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Watershed

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

‘Then there’s the corn snake, scientific name *Elaphe guttata*. It’s a lovely colour – orange with dark patches,’ the pet-shop man was saying on the car radio. ‘It’s also hardy, attractive, nice-tempered, inexpensive and a good feeder. An ideal beginner’s snake, in fact.’

‘Sounds more like the ideal wife,’ Pamela said to herself, reaching forward to switch it off. ‘A bit like Vinny.’

She turned her attention to the business of driving in the dark on the narrow single-track road ahead of her. In her headlights she could see a row of individual horse turds right down the centre of it, deposited on the hoof, as neat and regular as highway markings. She was just smiling at this, when the engine checked, choked and stopped.

The four by four was still rolling forwards under its own momentum and Pamela just managed to steer it into a passing place before bringing it to a halt. Bloody hell! She sat there in the sudden silence, then she switched the ignition off and tried the starter again several times before she saw that the needle on the fuel gauge was resting at the bottom of the red bit.

‘Shit!’

She peered about her, trying to see beyond the range of the lights. There was nothing visible down here on these low lying peatlands, but the water-filled ditches on either side of the road, and the flat greenish fields devoid of any features, even trees. Pamela had been so taken up with listening to the radio, that she hadn’t been paying attention to the infrequent landmarks on this customary shortcut of hers across the Somerset Levels, or ‘the moor’ as it was always known. She tried the starter again and then again. No joy.

‘Oh God, now what?’

She glanced at her watch. It was a cold March night, and after midnight. Vinny would be fast asleep by now. Tough. She’d have to wake up and come and rescue her in the mini. Pamela opened her handbag, extracted her mobile and stabbed in the number with an irritable forefinger. The numbers on the dial lit up, faded and then vanished. The battery was flat. Vinny always charged it up for her, except now of course, when it really mattered.

She was in for a long slog. There were very few houses in this area because it tended to flood every winter. Pamela turned off the lights to get her eyes accustomed to the dark. At least it had stopped raining and there was half a moon. Ah, but what about Vinny’s torch? She felt for the glove compartment and groped about inside. It wasn’t there.

It really is too bad of her, Pamela thought. She’s the practical one. She could at least have *reminded* me to fill Gertie up yesterday.

She would have to start walking, but in which direction? Pamela put her mind to trying to work out exactly where she was. That pump building which drained the water off this part of the moor should be fairly close. She was pretty sure she hadn’t already passed it, so it must be ahead. Maybe there would be somebody on duty there, or a passing vehicle that might give her a lift. But who would be out here at this time of night? She might get attacked, abducted… What, at her age? Pamela stretched her mouth in a wry smile. Then she opened the car door and got out, zapping it locked.

She buttoned her coat right up under her chin, shouldered her bag, stuck both hands into her pockets and set off along the road.

*

Jonathan was asleep in bed when he was awoken by someone hammering on his front door. He switched on the light and listened. More banging. So he got up, dragged on an overcoat over his pyjamas, and wandered downstairs. He found a short grey-haired woman in a fur coat, standing outside.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'My name's Pamela Wood. I broke down miles from here and I've had to walk all this way in the dark.'

'Oh?' She looked in perfectly normal working order to him.

'And when I crossed your little plank bridge thing outside, I very nearly fell into the rhyne!'

'Reen?' Jonathan didn't know the word, but was always receptive to new information.

'You know, the drainage ditch. You're not a local then?'

'No.' He glanced up to find her frowning at him. What did she want?

'So, can I please use your telephone?' The woman was advancing bossily into his house as she spoke.

'What telephone?' He was at a loss.

'You mean you haven't got one? You can't exist in this god-forsaken place without one, surely? Not even a mobile to call for help?'

'No,' Jonathan said politely. 'I don't need any help. I live here.'

She had got as far as the threshold of his sitting room, but now to his relief she began edging backwards towards his front door again.

'Right,' she said. 'Er … well never mind… Sorry to have troubled you… I don't suppose you've got a gallon of diesel either, have you?'

She's quite mad! Jonathan thought, but it's OK, I'm bigger than her. 'No,' he said mildly. 'I don't use it. I'm on mains electricity here.'

'What *are* you talking about?' She was holding onto the frame of the door with both hands.

'I haven't got a generator, so I don't need any diesel. It's not as though I'm in Africa now.' He felt he was being extraordinarily patient; doing his best to remember what he had been taught by the Special Needs woman on that communications course all those years ago.

'I-need-diesel-for-my-car.' She said the words slowly and with equal stress. 'I told you. It broke down. I've got to get home to Hembrow. Can you or can you not help me?'

'Ah.' Now he understood. 'Why didn't you say? George Overy will have some, down at Amber Junction.' She was staring fixedly at him, which made him feel uncomfortable. 'He's at the pumping station, about half a mile that way.' He gestured.

'Half a mile?'

'Yes… well probably more like seven hundred metres.'

*

It was now three am and Pamela was at last being driven home by Vinny.

'God, would you believe it?' she said. 'I walked until my feet virtually dropped off and all I found in that house was this idiot boy.'

'What, a child?'

'Oh no, he's probably in his mid-twenties. Nice looking too, but quite loopy. He had me worried there for a moment.' Pamela shook her head in disbelief. 'He doesn't have a phone. He doesn't own a car. I had to bully him into getting dressed

and coming with me to find the man who runs the pumping station, and get some help from him. Luckily for me, he was actually there because the pumps were running, but he was on his own and he couldn't leave until his shift ended, so it was ages before he could drive me back to Gertie in his van. And blow me down, even when we emptied a gallon can of diesel into her tank, the bloody cow still wouldn't start!'

'Air lock,' Vinny agreed, nodding her head.

'How d'you know that?'

'Diesel engines are different from petrol,' Vinny began to explain. 'If you run out of fuel and get a bubble of air in the pipe then the whole system has to be bled to get it out. It's because it works on pressure you—'

'I don't want a flaming lecture,' Pamela cut in. 'If you'd only reminded me to go to the garage yesterday, then none of this would have happened.'

'Why keep a dog and bark yourself?' Vinny observed.

'Yes! No… Damn it, you know what I mean. It's late and I'm bushed.'

'What a good thing you don't have to go to work tomorrow.'

'Darling Vinny, I am sorry! Still, at least your library job isn't too taxing, is it? Anyway, you haven't asked me about my bridge evening.'

Vinny sighed. 'So, how was it?'

'Brilliant. We wiped the floor with them. They were consoling themselves at the bar for the rest of the evening! Oh, now, while I think of it, have we got a spare bottle of whisky do you know?'

'No idea. Why?'

'Well I suppose I ought to take a little something to the Overy man this weekend, to thank him. He was so sweet and helpful.'

'What about the loony youth?'

'I'm not sure he deserves anything at all, except maybe one of your quiches? He looks half-starved.'

'Thanks,' Vinny said, yawning.

Pamela looked with affection at her friend as she drove them both back towards the higher ground, up onto the ridge of a low narrow hill called Hembrow Island – although it had long since ceased to be insular – and the village of the same name, near where they lived. At this time of night there might have been nobody in the whole world but the two of them. She could just see Vinny's profile; chubby, serious, looking straight ahead. And then unexpectedly on a straight bit of road, a car overtook them, lighting up her wispy brown hair and transforming it into a fleeting halo. Pamela smiled.

'What would I do without you?'

*

Vinny put on her old towelling dressing gown and slippers first thing the next morning and went down to the kitchen as usual to make the tea. Standing close to the warm bulk of the Aga as the kettle boiled, she wondered how long it would be before Pamela remembered that her only form of transport was now stranded miles away. And then how soon it would be before she embarked upon a campaign to commandeer the mini.

She carried the two full mugs upstairs on a little tray, leaving one hand free to open Pamela's bedroom door. She was still dead to the world, lying on her back and snoring gently, the lines around her eyes and mouth magically ironed out by sleep. Like this, she looked almost young. Vinny observed her dispassionately, wondering, not for the first time, why she had ever agreed to this arrangement of theirs in the first place. She was obliged to admit to herself that she had allowed Pamela's greater

certainty to override her own caution. It was hardly surprising after all. At the time, financial problems had threatened to overwhelm her, and the first anniversary of her parents' death had been very hard to bear. Who wouldn't have been weakened by an overwhelming need to feel secure? But why, after all these years, am I still here? she thought. Habit? Inertia?

Pamela gave a little snort and opened her eyes. 'Whasser time?'

'Seven o'clock. Time you were up.' Vinny put the tray down on the bedside table and sat on the end of the bed, sipping her tea.

'What's today?' Pamela asked, hauling herself up against her pillows.

'Friday,' Vinny remembered with a sigh, 'and I'm working all day until six o'clock.'

'Oh yes.' Pamela frowned – the first creases of the morning. 'I've got a WI committee meeting, and then lunch with Gordon. I'm going to be busy too.' She drank her tea abstractedly, gathering her thoughts for the day ahead. Vinny knew better than to interrupt her, and when she'd finished her own tea, she stood up. 'I'd better get going,'

'Oh *no*!' Pamela sat bolt upright. 'How am I going to get there? I'll have to take you to Otterbridge in the mini and drop you off. I can't possibly be without a vehicle all day.'

'Sorry,' Vinny was about to go to the blue bathroom on the landing; the one belonging to her own bedroom. 'I'm afraid I've got a lunchtime meeting too. I'll need it myself.'

'Oh but you can't. You'll have to tell them to rearrange it for another day. Please, Vinny?'

'The mini is my car, remember?' She tightened the belt of her dressing gown and left the room.

'Only because I gave it to you in the first place,' Pamela called after her.

'Oh,' Vinny muttered, scowling at her own reflection in the mirror. 'What wouldn't I give for some *unpredictability* in life?'

In the end Pamela agreed, with a bad grace, to telephone her garage as soon as they were open and get them to collect Gertie from the moor, and meanwhile to provide her with a courtesy car until they had got her running again.

'I'll go with you tomorrow to take your thank-you presents, if you like?' Vinny offered in an attempt at compensation.

So when Saturday morning came, Vinny found herself being driven by Pamela in a small hatchback belonging to the garage. It was, she noticed, considerably more luxurious than her mini.

'You get no view at all from these nasty little cars,' Pamela complained. 'They're so low down. I like to be up high so you can see over the hedgerows.'

'There aren't any hedges here.' They were driving back across the levels towards the pumping station. 'What's this George Overy man like?' Vinny asked her. 'I couldn't see him properly the other night when I collected you.'

'Oh, in his fifties I should imagine, very Zummerzet. You know the type. A bit like Bob in fact.'

'Except that he doesn't cut grass for a living.'

'Well for all I know, he might do that too.'

'I hope he drinks whisky.' Vinny leant forward to wrap the sheet of blue tissue paper more firmly round the bottle in the footwell.

'Every man in his right mind drinks whisky,' Pamela said, 'Don't worry, it isn't a malt.'

Trust Pamela to be concerned about the price of the thing, Vinny thought. That wasn't what I meant at all.

'There are hedges here,' Pamela observed as they came to a higher, less boggy stretch, 'and I can't see over them at all, which is highly dangerous on these narrow byways.'

'Well, you could always go a little slower.'

'Don't start, Vinny! I've been driving in these parts for thirty years remember, which is a good twenty years longer than you have.'

There were scrubby trees on either side of them now as the road ran through a small copse. Vinny could see primroses and celandines in flower on the woodland floor and the first haze of green above them as the hawthorn leaves were beginning to unfurl. It would soon be spring.

New beginnings? Vinny pursed her lips in a gesture of resignation.

'What's up with you?' Pamela asked. She had turned her head and was looking accusingly at her. 'It's not my fault that you're a nervous passenger.'

Vinny opened her mouth to protest that Pamela was the only driver in the entire universe who made her feel in the least apprehensive and that was for entirely rational reasons, which any normal person would readily…

The car, swinging round a sudden corner over a small hump-backed bridge, almost knocked a girl off her bicycle. A tote bag, which had been dangling from the handlebars, flew off as she wobbled from side to side scattering its contents all over the road. Vinny had a brief glimpse of the girl's face, which looked blank with shock. '*Stop*!'

Pamela braked sharply. Vinny scrambled out and ran back down the road. The girl by now had regained control of her bike and come to a shaky halt. She reached up to pull the iPod headphones from her ears as Vinny approached, panting.

'You all right?'

'Yes,' she said. 'No thanks to *her*.' She jerked her thumb in Pamela's direction. 'She was driving way too fast.'

She had a soft Somerset voice. Her long fair hair flopped over her shoulders as she laid down the bicycle and began to collect her belongings; make-up, a book, a mobile phone and some sweets. Vinny joined in, and glanced sideways at her several times as they were both bent double, picking things up. She saw that the girl's skin had a peachy bloom. Her fingernails were painted purple and her lips crimson. Her short leather jacket flapped open to reveal a top too skimpy to achieve any sort of sensible union with the waistband of her jeans. And in her baby belly button, winking in the light, there was a large ruby coloured stud. She seemed to Vinny to be a child who was anticipating womanhood but not very accurately. She couldn't surely be much older than thirteen? The nursery characters printed on her tote bag were now partially obscured by road dirt. Vinny dusted it off and handed it to her. She took it without a word.

Pamela was busy backing the car up. Then she too got out. 'Well, that was regrettable,' she said, bending down to retrieve the girl's paperback and proffering it with the title ostentatiously uppermost. *How Far Should You Go?* was displayed in large green letters. 'But no harm done then?'

'I can manage,' the girl said, snatching it from her.

'Look, I have apologised…' Pamela began in reasonable tones.

'I never heard no sorry.' She stuffed a handful of lipsticks into the dirty bag.

'Well I don't suppose you could hear much at all,' Pamela said with some asperity, 'with all that rubbishy pop music pounding away in your ears. And in my

opinion that makes you an unnecessary hazard on the road. It's you who should be apologising to me.'

The girl picked up her bicycle, hung her bag back on the handlebars and put one foot on the pedal. Her blue eyes looked challengingly at Pamela.

'Fuck you,' she said. 'If anyone's unnecessary round here its snobby old gits like you.' She took the last toffee from Vinny's outstretched hand, turned her back on them both and cycled off down the road in front of them. Vinny got back into the car without comment.

'Well *really*!' Pamela exclaimed, settling herself into the driver's seat and reaching for a box of wipes to clean her hands. 'I blame the modern education system. There's no respect these days. None.' She rattled her hand around the pocket in the door.

'Just as well you didn't actually crash into her,' Vinny observed.

'Cycling along with those things blocking up your ears,' Pamela pronounced, 'is like driving with your eyes shut.'

Or whilst looking sideways at your passenger. But Vinny didn't actually say that; what would be the point?

'There aren't any wipes,' Pamela accused her.

'Well don't blame me. It's not my car.'

Pamela exhaled sharply in a cross between a curse and a sigh, started up the engine again and let out the unfamiliar clutch rather too sharply. They lurched forwards kangaroo-style. 'Stupid bloody thing!'

As they drew level with the girl on the bike, Pamela slowed down with exaggerated care to little more than walking pace. Vinny, nearest to her, tried a sympathetic smile through the window, but was rebuffed by one finger strategically held at eye level.

'I'm glad I never had a girl,' Pamela said, speeding up again. 'They're far more trouble than boys.'

Vinny was surprised to hear this, schooled as she had been over the years in tales of the struggle Pamela had endured in bringing up Peter her only child. They focused upon her abandonment by that wastrel of a husband, and the unkindness of the fates in blessing her with a brilliant but hyperactive son who'd run her ragged, and then grown up to be a loser, just like his father.

'Boys are far more straightforward,' Pamela said. 'Girls can be so spiteful.'

They drove on. There were no hedges again here. The fields looked sodden after the recent rain, the grass only just starting to look properly green again after the winter. The ditches were full of peaty black water and there was a great deal of sky. It might look like a nothing landscape to the uninitiated, Vinny thought, but to me it's special for that very reason. It doesn't shout its wares at you. It waits quietly to be discovered, and when you really look, you see sudden jewels like a kingfisher flashing turquoise down a rhyne. Or a redshank perched on a fence-post and revealed as the mist lifts. Or gossamer spiders' webs covered in droplets of dew in the early mornings. Or bright yellow-flag irises reflected in the water…

'There's the weird boy's house,' Pamela said.

Vinny was startled out of her thoughts. 'What, that one up on the bank all by itself? It looks derelict.'

'That's about right. You'll see for yourself on the way back.'

Soon afterwards she pulled the car off the road onto a muddy lay-by between two bridges, and they got out. On their right the great wide Kingspill Drain full of grey water stretched into the far flat distance. On their left was the Amber Junction

pumping station, an ugly redbrick box of a building with metal windows. Behind it there were yet more waterways. A notice on the gate into its yard said: Employees Only. There was no sign of life. In fact the only sound in the still air was that of a wren, singing.

'But will he actually be here?' Vinny asked. 'He could be at home. I mean, the pumps don't appear to be working at the moment.'

'It's certainly quieter than it was on Thursday night.'

'Did you go inside then?' Vinny was intrigued.

'Only into the office. The rest was far too noisy and smelly.'

'There's no reason to suppose he's here now though, is there?'

'Well his van's parked over there.' Pamela indicated a small white Ford with the Environment Agency logo on its side. She pushed through the gate. 'Come on. And don't forget the whisky.'

Vinny hesitated. 'Which door?' There was a choice of three.

Pamela made for the tall double doors in the centre, which had to be all of twenty feet high. There was no bell so she hammered on one with her fist and after a moment or so it opened. A stocky balding man in green overalls emerged, wiping his hands on a rag.

'Hello George,' Pamela said. 'Remember me from the other night?'

'Oh yes.' He smiled a shade mockingly. 'You got home OK then?' He looked enquiringly at Vinny.

'Oh and this is the friend I rang; Vinny Henderson.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

Vinny was about to hold out her hand, but then noticed that his were covered in oil, so she smiled instead.

'Just doing a spot of maintenance,' George said, displaying them. ' 'Tis dirty old work.'

'We called to thank you,' Vinny said.

'That's all right. Want to come in and see the place now's you'm here?' He opened the door wider to admit them and they followed him in. The building seemed much bigger on the inside, with a vast high ceiling and masses of light coming in through the tall barred windows on either side. It was like a great secular cathedral, Vinny thought.

'My goodness,' Pamela exclaimed, 'What huge machines!'

'Four diesel pumps put in in nineteen forty-two,' George said. 'There's three of 'em runs on diesel still, and that one up the end's been modified for the electric.' He stood next to the nearest one, patting its shiny metallic surface proudly, and then polishing the spot with his rag.

Each enormous green pump took up the entire width of the building and was festooned with dials, wheels, taps and pipes. There were red metal cages over some parts one of which was open, exposing its innards and a pile of nuts and other components on the floor where George had clearly been working. Hanging on the wall behind them were eight giant sized spanners.

'Nineteen forty-two? That makes them pretty much obsolete, surely?' Pamela said. 'Modern technology would be much smaller and more efficient, wouldn't it?'

'Can't beat these beauties,' George said defensively. 'They knew about engineering in them days.'

'They must be able to pump an awful lot of water?' Vinny was awed.

'Certainly do. They—' There was a clattering noise outside as someone dumped a bike against the wall.

‘Dad?’

‘Mandy? Excuse me a moment.’ George went back to the door. ‘Hello love?’

‘Dad, That car outside nearly ran… Oh…’ Vinny caught sight of the face for a moment, before it retreated hurriedly. ‘Never mind,’ they heard her say. ‘Doesn’t matter. See you dinnertime, eh?’ And she was off again.

‘Teenagers,’ George said, coming back again. He was shaking his head but amused.

‘Your daughter?’ Vinny said.

‘That’s her. My only one, bless her.’

‘We passed her on the road just now,’ Vinny began.

‘Yes, well anyway,’ Pamela said hurriedly, ‘we came to thank you so much for all your help, and to give you this.’ She proffered the bottle.

‘Oh you didn’t have to do that.’ He looked uncomfortable for the first time.

‘Nonsense! It was the least we could do.’

‘Well, best put it in here then.’ He led the way into a small side office where there was a table and chairs and a drinks machine. ‘Can I get you anything? Coffee or tea?’

Vinny opened her mouth to accept. There were maps on the walls of the local waterways and drainage systems, and she would have been interested to hear about them and about George’s job in particular. He seemed to her, even on this brief acquaintance, to be a dedicated sort of a man, solid and entirely admirable.

‘Oh no,’ Pamela said. ‘We don’t want to hold you up. But there was just one thing I wanted to ask you. You know the young man who brought me here that night?’

‘Reckon I do.’

‘So is he… all right? In the head, I mean.’

‘Don’t know him that well. He’s only been around here a couple of months. Writing a book, so he says. Seems harmless enough.’

‘A book?’ Vinny said. ‘How exciting. What’s it about?’

‘He didn’t say, but he’m always down here asking questions.’

‘Is he someone one’s heard of?’ Pamela asked. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Crankshaw, Jonathan Crankshaw. I remember it particular ’cos it sounds like crankshaft.’ He grinned self-consciously.

‘I wonder if he’s any relation to Adrian Crankshaw the architect?’ Vinny said.

‘Oh, you mean him off the telly?’ George said. ‘Could be. He do talk like that, long words and all.’

‘Well,’ Pamela said, ‘This won’t do. I’m sure you have a lot of work to be getting on with, but thanks so much again. It was very good of you.’

‘That’s all right.’ He motioned them towards a standard-sized door at the other end of the room and ushered them out into the yard again. ‘ ’Fore you go,’ he said, pointing up to a small plaque on the wall at the top of the large doors, ‘I shows this to all the visitors. It marks where high tide do get to in the Bristol Channel. Makes you think, eh?’

‘Certainly does,’ Vinny said. ‘I’d no idea this area was so far below sea level. It’s really interesting. Thanks for showing us round.’

‘You’m welcome.’ He raised a hand in farewell as they reached the gate, and then disappeared, closing the door behind him.

‘Well, well,’ Pamela said, ‘so that dreadful girl is his daughter, then? I expect she’ll tell him tales about us once we’ve gone.’

‘Very likely.’

‘But more to the point, what if this Jonathan really is Adrian Crankshaw’s son?’ She opened her eyes wide for extra emphasis.

‘You mean if he’s middle class, educated and of a “good” family then he’s charmingly eccentric, whereas if he’d been merely ordinary working class, then he’d just be mad, and likely to be dangerous?’

‘Honestly Vin, you’re such an inverted snob!’ Pamela opened the doors of the car and they both got in. ‘Well I hope he appreciates quiche more than Overy likes whisky,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid in his case that wasn’t money well spent. We should have taken him beer, or maybe even cider?’

‘He was just embarrassed, that’s all.’ Vinny felt cross.

Jonathan’s isolated house, now that they had finally stopped outside it, looked even more unkempt to Vinny. It too was redbrick and built on the north bank of the Kingspill, presumably once the property of the old River Authority. It was accessible only over a pair of planks plus a rail, which bridged a smaller drainage channel between it and the road. The paint on the front door and on all the windows was peeling off, and there were no curtains that she could see. But high up on the gable end there was an oblong stone with the name of the house carved into it: THE PROSPECT.

‘Nice irony, that,’ Vinny said, pointing to it.

‘It’s pretty grim inside too, from what I could see last time,’ Pamela said. ‘Hardly any furniture and a muddy bicycle in the sitting room!’ She knocked on the door.

Though every prospect pleases and only man is vile… Vinny was thinking. I don’t know where that comes from. Must look it up. Then the door opened and a young man was standing there. Not vile at all, Vinny thought, in fact … he reminds me of Nathaniel…Her heart beat faster at the memory. This man was of similar build and beauty. Vinny was instantly taken back to the time years ago when she and Nat had been together. Not a long time as it had turned out, but one of never-to-be-repeated intensity.

The young man didn’t appear to recognise Pamela. ‘Yes?’ he said.

‘Hello Jonathan,’ she said. ‘Pamela Wood. Remember me? My car broke down the other night and you helped me.’

‘Oh… yes,’ he said. ‘But you’re wearing different colour clothes.’

‘Ye–es. Um, this is my friend Lavinia.’

‘Vinny,’ Vinny put in quickly. ‘How d’you do?’

‘Is this going to take long?’ Jonathan enquired, ‘because I’m right in the middle of something.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Pamela said. ‘I do realise how important it is not to be interrupted when you’re *writing*. No, we just wanted to give you this as a small token of thanks for your kind help.’ She handed him a package wrapped in foil. ‘I think it might still be frozen, but I expect it will soon thaw out.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a quiche.’ Then, because she could detect no sign of comprehension in his expression, she added, ‘A pie, for you to eat.’

‘Oh, right.’ He took it from her and waited with a will-that-be-all? expression on his face.

‘One last thing,’ Pamela held out a hand as if to detain him. ‘Do tell me, are you related to the famous Adrian Crankshaw?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Is he your father?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, how exciting! I suppose he’ll be visiting you here from time to time?’

‘No,’ Jonathan said, ‘Goodbye,’ and he shut the door.

Vinny expected Pamela to be outraged by his rudeness but when she turned to look at her as they walked back across the plank bridge, Pamela gave her a little grin of complicity.

‘Watch yourself,’ she warned, putting a steadying hand on Vinny’s arm. ‘We don’t want you falling in now, do we?’ She looked suspiciously cheerful. Vinny frowned.

They got back into the car but Pamela made no move to start the engine. Instead she sat there drumming her fingers on the steering wheel with a half smile on her face.

‘It seems to me,’ she said, ‘that young Jonathan must be estranged from his family. Why else would he be living in comparative squalor in the middle of nowhere? Something tells me that he needs help.’

Vinny snorted. ‘I’d have thought that’s the last thing he wants!’

‘Oh no, you can’t go by appearances. I’ve met these clever types before and they can be painfully shy. We’ll have to draw him out gradually – find out about this book of his.’

We? ‘Why?’

‘Because he’s interesting, Vinny! Surely even you can appreciate that? And I suspect that he could do with some backing.’

‘What d’you mean, backing?’

‘I think he needs a patron; some form of assistance to enable him to achieve his full potential.’

‘What, you mean sponsorship as in Adopt a Whale?’

Pamela started up the engine irritably. ‘Really Vinny, you can be remarkably childish at times.’

Vinny was torn between wanting to giggle and to protest. She was beginning to recognise with a sinking heart another of Pamela’s projects in embryo. Pamela didn’t have hobbies, she had all engulfing obsessions which flared up, flowered – sometimes all too briefly – and burnt themselves out, usually with recriminations on all sides.

Vinny took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘Cheer up,’ Pamela said, patting her knee encouragingly. ‘I have a premonition of good times ahead and you have to admit, don’t you, that my gut feelings are never wrong?’