



The Staveley Suspect

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London W1T 6DW
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First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2018.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2239-6

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

Bonnie had a cold, which turned her eyes and nose bright pink. ‘You look like a white rabbit,’ said Simmy. ‘A very poorly white rabbit at that.’

‘Urggh,’ said the girl. ‘Am I going to put the customers off, do you think?’

‘Very likely. They’ll think I’m a cruel employer, forcing you to work when you’re ill. You ought to go home for a couple of days.’

‘The house is freezing. It’ll make me worse. Corinne let the oil tank run dry and a man has to come and do something complicated to get the boiler working again.’

‘It can’t be worse than here.’ The florist shop was never very warm, since the blooms lasted much better in cool temperatures. The humidity caused by the watering increased the feeling of being in a rather inhospitable northern forest.

‘It’s all right,’ said Bonnie with a sniff. Before Simmy could

reply, the phone pealed imperiously, and she was distracted.

‘Hello – is that the flower shop?’ The voice was female, and instantly likeable.

‘That’s right.’

‘Good. I’ve got a commission for you, if you’re interested.’

Simmy picked up a pen, and swept through a mess of junk mail and delivery notes for the notepad she used for taking telephone orders. The system still hadn’t reached the level of efficiency that she had aimed for when she first opened the shop. The fact that the majority of orders came through the computer reduced the urgency. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘What can we do for you?’

‘It’s a party. A retirement party. I want to make it a bit special, with lots of flowers everywhere.’

‘When?’ asked Simmy, having written *retirement party* on the pad.

‘Rather short notice, I’m afraid. We were hoping for the weekend after next.’

‘Shouldn’t be a problem,’ said Simmy confidently. ‘Though it’s a bit close to Mother’s Day.’ Her silent inward sigh marked her customary reaction to that particular cultural atrocity. However she looked at it, she could only see it as cynical, commercial and sometimes even cruel.

‘Oh, God, Mother’s Day,’ said the woman on the phone, with a heartfelt groan that more than echoed Simmy’s little sigh. ‘It seems to come round every few weeks. I suppose it’s a big day for a florist.’

‘Right,’ said Simmy.

‘Anyway. The party. It’s going to be in Staveley.’

Simmy wrote *Staveley* on her pad. ‘Can I take your name?’ she said.

‘Oh – sorry. Yes, I’m Gillian Townsend. It’s my colleague who’s retiring. We’re solicitors. Things have been so busy lately, we didn’t get around to organising the do until now.’

‘Is it in a hall, or somebody’s house?’

‘That’s been quite a burning question. We did think of using the party barn at Askham Hall, but it’s a long way away, and somehow it doesn’t strike the right note. So now we’ve finally decided to have it at my mother’s house here in Staveley.’

Gillian Townsend sounded to be at least sixty, which gave Simmy a startled moment to think she had a mother living. But this was a regular experience in recent times. People in their seventies quite often had an ancient parent still surviving.

‘Is the party to be a surprise?’

‘God, no. What a horrible thought! Anita is quite central to the whole business. She’s right here beside me now, listening to us on the speakerphone. She has the final say on everything. But she’s a good delegator, so I get to do flowers, food and invitations.’

Simmy gave a polite laugh, while wondering what else was required. Drink; car parking; music, she supposed. ‘How many rooms do you want decorated? With flowers, I mean.’

‘Oh, gosh. Only two or three, I suppose. There’s a big hallway, two reception rooms, the kitchen . . . we won’t do the kitchen. And we’ll be using the conservatory, so we should do that as well. Can you come and look at it with me, do you think? We can plan it together, then.’ The voice had become breathless towards the end of this little speech, causing Simmy to wonder whether it was due to excitement or defective lungs.

Simmy was thinking about money, and lessons learnt over the past year or two. Charge for your time. Charge for wastage. Charge for use of containers and clearing up afterwards, if required. She was entitled to make a decent profit from the job, she reminded herself. Solicitors were generally well-heeled, after all. ‘Yes, of course. When?’

‘Well, the sooner the better.’

‘This evening? I could come on the way home, after I’ve taken some flowers to someone in Crook.’ Only then did Simmy notice that Bonnie wasn’t listening in with her usual avidity. Her young assistant had a habit of standing two feet away and mouthing comments on the conversation. Instead, she was drooping at the front of the shop, like a melting wax statue. Her head was bowed and shoulders slumped. Simmy took the phone away from her ear. ‘Bonnie? What’s the matter?’

‘I feel funny. My head hurts.’

Simmy went back to the phone. ‘Sorry. Did you say something? I was distracted for a minute. Can you tell me where to come, and I’ll see you at about a quarter to six.’ Her eyes were on Bonnie, who had straightened up slightly.

‘If you’re coming from Crook, you can most easily meet us at the lay-by by the bus stop in the middle of the village and we can lead you to the house. It’s a bit difficult to find, especially in the dark.’ It got dark by six, Simmy remembered, with her persistent nervousness about roaming the Cumbrian wilderness at night. Just a mile or two off the main roads, you could be lost forever if you took a careless turn somewhere, either on foot or in a car.

‘Actually, I’m not sure I can find the lay-by. Is there an obvious landmark?’

‘It’s across the road from the fish and chip shop, and the bus stop is part of the public lavatories. You can’t really miss it, when you come out from the Crook road. It’s just across from the turning to Kentmere.’

‘It sounds fairly foolproof. I’m sure I’ll find it. Thanks. I’ll see you later.’

‘Take my phone number, in case you get delayed – or lost.’ The last words were added with a laugh that sounded mildly scornful to Simmy. She had delivered flowers to addresses in Staveley perhaps half a dozen times in the past year, but had no recollection of a bus stop. She remembered a network of small streets, many of them cul-de-sacs, a defunct bridge that was slowly being rebuilt and a beautiful winding road out to Kentmere, running alongside a cheerful little river.

With a flicker of resentment, she jotted down the digits and hoped she would remember to put them into her mobile. The need to attend to Bonnie was the prime concern of the moment. ‘Hey,’ she said, as soon as the phone call ended. ‘Come and sit down. You must have got flu.’

‘I hope not,’ said Bonnie waveringly. ‘That would be a real pain.’

‘I’d better take you home. You look rather awful.’

‘Oh, no. You can’t close the shop on a Friday. Mrs Hyacinth hasn’t been in yet. And isn’t that man coming for his roses at eleven?’

Mrs Hyacinth was in fact an affluent local businesswoman who had, the previous Christmas, ordered eight bowls of hyacinths on the brink of bursting into flower. Simmy and Bonnie had agonised over the things and cast many slanderous aspersions on the woman. In the event it worked

perfectly, and earned a surprising gratuity on top of the inflated price Simmy had permitted herself to charge.

Now Mrs Hyacinth materialised every Friday lunchtime for more highly scented weekend flowers.

‘I’ll be back in time for both of them if we go now.’

‘No,’ Bonnie almost whined. ‘I don’t want to go home. I’ll make myself a Lemsip and I’ll be okay. It’s not flu. Corinne would tell you that flu’s a lot more serious than this.’

Outside the weather was dithering between winter and spring. The fells had snow on their heads, and the becks had fringes of ice. Snowdrops nodded cheerily in gardens and on mossy banks, but most of the trees were still playing dead. Nobody had very high expectations of March, with its tendency towards biting easterly winds. The majority of customers coming into the shops had the same pink noses and clogged throats as Bonnie had.

‘I bet Spike would be glad to see you,’ Simmy cajoled. Spike was Bonnie’s dog, whose welfare and general happiness had suffered some neglect over the past half-year or so. Not only had his beloved young mistress taken a job, causing her wholesale removal from his life during the day, but she had also taken a swain, who occupied her during evenings and Sundays.

‘Spike’s fine,’ said the girl defensively. ‘Corinne takes him everywhere with her these days.’

‘All right, then. But try to avoid fainting on me, will you? You look awfully cold to me. That jumper’s not much use, is it?’ Bonnie was wearing a thin garment with a low neck, leaving her bronchial region exposed to the cool air. ‘There’s a fleece in the back room that might fit you. Put it on.’

The fact that the girl didn't argue was proof enough of her illness. 'And Lemsip's a good idea,' Simmy added.

Fridays had, in recent months, acquired new levels of significance. Since the rekindling of a relationship from her teenage years, Simmy had begun to expect more of weekends than hitherto. But because both she and Christopher were often busier on Saturdays than any other day, the expectations had to be modified. It was worse for her, with every Saturday morning relatively hectic in the shop, while her boyfriend only worked every other weekend. He was the auctioneer at an operation near Keswick. For six or seven hours on sale days he sold antiques, collectables and general items to dealers and housewives and auction junkies of all kinds.

The arrival of the man for the roses meant leaving Bonnie to wrestle with her germs unassisted. The order had been for two dozen mixed blooms, scented, still in bud, and embellished with wispy ferns and other greenery. An anniversary, he said, without any further explanation. When he'd gone, the usual speculations as to the length of the marriage, the ages of the parties involved and the nature of their celebration did not take place. Bonnie sat down in front of the shop computer, and started making notes on the prices of various flowers, in a half-hearted attempt to educate herself. In the process, she tidied Simmy's messy heap on the table. 'Retirement in Staveley?' she said, looking at the notes on the pad. 'That's a bit different. You haven't put the date.'

Simmy was picking out faded blooms from the displays at the front of the shop. 'It's the weekend before Mother's Day. I've got to go and meet the woman this evening.'

She's taking me to see the house where the party's going to be. Oh, and I should put her number into my phone. I nearly forgot.'

'I'll do it if you like,' Bonnie offered. 'Is this it here?'

'Thanks.' Simmy willingly handed over her mobile, grateful for the skill of the young.

Bonnie changed the subject as she handed back the phone. 'Has Chris got a sale tomorrow?'

'He has. I won't see him until Sunday. I'll go over to Beck View after we close up tomorrow and give my mum a hand. Last time I was there, the place was looking very grubby. There'll be complaints if she's not careful.'

'Is she bothered?'

'Not very. But she's got to stick to at least some of the rules. They'll close her down if they think she's a health hazard.'

Bonnie gave a choked little laugh. 'That's not going to happen, is it? What does a bit of dust matter?'

'It's more than that. The bathrooms have to be spotless, for a start.'

'Was that your dad's job before he – you know?'

'Before his wits started to go. Don't worry, you can say it.' They exchanged smiles. 'He did quite a lot of that sort of thing, yes. He still polishes all the mirrors every week. That's always been his speciality. And some people do leave the loos in a pretty bad state. My mother hates anything like that. Always leaves it till last and then it doesn't get done.'

'Yuck,' said Bonnie.

The demands of the Lakeland B&B run by Simmy's parents were quickly becoming more than they could easily

cope with. Her father's sudden plunge into a mild variety of dementia had thrown the entire operation into confusion. His chief symptom was anxiety, causing him to lock doors and make excessive demands on the guests' patience. While his memory and general capacity to function remained unimpaired, he was unpredictable and increasingly uninhibited in what he said.

'Are you feeling better now?' Simmy asked, at lunchtime. 'Have you got plenty to eat? They say you should feed a cold, you know.'

'I'm okay. Mrs Hyacinth's late. I might have another Lemsip.' Bonnie was distracted by the warbling of her phone. Simmy had no doubt that it denoted a text from Ben Harkness. He invariably phoned or texted in the middle of the day. Still at school, he was in the final stretch of his A-level studies, trying to make light of an almost intolerable workload.

'You have to wait four hours,' said Simmy. 'It says on the box.'

'Duh,' said Bonnie.

They were diverted by the arrival of a small fistful of post coming through the door. The general procedure was for the postman to come in, and put the letters on whatever clear surface he could find, if Simmy didn't rush forward to take them from him. But this was a different man, and he simply threw them down without taking a step off the pavement outside. The absence of a letter box was clearly an annoyance to him. A long way down Simmy's to-do list was to attach a box of some sort to the outside wall for the purpose.

Bonnie went to collect the scattered envelopes. The mere

fact of old-fashioned letters intrigued her. People paid their bills with cheques to a surprising extent. Once in a while they included handwritten letters of appreciation. Two or three had enclosed photos of the wedding or birthday party showing how handsomely the flowers had enhanced the occasion. 'This one looks like it's from a satisfied customer,' Bonnie observed, pulling out a white envelope with a handwritten address on the front.

Simmy took it. 'Not likely. The postmark's Birmingham, look.'

Bonnie peered at it. 'Postmark?' she said with a frown.

'Good God, girl. Don't you know about postmarks?'

Bonnie grimaced. 'Not really,' she admitted.

'I'll report you to Ben. He'll be disgusted with you. Postmarks are often crucial clues in a criminal investigation. Agatha Christie must be full of them.'

The letter was giving Simmy some early pangs of apprehension. She knew the handwriting, but could not believe her own eyes. Surely it wasn't from the woman who made large capital letters and then bunched the rest of the word together after it? 'Windermere' followed this familiar pattern. And the person in question lived in Birmingham.

She opened it, took out the single page, and turned it over to see the signature. 'Bloody hell. It is her.' She looked at Bonnie, as if for an explanation. 'It's from my mother-in-law.'