

# Fingers of Fate, Part IV

Part IV of V – Read all available Parts [here](#)

by [Janet Charlesworth](#) (December 2024)



Breaking Through, The Grinshill, Shropshire (David Stead)

## Twenty-two

Jackson arrived back at the Red Lion to find the bar and restaurant closed, and a tense and subdued Symes. Symes brought him up to date on events, and advised that there was a

message for him from CDI Shaw asking that he contact the police on his return to arrange a mutually convenient time for an interview. Jackson had been away at the time of the landlady's death, and had a cast iron alibi, but Shaw wanted to hear what Jackson thought of Symes and his wife, and the pub.

Jackson called Shaw, and arrangements were made for them to meet for coffee the following morning at the George Hotel in Highgate.

Jackson was impressed with the George Hotel. It was the kind of place that exuded total confidence in its right to exist, and the right of its patrons to expect nothing but the best in everything the hotel could provide. It upheld that right in its unassailable standards of the highest quality in its service, furnishings, the food served in its restaurant, and in its gracious, gentile and comfortable atmosphere. One immediately knew that it would be very expensive, and worth every penny.

They settled into the two armchairs set by the fire in the bar, and were served with fresh piping hot coffee, and bite sized pieces of a variety of scones.

"So," said Shaw, "how do you like England?"

"Very much," said Jackson, "very much. It seems small to me of course, compared to my own country, and very crowded." Turning to Shaw, he said "you don't sound local, where are you from?"

"The south," said Shaw. "I really like this area though. I find the folks around here can be a bit garrulous at first, suspicious of strangers, particularly strangers from the south! They don't tolerate fools, and they expect folks from the south to be foolish, or arrogant snobs. You know, when they built the first motorway in England, it only ran north of London for about 70 miles, as if the authorities felt that no one would wish to venture any further north than that."

They both chuckled.

"However," said Shaw, "once they get to know you, assuming of course that you pass muster, they are the sort of people we generally feel are the salt of the earth."

Turning again to Jackson, Shaw asked, "would you mind filling me in a little on your background?"

"Ah," said Jackson, "well, the Law mostly. I taught Law, and practiced Law for a time. Why do you ask?"

"I wondered why you were in the area," responded Shaw, "and if it had anything to do with your work, that kind of thing."

"Oh, no, not at all," responded Jackson, "I'm here on a kind of sentimental journey. My wife died recently. Her family, and my own, are from around these parts, way back. I just wanted to see the place again."

Shaw smiled, "I see. Thank you. I'm sorry about your wife. I don't wish to intrude. Its just that it helps me to know a bit more about you, get a better feel for who I'm talking to. I appreciate your meeting with me, and giving me your time. As I expect you know by now, the landlady at the Red Lion, where you have been staying, has died."

"Yes," said Jackson, "Symes told me."

"Well," said Shaw, "there is evidence to indicate that it might not have been a natural death and, as a result, we have to investigate. I would appreciate your impressions of the pub, the clientele, and the landlord and his wife, and any thoughts you may have about their relationship." Shaw then sat back in his chair, and tried to relax. He wanted Jackson to feel at ease. Jackson was silent. After about half a minute, Shaw, beginning to feel a little uncomfortable, continued, "with your background in Law, and all that can mean in a deeper understanding of human nature and its failings, I

expect you would have been observant, and would have noted this and that, if only out of curiosity?"

Jackson nodded in acknowledgement of Shaw's comment, and raised a hand that had been resting on the arm of his wing chair before returning it to its previous position. He continued to remain silent. He sat comfortably, relaxed, arms still resting on the capacious supports on either side of his chair, gazing into the fire, deep in thought. After another half minute or so, he turned to Shaw and said, quietly, and cautiously, "Symes said that the Police were treating his wife's death as suspicious, even though I understand she likely died of a heart attack. That wouldn't surprise me. She liked her gin."

"There are some indicators that the heart attack which caused her death may have been induced by a physical attack. I would appreciate your observations and any thoughts you may have about that possibility," responded Shaw.

"OK," said Jackson, again cautiously. "It's a difficult business."

Jackson again leaned back comfortably in his chair and, after a few moments of reflection, said, with a brief smile, "I would say that they were at war those two. Whenever I saw them together, the hostility between them was palpable. I wasn't around the pub much during the day, and would only see them in the place together briefly around dinner time. She would be sitting on the end bar stool. When he came into the bar, she would leave. She was mostly around during the day, breakfast time, and he was mostly around in the evening."

"You said she drank a lot, how do you know that?" asked Shaw.

"Well," said Jackson, "whenever I saw her in the bar, and that could be at breakfast, lunch, or early in the evening, pre-dinner, she always seemed drunk. She would sit at the end of the bar, smoking, and the staff would just keep topping up her

glass. As I said, the favourite drink was gin, straight that is, straight gin, no mixers, ice if it was available. As soon as Symes came into the bar, she would pick up the glass, emit a kind of snarl, glare at him, and leave."

"So, no love lost there," said Shaw.

"Nope," said Jackson, chuckling. "Absolutely none I would say."

Shaw took out the picture he had of Jess and passed it to Jackson.

"Have you seen this woman at the pub?" He asked.

Jackson flushed as he looked at the picture. Jess. He hadn't seen her for years, but he recognized her instantly. He noted that his heart was pounding, and aching at the same time. She looked lovely, as always. He gazed at the picture for what seemed like half a minute or more, lost in his memories. Shaw was watching Jackson closely. He noted the flush on Jackson's face, and that Jackson's eyes had moistened.

After a few moments, Jackson took a deep breath, and turning to Shaw, said, "I know this woman. I knew her in Canada, years ago. What on earth are you doing with a picture of her?"

"You haven't seen her at the pub then?" asked Shaw.

"No, no I have not. Why are you asking me this? What's happened to her?"

Jackson was leaning forward in his chair now, and beginning to feel anxious.

"Nothing has happened to her," said Shaw. "I got the picture from her son. She visited the pub at some point. Went there for lunch and met up with Symes. Symes took a picture of her. She was his first wife you know. I wondered if she had been a regular visitor to the place."

Jackson stared at Shaw. His gaze was deliberately blank as his mind raced to take in the implications of what Shaw had just said. He had been staying in Jess' ex-husband's pub, and he had not known it. More, he had been fishing with Jess' ex-husband, and had talked to him about spirit and truth, of all things.

"I never saw her there. Is she still here, in the area?" He asked.

"Yes," said Shaw. "In fact she stays in this hotel, when she's in the area that is. I understand she's currently away up north for a few days."

"My god," Jackson exclaimed, looking around, "you mean she might walk in here at any moment?"

Jackson's heart skipped a beat.

"Indeed," laughed Shaw, "would you mind?"

"No, no," said Jackson. "It's the shock of it, is all. I haven't seen her for many years, and to come across her like this, here, and to find I've been staying at her ex-husband's pub, of all the places I could have stayed at. Well, it's bewildering."

He paused for a few moments, and then said, "we used to work together, she and I. I have a deep admiration and respect for her. Have you met her?"

"No," said Shaw, "not yet. But I will be interviewing her when she comes back to the area."

Jackson sat back in his chair and wondered at the synchronicities involved in bringing about these events: he and Jess taking a trip to England at the same time for starters, and then he, out of a myriad of other possible locations, staying in the pub owned by her ex-husband.

Coming back to the moment, Jackson exclaimed, "Surely you don't think she had anything to do with the landlady's death. Let me assure you, any such idea is preposterous."

"Well, she may not have actually physically had anything to do with it," said Shaw, "but I'm wondering if her turning up at the pub triggered a fight between Symes and his wife."

"Ah, yes, I see," said Jackson, "well, I never saw her there."

"What's it like, staying at the pub?" asked Shaw. "Is it comfortable? How's the food?"

"Its very comfortable," responded Jackson. "The room I had is tastefully furnished, and there is an en-suite bathroom. And the food is good, though the choice is limited. He has a good chef. I don't know how he keeps the place going though. I haven't seen it overwhelmed with clientele. I expect its possible they had money troubles. Maybe that's another factor to consider."

"Yes," said Shaw, "we are looking into that."

Jackson continued, "I am, of course, looking for another place to stay in all the circumstances. I hear there is likely to be some choice in Foxhill. I was thinking of taking a look around there. Its a few days yet to my scheduled flight back home."

They both gazed into the fire and sipped their coffee, deep in their own thoughts.

After a few minutes, Shaw asked, "I would appreciate it if you could see your way to staying on in the area for awhile. You may have some insights that could be helpful down the road. I expect the investigation will take a little time."

"I don't really know," said Jackson. "Certainly for this evening, and maybe for the next day or so I can be available. A lot will depend on what kind of accommodation I can find." Looking around the bar of the George Hotel, Jackson smiled and

said, "I did try to book in here when I first came to the area, but they were fully booked beyond my departure date, hence the Red Lion. I guess anywhere decent is pretty much booked at this time of year. Pity about the Red Lion though, it was comfortable, reasonably quiet, and handily located for the valley."

Taking a drink from his coffee, Jackson again sank back into his chair, and said "I have no firm commitments, apart from the flight back home. I may take a look around the Lake District, though I understand it's pretty crowded at this time of year, and I may not be able to find anywhere decent to stay. I'll have to see how it goes. Maybe I'll just head back down to London, take in some shows, and go home."

"I would appreciate it if you could stay around for a few days," repeated Shaw. "You might be able to help me with something down the road. I haven't completed my investigation as yet. Could you let me know when you find somewhere to stay?"

"Sure, no problem," said Jackson.

After Shaw had left, Jackson stayed on awhile. The chair was comfortable, and the fire welcome. He considered whether or not to inquire if a room had become available at the hotel, and if so, how it would be to stay in the same place as Jess. There would be opportunities for sharing meals together, breakfast, dinner, maybe spending time together during the day. The prospect was tantalizing. It would be so easy to do. However, if it didn't work out, it would destroy his memories, and any hopes he still held, though firmly repressed, for the future. He remembered how Jess guarded her boundaries and privacy and he did not want to do anything that she might feel as an intrusion or ambush.

He had been married when they had last been together, and notwithstanding the strength of their feelings for each other,



she had preserved her self-respect and integrity, and his. He suddenly felt very unsure of his reception; it had been some years since he had seen her. She may well be involved with someone else now, indeed it would be surprising if she was not, and his presence in her hotel could be embarrassing and not welcome.

He resolved to stick to his original plan, and look for a place to stay in Foxhill. He could maybe drop by the George Hotel at some point, check in for dinner perhaps. He doubted he would be able to stay away entirely.

### **Twenty-three**

Shaw's sergeant had been working his way through the statements taken from those who had been at the Red Lion on the evening before Louise had died. Most of them were couples, but there was one single woman, and the sergeant's nose for anomaly had detected a possible opening into a different perspective on the situation – what was a woman, on her own on a Saturday night, doing at the Red Lion?

The woman, a Dolores Winter, had protested a great deal about giving a statement, and had been anxious to know whether or not what she had to say would become general knowledge; she had been reassured that it would not unless there was a court action and her testimony somehow was vital to the proceedings. This had not reassured her apparently, which had raised the sergeant's antennae, and stimulated his further interest.

He had subsequently visited Dolores, and talked to her further about her experience of the Red Lion, its landlord and landlady, and why she had been at the pub on her own on a Saturday night. He had such a calm, down to earth, accepting and reassuring manner, that she had eventually confessed that she had been having an affair with Symes, and had then burst into tears. Also, with a bowed head, and more tears, she had

confessed that Symes had recently ended the affair, and she had been so distraught at her loss of him that she had gone to the Red Lion in the hope of an opportunity to talk to him and persuade him to continue seeing her.

She had not wanted her husband to know about the affair. She was afraid that if her husband found out about it, he would end their marriage. She wanted to avoid that outcome as she was none too sure about Symes. For someone like Dolores, to end up on her own, with no man in her life, was a prospect worse than death.

Her husband had been away at a business conference that weekend, and she had told him that she would be taking the opportunity to spend some time with her ailing mother. She did stay at her mother's over Saturday night, but before going there, she had spent the later part of the evening at the Red Lion, hoping for an opportunity to speak to Symes.

The sergeant reassured her, but advised that he would have to check out her story, and where her husband was, and that might involve him in having to speak to her husband.

The sergeant liked Dolores, and was sure she wasn't the type to murder Louise over an affair with Symes. As for Dolores' worries about her husband finding out, in his experience, a husband or wife in a marriage generally knew instinctively when their partner was being unfaithful.

He contacted Dolores' husband, George Winter, who initially confirmed his wife's advice that he had been away at a business conference. However, when the sergeant made further inquiries for confirmation of the business conference, he found that it was a fiction. More inquiries eventually established that Winter had not been at a business conference, but had been away for the weekend with his mistress.

George Winter's reaction to the news that his wife had been at the Red Lion on the Saturday evening was one of relief, not

condemnation. He had found his wife's willingness to subjugation in exchange for promises of protection and security an irresistible attraction for a time, but he had tired of it. Winter knew Symes' reputation, his dominant attitude, and his general derogation of women. He had no illusions about why his wife may have been at the Red Lion on her own on a Saturday night. The information had pulled into focus a few anomalies in her behavior that had been bothering him over the last few months, anomalies he had at the time thought might have been indicators that she had grown suspicious of him. It had never occurred to him that she might be having her own affair. The news was a relief.

He decided to talk to her directly about her affair with Symes. He would play the role of the understanding but irredeemably hurt husband, unable to contemplate a reconciliation, and that a divorce was inevitable. He would keep his own affair out of it, and divorce her on the grounds of her affair with Symes. Maybe, if his own affair came to light in the proceedings, he could argue that his wife had turned away from him, and he had looked for comfort and consolation elsewhere, that it was all her fault, all of it, and she was undeserving of anything over the bare minimum in future support from him, and that even that bare minimum was a gross miscarriage of justice in all the circumstances.

## **Twenty-four**

George Winter returned home early to confront his wife with his knowledge of her affair. He found her sitting in their sun-room, with a very dry cocktail, and looking agitated and stressed. She wasn't dressed in her usual impeccable and ready for inspection fashion either, but was wearing lounge clothing, the sort of clothing she would wear just prior to going to bed. She was startled to see him and stood and fussed with closing and belting her dressing gown. Picking up her

drink, she started to make her way to the kitchen, assuming he would want something to eat, expressing her astonishment and some irritation at his early and unexpected appearance while she did so, and asking if he would like a cocktail while he waited.

He told her to sit down. She did. He told her that he had met with Townley, and that he knew she had been having an affair with Symes. He told her that he wanted a divorce. She collapsed in tears, protesting her innocence, while at the same time, between protests of innocence, asking him to forgive her, declaring that she had never loved Symes, that she had only ever loved George, that he couldn't leave her, that she would have no one if he left her, and that she needed him to stay with her, and that they could get over this, get through it, and be happy again.

He had listened to her, feeling contempt and repulsion, not sympathy. When she had finished speaking, and had subsided into paroxysms of tears, he had said, clearly and loudly, that he would be contacting his solicitor, and would be starting divorce proceedings. He had then gone up the stairs to pack a small suitcase, before walking out of their home.

Dolores was devastated. She could not imagine going through her life without a man to provide for her, to give her a home, status in the community, a felt sense of protection and security, and a sense of place, meaning and purpose. What was she to do now? She felt threatened and vulnerable. She could feel herself falling into a panic, collapsing, and out of her despair and anger she formed a new resolve – she would tackle Symes again. After all, in her mind, Symes was responsible for all of this. He had seduced her. He had lured her into an affair. She was, she felt, actually a virtuous woman who would never have dreamt of such a liaison if Symes had not tempted her. It was all Symes' doing. It was all his fault. He had a duty now to make it right by her. Apart from all of that, she could tell him that she had seen him strike Louise on the

night she died, and that he had to marry her now for his own protection. She understood that a wife could not testify against her husband. Louise was now dead, and when George Winter had divorced her, Symes would be free to marry her, and must marry her, or she would tell what she knew to the police.

She decided to confront Symes as soon as possible. She felt strong now in her resolve to tackle Symes and have him make all things right by her. In her thinking, it was his place to do so.

Dolores was scheduled to meet her friend, Anne, for lunch the next day. Instead, she called Anne, and left a voice mail, telling her that she had seen something the night Louise died; that she was going to go and see Symes, confront him with what she had seen, and talk to him, persuade him to marry her now that her husband was leaving her and Louise was dead.

Dolores drove toward the Red Lion but did not go in. She telephoned Symes and asked to meet with him. She knew he often took his two dogs for a walk before lunch and she persuaded him to meet with her, saying she knew what he had done, and that she needed to speak to him about how they were to go on.

Symes had found Dolores' worshipful submission to him flattering to his ego, and helpful in maintaining his reputation as the area's king of seducers, but she was also an irritant, and he was tired of her. He justified his use of her as being what she had asked for, what she had submitted herself to, and what she had seemed to want, and what she had brought on herself. He had never felt any warmth for her, and certainly not love. Symes didn't know what love was. He felt he had never experienced it, and was contemptuous of its existence, deriding it as a kind of romanticized expression of need and dependency, and used as a justification for submission to the culture's expectations in its effort to hold society together. He had read many novels containing accounts of love, and many philosophical books and psychological

explanations of its existence, but he had never experienced it.

When he got the call from Dolores, he was annoyed, and then alarmed. He had to find out just what it was she thought she knew.

There was a local walk, within a short driving distance from the Red Lion. It took one along the edge of the tops of what were locally known as the crags – enormous stone stacks often used by climbers to practice for their more adventurous pursuits in far and distant lands. He arranged to meet with her there.

They met at the car park at the beginning of the walk, and set out together in a tense silence. He had his two dogs with him. After a few breathless minutes – Symes had set a furious pace – she said, “George has found out about our affair, and is going to divorce me. You have to marry me now. I have no one if you don’t. You have to marry me. I cannot be without someone. Marry me and I will not tell the Police what I saw.”

Symes abruptly stopped his furious pace. Dolores was gratified to see that his manner had changed from its usual confident assurance into a rigid and strained turned away posture. Her comments had clearly had an effect, and she felt strengthened in her position, and more confident in the successful outcome of her plan. She was not however reassured when he turned back toward her with an expression of anger and disdain on a face that had gone taut and white.

“What do you mean?” Symes demanded, in a low and angry voice. “What on earth do you think you saw?”

“I saw you hit Louise and knock her over,” she shouted, “and she hit her head on the fireplace, and died. You killed her. That’s what I saw. But I won’t tell anyone. I love you. You know I love you. Marry me, and then we will both be safe.”

Symes continued to look at her with his hard expression for a few seconds, then he threw his head back and laughed.

"How the hell did you see anything?" he demanded. "You had long gone when Louise died."

"I was going to leave," she responded, "but I changed my mind. I wanted to talk to you again. I came back in, and heard you both arguing. I waited in the passageway to the back kitchen. I wanted to talk to you. I was desperate to talk to you. I saw you hit Louise."

Symes started walking again, at a slower pace, and looking around, he called to the dogs. They were running along the tops of the crags on the edge of the drop into the valley below. He made his way over to where they were, still calling to them to come to heel. Dolores followed him while continuing with her argument that he was free to marry her now, and that she couldn't testify against him if she was his wife, and that she loved him, and would never testify against him anyway, and that they could marry and be forever happy together, bound by their shared secret. Symes continued to walk toward his dogs, and the edge of the crags, and the downfall to the valley below, while rapidly assessing his options.

He would be telling the truth if he were to later say that Dolores, because he had ended their affair, had been hysterical and desperate. He could argue that any stories Dolores had told about him hitting Louise could be understood as her being malicious, angry and jealous, and her allegations against him had been an attempt to blackmail him into a marriage with her. That might work. But even if he could discredit her in that way, and discount her evidence, and the police believed him, she would go on to talk about it all around the village, and the valley, and he would never be free of the suspicion. It could ruin him. She would be a constant pest and oppression in his life, a kind of avenging angel.

He had lived a lot of things down, but he hadn't the arrogance to assume that he would be able to live down a suspicion of murder, especially when he knew it was true.

He turned to look at her again. He felt he was a great distance from her. She was just an object, not a person, and she was pathetic in either category: an object, crying, black mascara eye make-up running down her face, her nose running, her hair all over the place; a disheveled, caviling, blackmailing, low-life bitch – and presuming to threaten him, him!

He turned away, his mind made up. He was not going to have her in his life going forward. He reasoned with himself that it had been she who had started all of this. She had seduced him, hung around the pub, followed him around, tempted him into an affair with her. It was all her fault that she was in the situation she now found herself in. He had no sympathy whatsoever. From his view, she didn't deserve his sympathy, and she was not going to control his life. He could see clearly that her dependency needs would never end if he married her. She would never feel secure. She would always hold over him what she felt she knew, always, and she would dominate the relationship with the implied threat of the damage she could do to him if she should ever choose to use that knowledge. He would be trapped, subjected to her. Her captive. His spirit rebelled. There was no way he would live like that, not now, not ever.

When they got to where the dogs were, on the very edge of the drop down into the valley, he pushed her over and watched her body fall until it hit the jagged rocks waiting below. He then returned to the well-worn path that wended its way along the tops of the crags, and continued his walk with the dogs for another ten minutes or so. On the way back, he checked to see that her body was still where it had fallen. He could discern no movement, and felt confident that he could assume she was definitely dead.



He made his way back to his car, and back to the Red Lion. He briefly thought about Dolores' vehicle, still parked at the entrance to the pathway over the crags, and dismissed it as presenting any danger to himself. The chances of anyone seeing his vehicle parked there at the same time were so minimal he felt he could afford to not worry about it. In any event, if push came to shove, he could say he had seen her vehicle there, and had gone on up the path with the dogs for their walk, and had not seen her. Or he could make up a story about them having met briefly, at her request, and that she had pleaded with him to take her back, that he had refused, that he had not gone for a walk with her, but had gone straight back to his vehicle and had left the area. Something like that. If push came to shove.

He had expectations of a busy weekend – there were more bookings than usual for dinner. The more salacious types were no doubt anxious to get their dose of gossip. He chuckled to himself. He knew, given a chance, that he would soon forget about this episode, and that his life would go on in its own way.

## **Twenty-five**

Jess had returned from her sojourn in North Yorkshire in time for the scheduled meeting on Sunday with Edwin and Emily Dillthorpe. They drove up to the old church that Jess had visited just a few days ago. Just a few days ago? It felt more like a year ago that she had last been there. Instinctively, she knew she was going to meet that boy's grandmother again, the lady with the wrap around apron. Sure enough, they parked up near the old church, and walked up the path to the door into that older woman's home. Edwin knocked on the door, and then entered. His wife followed. Jess brought up the rear.

Edwin's mother was standing in the front room. She was not

wearing her apron, but appeared to be dressed in her Sunday best clothes. The room was tidy, and cups and plates, spoons, serviettes, milk and sugar, were laid out on the table under the window. She invited them to sit down, and to make themselves comfortable while she attended to getting the kettle boiled, and the tea made. She saw them sat down, and disappeared into the back of the house. There were noises of gas being lit, and some clattering, and then she reappeared with a tin, which contained biscuits, some of which were arranged on a plate on the table under the window. She disappeared again, and after a few minutes, reappeared with a large teapot encased in a brightly coloured, and clearly home knitted, tea cosy. The ritual of pouring tea, and ensuring that they all had milk, sugar, and a biscuit or two completed, they settled down to the business that had brought them together.

“Naw then, lass,” said Edwin’s mother, “I canna say I’m surprised to see thee again, but I’m surprised to see thee here with me lad and his missus. So, what’s up?”

“Oh, I’m sorry to bother you again,” said Jess. “Its just that once I got started on this search, one thing led to another. One of the names that came up was Dillthorpe, and so I called your son, and he said I should talk to you. I hope you can help me.”

“Well, I expect I can lass. But as I said to thee afore, what’s past is likely best left in the past. Let the dead begone. There’s no saying what can happen digging all that tragedy up again.”

“I know about the plague,” said Jess, “and that Frank and his sons and the old squire, and well, I expect, everyone who was at Nether Hall then, all died of it.”

“Aye, that’s right lass,” she said. “That Frank was a vain and arrogant kind of boy by all accounts. Thought he was God’s

gift. Only son of the old squire, or thought he was. His clothes had to be made from the best fabric by the best tailors, and his tailor got his fabric from London, no less. Quite a swell was Frank. But his tailor got his fabric from London, and that's where the plague came from."

"Oh my," said Jess. "I've read about an outbreak of plague not too far from here, years ago, and that was from fabric brought up from London. I understand most of the people who lived in that village died because of it."

"Aye lass. Terrible."

"So did the Cudworths contain it then, contain it to Nether Hall?" she asked.

"Aye, they did. I'll say that for 'em. T'old squire sent everyone away who had not been in touch wi'im or his son, or that cloth – that were all t'gardeners, kitchen staff, downstairs maids, anyone who had not been in direct contact wi'em. That still left a few though, and there were that woman he took in. She died wi'em. And Frank's wife, and the bairns."

"It were a curse on 'em, a curse on 'em." Edwin's Mom was shaking, and visibly upset. Edwin went to her side and held her.

"Its OK Mom," he said. "Its OK. Its over now. Them days are long gone."

"Aye," she said. "Aye, they are. And thank God for that. T'were a tragedy though. A tragedy. Makes a body wonder what the Almighty is up to, and no mistake."

Jess had fallen into a void of grief as she imagined how it must have been for the old squire and those connected to him as they faced their certain deaths in pain and isolation at Nether Hall.

After a few minutes, she said quietly, "I'm sorry to upset

you.”

“Tha’s alright lass,” the older woman said. “I can see tha’s feelin it anall. T’were my gran that were maid to t’old squire’s woman in them days. She had to stay wi’em, and die wi’em.”

“Omi, I’m so sorry, so sorry, I had no idea.” Jess felt terrible. “That would have been the squire’s second wife, would it, that your gran was maid to?” asked Jess.

“No lass, no. Squire had sent his second wife away. The woman my gran was maid to was his mistress.”

“Goodness,” said Jess. “This is getting complicated. Where did the second wife go, do you know? And do you know what happened to Lilly?”

“It were Cubdale I eard, o’er Whetstone way. It were still on some land he owned. Lilly went to live with her Mum when she was a bit older, and after her sister died.”

“Well, that clears that up,” said Jess. “Do you know anything about the first wife, Elizabeth?”

There was a quick exchange of glances between the three Dillthorpes.

“The records say that she died in childbirth, and that there was a child, a son called Edward. Do you know anything about him?” asked Jess.

The old lady took a deep breath. “Well tha might as well know it all,” she said. “Edward were put out to a wet nurse. T’were said old squire couldn’t bear the sight of him, kept reminding him of his mother. They say Elizabeth were the old squire’s childhood sweetheart and he never got over her death.”

“Do you know who the wet nurse was?” asked Jess.

"I'm not sure lass. Could'a been one o'them Thornley lot, but I don't rightly know. But Edward was a weak child. Not what the squire wanted at all. He didna want Edward anywhere near the Hall. Afta squire married again, and got that son Frank, he never saw Edward again. Squire had Edward living on one ot' farms right out at the end of the valley, as far away from the Hall as he could get 'im wi'out kicking him off the Estate altogether. Edward had his old nurse, and her family, come to live wi' him. He ended up marrying the daughter. T'old squire would have nowt to do wi 'em."

"Did they have any children do you know?" asked Jess.

"Lass, if they did, I never eard of em," she said.

Jess sat quietly for a few minutes, digesting all this information.

"You know, I'm feeling really upset right now, and I am sure you must be also, going over all this again. If you don't mind, and maybe its for the best, if we all have some time alone for awhile?"

The old lady nodded her consent.

"I would like to come back and talk to you again though, if I may, if that's alright with you?" Jess ventured.

"Aye lass," she said. "That's a can o'worms tha's opened up agin now. We'll ha to talk on it more."

"Thank you," said Jess. She turned to look at Edwin and Emily, and they acknowledged that they felt it would be a good time to leave. Jess felt terrible that she had upset Edwin's mother. She just wanted to get out of the place and breathe some air, calm down, think over all this new information, and consider whether or not she wanted to go any further with all of this.

The Dillthorpes dropped her off at the hotel. They all wanted

to be in their own space. Jess felt no inclination to invite them in for tea or dinner. It was a friendly leaving however. They had been very kind, and Edwin was happy for Jess to spend time with his mother when he wasn't there. e anHe

He and his wife both worked, and they had limited free time to spend on other people's ancestral searches.

Overall, on reflection, Jess felt it had been a good meeting, that she had made some new friends, and was not unwelcome at the Dillthorpes' home.

## **Twenty-six**

After leaving the Dillthorpes, Jess spent some time in her room thinking over the implications of what she had learned so far. The Squire had been married twice. His first wife had died in childbirth, which was not unusual in those days. The child had survived, but had been given up into the care of a wet nurse. The Squire had married again, and had 3 further children, a son and two daughters. One of those daughters had been Lilly. The Squire had moved Patricia, the mother of his children, Lilly's mother, out to Cubdale, when he had taken up with his mistress. Lilly must have also moved to Cubdale at some point. Lilly's sister had died of pneumonia, and Lilly's brother, his two sons and his wife, the old Squire, his mistress, and some of the servants, had all died of the plague at Nether Hall.

The son from the first marriage had lived with his wet nurse and her family, and had married the daughter of his wet nurse. They had lived on a farm somewhere in the area.

Jess needed to find out more about the squire's first son. She checked a map of the area, wondering where the old lady could have meant when she said down the valley, and about as far away from Nether Hall as he could get. Maybe the first thing

to do would be to find out what lands Nether Hall had in those days. Maybe the parish council offices could help her with that, or the local library perhaps.

Feeling she had had enough of the Cudworths for awhile, Jess made her way into the restaurant bar for a suitable cocktail, and a study of the menu in anticipation of a good dinner.

The weather was cooling, and the fire was lit in the snug end of the bar area. Watching the flames from the comfort of one of the wing chairs, she began to relax into feelings of ease, peace, and solid and enduring comfort. The wing chairs were strategically placed with their backs to the dispensing area of the bar, and attendant traffic, and gave a quiet, secluded and serene feeling to the space. She was annoyed then when she was joined by a man who took over the opposite wing chair, filling its capacious environs, and making it seem small.

Shaw had been filled with a sense of excitement, and portent, when he had caught sight of her in the course of his usual habit when entering a room of surveying everyone and everything in it. He had decided to have a drink in the bar before dinner, and there she was, the woman in the photograph.

She had frowned when he settled himself opposite to her. Jess had found the English male more forward than the Canadian counterpart, and had got quite used to being approached in England by strange men, particularly when she was trying to enjoy a cocktail before dinner, on her own. It seemed the English male entertained the belief that a woman on her own, in a perfectly respectable cocktail bar in an exceedingly expensive hotel, was somehow signaling to every man in the vicinity that she was available to entertain him.

“Sorry to disturb your peace. I hope you don’t mind,” he said.

Jess didn’t reply, but gave a slight nod of acquiescence to his perfect right to sit there if he chose. She shifted her position so that her body was directed away from the chair in

which he was sitting, and started flexing her foot. She was wondering if it would be excessively rude to straight away leave, taking her cocktail into the restaurant.

"I'm new to the area, but I understand that this hotel is very comfortable?" he ventured.

She turned slightly, and looked at him. He seemed harmless enough; handsome with an open friendly expression, and he looked intelligent. She decided to relinquish her annoyance and respond. Her peace and enjoyment of the space was shattered anyway.

"I'm here on holiday," she said, "and, yes, I agree, the hotel is comfortable."

"On holiday, ummm, so where are you from?" he responded.

Here we go, she thought, another boring conversation which would expect her to reveal personal information that she preferred not to divulge to perfect strangers. She found the effort of humdrum conversation quite exhausting. She considered whether to make up some fantastic tale, or leave, but there was something sincere and open in his expression, while yet firm, and she felt intrigued.

"I'm over from Canada," she said, "visiting the old homeland."

"Oh, very nice. I've never been to Canada. I've seen documentaries and pictures of course. The country looks very beautiful."

"It is," she agreed. "Particularly where I live, in British Columbia."

"Ah yes," he said. "All those mountains. The west coast looks very scenic. Didn't they have the Olympic Games there not so long ago?"

"Yes," she acknowledged, with a short laugh. "They tried. The



winter Olympics in 2011 were held in and around the North Shore and Whistler, though it was somewhat embarrassing. It had been a fairly mild winter, and there was hardly any snow at some of the locations. They were attempting to ship snow in by the truck load at one point from locations in the interior, where there was plenty of snow. The climate around Vancouver is quite different to the rest of Canada.”

“Yes, I seem to remember hearing about that. So, how long have you been in Canada?”

“Ummmm, over 15 years,” she responded, feeling that such a rejoinder wasn’t exactly a lie.

“And is this your first trip back then?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“Oh. So you come back regularly then do you?”

She was beginning to feel uncomfortably questioned. His tone of voice had a slightly more insistent note about it, and he had moved to sit forward in his chair and was looking at her very closely.

“Well, you know what its like for ex-pats, or perhaps you don’t. One never feels quite the same after leaving one’s roots. Trips back to the old country can be comforting, reassuring, especially if one’s old stomping grounds are a Peak Park, and haven’t changed a wink since one left.”

“So, is your family still hereabouts then?”

Another question she thought. Fairly innocuous sort of questions she understood, that generally pass for polite conversation, but, again, there was something about his manner that made her feel that there was a great deal more to it than that.

“Let’s talk about you,” she said. “Why are you here?”

"Oh, I'm here on business. I live in the Foxhill area, but I'm meeting a colleague for dinner here."

"And what is your work?" she asked.

"I'm a policeman," he said, "Chief Detective Inspector Shaw".

So that accounted for the manner. She realized she had felt as if she was being cross-examined.

"And your questions of me," she asked, lightly "are they part of your work?"

"Could be," he acknowledged, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Shouldn't you have warned me, or something?" she asked, again keeping a light tone.

"Oh, well, I could give you a warning now if you like," he laughed, "but I've told you I'm a policeman, and this is not an official interview in any event. I just happened to see you there, and wanted to talk to you. I've seen a photograph of you."

"Goodness, where?" she asked.

"A young man showed it to me recently. He said you were his mother."

Jess stared at Shaw in amazement. Her heart was beginning to pound, and her thoughts to scramble. With an effort, and gripping the arm of the wing chair, she now leaned forward and, feeling irritated and ambushed said, "what's happened, what's going on?"

"You haven't heard then," he said. "There has been a suspicious death at the Red Lion."

"Who?" demanded Jess, leaning further forward in her chair and glaring at the Inspector.

"The landlord's wife," he responded quietly, somewhat taken aback by the vehemence of her reaction.

Jess sat back in her chair with a thump, incredulous and aghast, her mind racing. What the hell, she thought, what the hell, what, what? She leaned forward again, gazing intently at the Inspector, and asked "Is my son involved at all?"

"Why do you ask that?" he asked.

"Because you have just told me that you have seen him, and he showed you a picture of me." Her voice was low and hard, her eyes were blazing.

Shaw sat back, feeling momentarily intimidated by her strength. He realized there was a lot more to this woman than he had imagined.

"It's early days yet. I don't really know. I'm sorry to upset you. We are still in the very early stages of our inquiry."

"But he's a potential suspect, that's what you're saying, right?"

"I'm saying I cannot rule him out at this stage. He lives at the Red Lion." Shaw paused to give her time to digest that information. Then he said, "I understand you were at the Red Lion a few days ago, around lunchtime. Is that right?"

"Yes, yes, I was there," she said impatiently. "I'd seen the beer garden when I passed the place awhile ago, and decided I wanted a run out for lunch. I had no idea Symes lived in the Valley. I had no idea he had a pub. When I knew him he was a teacher in the City."

"Did you know his current wife at all?"

"No. I've never met her. I haven't seen Symes for a very long time. I went into the pub for a sandwich. I didn't see anyone serving in the bar that could have been her. It was a younger

person who took my order. I assume his wife would have been about his and my age. It was very quiet. I seemed to be the only customer in the place.”

“Well, she died later that night, the same day you had been to the Pub at lunchtime,” advised Shaw.

Jess sat back in her chair and gazed at the fire. Horror was beginning to seep into her thoughts and emotions. What could this be? Why was this happening? Why did she have to go into that pub? Why? And why, when she did, did something like this happen? What possible portent could this be? She remembered seeing the police cars, and the ambulance outside the pub when she was making her way back from the church up on the hill. What did it all mean? How was she involved? She felt she must be involved, somehow. The inspector seemed to be insinuating that there was a connection between her visit to the pub at lunchtime, and the death later the same day.

“I haven’t seen my son for a very long time,” she said. “I expect I would recognize him if I met him, but I might not.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, without being sure of what precisely he was sorry about.

Shaw was watching her closely. He had been astonished to see her sitting there by the fireplace when he had walked in. She was having a cocktail, and looking at the menu. She was immediately recognizable from the photograph he had seen earlier. She was an attractive woman, a “looker” as they would call her in that part of the world. She was also very intelligent. He had noticed that straightaway. Her clothing was elegantly casual, and beautifully coordinated and flattering to her skin tone and hair colour. She was a winter group. His wife had “done her colours” at one time. She had been a winter group. Blue pinks, lavender and soft purples were particularly good. She was wearing a muted grayish purple long skirt with a long sleeved hip length lavender top in a

light jersey material, a coordinating long scarf, bare tanned legs, and comfortable but expensively elegant flat shoes. Her intelligence was evident in the relaxed way she sat there, her posture generally, the way she held her head, the direct eye contact, the calm, open facial expression, and the polite guardedness with which she had answered his questions.

“Well, I’ll leave you to think on the news. I have another commitment that I have to go to now. We can talk again. I’ll have my Sergeant come and meet with you, likely tomorrow, and take your statement. I must ask you not to leave the area.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I have no plans to leave the area just yet.”

Shaw had the distinct impression that if she did have plans to leave the area, she would do so.

He stood to leave. On an impulse, he asked, “perhaps we could have dinner some time?”

She looked him fully in the face now, and he had the wit to see that she was objectively assessing him. It was a new and uncomfortable feeling. He had a sudden felt sense of being a participant in an experiment with an uncertain outcome. He wasn’t used to that. Generally, he was used to feeling he was always in full control. Then she stood. She was quite tall for a woman, about 5’9” he guessed, and slender. She extended her hand to shake his in a parting politeness, and said, “In the circumstances, that’s probably not going to work for me right now. But thank you for the thought.”

“Goodnight then,” he said. “My sergeant will be in touch with you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight.”

As she left the bar, she headed for the elevators, in the opposite direction from the restaurant.

## Twenty-seven

Sergeant Dickson was feeling a bit irritated with the woman across the table from him. He was feeling particularly low on patience after being on night duty over the weekend. As well, his wife had been none too pleased with him that morning. He had to tell her that he had given up his day off to cover for a mate who had to take his aging mother to the hospital for tests. His wife had wanted to know if someone else's aging mother was more important to him than she was. She had to cancel the plans she had made for the day. It was a no-win situation for him, and he was not in a good space.

He felt the woman before him, Anne, was overly emotional for the circumstances she described. She was a friend of a woman called Dolores Winter, and she was worried about her as she had not been answering her phone over the weekend, and had failed to turn up at a meeting they had arranged for the previous Friday. She said she would have come into the police station over the weekend, she had been so worried, but she felt she should leave it for a couple of days. Dolores could have gone to her mother's home for the weekend. However, here it was, Monday, and Dolores had not turned up, and had not returned her calls, and so she was here to report her missing.

They had gone through the usual preliminaries. Dolores was a grown woman. She may be at her mother's and may just have chosen to not return Anne's calls. Had she and Dolores had a fall-out, for example. No, Anne said, certainly not, and she had called Dolores' mother that morning. She hadn't called her on the weekend as she didn't want to worry the mother unnecessarily, but Dolores' mother said that Dolores had not been there over the weekend. She felt very confused, and didn't know what to do for the best. Could Dolores have gone off for a few days? suggested the Sergeant. Well it was possible, she agreed, but it would be odd for Dolores not to

call her to let her know if she had done that.

Dickson wondered what possible reason could this woman have for being so agitated and worried about Dolores. Then it became clear. Dolores had been at the Red Lion on the night of the landlady's death, and had indicated that she knew something about it. She had arranged to meet with Anne to talk about that. It was that meeting that she hadn't shown up for. Sergeant Dickson decided to call Townley.

Anne explained to Townley that Dolores had telephoned her the previous week in a bit of a state. She had been very upset. Dolores' husband had told her he was divorcing her because of her affair with Symes. Dolores planned to go to see Symes, and to insist that Symes marry her. Dolores had been at the Red Lion the night Louise had died, and she had seen something that she felt would persuade Symes that he had to marry her. She had not said what it was over the telephone, preferring to meet to talk it over. They were to have met the previous Friday.

Townley had Dolores' phone records checked, and found that she had made a call to Symes on the Friday, and there had been no calls since.

Townley called Shaw with the new information.

It was arranged that they would visit the pub the following day to interview Symes.

## **Twenty-eight**

It was a cooler morning on the Tuesday when Shaw and Townley pulled into the Red Lion car park. Symes was in the kitchen, hectoring the chef over complaints from customers about the soufflé served over the weekend.

They moved into the lounge bar. There were no customers.

Townley presented Symes with the evidence of Dolores' phone records, and asked for an explanation.

"Yes. I got calls from Dolores from time to time," said Symes. "She was a bloody nuisance. The last time she called, I told her to stop calling me. Maybe that was on Friday, I can't remember."

"So, you were in a relationship with Dolores?" queried Shaw.

"Yes. We had a bit of a fling. Didn't last long. She's one of those emotional, demanding types. Tiring, you know."

"Can you remember what you said to her in your last call?" asked Shaw.

"Well, I told her that it was over, that she should stop calling me. She was a bit hysterical. She said I had to marry her." Symes laughed. "As if," he said.

"Do you remember if Dolores was here the night that your wife died?" queried Shaw.

"Yes, I believe she was. I didn't have time to talk to her. It was a busy night. She didn't hang about. I assume she left before closing time." Symes' tone was dismissive. Then his expression brightened, and turning to look directly at Shaw, he said, with a triumphant note in his voice, "Hey, maybe she didn't leave the pub. Maybe she waited around until everyone had gone. There are plenty of places in the pub where she could do that. Maybe she was the one who fought with Louise later. I wouldn't put that past her. As I said, the woman was hysterical, unstable – the quintessential jealous type, and capable of anything."

"So, you haven't heard from her since Friday?" asked Shaw.

"Nope," said Symes. "Thank God."

Shaw and Townley left the pub, convinced that Symes had



something to do with Dolores' disappearance, but having to acknowledge that all they had to go on was their instincts.

Symes had once again come up with a plausible interpretation of the circumstantial evidence which would put him in the clear.

## **Twenty-nine**

Jess was feeling aggravated, irritated, and angry. She had spent the evening thinking over her meeting with Shaw, and had completely missed her dinner. When she had gone to bed, eventually, she had realized she was hungry. There was no prospect of sleep. Damn the man. Damn. Damn this whole damned venture. She had taken an early breakfast in her room, and was now walking on a path which led out from the back of the hotel into the countryside. She felt some vigorous exercise would help her to calm down. Damn Symes. He had brought nothing but trouble and grief into her life before, and now, now, just one chance meeting, and here she was again; trouble and grief, storms and tempests, and involved in a suspicious death. Damn the man. Damn.

The path took a turn up a steep hill. She had to concentrate on her breathing to keep up the furious pace she had set for herself. At the top of the hill, she stopped to look around at the view. Slowly, as she surveyed the vista below her, the tension in her body and her mind eased, and she began to regain her balance and composure. She realized that her fury was not so much at what was happening around her, but in realizing that, though she knew she had nothing to do with the suspicious death at Symes' pub, she had felt afraid, had felt she would not be believed, that she would be accused and blamed. She had momentarily lost her confidence, and had fallen back into the space she had lived in for the years she had been married to Symes. A constant state of feeling

powerless, afraid, unheard, disbelieved, and blamed for what Symes did to her.

In the years since the ending of her marriage to Symes, she had worked through a scapegoat complex, the effects of the Stockholm Syndrome, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Years of anguish and inner work, which she could expect would now enable her to distance herself from events which were not of her own making, were other peoples' stuff and troubles, other peoples' business, other peoples' problems.

She was peripherally involved. Symes was her ex-husband, and father of her children. It was Symes' third wife that had suffered a suspicious death, and on the very evening of the day Jess had been at his pub. She was not responsible for that death. She needed to stand her ground, and to not be afraid.

She found a suitable spot, and lying flat on her back in the grass, watched the clouds scudding across the blue sky, and the blessed birds wheeling and diving, and singing. She started to let go of each feeling as it came into her consciousness, releasing it to go up into those scudding clouds. Calmness was slowly restored, and a return to a more secure footing in her own centre. An objective examination of the way the old complex had been triggered by the conversation with Shaw slowly became possible.

She realized the chance meeting with Symes had stirred up the past again, had reactivated memories of traumatic events, events she had not thought of for a long time, though they were never far from consciousness. Her psyche had protected her for many years from suffering the full effects of the devastation wreaked in her life all those years ago. Archetypal defences of the personal spirit, the experts called it. It had been very slowly, over the years of work, that she had been able to tolerate and assimilate the despair of those years, and for it to become manageable. She had felt affirmed when told that she had suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome

on the breakdown of her marriage and the loss of her children, and further affirmed on the diagnosis of her having suffered in the marriage from what was now called the Stockholm Syndrome.

She knew now, as she looked back on her experience, that there was something in her that had protected her so as to enable her to function, to carry on with life, and that it had only been very gradually, as she had built the reserves to deal with what had happened to her, that she had explored the heritage of her experience. She felt she wasn't completely unfrozen yet. She also felt, because of the work that had been done, which had increased her awareness of the suffering that she had been through, that she was more aware now of her vulnerability than she would have been even 5 years ago. Could she handle what she would have to go through now? She felt afraid, but also felt that she had to trust. Maybe this reliving of the old trauma was no accident, but a design, a way to finish the work of healing. She tried to see the good that could come from it and knew she must remain strong.

When Shaw had told her that Symes' third wife had died, and that he was questioning people about their movements, that it was a suspicious death, she had identified with Symes' wife, had assumed Symes had beaten her and killed her, and that had taken her back to her own experience of beatings, and back into the old familiar black hole of feelings of impotence, helplessness and abandonment. Well, she wasn't impotent or helpless now, and she was well used to being on her own. Her mother used to say, with some envy, that she had done well, despite the odds.

Jess stood up, brushed the grass off her skirt, raised her arms, and twirled around with a quiet smile on a face turned to the sky. In her heart she gave thanks. She had survived. She was well. Symes was the past.

Gradually she returned to the day.

As she now had to stay in the area for the time being, she decided to tackle the business of the size and location of the Cudworth Estates. She needed to figure out where Edward could have lived, and then she could check the relevant parish records. With that resolve, and feeling she had reclaimed some control over her life, she headed back down the hill, and into the local library.

## **Thirty**

Apart from a bowed head behind a front desk, Jess found she was the only person in the library.

It was a high ceilinged building, with tall windows. Jess noted the similarity to what she remembered of her infant school buildings, and the council office buildings she had recently visited: the same stone exterior, the same high windows and high ceilings, the same colour of paint, and the resultant institutionalized, and somewhat depressingly controlled feel about it all. She wondered, briefly, and without too much interest, what was going on at the time all of these buildings were brought into existence. Perhaps a statement of council control, evidence of a kind of totalitarian intent, or perhaps it was just a needed and more pragmatic approach to expenses in the days when there wasn't much money about, and to use the same formula for public buildings was a saving on architectural and designer fees.

The windows were in need of a clean, but the sun filtered through the dust, and the atmosphere was generally airy and pleasant. Jess relaxed. She approached the receptionist, who was studying a ledger on her desk. Jess waited patiently to be acknowledged. After half a minute or so, probably the length of time, Jess assessed, that it took for this woman to feel she had established her importance and authority, the woman looked up, smiled, and inquired if she could be of any

assistance. Jess was surprised to see that the receptionist was a young woman with intelligent grey eyes, somewhat shrouded with heavy dark rimmed glasses. With her head bent down, all one could see of her was a permed hair style generally seen on middle-aged women, a knitted grey twinset and the beginnings of what looked like a grey pleated skirt. She wore a string of pearls around her neck. She looked quizzically at Jess, but did not question her request for information on the Cudworth Estates. She directed Jess to the back of the library where history books relating to the local area were, and returned to the work she had on her desk.

The books were old. Clearly no one had been sufficiently interested in the local area to write about it for many years. Jess started at the beginning of the indicated section, taking the first book to a nearby desk and chair. She settled down to the task before her. She expected to have to gradually work her way through the tomes, one by one. There were sketch maps of the area generally, but it wasn't until she was about half way through the 20 or so volumes that she found a sketch specifically identified as being of the Cudworth Estates. It was a rough sketch, and the names on it were written in a script that made them hard to read. She copied the sketch. There were references to the Cudworth Estates in all the following books. It had clearly been a key component of life in the area for many years, and still was. The Cudworths had been, and remained, major land and property owners.

Jess took the copy of the sketch back to her hotel to compare it with her large scale current map of the area. Using the compass points on the sketch, and what she already knew about the location of Nether Hall, she felt reasonably sure that she could generally define where the Estate's boundaries must once have been. Jess felt that the old lady's description of "down the end of the valley, and at the far edge of the Estates", would point to the Longden area. It was too late to do anything further that day, but she would make a trip to

Longden the next morning, and see what the parish records there had to reveal.

Dinner at the hotel was without incident. Shaw didn't appear.

### **Thirty-one**

Tuesday morning saw Jess on her way to Longden. She knew the area, and that Longden was a small village tucked away from the mainstream in an idyllic valley. A popular hiking trail, which wound its way across the tops of the hills which ran down the centre of that part of the country, could be accessed from the north side of the village. Longden's residents, grown used to their peaceful seclusion, had been none too happy with the generosity of a government which had revived the old and abandoned railway line that ran through the valley, providing ready and easy access from the nearby cities to their village and its surrounding countryside. Residents now had to tolerate regular invasions by a great number of folks from those surrounding cities who visited the area to refresh their lungs with the country air, and to reset their minds, emotions and perspective in what they experienced as relatively peaceful, and less crowded spaces. In doing so, they considerably lessened the peace that the residents could now only intermittently enjoy. The only resident of the village who did not resent the invasions was the landlord of the one and only pub.

The church was easy to find. It was locked. She made her way to the pub, ordered a half bitter and a ploughman's lunch, and asked the landlord if he knew how she might access the parish records. The landlord, not a local man, was clearly unaware that there were such things as parish records, and gave her a look which conveyed his view that she was probably another one of those nutters from a university somewhere. He was busy serving other customers, and didn't have time to discuss the

matter. Jess made her way from the bar to a quieter corner of the pub and settled to wait for her lunch.

She was looking at the sketch again when someone asked: "You're a stranger then, hereabouts, and not a hiker by the look of you?" Jess turned to see an extraordinarily thin middle aged man with sharp features, set in a deeply lined face, and topped with a shock of abundant white hair. He had come to sit at the adjoining table.

"Right, on both counts," she laughed. "As you can spot me for a stranger, can I assume that you are local to Longden?"

"I suppose you could say that," he said, with a smile, "I do live here. Have done for awhile now. Well, most of my life. I expect that makes me a local, though I can't say I'm generally to be seen in this pub! My car is in for repairs – so its needs must." The tone indicated a derisive disrespect for the premises in which they were both sitting.

He was smoking a cigarette. Jess noticed they were the type that one rolled for one's self.

"Maybe you can help me?" she ventured. "I was hoping to look at the parish records. I'm trying to track down some folks who lived here in the 1800s. I went to the church, but its locked."

He looked at her with some curiosity. "Yes," he said, "the church is locked. Too many city types wandering around these days. Not that there's much in the church now. They didn't start locking it up until most of the stuff in it had been stolen." He laughed, a chortling gay kind of laugh. Then he continued, "Ummm, parish records. Not sure. Maybe my wife could help you with that. She's been here forever."

"Wow, that would be great if she could help me. Could I meet her?"

“Sure, I expect so,” he said. “We live just around the back of the pub here, a place called the Robin’s Nest. She’s around this afternoon as it happens.”

“That’s just marvelous, thank you. Should I come now? I’ve just ordered a ploughman’s lunch, but I could miss that if I should come now.”

“Hey, well, I don’t expect there’s any rush. I’m just enjoying my pint here. Have your lunch. No problem. My name’s John by the way.”

“Oh, and I’m Jess,” she rejoined, leaning toward him to shake hands.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“And you,” she rejoined.

“So, you don’t sound English. Where you from?” he inquired.

“I am English actually, but I’ve been living in Canada for a long time now. I guess I’ve got a mid-Atlantic accent. I live in Vancouver in British Columbia, but I grew up around here.”

“Oh, whereabouts?” he asked.

“Over the hill,” she laughed, “and far away. No. Seriously. I lived near Whetstone when I was growing up. I love the countryside around here. Its the one thing I miss about England.”

“Its hard to beat, that’s for sure,” he said. “As I said, I’ve lived in this valley most of my life, and wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. So what’s your last name then? I wondered if I knew you, you look a bit familiar. It’s why I decided to say hello.”

“When do you think you may have known me?” asked Jess cautiously.



“Umm, well, not sure, nothing springs immediately to mind.” He turned to look out of the window for a moment, and then, turning back to her, said “Umm, parish records is it. Well, as I said, nothing springs to mind.” He continued to look at her closely with a quizzical expression.

“Oh,” exclaimed Jess. “Its not my maiden name type of thing I’m looking for, its the Cudworth family. I understand that an Edward Cudworth may have lived around here, and I wanted to see when that was, and if he had any children.”

John looked up quickly.

“Well now, that’s a different matter,” and, after a pause, “I’m sure my wife will be able to help you with that. She’s more into the local history than I am.”

“Oh my,” said Jess. “That would be wonderful.”

The ploughman’s lunch arrived, and seeing that John had finished his beer, Jess, feeling anxious to maintain the connection, and too excited to eat anyway, asked for her lunch to be put in a doggy bag. The request was met with a blank incomprehension. She needed to explain that she meant a bag in which to put her lunch, so that she could take it away with her, and that there was no doggy involved. There was resistance, and further explanations had to be made. Jess began to feel that she should just have eaten the meal, or pushed it into her pockets, or simply left it. However, in the result, she got the bread roll and the cheese and pickles in a bag, with an attendant serviette, and left the pub feeling as if she had just threatened the very foundations of the British Empire.

“Robin’s Nest” turned out to be a substantial stone built detached property, the entrance to which was just a few yards up the lane past the pub. It was fronted by a long driveway, and immaculate gardens. They walked up the driveway, and around the back of the house. There was a large fish pond set

into the grounds under the trees toward the far end of the gardens. It was all quite lovely. They went in through the back door. The lady of the house was called into the kitchen, a kettle was put on the Aga, biscuits were produced, exquisite china cups laid out on what appeared to be an ancient pine kitchen table, and then, formalities over, John explained to his wife the nature of Jess' visit.

"The Cudworth name is well known around here," she said. "They are the biggest landowners in these parts. They own most of the farms around here, and down the valley. The ancestral home is a conference centre now, perhaps you know that already?"

"Yes," Jess said. "I had come across that. I'm trying to find out more about the old squire's first son, from his first marriage. I understand he lived around here for a time. His name was Edward."

"Peggy and Harold," she said firmly. "I'll give them a call."

She disappeared out of the kitchen. Jess blinked, and sat back in her chair. John laughed at her expression. "Its a small world around here," he said. "I expect Peggy and Harold will be able to help you."

Jess heard a call being made, and then John's wife came back into the kitchen.

"They'll pop over," she said. "They live just across the lane. They're very interested in meeting you. There's a Cudworth in the graveyard here you know, perhaps you haven't seen that?"

Jess shook her head.

"Peggy and Harold have always been very involved in the church. Of course, nowadays, its not much of a church. We share a vicar with three other congregations, and we only get to have a service once a month. Its either a morning or an evening service, not both, and hardly anyone turns up. Its a

bit painful actually. I don't have a very good singing voice and the two or three others that show up aren't much better." She laughed. "We make the effort, but it would be difficult to call the noise we make praise." She laughed again. "Peggy and Harold still try and keep a good heart, and look after the old place. Peggy always has fresh flowers on the altar, and Harold cuts the grass, that kind of thing. They'll know whatever there is to be known about the Cudworth that's buried there."

Jess was delighted. She couldn't believe her luck. Or, she suddenly thought, was it luck, or was it synchronicity again. After all, just what were the chances of John's car being in for repairs, and him being in the local pub, just as she was in there waiting for her lunch, and him knowing Peggy and Harold. She went from delighted openness to a subdued wondering and guardedness.

A few minutes later, Peggy and Harold appeared at the door, and after the fussiness of greeting their arrival, and getting them settled with cups of tea and a biscuit, they were introduced to Jess with a brief overview that she was interested in the Cudworth family. Then they all sat back, Peggy, Harold, John and John's wife, and looked at her expectantly.

"Gosh," said Jess, looking at their faces, and realizing she had to come up with a convincing explanation. "Well, I'm not sure really how I got into this, but it turns out that its possible I'm related to the Cudworth family, and so into it I am. The trail leads to Edward Cudworth, who, I understand, was the old squire's first son by his first wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth died in childbirth. I understand Edward was given into the care of a wet nurse after his mother's death, and that he never returned to the ancestral home. The squire married again, and had three other children. One was a boy, and I understand that when he got that boy he definitely didn't want Edward back at the Hall. Edward wasn't a healthy child apparently, and probably wasn't expected to live long in

any event. The wet nurse lived on a farm around these parts, as far as I can make it out, and I'm wondering if there are any parish records that may have his name in them. I'm curious to know what happened to him, how long he lived, whether or not he got married or had any children, stuff like that."

"Well, his grave's in Longden churchyard," said Harold, matter-of-factly, "so I expect he'll be in the parish records somewhere."

Jess felt her heart thud to a stop. She took a deep breath, several deep breaths. Such a simple declaration, and made with absolute surety and confidence. There was no doubting what Harold said.

"Oh my. Oh my. How could I see those records, do you suppose. Do you know where they are?"

"Aye, of course I do," said Harold, smiling broadly. "They've been sent off to Foxend for safe keeping like. You'd have to get in touch with the vicar and arrange it all with him. I can give you his name and phone number."

Jess was stunned. She could barely contain her excitement. All so easy. The fortuitious meeting with John, and then with Harold. She began again to wonder if supernatural forces were at work, if she was on some pre-destined path in accord with the spirits of her ancestors.

Jess expressed her heartfelt thanks. A piece of paper and a pen were found, and she took down the information. Her excitement was contagious. All of them were laughing, and jesting about what she might find in the parish records, and whether or not it would be advisable for her to approach the vicar in disguise, and that she had to come back as soon as she could to report on developments.

After more cups of tea, and chats about life in Longden, the state of the world, and the ongoing aggravation of the hordes

of hikers, John suddenly exclaimed, "I remember you now, you were once married to that Symes bloke!"

Jess felt appalled, as if she had been found out in a lie, or a misrepresentation of herself to these folks who had been so welcoming and helpful. From what she had heard of Symes and his circumstances recently, she was sure the connection was not a beneficial one.

"Yes," she responded, quietly. "I was married to a man called Symes in another life, or, at least, it feels like another life to me. But that was many, many, years ago."

"I thought I recognized you in the pub!" exclaimed John. John was clearly more satisfied that his memory had not proved false than in entertaining any notions that Jess may have deceived him.

"I remember you. It was after you divorced Symes of course. I used to see you about the scene here in the valley, years ago – the folk club, stuff like that." He turned to his wife. "You remember, you must remember that." His wife wasn't so sure, but was prepared to agree with her husband.

Jess laughed and told him about the couple in the other pub who had remembered her also as being about in the valley at one time. She expressed the thought that she was perhaps only remembered because she had once been married to Symes.

"Well, you could have something there," acknowledged John, "that Symes fella has a kind of notoriety about him, that's for sure."

She apologized for having no clear recollection of having met John or his wife before, and made a lame attempt to explain that away on the ground that she had been living abroad for so long, she had lost touch with her memories from England. She didn't want to explain that she had gaps in her memory still because of the fallout from the trauma of being Symes' wife,

and its tragic aftermath.

She expressed her delight at having met them all, and how pleased she would be to meet with them again, then, armed with the vicar's phone number, and address, and John's phone number, Jess left the Robin's Nest late in the afternoon. It was time to go back to her hotel and shower, call the vicar and arrange a time to meet with him, hopefully the following day, and try once again to have a civilized cocktail and a good dinner, and a decent night's sleep.

When she got back to her hotel, she was given a message from someone called Townley, a police sergeant, who wished to meet with her at her convenience.

### **Thirty-two**

She phoned Townley from her room, leaving a message that she was back at her hotel, and would be dining in the restaurant that evening. She also advised that the following day she expected to be out in Foxend for most of the day, but back again at the hotel in the evening. Townley could meet with her either later that evening, or the following evening.

She then called the vicar in Foxend, and arranged a meeting with him for 11.30 the next morning.

She showered and changed, and headed down to the bar, and the fire, and the wing chair, and was not surprised to see Chief Detective Inspector Shaw already in place. She had dressed a little more carefully with that expectation in mind. She was determined to stay in control this time.

"Good evening Inspector," she said gaily, as she sat in the other wing chair, and set her cocktail glass down on the side table.

"Well, hello again," said Shaw, pretending to some surprise at

seeing her again. He was clearly pleased to see her, half rising from his chair, a warm smile on his face, and extending a hand in greeting. Jess shook his hand.

“So how goes your investigation?” she inquired, with a smile on her face. “Have you arrested anyone yet? I hear your sergeant is wanting to meet with me. I hope that doesn’t mean I’m a suspect!”

He laughed, and shook his head. “No, No. How’s it going for you? Are you enjoying your holiday?”

“Yes, I am,” said Jess, smiling broadly. “I’m doing my own investigation as it happens. Trying to track down some ancestors. I’m off to Foxend tomorrow to check the parish records there.”

“Oh, well, I hope you don’t come across any skeletons you would have preferred to leave in the cupboard!” He laughed. “I’m not sure I’d want to look too deeply into my own family’s history.”

“Its fascinating,” said Jess, “and I got started on the search quite by accident.” And, eyes sparkling, she told him about her visit to the church on the hill, and the people she had met since, and how she felt close to finding out something very important in the parish records.

“Are you dining here this evening?” he inquired. “If you are, could we continue our conversation over dinner?”

“Very well,” responded Jess, her excitement at the progress of her own investigations overcoming any misgivings she might otherwise have felt, “Yes. We can do that.” As well, she reasoned to herself, as they walked into the dining room, it was unlikely that Shaw would be having dinner with her if she was a murder suspect – that must be against his rules.

They were shown to a very pleasant table by a window

overlooking the gardens. It was a dusky light now; the evenings were beginning to draw in as Autumn secured its foothold. The dining room was as comfortable as the wing chairs by the fire: round tables with white tablecloths reaching to the floor, silver cutlery and condiments, fresh flowers and candles, upholstered chairs covered with a fabric of deep maroons and golds, panelled walls, and a blazing fire.

The menu was impressive. The business of ordering food and wine completed, they settled back in their comfortable chairs and relaxed into the environment.

“So, on family connections,” began Shaw, “have you seen your son since we last talked?”

Jess felt her heart rate increase. Her pleasant mood vanished. She had hoped for a social evening, and no more talk of the death at Symes’ pub. A foolish hope she realized, a vain hope. Oh dear, she thought, I hope this doesn’t turn out to be another missed dinner.

“No,” said Jess, somewhat shortly. “I really have no desire to go back to Symes’ pub, and I have no idea how to contact my son in any other way.” After a few moments, Jess continued, “I haven’t seen him for a very long time you know. I’m not at all sure I would be welcomed, and with the death of Symes’ current wife, well, its not the best of times is it?”

“I guess not,” said Shaw. “I have met him. I had to talk to him of course. He’s an impressive young man.”

Jess felt some annoyance. So Chief Detective Inspector Shaw had met her son. Well, how very nice for him, she thought, how very nice for him. How very nice for everyone who had met and known her son. She on the other hand, she was only his mother, she had not met or known her son. Well, par for the course, she thought, par for the course.

“How nice for you,” said Jess, stiffly.



Shaw smiled at her, and reaching for the wine, poured a generous amount into their respective glasses.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I don't want to upset you. I thought you might like to know that he is an impressive young man. He seems very sensible and successful. He drives a white MG Midget," he added, somewhat lamely.

"Not a dark blue BMW then?" said Jess, laughing.

"No," said Shaw. "Why do you mention a dark blue BMW?"

"Oh, no particular reason; its just that I've seen one about here and there while I've been driving around."

"There's a resident at Symes' pub who has a dark blue BMW," said Shaw. "Where did you see it?"

"Oh, once in the car park at Highgate, once driving up the lane to the tops along the valley there, and once parked just off the road near the Hope Estates."

"Parked off the road?"

"Yes, there's a spot where there's room for 3 or 4 cars."

"So, you've never met the driver then?" inquired Shaw.

"No," said Jess. "I just noticed the car because of the colour. It looks very smart."

"Well, the driver seems to know you," said Shaw. "I showed him your photo. He's from Canada."

"Goodness," said Jess. "Do you have his name?"

"Jackson," said Shaw, and watched as Jess drew in her breath and sat back in her chair, blinking rapidly for a few seconds.

"Do you know him?" asked Shaw.

"Yes," said Jess, her heart pounding. "We worked together for

a time, some years ago.”

Jess sank into silence. Shaw waited.

“Is he here?” asked Jess, looking around the dining room.

“No,” said Shaw, shaking his head. “He was staying at the Red Lion, but said he would be moving to another hotel in all the circumstances, probably in Foxhill. He will let me know.”

“He was staying at the Red Lion! My God,” exclaimed Jess, shaking her head in bewilderment and dismay. “Oh, this is all too weird, too strange, I’m having difficulty believing any of this.”

“Well, its true,” said Shaw.

“Surely he’s not involved in the death of Symes’ wife?” exclaimed Jess.

“Goodness no,” said Shaw. “He was away at the time, touring the Lake District.”

“Thank God for that,” said Jess, “but staying at the pub. I can’t believe it. This is all too weird.” Jess gazed out to the gardens, shaking her head.

Shaw waited for a moment, and then, “so” he said, “tell me more about these ancestors of your’s.”

Startled back into the present, Jess resolutely repressed her amazement at finding that Jackson was in the area, and that he had actually been staying at Symes’ pub. She determined to ask no further questions of Shaw, show no interest, and think about it later. Collecting her thoughts, she began to relate her findings on her ancestral search. The evening passed quickly, and pleasantly. Shaw was an easy companion: open, considerate, intelligent, and very interested, apparently, in everything that Jess found interesting. He put her at her ease, and the conversation flowed easily. They parted

amicably. Jess felt a twinge of regret that no firm arrangement was made for them to meet again. There was a vague, "I'll be in touch," as they left the dining room, but nothing firm.

She wanted to ask him about his personal history, about his ancestors, about his career, and his interests. She wanted to meet him again.

Safely back in her room, she let herself dwell on the extraordinary synchronicities that were unfolding in her life. What did they all mean? Where was all of this going? That things were going so well indicated to her that she was in the right path, and should continue. But Jackson, here in England, now, and at Symes' pub. It was unbelievable.

Foxend tomorrow.

*To Be Continued*

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