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Casting the Net

Written by Pam Rhodes

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CASTING THE NET

By the same author

With Hymns and Hearts and Voices
Fisher of Men

The Dunbridge Chronicles

Book 2

Casting the Net

Pam Rhodes



LION FICTION

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For Tom Sander, the bright young curate who, in sharing his own experience of curacy with me, has helped to shape Neil's story. With inspirational young priests like Tom at its helm, the church we love is in safe hands.

Who's Who in Dunbridge

Reverend Neil Fisher – curate at St Stephen's.

Reverend Margaret Prowse – rector of St Stephen's; **Frank Prowse** – Margaret's husband; **Sarah**, their daughter, married to **Martin**, with a toddler son, **Edward**.

Iris Fisher – Neil's widowed mother, who lives near Bristol.

Peter Fellowes – churchwarden; **Glenda Fellowes** – Peter's wife; they have two grown-up children with families of their own: **Christine** in Brighton and **John** in Scotland.

Cynthia Clarkson (Cyn) – churchwarden; husband **Jim** and sons **Carl**, **Barry** and **Colin**, the eldest, married to **Jeannie**; **Ellen** – Colin and Jeannie's baby daughter.

Harry Holloway – elderly widower, Neil's neighbour.

Claire – Harry's great-niece; gardener employed by St Stephen's.

Sam – Claire's young son.

Ben – Sam's estranged father, who returned home to Australia before Sam was born.

Felicity – Claire's mother, who lives with her second husband David in Scarborough.

Wendy Lambert – Neil's keenest admirer; leader of St Stephen's worship group; music teacher at Fairlands School for Girls.

Sylvia Lambert – Wendy's mother; St Stephen's choir leader.

Brian Lambert – Wendy's father; organist at St Stephen's.

Barbara – runs St Stephen's playgroup.

Brenda – Sunday school teacher.

Val – widowed palliative care nurse; regular worshipper at St Stephen's; friend of Peter Fellowes.

Roland Branson – Glenda Fellowes' boss.

Boy George Sanderson – octogenarian leader of St Stephen's bell-ringers.

Madge – bell-ringer.

Clifford Davies – former professional pianist in variety; organist at the local crematorium.

Graham Paterson – Neil's friend at the Wheatsheaf; fellow member of the darts team; Deputy Head of Maths at Dunbridge Upper School.

Debs – lives next door to Graham; policewoman; plays the flute in St Stephen's worship group.

Bob Trueman – local farmer; chairman of the Committee of Friends of St Stephen's.

Garry – pastor of Church of God Evangelical Church.

Shirley McCann – matron of the Mayflower residential care home.

Sylvie – care worker at the Mayflower.

Tom – resident at the Mayflower, who plays the piano.

Victor – previous rector of St Stephen's for more than twenty years.

David Murray – churchwarden at St Gabriel's, sister church to St Stephen's, in nearby village of Minting.

Angela and Keith Barker – worshippers at both St Gabriel's and St Stephen's; live almost next door to St Gabriel's; Angela is a part-time registrar; Keith works in the City of London.

Dr Wynn Jones and **Dr Saunders** – both partners in the local GP practice.

Bishop Paul – head of the team to which both Neil and Margaret belong.

Hugh – retired local minister.

Rosemary – non-stipendiary industrial chaplain.

Mrs Martin – teacher at local church school.

Maria – from Romania.

Lady Romily – chairwoman of St Stephen's Ladies' Guild.

Members of the Ladies' Guild

Beryl – renowned cake-maker; organizes the St Stephen's cake rota group.

Olivia – deputy chairwoman of the Guild.

Penelope – secretary.

Julia – treasurer.

Chapter 1

Most of the time he just looked down at his boots, counting each dogged step as he paced, one foot in front of the other. The terrain was becoming more rugged, with unexpected outcrops of sharp rock, and cambers on the scrubland that could easily dislodge his footing or twist an ankle. The straps on his rucksack were starting to chafe his shoulders through his cotton T-shirt, and he could feel a sticky trickle of sweat coursing down his back, even though he'd stripped off his jacket and tied it round his waist a mile down the hill. The sun rose steadily in the sky towards the height of the day.

Three hundred, three hundred and one, three hundred and two, three hundred and three, three hundred and four… Some way back, Neil had begun counting his steps, determined not to slow his pace or deviate from his aim to reach the peak of the hill by eleven o'clock. Then he could stop, unpack his rucksack, and get out his Bible. Until then, he would only let himself think about pausing after each five hundred steps to catch his breath, sip from his water bottle or take in the view. Just a couple of minutes would be allowed to muster his energy and purpose before starting off again. It was a discipline he'd set himself – and God knows, his life needed discipline.

Four hundred and ninety-six, four hundred and ninety-seven, four hundred and ninety-eight, four hundred and ninety-nine, five hundred! Relieved, he bent forward, clasping his knees and gasping for breath. For a few seconds he stayed there, doubled up, as his breathing became more relaxed and regular. Slowly pulling himself up, he reached back into his rucksack for his water bottle and downed the lukewarm liquid in short, frantic gulps. Only then did he look up and around him, his gaze taking in the rolling contours and vibrant summer colours of the Derbyshire Dales.

Last time he and Rob had come here, it had been earlier in the previous year, when there was still a frost in the air and a biting wind. That must have been last April – fifteen months, and yet a whole lifetime ago. They'd both been students then, getting away for a weekend of walking before facing their finals at theological college. They were young men full of academic theory, with high hopes for the life that lay ahead of them. Seeing Rob again over the past week, Neil recognized in his friend a new maturity, honed by the year he'd spent as a curate in a large inner-city church.

Could Rob see a similar maturity in him, Neil wondered. Since the ordination ceremony at the weekend, when they had both taken their final vows of priesthood, had Rob seen him as a man of mission and calling, able to bring wisdom and insight to others as he served his community and led others into a deeper relationship with Christ? Would anyone in Dunbridge think that of him without an incredulous grin on their face?

Neil's shoulders slumped as he thought about his role as curate at St Stephen's Church in the small Bedfordshire market town of Dunbridge. His parishioners might be kind enough to describe him as being fired with Christian purpose

to serve the Lord with dedication and skill, but Neil would be the first to admit the long list of failings they might also mention. Who wanted a curate who was naturally shy and hated the limelight? What good was that when the heart of the job was to give inspirational sermons every Sunday? And if he were being brutally honest, his organizational skills weren't brilliant. Of course it was helpful to be quite neat and tidy by nature, but when those qualities were paired with a sieve of a mind that regularly forgot what he'd been thinking about just the moment before, his tidy nature didn't save him from coming across as ill-prepared and forgetful.

And if that sense of inadequacy and muddle weren't enough to overwhelm him, then his complete failure in affairs of the heart would certainly tip him into depression. Some people might think a man lucky to have *two* interesting and attractive women declaring love for him, but not if the man's a priest, for heaven's sake! He could try to excuse himself by recognizing his lack of experience in relationships with the opposite sex, but he couldn't pretend ignorance of the fact that one man was only supposed to share love and loyalty with one woman at a time. Somehow he'd found himself drawn to two very different yet equally remarkable girls.

He could see that Wendy, the music teacher who ran the worship group at St Stephen's, would make the perfect wife for an eager young curate. It was less easy to imagine a future with the other woman who had burst her way into his heart. Claire was his neighbour, prickly, challenging and very attractive in an off-beat sort of way. Quite simply, he'd never met anyone remotely like her – a single mum who described herself as an atheist – and yet, in the year since he'd come to Dunbridge, they'd both been surprised to recognize the unlikely, deeply unsettling connection that constantly sparked between them.

Too much thinking and not enough walking! Stuffing his water bottle back in his rucksack, Neil glanced at his watch, then set off again, singing out loud to give himself a beat to march to.

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus going on before!

Four verses later, the hill had got steeper, his path less clear – and he was taking the hymn at a much slower pace. By the end of his second rendition, his singing was barely above a whisper, as he no longer had the breath to sing the words out loud.

His thoughts drifted to the music at his ordination service in the abbey the previous Saturday. The glorious harmonies of the opening anthem, and the fullness of the congregational hymns echoing around the ancient walls, which were steeped in centuries of song, prayer and worship – somehow they blended together to fill the huge space of carved arches and curving ceilings with joyful celebration one moment and deeply reverential prayer the next. In some ways, Neil wished he could remember more of the detail of the service. He'd prepared for it for so long, and knew the words by heart, but sadly the whole thing had become a bit of a blur, with just the odd gleaming moment shining in his memory with absolute clarity. Most of all, he could feel again the crackle of energy that seemed to go through him as the supporting group of local clergy stood around him, their hands on his shoulders, while Bishop Paul blessed him and welcomed him into full priesthood. That moment was the culmination of his life's purpose so far, and pointed him towards the path he must follow from now on. He would relive that moment over and over again in years to come – although perhaps not just now, with his lungs ready to

explode and a large blister mushrooming on his left heel as it rubbed savagely against the back of his boot.

The summit of the hill loomed clearly into view at last, thankfully not that far above him. Within minutes, he'd got to the top, where he leaned over to get his breath back for a while before lowering his backpack, untying his jacket and spreading it out over the damp grass in front of him. Then he reached into the rucksack to pull out his water bottle, gulping down half the remaining contents. Refreshed at last, he pulled out his Bible and laid it before him as he carefully knelt down on the jacket.

Ouch! His knee made contact with something hard and sharp in his jacket pocket. Pulling out his car keys, he placed them on a flat rock behind him, then settled himself into a position for prayer.

It was a good half hour before the cramp in his knees got too severe for him to stay in that position a minute longer. Pulling himself gingerly to his feet, he stood for a moment to savour the colour and spectacle of the layered hills around him. It had been a good idea to come here, where the wind could blow fresh thoughts into his head, and God himself could whisper in his ear. This walk had served its purpose. He knew now what he had to do.

Quickly gathering his things together, Neil started the downward journey with new energy and commitment. This was how those old-time missionaries must have felt as they ventured out to face unknown dangers in far-flung corners of the world. Now he understood their zeal, their sense of mission, and their certainty that God was with them always. He had joined their holy army! *Look out, world, here I come!*

He didn't even bother to stop for a break on the way down, and forty-five minutes later he was striding across the

gravel towards his car. With a smile of anticipation, he peered through the window into the back seat. There it was – the ice box he'd asked the hotel to fill for him before he set out. His mouth watered at the thought of crusty bread filled with home-baked ham and spicy pickle, the crisp salad, and the slice of lemon drizzle cake, all to be washed down with a thermos of hot coffee.

But as Neil fumbled through his pockets, an awful truth dawned on him. Suddenly he remembered where he'd left his keys. He could picture the small rugged outcrop where he'd stopped at the top of the hill, and the low, flat rock on which his car keys were no doubt glistening in the midday sunshine at this very moment.

From his mouth, unbidden and unforgivable, came a very un-Christian expletive – not just once, but twice – and, louder still, three times, four, five – until the sixth completed its echoing journey around the circle of hills in time to smack him in the face like a hard punch.

Ashamed of his language, Neil bent his head in a quick prayer of humble apology. Then he straightened up and grabbed his rucksack to check on his water supplies. Dwindling, he thought miserably, as he shook the water bottle. Still, the sooner he set off, the sooner he'd be back at the car tucking into those ham sandwiches!

Off he marched, chin up, eyes on the horizon, determined that neither the throbbing pain in his heel, nor the bruise he could feel developing on the ball of his foot, would hold him back. Perhaps he should have kept his eyes on the ground, because he failed to notice the cluster of small stones that brought him crashing to his knees.

That word rang out again across the hills – and again, and again, until the hill finally demanded all his breath for climbing.