



The Bowness Bequest

REBECCA TOPE

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
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allisonandbusby.com

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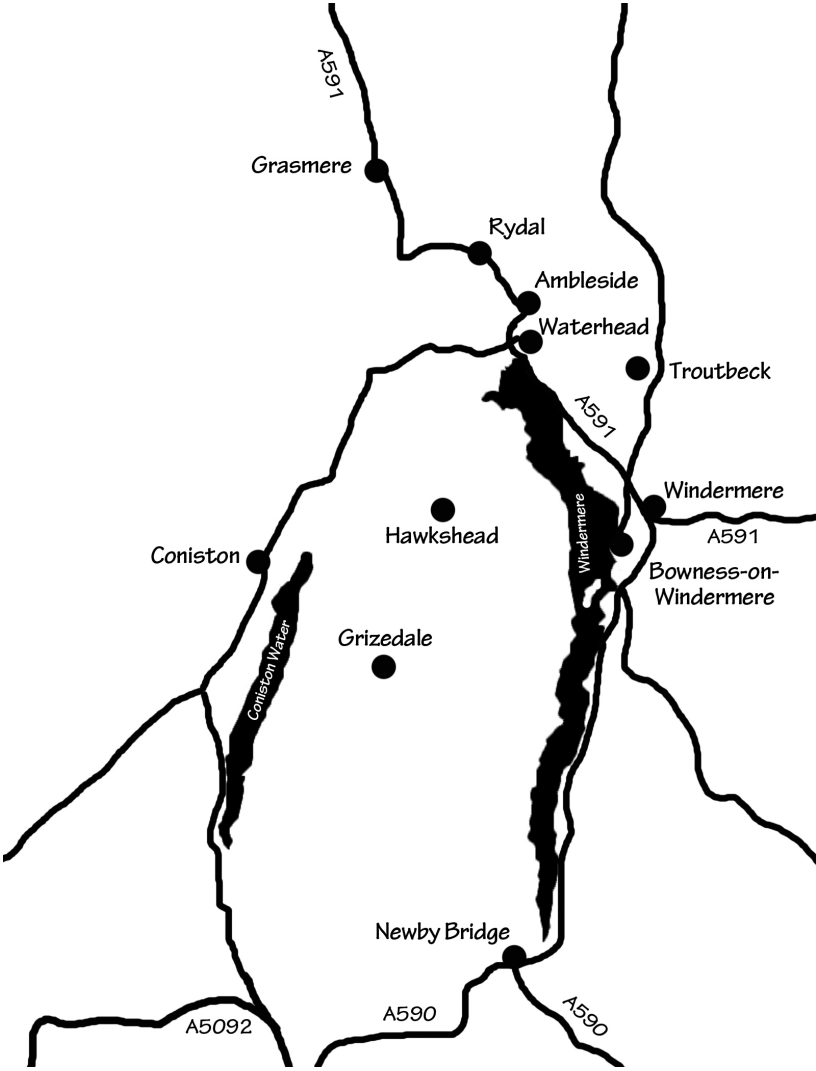
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*Another one dedicated to Sue,
even if she never reads them*



Author's Note

The towns and villages in this story are real, but the auction house has been invented.



Prologue

As funerals went, this was a low-key one, in Simmy's view. The family had lost a wife and mother, and were accordingly bereft and bemused, but they had not been flamboyant in the manner of her send-off. It had been a sad and shocking death from pancreatic cancer. 'The one they have no clue how to cure,' said Simmy's mother sourly. 'Or prevent,' she added for good measure.

A formulaic cremation, followed by tea and cake in a modest hall in Bowness, had been all the family could manage. There were perhaps sixty people assembled, including Simmy's parents. Frances Henderson had been sixty-three; an ordinary woman struck down by a fast-working cancer. Friends, colleagues and offspring were seated around the formica tables. The average age appeared to be below fifty, which perhaps made the occasion unusual, but in every other respect it offered little worthy of note.

Simmy carried her little plate of cakes around, in search of a seat. The one she had left to collect her food had quickly been nabbed by a man who looked eager to talk to Angie, Simmy's mother. There was a table containing three women of roughly Simmy's own age, and she diffidently joined them.

'Hi, I'm Simmy,' she said. 'My mother was one of Frances's oldest friends.'

'June, Cheryl and Hannah,' said one of the women, pointing to each in turn.

'Oh – Hannah! Of course, it's you. What a fool I am.' Simmy was deeply embarrassed. 'I only saw the back of your head at the crematorium. What is it – twenty years since we last met? But you haven't changed.'

She paused, her mind full of memories of a shared childhood with the five Hendersons and their parents. A series of flashbacks had been assailing her for the past hour, and still had her in their thrall. The three boys, each with his own individual habits and preferences, arguing with the two younger sisters, ignoring their parents on the sporadic occasions when there was an attempt at discipline. Simmy, with her mum and dad, trying to join in, and mostly failing. And now, here they all were, so oddly different from their adolescent selves, with their mother dead and their father cocooned in an invisible wrapping of shock. He had spoken a few words to Angie, nodded at Russell and frowned at Simmy as if unsure of who she was.

But Hannah was remarkably the same, with her cloud of thick hair framing small features. There was no possibility of failing to recognise her, face-to-face. 'Simmy,' she said now. 'That's okay. You've changed a lot. Were you always so tall?'

Simmy laughed. ‘Pretty much, I think.’ She took a seat next to the woman introduced as Cheryl. ‘Have I met you before as well?’

‘No, I don’t think so, although I know who you are. We live just over the road – I think we know everybody here. Neighbours, workmates, family.’ She looked around the room, not appearing to take any pleasure in her social knowledge. ‘I’ve known the Hendersons for ages. I worked with Kit in the carpet warehouse. It was my first job from school. June too, for a bit. She knows everybody as well.’

Simmy focused on the other woman. ‘Hello, June,’ she said.

‘Hiya,’ said June listlessly.

Cheryl was a colourless creature, wearing a bulky dark-blue coat. Plump, pale and clearly not very interested in Persimmon Brown. Her friend was prettier, with long bleached hair and a full mouth. Both looked to be in their early forties.

‘A man stole my seat,’ said Simmy, waving a hand at the other table.

‘That’s my husband,’ said Cheryl. ‘Malcolm. He insisted on coming, but I don’t think he knows anyone, really. He doesn’t like me to go anywhere on my own.’ She preened slightly at this, as if it were a source of pride. ‘You not married?’ she added carelessly.

‘Divorced. Your husband’s chatting to my mother as if he knows her,’ Simmy observed.

‘He does that. We were in the row behind you at the crem, and he recognised your mum. He’ll be checking it out. I told you we know everybody, just about.’

‘I remember your mum very well,’ said Hannah. ‘She was always great on our seaside holidays. Full of all those stories about the swinging sixties. I loved all that. I was sorry when everybody got too old for them and we all drifted apart.’

‘Where’s Lynn?’ Simmy asked. ‘I only saw the back of her head as well. You two were always so alike.’

‘Still are, according to most people. She’s doing the tea, in the kitchen. Can’t let anybody get on with their job without interfering. She’s still furious with George for bunking off right after the cremation. Says he has a duty to be here.’

‘Poor old George. He’d hate all this, wouldn’t he?’

‘Time he grew up and got over himself,’ said the man’s unfeeling sister. ‘But, if anything, he just gets worse.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Simmy, still immersed in early memories of the Henderson family. ‘Eddie makes up for it.’

‘Not to mention Christopher,’ said Hannah. ‘Three brothers, all as different from each other as anyone could imagine.’

Simmy nodded in agreement and sipped her tea.

Chapter One

The shop door pinged huskily at two o'clock on the Monday afternoon following the Friday funeral. *Must see what's the matter with it*, thought Simmy. It wasn't electronic, but a simple old-fashioned bell above the door. Perhaps there was some fluff caught in the works.

An unmistakably familiar man was walking through the shop towards her. Brown eyes, hair with a hint of auburn in it. Tall, with big hands and a hesitant smile, he combined features from both his parents. Something quick in his movements conjured his father, while the big head and long chin were from his mother's side.

'Christopher,' she smiled, mentally running through potential reasons for his being there. Yet again, the sight of him revived sweet memories of sand and salt and fried fish, combined with an easy intimacy that had existed from her earliest days.

'Have you got a minute?' He met her eyes with a look

she had seen on men countless times before. A look that said, *Just how well do we really know each other?* She wondered whether a grown-up brother would have asked a similar question, if she had ever had one.

She spread her hands to indicate the empty shop. Early November had to be one of the quietest points in the year as far as a florist's business was concerned. 'Very much so,' she said.

'I thought it would be better to come in person. Much better than a letter from a solicitor.'

'Pardon?'

'My mother left you something in her will. I thought you might know about it already.'

She was bemused. 'No, I had no idea.'

'Well, our families have been friends forever. She approved of your new life. It's not so surprising, is it?' He seemed impatient, even mildly irritated.

'But . . .' The dead woman had five children, and had not been wealthy. The modest bungalow in Bowness had always needed painting or pointing or roof tiles replaced. A widower remained there with his memories. His offspring were all still in the area, three of them married.

'She was fond of you,' he repeated.

'Yes. And I almost never went to see her, since coming here. She was my mother's friend much more than mine. Did she leave Mum anything?'

'You'll have to ask her,' he said uncomfortably. 'It's supposed to be confidential.'

'Are you an executor?' Simmy was very hazy about the way such things worked, but she was under the impression that people's wills became common knowledge once the

person had died. Her parents had never yet discussed their own end-of-life affairs with her, but she had a suspicion that they might get around to it before much longer. When they did – if they did – then being an only child would presumably make everything nice and simple.

‘Oh, yes,’ he sighed. ‘Eldest son, and all that. It’s us three boys, actually. Lynn and Hannah are sulking about being left out, but they’ll soon realise they’ve had a lucky escape.’

‘Sounds complicated. I can’t imagine that George will be very useful.’

‘George is a law unto himself, as always. He’s going to take a while to settle down, after losing Mum. But actually, the business side of things is all fine. Eddie and I are cracking on with it quite happily so far. And Dad’s okay with it all. He only wants to be left to get on with everything the same as always. He hasn’t really taken on board that he’s on his own now.’ He sighed. ‘He’s really not in very good shape mentally. I hadn’t realised just how far he’s sunk. He’ll need somebody to watch out for him from now on. And everybody seems to think it’ll be me.’

‘I like your dad,’ she said, with a degree of exaggeration. ‘I always did.’ In truth, she had seldom been able to feel anything for the man. She couldn’t get closer than liking the *idea* of him, rather than the reality. He had been a detached sort of father to his large family, but basically harmless, as far as she knew. He maintained a steady income and never hit anybody.

‘You’ll have to visit him, then. He’d be thrilled if you did.’

Simmy entertained another rapid kaleidoscope of childhood memories in which the Straw and Henderson families had holidayed together, year after year, in North

Wales. Christopher and she had always been good mates, swimming together and pootling in the rock pools. They had been born on the same day in the same hospital, which explained the friendship. The two new mothers had become welded together, despite the subsequent move of the Hendersons to Cumbria when the children were in their teens. Ten years later, Angie and Russell Straw had followed them, and ten years after that, Simmy too had moved north.

‘So what have I inherited?’ she asked again.

‘Come down to the house, and I’ll show you.’

The Hendersons lived at the southern end of Bowness. It would take twenty minutes to walk each way from Simmy’s shop in the middle of Windermere. Longer coming back, in fact, due to the uphill climb. Perhaps she’d take the van and save the time. ‘After work,’ she nodded. ‘Is that okay?’

He looked uneasy. ‘I suppose so. Can’t you come now?’ He glanced around the shop, evidently searching for a deputy.

‘Sorry. Bonnie isn’t in today. She takes Mondays off, in lieu of Saturdays. I can’t just close up for an hour or more, can I? Shouldn’t you be at work yourself?’

Christopher’s career had always been a source of fascination to the Straws. He had gone to university for a year and then dropped out, spending the next two years working on an organic farm and fighting against a variety of perceived ecological threats. At twenty-two, he then switched track again and took part in an epic voyage on a sailing ship, down to the Straits of Magellan and up the western side of the Americas. None of his friends or relations saw him again until he hit twenty-five, got married

and settled in Solihull working for a stonemason. At no stage did he have any reliable income; a fact that his wife eventually found intolerable. She wanted children and an easy life. ‘Why in the world did she ever marry him?’ Angie Straw repeatedly demanded.

‘Because she loved him,’ said Frances, his mother. ‘Obviously.’

Christopher was unarguably lovable. Women melted under his charm. The past ten years had seen him mostly based in Cumbria, albeit with regular absences. The stonemasonry fizzled out, and he took another swerve into antique dealing. Here he finally found his niche. After dabbling in china and glass, then stamps and postcards, he settled into a post as second in command at a thriving auction house, gaining a reputation for straight dealing and bottomless knowledge. He did most of the high-profile work as auctioneer, while his boss sat in a small room and offered valuations and expert identifications of a vast range of objects.

‘Mondays are quiet for me, too,’ he said. ‘We had a big sale on Saturday, so I’ve earned a day off, same as your Bonnie. The girls are always crotchety on the Monday after a sale. People forget to collect their purchases, and then phone in a panic. The staff have to keep their wits about them, in case anyone tries to claim the wrong things, accidentally on purpose. And it’s all got to go on the website. I’m best out of their way.’

‘Is it an antique, then? My bequest?’ Her curiosity was starting to blossom, after the initial surprise.

‘Wait and see,’ he insisted with the first proper smile since he came in. ‘I’ll be there if you come at five or soon after. Dad’s going to want to talk to you as well.’

He left awkwardly, his brow furrowed as if burdened with a long list of tasks to complete. Other people to inform about an inheritance, perhaps. Simmy watched him thoughtfully, her head full of questions. *Had* Frances left anything to Angie, Simmy's mother? Did anyone in the family resent this apparent generosity to an outsider? At the funeral, the widower had held himself straight and stiff and nodded randomly at anyone who approached him. He was seventy-four, in good physical health. Angie Straw had reported that Kit was wearing rather better than her own husband, afflicted with an abrupt decline into a type of paranoid neurosis. The two wives had enjoyed regular sessions, in which they appeared to fortify each other through the disappointments and tedium of stale old marriages. Angie would pass on a few snippets to her daughter, generally along the lines that she might not be missing a great deal by being single again.

But then everything collapsed with Frances's cancer and Angie lost her highly valued friend. From diagnosis to death had been five weeks. 'And that's a lot more than some people get,' said the visiting Macmillan nurse.

Mr Henderson was another Christopher, but was known to everyone as Kit. Frances had a sister named Christine, shortened to Chris, which meant that the firstborn son was always referred to by his full name. 'Why in the world didn't you think of something else for him?' Angie had demanded, on the very day the child was born. 'It's a family thing,' Frances had replied. 'There's no ducking it.'

Angie had been almost as scathing about all her friend's subsequent children's names. 'So dull,' she said. Simmy always winced, with her own exotic 'Persimmon' more

burdensome than she liked. Hannah or Lynn would have suited her very nicely.

The afternoon drifted by, with a single customer searching for an African violet that would be guaranteed not to die. Simmy was the soul of patience, explaining the plant's preference for water from beneath the pot, as well as adequate warmth and light. 'The clue's in the name,' she smiled. 'They're from Africa, where conditions are very different from here.' She hoped, by the end, that at least a few of her hints had taken root. So many people seemed to be unaware that plants were living things, with all the same needs for nourishment as any other creature.

Accustomed to spells of quiet in the shop, she occupied herself with ordering new stock, and making plans for the Christmas display that Bonnie was due to create in a month's time. The girl had a flair for design and colour, already dismissing any notions of wreaths or poinsettias, suggesting all kinds of alternatives that would catch the eye of anyone passing their window. She intended to make liberal use of gold paint and glass baubles, she warned her employer.

'It'll be amazing,' Ben Harkness had approved. He and Bonnie were a closely entwined couple, bonded by each being seen as unusual, if not downright bizarre, by the world at large. Ben was just eighteen, Bonnie a few months younger. He was studying for a clutch of A levels, and she had abandoned any further attempt at passing exams, having had an interrupted school career that left her with a pathetically meagre set of GCSEs. Nobody doubted that she would make a success of life, regardless of formal qualifications.

Simmy had been running her Windermere flower shop for a year and a half, slowly learning her way around the Lakes, and discovering the different characters of the various small towns: Ambleside with its confusing streets and legions of hotels and guesthouses; Coniston with its Old Man lowering protectively just behind the houses; Hawkshead, with its timeless little huddle of odd-shaped buildings. She loved them all, as well as the fells that surrounded them. Windermere and Bowness were both a lot less distinctive, on lower ground, with the fells away in the distance. The water lapped gently at the edges of Bowness, and a patch of tame woodland sheltered Windermere from the worst ravages of the winter weather. ‘Soft,’ people said of these two settlements. You were safe and warm, down here – unlike on the unpredictable heights of Kirkstone or Grasmere.

And although Simmy found the wilder regions thrilling and beautiful, she had to admit she spent almost all her time in the lower reaches. Her home in Troutbeck might sit on rising land, closer to the fells than it was to the lake, but it was very nearly as hospitable as Windermere for much of the year. Troutbeck, she had concluded, was as remote and adventurous as she was ever going to feel comfortable with.

The first few months after moving north had been devoted to establishing the shop, a process involving mountains of paperwork and rapid learning. By the end of the summer of the previous year, she had everything in place and a growing stream of people wanting her flowers. Assisted by Melanie Todd, a local girl of considerable ability, she had supplied weddings, funerals, birthdays and other

momentous life events with suitable floral embellishment. And along the way – at a wedding, then a birthday and after that three other commissions – people had been violently killed. Simmy had been drawn into investigations and personal danger, merely by virtue of delivering flowers. The first occasion was just over a year ago now, and she profoundly hoped that the anniversary would mark a change of fortune, leaving the whole business of murder far behind her.

The fact of an unexpected bequest seemed to add weight to this hope. It had never happened to her before. Even when her grandparents had died, they had left their meagre savings to the generation above Simmy. Not so much as a silver candlestick had come her way.

Visions of jewellery, or a picture, or a handsome piece of china filled her head. Something that Frances had kept tucked out of sight – because Simmy could not remember ever seeing anything of the kind on display in the house. One thing she was sure of: it would not be money. How could it be, when the family had always been struggling to find cash for holidays or a new car, or a replacement television? Kit Henderson had worked as a carpet fitter for most of his life, earning little more than the basic retainer during the big recession nearly ten years earlier, without the added commission for jobs done, since few people saw a new carpet as a high priority. Although the situation improved, he had seemed glad to retire on a very modest pension at seventy, leaving his wife to keep them afloat with what she earned as an administrator in Barrow Hospital. ‘I’m really just an office clerk,’ she would say, ‘but everyone calls themselves administrators these days.’

The hours finally passed until five, at which point Simmy hastily locked the shop and went to the van parked on a tiny paved area behind the shop. Her car was somewhere out on the eastern side of Windermere, where parking was free and unrestricted. She would leave it every morning, and have to try to recall exactly where in the afternoon. When she got back from Bowness, she would have to locate it in the dark, damp streets where all the cars looked the same.

Eagerly, she turned the opposite way from usual, and headed southwards towards Bowness. *I've got a beque-e-est*, she sang softly to herself. It made her feel oddly blessed, as if an angel had brushed her with its wings. Within a very few minutes, she would discover exactly what it was that Frances Henderson had left her.