fiver, the used car salesman had used his own contacts to find out where the motorbike C oil n Maguire had been riding around was usually kept.

Seamus had previously had no idea what Maguire's real name was, that was part of the agreement. Nor did he have any clue about where he officially lived or if he lived with anyone.

Now he had not only his name, but also his address. It was breaking the rules, but as the lad wouldn't be around for much longer, Seamus reckoned that the rules didn't apply any more.

"Make it look like an accident," it had been decided in the end. "He's not really been with us long enough for us to draw attention to him with a formal execution. It has to look like an accident."

Seamus had then made his way to the address, which was in a place called The Maypole in Birmingham. It wasn't a hundred miles away from the bedsit in Moseley, so Seamus was content that wires hadn't been crossed.

He'd watched the house, a two-up/two-down end-of-terrace in a back street for a couple of days over Christmas. He'd watched the lad come home and go away again, but this time he was wearing his crash helmet.

Quinn had managed to rent a room in a house not far away so he could be close to hand. His digs were in a nasty little hovel on the edge of the red light district, but Seamus didn't care about that. He'd stayed in far worse places and because it was classed as a less desirable part of Birmingham than, say, Bournville or Edgbaston, there were less callers and he'd be less noticed.

The girls who lived in the area didn't fetch their work home with them in any case. Instead, they walked the streets nearby and conducted their business in customers' cars, in public toilets, or in shabby bed and breakfasts far enough away from home that the punters wouldn't know where they lived and drop by unexpectedly. Kerb-crawlers were starting to be a problem, but it was nothing that made Seamus too uncomfortable. And besides, they weren't bothering him. Not here.

This recent Christmas period had been fairly quiet and even the motorbike didn't seem to have moved since the last time he'd seen it in a relatively secure place at the back of the house. Seamus had watched the place at a couple of different times during the day and the owner, a Mister Francis Drake, a name Seamus had privately guffawed at, appeared to be out.

It was possible he'd gone to visit family or friends over the holiday. But why leave his bike? Unless he had a car as well, or someone had given him a lift.

Perhaps he hadn't meant to stay away for so long and fully intended on coming back. Or perhaps it was an unplanned absence he had no control over.

Whatever, it didn't matter to Seamus, and at least it ensured that Quinn could do what he needed to do in relative peace.

On the night before New Year's Eve, Seamus Quinn crept into the garden under the added cover of darkness. The garden wasn't overlooked at any rate. There was a public footpath that ran along the backs of the gardens, but it looked overgrown and under-utilised, and the solitary street light planned and positioned to illuminate the path about halfway along wasn't working.

Seamus thanked his lucky stars for power cuts.

He hadn't seen any neighbours either and assumed they'd either gone out to the pub, or were too stuffed with Christmas cake and mince pies to move off their couches.

Seamus would be safe and if anyone did spot him, if they also had the nerve to approach him, he'd claim to be working on the bike for his mate Frank, fixing it. If 'Francis Drake' was out, they wouldn't be able to check with him anyway.

Nobody did disturb him. Nobody spotted him. Nobody approached him. And any cars at the front of the houses just carried on driving by. It was so easy for Seamus to do what he needed to do and slope away that he didn't think it was fair. But slope away he did, wiping his hands on an oily cloth and dropping it in the gutter.

Seamus Quinn's work here was done. He wouldn't be going back to his digs. It was time for him to disappear again, back underground. A ghost. A non-entity who only crawled out of the woodwork when someone had a job for him to do.

Tuesday 31 December 1974  
New Year's Eve

## **Lenny**

### **Elmdon Old Village**

Lenny decided that she was furious with Shaun.

First of all because he'd appeared to take her mother's side over him not playing for the football team at the moment.

Then because he'd actually told Hattie he wouldn't be playing anyway for the foreseeable future.

Then because he hadn't bothered turning up to Jax's funeral, even though that was days beforehand.

And now because he'd disappeared completely.

She realised she'd not seen him at all over the Christmas holiday when usually they were in each other's pockets the whole time. Now, if she called him at home, his parents said he was out. If she turned up at the house, there was often no answer. But she could feel someone watching from behind the curtains.

What she couldn't understand was why he was avoiding her. What had she done that was so bad?

At first she was upset. Then she was confused. And then she was annoyed. Even if she had done something wrong, she thought the least he could do was tell her what it was. She might want to do it again, she was feeling so bolshy. But this stupid silent treatment was, well, stupid. And childish.

So Lenny went to the football club on her own instead of calling for Shaun. She hung about in her room on her own, listening to records, while Vicky was out playing with her friend Marcella. And she wrapped up warm and went for a walk in the park. She'd never thought she'd ever wish her holidays away, but here she was doing just that.

Lenny couldn't wait to get back to work. He wouldn't be able to avoid her so easily there. But that was almost another whole week away!

She was really missing him. And maybe that was what was making her so grumpy just lately.

## **Chapter 38**

Wednesday 1 January 1975

New Year's Day

**Lenny**

**Elmdon Old Village**

For the first time in Lenny's memory, her mother's football team, Elmdon Town, were doing badly.

"It's because you're not playing all of the best players," she argued, again, over their breakfast.

"She's right, Hattie," agreed her dad, Tom.

"But I can't play any of the Irish lads," Hattie complained.

"Why not?" asked Lenny.

"You know why not," Hattie admonished her daughter.

"But they've got the men who did it," said Tom.

"Race shouldn't have anything to do with sport anyway," said Lenny.

"Tommy, Timmy and Brenda are all half-Malaysian," she continued, referring to her older half-siblings. "With a convicted criminal for a mother who also committed suicide."

Tom winced. He should be used to his daughter's blunt manner by now, but everyone knew it still caught him unawares whenever she blustered on like this about his first wife. But Lenny ploughed on, not even noticing his discomfort.

"It never did them any harm and you always play Timmy and Tommy."

"Quite right!" agreed Tom at last, clearly battling with the sadness that always engulfed him when he was reminded of their tragic mother. It still went right over Lenny's head sometimes.

Tom Rainbow had met Nobuko during his national service in Malaysia. He'd brought his bride home to England at a time when many British soldiers were bringing home German brides. Unfortunately, the second world war was still

foremost in most people's memories, and wives of foreign origin were treated with disdain and suspicion.

Despite bearing three children, two of them twin boys, Nobuko Rainbow found it difficult to adapt and settle, and after she'd been convicted of shoplifting, she abandoned Tom and their children, supposedly to return home. Instead, she'd thrown herself under a tram in Birmingham's city centre, and died instantly.

Fortunately, the twins and their sister were too young to remember their mother, and Tom and Hattie had met not long after he returned home himself. As far as everyone was concerned, Hattie was their mother. But both Tom and Hattie made sure the children knew who they were, where they'd come from, and who their mother was.

Lenny didn't mean anything spiteful by bringing the story up, but there were times when both of her parents told her they wished they'd never told her anything about her siblings' mother.

"Yes," continued Hattie. "But they're the manager's step-sons. My step-sons. No one has any right to protest at that."

"They'd have every right," said Lenny. "They'd think they had special privileges and might resent them."

"But they know me better than that," said Hattie. "They know the team always comes first."

"So put the team first now and reinstate those boys," said Tom. "Honestly, Hat. I've never known you back down under public pressure before. You were even one of the first to let a German play."

"And a Jew," piped up Lenny around a mouthful of bacon and runny egg.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," said Hattie, automatically.

"Sorry," mumbled Lenny.

"I don't know--"

"Oh, come on, Mom. You can't have one rule for Tommy and Timmy just because they're family, and another for Shaun and Damien just because they're Irish. Although Shaun isn't, by the way," she added, as if she needed to keep pressing the point home.

"They might not even want to play," sniffed Hattie. "Nicholas has already left the team--"

"And he's not Irish anyway," mumbled Lenny, not really wanting to dwell on Nick."

"They might not want to be in the spotlight," Hattie pushed on. "Shaun asked for a leave of absence too, though he hasn't resigned completely."

"Yet," said Tom, waving a sausage-laden fork at his wife.

"Shaun would play if he hadn't been made to feel so dirty and hated!" argued Lenny. "He's not Irish, he's English," she repeated. "At least Damien has an Irish accent and went to a Roman Catholic school. Vicky still goes to a Catholic school. She's surrounded by Irish people who also didn't plant any of those bombs in Birmingham, or anywhere else for that matter."

"Vicky leaves that school this year," Hattie reminded her.

"Yes, and you're sending her to another Catholic school. She'll still be surrounded by Irish people who still didn't have any part in it. Mom, you're being a total hypocrite--"

"And you're not too big to get a clip round the ear," Hattie said.

"You mustn't speak to your mother like that, Elaine," agreed Tom, and Lenny found herself apologising yet again.

God, she felt like a five-year-old. No wonder she sometimes thought it was time she moved out. They were right, though. For as long as she lived under her parents' roof, they deserved her respect. Even after she moved out.

"Do you think his brother will come back too?" asked Hattie finally.

"Whose brother?" asked Lenny.

"Shaun's brother. Do you think Nicholas will come back?"

Being made to think of Nick, despite trying not to, suddenly put Lenny off the rest of her food, and a wave of nausea washed over her again.

She placed her knife and fork across the plate to show she'd finished her meal. She'd done so well to push him from her mind.

Until now.

"I don't know about Nick," she said quietly. "Didn't you say he's already left? I bet the others will too once they find out how Shaun and Damien are being treated."

"If you don't do something soon, Hat," said Tom, "that team will be sliding down the slippery slope to relegation again."

"Hmm," said Hattie, pouring tea into a cup from the pot. "They've not been relegated for more than ten years. They've not even been in the zone. But it will mean so much trouble and bad feeling."

"And it will blow over once they start playing, and winning, as a team again," said Tom.

"Hmm," said Hattie again.

Lenny excused herself from the table just as Vicky surfaced from her room.

## **Frankie**

### **The Maypole, Birmingham**

The all-night party had been a doozy and, truthfully, Frankie Drake was still a bit hung-over from the amount of booze he'd had to drink. At least it had been at his house, though. So he hadn't needed to drive anywhere. Or ride his bike.

The bike had been left chained to the fence post in his garden all over the Christmas break while he stayed with his family. But he was home now and had been since the middle of the previous day.

He switched the bike on and revved the engine just to make sure the battery wasn't flat. It was a little flat and it took a few goes to get it going properly.

He turned the throttle a couple of times to try and make the engine catch, but it coughed and spluttered and he had to really turn it over.

Not happy, he decided the bike needed a run. Only a quick one. He needed milk and sugar anyway, so he thought he'd take it out and find a petrol station that was open. Or a Pakistani shop. Even on public holidays you could guarantee to find a Pakistani shop open, they were such hard workers.

Frankie went back into the house and finished tidying up, of a fashion. He scooped empty beer cans into a black dustbin liner and tipped out overflowing ashtrays with the barest nubs left of hand-rolled joints and cigarettes.

He tied the bag into a knot and dropped it into a dustbin on his way past, grabbing his leather jacket with his free hand. He didn't waste time picking up his helmet. He wasn't going far and wouldn't be able to carry that on his arm and a carrier bag with milk and sugar in it.

The Alcester Road was always a good one for a straight run. He just wanted to open the throttle a little, give the bike a good burn, run it for at least twenty or thirty minutes to make sure the battery recharged.

As he woofed through the gears, he noticed a strange noise, but didn't think to stop and check to see what it was. In the next moment, he lost control of the bike, hit a kerb and bounced across the road, where he smashed against a tree with the motorbike crushing him.

He hadn't even made it as far as the Alcester Road.

As he came to, only two things occurred to him. He didn't feel any pain, but neither could he feel his left leg. And when he tried to look, he couldn't see either. And he couldn't free his hands to wipe the blood from his face.

The bike had almost severed his left leg and a branch of the tree had stabbed him in his left eye.

## Chapter 39

**Lenny**

**Elmdon Town Football Club**

"Victoria!" said Lenny. "Will you STOP taking pictures of everyone and everything?"

Her little sister was driving her and everyone else absolutely barmy.

"But I'm recording today's football game for posteriors," Vicky defended.

"You mean posterity," said their mother.

"That's what I said," said Vicky, and she took another picture of Hattie in the dugout while she watched her boys on the pitch.

Lenny laughed. "That will teach you to buy her something like that for Christmas, Mom."

"I know! We thought it would give us more peace than a...than a..."

"Trumpet?" volunteered Lenny, and they laughed again.

Lenny pulled herself up. She was forgetting again. They shouldn't be laughing.

"Smile!" shouted Vicky, and the flashbulb went off once more, blinding Lenny this time.

"Victoria!" she repeated.

"Here," said Hattie, giving Vicky some change from her purse. "Go and get yourself a Mars Bar or something from the tuck shop."

Finally, off skipped the ten-year-old to spend her new pocket money in the clubhouse.

The clubhouse had been funded following a testimonial game for a player who had been killed when lightning struck him at their old ground. Two others had also been struck by lightning in the same storm, but the tallest man on the pitch was killed instantly. It wasn't the first time players had been struck by lightning either. But it was the first time one had died.

A testimonial game was held at St Andrews, the home of Birmingham City Football Club, between two top-flight teams, Aston Villa and Crystal Palace. A number of local celebrities had also attended and played a five-a-side game during the half-time break. The idea was to help the player's widow, following his death. But they raised so much money, she gave most of it back to the club and they were able to move grounds and they built the clubhouse in his memory.

It meant the team now had proper changing facilities, toilets, showers, and a bar. It also meant they were now permitted to put proper hard-standing around the pitch, something the previous parish council had repeatedly refused permission for. The improvements brought more fans to games, and that meant a new car park and a new pavilion.

All of this in turn saw a climb up the football table for the team and now they were in the top Midland league. If they could only get the council to agree to the erection of four floodlights, then two more leagues and they'd be in the national Division Four.

The clubhouse, then, was still all shiny and new and smelling of fresh paint. The bar was planned so they could have bands on or a discotheque. The new committee room was a small room off the chequerboard dance floor. An L-shaped bar wrapped itself around two sides of the room and there were two entrances. One entrance came in via the changing rooms and toilets. The other entrance led straight in from the car park to the dance floor.

This came in very useful when the club decided to hold disco nights on a Friday that were free to members but non-members had to pay an entrance fee. There was a vestibule between the doors and the dance floor to enable this to be conducted with the overhead light on and in privacy. Committee members and players took it in turns to man these doors, check membership cards, charge the admission fee, and eject anyone they didn't want coming in.

In between the bar and the changing room area was a large kitchen with a full-length serving hatch. Here, on match days and during special events throughout the year, the ladies of the committee cooked and served hotdogs, beef burgers, and baked potatoes. They served tea, coffee, Bovril or Oxo, hot chocolate, orange squash or tins of fizzy pop. And they had a small selection of sweets and chocolate bars.

The club had only been at the new site for two seasons, but one of Lenny's favourite events was the annual bonfire party. This was something that was carried over from the old ground, but it was much better than the old place and much better organised. It was always on the Saturday closest to 5 November and the huge bonfire was lit right after the groundsmen had tidied up if there was a home game. If the team were playing away, the volunteers were able to help the groundsmen much earlier in the day. But on a match day there was less time.

The bonfire was built on the practice pitch, which was also the training ground. Often, footballers from Birmingham City and Aston Villa would come and train with their mates at Elmdon Town, many of them having served their apprenticeship at the club. But around Bonfire Night, the practice pitch was out of bounds while they built the bonfire, and the Elmdon Town footballers went to the Aston Villa or Birmingham City training grounds instead.

The three clubs worked very closely together, with Elmdon Town acting as an unofficial football academy for the two bigger clubs, and they all maintained a very close working relationship.

In the expanse of ground beside the second pitch was where the fireworks display was organised. Both areas were roped off to stop anyone who shouldn't be there wandering in by accident. Here, three men with torches kept on top of the very well choreographed firework displays while other volunteers kept the strays out.

Lenny loved those evenings when the air smelled of gunpowder, children drew pictures in the air with their sparklers or lit their coloured Bengal matches. The fire was always way too hot, and there was a constant stream of food available, served in one of the changing rooms on trestle tables by the ladies of the committee.

Vicky didn't take long to come back with her Mars Bar, so there clearly wasn't a queue yet. The queues would begin closer to half time. So Vicky had been served straight away. It took her a while to munch through her chocolate, though. But soon enough she was up again and taking pictures of all and sundry again.

The game, meanwhile, was going well. Elmdon Town went ahead very early in the game and then stayed there for the rest of the first half.

In the break, two local kids' teams played a six-a-side game, and Vicky was off again, taking pictures of the young boys in their colourful kits. The time flew, while those who weren't interested in the half-time entertainment went to grab a pint of beer or a beef burger.

At the end of the break, two small mascots led the two teams back onto the pitch and Lenny was transported back to a day a long time ago, to the other ground, in another new pavilion, when four children spoke of their hopes and dreams.

## Chapter 40

## Lenny

Two of those children were no longer around now, only ten years later. One had been killed in a horrific manner while the other had apparently disappeared from the face of the earth. Even the third, Shaun, had decided not to come to the game today, and it made Lenny fill with sadness. She was the last one standing, or that's what it felt like. And it was a very lonely place to be.

The flashbulb went off again. Vicky was back taking pictures of Lenny and Hattie and other members of the audience.

"Smile!" said Vicky. Lenny poked her tongue out instead. "Well, that's very grown up, I must say," said Vicky, stomping off to take a picture of someone much more accommodating. Lenny dreaded the pictures coming back from the developers and wondered how many she'd be forcing her little sister to throw away.

A massive cheer went up from the pavilion as Elmdon Town scored their fourth goal and went three ahead.

"At this rate we'll be fighting the council for those floodlights," said Hattie, delighted. The team had had a bad run before Christmas, between the end of November and the middle of December. But they were certainly back on form now they'd got over their differences and started to play as a team again, leaving politics and various other thoughts and opinions at the touchline.

And then they scored again!

"Front page of the *Sports Argus* again too at this rate," added Tom Rainbow happily, who was sitting on the other side of his wife in the dugout.

Silently Lenny seethed. Shaun should have been part of this. So should Nick. And Jax. It just wasn't the same any more.

"Perhaps we should get our Victoria a new camera?" suggested Tom, watching their youngest daughter on the other side of the pitch with indulgence. "She could be the team photographer at this rate."

"Don't encourage her!" hissed Hattie. "She's already driving everyone insane with that blummin camera you bought her for Christmas—"

"Er, the camera that *I* bought for her?" he laughed. "And there was me thinking it was you who took the Green Shield Stamps in to exchange them for it."

"It is a good idea, though," conceded Hattie. "It might keep her out of mischief."

So that was that, thought Lenny. She had always wanted to play for this football team but her mother had never let her. Vicky didn't even have to open her mouth and, all of a sudden, she was the team photographer-in-waiting! She was only ten. And people wondered why Lenny sometimes suffered with an inferiority complex.

The visiting team pulled one back, but there was no catching Elmdon Town Football Club today. They were on fire, and no doubt on their way back up the

division. Yes, there would be arguments again with the council over the summer this year.

Tom took the girls home with him while his wife wrapped up her management duties. And it was Lenny who got the tea on, ready for when her mother got home.

She started the chip pan off and began to peel and chip the potatoes. A large can of Heinz baked beans had been poured into a saucepan on the hob. The grill was warming up, ready for the crumpets. And she got the frying pan out ready for the eggs. But the smell of grease was making Lenny heave and she had to hand over to her father, who managed admirably until the return of Hattie. Then that paragon of household management deftly took over and still managed to serve everything up together and still hot. But Lenny couldn't face it, her favourite meal of the week.

"Perhaps the excitement of today's win was too much for you," said her mother, shooing her off to bed. "I can always make you a chip butty later if you fancy it, or butter some hot crumpets..."

But Lenny felt really ill still, and she dashed up the stairs just in time to throw up in the toilet. When she was done, she crawled into bed and stayed there until the next morning. She missed all of the match postmortem, and all of the New Year's Day telly.

Thursday 2 January 1975

## **Cóilín**

### **Somewhere in Birmingham**

The man known as Cólín Maguire was still scouring the newspapers for news of the bombings. It had dropped off a lot by now, with Christmas news and activities taking up the pages. Plus, the court case hadn't started yet for those men arrested in Lancashire, so there was nothing new to report. There were a couple of short follow-up articles on the murder of the MP. But everything else had returned to local reporting.

He almost missed the very small story about a near-fatal motorbike accident that had taken place on New Year's Day. But being a biker himself, it somehow still managed to reach out eventually and grab his attention:

#### ***MOTORCYCLIST SERIOUSLY INJURED ON ALCESTER ROAD***

*Twenty-three-year-old Francis Drake was seriously injured on New Year's Day when the motorbike he was riding ploughed into a tree.*

*It is believed that the motorcyclist, who lives in Maypole, Birmingham, lost control of his vehicle, a 1973 Triumph Trident 750, whilst on an errand to fetch milk.*

*He is at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, where he is described to be in a serious but stable condition.*

*Drake's left leg was amputated at the scene and specialists hope to save his sight.*

*Meanwhile, he is being kept in an induced coma whilst doctors learn the extent of his injuries.*

Shit! Shit! SHIT!

Seamus Quinn!

Cóilín knew he was up to no good when he'd spotted him lurking around the flat. Cóilín had done the right thing going into hiding. Quinn must have found out where the bike was registered and assumed that was where Cóilín lived.

It wouldn't take long for Quinn to realise he'd made a mistake and come looking for Cóilín again. It was time for Cóilín Maguire to disappear.

He cut out the article and added it to a new bundle he'd started over Christmas.

As soon as he could, he would visit his friend in hospital. It was, after all, Cóilín's fault he was there. Of that, Cóilín had no doubt whatsoever.

And then he'd get in touch with Sergeant K and arrange his own disappearance.

**Seamus**

**Somewhere else in Birmingham**

Seamus Quinn had not almost missed the story in the newspaper. In fact, he was looking for it.

It had been interesting to learn the man's true identity and here it was confirmed in the newspaper along with his name and his age.

He'd bungled it a bit, though. The man was supposed to die, not end up a half-cripple. For as long as he still had a tongue in his head, Cóilín Maguire or, he checked the newspaper again, Francis Drake...Francis Drake! He still found the name funny. Seamus snorted and smoke from the cigarette in his mouth drifted into his eyes, causing them to smart.

He stubbed the fag out in an ashtray and wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

For as long as he still had a tongue in his head, this Francis Drake one was still a threat.

Seamus would have to go to the hospital and finish the job.

The phone rang and he folded the paper, leaving it on a table next to him, and picked up.

"Quinn!" he announced.

"You idiot!" said the voice at the other end.

"I know," said Seamus. "I'm on my way to finish it now."

"You got the wrong man," hissed the voice.

What? Seamus held the handset away from him and blinked at it before placing it against his ear again.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"Frank Drake isn't Cólín Maguire," said the caller. "Try again. And get it right this time."

The caller hung up, but Seamus understood what the caller hadn't said. If he didn't get it right this time, it would be his turn to disappear next...

## Chapter 41

### Shaun

#### Elmdon Old Village

Shaun bumbled along feeling totally fed up.

He'd had the worst Christmas and New Year ever, one of his best friends had died, and his twin brother was keeping away. He'd not gone to any of the most recent football games. Despite his bravado and his offer to stand down, he still hated to be watching from the sidelines instead of getting in there with the action.

Many of his friends had stopped speaking to him and people he barely knew threw him dirty looks across the street before turning and facing in the other direction. It really had been the worst of times.

He'd even fallen out with Elaine too, the very last of his childhood friends and memories. He loved her so much, he really did. But she was still so stupidly besotted with his brother.

He never understood how Nick managed to find such devotion amongst his female followers. There was always one girl or another, sometimes more than one at a time, mooning or crying over him.

Shaun couldn't understand it when Nick could be such a bastard. Especially to the women.

He had heard the rumour about a girlfriend on the other side of town, but he'd not met her yet. Or even had the rumour confirmed by his brother or anyone who'd really know. He'd heard that whenever some silly little girl got too clingy, back he went running to this other woman who just happened to live in a posh part of Birmingham.

Shaun snorted. Trust his brother to find himself a bit of posh.

He didn't know her name, though. And either she wasn't aware of Nick's philandering ways or she didn't care. Perhaps they were two of a kind. Perhaps they had one of those open relationships made popular less than ten years before during the Summer of Love and the ensuing hippy movement.

Shaun hated that Laine only seemed to have eyes for his brother, and eventually he'd lost patience with her, they'd fallen out, and he'd not seen her since. He needed to rectify that because he really was very fond of her and didn't want to lose her as well.

He knew all he had to do was bide his time. It was just taking a lot longer than he thought it would.

It started to drizzle and he noticed that the daylight was starting to go. He came to a standstill to get his bearings.

How long had he been walking, with his head down and his hands thrust deep inside his pockets?

He took in his surroundings. He was only on the Coventry Road, down the hill, almost at the airport, but he'd gone a round-about way to get there and now here he was outside the *Arden Oak* pub. It was fairly local to the villagers but not one that many seemed to frequent. It certainly wasn't one that he went in very often.

The *Arden Oak* in Sheldon wasn't on Shaun's beaten track. They'd tried to get in once, but Lenny and Jax had been questioned about their age, and while Lenny had quite happily announced that she was seventeen, Jax had felt unable to tell an untruth and admitted she was only fifteen. So they hadn't been allowed in as a group and Shaun had never been back there since, although he understood that Nick had.

As he entered the unfamiliar surroundings, he was grateful that he and his brother weren't identical twins. Sure, they looked alike. But that was about it. And nobody knew him in here anyway. Nobody looked at him twice. Nobody gave him a dirty look and left the room. Even the barman served him without a questioning glance.

Shaun took his pint of mild over to the jukebox and perused the titles without putting any money in. He spotted a stool come available in a little nook in the corner behind a one-armed bandit. He checked that nobody else wanted it and sat down himself, placing his pint mug on the table next to him. He was hidden away where no one could really see him, but he could sit quietly, observing his fellow drinkers, and eavesdropping on some of their conversations.

Mostly the snippets didn't make sense, but one group of men were getting particularly rowdy not far from him and he realised they were discussing the pub bombings and the IRA in general. Still.

He had the shock of his life as soon as he realised who they were talking about.

"Yeah," he caught. "That O'Flaherty bastard!"

At first he thought they meant him and they'd seen him lurking in the corner. Then he realised they weren't even looking his way and were wrapped up in their own conversation.

"What? The one who comes in 'ere?" asked one.

"Yeah, looks like that ponce Richard O'Sullivan off the telly," said the first.

"I know 'im. Worrabout 'im?"

"Nicked my brother's bird for a start."

"Oh, is that all?" A slurp of his bitter. "Everyone's nicked your brother's bird."

"Bin mixin' with that Irish scum."

"What? The scum what planted them bombs?"

"Ar." A swig of mild, a drag on a fag.

"Fook me," said the Bitter. "Oo'd a thought it?"

"Well, he *is* Irish," said a well-spoken chap drinking whiskey.

"That's loike sayin' all the Irish are the same," said the Bitter.

"They are, ain't they?" said the Mild, causing Shaun's hackles to rise.

Shaun was interested in what they had to say about his brother. Everyone said he looked like Richard O'Sullivan. Another reason to be cheerful they weren't identical, in Shaun's opinion. So he knew who they were on about. Well, he didn't think they were talking about his dad, and there weren't any other O'Flahertys in the immediate vicinity.

"Been seen at the Irish Centre loadsa toims," the mild-drinker was saying. "Parrently, ain't nobody seen 'im since the bombings."

"And they think 'e was involved?" asked the bitter-drinker.

"I heard he was one of the ring-leaders," added Whiskey Posh.

"Nah!" a slurp of bitter.

"Ar," said the smoker, who lit another fag from the glowing ember of the one he was just finishing. "Oi 'erd that anorl." A swig of mild.

"Then they should string 'im up," said the Bitter, putting an end to it as far as Shaun was concerned.

He didn't want to hear any more. He drained his pint, took his glass mug and put it on the bar counter, and left. He wanted to get drunk now, forget everything. So he headed to the anonymity of the *Good Companions* in Small Heath, where the resident biker gang kept people like these guys at bay and where the music was hopefully too loud for him to overhear any more slanderous discussions about his brother.

Then he'd crawl home and stay in bed until he had to go back to work on Monday.

## **Seamus**

### **Somewhere else again in Birmingham still...**

He waited until he thought all the neighbours had turned in for the night before using the light from the lamppost to tamper with the forks. If anyone spotted him, he was 'working on his bike'. But nobody did, and when he finished, he stepped back into the shadows wiping oil from his hands with a handkerchief.

This time he would watch Maguire get on the bike and drive off.

And *then* he'd disappear.

## **Nick**

### **Bacchus Gardens, Handsworth Wood, Birmingham**

The man had a hood up against the rain and a thick scarf around his face. It wasn't that cold, but perhaps it was extra protection against the rain. The man looked as though he was looking at Nick's 1973 Kawasaki ZI Super 4 on the other side of the road, chained to the lamp-post. Nick was used to this kind of attention, even from police who would often stop him just so they could give his bike a quick once over. It was a nice-looking bike and always drew admiring glances.

The stranger finished lighting his cigarette, tossed the match into the gutter, which extinguished itself as it went, looked both ways and then crossed to the

same side of the street that the bike was on. As his face turned towards the window, Nick thought he looked familiar. But it was a fleeting feeling.

For a start, no one knew he was there. And second, none of his friends knew where Rowena lived anyway. Many didn't even know she existed.

Nick felt himself bristle with pride as the man walked around the bike a few times. If he was still there when they went downstairs, perhaps Nick would have a chat with him. But now they really needed to get going.

"Are you nearly ready, Ro?" he called.

"Coming!" she replied from the bedroom. Then she emerged, still looking as glamorous and as beautiful as ever, despite wearing several thick layers of clothes, hitching the ruck sack onto her back over her best red suede jacket.

Nick collected the duffel bag again and threw it across his body, again. He pulled out his thick bike gloves from inside his helmet and passed the helmet to Rowena.

"You wear this one," he said. "I'll go without."

"I think you should wear one," nagged Rowena, though she already knew better than to push. If Nick felt like anyone was telling him to do something, he usually did the complete opposite. He hated wearing the helmet anyway and would often go without.

Nick picked up the spare helmet, but left it on his elbow, secured with the chin-strap.

By the time they got outside, the man had gone. The rain was heavier and it glistened on the road and pavement as the street lights started to flicker on.

Nick straddled the bike and kicked it into life, giving it a few revs on the throttle for good measure.

When he was ready, Rowena climbed onto the passenger foot-peg and threw her leg over the pillion seat. When she was comfortable, and holding on tight, Nick pulled away and felt the cold air bite his face.

"Where are we going?" shouted Rowena.

"South Wales," he replied. "I have family there."

## **Seamus**

Seamus Quinn pulled the scarf down from around his face, lit another fag as he stepped out into the road, and he watched the Kawasaki drive away.

Satisfied, he turned in the opposite direction and walked towards the bus stop.

**to be continued...**

a molly's clan short story

# Wordsworth Shorts



– Diane Wordsworth –

new year's revolution

## **new year's revolution**

*When I still went out to work, I worked at a place called the National Grid and our business often took us to the south coast. Whilst there, I'd stay with a colleague and his family. It was there that his five-year-old daughter, who was looking after a stick insect for school, told me everything she'd learned in class about the creature. Recited it, in fact. And she was only five! This is where I first got the idea for a story that was later published in a UK women's weekly magazine.*

*Now, almost 30 years later, Molly and her family have a series of short stories of their own.*

~~~

Stig arrived at the Southam's home, just in time for Christmas.

"What's that?" Molly asked of her eleven-year-old son.

"He's a stick insect," replied Toby.

"Yes, I can see that. But what is it doing here?"

"Miss asked for volunteers to look after the animals over the Christmas holiday."

"And you volunteered us, right?"

"Right."

"I see." Molly regained her composure. She couldn't very well send it back, could she? And it could have been worse. He could have brought home a nice cuddly rat, or a snake in a tank. "And what does it eat?" she asked, peering at the bright green creature through the ex-pickled egg jar. Someone had thoughtfully provided an ex-stocking leg for the lid too.

Toby put on his big, grown-up voice and recited what he had clearly learned in class.

"The stick insect eats the foliage of plants, shrubs and trees, usually at night. Privet will do."

"I see," said Molly again, picturing her prized privet being gnawed to shreds by this...insect... "Does it have a name?"

"Stig."

"Stig?"

"Yes. We couldn't make up our minds between 'Stick' or 'Twig', so we called him 'Stig' instead."

"And does 'Stig' have any friends?"

Toby frowned, shook his head, and took a deep breath. In that matter-of-fact voice of his, he recited from his lessons once more. "In some species the male is rare. So the female reproduces an exact replica of herself without mating."

Molly shook her head and laughed, while at the same time marvelling at her son's knowledge. "We'll leave him on the windowsill then above the draining board, all right?" Toby nodded. "Just so long as you look after him."

"Oh I will," he agreed, though Molly wasn't so sure. After all, who looked after the stray kitten he had found one day? Who fed and cleaned out his rabbits? Who returned his slugs and snails and all sorts of other creatures to the

safety of the garden when he tired of examining them in the kitchen? Molly did. "And keep it away from Petra. You know how she hates creepy crawlies."



On the day before Christmas Molly frantically rushed around the place trying to get ready for work. It was the busiest day of the year at the department store in town where she worked. Her ex-husband was coming to take the kids shopping. Toby was getting dressed in his room and Petra was hogging the bathroom, again.

"Petra! Will you get a move on in that bathroom," she screamed up the stairs to her sixteen-year-old daughter. "Some of us have to get to work."

"Okay, sorreee!" called Petra's voice from behind the locked door. Molly paused for a second to listen for the plug to be pulled in the bath. Nothing.

She took a deep breath and busied herself around the kitchen: moving Toby's creatures back into the garden and disinfecting the worktop where they'd been; replacing the stocking lid on Toby's stick insect jar; emptying, cleaning and refilling Toby's kitten's litter tray; feeding Toby's rabbits...

"All yours," came Petra's voice through the open kitchen door. Molly had been so engrossed in Toby's chores she hadn't heard the bath water gushing down the waste pipe outside. "What time's Dad coming?" she asked, running down the stairs.

"In about five minutes," replied Molly, checking the hall clock while she ran up the stairs. The doorbell rang just as she opened the bathroom door and was greeted by her daughter's mess.

"Come on Toby," called Petra as she met their father on the doorstep. "Dad's waiting."

"Bye Mom," called Toby, tearing out of his room and down the stairs, two at a time.

"Bye Mom," shouted Petra, just before the door slammed behind them.

"Er... 'bye kids..." said Molly weakly.

She took a deep breath and busied herself around the bathroom: washing Petra's tidemark from around the bath; fishing Petra's long, dark hairs out of the plug hole; collecting Petra's soaking wet towels from the floor, the toilet, the sink, the bath (why she needed four, Molly didn't know); replacing the lids on bottles of Petra's cosmetics and wiping up the spillages. Her children lived like pigs, and Molly was going to be late.

She put the plug in and started to run her bath, but the hot water tap coughed and spluttered before dying completely. Molly groaned. Not only had Petra emptied the entire hot water tank, but Molly didn't have the time to wait while it filled up again and reheated.

Molly wasn't usually one for New Year resolutions, but this year things were going to be different.



On New Year's Morning Toby dashed up to Stig's jar clutching a handful of privet – and wailed.

"What's the matter with you, you big baby?" asked Petra spitefully.

"He's gone! Stig's gone." He darted around the kitchen hunting for his pet.
"Miss will kill me."

"Perhaps you should have replaced the lid," suggested Molly gently. She was drinking a cup of tea and reading a magazine.

"I thought you'd do it."

"I'm on strike."

"You're doing what?"

"Mother's revolting," confirmed Petra, chuckling at her own joke. "Did you wash my cardigan, Mom?"

"Which one?"

"The blue mohair one."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm on strike."

"You only went on strike yesterday. The cardigan's been on the draining board since Boxing Day."

"Did you wear it then?"

"No."

"So why did you want me to wash it?"

Petra sighed. "I tried it on a few times."

"But you didn't wear it?"

"No."

"So it isn't dirty."

"But I left it on the draining board."

"Then it will still be there, won't it?" Molly lifted her eyes from her magazine and watched her daughter snatch the cardigan up from the draining board and shrug into it. "If you wanted it washing that badly you should have done it yourself."

"But I couldn't put it in the washing machine. It has to be hand-washed."

"So?"

Petra tutted and turned to make some toast. Something caught Molly's eye and she returned her gaze to the magazine.

"Have you found that insect yet, Toby?" asked Molly.

"No," he wailed. "Oh where is he? I'd do anything to find him."

"Anything?" said Molly.

"Anything."

"Would you remember to replace his lid every time you feed him?" Toby nodded. "Would you look after your kitten and the rabbits?"

"Yes."

"And would you take all of your nasty little creatures back into the garden when you've finished with them?"

"Anything!"

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"He's on Petra's back—"

Petra screamed and dropped the toast butter side down on the floor. "Get it off me!" she cried, frozen to the spot with terror.

"He won't hurt you," assured Toby, taking his time. He could see his pet was safe so was in no hurry.

"Just get it off me."

"What's it worth?"

"Anything."

"Anything?" said Molly.

"Anything," screamed Petra.

"Will you remember that there's more than you who needs the bathroom first thing in the morning?" Petra nodded, flexing and unflexing her fingers as two tears squeezed from her tightly closed eyes. "And will you clean up after yourself when you've finished?"

"Yes."

"And will you stop bringing your clothes down to be washed when you've not even worn them?"

"Anything!"

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise. Now would you just get that thing off me, please."

Ooh, thought Molly. A 'please' too. She smiled and nodded at Toby who reached up and rescued Stig.

"Oh dear," he said.

"What?" said Petra.

"His leg's fallen off—"

"What?" she screamed.

"It's hanging off your cardigan—"

"Get it off me!" she cried.

"Don't worry, sis. It's a known fact that young stick insects can replace a leg if they lose one," he said matter-of-factly. "He'll soon grow a new one—"

"Ugh," she said, dashing from the room, the bright green leg still dangling from the blue mohair.

~~~

On the day Toby went back to school Stig moved out. Molly was quite sad to see him go. He'd turned out to be a real friend. Petra, on the other hand, was ecstatic, and Toby would still see him every day at school. Of course, the children didn't keep their promises, but it had lasted for a few days at least.

No one could see the tiny, seed-like egg buried deep inside the blue mohair cardigan. If it remained there undisturbed, protected by its hard shell, in a year or two they would have their own little baby Stig – a perfect replica of her mother...

the end

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previously published short story: *The Mystery of Woolley Dam*  
a complete brand-new novella: *China*  
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part 4 (novel excerpt): *Catch the Rainbow*  
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