



*Hawthorn Close*

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## *Author's Note*

The hawthorn tree is associated with Beltane, the ancient festival celebrating spring, and it is one of the most sacred trees in Celtic mythology. It symbolises love and protection.

In March, the leaf buds start to open and pale green leaves appear, joined by masses of delicate white flower buds in May, whose blossoms have five white petals surrounding stamens with bright pink heads. They produce red berries in July.

Songbirds love hawthorns and they'll visit often in the autumn and winter to enjoy the bright coloured berries.

Hawthorn trees are most frequently used as hedges in the UK, and to have a whole street of very old trees would be extremely rare and precious.

## *Chapter One*

Rob Carswell woke suddenly during the night. For a moment he lay there wondering what had disturbed him. Then he realised it was someone sobbing. It sounded like a woman's voice and was coming from the house next door, which looked to be in a very bad state of repair.

He'd never seen the person who lived there, but then he'd not spent a lot of time in Essington St Mary since he inherited this pair of semi-detached houses in Hawthorn Close from his great-aunt Flo three months ago in early January. That legacy had been a wonderful surprise, but it had hit him in the middle of a super-busy time at work in London, with a lucrative contract pending that would leave him able to semi-retire if he could pull it off.

To his delight it had all come together nicely and he had now stopped working full-time for others, but would take on occasional contract work as well as developing his own programs and apps. He'd moved here permanently a couple

of days ago and put his London flat on the market. He was looking forward to starting work on the renovations this pair of older houses needed.

The woman next door was sobbing more quietly now but he could still hear her. She'd probably be horrified if she knew how the sound carried, but as long as it wasn't too cold, he preferred to keep his bedroom window open, and he lived next door to her in Number 4.

Heaven alone knew how noisy it'd be here when the damned builder who'd recently bought the first two houses on this one-sided street started knocking them down. Belkin was apparently youngish and a hustler. He'd no doubt be erecting several others in their place.

But at least the building noise would be a finite nuisance because he only had two plots of land to build on. Rob had been horrified, however, to overhear the builder arranging to have the two old hawthorn trees on the verges outside his houses knocked down.

How could he do that? They were heritage-listed. The trees lined the whole street and were over two hundred years old. They were glorious when they were all in bloom.

He'd played under them as a child when visiting his great-aunt, gathering their fallen blossoms in his toy bucket and making patterns with them on the paved area at the back of the house. Hawthorn Close wouldn't look right with the first two magnificent trees missing from the entrance.

Belkin had tried to buy this pair of semis from Rob the day after he'd found out that he'd inherited them, and you had to wonder how the man had got hold of the information so quickly. But Rob didn't intend to sell them, most definitely not.

Unfortunately, the fellow didn't seem to understand the word 'no' and had tried twice more since then, increasing his offer slightly each time and sending his agent to pester Rob about them.

No way was he selling! And if he blocked Belkin's progress up the street, maybe it would remain a quiet, happy place for the most part, not a noisy one crowded with tiny homes whose owners' cars were parked along the nearby part of the road.

Last month, Rob's long-term tenant in the other semi had given notice unexpectedly and moved out from next door almost immediately, saying he didn't want to live so close to a building site. But as no demolition work had started there yet, except for removing all the plants from the gardens, and there were two houses between his rental and the building sites, he had to wonder whether someone from Belkin's had bribed the tenant to leave.

Since Rob had been working long hours just then, sometimes well into the night, he'd simply left both houses empty. After a couple of windows had been smashed, he'd hired a local security firm to keep an eye on them.

He had sentimental reasons for living here as well as the financial ones. As a boy, he'd always loved coming to Essington St Mary to visit Auntie Flo. Such a charming little town. Those holidays were some of his happiest childhood memories and he'd put up a magazine picture of a blossoming hawthorn tree in his bedroom when he had to go home again. He still had it somewhere.

He'd never give away his inheritance to a 'property typhoon', as Flo had called builders like that one.

He turned over in bed, trying to ignore the sobbing

next door but couldn't, just could not. It wasn't loud but it sounded despairing. No one should cry alone like that. And she must be alone. In his four days of living here permanently, he'd been using the smaller front bedroom as an office and had seen no one enter or leave the old house next door, nor had the postman delivered any mail there.

In the end Rob gave up on sleep and went down to get a drink of water, not bothering to turn on the lights. He stood by the kitchen window, staring out at the stars sparkling in an almost cloudless sky. He noticed the vague outline of a figure on the back patio next door but she didn't have an outdoor light on, so he couldn't make out any details.

She'd stopped crying now, thank goodness, and he'd expected her to go back into the house, but she hadn't. Wasn't she afraid of being attacked, sitting out there alone? Most women would be, even in a peaceful little town like Essington. But perhaps she wasn't thinking clearly.

She got up and walked slowly across to sit on a two-person swing. As it moved to and fro, it let out a regular squeaking noise. It wasn't loud but it set his teeth on edge. That was more than enough to stop him getting back to sleep.

He didn't like to confront her about it just then. A strange man coming into her garden in the middle of the night would frighten any woman.

The squeaking went on and on, and when he went back to bed he could still hear it, even in the front of the house. He'd go across in the morning and offer to oil the damned

thing. Like the house and garden, it was probably in sore need of maintenance.

Perhaps the owner was, too.

Even after the noise eventually stopped, it was a long time until he fell asleep.

The next morning, Rob woke late feeling heavy-headed. After breakfast, he sat scowling at his computer, too tired to feel inspired. The creaking of the swing could easily be stopped, but how to approach her tactfully to suggest he oil it for her?

He'd never even met her, hadn't particularly wanted to because since his divorce last year he preferred to keep himself to himself where women were concerned. He felt rather embarrassed at the thought of knocking on a stranger's door and betraying the fact that he'd been awake and heard the swing creaking.

If he did that, she was bound to realise that he'd have heard her weeping too. No, he'd leave it. She hadn't sat outside on that damned swing before and probably wouldn't again.