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THE MAGPIE TREE

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ONE

The day I went to Jamaica Inn was the day I saw a man hanged.

The hanging was at the gaol, in Bodmin, and it was done early, before the sun had time to rise higher than the walls where the gallows stood. By evening, I was in Jamaica, and the hanged man in the ground, dropped in a pit behind the walls they'd hanged him from. He'd never escape. His bones would soften into the soil and he'd become that wretched place, feed it as he faded, while I was free to leave the moor, go on with the rest of my life. That's what I told myself as the cart rattled up the high road to Jamaica Inn.

But it was a lie. I would never be free of what had been done.

The inn was full of bodies and all of them men, save for me and Mrs Williams. That was not her name, of course. Not her true name, at any rate. She had told me she was called Anna Drake. I didn't know if I should believe her.

She'd asked me to work with her. I didn't know if I should believe *that* either but I had nowhere to go after the hanging was done but to Jamaica Inn, where she was going. I'd lost my work on the farm because of meeting her. This woman calling herself Anna Drake.

This woman now asking the man behind the bar the price of rooms.

Paying was her concern for I had nothing to my name, not a ha'penny, and so I looked about me at this place she'd taken me to.

Jamaica Inn was like all inns – white walls yellowed, slate flags dirtied with mud and candle wax. A thin dog gnawed a bone in the corner. The crowding made everyone too close, forced people to whisper. Pipe smoke curled at the ceiling, as if the fog had crept in from the moor beyond. The smoke didn't deaden whispers, though, as fog would. Instead it moved them about the room so that the air seethed with the secrets of the men gathered in that place, and there were many that came to Jamaica Inn. It brought them up from the south and took them north, for the inn stood on a good road. The coaches stopped there. You could get far away from Bodmin Moor if you called at Jamaica.

I knew another way to leave that inn, that inn thick with the smell of meat cooking and of men. To leave the whole world behind. To forget the sight of my friend jerking at the end of a rope.

Anna caught me, of course, and stayed my hand. She didn't care for thieving. I said to myself, later, Shilly. You'll have it later.

'One room, you're wanting?' the barman said.

'Yes,' I said.

'We'll take two.' Anna counted out the money.

'Better you're in together,' the barman said in a low voice. 'Ladies on their own in this place . . . Well. You're safer with a friend.'

That was my thinking too, but Anna was of a different mind.

'Two rooms will suit *us* better,' she said.

The barman said he was away to fetch the keys and I was left in no doubt about Anna and me. Though I'd had her in my arms the night before, her flesh against mine, her wetness in my hands, she'd had her fill of me.

A group of men, huddled nearest the cold hearth, had taken her fancy now. She half-turned to listen to them talking.

‘Coal,’ said one of the men. ‘That’s what them wicked women done. Turned him into a lump of coal.’

‘A little boy?’ said his friend. ‘They turned him to coal?’

‘You heard me.’ He was old, this one speaking of coal. Wrinkled as a summer apple forgotten at the bottom of a winter barrel.

‘You know him?’ Anna whispered to me.

‘Why would I? We’re ten miles from the farm.’

‘That’s hardly far, Shilly.’

But ten miles could take you a long way on Bodmin Moor. Into a world of strangers. Into a marsh and so to your end. Anna didn’t understand such a place.

The wrinkled man’s two friends were each a little younger than him, but not by many years. I had the sense they were often to be found so seated. It was the drink. They reeked of it.

‘Them women lured the child into their cottage,’ one of the friends was saying now. ‘Tricked him.’

‘And when the cottage door was locked on him,’ the wrinkled man said, ‘them creatures said their Devil words and the boy was changed.’

‘And then they burnt him!’ one of the friends said.

‘And then the boy was ash!’ said the other. ‘They put him in the tea tin and stirred it up so his mother and father didn’t know he was in there, and then his mother—’

‘She boiled him up and drank him.’ The wrinkled man took a long swig of beer and the others screeched with laughter. His lips were shiny with drink. I thought about pressing my own lips against his, flicking my tongue across them for the drops, to have them slip down my throat.

‘Tis wickedness, though,’ the friend said.

‘Something should be done,’ said the other.

‘Oh, it will,’ the wrinkled man said. ‘You mark my words. The squire there, he’s offered a reward to see the women hanged.’

A chill passed over me though the day was warm for it was late August by then. I thought again of my friend. Matthew Weeks. Anna

and I had failed him. May God have mercy on his soul, and hers too. Charlotte. She they said he'd killed. Oh God, for a sup—

'Here we are, then,' the barman said, and my heart stopped with the fright of him coming back so sudden. He handed us each a key.

'A jug of beer,' Anna said, and then my heart was loud in its rejoicing. Though we were but lately met she knew me well. Too well, I sometimes feared.

'I'll bring it up,' the barman said. 'Rooms are at the top of the stairs, end of the passage there.'

'I'll take it here, in the bar,' Anna said. 'Just one glass. My friends by the hearth only need topping up.'

The barman turned to me. 'And you, miss?'

'She'll inspect the rooms,' Anna said. And then without looking up from counting the money she said quietly, 'Not a drop, Shilly. You hear me?'

She took the jug of beer to the men by the hearth.

'Gentlemen. Your glasses are low. Allow me. You were speaking of two women turning a child to coal. Where are these fiends to be found?'

I took the keys and left the bar. She would keep me lonely even as she kept me by her side.

'Trethevy,' she said when she came to take her key. If she had drunk any beer then she held it well for she didn't sway or pitch. Perhaps she *could* hold her drinking. I knew so little about her and yet I'd thrown in my lot with hers.

She sat down on the edge of my bed, as far from me as she could without being on the floor. Her bony lightness barely made the cover ruck.

'What's Trethevy?' I said.

'A hamlet.' She took out her pipe. 'That's where they're living, in a wooded valley haunted by a saint, apparently.'

'Who's living there?' I said.

'The witches. The pair said to have turned a child to coal.'

I moaned and covered my face with my hands. 'I can't. Not again. Not after Charlotte . . .'

'You needn't upset yourself, Shilly. I don't believe those women are witches any more than I am, but what I *would* like to believe is this talk of a reward. It's being offered by the gentry there, Sir Vivian Orton, and we must be quick if we're the ones to gain it. We cannot live on air alone.'

'Sharing a room would've saved money.'

'We need to start earning if we're to establish the agency,' she said, as if I hadn't spoken.

'Agency?'

'You're right. That is too grand a name to start with. A business, then, for private cases. This disappearance of a child is an excellent start. Finding him will be our next investigation.'

She sounded pleased a boy had been turned to coal. She was cruel, and I could be cruel likewise. In that we were a good pair.

'You've given up, then?' I said.

She pursed her thin, bloodless lips and looked down her thin, bloodless nose at me. 'If you're referring to my attempts to join the men at Scotland Yard, then yes, Shilly, I have given up, because I don't need them. Far better to work for myself. A new opportunity presented itself in the bar this evening. You're keen on portents. Don't you think hearing of the lost boy is a sign I'm right to find my own way?'

'And what am I doing in all this, aside from knowing what are signs and what aren't? You said we'd be equals, Anna, if I came with you. You said you'd take me to London.'

She got up and went to the door. 'Equals, yes. Taking you to London – I don't believe I ever promised that. You must have imagined that part of the conversation, perhaps when you were dr—'

'Are we going, then, to the saint's place?'

'I've paid for seats in the Boscastle coach,' she said.

'Boscastle . . .' The corners of the room fluttered and I had no breath. That place. Not that place.

‘Shilly, are you listening? I said we’re not going so far as that. Trethevy is on the *way* to Boscastle, so my friends downstairs tell me. We leave at eight. I’ll come and dress you before then. You can’t keep wearing her clothes.’

And she was gone.

I lay down on the cover. It was hot in the room for the day had been hot and there was no wind to send it away. Sweat prickled like gorse under my arms, at the back of my neck, and I knew I should take off my dress, let the air reach my flesh. But it was the last of Charlotte Dymond left to me. I ran my damp hands across the green silk that she had worn when I first met her. It had been a good dress once, for she had liked good things. But now the silk was thin in places, and there was a tear at the waist. I slipped my hands across my breasts, under my backside, to feel the wear of it.

We were to catch a coach going to Boscastle, Anna had said. That was where Charlotte had come from. My girl. Oh, my girl in this green silk dress. Oh, my girl. This silk that had touched her, as it now touched me. I rucked the skirt up round my waist and made believe my hands were hers seeking me, helping me.

When I was finished, I was hotter than ever, and damp now all over, but still I couldn’t take off Charlotte’s dress because it clung between my thighs and that was a good thing. There were few of those in the world.

I opened the window wide as it would go. I leant out and breathed the moor to cool myself, breathed all its dank, dark air – the aching, lonely miles of it that spread across the land and made Jamaica Inn a small place, a nothing place, and me a nothing soul inside it.

TWO

Anna said I stank. I knew it, but I didn't care. I wanted her to smell me, to want me as I wanted her. I'd had her once. I'd have her again, but it meant doing as she asked, so I took off Charlotte's dress and folded it best I was able. I was never neat with such things and the dress was wilful. That was Charlotte, still making the world do as it didn't ought to. I gave up and stuffed the dress in Anna's travelling case.

Anna snatched the dress back out. 'It's time you gave her up, Shilly.'

'But—'

'You know I'm right. A new start, after today. Charlotte Dymond is gone. Just as Matthew is.'

If only it was that easy.

There was no fire lit so there was no burning the dress. Instead, Anna took a pair of scissors from a pocket of the case, one sewn into the lining, and cut the dress to ribbons. I lay down in the nest of them on the floor and wept, of course I did, but I couldn't put the dress on again, couldn't put *her* on again and that was right. That was needed. Anna, I needed. More than I cared her to know.

She pulled me from the floor and set me in a chair, then she gathered

the green silk slips and threw them in the grate. I turned the chair so that I couldn't see them.

'Now, who will you be, Shilly?'

'I . . . I would be myself.'

She waved away such a foolish notion. 'I got rid of your farm clothes. You don't need them now that you're a detective assistant.'

She was dressed in red, a deep red that made me think of blood. There had been too much of that spilt on the moor, and it was good that we were leaving. Her short yellow hair was hidden beneath a wig of black knotted at the nape of her neck. It lent her meekness she didn't truly have. If I could have picked a wig for her to wear it would have been the long red curls, and that she would *be* the woman who had such lovely ringlets.

She was rummaging in the case. 'We're presenting ourselves to the squire of Trethevy. You can't very well go as a milkmaid. Ah! *This* might do.' She pulled out a dress of palest blue, a dress cut from the summer sky that waited beyond the window. 'This will suit your dark hair. It might even make you look less . . .'

'Less what?'

'You could use more colour in your cheeks, that's all.'

'Well,' I said, 'if it's more colour I need then *this* would be better.'

I pulled from the case the purple mourning dress that belonged to a great friend of mine. She was a false self, I knew. Another that Anna put on for show. But all the same, I liked her.

Mrs Williams.

Oh, how I'd missed her! The curves her special padding gave to Anna's narrow body. The neatness of her waist. The trim fur hat atop her false red curls, and the plumpness of her painted lips. I knew such things were tricks, of course. But that didn't mean I didn't like them. Sometimes I was all for being tricked.

Anna was looking me up and down as I clutched the dress.

'She shouldn't be a bad fit. But remember, Shilly. Mrs Williams is

more than just the dress and the hat and all of that. She's a widow and she knows her own mind. The latter won't be a problem for you.'

'Anything else?' I said, quickly stepping into the dress before Anna could change her mind.

'Mrs Williams was originally from Clerkenwell, but your accent won't carry that. It's time she was refreshed anyway. Who do *you* think she is?'

I wriggled my hips and pulled up the dress. The padding Anna had sewn inside felt strange, like my body had broken out in lumps, grown bones where they didn't ought to be.

'Don't yank it like that – you'll tear the stitching. Let me do it.'

She slapped my hands from trying to smooth the lumps. With some little tugs and shifting the cloth so that the dress hung more squarely, the padding fell into place. I put my hands on my new hips and turned to face her, but she had moved away, to rummage in the case.

'Now, where is it? Ah . . . I think it will work.'

She held a bag, drawn closed with fine string. She opened it, reached inside and pulled out a pad of red fur that looked like a kitten, curled and sleeping. The bag slipped to the floor, Anna shook the kitten and lengths of hair were all at once dangling, bouncing.

Mrs Williams's long red curls.

I grabbed the wig from Anna and put it on. It was scratchy and terrible from the first but I told myself discomfort was worth it for such loveliness.

'One last thing,' Anna said.

She had found a little pot and wiped whatever was in it across my lips. I felt the slickness of the paint. Felt her finger pressing, smoothing. Moving into my mouth. I licked her.

She jerked away and went back to the wretched case.

'So,' she said without turning round. 'Who is she?'

I thought a moment, watching her.

'She writes books,' I said. 'She's with the Temperance. And she killed her husband with a poker for his drinking.'

Anna faced me, grinned. 'I should think we'll get on famously, Mrs Williams. Now, one last touch.'

She took my hand in hers.

'You can't be a widow without a wedding ring,' she said. 'Unless you've come to grief and had to pawn it?'

I shook my head. 'Things aren't so bad as that.'

She slipped it on, that thick band of shine, and it fit so well, like it had been made for me. Like *she* had made it for me, to make me hers, as men make women theirs before God and all the rest of it. There was none but us there that morning to witness our joining together but joined we were, in a bedroom of Jamaica Inn in August 1844. Did the ring mean anything to Anna? Anything more than a trick? I didn't know. The ring was heavy and I feared I should bang it against things, doors and the like. I'd never worn jewellery in my life until that moment.

Something else was weighing me down besides the ring. Something I'd carried from the moor.

'If I'm Mrs Williams,' I said, 'going to see about this boy turned to coal, who does that make you?'

'I'm Anna Drake.'

'That's the name you'll be using? That I'm to call you when others are about?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Why?'

'Well, you had different names on the moor, didn't you? Why are you using your true name now, for this case?'

She shrugged and set Mrs Williams's fur hat on my new red curls. 'Does it matter?'

'Of course it matters! It's who you are.'

'Names are just letters. You know that better than most, Shilly. Or would you prefer it if I called you by *your* real name?'

'But Anna Drake isn't your name, is it?' I said, and felt like taking off my ring and throwing it at her. 'That's why you'll use it. You promised you'd be honest with me, Anna. That's why I said I'd come with you.'

“Anna”. See? You have it. What more needs saying?’

‘A great deal more,’ I muttered, but she wasn’t listening, whoever she might be. If there were ever to be answers, she’d make me wait for them.

She said we should each take a few things, and that she would send for her case once we knew where we’d be staying.

‘Will the case be safe here?’ I said.

She locked it with the little key she kept on a thin chain round her neck. ‘I’ve paid handsomely to ensure it.’

‘More spending.’

‘Time we were earning, then,’ she said. ‘Come on. The coach will be leaving soon.’

That cost us dear too, for Anna had paid for seats inside the coach when we could have saved and sat outside. It was such a warm day I didn’t see why she’d wasted the money and I told her so.

She hushed me, glancing at the others squashed in the coach with us. ‘It wouldn’t do to arrive in Trethevy looking too poor to ride inside. We’re seeing a squire, remember.’

‘But we *are* too poor, aren’t we?’

She wouldn’t answer. I wondered if there was more money tucked about her person than she let on. If there was, then it would be gone soon enough if she was in charge of it. I’d have to have my wages regular and keep them myself or I’d be in the poorhouse before too long. My wedding ring might have to be pawned after all.

The coach was full on leaving – six of us inside and the wise souls riding with the driver. We stopped many times as we crossed the moor and the faces changed, but not the smell of sweat and not the lurching that made me regret the eggs I’d eaten before we left Jamaica Inn. After Camelford there was only three of us – Anna and me and a young man who slept, his mouth fallen open and spittle sliding down his chin.

He woke with a start when the driver shouted Bossiney! Bossiney! and the coach tumbled to a stop. The spittle man got out and in his

place came a young woman with a braggaty face. The marks weren't the pox. They were the mottles people were born with. A misfortune. I had to look out the window to keep from staring. And I was glad I did look out, for not long after we left Bossiney's narrow streets I saw the finest sight of my short life. It was the sea.

I had seen it before but only from the high reaches of the moor where it had the shine of a new sixpence, and the thinness of a sixpence too. A scratch of light on the edge of the world the sea had been to me then, a small thing, but now I saw it was a great slipping shakeabout of the sky's blue and slate and gorse colours. I wondered if the sea was bigger even than the moor itself, and as I was so wondering I heard a strange noise, a grindy-clack like the black cat at the farm had made when she watched birds on the barn's roof. But I was the black cat in the coach that day, grindy-clacking my teeth at the sight of so great a thing as the sea. I wished to eat it – to have it in my mouth and keep it for myself. Know it better.

Anna was likewise bewitched, and leant across me to have a better view, almost lying in my lap so I had two things to enjoy.

'I'd happily never go back to London if it meant seeing this view every day,' Anna said.

'Quite lovely,' said the young woman sitting across from us. She fiddled with her cuffs. She liked Mrs Williams, that was me, better than the sea. I could see it in her soft smile and the tilt of her chin.

Then the sea was gone for we were jouncing downhill, fields and their walls getting between me and the blue greatness, but I had no time to feel the loss sorely for we went over a bridge with a lurch that threw Anna to the floor. I helped Anna up and the coach climbed the hill beyond. On the other side of the road to the sea was now a thick bank of trees that kept pace with us.

I didn't like this. The trees were very close together, all higgledy-piggledy trying to peer round their brethren, peering at the coach as we passed. I didn't know there could be so many trees in one place. On the moor, the ground

had been thick with stone and that had kept trees sparse, stopped their roots, and the wind had kept short and twisted what did find a way to grow. The trees in this part of the world were tall and so broad I couldn't see beyond the wall they'd made. I hoped we'd soon pass their darkness but before we had outrun them the coach stopped and the driver shouted Trethevy.

'This is it,' Anna said, opening the door.

'I think it was back a way, where the sea—'

'Get out if you're getting!' yelled the driver, readying to crack his whip and be off again.

Anna hauled me from the coach and then the driver was away, taking with him the woman. She watched me from the coach's window, her braggaty face growing smaller, and so more beautiful, and then winking out.

Before us was a wide house with many chimneys. More of the thickety trees were crowded nearby, flanking the house on two sides. They creaked their knees in the bare breeze, a great spread of them, stretching how far I didn't know. A prickle crept up my neck as I thought to myself, there could be anyone watching me in there. They'd be able to see *me* without *me* seeing *them*. That gave all the knowing to the trees and their hidden watchers. I was weak and ready to run.

But Anna wasn't having that.

'Time to go to work, Shilly. Let's see if we can't put a stop to this nonsense of witches.'

She pulled the rope and set the bell clanking because we were business callers now, not hiding our true purpose like when we ferreted in the places the moor kept its secrets. The door opened.

'Yes?' said a sour-faced woman with a sour voice.

Anna told her we wanted the reward. She didn't say it quite so bold as that, of course, but that was the bones of it. The money.

'Is the squire at home?' Anna said.

'He is,' the sour-face said, 'and I'm to admit callers about them women in the woods.' This fact seemed to rankle with her, but she let us into the hall.

‘Have you had many calling about the reward?’ Anna said, and I could hear the worry in her voice.

‘You’re the first,’ the sour-face said. She looked us up and down all sneering. ‘But I don’t suppose you’ll be the last.’

And with that rudeness she led us down a passage wide as the whole house I had lately left.

Her clothes were plain as mine had been before Anna dressed me better, though not as worn as mine from working on the farm. This woman had decent fastenings on her dark-blue dress and wore a clean apron over it, which I had never had about me. She clumped along, a grumbling step, and I thought her to be fifty or so and likely a housekeeper.

Anna spoke low to me. ‘We must have cards made, once we’re established.’

‘Cards?’

‘To announce ourselves. It doesn’t make a good first impression if we can only give our names verbally on arrival.’

Would my name go on such a card? Even if she said it was there, I would have to trust she wasn’t lying, and she was good at that. I needed to learn my letters. Then I could be more certain about the things Anna Drake said.

The sour-face took us to a room and shut us in. The room was awash with sickly light for the walls were green, the rugs too. The place was filled with chairs and small tables, as if a party was thought to come but each person would be made to eat alone. Anna took a chair by the window and bade me sit next to her and stop fretting, but the window gave on to the trees outside and they were still very darkly gathered. I moved to the other side of the room, the corners of tables catching at me as I went.

‘Must you roam like that?’ Anna said.

‘I’m looking at the pictures,’ I said, seeing the frames and fixing on them to hide my being ill at ease.

But that was a poor choice and no mistake, for the frames were

made of wood and they held nothing but more woods still! Every painting in that room was of trees – boldly alone or clumped together as if whispering. I peered for signs of life beneath the branches. People taking charge of the tallness gave me comfort, but such comfort was thin. It was as if the woods had come inside the house. And what did they want from us?

Something dropped into the fireplace with a rustle. I scurried to sit with Anna and pressed myself against her.

‘What was that?’ I whispered.

‘I don’t know – a twig, dropped by a bird? Does it matter? Shilly, you’re pinching me.’

‘We must be careful. The woods are watching—’

‘Hush!’ Anna said. ‘We’re trying to get rid of witches, not be mistaken for them ourselves.’

‘You said you didn’t believe they *were* witches.’

‘I . . . I’m reserving judgement on that matter.’

I sat back in my chair. She had come closer to my way of thinking about such things as witches and curses and other parts of life that were strange troubling. And she needed me for all of that business. She’d have to keep me close.

Anna twisted so that our hips were not so snug together. ‘A child is missing, Shilly. That’s the matter at hand. I’d ask that you—’

A woman screamed outside the door.