

A St Ives Christmas Mystery



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For Alan, in loving memory



PROLOGUE

Bristol, 12th April

Merrin McKenzie popped two pieces of bread into the toaster. Toast was not her breakfast of choice but the family's African Grey parrot, Horatio, was watching her intently from his favourite morning perch on top of the wine rack. Horatio insisted on toast every morning, or else he sulked. It was Merrin's firm belief that no creature on the planet could sulk so effectively and consistently as a parrot.

She walked over to the sink and gazed out of the window. It was a beautiful spring morning. In the last couple of days, the cherry blossom had flowered in the garden of the house opposite. The contrast of the pink blossom against the blue sky was lovely.

Her mobile rang. She smiled; it would be her husband, Adam, who had left for work that morning before she was properly awake. She picked up her phone. It wasn't

Adam; it was his sergeant, Harry. In all the years ahead, Merrin would never come to understand why she had experienced no sense of foreboding at that moment.

‘Hello, Harry,’ she said, ‘how are you?’

‘Mrs McKenzie, the gov’s had an accident,’ Harry said.

Still Merrin felt no real sense of panic. Adam, now a chief inspector, had been in the police force for over thirty years. Particularly in the early days of his career, he was often coming home with injuries of one sort or another. ‘What sort of accident?’ she asked.

‘I — I’m not sure,’ said Harry, ‘I wasn’t actually there when it happened. He’s in an ambulance on his way to Southmead. I’ve sent a car round to pick you up and take you to the hospital. It should be with you at any moment.’

And then it hit her. It was like being slammed against a brick wall – the breath forced from her body. Whether it was the tone of Harry’s voice, or a premonition borne of having known Adam her entire adult life, but she knew in that moment, with absolute certainty, that Adam was dead.

She put down the phone with a trembling hand. In the distance, she could hear the sound of a police siren, presumably the car on its way to collect her.

Mechanically, she went to the toaster, tore off a piece of toast and handed it to Horatio.

CHAPTER ONE

Seven months later, Merrin's footsteps echoed as she walked across the kitchen to the window – for the very last time. She stood in her jeans and padded jacket and stared across the road. The cherry tree was bare, of course, which seemed fitting. All that was left in the house, apart from herself, was a small overnight bag, a tub of parrot seed and Horatio in his travel cage. He was absolutely furious.

Adam and Merrin had met in their first term at university and, apart from the odd falling-out in the early days of their relationship, had been inseparable ever since. They both read law, which had led Adam into the police force. On leaving university, Merrin had joined a firm of solicitors to do her articles and had specialised in family law. Without question, they had always known they would marry one day, and within a year of leaving university they had formed a plan. Adam's parents lived

in Argyll, just outside Oban, and Merrin's parents lived in St Ives, West Cornwall. Being so far apart, neither family's location seemed a practical place to settle and so they decided to stay in their university city of Bristol. They found a dilapidated Victorian terraced house, named Arcadia, close to the city centre but not on one of those roads that acted as a rat run during commuter hours. It was delightfully quiet. With help from both sets of parents and an eye-wateringly large mortgage, they moved in on their return from honeymoon and virtually camped for several years, both ambitious and therefore giving priority to building their careers.

It was the imminent arrival of their first and only child, a daughter, Isla, that prompted some serious repair and maintenance work. As a result, Arcadia had gradually morphed into a cosy and much-loved home for the three of them – no, four; one must not forget Horatio.

Standing now in the empty house, memories flooded back. Often, when Isla was tiny, Merrin would bring her down to the kitchen at night in order not to disturb Adam, who worked such long hours. She remembered so many nights, cradling her daughter in an effort to lull her to sleep, standing in front of this very window and staring up at the night sky.

Their kitchen was also their dining room and therefore their party room. And there had been so many parties; in the early days, when most of their friends were still single and childless, the parties involved much loud music accompanied by appropriate quantities of booze;

there was Isla's first birthday party, sitting proudly in her highchair; and the parties Merrin loved best, a myriad of family and friends of all ages – including grandparents, teenagers and rampaging small children. This room had a great many stories to tell.

'Come on, Horatio,' Merrin said, draping a cover over his cage. Normally, Horatio would have tried to tear off the cover, enraged at having the world blotted out. This time, he remained uncharacteristically silent. *He's just as nervous and apprehensive as I am*, Merrin thought.

She put the cage and her bag in the car, then returned to the house and closed the front door. The door was painted a deep red and a small granite plaque alongside displayed the word *Arcadia*. She locked the door and then, after a moment's hesitation, pushed the keys through the letterbox. She took two steps backwards, still facing the house. 'Am I doing the right thing?' she asked.

The house declined to comment.