

WORDS WORTH

Issue ONE

October 2024

READING

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



DIANE WORDSWORTH

PAPER ROSES

Words Worth Reading
Issue 1 | October 2024

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Diane Wordsworth

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welcome

A warm welcome to the official Issue One of *Words Worth Reading*. Issue Zero in October 2023 was a reboot.

In this edition you'll find seven complete short stories, three of which are completely brand-new. You'll also find a short story from the archives as well as Part 2 of the novel serialisation for *Night Crawler*. Part 3 next time.


One of the short stories, *The Ace of Cups*, is the second instalment of a series of Tarot-related tales that stand up on their own. These are the backstories for my series of mystery novellas set in the fictitious Yorkshire Riding of Horvale and starring Stevie Beck. Her name was going to be Stevie Ash, but I changed it, for reasons that will become clear during the full series.

Three of the stories have previously been published in UK magazines, including the one from the archives. *The Ace of Cups* was published as a standalone during my year-long publishing challenge in 2021/2022. I can hardly believe that the challenge finished two years ago!

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



Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

paper roses

paper roses

This story started with a prompt from a book about a woman who finds an old book of poetry in a second-hand bookshop and a letter falls out. I designed the cover way before I put pen to paper after I spotted the stunning artwork.

~

A fat raindrop splashed on Maeve's cheek and she tutted. She'd just paid a fortune for a new hair-do. She ducked inside the nearest shop and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness she sneezed.

Oh, how she loved the smell of old books.

A white-bewhiskered man sitting behind a small counter glanced up from his crossword and smiled, nodded and returned to his puzzle, sticking the stub of a pencil behind his ear.

Maeve had no idea what she was looking for, but she knew she would know it as soon as she saw it. Running a finger along a shelf, she stopped when she saw the dark green cover of a shabby book. *Love Letters and Other Poems.*

Maeve flicked through the pages. Something dropped out and when she picked it up she saw it was a paper rose, flattened by the pages of the book, its colour faded with age. She placed the rose back inside the book and saw that a piece of paper had also been pushed inside. The ink on the paper was also faded, but Maeve was able to make out the words written in an elegant, old-fashioned hand. It was a letter. A love letter. It was addressed to 'My dearest Rose'.

Maeve turned the paper over to see if there was an address. There was only a date at the top of one side and the writer's name at the end: 'With all my love, Hal'.

“Aww,” murmured Maeve. “Rose and Hal, how lovely.”

“Beg pardon?” said a gruff voice. She looked up to see the bewhiskered gentleman peering at her over the top of his reading glasses.

“Do you know whose book this was?” she asked, taking the book to him.

He folded his newspaper and took the book from her.

“There’s this name and address in the front,” he said, showing her the writing in pencil. “Looks like Harry Blenkinsop. But the houses on that road were flattened a long time ago and turned into a car park.”

“Do you keep records of where your books come from?” she asked.

“I do,” he said, placing the book back on the counter. He tapped at his temple with a gnarled finger and he chuckled. “Most of it’s up here as well.” He nodded down at the counter. “That one came from a local jumble sale.”

Maeve picked up the book and showed him the paper rose and the love letter. He took the book from her and showed her more of the same, tucked between different pages of the book.

“Would you like to buy it?” he asked.

“How much is it?”

He turned it over and pulled a face as though he was in a gurning contest. “Says one-pound-fifty, but I’ll take a pound.”

“I’ll give you two,” she said, fishing in her purse for loose change. “What about the letters?”

He shrugged. “They come with the book.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “May I leave it here while I look around?” She glanced at the door. “It looks like it’s still raining.”

The man nodded and picked up his newspaper.

The rain turned into a raging storm and that evening Maeve curled up in front of the fire, pulling her stockinged feet beneath her in the big, squidgy armchair.

There were sixteen letters, each one slipped between the pages where a new love poem started, each accompanied by a pressed paper rose, each referring to the poem it was with, how it reminded Hal of Rose's perfumed hair, her soft touch, her tinkling laugh.

By the time Maeve had finished reading them, she had quite fallen in love with Hal and was now determined to try and find him. She was a glutton for a good old love story.

~

That weekend at the library Maeve was reading newspapers on an old micro-fiche. "We haven't got around to computerising everything yet," apologised the librarian. Maeve didn't mind. She loved trawling through the old pages, looking for snippets.

The bookshop owner was right. The address written in pencil at the front of the book had been flattened more than thirty years earlier and was indeed now a multi-storey car park. She asked the librarian what she could do next, and the librarian brought out a half-dozen thick, red, oversized books.

"These are the old electoral rolls," explained the woman. "You should be able to trace Mr Blenkinsop, when he moved out of that house, where he went to, if he stayed in the area." She wrinkled up her nose.

"What is it?" asked Maeve.

The young woman sighed. "He could be anywhere," she said wistfully. "He might even be..." She left the sentence hanging.

"Well, if he is, he might have family," said Maeve brightly.

The two ladies took a tome each and worked through them until they had discovered exactly where Harry Blenkinsop had moved to and from over the years. It seemed he hadn't left the area at all and the last entry, before the electoral roll moved to computer, was a warden-controlled bungalow complex. He had not been alone, however, for his name was joined by Mrs Elizabeth Blenkinsop. Maeve wondered what had happened to his Dearest Rose.

"Is that complex still there?" she asked the librarian, who frowned before tapping a few keys at a computer terminal.

"Yes, it's still there," she said, moving closer to the screen to read it. "And it still has a warden."

"Great!" said Maeve. "I'll go and have a chat."

"Let me know how you get on," said the librarian.

"I will," promised Maeve.

~

The fine weather returned the following week. Maeve drove over to the retirement complex, now an entire village that nestled alongside a Norman church. A white sign on the church gate announced that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had graves in the churchyard and Maeve thought she'd go and pay her respects on her way home.

She found the warden, who was very busy but didn't mind speaking to her. "It's always nice to get visitors," he said.

Maeve explained her quest and showed him the book that seemed to go everywhere with her these days. She had returned all of the letters and paper roses to where she had found them, pressed between the pages of the thick book.

"Oh yes," said the warden. "Hal and his wife moved here long before I arrived."

“If I give you my phone number will you ask him to contact me?” she asked him hopefully, and the man frowned.

He nodded back along the road down which she had come. “You’ll find Hal in the cemetery,” he said, and Maeve’s heart dropped.

“Oh,” she said. “Th-thank you.”

Maeve walked towards the church and let herself in through the lychgate, sighing sadly. The book grew heavier and heavier, but she was determined to find where Hal Blenkinsop was buried.

~

There were hundreds of graves in the churchyard, but another white sign pointed towards the war graves. “I might as well go and have a look at them now I’m here,” she said out loud. It didn’t take her long to find them. “I’ll see if there’s a grid reference or something to tell me which grave is his,” she muttered.

“Eh?” said a voice behind her, and she turned to see an elderly man who had been kneeling beside one of the war graves. He struggled to get up but when she went to help him, he waved her away. “Who yer lookin’ fer?” he said. “I know every grave in this yard.”

Maeve held the book up for him to see. “I’m looking for Harry Blenkinsop.”

The man frowned but looked at the book with rheumy pale blue eyes. “What yer got there?” he asked.

“It’s a book of love poems.”

He nodded. “Well, yer’ve found ‘im,” said the old man.

She looked about at the graves that lay in regimental rows on either side of the narrow pathway. “Which one is it?” she said.

“Eh?” he said, then he burst out laughing. “*I’m Harry Blenkinsop,*” he said, prodding at his own chest.

“Oh,” said Maeve with confusion. “Oh!” she said then, realising. “Then you’re not...?”

“Not yet,” he said. “Or I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” she repeated. She looked down at the book. “Then this belongs to you.”

“It did once,” he said. “Where’d yer find it?”

He led the way to a stone bench where they both sat down while Maeve related her tale and how she had found him. “What happened to Rose?” she asked carefully.

Mr Blenkinsop boomed with laughter again. “Why, I married ‘er, of course,” he said.

“But...” said Maeve. “Who is... Elizabeth?”

“Her name is Elizabeth Rose, but she’ll always be my Rose,” he said with a proud smile. “Come back to the bungalow. She’ll want ter meet yer. Come an’ ‘av a cup of tea.”

Maeve smiled, nodded and thanked him. They got up from the bench and weaved their way back to Hal and Rose’s house, passing the war graves where each headstone had a carefully tended rose bush behind it.

THE END

a molly's clan short story

Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

the kite festival

the kite festival

In 2023, I started a writing challenge. The challenge was to write 12 short stories in 12 months. I ran out of time around the month 8 mark, but The Kite Festival is one of the ones I completed.

We were given the prompt 'teach' and that was all. We could choose whatever we liked and we didn't even need to use the prompt. I already had two short stories about Molly and her family, but I chose to use the prompt for them, and this is what I came up with.

~

Molly glanced at the clock as she cleared the table. The kids would be home soon and ready for tea. She'd been stuck in traffic getting home from work and was running later than she would like. The table wasn't too bad, but it was strewn with pictures and posters depicting birds of prey. Toby was learning about red kites at school and had been regaling the family with his newfound knowledge.

Just as Molly straightened the cutlery, the door burst open and in rushed Toby, anorak half off his shoulders, satchel trailing behind him.

"Mum! Mum!" he cried, dropping the satchel on the floor and peeling off his coat. He dashed to the sink and helped himself to a glass of water.

Molly waited for her son to catch his breath. Then she nodded pointedly at the heap he had left in the middle of the kitchen floor.

As he picked up after himself, he passed along his news. Molly always braced herself because news from school usually meant money for her to fork out.

"Mum!" he repeated. "There's a kite festival. Can I go?"

Molly, a little perplexed, said, "A kite festival?" The only place she had heard there were red kites was in the middle of Wales, miles away from anywhere. Toby had told her there was a big feeding station run by a local landowner, and hundreds of red kites swooped down to take the meat the volunteers spread around a field.

Toby looked at his mother quizzically, just as Petra, Molly's teenage daughter, arrived home from school.

"I'm not sure I can afford a school trip to Wales to see the kites," said Molly.

"You don't have to," said Petra, taking her coat off and hanging it in the closet.

"But how else will he get to Wales?"

Now it was Petra's turn to exchange a confused look with her brother. Toby shrugged and shook his head, then he sat himself down at the table.

"Mum," said Petra. "The kite festival is on the common. We don't have to go all the way to Wales for it."

"But we don't have any red kites here," said Molly, checking the oven. "Is it a bird of prey group who are coming to the village?" she asked. She knew there were birds of prey centres all over the country but the only time she ever seemed to see them was at fetes and fairs and other fundraisers.

Petra laughed. "No!" she said. "Not that kind of kite. He means the type made out of paper and string that you try to fly but usually end up chasing, picking up, and repairing."

"Oh!" said Molly slowly as her mistake dawned on her. "I see," she said, laughing now as well.

Toby joined in and soon all three of them were almost in tears as the contagious laughter worked itself through them.

"It's a local event," said Petra, drying her eyes on her sleeve. "No travel required."

“Ah well, in that case you can go,” said Molly to her son. “We can all go. It’ll be a nice day out.” She turned to Petra who was scowling. “Something different.”

“I don’t mind paying for it out of my pocket money,” said Toby.

“So there is an admission fee?” asked his mother, finally serving up their tea. She usually had her own tea with them as well, so that they could all eat together at the table as a family.

“It’s not much,” said Petra. “Only a pound each or something like that.”

That wasn’t so bad, thought Molly. She could stretch to three pounds if Petra decided to go too.

“But I need to buy a kite,” announced Toby around a mouthful of fish fingers. “I don’t know if I can afford to buy a kite as well as pay for the tickets.”

“A kite?” said Molly, remembering back to when her old dad had made her a kite. “Don’t you want to *make* a kite?” she asked. “I thought half the fun was that you made it yourself and it actually flew.”

“Have you ever flown a kite, Mum?” asked Petra, cutting her fishfingers into pieces that were all the same size before popping a piece into her mouth.

“Your granddad used to take me kite-flying,” replied Molly, smiling again as fond memories came flooding back.

“I bet it’s easy,” said Toby.

Molly gave him an indulgent smile, knowing full well that if they ever did get to fly a kite he would find out exactly how easy it was *not* for himself.

~

A few days later Molly found she could barely conceal her enthusiasm.

“They had it on offer at the toy shop,” she gushed happily when she saw Toby’s face light up.

“It’s ace, Mum!” he said, unwrapping all the sticks and fabric and bits of string. “Does it come with instructions?”

“I hope so,” said Molly, looking with dismay at the tangle of colour that now lay on the table.

Toby rummaged through the box until he found the piece of paper he was looking for. Molly watched as the big grin suddenly dropped and Toby frowned.

“What is it?” she asked, taking the paper from him.

“It’s all in a strange language!” said Toby sulkily, looking in the box for the leaflet that was written in English.

“Is this all there is?” asked Molly, turning the single piece of paper over in her hand and trying to decipher the jumble of letters that was printed on both sides.

Toby looked so crestfallen that she forced a bright smile onto her face. “Never mind,” she said, pointing. “Look, there are pictures.”

He looked at the diagram, checked inside the box one last time, and shrugged his shoulders. “Okay. Let’s give it a try,” he said, pressing his lips together.

Molly concentrated on the illustrations, trying to make sense of them. *If all else fails*, she told herself, *Petra can look on the internet*.

Fortunately she didn’t need to ask Petra for help because, despite a few aborted attempts, several hours later the kite was assembled, and they hadn’t even torn any paper or knotted any string.

“Do you think it will fly?” asked Petra.

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Molly getting her coat. “Wrap up,” she told them. “It is, after all, the middle of a perfectly average British summer.”

It was so windy up on the common that the three of them struggled to keep hold of their coats, let alone the flimsy string that was supposed to control the kite. Petra's long blonde hair thrashed about her face, tugging itself loose of a bobble she'd tied it into a pony-tail with. Molly's hair was held rigidly in place with hairspray and Toby's was very short.

"I hope there's no one up here to see me!" complained Petra.

From the corner of her eye Molly noticed three young lads who were successfully flying a big colourful kite between them, and she bit her lip. *If Petra hasn't seen boys her own age up here, I'm not going to be the one to tell her*, she told herself.

"Did you find any instructions on the internet telling you how to actually fly the thing?" Molly asked her daughter, keeping Petra positioned so that the boys were behind her. Molly might have flown kites with her dad when she was little, but she couldn't remember how to do it now.

"Here!" said Toby. "I'll have a go." He gave his sister instructions to hold the kite in the air while he ran as far as he could in the other direction, holding on to the end of the string. "Let go now!" he shouted to her, but his words were whipped away on the wind.

Molly cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "LET GO NOW!"

Petra nodded and released the kite. It crept up into the air but came circling and crashing back to the ground, its long colourful tail snaking behind it.

"Would you like a hand?" asked a voice suddenly. Molly turned to see that the older boys had joined them, and she quickly glanced at Petra's face. Petra's startled eyes darted everywhere but at the boys.

"Yes please!" shouted Toby, completely oblivious to his sister's plight.

“That’s kind of you,” said Molly.

In no time at all there were two kites in the air performing acrobatics with each other. Two of the boys managed their own kite between them while their friend stayed with Toby and Petra. Molly watched from a distance with amusement.

By the time Toby had mastered his kite, it was time to go home for supper. Molly thanked the boys for their help.

“Not a problem,” said the lad who had stayed with them. He ruffled Toby’s hair and said, “There’s a kite festival here next week.”

“That’s what the kite’s for,” said Molly, smiling.

Toby grinned up at him too. “Will you be there?” he asked. “Will you help me again?”

“Of course we will, won’t we?” he said to his pals, who had now joined them. Then he looked at Petra nervously. “Would you like to come with me?”

Petra’s face lit up and she looked interested for the first time since the boys had joined them. “Yes... yes, I would,” she said. “Thank you.”

Molly smiled again and thought, *that will save me a pound at least.*

~

Toby, Petra and Molly had a great time at the kite festival and Toby was drawn to one kite in particular.

“Is that...?” he said, pointing upwards.

Petra was too busy chatting to her new boyfriend to look, but Molly shaded her eyes and peered up at what looked like hundreds of kites in all shapes and colours dancing on the breeze.

There, in amongst the diamonds, the squares, the boxes, and other complex structures flew a beautiful red-coloured kite in the shape of a bird of prey.

“Why yes,” said Molly. “I think it is.”

Toby looked sadly at his own kite, now in tatters. “I think I would like a new kite in the shape of a red

kite, just like that one,” he said, looking up at the sky again.

Molly sucked in her breath wondering how much such a kite would cost. “Then we will have to see what we can do,” she said, giving her son a hug. “Come on, let’s get this one home. We might be able to repair it.”

As they walked down the hill towards home, Toby said, “By the way, the Birds of Prey Centre are coming to our school for the summer fair.”

“That will be nice,” she said, certain that she had the right kind of red kite in her mind this time.

THE END

wordsworth flash fiction



- Diane Wordsworth -

take your pick

take your pick

This is another story I wrote for 12 Stories in 12 Months. The prompt was 'pick', and the wordcount was one of the shortest in the challenge.

~

Jenny fiddled with her necklace with one hand and held her Kindle in the other as she pretended not to watch the café door. She had a clear view of the entire room. If he came in, she wouldn't miss him. IF he came in, that is...

Would he even remember? she mused.

Her eyes flicked from the screen to the door every few seconds. She must have read the same line in her book at least a dozen times.

What if he doesn't come? she wondered for the umpteenth time. And for the umpteenth time she told herself it wouldn't matter if he didn't.

She placed the Kindle down on the table and sipped her caramel latte. The coffee was going cold. If he didn't turn up by the time she reached the bottom of her cup, she would accept defeat and go home.

She picked the pendant up again, feeling the smooth shiny plastic of the guitar pick.

~

Her friend had warned her about guitarists in bands.

"They're all only out for what they can get," Susanna told her when she caught Jenny and the guitarist exchanging yet another smile. "He'll have a girl in every town, you'll see."

Still Jenny watched the guitarist, certain he was looking right at her too. But Susanna was right. Why would he be interested in someone like her? She sipped at her glass of wine and looked around the

crowded room for something else to distract her from the handsome musician.

When the guitarist sidled up to them at the bar after their set finished, Susanna's mouth dropped open. He even brought his drummer friend with him. The four of them enjoyed a few drinks, bought by the guitarist, who was called Matt, and the drummer, Jake, before the headlining band brought the night to a close.

~
"Take your pick!" Matt said a few days later, with his lopsided grin. In his hand sat a pile of guitar picks. Some were grey, others had names of guitar manufacturers stamped on them, while others were brightly coloured.

Jenny met his blue eyes. "I can't take one of your picks."

"Why not?"

"You need them."

He laughed then. "I have plenty. I keep these to give away."

"Oh..." Jenny replied, trying not to feel crestfallen. For a moment he'd made her feel special. Now she knew she was only as special as the next fangirl who came along.

"And anyway, we're in England now, so they're plectrums not picks," he added with another grin.

Jenny forced a smile, chose a psychedelic *plectrum* and looked at him in surprise as he took it away from her again with a wink.

For the next week, Matt and Jenny were inseparable. Susanna didn't waste a moment warning Jenny about how unreliable people in bands were. "Especially guitarists."

~
At the end of the week, Jenny met Matt in a café.

"How long will you be away for?" she asked, thinking that at least she'd had *some* fun.

He shrugged. "We'll be in Europe for three months." He rummaged in a pocket. "Then we're off to the States. But I made you a present so you won't forget me." He pulled out the psychedelic plectrum she'd chosen, but it was now attached to a leather boot lace.

"Thank you," she said, taking it from him. "I bet you give one of these to all the girls," she added with a laugh.

"I don't always keep one for myself as well, though," he said, moving the collar of his polo shirt out of the way to show her. "You really are special to me, Jen," he said quietly.

Thinking he was just being kind she hung the necklace around her neck and smiled again. "Thank you."

"And to prove it," he continued, "why don't we make each other a promise?"

"Such as?" she asked, folding her arms on the table.

"Whatever happens when we come back from touring, we'll meet at this exact spot again..." he looked up at the ceiling, "...ten years today."

"Ten years?"

"Ten years."

Jenny giggled. "All right, then," she said, hardly believing her own ears.

~

That was ten years ago to the day.

Jenny picked up her Kindle just as the door opened. She felt her eyes widen and her mouth drop open as her husband of five years paused in the doorway and looked around the busy café.

The noise her Kindle made as it clattered to the table must have attracted his attention. He looked over towards her and smiled, that lopsided smile she had always loved. And as he came to join her at the

table, his hand went to his own throat and he wiggled the matching guitar plectrum at her.

“You remembered,” she said.

“Of course I did,” he replied.

THE END



Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

harvey's festival

harvey's festival

I had an idea for a story about a little dog called Harvey, and when one of the prompts for 12 Stories in 12 Months was 'thin', I thought that was an ideal discipline to get my story written to a set word-count and a set deadline. Harvey's Festival is the result.

This is a brand-new story that hasn't been published anywhere else before.

~

Michaela watched the woman cast an appraising eye over the little dog and smile at him. The woman wasn't much older than Michaela and her name was Jane. She'd already passed the home inspection. Apparently Jane lived in a small house with a very secure garden and she had recently accepted a part-time job, so Harvey, the dog, wouldn't be left on his own for hours on end.

"He's a bit thin," said Jane to the kennel maid. She glanced at her name badge and added, "Michaela. What a pretty name."

"He's put on some weight since he's been with us," said Michaela.

"What do you know about him?" Jane asked, reaching out and tickling the animal behind the ears.

Michaela smiled at the dog's reaction. They all loved to be tickled behind their ears. "Not a lot," she replied. "He was found on the streets and when no one came forward to claim him, we were asked to step in and help. Our foster carer says he has a lovely temperament, is great with children and other dogs. Even cats."

Jane laughed. "I don't have either. Do you think he'll be happy as an only dog?"

Michaela glanced down at him and the dog appeared to be grinning back at her. He thumped

his tail and looked at Jane with hope in his big brown eyes.

“Yes,” said the kennel maid. “I think he will.”

Jane looked into the dog’s eyes. “Would you like to come home with me, Harvey?” she said. The dog yipped twice and thumped his tail again, looking from Jane to the kennel maid and back.

“He’s ready to go,” said Michaela. “The home inspector thinks your place is perfect.”

“Great!” said Jane to Michaela. “Let’s get you home,” she said to the dog.

The paperwork was all sorted out and Jane paid the rest of her adoption fee, then she went out to her car and brought out all of the paraphernalia she’d clearly spent a fortune on to take Harvey home. He had a bright red collar that had shiny studs, a matching lead, and a car harness to keep him safe. Michaela knew he’d look very smart. Jane had also brought along a knotted rope for him to chew on.

As Jane drove off into the sunset with her happy newly homed dog, the kennel maid waved after them, a tear in her eye, satisfied with another happy ending for a Yappy Tailz Poundie.

~

Less than two months later, to Michaela’s huge disappointment, Jane and Harvey were back.

“I’m so sorry to be bringing him back so soon,” said Jane.

The kennel maid could see the tears in her eyes, but she felt sorry for the dog more than anything. It was always sad to see a dog they thought they’d successfully rehomed come back to the kennels.

“These things happen,” Michaela said, keeping her tone light. “Which university are you going to?”

“Stirling,” said Jane. “In Scotland. I was really surprised when the letter came. I thought I’d flunked it and had that job lined up and everything.”

“It’s a shame you couldn’t find a flat that allows pets,” said Michaela.

“I know!” said Jane with a serious frown. “It all happened so quickly that all I had available to me was a room in the halls of residence. And they definitely don’t allow pets of any kind.”

It was not for the kennel maid to pass judgement, and once she received Harvey back into her care, he was her priority, not the person who’d brought him back.

Michaela glanced down at the poor dog and patted him on the head. “He won’t be going back into kennels,” she said to Jane. “I’ll foster him with me.”

“Oh, I’m so glad,” said Jane. “He really is a lovely little dog.”

This time Michaela didn’t bother waving Jane off into the sunset. She was far too busy trying to distract Harvey, who whined a little, but thumped his tail and ran after the rubber ball she threw for him.

~

Harvey didn’t stay on the list for long. Michaela knew he wouldn’t. The next person to come and have a look at him was an elderly lady who had contacted the kennels shortly after her own dog had died. She had responded to Michaela’s Facebook appeal and could hardly wait to take Harvey home. The lady was very keen.

Perhaps a little too keen.

Michaela checked the paperwork. Again, the home had already passed inspection. Mrs Pigeon lived in a bungalow that had a safe and secure back garden and front garden. The lady was an experienced dog owner and could more than afford the adoption fees and ongoing maintenance and veterinary costs.

Michaela stood at the front door beaming a smile of welcome at Mrs Pigeon as she spritely tap-tap-

tapped her way up the street towards the building with her walking stick, a groovy, colourful cane painted with gold and turquoise flowers.

She doesn't look a day over sixty, mused Michaela as the lady drew nearer. Yet she knew that Mrs Pigeon was a good twenty years older. They didn't often accept older adopters without first arranging a contingency too. And while she was certainly very agile, Mrs Pigeon was no exception.

Instead of watching what she was doing, Mrs Pigeon grinned at Michaela and promptly tripped over an uneven paving slab, landing heavily on her hip.

While secretly thanking their lucky stars that Mrs Pigeon hadn't tripped over an uneven slab on *their* property, Michaela was very quick to call an ambulance. Yes, they were insured, of course they were. But the paperwork would have taken months and months. Time that could be much better spent caring for the dogs, arranging rescues, and sorting out adoptions.

When she had assured Mrs Pigeon that the ambulance was on its way and arranged for a kennel lad to sit with her and make her as comfortable as possible, Michaela made another phone call, this time to Mrs Pigeon's chosen relative. The niece didn't think she would make it to the kennels before the ambulance. But she asked Michaela to assure her aunt that she would be waiting for her at the hospital.

The accident meant that Michaela got to spend a bit more time with what was fast becoming one of her favourite residents. It was hard not to get too attached. All Michaela could hope for was that the dogs she couldn't keep herself – and she would have taken ALL of them in if she could – found happy, loving homes and that the owners would

send them updates at, say, Christmas, perhaps, or postcards from holidays.

The news wasn't great when Mrs Pigeon's niece called the kennels later that day.

"I'm afraid that Auntie has broken her hip," she said.

"Oh no!" replied Michaela. "And yet she was so chirpy while she waited for the ambulance."

"That's Auntie for you," agreed Mrs Pigeon's niece.

"Are they giving her a new one?" asked Michaela.

"They're operating on her right now," she replied.

"Oh, that's good news," said Michaela. "Is the prognosis good?"

Michaela could practically hear the woman screw her nose up at the other end of the phone. "We hope so, but we won't know for at least three months or so, especially at Auntie's age."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Michaela, her heart starting to sink. Yes, she was sorry that Mrs Pigeon had hurt herself, but she knew what would be coming next.

"It's impossible for her to commit to taking in a new dog now," continued Mrs Pigeon's niece.

"Of course," said Michaela, forcing a smile into her voice. "And we will, of course, give your aunt a full refund."

"Oh, she made it clear that wasn't going to happen," said Mrs Pigeon's niece. "In fact, she would like to make a donation to the Yappy Tailz Poundies instead."

And as it turned out, it was a most generous donation.

"It's me and you again," said Michaela to the dog with a smile.

Harvey smiled back and thumped his tail before gnawing on the bone she'd bought for him to stave off any disappointment.

~

A family of three were next through the doors in a bid to give Harvey a home. Michaela glanced at the little lad who was with them.

“Do you have any brothers and sisters?” she asked him, but the little boy stared at her blankly and she looked to his mother instead.

“He’s hearing impaired,” said the sympathetic-looking woman.

“Meningitis,” said the equally kind-looking gentleman.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Michaela, biting her lip as she realised her *faux pas*.

“It’s okay,” laughed the mother.

“We’re hoping it’s only temporary,” said the father. “But Tommy would love to have a dog and we were hoping he and Harvey might make a perfect match.”

“Why doesn’t Tommy take Harvey into the garden?” said Michaela. “See how they get along.”

As they watched a giggling Tommy and a panting Harvey play ball, Michaela couldn’t resist voicing her fears.

“Tommy doesn’t intend to go to university any time soon, does he?” she asked.

Tommy’s mum frowned with confusion. “He’s eight.”

“And he’s not a clumsy child?”

“Not at all,” said Tommy’s dad.

Seeing their concern, Michaela explained to them Harvey’s more recent history. They were very understanding.

“Just look at them,” said Tommy’s mum. “They’re getting along great.”

A car suddenly backfired but Tommy was completely oblivious to it... until Harvey started to bark and tug gently on the boy’s sleeve.

“Did you see that?” said Tommy’s dad.

“What?” said his wife.

“That car backfired and Harvey seemed to... warn Tommy,” he said.

“I saw it,” said Michaela.

Tommy’s parents exchanged a look.

“Do you have a paper bag I can blow into?” asked Tommy’s dad.

Michaela thought for a moment. “Only the one his bone came in from the butcher.”

“That’ll do!”

She retrieved the bag from the recycle bin, smoothed it out and handed it over. He examined the outside and decided it looked clean enough. Then he blew into it and screwed it shut. He placed a finger to his lips. “Ssh.” And he tiptoed into the garden. Then he clapped his hands together, bursting the bag and making a loud noise.

Once again the little dog barked, gently took hold of Tommy’s sleeve, and dragged him away from the noise.

Tommy thought it was great fun and he laughed and laughed.

Tommy’s dad came back into the house nodding and grinning.

Tommy’s mum turned to Michaela. “I think we might be able to train Harvey as an assistance dog,” she said. “A hearing dog.”

“I think Harvey would like that very much,” said Michaela, with only the tiniest of lumps in her throat.

~

Six months later a greetings card arrived at Yappy Tailz Poundies inviting Michaela and the rest of the kennel lads and maids to a festival. The poundies were invited too, and quite a crowd the young men and women made with the dogs on that fine autumn day.

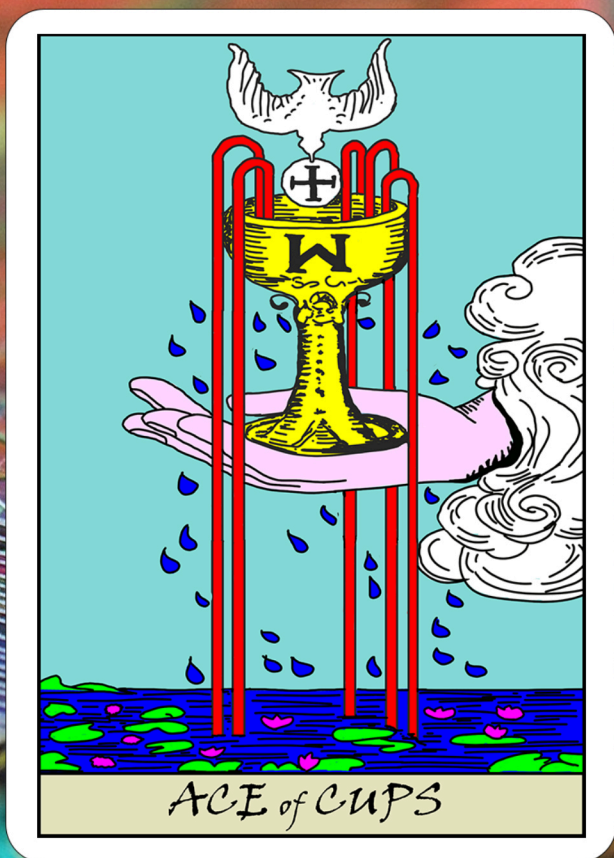
The highlight of the show was a utility dog event starring, of course, Harvey, with his young handler Tommy, whose hearing wasn’t showing any sign yet

of coming back. Not that it mattered, because he had Harvey to help him. And Harvey, at last, had found his happy, yappy home.

THE END

a short Tarot tale

THE ACE OF CUPS



Diane Wordsworth

the ace of cups

The Ace of Cups *is the second in a series of loosely Tarot-connected short stories.*

Each story is the backstory for one of the characters that features in the novellas of the same series. But I won't tell you which character other than that the aces represent each of the four main players.

~

The Ace of Cups indicates the early stages of a romance. It can also mean falling completely in love with someone OR something, so the object of our infatuation can be an idea or a person. The card reminds us to let a divine energy into our lives, that it's time to concentrate on more spiritual aspects.

~

With darkness closing in, the street where nobody walked alone if they could help it became more deserted than ever. A double-decker bus crept along the tree-lined road. There was no one at the bus stop, but there was someone waiting to get off. The bus was later than usual due to a traffic jam on one of the islands leading out of the city centre. Rose muttered a few expletives beneath her breath, but there was nothing she could do beyond just wait for the bus to get her there.

As the bus slowed down, Rose grew more nervous. She hoped that she could make the dash from bus stop to house without encountering anyone or anything and she cursed again the bus that hadn't shown up before, making her wait for this one. She glanced behind her to see the remaining passengers still seated, with their eyes firmly fixed on the windows, even though it was too dark to see anything.

“All right, love?” said the driver as he opened the door, letting in an icy blast of cold air.

Rose looked at him, gave him a tight smile and a quick nod of the head. Then, eyes down, head bent, hands in pockets, front door key clasped between fingers, she ran the short distance to the converted house. The bus driver waited until he could see that she was safe, then he closed the doors and pulled away from the kerb.

The old house wasn't far from a junction with two other roads. As she scampered up the path, she was aware that the men were gathering, as they always did immediately after dark, right on the crossroads. Each had already received his instructions. When they all arrived and reported for duty, off they would go in pairs to stand on street corners or beneath broken streetlights, and by torchlight would jot down the car registration numbers of all the kerb-crawlers that ventured into the area. They had a friend who could access the car owners' addresses, and the Asian vigilantes would find out if there was a wife or a girlfriend who needed to know what her partner was up to.

The vigilantes were doing a good job, actually. But still, it was not a desirable road in which anyone would wish to walk alone after dark.

Welcome to the red-light district. Soon to be the former red-light district, hoped the vigilantes, eager to clean up the neighbourhood they'd been dropped in by the council.

The communal door to the big old house was already ajar, which frightened Rose even more than having to do battle with the key. She carefully pushed the door open and peered into the large hallway. Her nostrils twitched. Stale urine. She could see two doors, each with a bedsit hiding behind it, but they were both firmly closed. Someone was frying onions. If she could just make

it to the bottom of the stairs, she only had to go up one flight and she was home... If she could call it home.

The house was three storeys high with two large bedsits, a kitchen and a bathroom on the ground floor, two slightly smaller bedsits, a bathroom and a separate toilet on the second floor, and four tiny bedsits on the top floor with no bathroom and no toilet. At the bottom of each of the two flights of stairs was a push-button light switch that timed out and popped out again before anyone had chance to make it to the next floor.

Rose hit the button and took the stairs two at a time, and still didn't make it before the lights went out.

She quickly jiggled the keys about and inserted one into the lock. The door to the flat behind her, on the other side of the landing, was also tightly closed. But as she pushed her way into her own bedsit, she heard a soft thud and a cry coming from her neighbour's flat.

He was laying into her again, she thought. She was going to ignore it, as she usually did, but then she heard the child shout, "Stop hurting Mummy!" and she knew she had to intervene.

Leaving her own door open so she could beat a hasty retreat, if necessary, she stepped across the landing, took a deep breath, and rapped on the door with her knuckles.

"Help!" shouted the little girl, followed by a loud slap. The girl screamed and burst into noisy tears.

Rose rapped on the door again. There was a scratching sound from the other side and the door was pulled open by the little girl, tears and snot streaming down her dirty face. She ran out and threw her arms around Rose's knees.

"Daddy's hurting Mummy!" she wailed.

Rose gave the girl a quick hug and pushed her towards the other flat. She couldn't leave the girl's mother, though, and so she went back to the door to see the large bulky frame of the woman's partner leaning over her slumped body lying battered and broken on the floor.

His hand still in a fist, he looked at Rose, saw the blood on his knuckles and dashed towards her. Fearful for her own safety, she pulled the door to and dashed back to her own flat, pulling the girl in with her and locking the door behind her.

As she stood with her ear against the door, she heard him come out of the flat. But he didn't pause outside her door. Instead, he ran down the stairs. When she heard the door slam behind him, she went to her window to see him running down the street away from the vigilantes.

When he disappeared into the darkness, she turned to the little girl. They had been neighbours for less than a month, so Rose didn't know anything about them really. Other than this brute of a man could frequently be heard shouting at her neighbour and almost as often she heard him lash out. But Rose had only become aware that there was a child there as well when she saw mother and daughter coming back from school one day.

They had exchanged a nod of the head but no words.

Rose knelt on the floor so that she was at the same level as the child, who was still sobbing, but much more quietly now.

"What's your name, sweetie?" asked Rose.

The child jammed her lips together.

"You've been told not to speak to strangers?"

The girl paused, then nodded her head.

"That's good advice. I don't talk to strangers either!"

That almost raised a smile, but the girl looked towards the door instead.

“Okay,” said Rose, getting to her feet. “Will you wait here while I go and check on Mummy?”

The girl nodded, but she would not sit. Rose racked her brains, but she didn’t think she had any sweets or cake or anything.

“I’ll be as quick as I can,” she said, and the girl nodded again.

Rose left the door standing open behind her so that she could keep half an eye on the girl. She glanced down the stairs, but no one else had come to see what the fuss was about. Inside the other flat was carnage. There had clearly been a fight of sorts. Furniture had been upended. Crocks had been smashed. Food had been trodden into the threadbare carpet. And there on the floor lay a bloody, beaten mass with pulp for a face.

Rose stooped over the woman, who was whimpering softly.

“I’m going to call for help,” said Rose. The woman did not protest, did not grab her hand, did not try to sit up. She simply lay there. Whimpering.

“Is Mummy all right?” asked a little voice from the door.

Rose spun around on her heels, still hunched over the child’s mother, to see the little girl framed in the doorway. She pushed herself to her feet, making her thighs scream in the process.

Holding out a hand to the child, Rose rushed to the doorway, but the child looked at the hand and backed away. Rose was not surprised, for the hand was covered with the girl’s mother’s blood. She wiped her hand on her coat and held out her other one. This time the girl took hold of it and she allowed Rose to lead her down the stairs. She had stopped crying now, so Rose took a tissue out of her pocket and gave the girl’s face a good scrub.

“There,” she said. “That’s better.”

There was a pay phone on the wall in the hallway. Rose knew it worked because the working girls received a lot of their calls on it. So she sat the child down on the bottom step, picked up the receiver and dialled nine-nine-nine, asking for an ambulance. When she had given the details, the operator told her that the police were also coming and asked her to wait inside the property with the child.

~

Madeleine did not want to go with the strange lady. She wanted to stay with her mummy. But the strange lady made her sit on the stairs until a lot of people came with flashing blue lights. She didn’t really understand what was happening.

“Is my daddy coming back?” she asked the lady.

“I don’t think so,” replied the woman. “Won’t you tell me your name?”

Madeleine had always been told by her mummy not to talk to strangers. Strangers were not nice people. But the lady lived in the same house. Did that make her a stranger? If the lady told Madeleine her name, then Madeleine would tell the lady hers.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

The lady smiled at her. She looked pretty when she smiled. Mummy used to look pretty too when she smiled. And when she had to go out to work, Mummy made her face even prettier, and she wore much nicer clothes.

“My name is Rose,” said the lady.

“Rose,” said Madeleine, trying the name out. “Like the flower?”

“Yes, like the flower,” laughed the lady. She looked even prettier then, so Madeleine smiled back. “Your turn,” said Rose.

“Madeleine.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely name.” Madeleine wrinkled up her nose. “Don’t you like your name?”

“It’s too long.”

“What does your mummy call you?”

“She calls me Madeleine.”

“Do you know your mummy’s name?” said Rose. Madeleine shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. “Do you know your daddy’s name?”

“Claude,” said Madeleine.

“What does Daddy call Mummy?” asked Rose.

Madeleine suddenly looked away. “I’m not allowed to say,” she said. “Mummy said it was for grown-ups only.”

“Ah,” said Rose. “He didn’t call her a nice name, then?”

“No,” said Madeleine, shaking her dark curly head.

There were a lot of people running up and down the stairs, and then the people who came first brought Mummy down the stairs on a sort-of bed. She was lying on there covered with a white sheet that had red splashes on it. Her face was covered with a mask and there were brightly coloured brick-like things on either side of her neck.

“What are you doing with my mummy?” shouted Madeleine, jumping to her feet.

“We’re taking her somewhere to make her better,” said the man in green overalls. “Does she have someone she can stay with?” he asked Rose.

Rose shook her head. “I don’t think so. I don’t really know them very well.”

“The police will probably call social services,” said the woman in the green overalls, who was squeezing a balloon that seemed to be full of air into the mask on Mummy’s face.

Madeleine knew about social services. They were as bad as strangers. She grabbed hold of Rose’s hand and hid behind her.

“I’m not allowed to talk to social services,” said Madeleine seriously.

Rose looked down at her. “Do you have an aunt or a grandparent we can call?”

Madeleine shook her head. “Just me and Mummy,” she said. Then she added, “And Daddy.”

The woman in the green overalls frowned and spoke to Rose again. “Did you say it was her father who did this?” she whispered loudly.

Rose started to say that yes it was, but Madeleine piped up again. “Daddy always does it to Mummy. I don’t want to go and stay with Daddy.”

A lady and a man wearing bright yellow coats appeared. Madeleine knew that they were the police because they had big blue signs on their backs saying so.

“We’ll take over here,” said the woman police officer to the man and woman in the green overalls. “Get the mother to hospital and we’ll see if there’s someone who can look after the child.” The other one, the policeman, went up the stairs. Madeleine could hear his heavy boots on the wooden floor walking around. Letting go of Rose’s hand, she sat down on the bottom step of the staircase again. If she stayed very quiet and still, they’d forget she was there and say things she wouldn’t normally hear. Her mummy had done it many times.

~

The woman police officer looked at Rose. “Are you a relative?”

Rose shook her head. “I live across the landing.”

“Are you a friend?” asked the other officer.

“Not really,” said Rose. “I only moved in here about a month ago.”

“What do you do for a living?” asked the woman. “You don’t sound as though you’re from around here.”

“I’m not,” said Rose, screwing her face up. “I don’t know the area and the flat was cheap. I should have done more homework.”

“Then you might have moved somewhere else and there would have been no one here to help the child,” she replied, nodding her head at Madeleine. Rose had almost forgotten that the child was even there. “So, what is it you do?”

“I’m just an admin clerk in town. I work for the council.”

The policewoman nodded. “You do know this is one of the city’s red-light districts?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” agreed Rose. “Or I do now.”

“It’s not as bad as it used to be,” said the other officer. “The local residents’ association is doing its best to get the streets cleaned up.”

“I’ve seen them,” said Rose with a smile. “Every night since I got here.”

“It’s a shame,” continued the woman. “The girls have to go somewhere but it’s so against the Asian culture. They didn’t ask to be dumped here, but they’re doing their best to make the most of it.”

“Is there anywhere safe for the women to go?” asked Rose.

“Not really.”

“What about women like Madeleine’s mother?”

“We know her as Claudette,” said the man.

“Her husband’s called Claude,” mused Rose.

“According to Madeleine.”

“He’s not her husband,” replied the other woman. “But we do believe that he’s her pimp. What did the girl say?”

“That he’s her daddy and his name is Claude.”

She nodded again. “He probably is her father.”

“What will happen to her?” asked Rose.

“To Claudette or Madeleine?”

“Both.”

The policewoman sighed and looked about her at the squalid surroundings. “We don’t have any refuges in the city at the moment for battered women,” she said sadly. “But I wish that we did. I see this all the time, and all we can do is send them back into the home. We need a safe place for these women to go, just as we need a safe place for the prostitutes.” She turned towards the door through which the ambulance medics had taken Claudette. “I can’t imagine Claudette surviving those injuries,” she said. “He’s gone too far this time.”

Rose heard a tiny whimper coming from behind her on the stairs. Both women looked down to see Madeleine looking up at them with sad, wide eyes. Rose sat down on the step beside her and pulled her into a hug.

“What will happen to Madeleine?” she asked.

“In a case like this, social services will need to sort something out.”

“So she might go into care?”

“In all probability she will.”

“But there aren’t any children’s homes left,” said Rose. She could feel Madeleine start to tremble.

“She’ll go into foster care,” said the policewoman. “Can you stay with her until social services turn up?”

“I can,” said Rose.

“I’m not allowed to talk to social services,” repeated Madeleine.

Twenty-five years later

Maddy beamed at her parents as they went up onto the stage to accept their award, wiping the tears of happiness from her cheeks. Reggie and Doreen Kendrick had fostered five hundred children since they married in 1950, and adopted three – Neil and Laura, both black, and Maddy, who was mixed race – fighting the authorities tooth and nail to let them formally adopt the children who were not white like

them. Maddy and her siblings were guests of honour at their parents' award ceremony, as was the bishop, for Reggie and Doreen were deeply religious, Reggie having been brought up in a Catholic children's home himself in the 1930s.

Maddy had not had one of the greatest starts in life herself, after first witnessing her pimp father murder her prostitute mother and then getting lost in the care system. She'd ran away so many times, but her natural mother had always told her that the church was a safe place. And every time she ran there, they found her a new family to go and live with. She had to give them that – the authorities never knowingly returned her to a place of known abuse.

Everywhere she went she witnessed physical abuse. Fortunately, she had learnt early on how to make herself really small and she knew that if she stayed quiet and still, people forgot she was even there. So she had never received more than just one slap in her life, and that was when she was very little. Every time she saw it again, in whatever foster home she'd been sent to, she ran away again. To the church, again. Not always the same one, as she was placed all over the county, but to any church that was open.

Then she was returned to Birmingham and had been allocated to Reggie and Doreen, who were older than any of the other foster parents. They were sweet and kind, strict and fair, and they had already successfully fostered hundreds of children. And they were Roman Catholics. They sent her to a Roman Catholic school where she made lots of friends for the first time in her life. They gave her stability. And ultimately, once they'd been allowed, they had adopted her. But when she told them she wanted to train to be a vicar in the Church of England, they didn't stand in her way. They were

proud of her. Now it was her turn to be proud of them.

Reggie and Doreen were both far too shy and humble to say anything into the microphone beyond a quick and quiet “Thank you!”, so it was down to Maddy to go and say a few words. She adjusted her dog collar, gave her brother and sister a quick hug, and made her way up the wooden steps to join their parents. She’d not long qualified as a vicar and this was one of her first formal engagements. She was delighted that it was at her own parents’ special day.

~

Once she *had* qualified, Maddy struggled to find a placement. More and more dioceses were accepting female vergers and vicars these days, but they had to be willing to travel in most cases. Maddy didn’t want to move too far away from home because her parents were now quite elderly and she, Neil and Laura tried to look after them between the three of them. None of them wanted them to go into a care home. They’d all been there, and it was where their dad had started life.

One thing that she had done while she was looking was step in at the last minute when someone fell ill. But as she travelled from parish to parish, she was still horrified to see the amount of abuse that went on in the inner cities and poorer areas, and more particularly against women and children. Something had to be done.

She had joined a committee on the city council that had successfully campaigned to reinstate the old hostel system for battered women in Birmingham, and one of her many duties was a tour of those. But since then, a windfall from her parents plus corporate help from her executive brother meant that Maddy had also been able to start a project of her own along the lines of some of the projects around the country to help the homeless

back into work and homes of their own again. But Maddy was doing it for the abused. As she populated the properties she managed to release, what shocked her more than anything was that it wasn't just women who needed the project's help. There were a few men on her list as well, which was a bit of an eye-opener and she scolded herself for being too narrow-minded to know it existed before.

One Saturday morning she was doing the rounds, as usual, visiting the hostels she and the council had been able to re-open. She liked to stick her head in, show her face, chat to the staff and the residents. She was able to build up a rapport with the staff, but the residents didn't stay long. Some of them went back, for whatever reason. Some of them moved on. None of them stayed. That wasn't the point.

This one was on the Soho Road, a colourful multi-cultural part of the city. She keyed in the code to let herself in through the giant red-painted wooden doors that led into the hostel. It was once a large residence but, as with the other properties all attached in the same enormous terrace, it had been converted and could now be found sandwiched between a high-class law firm and a multi-partner accounting company. To the ignorant passer-by, the hostel was more likely a private chiropractor than a refuge for victims of domestic abuse.

"Hello Rose!" Maddy called out to the refuge manager. Rose was like another adoptive mother to Maddy, for it was she who had rescued her in the first place all those years ago.

"Hi, Maddy!" she sang back.

Her face was showing signs of tiny lines now and her hair was turning a lovely salt-and-pepper grey, but other than that she had hardly aged over the past twenty-odd years and Maddy was delighted that the two of them could work together in this way.

Maddy didn't have time to chat on this side of her visit for she had an appointment with one of the new residents. So she waved a hand over her shoulder on the way past, grabbed at a clipboard, and shouted, "See you in a bit!"

The new resident was sitting at a table in the communal dining room playing with a deck of brightly coloured cards. The room was part canteen, part residential dining room. The residents could work behind the counter in the kitchen, or they could sit and enjoy a meal in safety. Or they could simply play cards.

Maddy looked down at the name on the clipboard as she reached the woman.

"Stevie?" she said with surprise.

The woman froze for a moment before turning to greet her. "There's only one person who's ever called me Stevie!" she said, her face breaking into a wide smile.

"Rebecca Stevens!" said Maddy with surprise. "I've not seen you since we left school! How long ago was that?"

Stevie did a quick calculation in her head.

"Fourteen years?"

"It must be," said Maddy. Then she hesitated and sat down on the edge of the chair opposite her old friend. "Look, you don't have to do this if you'd rather speak to a stranger," she said carefully, conscious that the women here already found it difficult to tell anyone of their experiences, let alone an old schoolfriend. "We can definitely catch up, but you don't have to speak to me about anything sensitive."

The other woman paused to think, then she pointed at Maddy's throat. "You're wearing a dog collar," she said.

"That's right," said Maddy with pride, fiddling with the starched collar.

“I know you’re not a Catholic priest, but does the confessional privilege still stand?”

Maddy screwed up her nose. “It’s not really the same thing, but I can confirm that anything you say to me will be done so in the utmost confidence.”

“Then I’ll tell you,” said Stevie. “And then, if you have time, we can catch up.”

Maddy nodded while her old friend tidied up her deck of Tarot cards. A card slipped out of the pack and landed, face-up, on the table between them.

“What’s that?” said Maddy, turning it around to look at it properly. “The Ace of Cups?”

“I’ve been getting that same card turn up for a week,” said Stevie, picking it up and tapping the edge of it on the table. “Rose found me a Tarot bible and I’ve been learning what the cards mean.”

“What does the Ace of Cups mean?” asked Maddy.

Stevie pointed at her dog collar again. “You, I think.”

“Me?” said Maddy with surprise. Of course, the Tarot was only a bit of fun. It didn’t really mean anything. Did it?

“Yeah, I knew I wasn’t likely to be falling in love any time soon,” said Stevie. “So it had to be the divine aspect the card was telling me about. It’s time for me to establish some new bonds, I think.”

Maddy’s face broke into a massive grin. “Then you might be exactly the person I’m looking for,” she said.

THE END... FOR NOW...

Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

**the city of
glasgow**

the city of glasgow

Here is another of my entries to the 12 short stories in 12 months challenge.

We were given the date 1852 and that was all. We could choose whatever we liked and we didn't even need to use the prompt. I chose to use the prompt, did my research, and learned about the steamship City of Glasgow.

~

December, 1852

The steamship *City of Glasgow* bobbed like a match atop an inky, tumultuous sea. Wind whipped at her sails, icy rain lashed her deck, and house-high waves engulfed her as she floundered.

In her airless, stinking hold, four hundred passengers huddled together, many experiencing seasickness for the first time, packed together like animals for the duration of their journey.

Lady Juliet wrinkled up her nose and inhaled through her mouth. As the queasiness started again, she concentrated on her breathing.

She opened one eye to squint at her companion. Sir Matthew was apparently not a good sailor either. He lay flat on his back on the floor, not caring what he might be lying in, with his eyes closed, one hand across his belly and the other across his face.

She rubbed his arm. "Are you quite well, Matthew?" she asked him.

He grunted something indecipherable and she returned to her breathing.

How has it come to this? she wondered. But she knew how it had come to this...

~

It was raining then too, in Manchester. It always rained in Manchester. Juliet hated it. She was far

happier in her beloved Devon. However, Papa had insisted she accompany him on his journey.

“I do not wish to go north with you, Papa!” she protested.

“You will come with me and that is an end to it,” he replied.

“But why? To what end?”

“It will be your penance for refusing a perfectly respectable offer of marriage from Lord Denby,” he said.

“The man is at least forty years my senior, Papa. Is that what you want for me?” Juliet had absolutely no intention of marrying such an old man.

“I want you married,” her father huffed. “And as you have failed to find a match here in Devon, we will look for one in Manchester.”

She had tried to argue further, but he had held up his hand. The subject was closed. Juliet was going with him and that was that.

It was in Manchester that she was introduced to Sir Matthew, a business acquaintance of her father’s. Matthew was no lord, but Juliet was drawn to him and, fortunately, he to her. He was tall with dark wavy hair and brown eyes, and he was *young*. Certainly much younger than Lord Denby. When Sir Matthew asked her father for permission to court his daughter, permission had been granted. The earl was keen to have his eldest daughter married, and he liked Matthew.

The whole duel had been the silly result of an equally silly argument between Matthew and another business acquaintance, who had apparently insulted Juliet by insinuating that she was a strumpet.

“He said it was unbecoming for an unchaperoned young lady to accompany a gentleman to dinner when their betrothal has not been formally

announced,” said Matthew. “And that you were quite clearly a fallen woman for doing precisely that.”

“It matters not!” she had assured Matthew. “He is of no consequence to us.”

But it was too late. Matthew had already challenged the man to pistols at dawn the following Sunday.

“Apologise!” begged Juliet. “Tell him it was but a joke.”

“I cannot,” Matthew frowned. “I am the offended party. He did not apologise to me, despite being given ample opportunity. He will think me a coward if I apologise now.”

“Have you ever fired a pistol?” she asked him.

“I have three days to learn,” he said quietly.

~

Matthew, his second, and Juliet congregated upon a wet and windy moor overlooking a grey and grim Manchester and waited. Juliet pulled her cape tight, she wore a fur-lined bonnet, and she held an umbrella aloft. Still a cold and cloying damp seeped into her bones.

She watched Matthew test the weight of the flintlock, point it, and pretend to pull the trigger before putting it back in the case.

“You are clearly nervous,” she said.

“I am perfectly fine,” he replied.

It was not usual for the lady in question to accompany the duellers on the morning of their fight for her reputation. Then again, the lady in question had never been Juliet before, and she had no intention of reclining in bed while her intended risked his life for her.

As a distant clock struck six, the challenged party arrived.

“Right on time,” muttered Matthew.

I would rather wish they had not turned up at all, mused Juliet to herself.

Alas they *had* turned up and following an initial scuffle the deed was done and the challenged man lay bleeding and unconscious on the ground.

Matthew's face turned white. He seemed frozen to the spot.

"Come now," urged Juliet. "We must leave."

"You will not get away with this!" said the other man's second.

"You go, sir," said Sir Matthew's second. "I will finalise matters here."

It was several hours later that the second's letter reached them. *The man has died*, said the note. *You must leave Manchester immediately.*

~

Juliet and Matthew left the city, taking a hackney carriage to Warrington where they awaited the stagecoach. "I have a friend who runs a shipping company in Liverpool," said Matthew. "He will find us work and lodgings."

"I have never been to Liverpool," said Juliet. "Is it as dismal as Manchester?"

Matthew laughed. "It is a lot brighter, busier."

"And more cheerful, I hope," she replied.

They carried only one item of hand luggage each, with the intention of buying anything else they needed once they had secured somewhere to live.

"We must marry soon," said Matthew, squeezing her free hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed her fingers, one by one, as they waited for the passengers who would accompany them to Liverpool to join them.

~

They found Matthew's shipping friend in a fancy shipping office a few streets from the docks. He greeted Matthew like the old friend that he was.

"What brings you to Liverpool, Matty boy?" asked the shipping man. "And who is this lovely lady?"

“This is my fiancée, Lady Juliet Stone,” said Matthew proudly.

“Jeremy Nailor at your service, my lady,” said the man with an ever so slight Liverpool accent that Juliet was already growing fond of. “Did Matty tell you we were at Harrow together?”

Mr Nailor arranged for refreshments to be brought to his office and the two men caught up on the four or five years it had been since last they saw each other. Over tea, Matthew filled him in on their immediate quandary.

“Hmm,” said Mr Nailor, tugging at the whiskers on his face. “A duel to the death is illegal now.”

Juliet reminded him that they hadn’t intended on the man dying, but he held up a hand, nodding that he understood.

“I am only saying it might be worth changing your names. There could be a warrant out for you, my friend.”

“Surely it will not reach as far as Liverpool?” said Matthew.

Mr Nailor pushed out his bottom lip and shook his head. “If the man has truly died, I fear it most certainly will reach us. I can certainly arrange both work and lodgings for you, but I would rather we use *sobriquets*, if it is all the same with you.”

They all agreed and the day after they were wed, Matthew was installed in the offices of the Nailor Shipping Company whilst Juliet started work at the library, for which Mr Nailor was a sponsor.

It lasted a week.

“You are home from work early,” said Juliet before she noticed his white face. “What is it?”

He pulled out a scrappy piece of paper. “They have found us,” he said flatly.

Taking the page from him Juliet frowned. “Who has found us...? Oh...” It was a piece of paper with

not only their names on, but also an artist's impression of their two faces.

"This says we are wanted," said Juliet. She looked up at him. "For murder. There is a reward."

"It is as we feared," he replied. "I did not think they would reach us here." He hesitated for but a moment before saying, "We must go. Far away."

"Will Mr Nailor notify the authorities?" she asked him.

"No," said Matthew. "He would have notified them the moment we arrived if that were the case."

Juliet nodded her agreement.

"However, we must not remain here. We will put him in danger too otherwise."

Juliet encouraged her husband to sit down while she made them both a nice cup of tea. One thing she had found herself to be good at this past week was making endless pots of tea.

"I saw something at the library this morning," she said. "In the newspaper." He sipped at his tea but looked at her with hope in his eyes, nodding for her to continue. "There is a steamship currently in the docks, the *City of Glasgow*, I believe."

"I have heard of it," said Matthew. "Jeremy has dealings with the Liverpool and Philadelphia Steam Ship Company who own her."

"She is due to set sail to the Americas."

"And?" asked Matthew.

"We could pay for our passage."

Matthew snorted in a most ungentlemanly fashion. "We can barely afford to pay for our lodgings. We will surely not be able to pay twenty or thirty guineas each to board a ship bound for Philadelphia."

"Cabin berths start at only fifteen guineas," she said gently.

"It is still too much." He shook his head and finished his tea.

“Steerage is only eight,” added Juliet.

He opened his mouth to protest but closed it again. “Eight guineas each?” he said eventually. She nodded. “And is that what you would like to do?” She nodded again.

~

After several days of continual storms, the *SS City of Glasgow* finally emerged, exhausted but still intact, off the coast of America. Juliet went up on deck and turned her face to the feeble winter sunshine. Matthew was still looking a bit green about the gills, but they had survived. *We have survived*, she said to herself.

“We made it,” said Matthew with a weak smile.

“Mr and Mrs *Flintlock* made it,” said Juliet.

“A fine name for a couple who will travel to the west,” said Matthew, growing stronger by the moment. “And I would wager that out here it will be less unusual for a man to have a wife who is as handy with a gun as mine is.”

Juliet shuddered, thinking his joke just a little in bad taste.

She had not intended to kill the man. She had not intended on firing the gun at all. She had simply grabbed it at the wrong moment, already cocked, in a bid to stop that ridiculous farce. The retort had knocked her backwards and she landed on her backside on the wet grass, and it was only then that everyone realised she had hit her target.

~

Two years later, in March 1854, the *SS City of Glasgow* vanished *en route* from Liverpool to Philadelphia. All four hundred and eighty passengers and crew disappeared without a trace. Reading the news in the paper, Mrs Juliet Flintlock shuddered as she rocked her nine-month-old daughter in her crib.

Remembering how the steamship had rescued her and Matthew, Juliet felt a little sadness. But she thanked her blessings that she and Matthew were not on board this time.

THE END



a Marcie Craig mystery

Night Crawler

Diane Wordsworth



night crawler: part 2 of 4

Night Crawler was the first novel I completed. It introduced Marcie Craig, the sassy Harley Davidson-riding Jeep-driving rock DJ.

I wrote it in 1996, self-published it in 2010, and sold the large print rights to Ulverscroft. It was rebranded and republished in 2015 when I married and changed my name.

Read Part 1 in Words Worth Reading Issue Zero, available from books2read.com/DianeWordsworth.

~
*** warning: strong and explicit language ***

Chapter 10

As if to make sure I'd heard him properly, Woodstock said it again. "I only ever pretended to be gay."

"Yes, Woody. I think I'm with you on that one now," I said, for want of something – anything – more sensible to say. I was shocked and stunned. You think you really know someone when in fact you don't know them at all. There were only two things on my mind now. All of those wasted opportunities when Woody had stayed over at my place, and the things that go on in that car park.

"In the car park?" I asked, at last. I wouldn't have been bothered about being The One. "You and Gavin?" I would have been perfectly happy with the occasional shag. "So that was the forensic?"
Spiteful bastard.

He nodded. "I think it must be. The police hinted as much. We went out there at about nine-fifteen. Afterwards, I waited and waited. But he never showed up."

Served him right, I was thinking. The lying toe rag. “You thought he’d got what he wanted and then walked out on you?” Woody nodded again. “And because of this ‘evidence’ you’re immediately guilty?”

“Not just the evidence, no. I’m also gay –”

“You just said that you weren’t. Several times in fact.” My voice was giving away the fact that I was mad at him for deceiving me.

“As far as *they* are concerned I’m gay. Bisexual doesn’t count. Because I smoke dope – that automatically makes me a junkie – because I, too, don’t have any family to speak of. Because I lied. Because he was a minor. Because we were seen. And I resisted arrest too, blacked a copper’s eye in the process.

“Oh yes, they can certainly build up a good case against me.”

“Phew. So what’s their motive then? I presume they’ve worked that out too?”

“A lover’s tiff, I think.”

“Oh, so they do consider it accidental then?” I added dryly. “And do they have a weapon?” I’d got the impression that they didn’t.

Woodstock shrugged his shoulders. “Dunno.”

Our escorting officer cleared his throat noisily and looked pointedly at the clock. I gave him what I hoped was one of my most dazzling smiles, and continued. It still didn’t add up to me. I’d met the officers in charge of the case. They seemed pretty regular guys. I didn’t believe that they’d go for a story like this one – apart from the positive identification that someone had made. They must have had something else.

“Woody, did you tell the police that you’d, er, done it with Gavin? Once they made it clear that they knew, that is? Did you admit to it?”

“No way. He was only fifteen.”

“So?”

“He was under age.”

“But you still agreed to an intimate sample?” They had to have taken some of his blood, or a swab, or something.

“I didn’t. They took a non-intimate sample instead. One of them arseholes pulled my hair.” He rubbed at his head as if feeling the sting all over again.

“And you still didn’t tell them?”

“I didn’t think they’d trace a puddle of spunk to a hair taken from my head,” he spat.

“Per-lease! Spare me the detail.” I cringed at the thought.

“Woodstock, you are up for a murder charge. Having sexual intercourse with an underage male is not high on the police priority list right now. They need to find a *murderer*. And the longer you refuse to admit – to them – that you had sex with the guy, when they can prove,” I made little quote signs with my fingers, “beyond shadow of a doubt that you did, the more guilty you are going to seem.

“That, plus the ID, is probably why they charged you. They must think you have something to hide.”

Woodstock’s pleading brown eyes gazed at me from hollow, shadowed sockets. “If I tell them, do you think they’ll let me out of here?”

“They probably already know. I don’t know. You should have got yourself a solicitor.”

“But I’m innocent.”

“Even the innocent need solicitors, Woody.”

“Yeah, well. They made me see one of theirs didn’t they? A duty solicitor or someone. Fat lot of good he did me.”

“Time up,” barked the prison officer.

I got up to leave, hesitated, and gave Woody a quick peck on the cheek. He’d lied to me – albeit quite harmlessly – and he’d led a lot of us up the garden path. He’d treated a lot of women abysmally.

But some lads do that. He was still my mate, though. And he still needed to know I was there for him. I could tell him what I thought of him when he got out. And no doubt he'd learned his lesson. I just hoped he'd get the chance to prove it.

"Chin up, mate," I said, grinning. "They can't keep you locked up for something you didn't do."

He stood up too, but was firmly pressed back down into his seat by the prison officer. "So you will help me?"

"I don't know what I can do."

"You can do a damn sight more than I can stuck in this hole."

"You'll have to help yourself too."

"So will you help me?"

I let him wait a beat. "I'll see."

He let out a huge sigh of relief. "Thanks, Marce."

I patted his arm before I was led away. I presume he was led the other way once I was safely through the door.

~

Back at the station I had another word with Anderson.

"What if he admits he had sex with the guy?" I asked.

"It probably won't help him now. We already know he did, and him denying it until he's already locked up only substantiates his guilt – in the eyes of the law."

"How can you *know* he did?"

"We have the proof."

"What kind of proof?"

"The ID for a start."

"Oh, right. So your 'witness' watched them shagging, yeah? That's not proof and you know it."

"Yes, well... we have the evidence too," he continued.

“What kind of evidence?” I wasn’t letting on how much I already knew.”

“Forensic –”

“Forensic? Already? I always thought that took weeks.” I never miss an episode of *The Bill*, thanks to my video recorder.

Anderson fidgeted. “Yes, well... once he knew we had samples, he more or less admitted it.”

“He *admitted* to murdering Gavin?”

“No. He admitted that they were out there together, after first denying it.”

“Right. So you don’t actually have any proof yet, and you don’t have any confession? When he gets out of that place he is going to hang you out to dry.”

Anderson shifted position, a little annoyed, but then squared his body towards me. That’s common throughout the animal kingdom. When you feel intimidated, make yourself look bigger and you’ll be fine. “We’ve got our man, Miss Craig.”

“And there’s no way I can get him out of that place?”

“If you believe he’s innocent – and we don’t – you have to give us the real killer on a plate. Preferably with concrete proof *and* a confession. But I would have to advise you not to put yourself in any danger. You’d be wasting your time anyway.”

That made up my mind.

“But, Miss Craig,” he added, as though reading said mind, “don’t get doing anything silly. We’ve got our killer. Case closed.”

Arsehole.

Chapter 11

Life wasn’t such a gas anymore. In fact, it was quite unpleasant. I needed to talk to Reefer. Until recently I only knew him vaguely, and had only just found out he was a copper. I didn’t know his real name and hadn’t made a note of his collar number. I didn’t

even know if he'd help, but as far as allies go, he was my best hope.

I had two choices. I could loiter around this place for a couple of hours, or I could wait until he showed up again at The Cellar. Though I doubted either would be fruitful, I decided on the latter. He'd already told me all the city nicks were full and when they brought us all to Acocks Green, he could have been called out from any one of them.

Besides, if any of his colleagues caught us talking, his cover could be blown. Woodstock wasn't going anywhere for a while. I'd have to wait for Reefer to come to the pub.

~
"Hi there. This is Marcie Craig welcoming you to The Cellar – the hottest little rock spot in Brum..." I played Diamond Head as usual, keeping my eyes peeled for PC Reefer. I caught sight of Roach instead and beckoned for him to come over. He probably thought his luck was in.

"Hi Marce. How's things?" He was shouting over the volume of the music, so I turned it down a bit.

"Not good," I replied.

"No?"

"I went to see Woodstock this morning."

"Is he ill?"

"No. He's in prison."

"Prison? Woodstock? What for?"

"God, Roach. Where have you been?" Come to think of it, I hadn't seen him since Good Friday.

"I've been working." Roach is a long-distance lorry driver. "So what did Woodstock ever do wrong? Was he jay walking?" He chuckled.

"You remember that kid me and Vernon found?" He looked vague. "The night Angus and his chums invaded us?"

"Oh yes. I read about that in the paper too. You mean the stiff."

“Roach!”

“Sorry. Go on.” He took a mouthful of lager.

“They’ve charged Woody with his murder.”

I waited politely for Roach to finish choking. If it wasn’t for the cage, I could have patted him on his back. I needed to change records anyway, and plumped for Black Sabbath’s *Paranoid*. Well, it was the way I was feeling.

“The shirt-lifter’s?” he said finally, once he’d recovered. He wiped the lager from his chin with his sleeve.

“That ‘shirt-lifter’ happened to be a friend of Woodstock’s.”

“But Woody couldn’t have killed him.”

“I know. But unfortunately the police don’t have our faith in him –”

“No. I mean he *couldn’t* have done it.”

Sometimes I can be so dim even *I* get embarrassed. Suddenly, I clicked.

“Why couldn’t he have done it?”

Roach started to look a bit shifty and uncomfortable. “Because he was still alive after Woodstock came back into the bar.”

“You *saw* them go out to the car park?” He nodded and emptied his glass. “Did you know what they were doing out there?”

He shrugged his shoulders and looked restlessly towards the bar. “Same as anybody else, I suppose.”

“And you saw Woody come back?”

“He went to the bar.” He was rummaging in a pocket now for some change.

“So how do you know Gavin was still alive?”

“I went out there for a piss. Look, do you want a drink?”

“No thanks.”

“See ya later then.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Well, that was the best news yet. Roach saw Gavin *after* Woody claimed he'd left him. If I could get Roach to tell Anderson, then Woodstock would be off the hook.

I played *Life's a Gas* by T-Rex to celebrate, and went off in search of Roach.

I couldn't find him.

~

The next day was Saturday. By the end of the evening, with no further sign of Roach, I was ready to write off the whole weekend as a lost cause. Just in time for last orders, I walked Reefer, looking absolutely gorgeous in biker's leather and jeans. He certainly has the right bum for a pair of faded denims... and terrific legs. It was funny how I'd stopped noticing what Roach was wearing. Reefer waved at me as he paid for his pint and then came over.

"Hi there," I said, thanking my lucky stars.

"Can I get you one?" he asked, holding up his glass.

I shook my head and said: "Am I pleased to see you!"

"Oh yeah?" he grinned. He looked just as good in civvies as he did in uniform, so I sneaked in a quick *Denim and Leather* by Saxon as a private tribute.

"Don't get the wrong idea," I said, once the Saxon record had started. "I need your help."

"Sounds serious. Let me have some of this first." He indicated his pint – hmm, cider, a man after my own heart – then downed more than half in one go. He smacked his lips, and I could almost taste the thick, syrupy juice. "What can I do for you?"

I told him about Woodstock, what Anderson had said, Roach's evidence. I didn't tell him about Woody's little game. That was his own secret to share with whoever he wanted to. Reefer finished his pint and shrugged his shoulders.

“How can I help?”

I put the last record on, *Paper Roses* by Marie Osmond, before answering.

“I wondered if you might be able to find out what they have on Woodstock. See if they can place anyone else at the scene.”

“Sounds pretty much conclusive to me. Besides, I don’t have access to that sort of information. I’d have to tap into the system illegally and, if they find out, that’s my job gone.”

“I thought they wanted you out anyway.”

“They do. And they’d kill to get something like this on me. It’ll be all on computer in the incident room. They’ll know I violated security, even if I don’t manage to get in. I can’t do it Marcie.”

“Reefer, an innocent man is locked up while the real killer is still out there somewhere. He could kill again.”

“What makes you so sure he didn’t do it?”

“I don’t know.” I thought about that one. The music had finished and the doormen were hurrying folk up. It was time I started to pack up too as Vernon was hovering nearby and kept on giving me and Reefer curious looks.

“I’ve known him a long time,” I said, but thought I just didn’t *know* him as such. “I believe he was truly fond of this lad. He was really down when he thought Gavin had dumped him.” Well, that part was true at least. “I don’t think he could have faked that. And then there’s Roach.”

I looked hopefully at Reefer. Was it really fair of me to expect him to jeopardise his career? Was it fair to knowingly ignore the possibility of the real killer striking again? There was no contest in my mind. A liar he may be, but I was sure that Woodstock was no murderer.

Reefer let out a huge sigh. “Woodstock could have lied about the time he says he last saw Gavin.

But if Roach is so sure, he should make a statement. Is he here?" He looked about him at the fast-emptying room.

"He hasn't been in. I haven't seen him since last night. I think he must have gone to Barneys or something. He might be there now."

Reefer drained the dregs before handing his glass to one of the bar staff. I hoped his conscience was pricking him a little.

"I'm still not sure," he said, frowning. But I could feel him giving in. I applied a bit more pressure.

"Doesn't anyone in the incident room owe you a favour?" I asked.

His eyes lit up as an idea struck him. "Actually, there's this tasty little piece who's got the hots for me. She might help."

Ouch! Where did *that* pang of jealousy come from? I brushed it away. No time for selfishness or silliness now. He was still doubtful, so I tried one last time. "Ple-e-e-ese."

"Okay," he sighed, again. "I'll see what I can do. But the first sign of trouble and I'm outta here. I do like my job, you know." I could have kissed him – again. It's a shame about that cage really. "Look, I'm off to Barneys myself now. Do you fancy joining me?"

That was a tough one. I didn't really want to go as I'd be working there the next day, but I didn't really want to turn him down either. He was quite nice, and he might not ask again.

"I'd rather go to CJ's, instead," I said finally. It's quieter there. "I'm at work at Barneys tomorrow and it doesn't really feel like a night out. I only go there when I'm desperate." Like the other week after the murder.

He pulled a face. "They don't have cider at CJ's," he said. "And I'm meeting some mates at Barneys."

“Oh.” So he wasn’t asking me for a date after all. I declined the offer, regretfully. “How about you joining me at Barneys tomorrow while I’m working?”

“Nah. Working myself tomorrow night.”

Oh well. It was probably just as well if he was planning on chatting up some tasty totty at work in the next day or so. Best to keep my distance – at least for now. “I’m done in anyway,” I said, truthfully.

“Maybe some other time then,” he said. Well, that was something, I suppose.

“Okay,” I said, giving him one of my cards, in case something came up. He told me how I could get hold of him too, if I needed to.

After we said goodnight, he wandered off and, for some reason, I chuckled at his name: David Plant. PC Plant. A nickname like Reefer and a surname like Plant. A real pothead.

I had a long ride ahead of me and needed to be up early the next day. Penny and Richard, my sister and new brother-in-law, were coming home from their honeymoon. They’d gone to the Middle East or some such place. Mother would never forgive me if I didn’t make the welcoming committee.

After finishing packing everything away, I said goodnight to everyone and headed upstairs. No more parking the bike for me in the car park – or not for a while at least.

~

Penny’s welcome party wasn’t so bad. We were waiting for them at their nice new little house. Mother was able to quip: “At least one of my daughters won’t be living like a tinker.”

It was supposed to be one of those surprise things, the party. But I reckon the balloons along the garden path and the twenty-foot ‘Welcome home Penny and Richard’ banner over the front door might have given the game away.

They both looked as though they had spent far too much time in the sunshine and not enough time in the honeymoon suite. Penny can take the sun quite well being dark, we both can, and she'd gone a lovely nut brown. But poor old Richard, on the other hand, was as red as a lobster. I found myself wondering if he squealed like one too...

Fortunately, for me in any case, I had to be at work later. So I made my excuses, avoided Mother, and left.

~

Barneys was pretty routine. It's a bit different here. In The Cellar, us DJs are on the same level as the punters and the bar staff. At Barneys there are the three floors (heavy, traditional and fashionable – I do the traditional floor). But instead of being to one side of the dance floor, or at least up on a dais or a stage, we're shut away in a tiny room. Only those who know how to find us, or are at least still sober enough to remember the way, manage to make it through to us with requests.

It gets very lonely at Barneys.

~

After a late night I was relieved to hit the sack. And when the phone woke me in the early hours *again* the following morning, I was sorely tempted to get the thing disconnected.

“Yeah!”

“Hi Marcie. It's me, Reefer.”

“Reefer?” I checked the clock. “Reefer, it isn't even eight yet.”

“Yeah. Sorry. But I found something out.”

“You still on duty?”

“Yeah. That's why I had to call now, before someone comes in and finds me here.”

“Can you talk now?”

“Only briefly. But I'll be quick.”

I scratched around for a pen and some paper, but as it happened, I didn't really need it.

"My friend checked the file." I tried to imagine his 'tasty little piece' falling over herself to help him. "Your friend Palmer – Woodstock – isn't the only person they can place at the scene. He was just one of many. With all the fag ends, urine samples, and dabs on the hypodermic, they should be able to identify at least half a dozen more."

"Go on," I prompted, when he paused.

"They've identified one already. Someone they had in for a minor drug offence several months ago managed to get his dabs all over a poly bag filled with pills. Someone called John Beadsley –"

"John Beadsley?"

"Yeah. Why? Do you know him?"

I couldn't believe it. "Reefer, that's Roach..."

Chapter 12

Reefer hung up on me, which suggested that someone had just walked in on him. I hoped he didn't get into any real trouble on my account.

For what seemed like an age I sat there on the kitchen floor, clinging to the telephone receiver. If I ever decide to keep the noisy thing, I'll have to get one put in by the bed. Even if I got an answering machine, I'd want to know who was calling and would still get up and listen to it.

A constant whirring buzzed away in my ear. It was therapeutic.

If Roach's fingerprints were on Gavin's pill packet, either Gavin had shared them with him, or Roach had given them to Gavin... or flogged them to him.

"The other person has cleared," said an obnoxious sounding woman suddenly from the other end of the phone. "The other person has cleared..." It was one of those recorded messages

letting me know I'd been hung up on – in case I hadn't already noticed.

I slammed the phone down, jumped up off the floor, showered and got dressed. It was Monday morning. I got my bike out of the lock-up and headed over to Roach's place, hoping he didn't have an early haul today, and really expecting him to be already out in any case. I needed to see him and speak to him now.

Roach lives in a house in Sheldon along with three other guys, all bikers, all Satan Beasts. The place is a hovel. They all work, two of them in tool rooms, and one at the Rover, so it's generally filthy dirty with none of them having either the time or the inclination to clean up after their greasy selves.

Roach's mom used to come over and clean for them, but she soon jacked it in after finding a used condom blocking the waste disposal in the kitchen. Well, what did she expect from a houseful of grown, single men?

They do have other mod cons like the waste disposal – like a dishwasher and a washing machine – but they don't seem to know how to use them. I suppose they have to find them first. I used their bathroom once and discovered a bidet lurking beneath a pile of wet and dirty linen. (I was looking for the loo roll.) They were using it to soak their dirty socks.

The doorbell plays about twenty-eight different naff tunes but that, like everything else in Roach's house, wasn't working. They'd stuck a plaster over the top of the bell push to stop people pressing it. I banged on the letterbox and waited.

No sign of life. So I banged it again, making sure it rattled annoyingly. It looked like I was out of luck. The other three were probably already at work too.

I went and got back on my bike, but as I revved up ready to go home again, I spotted Roach up at

one of the bedroom windows. He'd seen me too and motioned for me to come back to the door. By the time I reached it, he was downstairs too, and poking just his head around the door.

"I thought you'd already gone out," I said, as I removed my lid and shook out my hair. "I was making enough noise to wake up the dead."

"You did a good job," he complained, rubbing the stubble that was sprouting from his chin. On a good day, Roach looks like quite the hunk, in a Ross Kemp kind of way. Right now he didn't. "Heavy night," he explained, swinging the door open.

He was wearing a tee shirt, a pair of black ankle socks... and an early morning rise...

"Would you like to make yourself decent before I come in," I asked, nodding towards his todger and trying not to look embarrassed. "Do you greet all of your guests like that?"

"Only the ones I like," he shot back, waving me in and closing the door behind me. I followed him into the hall where he retrieved a pair of tracky bottoms from the banister, sniffed them, and pulled them on. The house smelled faintly of stale ale, cigarette smoke and dope – a bit like The Cellar, in fact.

"I didn't see you up Barneys," I said at last, realising he'd said something about a good night, but forgetting that the only reason I would have seen him at the club was if he'd come all the way into the 'office'.

"Nah. We stayed in. Spliff fetched some gear over last night and the five of us got stoned." Spliff is Roach's vice president at the motorcycle club.

I looked up the stairs. "Where's Spliff now? He's not going to greet me in the altogether too, is he?" I didn't fancy Spliff in the slightest.

"He went home last night –"

"On his bike?"

"Yeah."

“After you’d all been smoking?”

“Sure.” It didn’t seem like such a big deal to Roach. He can be a bit of a dickhead at times.

“And where are all the others?” I asked, referring to his housemates.

“Probably gone to work. What time is it?” He scratched at his balls.

They say you have to truly love a man to love him first thing in the morning. Seeing him like this, in full slob mode, I was wondering what it was I’d always liked about him so much.

“After nine.” I didn’t need to look at my watch. I plopped my helmet down on a stair and unzipped my leather, but he didn’t take the hint. “Are you going to keep me in the hall?”

“Sorry. No. Come on into the kitchen.” He led me towards the back of the house but I already knew the layout.

“How come you’re not at work?” I asked.

“I’ve got the week off. Do you want a cup of tea?”

I glanced at the mould growing in the bottom of a mug he was threatening to rinse – with the cold tap. “Er... no thanks. I’m not stopping long.”

“You don’t mind if I have one, do you?” I shook my head. He was welcome to it. Hell, there was enough penicillin lining his cup to protect him from anything else he might catch. “Me mouth feels like the inside of a –”

“Yes, thank you, Roach,” I interrupted. “I don’t want to know.”

“Oh. Right,” he shrugged. “So, what can I do for you at this hour on a Monday morning when you didn’t think I’d be in anyway? I must say, I am honoured.” He grinned at me alarmingly, and I remembered exactly what it was about him I liked.

“I wanted to check out your story the night Gavin died.”

He flicked a switch on the kettle. "I've already told you once."

"Yeah. I know. I just want you to tell me again. That's all."

"You working for the cops now?"

"Just answer the question, Roach." I settled on the edge of the kitchen table, as all three chairs were piled high with washing.

"What do you want to know?"

He was playing for time. "Tell me again why you went out into the car park."

While he scrubbed at the mug with a dolly mop he kept his back to me. I couldn't see his face, but I could see his neck starting to turn an angry looking red. "I needed a piss, so I went out there."

"Why didn't you use the gents?"

He laughed at me over his shoulder. "Gimme a break, Marce. I can tell you've never set foot in that place. You have to swim across to the trough the floor is so flooded, and then you don't know what you're swimming through. It's not nice, I can tell you."

It sounded just like his own bathroom to me – and the ladies at The Cellar. "So you went for a pee and saw Gavin with Woodstock?"

"No. Woody was already on his way to the bar. I told you that."

"Did you speak to Gavin?"

He sighed. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"What is this, Marcella?" he asked, spinning around to face me, grubby tea towel hanging from his hand. (That was probably over-inhabited by micro-organisms too, judging by the state of it.) His eyes were almost navy with fury. "Am I one of your suspects?" he spat.

Uh-oh. I'd got his mad up. "Fortunately for you," I said calmly, "the police already have their prime suspect, thanks, as you well know."

"So what's the problem?"

"Only that they've got your dabs all over Gavin's drugs."

Roach at least had the decency to let his face drop. "Oh."

"You may well say 'oh', John Beadsley." I could resort to full names too. "But our friend Woodstock – you remember him? – is rotting away in Winson Green because you haven't given him an alibi. What's the matter, Roach? You scared they might do you for using?"

"No." He *was* looking guilty now.

"Then what?"

He hung his head in shame and picked at the hem of the tea towel.

"I'm scared they might do me for dealing."

Chapter 13

"Roach" – in his own words

A lot of people seem to think that driving a lorry for a living is easy money. Well, it can be a good job if you work for the right people or get a decent contract. Same as any job. But aside from paying for somewhere to live the rest of the time, we also have to pay rent for digs when we're away. You can't always sleep in the cab. Then there's insurance, road tax, petrol. It all costs money.

I'm paying for me own cab too and often have to hire a trailer. If I worked for a big haulage firm, then it wouldn't be so bad. But why do you think I have three lodgers? I have to pay the mortgage somehow, and the hire purchase on the wagon.

Most people I know think I inherited the house, and I suppose I did in a way. But me Auntie Mo

went into a home. She didn't die. Her life insurance didn't cover that possibility. So I bought the house off her. The capital pays for her care. We probably won't see any of that even after she dies, me and me mom.

The four of us lads all work so there's no time to look after the place. I can't afford a cleaner let alone a gardener. So it just falls about around our ears. You think the house is bad? The garden's a wilderness.

Anyway, I was managing, the way you do. But then I got meself involved with a bird. No one knows her down here. She lives up north, in Morecambe. I stayed at her dad's guesthouse a couple of times. Her name's Wendy and she's a stunner. But she's also a bit loopy. I don't know what's wrong with her. Maybe she's a schizo. She can get a bit nasty, like during sex, and I'm not really into that sort of thing.

So I dumped her and found meself a new guesthouse. It was more expensive but less hassle. The next thing I hear from her is that she's pregnant and telling everyone the kid's mine. I knew that was a lie so I told her to get lost. She was calling me up on the mobile phone at all hours, begging me to come back one minute, hurling obscenities at me the next. I smashed the phone up in the end and got a new one.

Then she got hold of me address. Probably from her dad's records at the bed and breakfast, but she could have got it off the client I was driving up there for, or she might have rifled me pockets months before. I'll probably never know. And after she had the little bastard, she set the Child Support Agency on to me.

If ever there was an evil organisation, it's the CSA. It's no wonder men commit suicide after they've come calling. They're above the law. It didn't matter that I wasn't the child's father. Guilty until

proved innocent, that's their motto. Wendy was able to give them exact dates that coincided with me trips up north. She must have planned it all months before.

It isn't up to the CSA to prove that you are the father. It's up to you to prove that you're not. How many relationships can they have wrecked in the years they've been in existence? It didn't matter that I already had commitments, nor that I could prove the baby wasn't mine.

"They all say that, Mr Beadsley," they said.

It didn't matter that I had a hefty mortgage. What was a single man doing with a four-bedroomed house in any case? Wasn't that a bit extravagant? Perhaps I should sell up and move into a more suitable bedsit.

I didn't declare the lads because their rent would have been classed as income. And if I lived with a bird, then her income would be taken into account an' all.

It didn't matter, either, that I had a hire purchase agreement on the wagon, because child support must come before any other debt. Men have to live with their responsibilities. And if I jacked in the job to avoid paying maintenance, they'd have me arrested and thrown into jail. I couldn't win.

So I filled in this enormous form they sent me and my assessment came back at nearly £400 a month, backdated to when Wendy first made the claim, since I'd been so obstructive. And the kid wasn't even mine.

At first I refused to pay and they threatened an attachment of earnings.

"Attach away," I said. After all, I'm self-employed and that wouldn't matter.

Then they said they'd take me to court and in the meantime me outstanding payments would accrue interest. I swore the kid wasn't mine, showed them

the paperwork and everything. But they said they could only accept a blood test as I hadn't been back for me sperm count after I'd had the chop. And I had to pay for the test meself. Until I got the results, the liability was still mine.

I had to pay the £400 a month, plus interest on late payments, plus the mortgage, plus the HP, plus everything else. It could have meant selling the bike to pay for everything, but that would have soon ran out. And *then* they went and walloped a couple of extra charges on top, too. I had to pay a one-off calculation fee *and* an annual collection charge. Can you believe that? I had to pay *them* for the privilege.

After a lot of thought I decided to meet their outrageous demands. They were locking men up left, right and centre. I couldn't afford a poor credit rating or a county court judgement and they assured me that if I did turn out not to be the father I could have a full refund. So I coughed up and tried to arrange the blood tests.

I was finding it really difficult to find the money for everything and Wendy kept on stalling. She kept saying the kid wasn't old enough, or there was always something wrong. Before I knew it, three months had already gone by, but there was a temporary solution about to land in me lap.

The M6 is well known for hold-ups and traffic jams between Stafford and Wolverhampton, or that general area, even more so on a Friday afternoon, and worse when there are road works, which is most of the time. On one of these days, we'd been standing still for ages and I noticed something strange going on up ahead.

A foreign trucker and a van driver were discussing something through their open windows, then the van driver handed the truck driver a ten-pound note. The van driver was British, the lorry driver was

Belgian. The Belgian handed the Brit a package and they had a good laugh about something.

A bit later, after the traffic had moved on a bit, the Brit made a call and, once finished, made sure he came up alongside the Belgian again. He bought another two packets of... whatever... and drove off at the next opportunity with a wave.

Had I just witnessed a drugs handover? I didn't know, but I was going to find out. As soon as I could, I caught up with the Belgian and gave him a cheery wave. He'd already clocked me in his wing mirror and he crawled along until we were level.

"Hello," he called out, and laughed. "You like?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Golden Virginia."

He was flogging tobacco.

"How much?"

He held up a package the size of a house brick. "Ten pounds only."

I thought it looked like a good deal and bought a pack off him. Then we exchanged mobile phone numbers and separated.

I managed to shift the stuff easily enough, and at quite a profit too. And me and Georges set up a regular thing. After a few weeks he suggested something a bit stronger. The tobacco had worked out all right, so I thought, why not? I needed the money.

Georges got me a bit of cannabis resin and a few Es. Gavin became one of me regulars. He took the pills while the lads helped me out with the resin. And there was still the tobacco. I'd got nicked once, too, during a raid on CJ's. But I'd already moved most of the stuff and they could only do me for possession. I paid me fine and carried on – just more carefully. It was easier to make ends meet and I'd soon saved up enough to cover the blood test.

The nicking made me realise I had to stop. Next time I might not be so lucky. I couldn't keep it up for much longer.

Wendy's kid must have been almost twelve months old by now, and still she was coming up with excuses. The CSA, meanwhile, had gone through a bit of a makeover, so I went back to them. I was about due for a review anyway. They agreed to scare Wendy into action by threatening to withhold her benefit if she didn't get the test done. They can do that too, apparently. And she caved.

What bit of stuff I had left, Gavin took off me and me and the lads kept the cannabis for our own use. Gavin had the last of the Es on the night he died. I went out to the car park, like I said, and bumped into Woody on his way to the bar. Gavin was getting himself ready for a fix, but I think he took one of the pills instead. I thought he was following me back into the pub, too, but he can't have been.

Those results came back last week and the baby – a boy, I only just found out – isn't mine. I took the week off work to celebrate, I've been working so hard to pay it all. The CSA are arranging the refund and I should be able to pay off the loan for the cab. The admin charges and the test fee still stand.

But do you know the craziest thing? If me and Wendy had been married, I would still have to cough up for a kid that wasn't mine. It seems in the eyes of the law, CSA-style, I'd still be considered the one financially liable.

That can't be very fair, can it?

Chapter 14

Bugger it!

I'd got myself all worked up to be mad with him and now I felt sorry for him. Roach's confession certainly knocked the wind out of *my* sails.

On the one hand I was a bit disappointed with him for resorting to selling drugs. But on the other, I could see his point and he *had* decided to jack it in.

“Your tea’s gone cold,” I said, for want of something better to say.

He glanced at the cup, felt it with his hand, and chucked it down the sink, flicking the kettle back on again. I was surprised he’d needed to feel it. The surface had congealed and shrunk away from the sides of the cup.

“Do you want one this time?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Roach, you have to go to the police.”

“Okay, I’ll go. But I’m only going to give him an alibi. I’m not admitting to anything else.”

“You don’t need to admit anything. They already know. Aside from already having your fingerprints, remember, they’ve already got you on record. Don’t you think they would have picked you up by now if they were going to?”

“I suppose so,” he said, sulking. “But what should I say?”

“I don’t care what you say,” I hissed. “Just get Woodstock out of that stinking hole.” I was angry with myself and with him. I slammed out of his house and kicked my bike. Why didn’t he want to help Woody? Why was I being such a wimp? He was a drugs dealer, for God’s sake. But, also, he could have stopped Woodstock getting banged up too.

There was no way I was riding home in this state... and anyway, I’d left my crash helmet on his stairs. I decided to go for a walk instead, and found myself in the park we used to go to when we were both kids.

Who knew what kind of adults we’d grow into when we were young? Not our teachers. Nor our parents. And certainly not ourselves. We all just

wanted to get there as quickly as we could. Maybe we all turned into disappointments no matter how well we were brought up. I sat on a swing and mulled. I was definitely disappointed with Roach.

For some strange reason I decided to go and see my mom and dad, who only live about twenty minutes' walk from the park. My parents still live in the same house they bought nearly forty years ago. Creatures of habit. I left the swing swinging on its own.

By the time I got there, Penny and Richard were already visiting too.

"No work today then?" I asked.

"No," said Penny. "We both took an extra day off to recover from the honeymoon," she beamed. I caught a secret little look she exchanged with her husband. Well, it wasn't very *secret*. No doubt they'd soon get the hang of it, given time.

"How about you?" asked Richard.

I was about to remind him that I didn't work during the day when Mother piped up instead.

"Marcella doesn't *work* for a living, Richard. You know that. She can't do an ordinary job like anybody else," she sneered. "My eldest daughter's a *disc jockey*." She said it as though she were repeating a swear word she'd just heard for the first time.

"No. Marcella has to go gallivanting about at night so she can idle the day away in bed."

"Yeah, like now," I said.

Richard stifled a grin and looked pointedly at his watch. "My, is it really ten o'clock already?"

I quite liked my new brother-in-law, I decided, who winked at me just then. Mother graciously smiled at his wit, but I don't think any of us missed the sour expression on her face as she turned to go into the kitchen.

"Tea anyone?" she called, politely.

We all agreed. Richard winked at me again, and gave his wife another one of those meaningful looks. If they kept that up, I'd need to carry a sick bucket around with me.

And so passed an otherwise pleasant morning at Mom's and Dad's. They're both retired now so I knew they'd probably be in. They never do anything on the spur of the moment, or go away unannounced. In fact, they usually give everyone ample notice if they do go away or even if they just go out for the day.

Dad was upstairs for most of the time, in his 'hobbies' room – my old room as I'd been left home the longest. He was building an *Airfix* model.

Richard is tall, slim and blond and, considering his sharp sense of humour, he does blush rather easily. He wears metal-rimmed round glasses that give him a dishy Joe-90 sort of look. He's quite fit and healthy as he hang-glides and backpacks whenever he can, for pleasure... for *pleasure!* Fortunately Penny likes backpacking too, and that's where they'd been for their honeymoon – in Bali, as it turned out.

They've both got good jobs. He's a chartered accountant and she works for a local management consultancy. I honestly don't know what Mother's problem is sometimes. Penny more than makes up for all of my shortcomings.

When Richard took to pacing the lounge carpet, I noticed he was playing with two of those Chinese silver ball thingies. I hadn't realised he was a stressed-out sort of person, and told him so too.

"No, I'm not," he replied.

"Richard's too laid back to get stressed," agreed Penny, truthfully.

"I just find them a bit soothing. It's the noise they make." To demonstrate, he made them tinkle.

“My gaffer at The Cellar is always playing with those things,” I said. “Well, he used to. I think he must have lost them. I haven’t seen him with them for ages. Now he *is* heart attack fodder. He has such a short fuse. Maybe that’s why he drinks.”

Mother tutted.

“I just find them soothing,” repeated Richard, returning the balls to his trouser pocket. Now that did look odd.

“Anyway, Marcella,” said Mom. “To what do we owe the honour of *your* company so early this morning?”

Gee, it was nice to feel welcome. Two sarky comments in one day from two different people – and it still wasn’t twelve o’clock yet.

Actually, I’d almost forgotten myself. But there was no way I was going to tell her how disappointed I was with Roach. “Not that *nice* young man you went to school with, dear?” she’d say.

“Yes, and by the way, did you know he deals in drugs?” I’d reply. And I certainly wasn’t going to admit to realising what a disappointment I must be to her and Dad.

Instead, I lied.

“Oh, I was just passing.”

“And where’s that nasty machine you normally ride about on?”

Oh no! I’d left it outside Roach’s house. Before I could go home, I had half an hour walk ahead of me.

“Actually, Mom,” I said, jumping to my feet. “I’ve left it at a friend’s. I’d better go.”

I dashed to the door yelling my farewells to the others and up the stairs to my dad.

“Hrmp. I might have known she wouldn’t be staying very long,” I heard Mom complain to Penny and Richard.

An hour and a half I'd been at my Mom's and Dad's. The longest I'd managed in a good while. It must have been the company. I felt sorry now that I hadn't got to know Richard sooner. I suppose it was the way that Mom raved on about him. Yes, that probably did put me off. He'd turned out to be quite an ally on the old Home Front.

And he was sexy too.

By the time I got back to Roach's house it was well past noon and I had a stitch in my side. He'd strapped my helmet to my handlebars, so I knew he must have gone out. He arrived back on his bike, though – a Honda 750-4 – just as I was climbing on to mine. I wondered, idly, if he'd been to the cops.

He had, bless him.

"How did you get on?"

"Bloody waste of time," he shrugged, undoing his chinstrap.

"No good?"

He pulled off his helmet. "They kept me hanging around for ages, and then said there was no one available to take me statement, and anyway, the case is closed."

"How can it be closed? They haven't found Woodstock guilty already, have they?"

"No. But he's been charged. They suggested I get in touch with the officer in charge. Do you know who that is?"

"I presume it's DS MacGregor. Or you could try DC Anderson. Failing that, there's also a PC Plant, too, from Steelhouse Lane. Which one did you go to?"

"Steelhouse Lane."

"Then you probably need to go to Acocks Green. I don't know. Reefer said you should give them a statement –"

"Reefer? Who's he?"

“That’s PC Plant,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. I didn’t want to blow his cover.

Damn. It really was as though the police *had* got their result and weren’t bothered about the truth.

“Do you know who you spoke to?”

“Nah. But by the looks of him, he was just a snotty little YTS. Do they have them in the police?”

“Dunno. Didn’t he say anything else?”

“Just that I might be called in to the trial by his defence as a witness. I did try, Marcie.”

I looked at him and knew he was telling the truth.

“Yeah, I know. Thanks for trying anyway.” I switched on the ignition and gave the engine a couple of revs.

“What are you gonna do now?” he asked.

“I dunno. It looks like the next thing I should be doing is finding as many witnesses as I can.”

“Like who?”

“Angus –”

“That prick?”

“He was there on the night. Don’t you remember? One of his mates attacked me and he came to my rescue.”

“He fancies you.”

“He does not.”

“Yes he does.”

“So what?”

Roach turned up his nose in disgust and changed tack. “Who else?”

“Daisy.”

“What can she do?”

“I don’t know... yet. But I’m sure she saw someone... or knows something.”

“Anyone else?”

“Pendle probably.”

Roach snorted. “He won’t help much.”

“Why not?”

“Well, apart from the fact that he was probably three sheets to the wind, by *opening* time, he wasn’t even there.”

I thought about that one for a moment. “Yes he was.”

“So why didn’t he do something when that prospect was playing up? He wouldn’t have pulled a stunt like that with you if the gaffer had been there.”

Yes. That was true. Drunk or not, that temper of his could always pack a punch, in more senses than one. And he didn’t like any trouble in his pub. Ken Pendle would have had the little runt flat across the bar in a shot. We’d seen him do it to his wife in the past. Now, she’d had a gob on her. When I came to think about it, Roach was right. Pendle hadn’t been there. I remembered him coming in through the door with Vernon at last orders.

“So that leaves Angus and Daisy,” I said finally.

He grunted some kind of agreement. “What’re you gonna do first?”

I nodded towards his neighbour’s house where one of the net curtains was twitching erratically. “If I don’t scoot soon she’s going to come out here and complain about the noise.” Both of our bikes were running, and his doesn’t have any baffles.

Roach looked over, stuck up his middle finger at the woman, and grinned back at me. “Don’t mind her. She’s a nosy old bag.”

Charming. “Nah. I’m off anyway. I’m going to go and get me some dinner.” We have it at lunch time in Birmingham. “Then I’ll see if I can get hold of Daisy. She’s normally up town on a Monday afternoon. Business is still okay then, apparently.” I tightened the chinstrap on my helmet – have you noticed how no one *ever* does that on the telly? – and revved the bike again, to make sure it wasn’t about to cut out.

“Do me a favour, though,” I said, before going.

“What’s that?”

“Spend some of your holiday tidying up that pig heap you live in.”

He grinned and called: “See ya,” before bumping his bike up onto the drive.

“Tarrar.”

I rode into town and grabbed myself a baked potato with cheese and baked beans. I use this little caff at the top end of New Street – opposite where Bogart’s used to be. The place has been there for years in some shape or form, but most people seem to prefer the burger bars and pizza places. It’s cheaper and I can always get a seat. It’s a tiny shop crammed between a newsagent and a hippy shop. I don’t go in the shop that often so can’t remember the name... come to think of it, I *do* go into the caff a lot, but I can’t remember its name either.

In the old days when Mister Bill’s used to be *the* place to be on a Saturday afternoon, there was still a *Woolworth’s* in New Street. We all used to have a skin full of beer at the bier keller, and then meet up in the canteen on the top floor. I was always surprised when they let us in. Any other shop would have been scared, and would have thrown a load of drunken rockers and bikers out.

Woollies moved out of town a while back, though it’s since returned. And those of us who still felt the urge to eat had to find somewhere else. I found this little caff and I’ve stayed loyal to it ever since. They really pile your plate up, for a fraction of the price at other places. And it’s fresh.

After dinner I spent the afternoon trying to locate Daisy. I know a few of her haunts and loitered around in them, hoping I wouldn’t get picked up. Fortunately, I know some of the other girls too, so didn’t get done over for trespassing onto their patch. We even exchanged pleasantries and a few jokes.

In the end I asked one of them if she knew where Daisy was and she said, after checking her watch, that she'd probably be at The Cellar by now. I made my way over there, looking forward to a swift half – the place stays open all day for the market traders – and there was Daisy, just leaving.

“Hi Marcie,” she bawled. “How’s things?”

“Not good.”

“How’s Woodstock? I didn’t get to see him.”

“They’ve charged him with Gavin’s murder, Daisy.”

“But they can’t.”

“They can and they have. He’s in The Green now, on remand.”

“What, *Winson* Green?”

“Yep.”

She looked in the general direction of the prison and then looked back at me. “But Woodstock didn’t do it,” she blurted.

“You know that. I know it. Roach knows, and so does Woody. It’s a shame the police don’t, really.”

“No. It’s impossible. They can’t have charged him.”

She sounded pretty certain. I frowned at her.

“Were you there, Daisy?” I’d always suspected she might have been. She didn’t reply. “How much did you see?”

“Woodstock and Gavin shared a joint before they... you know... then Woody left him and Roach came out.” She gave me a sideways glance.

“I know why Roach was there, Daisy. It’s all right.”

She released some of the tension in her shoulders. “Well, anyway, they had this argument –”

“Who? Gavin and Roach?” Roach hadn’t said anything about a row.

“No. It wasn’t Roach.”

“Then who was it?”

She looked away from me, checked her watch, then strained to see up the road behind me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, looking over my shoulder and back at Daisy again. “Are you waiting for a bus?”

“No. I’m meeting a client. I’m going to be late if I don’t hurry.”

She was clearly uncomfortable and appeared to be struggling with herself.

“Daisy?”

“I can’t break a client’s confidence.”

“You can if it gets an innocent man off the hook...” She wasn’t biting. “You’re not a doctor, and even they’re allowed to break a confidence in a murder case.”

She took a deep breath and glanced back into the pub. “I’m not certain he did anything, though, because I left just then. So I’ll give you a clue. But you dare tell him I told you anything and I’m dead.”

“Who?” This was really annoying me now.

“Never mind that for the moment. You’ll have to find that much out for yourself.” She began to totter away along the tiles, on her spindly legs. “And remember, I’m not really sure he did anything anyway.” Her micro-mini skirt was way too tight and her yellow stilettos were way too high. “Find out what they were arguing about... find out how he died –”

“Who?”

“And everything else will fall into place.”

I didn’t understand. But she was putting some distance between us now. “Who, Daisy? When?”

“Three years ago,” she called back.

“Where?”

“At the Royal Infirmary.”

“Daisy!” I called after her and took a few steps towards her retreating back. But she either hadn’t heard, or didn’t want to. I watched after her thinking,

never mind. It'll keep. As she disappeared around the corner I descended the steps myself to the black hole below.

I will always regret not going after her. I never saw Daisy again...

Chapter 15

I almost collided with Ken Pendle on my way down the stairs into the pub. He was on his way up the steps with Vernon. The Cellar has always used Vernon's company for security. It was us who recommended him to the brewery and now all of his work comes from there. They don't like moonlighters much anyway and prefer all of their staff to be exclusive to them. They tried it with me, but until they could guarantee me five nights a week, I told them they could whistle.

"Sorry, boss," I said. "I didn't see you there in the dark." I nodded towards the bouncer and greeted him. "Vernon."

"Marcie," he replied.

"It's the wrong day for you, isn't it?" grinned Pendle. "A bit early too, Marcie."

Oh, I do like his little jokes. "I fancied a swift one, boss."

"Come on in then. You can have this one on me." He turned around and came with me back down the steps. "See you later, Vernon."

"Boss," replied the doorman, who continued on out of the pub.

"Gee, thanks," I said to Pendle. He must have been drunk already. That's usually the only time he ever buys a drink for anybody – which just happens to be most nights. Not that he actually 'buys' them. He just helps himself to the pumps and optics. "But weren't you on your way out, though?"

“What? No. I wanted to catch Daisy before she left. For a quick word. But it looks like I wasn’t quick enough. Maybe Vernon will catch up with her.”

~

I let Pendle ‘buy’ me a half a pint of sweet cider – on draught – well, I was driving. Otherwise I might have really took advantage and let him stand me a whole pint. Best to make the most of his generosity. You never know how long it might last... or not, as the case may be.

I only ever have a half when I’m driving, or riding my bike. Any more and I might forget I’m supposed to stop and keep going. Then I’d have to get a taxi home. It’s an expensive habit, drinking. I perched on a bar stool next to the bar.

Stone Age Sal, president of the Cycle Witches, wandered in bang on half past three. She empties the dustbins and rubbish bins in town for the council and always pops in when she’s finished. I knew she wasn’t in on the night Gavin died, but I hoped she might be able to tell me where I could find Angus. She and him have this thing going – in her dreams. She’s an easy lay and Angus takes advantage of that. Nothing more.

I let her buy a drink before sliding down off my stool and sidling up to her.

“Hi Sal. How’re you doing?” I tried not to let my nose turn up at the faint whiff of dirty bins.

She looked at me as though she’d just scraped me off the bottom of her shoe, or like I’d just slapped her in the face. Okay, so maybe I don’t make a habit of making polite conversation with her, but there was no need for her to look at me like that. She could be so hurtful at times.

Before answering, she checked over both of her shoulders to make sure I was really talking to her.

“What do you want?”

Oh, wow! She had bad breath too. I held up my hands in mock defence and also to deflect some of her smells too, and took one step backwards.

“Okay, okay. I give up. I need your help.”

“*You need my help?*”

“Yeah. I need to get hold of Angus, and thought you might be able to tell me where he’s likely to be.”

She sneered, giving me a vicious glint of those metal teeth. Then she took a long swig of her beer.

“You fancy him or something?” she grunted at last.

“No,” I snapped, rather too quickly.

“Why? What’s wrong with him? Not good enough for the likes of you?”

I was in a no-win situation here, obviously. “No, nothing. He’s all right really,” for a Rider I added, to myself of course. “And anyway. He’s spoken for, isn’t he?” That’s it, Marce. Butter her up.

“Yeah, well. You just remember that. That’s what I say.”

It’s what I’d just said as well, wasn’t it?

“He’s mine, so you can keep your robbin’ hands off.”

I had no intention of laying a single finger on him, dearie. What a shame Angus didn’t realise he belonged to such a delightful person.

Apart from the mean teeth, Stone Age really does have wild hair. It’s a dirty blonde sort of colour. Ash, I suppose. She’s about five feet nothing but quite broad shouldered. Like a man. Everyone knows she works weights, at the same gym Daisy uses. I wondered how she would look covered with baby oil and wearing a miniscule bikini... probably like a man in a bikini. Because she’d just come in from work, she was wearing a Day-Glo coat, which came down to her knees.

“So,” she was saying. “What do you want him for?”

“I need to talk to him about the last time he came in here.”

She screwed up her plain features as though she were concentrating... or straining to have a fart. I hoped she didn't follow though. “Wasn't that Good Friday?” Wow! Was she keeping tabs on him or what? “The night that faggot got done in?” I cringed at the expression, but nodded anyway, at the same time as swigging my cider. “Well, Angus didn't do it.”

“I know. But neither did the kid they've got locked up for it. That's why I need to talk to Angus.”

“Why? Who've they got for it, then?”

“Woodstock.”

“Woodstock?” she snorted. “Well, he wouldn't hurt a fly.”

“Exactly.”

I got this crazy image of Sal offering to give Woody a blow job and him preferring his own hand. I would *not* let that smirk creep across my face.

Stone Age glanced up at the clock behind the bar and drained her glass, all in one movement. “I gotta get the truck back to the depot.”

“So where will I find Angus?”

She thought again for a minute before replying. “He'll probably be at The Den around eight tonight.”

Great. I finished my own measly half as she collected her huge rubber gloves from the bar top and stomped off up the stairs. The Den is a worse hole than this place and just happens to be the club house of the Death Riders. I should have guessed he'd be there, really.

The Den – admission solely by invitation only.

~

At five minutes to eight I arrived outside The Den, a dirty hovel at the back of the White Lion public house, in desirable (not) Balsall Heath. I was a bit reluctant to leave my bike unattended, but the Riders had all left their bikes in the pub car park. I

thought that maybe mine would be okay out here too, but then decided that any regular would spot it and realise it wasn't one of theirs. I had absolutely no desire to emerge from the Riders' club house and discover my precious bike had been pinched, and I certainly didn't relish the idea of walking through this area in the dark in search of a bus stop or a taxi. Kerb crawlers might take me for a prostitute, as might the numerous Asian vigilantes who hang around on street corners in an attempt to improve the neighbourhood.

This community will report anyone to the police if they thought it would clean up their streets. What they do is make a note of the car registration numbers, get in touch with someone they know who has access to the right sort of information, find out the owner's name and address, and either write to them threatening to tell the wife, or pass the details on to the police. As far as I can tell they're doing a pretty good job too. The streets are definitely cleaner. But shit sticks and the whole area is still avoided by those who have no business there.

Anyway, I wheeled my bike right up to the club house door, and stayed astride it while I waited, with the engine running. That way we'd both be safe. No one could nick my bike with me on it, and if I got the faintest hint of trouble I could burn off out of there.

Because of the number of motorbikes parked outside, I knew there were Riders inside. Angus was here already too, or at least his bike was. It's unmistakable as it has a painting of the Grim Reaper on the petrol tank.

Not knowing any funny handshakes or secret knocks, I had to wait for someone else to go in, or come out, and let Angus know I was there.

Twenty minutes later I was in luck. A tiny 125cc phutted to a standstill and the guy dismounted and walked over, taking his crash helmet off on the way.

As I caught sight of the shock of bright orange hair glowing in the dim light, I realised I wasn't in luck after all.

Of all the bikers in the whole of Brum the one man I needed to rely on for a favour was a wanker. Only Ginger, the creep who tried to rip my hair out at The Cellar on the night that Gavin died.

"Hi Ginger. How're you doing?" I decided that confidence was the best thing right now.

"Well, if it isn't Marcie Craig. How're *you* doin', girlie? I think we have some unfinished business, don't you?"

"Oh sure, in your wet dreams, sunshine." I didn't really care if I upset him or not. But he could prove useful and I did need the favour. While he struggled to come back with a smart reply, I changed tack. "I'm surprised to see you here, actually," I said truthfully. "I thought Angus gave you the boot."

"He did, thanks to you. But then you pissed him off and he gave me a second chance." He looked me up and down with those leering, green eyes and turned his nose up. "I don't know what it is he sees in you myself. You look just like any other split arsed cow to me."

Ouch! Another one of my least favourite expressions. "Has he let you in yet, then?" I meant 'in' to the gang.

"Nah. I'm still prospecting. But he will soon."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself. How do you fancy earning a few more brownie points?"

"Like how?"

"Like, why don't you run along in there and tell Angus I'm here?"

"Run along yourself," he mimicked. "You're a cheeky cow. You can go on in there if you want."

Oh yeah, like if I wanted my face broken. "I can't stop, I'm in a hurry," I lied. "Angus will be dead

impressed with you if you let him know I want to see him.”

Ginger thought about that one for a while as the engine on my bike purred along. I could imagine the cogs creaking into action in that thick skull of his. I reckoned he must be weighing up the pros and cons inside his head. Finally he relented.

“Okay. You wait here.”

In this dump? I wasn’t going anywhere.

Now, either Angus is keener on me than I originally thought, or he was standing quite close to the door. No sooner had Ginger disappeared through it than Angus appeared at it. I cut the engine, climbed off my bike and removed my helmet. With Angus here, neither me nor the bike were in any danger.

“Hallo, Marcie. What do you want?”

“Oh, I’m fine thanks, Angus. How are you?”

“Cut the crap, Marcie. The only reason you’re here is probably because you want something from me.”

My, either he was pretty cute, or the jungle telegraph had beat me to it. “Okay, Angus. It’s a fair cop. I hold my hands up.” And I did.

“So?”

“Do you remember the last time you came up to The Cellar?” He didn’t answer, just glared at me.

“Oh good. You do. Anyway, that was the night this lad got himself murdered.”

“So?” he asked again.

“A friend of mine, well, a friend of yours too, actually, has been charged with the kid’s murder. He’s on remand at Winson Green.”

“Who?”

When I told him, Angus snorted just like Stone Age Sal had. And he reacted with the same expression too. They were obviously made for each other. “Woodstock couldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Precisely. It seems that everyone in this city knows that except the cops.”

He shrugged. “So what do you want me to do about it? Get him out?”

“No... well, yes. I wondered if you could remember anything about that night that might help get him out of the frame.”

“But if he did it...?”

“That’s just it. He didn’t. And being in The Green will probably kill him.”

“The pigs must think he had something to do with it, else they wouldn’t have charged him.”

“They do think so. But you and I both know he couldn’t have done it. Not Woody.”

He rubbed his stubbly chin thoughtfully. “Why should I help him?”

“Because he’s a mate. And because you might remember what it’s like to have a good friend wrongly accused of murder.”

Angus winced. About ten years ago, I thought it was, a mate of his, his old vice president actually, had tried to help a taxi driver who’d been stabbed one night. When the taxi driver died, Angus’s mate got put away for fifteen years. The bloke who had actually murdered the man only got a twelve-month sentence – and that was suspended.

Angus continued to rub his chin as he tried to remember something. “We were only there for a bit. We had the one drink and then we left. There was just that bit of trouble you had with Twinkle Toes in there.” He cocked his head towards the club house door. “We didn’t stick around after that.”

“And you’re sure you don’t remember anything else?”

He thought long and hard, he really did. But still he came up with nothing. “Nah. That’s all. Sorry.” Damn. “Tell you what, though. I’ll ask around, see what I can find out.”

“Cheers. Thanks for trying, anyway.” I switched the engine back on and gave the engine a bit of a rev. “If you do think of anything...”

“I’ll be in touch,” he finished for me.

“Cheers. I appreciate it.” I started to put my helmet back on but he caught hold of my arm.

“Hey,” he said.

“What?”

“Don’t I get a kiss?”

“What for?”

“For helping.”

“You didn’t.”

“I tried,” he grinned. “And I’m going to try harder.”

“But you haven’t yet.”

“Call it a down payment.” He grinned again and cocked his head to one side. Coy prick. But it was tempting... he might be a bit of a pillock, but he *is* quite nice looking. Rugged, rough and ready.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ll make sure Woody’s looked after.”

“And how can you do that when he’s already inside?”

“Where do you think they’ve been keeping Stu for the past seven years?” Was it really only seven? I’d thought it was much longer. “I’ll get Stu to look out for him.”

“Thanks.”

“Now, about that kiss...”

“Okay.” I yielded and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. But that wasn’t enough.

“Come on, Marcie Craig. You can do better than that.”

So I closed my eyes and thought of England... and, truly, it wasn’t so bad. He was quite gentle, in fact. And at least he let go of my arm then.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you around,” he said finally, turning and heading back in to the club house.

“Sure,” I replied as he disappeared through the door, so I addressed the door instead. “Yeah, I’ll be seeing you.”

Not one of my more successful meetings. Although I did discover one thing. Angus, president of the Death Riders motorcycle club, is actually human after all... shame old Stone Age isn’t too.

Unfortunately, I spent far too much time mulling over this latest little gem and not enough time worrying about clearing off. I should have got my sweet little ass outta there as soon as we’d finished. After another quick rev of the engine, which always makes me feel good for some unknown reason, I tried again to replace my helmet.

A faint whiff of dirty bins told me I had company.

Chapter 16

I don’t know where they’d come from, or where they’d parked their bikes. But I was a bit surprised to see five Cycle Witches, led by their prehistoric president.

“Sal. You never said you’d be here too.”

“I wasn’t going to be. But after our little chat I thought that maybe I’d better come along after all and watch out for my interests.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” And, really, I didn’t.

“Angus. Remember?”

“What about him?”

“Off limits,” chimed in Gloria, a busty slag with dyed yellow hair... although the bottle must have claimed it to be some kind of blonde.

“I told her already. I’m not interested.”

“Didn’t look like it just then,” added Sylvia. She was the skinhead of the bunch – and probably the dyke.

Shit. “That was just a friendly gesture.”

“Friendly isn’t the word I’d use,” said Stone Age, stepping intimidatingly closer.

“I was just showing my appreciation. It isn’t how it must have looked.” I backed away. That was a mistake. The only thing behind me was the club house. I tried standing so my bike was between us. That was mistake number two.

“We could see you, you bitch,” scoffed Gloria. “We were watching you the whole time.” Ah. And if I’d known I could have left my bike after all – under the watchful gaze of this lot.

“But it’s too dark now to see anything,” I argued.

“There’s no wriggling out of it now,” said Gloria, and she pointed at a lamp fastened to the building above my head.

If I had the gumption I pride myself with at times, I would have hopped on the bike, helmet over arm, and fucked off out of there before they could do me any damage. Sod the police and their stupid helmet laws.

Instead, I froze. Stupid bint.

They drew menacingly nearer. I had nowhere to run. My back was against the club house door (kept locked from the inside), and my face was against five goons from a female motorcycle club.

My bike was between us. I started to mount it, but Stone Age gave me one almighty shove causing me to drop the bike and collapse beneath it. The engine was still running and I was going to get my face broken anyway. I should have taken my chances with The Riders. At least men don’t fight as dirty as women do.

Pinned beneath Harley I was chicken feed. It was too heavy for me to lift, so all I could do was switch off the engine. My legs were trapped and I protected my head with my helmeted arm. That didn’t last long. Someone dragged it off me and hurled it across the car park. Then five pairs of fists rained down onto my skull, alternating with ten sets of talons clawing at my face.

One blow caused my skull to crack into the concrete floor beneath me, causing all of my teeth to vibrate and a whistling sound in my head. Dirt or gravel ground into my bare hands. I felt a boot in my chest, knocking the wind out of me.

All of my flesh felt on fire... another crack on the back of my head as it hit the concrete again... and then it all went dark...

~

When I woke up I wasn't sure where I was. The last thing I remembered was kissing Angus outside The Den. Now why on earth was I doing that?

Somewhere there was a shining light. I was lying on my back, that much I could tell. My vision was a complete and utter blur. I didn't want to open my eyes at all. Was this what having a migraine was like? I'd never had one of those before. No wonder everyone made such a fuss when that happened.

I tried to move. Someone very close to me started to groan. I waited for them to finish and when they did I tried again. But again, someone groaned. A dark shape moved into my field of vision, if you could call it that. I moved once more and my whole body felt as though it was being fed through a mincer.

"I think she's coming to, now," said the blob into a megaphone. "Try not to move," it shouted at me. Try not to *move*? There was no danger of that. I felt so sore. Every muscle throbbed. Every bone ached. Had I been trampled by a herd of elephants? Or maybe I'd driven my bike under a bus.

I was curious to see if I recognised the blob. I screwed up my eyes and creaked my head to one side. Ouch! Bells pealed and cymbals crashed. My vision remained quite blurred and, for a second, I thought there were six blobs instead of one. I've heard of seeing double, but this was ridiculous.

Voices bellowed away somewhere close and the first one I recognised was that of my mother. That's it. I was in a nightmare. I groaned again, realising for the first time that it was me who had been doing it all along.

"I knew you'd come to no good riding around on that horrible motorbike," she screamed. I wished someone would turn the amps down. "Nothing but trouble. Well, you're not going out on it again. That's for sure."

"Hi Mom. Thanks for coming." Or at least that's what I was trying to say. It probably came out like the mouthful of cotton wool it felt like. I wanted to remind her that I was now thirty-two years old and could basically do whatever I liked, with or without her permission. But my face hurt. My mouth hurt. My head hurt. I must have had an accident, and, to be honest, I really didn't fancy the isn't-it-time-you-acted-your-age? argument. I decided on a muffled "Yeah Mom, I'm fine, thanks for asking," instead.

"And there's no need for sarcasm either, my lady. I can see precisely that you are *not* fine."

She caught that part, then.

"Where am I, anyway?" I asked.

"You're at the Midland Hospital."

Yeah. I guessed I must be in a hospital somewhere. My vision was improving now and I caught a glimpse of her dabbing at her eyes with a hanky. Dad's friendly face appeared over her shoulder, concern written all over it. I started to smile at him, but thought better of it.

"Hi Dad."

"You take it easy, love," he said, winking at me. I think he was relieved to see me awake. "Don't you mind your mother," he continued kindly, leading her away. "She's a little upset." Yeah, her and me both.

The next pair to pay court were Penny and Richard, still on their honeymoon, I thought for

some reason. Maybe they'd become joined at the hip. They were always together these days. I couldn't understand anything. Confused.

"How are you feeling, Marcie?" asked Penny.

"Sore, thanks. Hey, aren't you two in Bali somewhere?"

"No. We're at home, Marcie. Here, with you," she said, gently.

"Then you must be at work. Why aren't you at work? That's it. You only had the one extra day off work. How come you're not at work? Am I hurt that bad?"

Penny and Richard exchanged a sympathetic look before she answered, and a sick bucket popped into my mind. Then, for a moment, I was sure I was seriously injured. "Er... it's ten thirty," she said. "In the evening."

"Oh, right. So it's Tuesday, is it? How long have I been out of it?" I could play the wounded soldier as good as the next man.

Again they swapped looks. "No," said Richard. "It's Monday."

"Monday?" I struggled with that one for a bit. "So I've been here for a *week*?"

They looked sadly at each other, then to me, and then Penny shook her head. I was glad she wasn't shaking mine. "I think they brought you in about an hour ago." She turned to her husband. "I think she's a bit bewildered."

"That'll be the concussion," he agreed. "Maybe we should let her rest."

"Hey, I'm still here, you know."

"Yes, of course you are," patronised Penny, though not on purpose I was sure. "We'll come back and see you again tomorrow night." They smiled and wandered off.

I rolled my head back into the middle of the pillow, which felt like a rock, and closed my eyes. God, I

was tired. Someone cleared his throat, making me jump back to life. I must have dozed off. I moved my eyeballs to avoid dislodging my head too much, to see two more people standing by the bed. So there *had* been six of them altogether. I hadn't realised I was so popular.

"Roach!" I exclaimed. "Angus?" I asked. I'd been in only an hour and already they'd found me. And they were together. I was honoured.

"Um... Angus called the ambulance," said Roach, as though reading my mind.

"Thanks Angus," I said, dutifully.

"Then he came looking for me so I could let your folks know."

"Thanks again. What happened? Were you there too?" I really couldn't remember any of the accident.

"Sort of," said Angus. "I'd just gone back inside the club. Don't you know?"

"I can't remember. But I must have been hit by a juggernaut the way I feel right now. How's the bike? What's the damage?" I caught the two of them exchanging one of those looks Penny and Richard had. "I guess it's that bad then, huh?"

"You... er... got beat up," said Angus. "Outside the club house."

"Who by? How did I do?"

"Don't you really remember?"

I hazarded a guess. "Stone Age Sal?" She was the only person I could have possibly upset. There was a glimmer of recollection. "The Cycle Witches. I guess I didn't do so well after all then."

"Not really. Your mate Ginger was on his way back out and he saw them running off. He almost tripped over you. You... er... dropped your bike."

"Correction," I interrupted. "Stone Age dropped my bike."

“Well, whatever. You were stuck underneath it and it seems he doesn’t like the sight of blood much – not anybody’s he knows at least.”

“He’ll make an ace Rider.”

“He’s doing all right. He told me about you and I made the phone call. You know the rest.”

“Thanks,” I repeated.

“You gonna press charges?” asked Roach, carefully.

“Dunno. Will I have to?”

“I don’t think so. Only if you remember who it was.”

I took the hint. “Then I probably won’t.” He nodded his approval. Hey, maybe I’d get initiated into the Satan Beasts for that.

“Well at least you’re all in one piece,” said Angus. “Stupid bitch. Five onto one? Women don’t half fight dirty at times.”

“Ahem,” I said. “Some women fight dirty at times.”

“We’ll sort it,” said Roach.

“There’s really no need –”

“He said we’ll sort it,” said Angus.

I was hardly in a position to argue. “Okay. And thanks again.”

“Any time.”

“I hope not.”

I think I must have started to doze again because the two of them started to make leaving noises. They’d both done the decent thing, and for that I was grateful. They’d even put aside their differences on my account. Two rival bikers chumming it, eh? Can’t be bad. And both presidents too.

“I’ll be seeing you then,” said Roach.

“Yeah, bye,” said Angus.

“Cheers.”

A nurse popped by to make sure I was comfortable (*comfortable?*), then I finally drifted

back off to sleep. At least here there would be no early morning phone calls to wake me up...

... No, here they just shake you awake at six o'clock in the morning instead to make sure you're still alive, and then they tell you to go back to sleep. I did.

~

I had always felt quite proud of the fact that I'd never spent a single night in hospital. I wasn't even born in one. I'm one of those people whose bones bend instead of break, and I never seem to get any life-threatening diseases, touch wood. I even escaped having my tonsils out when I was eighteen because they, the hospital, forgot to give me enough notice. In those days they wouldn't operate on a pill patient unless she'd been off it for at least four weeks beforehand, other than in an emergency. They gave me four days. These days I believe they'd rather risk whatever the reason was than risk an unwanted pregnancy.

Hospitals have never been my most favourite of places either. I'm sure my parents both think I'm being selfish, but when my dad ended up in hospital with suspected appendicitis, and when Mom went in for her hysterectomy, I just couldn't face the prospect of going to visit them. I left all of that to Penny and waited until they were both safely back home again. I don't know why. I just never liked the idea of hospitals. Fear of the unknown, I suppose, like my fear of the dark. What a wimp.

After the nurse had kindly let me go back to sleep, and when I was allowed to re-wake-up in my own good time, I had nothing better to do than gaze around the ward they'd put me on. I didn't really get much of a chance the night before.

There were twelve beds, most of them empty. In fact, there were only four of us patients in the whole ward: two guys and another woman, all three road

traffic accidents by the look of them. I wondered idly if they'd all been involved in the same pile up. It happens sometimes, especially the speed some idiots drive down our over-crowded motorways.

The blokes were sitting up and reading newspapers, one the *Daily Sport*, the other the *Independent*. Well, it takes all sorts, I suppose.

The woman remained lying down, on her back, fidgeting and mumbling every now and then. Perhaps she'd been anaesthetised. Her long blonde hair fanned out across the pillows and her face looked badly bruised. I found myself imagining how my own face must look. I couldn't see anything else of the woman because the quilt was pulled right up to her chin.

At one end of the ward there was a desk island manned by about six people, all in nurses' uniforms, some male and some female. I couldn't be sure how many there were altogether as they kept on nipping in and out through one of the many doors that led from that end of the room. I'd always thought that hospital doors came in pairs, but apart from the main entrance to the ward, all of these were single. Aside from the one that was clearly the way out, or in depending on whichever side you're coming from, two led to patients' toilets and one led to an office. I can only guess which the other two were for. One probably led to the operating theatre while the other must have been the recovery room.

Or the morgue.

At the opposite end of the ward there were four more doors: one double set leading to a TV lounge, and another two leading to more toilets. Four toilets. Blimey, we had one each. There was a fire exit too.

All of the woodwork was painted a peach colour while the walls, also glossed, were duck egg blue. Very 1980s. The highly polished floor tiles had peach and green flecks against a sandy

background. All of the beds had quilts on them, either in duck egg for the men, or peach for the women. The empty beds had the bedding stacked up neatly at one end.

At each of the twelve windows that flanked the room, one for each bed, was a pair of curtains that didn't look as though it served any purpose. They weren't big enough to join in the middle. They were of a deep orange with a dark green stripe. Sand coloured roller blinds cut out the sunshine when required. It all looked very nicely co-ordinated. I wondered how much the interior designer had cost the health service.

The desk island was made of pale teak wood, and some modern wooden screens shielded a seated area. This was probably for visitors, or for patients waiting to be admitted or collected. This small area was carpeted in deep duck egg blue with peach and sand flecks. A satisfied, peaceful hush hung in the air, not the clinical silence I'd always imagined.

Hey, this place wasn't so bad after all. I'd expected it to be stark and white, but this was quite cosy, if a little dated. I must admit that I wasn't very impressed by the peace and quiet. But apart from that, this was all right. I was almost willing Mom or Dad to go down with something, not too nasty, so I could make amends.

"Good morning, Miss Craig," sang a black lady nurse who had come to plump up my pillows. "Or do you prefer Marcella?"

"Morning," I replied. "And it's Marcie, thanks." I recognised her vaguely from the dawn awakening I'd received several hours earlier.

"And how are you feeling?" She spoke with a strong West Indian accent and her bonny face was broken by a dazzlingly white smile. And do you know? She looked genuinely interested.

“A bit stiff. And I ache all over.”

“I should say so. It looks like you took quite a beating.”

I grinned, painfully. “Yeah, so I gather.” She was okay. Friendly. Not at all how I expected. I must have seen too many Carry On films.

“Do you feel like some breakfast?”

“What have you got?”

“You can have a full breakfast if you want, or we can do you some cereal. Or there’s croissants.”

I ran my swollen tongue swiftly around my teeth to make sure they were all still there. They were. And no wobbles either. A choice for breakfast, eh? This was just like the Ritz. “I didn’t think you could have a fry up in hospital.”

The nurse laughed, a deep hearty chortle. “We grill it I’m afraid, girl. Is that what you want?”

Heck, a grilled, cooked breakfast was just as good as a fried one. “Do you grill the eggs too?”

She laughed again. “They’re poached.”

I nodded, almost with glee, definitely with pain, and she walked away.

On the wall above the doors leading to the day room, there hung a clock. Nine o’clock. Was that all? Who knew how long I had to kill before a doctor came to tell me I could go home.

I thought about calling Penny to ask her to bring me some magazines. Then I remembered she was back at work today. I was a bit more with it than I had been the previous night, but I could remember feeling confused.

I thought about ringing Mom to make sure she went to feed the animals. But then I thought again. She would have remembered to do that anyway, or asked Jackie, my cleaner, to pop in, and she’d be insulted that I felt she needed reminding.

I thought about trying Roach... and then I remembered my bike.

Chapter 17

I tried to get out of the bed but it hurt too much. I must have groaned quite loudly. Both of the men patients glanced over in my direction, and the kindly nurse dashed back to my bedside, her cardigan flapping wildly from the effort. A badge peeped out from under the navy-blue jumper telling me her name was Clarice. I hadn't noticed that before.

"What are you trying to do by getting out of the bed, child?" she scolded.

"I wanted to use the phone."

"You see this little button here?" She picked up a contraption that had been resting on my locker, and waved it at me. "You call me with this, but only use the red button in an emergency. I will bring you the payphone, girl. There's no need for you to be walking about the place in your condition."

"I haven't broken anything, have I?"

"No. But you is badly bruised and you must rest."

Duly admonished, I let her tuck me back up in bed before she scurried off to fetch me the phone trolley. I scabbled about in the locker for some change and found a pile of 10p pieces. That would have been Mother, no doubt. Maybe she wasn't such a bad old stick after all.

Roach was out. Either that or he was so fast asleep he couldn't hear the phone. I knew he wasn't due in at work as he'd told me he had the week off. The smell of cooked bacon drew me to my breakfast, which was actually quite good. I might have enjoyed it more if my mouth wasn't so sore – and if I knew where my bike was.

I thought about poor old Harley left on its side outside that hovel and had visions of it being taken apart, piece by piece, never to be seen in one whole again. First the mirrors. Then the badge. Then the handlebars. Then the wheels... maybe it was best

not to think about it, but I dwelled on it all morning, trying Roach at various intervals.

Dinner was almost as good as breakfast: a plate of lamb chop, mashed potato and peas was brought to my bed by Clarice. She'd covered her uniform up by now with a white, plastic pinafore-type apron, but she kept her watch hung on the outside and the badge was still visible. It seemed that she had been assigned to me for the day, or at least as long as her shift. If I needed anything, I just pressed my little black button and Clarice looked after me. She even helped me to the loo and back. There was no way I was using a cardboard bed pan.

A couple more patients were wheeled in throughout the day, both men. The only other woman patient, who had been lying down earlier, had since come to at about half past eleven. Two of the nurses made a bit of a fuss of her, so I assumed she'd had an operation during the night.

At around two o'clock in the afternoon the doctor finally made a guest appearance with some X-rays, which, I assumed, must have been taken the previous evening when I was still unconscious. He looked to be in his early sixties, so I felt safe enough with him, supposing that he must know what he was talking about. The name on his badge was unpronounceable.

"Well, Miss Craig," he said, jovially. "And how are we today?"

"Feeling much better, thanks," I replied, cheerfully. It must have been catching.

He smiled at me but didn't look as though he really meant it. Well, there was years of practice down the drain.

Clarice pulled a curtain around the bed so he could examine me in private. "You'll be pleased to know that nothing's broken," he said. Clarice had

already told me that much. He had a feel of my abdomen. "Has she been eating, nurse?"

Could he tell?

"Oh yes, doctor. She managed a full breakfast, and a lunch."

"No loss of appetite then," he mused, poking and prodding around my ribs. My trunk was stained a rainbow of shades. No wonder I ached. "Does that hurt?" he asked, digging three fingers into my diaphragm.

"No," I replied.

"That?"

"No."

"And that?"

"No."

He started to stroke my body then. First my neck. Then my arms. Then my fingers. Bloody pervert. He asked if it all felt roughly the same and I agreed that it had... strange fellow.

"Hmm." He clipped his stethoscope into his ears and had a little listen. "Breathe in." I sucked in. "Breathe out." I blew out. "In... Out... In... Okay. Thank you."

He hummed again as he wrote something on a chart that had been at the foot of my bed. Then he shone a little light into both of my eyes, one at a time, and had a good look at my ears.

"Any dizziness?" I shook my head. "Nausea?" No. "Headache?"

"Yes, I've got a cracking headache, doctor."

"Hmm," he repeated, snapping the light shut and putting it in his pocket. "Only to be expected." *So why ask?*

He examined the cuts around my face and hands and dabbed at my bruises with his fingertips. Then he nodded. "Well, I can't see any obvious problems." He sounded almost disappointed. "You're very badly bruised and you lost

consciousness. But you're eating all right and there's no dizziness or nausea." He wasn't asking this time, but I agreed with him all the same.

"Is there someone to keep an eye on you at home?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Good. Well, we shan't keep you here any longer than necessary." No wonder all the beds were empty. "Get yourself home and take it easy until at least next Monday. Any problems, see your GP. I'll give you some painkillers, and nurse will discharge you just as soon as I've completed my rounds."

"Okay, doctor. Thank you."

He pasted that smile across his face again, so I pasted one across my own too. Then he moved on to the next occupied bed.

Phew. That was a relief. I could go home. I had to wait until he'd finished so I spent the time trying to get hold of someone – anyone – on the phone who could come and get me. They were all out. All two of them, which surprised me a little, because Mom and Dad never go anywhere without telling you first.

Maybe they were around at my place. I called my own number but nobody answered.

I checked the clock. Almost visiting time. So I waited for someone to come in and visit me.

~

At three o'clock, Roach walked in.

"Hi Marcie."

"Hi Roach. Where's my bike?"

He roared with laughter, causing everyone else on the ward to look. "Yes, I know it's good of me to drop by, but it's no sweat, honest. You're obviously feeling much better this afternoon."

"I've been ringing you all day. Where's my bike? I've been worried sick."

"It's in your lock-up. Me and Angus took it back between us, before coming up to see you last

night.” He took some keys from his pocket and placed them on the locker. They were my keys. “That prospect of theirs offered to put it in his dad’s garage, but Angus didn’t think you’d appreciate that very much.”

“Cheers.” How perceptive of Angus.

“So, how are you feeling?”

“Doc says I can go home.”

“Great. So how come you’re not dressed?” He glanced down at the white gown I was wearing, generously provided by the hospital and not at all flattering.

“I couldn’t get hold of anyone to come and collect me.”

“Right. So where are your clothes?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. In the locker I suppose.”

“Are you ready to go home?” he asked, bending down to retrieve my things from the cupboard.

“I’ll say. My body’s crying out for a nice, hot bath.”

He pulled a face. “Hurting that bad, then?”

“No, not really. It just aches. All over. I just fancy a good old soak.”

“Are you up to riding behind me on the back of my bike?”

I grimaced, but agreed. “I think so.”

He tossed my clothes onto the bed. “You can’t wear them. They’re covered in blood.” I hadn’t realised. “Do you want me to go and collect you some clean stuff? Then I can come back in your Jeep and you can go home in style.”

That was a good idea. And quite thoughtful. “Do you mind?”

“Course not.”

An embarrassed pause followed for some reason, during which he remembered he’d brought something with him – for me.

“Here. I’ve brought you something to read,” he said, holding out a crumpled carrier bag. Why do

men never use the handles that come with these things? They always have to twist and screw them up, and then throttle them with their fists. "It'll give you something to do while I go over to your place and back."

"Thanks," I said, taking the bag from him. Inside was a hastily written card – To Marcie, Get well soon, Love Roach xxx – a box of Milk Tray and about half a dozen bike and music magazines.

"Thanks," I said again, this time with more enthusiasm. "I could've done with this lot this morning."

He was just about to leave me to my new-found entertainment, and start his thirty-mile round trip, when in walked Angus, looking as white as a sheet. I'd heard the expression, but this was the first time I'd ever seen it in action.

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

"It's Daisy," he replied, the hand clutching a bunch of tulips hanging limply by his side.

"What about Daisy?"

"She's dead."

to be continued...



Wordsworth Shorts



- Diane Wordsworth -

**one born every
minute**

one born every minute

The first time I learned about the centuries-long feud between the Campbells and the MadDonalds, I didn't believe it. I certainly didn't believe that to this day there are signs on hostelry doors saying no Campbells allowed. But the more I researched it, the more the subject fascinated me, especially when I found out that the derision includes something about one being born every minute in the lowlands.

And then I found out about a murder that apparently took place on New Year's Eve...

I wrote this story and sent it to My Weekly. They rejected it, saying they didn't publish stories in this genre. Then I saw a story in this genre that they had published and I submitted the story again, completely untouched, pointing out in my covering letter that I was 'delighted to see' a story in a similar vein. (No spoilers!)

~

Izzy Campbell chuckled at the welcoming sign on the door of the 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' hostelry:

NO CAMPBELLS ALLOWED

It was the same at other places in Glencoe. A bit of tourist gimmickry.

While her parents checked them all in, Izzy had a quick look around the place. There was the tiny reception area, a small dining room and a large bar with Toby jugs on shelves and horse brasses hanging from the exposed beams in the ceilings. It was all very old-fashioned with rustic benches, tartan wallpaper and oil-effect lamps. A huge open fire roared away in the grate, a nice welcome on this cold December day.

Izzy decided she was going to enjoy herself here. Her parents had talked her into coming away with them for Hogmanay this year after she and Jamie had split up. Mum thought it would help take her mind off things, but Izzy didn't like to tell them the split had been her idea. Her parents were quite fond of Jamie. She was only thankful they didn't have the added complication of a divorce to go through.

After unpacking Izzy gazed through her miniature window at the icy cold outside and the dark mysterious mountains in the distance. A lot had happened in this area over the years, which probably added to the pleasure of coming.

They were going to spend their first afternoon at Fort William, but there was just time for a quick drink downstairs in the bar.

~

"Izzy?" said Jock Stewart, landlord of the inn. "That's an unusual name." He served her a small beer.

"It's short for Isobel," she replied.

"Isobel Campbell?" Jock rubbed his red beard thoughtfully. "We had an *Ishbel* Campbell here once."

"Campbell's a common name. They say there's one born every minute in the lowlands."

"No, *Ishbel*. She was here about a hundred years ago – before my time of course. She was murdered –"

"Murdered?" Izzy almost choked on her drink.

"Aye. Up at the Big House. Young Robbie MacDonald pushed her from the landing to the marble floor as the clock struck twelve. At the Hogmanay party. They were sweet on each other."

"So why did he kill her?"

"No one knows," he shrugged. "Robbie MacDonald ran off before anyone could question him further. Drowned himself in the new loch."

"But there must have been a reason."

"He was a MacDonald; she was a Campbell. They say that's reason enough."

"But the massacre would have been... about two hundred years before." Jock shrugged again. "You think it was revenge?"

"So they say. But they also say he couldn't live with the guilt, he loved her so much. He'd planned it right down to the last detail."

"Oh, that's so sad."

"He couldn't rest though. Each year, at the Hogmanay party up at the Big House – his idea by the way – as the clock strikes twelve, he can be seen on that same landing. Then he rushes down the stairs and out through the door."

"They still have the party then?" Jock nodded. "So where's the 'Big House'?"

"They call it Achnacon House now – after the village that was burned to the ground during the massacre. Good for tourism, so I understand."

"But that's where we're going tomorrow night."

"You might see him then."

"Oh I do hope so. It all sounds very romantic." Izzy checked her watch and drained her glass.

"Mum and Dad will be waiting. See you later."

"Bye."

~

As Izzy left the room Donald Cameron, who had been quietly polishing glasses in a corner, chuckled and addressed his boss.

"There's another one you've fooled, Jock. I don't know how you do it."

"I just tell 'em, Don. Callum does the rest."

"Your brother's lad still coming up from Sheffield, then? He's usually here by now isn't he?"

"He's had a few parties to go to at the university. But he'll be here. He hasn't let me down yet."

~

Achnacon House was certainly big. The grand stone house was always popular with visitors and the annual Hogmanay party was no exception. The long driveway swept through acres of parkland and ended at a large roundabout where cars could turn.

The double front doors led to a marbled main hall with a roaring fire and an elaborately carved, sweeping staircase that joined a fine landing which, in its turn, overlooked the hall. There were several tall oak-panelled doors, one of which opened into the ballroom, scene of this evening's celebrations.

Folk were already dancing to the reels played by a band, swirling tartans of all colours filled the dance floor. Izzy's mum and dad couldn't resist joining them, leaving Izzy to watch from the sidelines. She didn't mind, couldn't do it anyway. She sank into a large squidgy armchair strategically placed beneath an artist's impression of the 1692 massacre.

"Erm... " coughed a young man nervously. "On your own?"

Izzy glanced up to see the tall, dark Scot in full Highland dress gazing down at her. He was about the same age as her, and very, very nice.

"I guess I must be."

"Mind if I join you? I seem to be on my own too right now."

"Sure."

His name was Bob and they warmed to each other instantly. He lived at the Big House with his family. It had been his idea to throw the party every year, and every year it was a success.

He told her about the murder weekends and the game shoots – with cameras. She told him she lived on the borders and that she'd come here with her parents.

She even told him a little about Jamie and what a mistake that had been.

"You have a lovely home," she remarked.

"Do you think so?" Izzy nodded. "Thanks. Would you like to have a look around?"

"Can I really?"

"Course you can. Come on, I'll show you." He stood up and held out his hand, which she gladly took. It seemed to warm at her touch.

Before long he was leading Izzy along endless corridors, past doors marked 'private' and 'toilets', into numerous drawing rooms, boudoirs and offices.

"I didn't realise there were so many offices."

"The staff have to do their work somewhere. The estate doesn't run itself."

Until now the music had drifted softly up to them from the rooms below, but now it was quiet – silent almost.

"Must be nearly twelve," said Bob. "They'll be starting the countdown soon."

"Oh, I didn't want to miss it."

"Come on. There's loads of time yet. Let's go and join them."

The couple practically ran along the polished corridor. Down one flight of stairs and the floor became carpeted.

"Ten... nine... " began the chant from downstairs.

"They've started," said Izzy.

"It's okay, we're almost there."

"Seven... six... "

"We're going to miss it."

"No we're not."

"Four... three... "

They were now on the landing over the main hall and Bob sharply caught hold of Izzy's hand.

"We can have our own celebration here."

"One... Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year, Izzy." He pulled her towards him and pressed his lips onto hers.

"Happy New Year, Bob," she replied after he'd come up for air. He released her for a second and she slumped breathlessly against the balustrade. The clock finished striking twelve and Bob was once more against Izzy, leaning into her, kissing her hungrily.

Suddenly there was a loud crack and the timber balustrade broke in two. Izzy slipped and missed her footing, but Bob managed to catch her, pulling her back just in time. He held her tightly, muttering to himself over and over again.

"Thank God. Oh thank God!"

Gathering her composure, Izzy pulled herself out of his vice-like grip. She peered over the banister to the newel smashed to pieces on the marble floor. If Bob hadn't caught her...

"You saved my life."

"Are you all right?"

"I think so."

"Shall I get you a drink?"

"Yes please." She sat down on the top step and he headed down the stairs towards the ballroom.

Completely oblivious to what had occurred above them, the revellers continued to enjoy themselves. *Auld Lang Syne* became *Scotland the Brave* became *Mairi's Wedding*, and Bob didn't come back.

As the first partygoers began to leave Izzy remembered Jock's ghost story, and still there was no sign of Bob.

Then it dawned on Izzy. Robbie MacDonald hadn't murdered Ishbel Campbell at all. It had been a terrible accident – and a terrible mistake by those left behind. Well, maybe they could both rest in peace now.

~

"So," exclaimed Donald Cameron the next day. "You met the ghost of Young Robbie MacDonald yourself,

did you?" Izzy nodded. "And he saved your life too?"

"I think it was his way of clearing his name. I doubt there will be many sightings of him at future parties."

Jock Stewart rubbed his red beard thoughtfully. "So you think Robbie MacDonald was innocent after all?"

"No doubt about it."

"Well I never."

"Anyway," said Izzy pulling on her hat, scarf and mittens. "We're going skiing."

"Well you enjoy yourself," called Jock after her.

~

Donald Cameron chuckled.

"Well Jock, you've done it again. Still, they do say there's one born every minute. You certainly had her hoodwinked. Give my regards to your Callum. He can have a drink on me. He's done a grand job there."

"That's what concerns me, Don."

"What's that?"

"They had some heavy snow in Sheffield yesterday morning."

"So?"

"Callum didn't make it this time..."

THE END

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Diane Wordsworth was born and bred in Solihull in the West Midlands when it was still Warwickshire. She started to write for magazines in 1985 and became a full-time freelance photojournalist in 1996. In 1998 she became sub-editor for several education trade magazines and started to edit classroom resources, textbooks and non-fiction books.

She has taught creative writing to adults for several adult education departments and was a tutor for the *Writers' News* Home Study Division (now *Writing Magazine* Writing Courses) for many years.

In 2004 Diane moved from the Midlands to South Yorkshire where she edited an in-house magazine for an international steel company for six years. She still edits and writes on a freelance basis.

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