



SOMETHING  
IN THE  
CITY

**Distinctively English  
Short Stories**

**A.A. Abbott**

**SOMETHING IN THE CITY**  
**A Distinctively English Collection of Short Stories**  
**by A.A. Abbott**

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This collection of short stories is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or real events, is entirely coincidental.

Now the legal stuff is out of the way – sit down, relax, and enjoy the book! The stories are all set in England – in the buzzy cities of Birmingham, London and Bristol, or in the sleepy Somerset countryside.

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## **PERSONAL SERVICES - Birmingham**

Darren ran a tanned hand through his jet-black hair, dyed of course. It was essential to look good in his business. "I offer a very special service," he said. "Discreet and confidential. Even your bank manager doesn't need to know, because I'll take cash if you like. A credit card's fine too. How does that sound, John?"

The man at the end of the line was nervous. "No one must see you. I don't want my colleagues, or heaven forbid, my wife to find out."

"We don't have to meet at your home or office, John," Darren assured him. "I can book a hotel room by the hour. I'd need cash in advance for that, of course."

They agreed to meet the following lunchtime at a city centre hotel where Darren had an arrangement with the manager. Phone call finished, Darren drove to Leonie's nursery in his new Jaguar, personalised number plate proudly on display. Lisa was at a conference all week. He rarely collected his youngest, but enjoyed the admiring glances of female nursery staff and their customers when he did.

"Shall we make cakes, Leonie?" he asked when they arrived home. His three-year-old, all blonde curls and bubbles, readily agreed. Darren's work-life balance bore no comparison to his previous job as a hot shot sales director. It was hard to believe he'd left it only a year ago.

Darren had worked in sales all his life, acquiring a wife and three children on the way. Never academic, he used the gift of the gab to secure his first job. That was selling bathroom fittings. He

progressed through a kitchen company and estate agency to senior sales manager at a ball bearings factory. Although his targets were always exceeded, there was no chance of promotion.

“It’s dead men’s shoes,” he complained to Lisa. “The sales director’s in his forties and he’ll be there until he retires.”

“Not everyone’s young and ambitious,” Lisa said soothingly. She earned a little selling make-up to other mums, occasionally giving a few lessons. Her company operated by multi-level marketing, so she would have made more money recruiting and managing a sales team, but she wasn’t interested.

“I’d get another job,” he said, “but I keep being tipped the wink that they want younger people.”

“I can fix that,” Lisa told him. “A little cream to smooth the wrinkles, a dab of concealer around your eyes – that’s all you need.” At least she didn’t tell him that ageism was against the law; they both knew a wide gulf existed between theory and practice.

Darren was instantly successful in securing a sales director role and all the trappings of success. His office had views to the Lickey Hills and subtly better furniture than any of his colleagues. His company car was capable of, and was driven at, outrageously high speeds. His children went to private schools; his wife bought the latest fashions.

It couldn’t last. The company was taken over. “Nothing personal,” he was told, “but we’ve got a head office in London already, and we’ll service the customer book from there.”

His redundancy package soon ran out. When Darren sought work, he didn’t exactly encounter ageism – after all, Lisa made sure he looked his best – but having risen to the apex of the pyramid, it was hard to find other jobs at the same level. He was forced to consider a new career.

Luckily, he could capitalise on his looks: that boyish smile, artfully bronzed skin and appealing eyes. Darren’s successful rendezvous with John, for example, was extremely lucrative. “You look a new man, John,” he said proudly. “There’s a real sparkle in your eyes.”

John beamed at him. “At least five years younger.” He preened before the mirror in the boxy hotel room. “That promotion’s as good as mine, mate. I’ll have the foundation, concealer, bronzer, eye drops and mascara, please.”

“How about the moisturiser?” Darren asked. “I use it every day. I bet you can’t guess how old I am, John. Well, I’ll tell you; I’m forty-two.” His face was as good as his calling card.

“No way,” John said, pleasantly shocked. “Okay, a couple of those.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like an extra source of income, would you, John? These products are so good, they virtually sell themselves. You could get cash for that sports car, a foreign holiday. No? I can tell you’re a hit with the girls, John. Do your lady friends a favour and let them know about us. Easy money for them when they want a nice dress for a wedding, toys for the kids or a new kitchen. Here’s my wife’s card. Just send them along to her.”

## **FLYING - London**

Swift, white as ghosts but solid, remorseless, the flock of seagulls swooped down on the railway embankment. What had attracted their attention, Mason wondered? There were too many for a single rodent to have drawn them to the scrubby wasteland. Perhaps a fox or cat had savaged a few small creatures and left the bloody mess for the birds to scavenge. Suddenly, a train thundered along the steel tracks, and the flock circled upwards again, shrieking in a familiar cacophony. The jarring noise was at odds with their graceful appearance. He felt he’d listened to it all his life, for the gulls were already roosting on rooftops nearby when his mother first brought him to the flat.

He’d always loved gulls. As a boy, he’d admired their beauty as they soared over sand dunes in Norfolk, the scene of idyllic family holidays when his father was around and they were a family. Now, back in London and far from the sea, Mason admired the gulls as adaptors and survivors. He watched as they rose, wishing he too could feel the rush of air on his face. His bedroom window was close enough for him to jump onto the embankment. Like many in London, the buildings sprawled

right to the edge of the railway. Within seconds, the gulls, pinpricks in the sky, had left him far behind.

Mason splashed aftershave around his neck and ears. "Going out," he called to his mother. There was no reply. She was doubtless out of her head on vodka again. He left the flat by conventional means, walking through the dust and rubbish in the hallway, out of the front door, along the balcony and down the stairwell at one end.

Laura would be leaving school soon. He walked there quickly, humming. The smell of his aftershave, an expensive brand with a salty tang, lifted his spirits. Laura had bought it for him and she would remember. He arrived at the school gate minutes before the bell.

The sixth formers all wore black skirt suits and white shirts. They streamed out of the gate in a rush, chattering like crows. She was one of the last, her long blonde hair veiling her features. At last, she spotted him and waved.

He'd been sitting across the road on a garden wall, smoking. He stubbed out the tab in a flowerbed as she made excuses to her friends. One or two glanced at him with unreadable expressions.

"Want a coffee?" he asked.

"Sure."

They fell into step together as they walked to the high road. Mason waited until there were no other black suits around them, then pulled her close, nuzzling the top of her head. He liked the soft fragrance of shampoo in her hair, the way her clothes felt expensive and smelled clean, the peachiness of her skin. Best of all, he loved her warmth and softness. Knowing Laura was an overwhelming sensory experience, like eating a chocolate cake, then going back and having it again and again.

He ordered a cup of tea, she a skinny soy latte. They sat outside so he could smoke. It was high summer; the coffee shop had set out large green parasols to shade their customers.

"Mummy says the chairs on the pavement are like being in Paris," Laura said, "and she's right, but for the wrong reasons. Paris is choked with traffic and exhaust fumes too, you know."

Mason nodded. He would take her word for it.

"I've something to show you," she said, reaching into her school satchel. She produced a magazine, one of the glossy journals targeted at women, with a toothy celeb on the front. This one had Naomi Campbell, who was supposed to be pretty, but was really old. She should stick to collecting her pension and give the younger models a chance.

"You want me to read that?" he asked, a note of anxiety creeping into his voice. She might as well have asked him to look at her Latin primer; he had as much chance of understanding it.

Laura laughed. "Don't be silly." She flicked through the shiny pages. "This season it's all about handbags. Look, here's an article about a shop where Samantha Cameron and Alexa Chung buy theirs."

Why should Laura care what two old, unforgivably rich women did with their money? Still, he knew from talking to her that she thought the right brand of handbag was important, just as he wanted trendy trainers and a jacket from the West End. The shop's prices were mentioned: from six hundred to two thousand pounds. He began to see.

"Do you think Fred would take them?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't see why not. Give him the mag, and ask. By the way," she sipped her coffee thoughtfully, "I saw a sweet silver Vespa around the corner."

"Show me," he said eagerly.

They did the raid the following Tuesday, he and Gareth, Brett and Jon. The sort of subjects Laura studied at her posh private school – English, psychology and Latin – left him cold. Mason had only showed an aptitude for woodwork, DT and electronics. He could hotwire a motorbike in seconds. They took two, from the rank behind John Lewis at Oxford Circus. He drove one, Brett the other. Jon and Gareth rode pillion, dashing into the store while their drivers stood outside, engines running. They

piled the loot into bin liners and off they went, the wrong way up a one way street, weaving in and out of traffic until they dumped the bikes.

Mason had to admit he was pleased with the guys. They lifted the highest quality, rarest and most desirable items from the store. Laura had shown them photographs, taken at the weekend, and they'd followed her instructions to the letter. Even Fred was impressed, fingering the soft, hand-stitched bags, breathing in the new leathery smell as the merchandise was tipped out of bin liners in his front room.

"Nice work," Fred said. "I can let you have a grand for those."

"You're having a laugh," Mason countered. "Look." He brandished the Evening Standard. "It says those bags are worth fifty thousand pounds."

"Okay," Fred said, with suspicious swiftness. "Five. Full and final offer." He whistled, shaking his head as he read the piece. "Did you really have guns?"

"No," Mason replied. "Water pistols."

Laura bought motorbike leathers with her share; matching red jacket and trousers and a white helmet. Mason offered to take her for a ride on Saturday morning at five. The summer dawn was breaking as he arrived.

She was waiting around the corner from her house in Maida Vale, in a quiet, tree-lined road, untainted by traffic noise and trains. He drank in its tranquillity.

Laura rolled her eyes, misunderstanding his sense of wonder, of being a visitor in another land. "It's so boring, isn't it?" she said. She ran a hand over the silver Vespa's flanks. "Cool wheels."

"I saved it for you," he said. "I wanted your first time to be perfect."

He spent a minute or two showing her how to balance before they left. She was a natural, her grip around his torso firm yet relaxed. Still, they didn't go far. He took her to Primrose Hill. They watched the sun rise over London, the City's towers reflecting the rose-gold glow from the East. He squeezed her hand, enveloping her in a hug.

After a couple of hours, he took her home, promising to meet her later in the West End. She wanted to go clubbing. Although she wasn't really old enough, she had fake ID to prove she was twenty-one. He drove the Vespa to Somers Town, leaving it in one of the nastier roads. There was no need to trash it; the local boys would see to that.

Their night out lasted until six in the morning. Wakefulness fuelled by cocktails and cocaine, they danced frenetically. "Do your parents know where you are?" he asked.

Laura shrugged. "They think I'm staying with a friend."

Mason's mother hadn't asked where he was going. She didn't care, and why should she? He was an adult now, old enough to vote. He wouldn't, of course. Politicians were twice his age, minimum, and everyone knew they were all the same: liars and thieves the lot of them.

He had very little money left by now, but enough to buy brunch in Covent Garden, so it was noon by the time he staggered into the flat. The smell that greeted him, of unemptied bins in summer with overtones of vodka, barely registered. He lay on his unwashed bed and was asleep within seconds.

He replenished the coffers with another heist, jewels this time. The Standard didn't cover it, proving, Laura said, that journalists had an unhealthy obsession with handbags. She supposed they'd only garner more column inches by stealing designer clothes or caviar. They agreed that was senseless. He bought a jar of caviar at Fortnum & Mason, and fed it to her with a spoon, slowly, as they picnicked on Primrose Hill.

He heard the police banging on the door at 4am. His mother was cursing crossly. She assumed they were after her, but he knew they weren't. The old lush hadn't attracted their attention before, stealthily neglecting her home and children, so why would they care now?

He opened the window and jumped, flying to the embankment, joining the seagulls. Except they weren't there; they were already shrieking high above, disturbed by the goods train trundling past.

Mason was lucky. There were clumps of signals on the approach into Paddington, and the train was slowing. He climbed onto one of the trucks. It began to speed up again, whisking him away from the mean flats and the watchful eye of the police helicopter buzzing above with the seagulls. It was a constant visitor to the area. Had he done better at school, a career as a pilot might have suited him.

The truck carried Mason a couple of miles away before it groaned to a standstill. He dropped softly beside the tracks.

It was easy to find a suitable steed on which to ride with his lady. Years ago, there had apparently been a golden age, when cars could be hotwired too. Those days were gone, leaving only two-wheeled vehicles for the budding twoccer. Nevertheless, there were plenty of motorbikes around. He chose a Harley Davidson, huge and comfortable. There was a helmet padlocked to it, easy to liberate with a paperclip. Its owner was practically begging to be robbed.

The dawn sun hadn't risen yet. When he tried to phone Laura, there was no answer. He had to throw stones at her window to attract her attention.

"What's up?" Laura's face was pale in the moonlight.

"Fancy a spin?"

She knew. He could see it in her eyes, and cursed himself for the fear within his own. She would stay here, he thought, in her Maida Vale cocoon. Soon, she would have A levels and fly the nest, away to university and a stratospheric future. Even if he said anything about her, it was only his word against hers, and why should he mention her name anyway? She could be safe; all she need do was deny him.

"Sure," Laura said.

Delighted, he revved the engine as she emerged, clad in scarlet leathers. The sun rose as they hit the M11 and he took it to the ton.

He couldn't stop grinning, even when, belatedly, he saw blue lights in the mirror as they turned into Holkham.

He had been there so many times before as a child. Praying it hadn't changed, he drove over the wooden boards that led to the dunes. Wheels spun on the slippery sand, but somehow the bike still hogged the ground. A faithful servant, it carried them to the long, flat sandy beach, where no car could follow.

Above, seagulls skittered on air currents high in the blue, dome-like sky. The engine roared, wheels and wind whipping sand around them. He set course along the beach for Wells-next-the-Sea.

"They have the best ice cream in the world in Wells," he shouted, excited, although he suspected she might not hear him as the wind caught his words. "You have to try it." Fifty things to try before you die, he thought. He revved the Harley, flying.

## **NEVER THE BRIDE - Birmingham**

"Get away from that window – I need to see her in natural light," Jason said.

Wisely, Louise took her gear to the other side of the room. She could still get her shots; even if the lighting wasn't ideal, she'd Photoshop them later.

"Gorgeous," Jason cooed. "You'll knock him dead, sweetheart." He applied a final touch of powder and spritzed hairspray on the bride's locks. "Now, who's next? Ooh, did you have a little drinkie last night? Just rest over there a second with these slices of cucumber on your eyes; never fails, I assure you."

"Coffee would be better," grumbled the bride hopefully.

"Is that a fact? I tell you what, Lou can get them for us, can't you, Lou? You're just sitting around at the minute. There's a Nespresso machine in the kitchen and milk in the fridge."

"How do you take it, ladies?"

"Black, strong and long for me," Jason replied, with a wink.

Louise busied herself in the kitchen. While it was cheeky of him to give orders, they were all in it together, weren't they? Team Wedding. Besides, with a six o'clock start, she needed caffeine too.

Jason worked quickly. The group, three women and a little girl, were out of his studio by nine. "Fancy another coffee?" he asked. "I'll make it this time."

Louise gratefully accepted. "They look stunning," she complimented him.

Jason smirked. "Yes, I know how to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. I practice on Richard often enough."

"Isn't that a different style? I thought he was a drag queen."

Jason rolled his eyes. "There's drag queens, and then there's Roxy Rainbow, sweetheart. Richard is the last word in glam when he's all dolled up. Send him to the wedding, and that poor old bride would be jilted at the altar." He giggled.

"It's about time you two tied the knot," Louise said. "You know who to call when you book your photographer."

"You'd be top of the list, Lou. What's been going on in your love life since we last met, anyway?"

"You mean since last week?" Summer was a busy season for both of them; they often worked together. "Quiet as usual."

"You career girls," Jason drawled. "No time for love."

"I never meet anyone."

"Get away! How many weddings are you doing today? How many this month?"

"Two today and twelve over the month."

"Well then," Jason said, "even if they're small weddings, that's fifty guys at each. You'll meet six hundred men this month, all giving you the eye as they get plastered on prosecco."

Louise sighed. "Six hundred married, fat and old men. With a few gays and nerds thrown in. Anyway, I don't have time to talk to anyone, except to say 'Big Smile Now'."

"And all eyes are on you right then. I tell you what," Jason offered, "a young lady like you should be reeling them in. You don't exactly make the most of yourself. Give me ten seconds and I'll transform you."

Louise knew better than to argue, or complain that he made her look like a cheap tart. She needed to stay on good terms with Jason; he'd started to refer work to her and she didn't want him to stop.

"Sexy," drawled Jason, with a cheery wave as she left.

Louise didn't recognise the girl who stared back from her rear-view mirror. She wiped off as much make-up as she could. The bright pink lips and blusher went, but she had to leave her smoky eyes alone. Although the wedding wasn't until ten thirty, there still wasn't quite enough time to return home and scrub up. Saturday shopping traffic was already filling the city roads. Louise contented herself with arriving early at the church, a Victorian gothic number a few miles from the city centre. There were plenty of photo opportunities there: the front of the church itself, bathed in sunlight; an old wooden lych gate; a lush garden.

While the bride would be fashionably late, the groom and his ushers arrived shortly after Louise. They were army lads, clean-cut and handsome in dress uniforms.

"Mind if I set up next to you?" The questioner, a young man in a sharp black suit, was carrying an iPad.

"Be my guest. I didn't know I'd have a rival."

He laughed, his blue eyes merry. "I'm hardly that. Jeff, the groom, is my younger brother. I said I'd do a little video for him and his friends. They look good in the blues, don't they?"

"A bit bling with all that gold braid and buttons, like an old lady's curtains." The words spilled out before she had time to think. Louise raised a hand to her mouth, horrified. "Sorry, the customer's always right."

He chuckled again. "I won't tell if you won't."

He definitely had an eye for composition. She watched as he earmarked a spot to stand ready for the bridal party's arrival. It was a metre or so away from her but gave a much better view. She resolved to stick close by; she could still learn from a gifted amateur.

"You seem young for a photographer," he observed.

"I graduated from art school last year," Louise said, relieved Jason's handiwork didn't make her look old before her time. She wasn't used to wearing cosmetics.

"Me too."

It would be hectic later, so Louise was happy to chat. Her new friend had studied in London, it transpired, while she'd stayed local. He was called Ben, he regarded himself as an artist and painted as much as he could, but had taken a job to pay the bills. He would be working later in the day. "A swift exit for me as soon as the cake is cut," he said, "and strictly no alcohol."

Once the bride arrived, Louise barely spoke to Ben again. He occasionally pointed out a prime position for a shot, and she did likewise, but mostly she was cajoling the happy couple and their guests to gather, stand still, smile and disperse.

Her work at the church was done quickly, although not speedily enough for some of the guests, judging by their frowns. Now the ceremony was over, only the photographer stood between the assembled company and their first glass of champagne. After checking the couple were satisfied so far, Louise sped away in her old Corsa to the reception venue, a manor house just outside the city limits.

"Nice car," Ben said, emerging from an ivory limousine with the ushers.

"You're kidding," Louise said. "It's all I can afford, with insurance being so expensive. I need it for my business, though. I'm doing another wedding later in Harborne; I couldn't do that without a car."

"I can't even drive," he admitted. "Oh well. Back to the fray." He uncovered his iPad again.

Louise drank from a water bottle. There was Pimms and pink champagne for the guests, but it was rare for the photographer to be offered anything. Today was no exception. Her stomach rumbled as the guests were treated to smoked salmon canapés, then invited to sit down to a banquet. She ate a Mars bar and took a few candid pictures of the speeches, the tower of lavishly wrapped presents and the gloriously over-the-top cake. Ben was seated at the top table, and she couldn't resist a sneaky snapshot of him alone, nervously running fingers through his dark curly hair as he spoke with one of the bridesmaids. Louise sympathised. The bridesmaids were scary, especially the woman who'd begun the day with a hangover. Even the tiny flower girl was a little madam, insisting on too many sweets and being very ill all over her pink satin dress.

Ben, as good as his word, was gone minutes after the first slice of cake was cut. Louise's contract obliged her to stay until three. A grin fixed to her face for the wedding party, she felt a twinge of disappointment that Ben hadn't given her his telephone number or even asked for a lift. Still, she could have offered too. Why hadn't she? She kicked herself.

It should have been a clear run to Harborne for four o'clock. Expecting to be early, Louise was shocked to hear the radio spring into life with a travel alert as soon as she started the engine. The M5 was closed, sending traffic spilling every which way all over the local roads. Tension gripped her. The next bride, Doreen, was a personal friend of her mother.

Don't let me be late, Louise prayed. Doreen had bought the cheapest photography package on offer, with a hefty friends and family discount, but Louise still didn't want to disappoint her. She chided herself for taking on too many commitments. Now she knew why it was called a traffic jam, this line of vehicles oozing past the manor house, almost unmoving but not quite, like a viscous liquid slowly spreading. There was nothing to be done but join it until she found a shortcut, then zigzag through the backstreets of the city.

Her destination was the nearest of three parallel roads off the local high street. Louise drove straight there and thankfully found a parking space almost opposite. There would have been no time



to drive around looking for one. At five to four, the church was buzzing with activity. White balloons were tied around the door, and a banner advertised John and Doreen's wedding. A duo were practicing a folksy arrangement of the Wedding March with acoustic guitars. Louise introduced herself to John, the anxious groom, noting the relief on his face as she did so. At the last minute, she positioned herself to capture Doreen's entrance in a cloud of white lace.

It was a long ceremony, with lively singing led by the guitarists. Perhaps the pastor was happy to take his time because it was the last marriage of the day. Louise noted from the church's register that four couples had been and gone already. She sighed. Never the bride, she thought.

"Can we take a few more pictures inside?" Doreen asked once the register was signed.

"Of course." A fine mist of rain had begun, the sort that frizzed artfully-arranged locks and streaked satin dresses.

Louise left the church well after five. She was looking forward to sitting in her car again, alone, taking a deep breath and inspecting her smoky eyes in the mirror. With luck, they'd have survived the rain, and she could go straight to Doreen's reception, take a handful of photographs to complete the package, and go home.

She knew what was happening as soon as she saw the man in the bright yellow jacket lining up his little camera in front of her Corsa, but it was still a terrible shock.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked. "I parked legally, didn't I?"

"You're limited to an hour here," he said.

Louise was trying not to cry, but it was no use. How much was the penalty? She'd barely make a profit on her work for Doreen.

"I'm sorry," the traffic warden said. "If you'd been five minutes earlier, I wouldn't have issued a ticket." He gestured to her windscreen. "The paperwork's all done now."

"I didn't know about the restrictions," she pointed out.

"I tell you what," he said kindly, "I'll write a little note about that, and put it in with the ticket." He took a page from a notebook and scribbled a few words, tucking it into the plastic bag of papers stuck to the windscreen.

There was something familiar about him. Was it the blue eyes under his formidable black peaked cap? Louise blinked away her tears, but the rain was falling heavier now. Not only could she see very little, but she was about to get soaked.

"The weather's one of the joys of my job," the warden said wryly. "I'd get inside that car, if I were you."

Louise needed no telling. She took a tissue to the smeared dark rings around her eyes and cleaned up as best she could. He was long gone by the time she read his note. It said: 'Sorry. Can I buy a drink to make it up to you? Ben x.' Below, smudged by the rain but still legible, was a phone number.

## **THE RED DOOR - Birmingham**

Katy's alarm clock wailed like a cat in a corner. She stretched and yawned, hitting Dan's nose. "Sorry," she said. "I've got an early meeting, so you'll have to be out of the flat quickly."

"I'll get a coffee in the village," he said. He meant the crossroads a few minutes' walk away, which everyone called 'the village', although it was part of Britain's second largest city. He didn't have to work today; he might as well wait until the rush hour abated.

Really, she could have let him stay in her flat after she left. She trusted him enough to make meaningful noises about taking their relationship to the next level. This must involve living together, or at least putting a ring on her finger. He sighed. It wasn't worth hanging around. Katy would only have decaffeinated coffee and indigestible vegan food in her kitchen. He needed more than that after their crazy night out. Kissing her lips lightly, he pulled on his clothes and staggered out into the dark

morning. In the depths of February, it was still black as night, the road illuminated mainly by the tail lights of queuing traffic.

Dan was about to order a bacon sandwich and a mega-sized latte, full fat, when he realised his wallet and phone were missing. He must have left them behind at Katy's flat. Feeling his pockets, he noted they were completely empty: no loose change, house keys or bus pass. His only option was to run back. He prayed she hadn't left yet.

Yesterday's snow had turned to slush and ice. He slipped and slid in his rush, barely noticing the church on the left and straggling row of shops on the right, the last outpost of commerce in the village before it became sedately residential. Snow began to fall again, eddying in the drivers' headlights, adding a cloak of fairy dust to the tall trees and gracious gardens. This really was a beautiful area. He had felt its enchantment last night, half out of his head on what he was assured were dried magic mushrooms. Eyes locked on the full moon, he'd imagined werewolves creeping across the then-fresh snow, through gothic gates to the darkened dwellings. Looming behind ancient trees, the houses were magnificent half-timbered confections, gabled and turreted like castles built from giant liquorice allsorts. Of course, they were all divided into apartments, often ten or more in one building.

Katy's was one such, the thirteenth flat in the only house with a red door. For that reason, he was confident he would find it quickly, even though few roadside numbers were on display and thick flurries of snow obscured his vision. At last, it appeared like a beacon before him and he dashed to the security offered by the arched porch. He looked for Katy's doorbell.

There it was, the highest in a column of neatly numbered doorbells, each illuminated with space for text to the right. Dan was about to press it, when he saw the text no longer bore the name Katy Marchant. "Flat 13, where the women are sexy and the men are dangerous," he read aloud.

Katy must assume he would be moving in. Despite being peeved she was taking him for granted, he chuckled, proud to be thought dangerous. He rang the bell.

"Hello?" There was crackly interference on the intercom. Katy's voice was indistinct.

"It's Dangerous Dan."

"Come right on up." She buzzed him through the front door.

The blizzard was obviously playing havoc with the electricity. The bulbs on each landing barely flickered, casting more shadow than light. He arrived at the top floor by feeling his way up the stairs.

It wasn't Katy who waited for him, but a much curvier girl, standing in the doorway to the flat with a halo of light behind her. Hair artfully arranged in dark pin curls, an exaggerated red cupid's bow, a polka dot dress; she seemed unreal, as if a cartoon character had come to life. "Dangerous Dan, huh?" she drawled.

"That's me," Dan said, sufficiently intrigued to play along.

"I'm Sophie. Come in."

He had been wondering why she was there, why Katy was so quiet, and he knew as soon as he followed her into the dimly lit lounge. He had never seen its rather kitsch décor before: the table with a red checked cloth, the two brown easy chairs, the spiky wall clock, the fish tank.

"I've come to the wrong place." He couldn't understand it. No other property had a red door. He had walked the length of the street often enough to know. He had to leave, before Katy finished showering and primping herself in the bathroom and choosing her outfit, before she flew out of her flat in a tearing hurry for the bus and his wallet was lost to him for a day.

Sophie said, as if reading his thoughts, "Wrong and right is a state of mind. Have a coffee with me. You can stay all day if you want."

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, why not?" He could ring Katy at work after her meeting. She was bound to be free at lunchtime; she could return then. He didn't really fancy waiting until evening, feeling obliged to spend another night with her. He needed their relationship to cool a little.

Sophie busied herself with a chrome contraption that hissed, steamed and whistled as it produced coffee. Dan sat at the table, on one of a half dozen spindly chairs. He had to admit that Sophie had

done the whole retro look rather well. The only jarring note was a huge piece of hardboard propped against the wall, the life-size outline of a man traced on it in thick black ink.

Sophie noticed him staring at it. "My friend's," she said, by way of explanation, adding, "He's away right now. Here's your coffee."

It was deliciously creamy and strong. Dan sipped it gratefully, allowing the warmth to remove the wet chill from his bones.

"So tell me about yourself," Sophie said.

Dan almost gave her his life story, as he drank first one cup, then another. He told her how he'd arrived in the city as a postgraduate student. He spent a lot of time alone, reading archived material, except when he saw Katy. They had met on his first day in town. "I'm splitting up with her," he said with conviction, emboldened by Sophie's interested expression.

"Uh huh," Sophie said. "Do you want to call her now? The phone's over there."

It was a telephone in the old-fashioned Bakelite style, although a bright bubblegum pink. He called Katy, but he didn't end it, merely asked if he could see her for lunch. She had a busy day ahead, she said, but once she'd made her irritation known, she grudgingly agreed. She would be at her flat by 12.30.

"It's been lovely to meet you," Sophie said, kissing his cheek. "Do come round again. Actually, I'm hosting a pop-up supper club next Tuesday night. Please join me – you can bring your girlfriend." She glanced at the fish tank. There was movement within it, as something stirred behind a small rock, peeping out before hiding again.

As Dan walked down the curved staircase, better illuminated now grey daylight was streaming through the windows, he shook his head at Sophie's last words. He had no intention of taking Katy to meet her.

Outside the red door, he wondered which direction to take: left or right. In the event, he set off in the direction of the village and found Katy's flat two doors away. He must have walked straight past it in the blizzard. She was still cross, saying snippily that he should be better organised. How on earth had he gone to the wrong house? There were no others like it. He apologised profusely, bought her a sad-looking beansprout salad at a deli in the village, and thought only of Sophie as he offered a parting kiss.

The rest of the week, and then the weekend, passed. Dan buried himself in books and online research material, telling Katy he was too busy to see her. On Tuesday evening, whistling, he presented himself at the red door. Again, it had appeared suddenly. He had strolled away from the village, and then, without even apparently passing Katy's home, he had found himself in the right place. In his left hand, he clutched a bottle of Mateus Rosé. He was sure Sophie would approve. As a brand his parents had favoured in their younger days, it would fit Sophie's retro theme. The buzzer sounded as soon as he pressed the bell, and he bounded up three flights of stairs to the attic.

"Hi!" Sophie, in a shiny purple cocktail dress, wound her arms round him and kissed him on the lips. "This is my boyfriend, Sid," she announced, pointing to a young man standing by the sink with a small knife.

"Hello." Sid grinned. Like Sophie, he seemed larger than life. He was wearing a grey waistcoat over a white shirt, unbuttoned at the top so the dark hair on his chest was visible. A curled moustache and trim beard revealed teeth larger, sharper and whiter than Dan might have expected.

Dan tried not to show his disappointment. He should have known there was a partner on the scene, should not have fantasised otherwise. Glancing at the couple and their friends, he saw now that he was stuck with four hipsters for the evening. He hoped there would be plenty of booze. "Let's open the Mateus," he suggested.

Sophie ignored him. "I'll introduce you to our other guests," she said, gesturing to the candlelit table. The couple who sat there were a paler imitation of Sophie and Sid; she sporting platinum blonde curls and a sequinned shift, he extravagant ginger whiskers and a dark waistcoat.

“Jerry,” the ginger man said. “And this is Ella. I say, Sid, those G&Ts are taking their time.”

Sid turned his attention to a lemon, slicing it quickly and thinly, throwing the slices into a large jug full of clear liquid and ice cubes.

“Coming right at you,” he said, splashing the liquid generously into cut crystal glasses. “Bottoms up.”

They all sat round the table. “A toast,” Sophie declared, “to our special guest, Dan.”

Glasses clinked. Dan drained his in one. He started to feel better.

“I forgot to ask you, Dan,” Sophie said, with a frown, “you’re not vegetarian are you?”

“Definitely not,” Dan replied.

“Good,” Sophie said, “because we’re having a fish course first. This is an interactive meal, by the way. I didn’t tell you about my profession, did I, Dan?”

“No.” He remembered that snowy morning, when he had spoken at length about himself, and she had offered nothing in return.

“I’m a fire eater,” she said. “Our first course is,” as Sid drummed his fingers on the table, “flambéed prawns!”

Sid took a shiny metal pan from a rack by the sink, reached into the fish tank and scooped out half a dozen or so wriggling prawns. Dropping them into the pan, he poured a small bottle of brandy around them.

“You can’t do that,” Dan protested. “You’re cooking them alive.”

Sid chortled.

“We like our food fresh, don’t we Sid?” Sophie murmured, embracing Sid’s free arm. She pulled away and struck a match, using it to light a long, thin cotton torch.

The torch flared into golden fire. Sophie waved it at Sid’s pan, causing blue flames to envelop the bouncing prawns. She brought the torch to her red lipsticked mouth.

“More gin, Dan?” Ella asked.

Dan nodded. He watched in horrified fascination, torn by the twin spectacles and a sense that the prawn-killing was barbaric. His stomach pleaded for food that was sanitised and long dead.

“Bravo,” Jerry exclaimed, clapping his hands as both fires were extinguished.

They all clapped hands then, and Dan felt obliged to follow suit, albeit with less vehemence.

Sid swirled a pot of cream into the brandy, and slid the prawns onto five plates. “Enjoy,” he urged.

There weren’t enough prawns for everyone to have two. Dan quickly bagged a plate with a single crustacean. He tried not to gag as he ate it. It was actually sweet and juicy; probably the best he’d ever eaten.

“Perfect,” Jerry purred.

“That was Sophie’s party piece,” Sid said, “and now for mine.”

Sophie stood in front of the hardboard man-shape. Sid picked up the knife he’d been using to slice lemons and threw it at her. It flew past her shoulder and landed on the black outline. Dan could now see the outline was heavily pockmarked with small slits, although like Sophie, the rest of the hardboard appeared untouched.

Sid took another knife from the drawer, and another. In all, he threw nine blades, always hitting the black line. Sophie walked away with a modest smile.

“Bravo,” Jerry shouted again. “Wonderful. But when are we going to see our next course?”

“Patience, dear friend,” Sid said. He removed the knives from the hardboard.

“You try it,” Sophie entreated, looking longingly at Dan. She licked her red lips.

“Oh no,” he stuttered. “I couldn’t possibly throw those things at you. I mean, I’ve got no idea...”

Sid interrupted. “No, Dan, you stand there and I’ll throw the knives.”

“Please?” Sophie said.

Ella and Jerry gazed at him. They looked hungry. It would not do to have an argument, to delay their meal. What harm could possibly happen? Sid obviously knew what he was doing.

“All right,” Dan said.

“Bravo,” Jerry cried once more.

Sid picked up a knife. In the candlelight, his incisors gleamed, long and sharp like the blade.

## **THE CUCKOO AND THE PHOENIX - Bristol**

He'd always loved to go home. The night before the funeral, he slept in his old bed. Crisp sheets, smelling of Daz, always made up for him in the little bedroom. Old Eagle annuals, temptingly shiny on the tall bookshelves. The familiar rustle of oak trees at the window. Although his father had renounced smoking and spent the last year of his life close to an oxygen cylinder, the house still smelled of the sweet pipe tobacco the old man had favoured. His own property somehow reeked faintly of drains and stale curry, the dwelling of a man living alone and working long hours.

His parents had been the one constant in his life. In London, jobs, friends, relationships, even flats, came and went. Landlords sold up, companies were taken over, friends moved away.

There were a surprising number of people at the funeral, a hundred at least. Beneath the bald spots and wrinkles, he recognised several old school friends, now middle aged. Johnny, who went into the police force; Terry, who worked on the buses; Amanda. Who knew what Amanda did? Once he would have cared a great deal, but no longer. The years had not been kind to them. Looking at their faces, he realised they thought the same of him. Ruefully, he fingered his thinning hair. They invited him for a drink afterwards at the Hare on the Hill. It had been the Mason's Arms, rough as a pit-bull, in his youth. Now it was everything he thought a pub should be: light, wooden floored, smoke-free, serving well-kept beer.

“Prices are on the high side, mind,” Terry warned.

“They're worse in London,” he said, almost enjoying Terry's scandalised expression.

“Will you move back now?” Amanda asked. “The house will be yours, I suppose.” He noticed a hint of desperation in her eyes as she downed her dry white wine. It was her third within the hour.

“No, there's no going back,” he said, a remark that covered all the bases, he thought. He added, “That house is ugly. Like a cuckoo in the nest. They wouldn't get permission to build it now.”

It was a brown and white sixties monstrosity, put up cheaply on a bombsite, dwarfed by its grand Georgian neighbours. A good address though, in fact better than it was in the old days. Young professionals had realised you could walk to the city centre in ten minutes. Now the street was home to doctors, lawyers and accountants. A teacher like his father could never afford it.

The house didn't sell. Every fortnight, he spent a weekend there, tending the garden. Lawns were mown, shrubs trimmed, weeds composted. Inside the house, he flicked a duster around occasionally, but it stayed remarkably clean now nobody lived there. When he slept, exhausted, in his old bed, he felt his father watching him approvingly. He painted the front door to give the property kerb appeal, to leap up and grab the hearts of buyers.

He took to visiting the Hare on Sunday evenings. Terry and Johnny, maybe both, usually wandered in and shared reminiscences over a pint.

“Schooldays, eh. Best days of your life,” Terry said.

He was silent. He remembered his youth in Bristol as a time of boredom, frustrations, injustice. Caned by the headmaster for misdeeds that were not his. Sacked from the Jolly Boy pub for fiddling the till. He knew he'd never over or undercharged on purpose, and definitely hadn't stolen money. He suspected Amanda was the real culprit. Of course, he would no more have landed Amanda in trouble than cut off his right arm.

“Did you see the fire in the church hall two weeks ago?” Johnny asked, changing the subject. “You'd have been here then; it was a Saturday night.”

“No.”

“Shame. We’re looking for witnesses. Not often we get cases of arson round here, now. I don’t remember any for decades. There was quite a spate of it when we were young. Before you moved to London.”

He looked into Johnny’s eyes, sensing an agenda. There was nothing to see; Johnny was far too professional for that. “Better be off now. Up early tomorrow to go back to work.” He drained his pint.

He took the milk train to London and fell asleep. His dreams were usually pleasant. This time, there was lighter fuel, paper, matches. The school; old Mr Barney’s classroom and the headmaster’s study. Delight as the flames took, staring at them, entranced, from their cubbyhole in the shrubs by the playground. Holding Amanda’s hand at last. Horns, blue lights, voices, splashes. He awoke, ashamed, but chuckling to himself in spite of that. He had done more than hold Amanda’s hand. They had kissed for the first time. Then eyes sparkling, she had encouraged him to go further. He was oblivious to the busy firemen just feet away, and they to him. He was in love.

He drifted back to sleep, thinking of the wild look in Amanda’s eyes, that look that always made him go weak at the knees. The dream was darker now. It was the Jolly Boy pub, silent and empty. Amanda had said so, and he thought so too until the fire took hold and they heard the screams. At once, the scene flicked to the local newspaper. Headlines mentioned the tramp in the basement. He woke with a start.

That never happened, he thought. Tramp. That was a word you didn’t hear any more. There were travellers, who had lorries. There were the homeless, sitting in shop doorways wrapped in blankets, asking for spare change. When he first came to London, he had been surprised by the beggars in the streets of the richest city in one of the richest countries in the world. Tramps never begged. His father had pointed one out once, as they drove through the countryside.

“I’ve seen him every year,” his father said. “He works on the farms and moves on. He’s been doing it since the war.”

Why should the war have turned a man into a tramp? he had wondered. We won it, didn’t we? Every week, he bought comics reliving highlights of the war; brave Tommies triumphing over stupid Jerries. Sometimes, for a change, we outsmarted the cunning Nips.

He couldn’t imagine the tramp, young, lantern-jawed and brave, stepping into his comic strip and fighting for the Allies. The man was a collection of wrinkles and long whiskers, battered hat, torn clothes, walking through the hedgerows. Tramp, tramp, tramp. He tipped his hat as the car went by.

A car was no longer the badge of affluence it had once been. Everyone in Bristol seemed to have one, even the students who had a purpose-built colony nearby, new flats with underground parking. Even Amanda, who turned up in an old banger at the Hare one Sunday evening, and had to be persuaded to leave it there overnight.

“You’ve drunk a bottle of wine,” he said.

“I’ll have to stay with you then,” she told him.

He tried not to recoil. That wild look was upon her again, except now he saw it for what it was: a kind of madness. That would have been enough to deter him, but there was more: the grey roots of her bleached blonde hair, her face a mass of smoker’s wrinkles, her once lithe body run to fat. She had changed, and he had too; he had escaped his childhood, risen like a phoenix from its ashes.

Terry broke the awkward silence, offering to run her back. Johnny raised an eyebrow, but they knew Terry had nursed a single pint all night; he was on an early shift the next morning.

After a couple of months, he knocked £20,000 off the price. Miracle of miracles, a buyer emerged.

Although he had exchanged contracts now and he could have let the weeds grow, he returned one more time to do the garden. It would be his last farewell to his father, to his roots. All week, the weather in London had been hot and humid. Arriving in Bristol, he knew a storm was about to break. Dark clouds bore down on the city. He quickly took out the lawnmower, the spades and the shears, and set to work. When the first heavy drops fell, he had to rush to put the tools in the shed.

Then the electrical storm began. The air around him trembled. Lightning crackled, with thunder following just a second or so later. That meant the lightning was close. There were massive trees in the garden: an old oak, an outsize holly bush, a sycamore that dwarfed the house, all planted or self-seeded in the days of Queen Victoria. Electricity could strike them at any moment; he must stay inside the shed, breathing in the scent of pipe tobacco that still clung to the tiny wooden structure.

Thunder filled his ears, deafening him, the sound of a cross god shouting, of his father chiding him for selling and moving away. He watched with fascination as lightning flashed across the roof of the ugly squat house, not once, but twice, three times.

The storm moved on, taking with it the rainclouds that could have saved the building. Flames began to take hold. Then, as he heard an enormous bang, louder than the thunder, he remembered the oxygen cylinder in the living room. There was no saving the cuckoo now.

He stared at the fire, grinning, mesmerised, even when his landscape was filled with sirens and blue lights and Johnny was nudging his elbow.

## **CHILD'S PLAY - Somerset**

A shaft of sunlight fell on Ellie's auburn hair, intensifying its colour. It was as if a fire burned on the infant's head. "Letter," she said.

A flurry of post arrived through the letter box within seconds. The child must have heard the postman's footsteps, Maura supposed. Most of the documents tumbling onto the doormat were junk mail, but one stood out: a black-framed envelope addressed to her, with the name Barnett Twitling printed on the back.

Maura opened it. Barnett Twitling was a law firm in Somerset. The letter announced that her late aunt Enid had left her a cottage in the village of Flemyng Magna. At first, she wondered if it was a joke. She'd never met Enid, although she had dim recollections of her parents whispering about her mother's half-sister with disapproval. It was possible, and somewhat sad, that Enid could die without her family knowing. Surely her aunt was unlikely to make a valuable bequest to Maura, a virtual stranger, though? She checked her phone. It was nine thirty, so the law office should be open. She googled them and found the same telephone number mentioned on the letterhead. That proved it wasn't a prank. Maura found herself gasping with excitement.

"Barnett Twitling," the phone was answered by a woman with a slow, syrupy voice, the 'r' rolling and seeming to echo even when she'd finished speaking.

"Can I speak to Mr Twitling?" Maura asked.

"He's having a cup of coffee, my dear. Could he call you back?"

She left details. It was thirty minutes before her phone rang. Meanwhile, she played with Ellie, showing her how to build walls and houses and people with Lego bricks. The child was used to the stimulation of a day nursery, but Maura had withdrawn her as a cost-cutting measure. There was little point paying strangers to care for your daughter when you were no longer working and could do it yourself.

The man who phoned was extremely apologetic. He introduced himself as John Twitling, said he'd only just been told she'd phoned, and gave his condolences. He wanted to know who her lawyers were so he could arrange the transfer of the deceased's estate to Maura. On being told she had no lawyers, he said he supposed his firm could do everything but she would need to visit to sign some paperwork.

Flemyng Magna's railway station was just outside the village. Maura managed to buy cheap rail tickets by travelling at a time and on a route that others would consider desperately inconvenient. On arrival, she found Barnett Twitling's office in the main square, a quintessentially English ensemble of honey-coloured stone buildings. John Twitling, however, was nothing like the image she'd confected

in her mind when they spoke on the phone. Instead of a moustachioed country gentleman, resplendent in ancient tweeds, he was young, clean-shaven and sharp suited.

“Quite a character, your aunt, wasn’t she?” he grinned.

“We never met. My family have a gift for falling out with each other,” Maura replied drily. It was possible, she reflected, that her parents found it hard to accept their relatives as they were. Her mother had wanted a white wedding for Maura, displaying distress and hysteria when her daughter chose a single parent’s life rather than marry a man she didn’t respect. There was no sign of a reconciliation yet. Maura had left phone messages and sent a brief email about Enid’s death to her parents, with no response.

Ellie blinked up at Twitling from her pushchair. “Look,” she said.

Maura gave her a small board book to occupy her. “I don’t suppose we could go round to the property?” she asked. “I’d like to see it before it’s sold.”

It would raise enough for the deposit on a place in London when she finally secured another job and was in a position to pay a mortgage.

John Twitling raised an eyebrow. “You want to sell?” he asked. “Did you know your aunt lived in that cottage all her life? I rather thought she expected you to move in.” He frowned. “She wrote nothing in her will to that effect, though, so you’re free to do with it as you please.”

He agreed they could walk to the cottage together. It was a mere five minutes’ stroll, down a hill that fell steeply away from the main square. At the foot was a small stream, bounded by a clump of three cottages in a row. “This is Flemyng Terrace,” Twitling said, “and that is the River Flemyng. Looks gentle as a baby, doesn’t it?” He glanced at Ellie, who’d fallen asleep in her pushchair. “Don’t be fooled. When a spring tide surges, the river becomes wild, foaming like a beast with rabies. Ask my brother. He rents the cottage next door to Enid’s.”

“It’s never flooded, has it?” Maura asked anxiously.

He fingered his chin. “No, I don’t believe it has. Certainly not in my lifetime.”

The visit to Enid’s sparsely furnished, bare-boarded cottage was brief and without incident, but when Maura later instructed estate agents to market the property, she was shocked to discover it was blighted by flood and landslip risks. No-one would be able to raise a mortgage on it. Her options were to sell to a cash buyer for a knockdown price, rent it out, or live there herself.

Meanwhile, she was struggling to find another job in London, and her savings were rapidly vanishing. On the day she received an eviction notice for her flat, Maura sold her valuables to a pawnbroker. In the last few years, she had noticed a rash of such establishments appear on her local high street, as well as the betting shops that could be their twin brothers. The money she raised was used to hire a van. In this, she drove Ellie and their remaining belongings to Flemyng Magna.

Downshifting was her only chance of solvency she told herself, almost in tears as she left the bustling, dirty city that had been her home for so long.

The cottage sat in the middle of the terrace, its nooks and crannies intertwined with those either side. John Twitling had told her they all had flying freeholds over each other. One neighbour, she knew, was his brother. The other introduced herself on the evening that Maura moved in. There was a knock at the front door, followed by footsteps as the unlocked door was pushed open. Maura spun round.

“Welcome to the village.” The voice, in an accent redolent of cut glass vases and carefully arranged flowers, didn’t sound welcoming at all. Its owner was perhaps in her late thirties, a slim brunette who would be pretty were it not for her rather petulant expression. “I’m Andrea from next door. I thought you might like a cake, so I’ve made you one.” Despite the cheerful words, Andrea still didn’t smile.

“Sit down,” Maura gestured, delighted to meet a neighbour. She was glad the living room was tidy enough to entertain visitors. Her possessions had largely been stowed away already. There was plenty of room for them. Maura was no hoarder and nor, evidently, was Enid.



Maura put the kettle on. She had brought necessities like teabags with her, although she'd noticed a shelf-full of tea caddies and jams in one of the kitchen cupboards. They were labelled not with words, but with symbols: pictures of fruit on the jam jars; closed eyes, a red cross, and hearts and flowers on the tins. It crossed her mind that perhaps Enid couldn't read. Finding an old brown Betty teapot, she made a brew, hoping Andrea liked Tetley's.

Andrea looked askance at it. "I thought you'd throw out all of Enid's old things." She leaned forward, accepting the first slice cut from her cake. "I just wanted to let you know that she wasn't well-liked in the village. There were even rumours that she was a witch, although I never saw a broomstick." Andrea laughed for a split second, a sound quite devoid of mirth. "You need to prove you're a different sort of person to be accepted here. Bring cakes along to the WI instead of those dreadful herbs and jams she made."

"I don't think I've ever made a cake in my life," Maura said. "This is delicious, by the way."

"You'd do well to learn," Andrea said curtly, an ivory moustache of icing decorating her top lip. "Of course, it helps that you don't resemble Enid at all. You're not a gingernut."

The slang sounded strange delivered in such a prim and proper voice. Maura supposed that her visitor was obsessed with baking. She was about to reply when she heard a loud wail from the floor above. Ellie, who normally slept through the night for twelve hours at a stretch, had suddenly woken.

Maura brought the child downstairs to comfort her. Andrea immediately glared at the little girl's tumbling red curls. For her part, Ellie proceeded to throw a tantrum for the first time in her life, lying on the boarded floor and screaming.

"Well, thank you for the cake," Maura said, doing her best to smile.

"I can tell when I'm not wanted," Andrea huffed, slamming the door behind her.

"Wait," Maura said, reopening it and calling to her neighbour. In the blackness outside, Andrea was nowhere to be seen. There were no streetlights in Flemyng Magna; the darkness was total. Maura locked and bolted the door, realising as she did so that it was a city habit. While necessary for self-preservation in London, it might merely deter well-wishers bearing cakes in the depths of Somerset.

Ellie calmed down at once. "Cake," she said.

"Would you like some?"

The little girl nodded, and pointed to her Lego box. She ate a small slice of cake with relish, saving a crumb to feed to her Lego people.

John Twitling visited the next day. "Are you settling in all right?" he asked. "My, the little one looks at home, doesn't she?"

With a beatific smile, Ellie was treating her Lego people to cups of tea.

Maura explained she'd had a visit from Andrea. "I don't imagine she was one of Enid's friends," she said.

Twitling laughed. "No, I don't think so. Andrea divorced recently – I should know; I divorce everybody who's anybody around here – and I rather feel she moved into her cottage because she had her eye on my brother. Enid would have seen through all that, quite apart from being an inconvenient barrier between them."

"Anyway," Maura said, "Andrea brought round a scrumptious cake. You're most welcome to stay for a piece. So long as you don't charge me your hourly rate, that is, because I just can't afford it."

"I'd love to," Twitling beamed. "I say, this really is good. I must send my brother round."

However, it was a week before Maura saw her other neighbour; seven days during which the cake was consumed by a regular stream of visitors, she found a part-time job at the local estate agents, and Ellie began attending the village nursery.

Maura's first visit to the nursery began inauspiciously. A rather harassed-looking young woman opened the door.

"The tinies are having their afternoon nap," she whispered, a finger on her lips. Pointing to Ellie, she asked, "Can you make sure she's quiet, please?"

Ellie copied her. "Quiet," she said. She sucked her thumb.

"I was enquiring after a place for my daughter," Maura said.

The young woman grimaced uneasily. "Sorry, we don't have any." She looked over Maura's shoulder, her demeanour changing. "Hello, Carol," she said brightly.

"Good afternoon, Rosie, my dear." The woman standing behind Maura was much older, her hair dyed an improbable shade of purple. There was no mistaking her voice, with its rich, rolling 'r's.

"You're John Twitling's receptionist," Maura said.

"And secretary, personal shopper and dogsbody," Carol replied. "You'd be Enid's niece, I expect. John said you came in on my day off. What brings you here?"

"I need a nursery place for Ellie."

"Rosie will help you out, won't you, my dear? She always has spaces. Too many young ones are moving away these days, you see."

Rosie chewed her lip. "We can't take children with challenging behaviour. And...I mean, I heard..."

Carol interrupted. "You don't want to listen to everything you hear. John said this little girl was good as gold. I was going to invite her round to play with my grandson. Why don't you take her for a couple of days to see how it goes?"

"I suppose I could," Rosie admitted.

"That'll suit you, won't it, my dear?" Carol said to Maura. "Old Mr Davey tells me he's offered you two days a week."

"That's right," Maura said. "Thank you." She couldn't help but think the village didn't need a newspaper; everyone who lived there seemed to know everything that happened.

"Don't mention it," Carol said. "Do you have any of that cake left? I must drop round."

During the week, spring rain began to fall heavily, drenching the already sodden ground and causing the River Flemyng to swirl and eddy towards the top of its banks.

Maura had just collected Ellie from her nursery when she heard a knock at the door. As usual in Flemyng Magna, the visitor then walked straight in.

He was easily recognisable, a younger and slightly stockier version of John Twitling. "You must be John's brother," Maura exclaimed.

Before he could reply, Ellie said, "Tea."

He laughed. "Yes, on both counts," he said, shaking raindrops out of his curly dark hair. "I'm Luke Twitling, and I'd love some tea – if you have any left by now. First, I wondered if you'd mind me putting some sandbags out in your garden? I'm just about to start building my river defences, and I think I should help you and Andrea with yours."

"I don't have any sandbags," she said, puzzled.

Luke grinned. "Just as well I'm here then." He whistled. "I've never known the river so high at this point. Maybe Enid cast a spell on it before?" He winked.

Luke returned two hours later, when Maura was giving Ellie a bath. "I'd love that tea now," he said.

Maura gasped. "You look like a drowned rat. Of course I'll make you tea. Would you mind waiting until I've taken Ellie out of the bath, though?"

"I'll make it myself," he said. "I'm finished in every sense." He sighed with fatigue. "I'm completely confident our defences will hold, although Andrea doesn't believe me. She's popped outside with a torch to see for herself."

Ellie had taken her Lego people with her. Two sat on the side of the bath, and one was floating in it. Giggling, Ellie pulled out the plug. The Lego figure was sucked into the vortex.

"Oh no, you don't want to lose your nice Lego lady," Maura said, rescuing the toy.

"Nasty," Ellie said, stamping her foot.

The wind must be rising. There was a moaning, shrieking sound audible even above the rain and the raging torrent. Maura looked out of the window. In the dim light of dusk, she saw a figure struggling in the river.

Taking Ellie from the bath and flinging a towel around her, Maura dashed downstairs. "Luke, there's someone in the water!"

Luke raced outside. "It's Andrea," he called. "Do you have a rope?"

She had nothing of use, but Luke managed to find a rope in his shed and threw it to their neighbour. Andrea clung to it, while Luke struggled to pull her to the bank.

"Call the emergency services," he cried, "and go back to Ellie; she shouldn't be left alone."

Maura ran inside her cottage, rushing upstairs to Ellie as soon as she'd arranged for the fire brigade to attend. An ambulance was on its way too, she was told, although localised flooding would delay it.

Ellie was sitting on the bathroom floor, chuckling as she gave cups of tea to two Lego figures. The third was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's your Lego lady, Ellie?" Maura asked.

The little girl grinned and pointed to the bath. "Nasty," she repeated.

"Oh Ellie, it was very naughty of you to throw her down the drain," Maura said. "That's quite enough excitement today, I think. Now it's time for bed."

She towel-dried and combed her daughter's hair, waiting for Luke to knock on the door again and tell her their spiky neighbour was safe.

It didn't happen. "She dropped the rope." Luke's face was grim. Once the rope had gone limp, he'd thrown it to Andrea again and again, watching helplessly as she flailed, failing to grasp it, until finally she was carried away by the surging river.

All they could see and hear now was the river, gurgling and lapping at the sandbags.

Maura was devastated. "I blame myself," she said. "If I'd stayed outside to help you with the rope..."

"Well, you mustn't think that," Luke said, a kindly expression on his face. "I could easily have hauled Andrea out, had she kept her grip. You phoned 999 too. You couldn't have done more. Is your little one all right?"

"She's fine," Maura said. On being put to bed, Ellie had fallen asleep in an instant, two Lego people clutched in her tiny fist.

"I'll make that tea now," Luke said. "I'm sure you could use a cup, and no doubt the fire brigade will too."

Maura nodded, sick with worry, wishing she had stronger drink to offer him. She suspected Luke was keeping busy to cope with Andrea's disappearance.

"It's the hearts and flowers tea," he said, returning with the brown Betty and two mugs. "I hope that's okay." He evidently hadn't found her tea bags.

Maura ventured a cautious sip of Aunt Enid's tea. "Well, this tastes all right," she said.

"More than all right, actually," Luke said. "It's revived me already." His eyes sparkled as he glanced at Maura.

She held his gaze and thought how warm his brown eyes were. Setting down the teapot, she smiled at him, watching as a slow, sappy grin stole across his features.

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**I hope you liked Something In The City! If you did, I bet you'll love my full-length crime thrillers – set in England, of course.** They're fast-paced and fun. Readers have compared me with Ruth Rendell, John Grisham and Robert Galbraith – even master storyteller Jeffrey Archer.

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Very best wishes,

*A. A. Abbott*

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