



The Ghost of Christmas Paws

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CHAPTER ONE

The early arrival of winter was taking its toll on the town. Since the middle of November, the residents had been cloaked in icy fog and torrential rain, punctuated by two heavy falls of snow, which – though beautiful – had driven cats indoors and brought life to a standstill. Now, with only a week to go before Christmas, a new threat had come knocking: a virulent strain of cat flu, which was sweeping the town with terrible consequences.

Local businesses had closed their doors in a vain attempt to stop the flu spreading. Elsie Haddock hadn't fried so much as a chip for two weeks in her popular high-street fish emporium; Hilda Dabit had abandoned her dry-cleaning business and taken to her bed; and even Shroud and Trestle, undertakers, were

running a skeleton staff. Malkin and Sprinkle, the town's department store, had been forced to impose the wearing of face masks in their food hall to fight the germs, and the haberdashery department had been closed altogether since Lotus Ping collapsed behind her counter in a bout of violent sneezing, upending the button cupboard and burying herself in an avalanche of fancy fastenings. Turner Page's newly opened library had closed its doors for fear of the flu being spread via the books, and he had offered his mobile library van as an overnight shelter with hot soup and biscuits for cats who had no permanent refuge from the weather.

There had been a number of fatalities, although it was hard to say how many as most sufferers had isolated themselves and were dying unnoticed in their beds. Agnes Featherstone Clump, the local district nurse, was at her wits' end in trying to administer to the population, and if Irene Peggedrip, the town's psychic, hadn't offered her house as a makeshift field hospital, more cats would have been awaiting burial in Shroud and Trestle's refrigeration unit.

Betty and Beryl Butter's pie and pastry shop was one of the few businesses still standing, and served as a beacon of hope in a sea of coughing and spluttering. Beryl herself had succumbed in the early days of the outbreak but her sister carried on bravely, keeping the bread ovens fired up and administering large mugs of beef tea to her flu-ridden sibling, nursing her back to

health in time to dress the Christmas window.

The No. 2 Feline Detective Agency had its offices in the old storeroom behind the Butters' shop, and was run by Hettie Bagshot and her sidekick Tilly Jenkins. The two tabbies had earned themselves quite a reputation in recent months, having solved several high-profile murder cases and a number of minor thefts involving a Battenberg cake and a large wedge of French Brie. Like most offices in the town, the Detective Agency was closed and had been transformed into a cosy bedsitter for the two cats to lie low in until the ravages of the epidemic died down. Their rent included luncheon vouchers to be exchanged in the Butters' shop and as much coal as their fireplace could consume, and had it not been for Lavender Stamp, postmistress, who sneezed all over Tilly as she delivered her Christmas catalogues, all would have been well.

Tilly was having a terrible night of coughing and sneezing, falling in and out of a delirious state that began to frighten Hettie as she paced the floor, doubtful of her friend's ability to withstand the killer virus. She watched as Tilly tossed and turned on her cushion in front of the fire, first hot and bathed in sweat as her fur clung to her, then shivering with cold, her breath slow and rasping. This was Hettie's third night of vigil, and a brief visit from Agnes Featherstone Clump only confirmed what she knew in her heart: Tilly was in grave danger, and the next few days would be crucial.

Her friendship with Tilly had surprised her. Hettie wasn't the sort of cat to form lasting relationships of any kind, and her life had been a chequered journey of stormy seas, energetic endeavours and a host of brilliant ideas that never quite saw the light of day. With Tilly it was different: encouraged by her simple view of life – a good dinner, an open fire and a warm blanket at the end of each day – Hettie had never been happier, but there was a strong chance now that her own warm blanket was about to be pulled from under her.

She shivered, only partly from the cold, and pulled her dressing gown closer, eyeing the small pile of Christmas presents neatly stacked in the corner by the staff sideboard – the last thing that Tilly had done before falling ill. She had spent two days battling with sticky tape and labels under a makeshift tent so that Hettie's prying eyes wouldn't spoil the surprises procured from Jessie's charity shop, and she had been so excited – even more so when Hettie suggested that their coffers could run to a real Christmas tree to show the parcels off to their best advantage. That was several days ago now, and the prospect of Christmas had held very little magic in Hettie's mind since; the very thought of facing it without her friend was unbearable.

Hettie tiptoed across to the fire to add some more coal, careful not to wake Tilly now that she had finally

fallen into a deep sleep. Their friend Bruiser, who lived in a shed at the bottom of the Butters' garden, had brought in some apple logs as a get-well present and Hettie selected one and placed it in the middle of the coals. Everyone was so kind, and Tilly was getting the best possible care, but would it be enough? She was older than Hettie, riddled with arthritis, and had lost several teeth during years of living rough before an invitation to share Hettie's small rented room had changed her life.

There was a gentle tap on the door and Hettie responded immediately, hoping that Tilly would sleep on. The imposing form of Betty Butter stood in the hallway, proffering two steaming mugs of beef tea and a selection of savoury tarts, fresh from the oven. 'And how is the patient today?' she whispered, handing over the tray.

'Not good. She's had an awful night and I'm so worried about her. I don't know what to do for the best.'

Betty glanced at the heap of blankets by the fire, watching the rise and fall of Tilly's laboured breathing. 'Don't you give up. Our old mother always used to say that there's nowt to shout about till the undertakers are coming down the path.'

Hettie knew that the handed-down pearls of Lancashire wisdom were meant well, but she found no real comfort in Betty's words. Her tired eyes lingered

on the savouries, hoping that they might give her the strength to fight some of the darker thoughts that had engulfed her during the night. ‘Thank you for the tea and pastries,’ she said. ‘They look lovely. I’ll see if I can get Tilly to drink something when she wakes up.’

Betty bustled back to the shop and Hettie shut the door quietly behind her. She collapsed into the armchair by the fire, suddenly too tired to eat or drink, leaving the beef tea and tarts untouched on the table.

CHAPTER TWO

How long the two cats slept was hard to say, but it was Tilly who woke first, pleased to find that she felt much better. Abandoning her blankets, she stared out of the window in sheer delight: a thick covering of snow had fallen in the Butters' backyard overnight, and a pale winter sun made everything bright and sparkling. 'Ooh lovely!' she cried, clapping her arthritic paws together. 'I hope it stays till Christmas. I *love* Christmas!'

Tilly's joy was rudely interrupted by the appearance of Lavender Stamp in the yard, laden down with her postbag. She pulled her cardigan on over her pyjamas and met the postmistress at the back door, relieving her of a sack full of Christmas cards for the Butters and a single letter addressed to the No. 2 Feline Detective Agency, postmarked Cornwall. Returning

to their room, she turned the letter over in her paws and noticed that it had been sealed with bright red wax and stamped with what appeared to be a baronial crest.

Hettie – feeling the icy blast from the open door – was slowly coming to her senses after a good long sleep, and smiled with relief to see Tilly up and about. ‘Who was that at the door?’ she asked, struggling into her dressing gown.

‘Lavender Stamp. And look – we’ve got a very important letter.’

Hettie did her best to focus on the object of Tilly’s enthusiasm as it was waved in front of her. ‘Why is it important?’ she demanded, snatching the letter from Tilly’s paws. ‘We’re not expecting anything important.’

Tilly watched as Hettie examined the letter, willing her to open it. Her friend looked closely at the seal, then sniffed the envelope. ‘I thought so,’ she said, sniffing it again. ‘Fish. That’s what it is – fish. And look at the seal – it’s a crab on some sort of coat of arms.’ Tilly sniffed the envelope at Hettie’s invitation and had to agree that the letter did indeed have a very strong smell of fish. ‘I suppose we’d better open it,’ Hettie said thoughtfully. ‘Although I’m not very happy about getting letters from cats we don’t know. It’s a bit of a bloody cheek if you ask me.’

Tilly ignored Hettie’s comment, fearing that it would turn into a full-blown rant about the invasion

of her personal space. Instead, she put the kettle on and loaded the toaster with two slices of bread, knowing that they would both be in a much better state of mind after they'd eaten. The letter sat unopened on the mantelpiece while they chewed and licked their way through two rounds of toast, thickly spread with cheese triangles and washed down with two mugs of hot tea. Finally, after much cleaning of ears, paws and whiskers, Hettie reached for the envelope.

'Now then, let's see what this is all about,' she said, breaking the seal with her sharpest claw.

'Oh do read it out loud so we both know together,' cried Tilly, climbing onto the arm of Hettie's chair so that she could look over her shoulder.

The letter appeared to have been through several wars. It was splashed with mud and gave off a much stronger smell of fish than had been hinted at by its envelope. Noting the same coat of arms on the letterhead, Hettie began to read, allowing herself to lapse into a mild Cornish accent for greater effect.

*Lady Eloise Crabstock-Singe
Crabstock Manor
Porthladle
Cornwall*

*Dear Miss Bagshot,
I understand that you take on the solvin' of
murders and the like, and I would be most obliged*

if you could sort out a crime that 'as 'aunted my family for years – and it's still 'appenin'!

It is most urgent and I fear for my life. As I am the only one left, I'm next! I know it's comin' up to Christmas, but that's when it 'appens if it's goin' to 'appen, and she 'as been seen twice in the kitchen and once on the stairs since December arrived.

I am enclosin' two train tickets for Bodkin Moor Station, as you should not come on your own. I shall 'ave you collected and taken to Jam Makers Inn overnight, then on to Crabstock Manor the next day. I shall expect you on 20th December, and shall order your rooms to be made ready dreckly.

I will pay you in more gold than you can ever spend if you save my life.

In 'opes,

Eloise Crabstock-Singe

Lady of Crabstock Manor, Porthladle, and all surroundin' fields and allotments.

‘Well, that’s completely ridiculous!’ said Hettie, tossing the letter aside. ‘Sounds like something from one of those penny dreadfuls you bring home from Turner Page’s library. It must be a hoax of some sort.’

Ignoring the slight on her reading habits, Tilly tipped the envelope upside down and two train tickets

floated down onto the hearth rug. ‘The tickets are real enough. They’re dated for tomorrow, the 19th, and Christmas in Cornwall in a big old mansion sounds so exciting! We can have our own Christmas when we get back.’ She began to dance round the room, finding it hard to contain herself as Hettie read the letter again.

‘Well, I’m not saying we can’t go,’ Hettie said at last. ‘But this could all be a wild goose chase.’

‘A wild seagull!’ corrected Tilly. ‘They have seagulls in Cornwall.’

Hettie ignored the interruption and pushed on with her concerns. ‘You haven’t been well, and it’s a very long way to Cornwall. The weather’s bad and there are bound to be cancellations and hold-ups. Do we really want to get stuck in a snowdrift on Bodkin Moor?’ Tilly’s heart leapt at such an exciting prospect, and she gave very little thought to the harsh reality of Hettie’s words. ‘And then there’s the crime itself – who is ‘SHE’ who hangs round in the kitchen and on the stairs, and why is this Eloise Crabstock-Twinge the last one standing? This letter gives us very little to go on, and don’t they have aitches in Cornwall?’

Tilly giggled as she struggled to pull a battered old suitcase out from under the staff sideboard, bringing a multitude of cobwebs, dust balls and stray custard creams with it. ‘If we’re going to take the job, you’d better start calling her Singe and not Twinge. These

aristocats lay great store by their names. And Cornwall may not have aitches, but it is the official home of PASTIES!

Hettie gave up trying to be sensible and joined Tilly in her endeavours to pack everything they would need for the long journey ahead: hats, mittens and scarves; three of Tilly's best cardigans and two pairs of Hettie's warm business slacks with matching striped polo neck jumpers; winceyette pyjamas; long woolly socks; Tilly's penguin hot-water bottle that Hettie had bought for her the Christmas before; and Hettie's catnip pouch and pipe.

After a struggle and much swearing, the lid to the overburdened suitcase was finally closed and the safety catches snapped into place. 'I think you'll have to take your tartan shopper as well,' suggested Hettie. 'We'll need to take food and drink for the train, and God knows what home comforts will be on offer at Jam Makers Inn! I'll ask Bruiser to run us to the station in Scarlet. It'll be a bit of a squeeze but we'll manage somehow.'

Miss Scarlet was the No. 2 Feline Detective Agency's official mode of transport, a shiny red motorbike and sidecar christened by Tilly after a character in her favourite board game and skilfully driven by Bruiser, an old friend of Hettie's who had become indispensable to the agency and to the Butter sisters as their 'lad about the yard' – so indispensable, in fact,

that the Butters had provided a purpose-built shed for Bruiser and Miss Scarlet to live in at the bottom of their vegetable patch.

Hettie pulled on some warm clothes and – after locating her wellingtons, which she eventually found in the second drawer of their filing cabinet – trudged down the snowy garden path to inform Bruiser of their travel plans. Tilly rescued her tartan shopper from its parking space by one of the bread ovens and sat at the table making a list of the foods they would need for the journey. By the time she'd finished, she'd filled two sides of a piece of paper and was beginning to wonder whether the restaurant car on the train might be a better idea. Remembering what Hettie had said about the possibility of delays and cancellations, she eventually decided to stick with her list, trimming it down a little before leaving it on the table for Hettie's final approval. Then she dressed herself in one of her 'at home' cardigans and set about tidying their room and dragging the suitcase out into the back hallway for their early morning departure.

It was some time before Hettie returned. Tilly watched from the window until she came into view as a dark shape in the middle of a rather thick snow flurry. She skipped to the back door, ready to assist with the wellingtons which always seemed to fit on very easily and refuse to come off without collective acts of extreme violence. To make matters worse, the

wellingtons were caked in frozen snow. Hettie sat on the door mat while Tilly pulled with all her strength until eventually boot one gave way with such force that she shot across the hallway, landing in an ungainly heap by one of the bread ovens, the wellington still firmly between her paws. The second boot surrendered with much less effort and the two cats stumbled back into their room to warm their icy paws by the fire.

‘Bruiser said he’s been to Porthladle,’ said Hettie, getting a crumpled map out of the staff sideboard. ‘He says it’s full of sardines and old cats mending fishing nets.’

‘Well, we like sardines so that’s a good thing,’ said Tilly, trying to remain positive and hoping that Hettie wasn’t about to change her mind about their trip.

‘Look – here’s Porthladle, and Crabstock Manor’s marked. It looks like it’s hanging off a cliff! Bruiser says the coast round there has the worst storms in the whole of Cornwall, and as for Jam Makers Inn, he reckons there’s something odd about the place but he can’t quite remember what it is.’ Hettie struggled with the map until she had located Bodkin Moor. ‘Well, I doubt that many travellers stop off there. It’s in the middle of nowhere and not even marked on the map as far as I can see.’

Tilly scanned the area that Hettie had pointed to and finally settled on a spot marked with a cross. ‘That’ll be it. They always put inns at crossroads in

films, and that's where the two paths that cross the moor meet.'

'You wouldn't want to be stuck out there without a pie and a packet of crisps on a cold night, would you?' muttered Hettie, as she folded the map and put it ready to take with them.

'Speaking of pies,' said Tilly, reaching for her list, 'what do you think to this? I've allowed for elevenses, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and supper, with a few extras for emergencies just in case Jam Makers Inn doesn't do food.'

Hettie looked down the list, impressed enough to read it out loud, much to Tilly's delight, and she listened as if hearing it for the first time. 'Ham rolls, flapjack, egg and bacon tarts, fresh cream scones, cheese scones, iced fancies, beef and ale pie, salmon turnovers, crisps (2 x plain, 2 x marmite), sausage rolls, cream horns and two bottles of fiery ginger beer. I see you've crossed out the cheese baps and Betty's iced Christmas novelty biscuits – I think they should stay if you can fit them in. It's a very long way to Cornwall, and you need building up.'

Tilly was thrilled with Hettie's approval and wasted no time in pulling on her own wellingtons to trudge round to the front of the Butters' shop to place her order. The rest of the day was spent in writing Christmas cards and sending notes to friends, informing them of their imminent departure. Tilly had exchanged their

luncheon vouchers for a steak and kidney pie, and the two cats dined early, watching the evening news and an episode of *Top Cat* before turning in for an early night, hoping to wake refreshed for whatever the next few days would bring.