

Secrets in St Ives

By Deborah Fowler

A St Ives Christmas Mystery

Secrets in St Ives

Missing in St Ives

Escape to St Ives



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*To Bonce – thank you for your wonderful
friendship and support over so many years.*

PROLOGUE

Trehearne Farm, St Ives, West Cornwall, July 1992

‘Is that you, Philip?’ Sarah called out.

‘No, it’s that Mel Gibson, come to pay you a visit, lovely lady,’ was the reply.

Sarah smiled. It was an old joke. ‘Supper’s on the table, love.’

‘I’ll just clean up a bit,’ said Philip. ‘It was a difficult calving but we’ve a fine heifer at the end of it.’ A cheerful, red face appeared round the kitchen door. ‘Where are the kids?’ he asked.

‘They’ve gone into town with Annie and Dan from down the road. Geoff has passed his driving test now so he’s going to drop them all home later.’

‘I hope that Geoff is a careful driver, particularly now the visitors are about – most of them drive like maniacs – they just don’t understand narrow lanes. What are the kids doing in St Ives anyway?’

‘They’re just seeing a film, Philip. Stop fussing.’

‘At fifteen, I think Gemma is still too young to be gallivanting about in town at night.’

‘I seem to remember that you did quite a bit of gallivanting at her age,’ said Sarah, with a smile.

‘My point exactly!’ said Philip, laughing as he disappeared off to the bathroom.

Sarah opened a bottle of beer and, on his return, she placed a hearty plate of stew and mashed potatoes in front of him. ‘As I recall,’ she said, ‘rather than watching a film and behaving yourself, you spent most of your free time cuddling your girl on the beach.’ She smiled. ‘And look how that worked out – we got ourselves a life sentence!’

Philip stopped eating, his fork in the air. ‘Best thing I ever did, marrying you. We’re happy, aren’t we? No regrets?’

‘We are, my love, both us and our wonderful children. Alright, money’s sometimes tight and we work too hard, but no one goes into farming just to get rich and sit on their bums all day. I wouldn’t change a thing.’

They ate their meal in contented silence for a few minutes and then began a spirited discussion as to whether they could turn one of their large barns into bedrooms to provide bed-and-breakfast accommodation. It was a pipe dream, they couldn’t afford it, but they always enjoyed a little gentle bantering around the subject.

‘Would you mind if I dropped in at Halsetown Inn for a quick one?’ Philip asked as he helped clear the table. ‘Jim Ferrell reckons he’s sourced some winter feed at a really good price.’

Sarah laughed. ‘You know, that almost sounds like a

genuine reason for going to the pub – hardly an excuse at all.’

‘You cheeky mare.’ Philip grinned. ‘Particularly since it’s God’s own truth.’

Sarah came to the back door with him. Unexpectedly, he swept her into an embrace and kissed her soundly. ‘I love you, my darling,’ he said, still holding her close.

‘I love you too, Philip,’ she replied.

In the gathering dusk, as Philip trudged down the lane, Sarah watched him fondly, leaning against the door frame and straining her eyes against the gloom until he was completely out of sight.

She would always be grateful she did that – for she never saw him again.

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day

Merrin McKenzie walked briskly along Porthkidney Beach, deep in thought. It was fifteen months since her policeman husband, Adam, had been fatally stabbed ‘in the line of duty’. It was a term she loathed – it wasn’t his duty to die at the age of only fifty-four.

As a direct result of Adam’s death, in an uncharacteristic knee-jerk reaction, she had sold the Bristol house they had lived in all their married life and returned to her childhood home of St Ives in Cornwall. After initial resistance from her daughter, Isla, they both agreed the move was a good idea – but what now? Having specialised as a solicitor in family law all her working life, she needed a change. There was no way she could retire in her mid-fifties; she had to work at something – in fact, she couldn’t imagine ever retiring, she craved the discipline and structure of a

working day. But working at what? The problem was on her mind, night and day with no obvious resolution.

Turning to discuss the problem yet again with her childhood friend, Clara, she found her walking companion was no longer with her. Shading her eyes, Merrin saw that Clara was some distance behind her, busy collecting shells, which she liked to use as decoration in her restaurant.

‘Come on, Clara,’ Merrin shouted above the sound of the breaking waves. Clara waved an arm in acknowledgement but continued picking up shells.

‘What’s she like?’ Merrin addressed the dog at her feet. William, a dog of indeterminate breed, wagged his tail in agreement. ‘Still,’ she continued, ‘there could be worse places to wait.’

It was a sunny day in early July, that sweet spot where the summer had begun but the schools had not as yet broken up, so the beaches were still quiet. The sea was deep blue, turning to fluorescent green in the shallows, the surf, by contrast, a crisp white. It was fabulous, with just a light breeze to make walking comfortable. William cautiously ventured into the sea, but he was no swimmer – ‘never above the knees’ was William’s rule and his knees were very close to the ground. Inspired to follow, Merrin whipped off her flip-flops and paddled in to join him. The tide was coming in so the water was warm as it swirled over the hot sand. Merrin gazed out to sea. It was moments like this, when she was close to nature, that she felt as near to being happy as was possible since Adam’s death.

‘Here I am, darling Pearl,’ said Clara, interrupting

Merrin's reverie. 'Pearl' was the exclusive nickname Clara used when addressing her friend, for 'Merrin' in Cornish means 'sea pearl'. 'Look,' said Clara, waving her carrier bag. 'I've got quite a haul today. Come on, we'd better hurry or otherwise . . . oh God.' She pointed ahead of her to where waves were curling round the rocks, known as Hawkes Point, which separated Porthkidney Beach from the beach at Carbis Bay. Already a deep pool was forming.

'I thought you said we had plenty of time to get back to Carbis Bay before the tide cut us off?' Merrin challenged.

They had begun their walk a couple of hours earlier, driving out of St Ives, parking at Carbis Bay and then walking through to Porthkidney and across the beach to the Hayle Estuary.

'Don't fuss, Pearl. There's still a good half hour before we'd have to swim for it,' said Clara. 'At the moment, the state of the tide won't involve anything more than a shallow paddle.'

Clara sounded full of confidence but Merrin was not reassured. 'Why don't we go back on the cliff path?' she suggested.

'Because I haven't got time. I need to get changed and be in the restaurant in half an hour. Stop whinging, Pearl darling, it'll be fine.'

Of course, it wasn't fine. As they waded through the pool, Clara holding her carrier bag of shells above her head, Merrin with a deeply disapproving William firmly tucked under her arm, the sea was up their waists. 'Oh for heaven's sake, Clara!' Merrin began.

Clara turned and their eyes met. Suddenly, like the children they had once been, they were convulsed with laughter, struggling out on to Carbis Bay Beach, doubled up with mirth. Only William did not find it funny. He stood watching them with ill-disguised disdain.