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Without a Trace

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Without a Trace

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For Barry Greenwood,
you have enriched my life, dear friend

Chapter One

2 June 1953

'Where on earth could Cassie and Petal have got to?' Molly Heywood was shouting out to Brenda Percy, landlady of the Pied Horse, because the village hall was so noisy.

It was Coronation Day and, due to heavy rain, the long-planned and highly anticipated street party had had to be moved into the hall at the last minute. Molly and Brenda were working their way down the long row of excited seated children, offering sandwiches.

Brenda paused to admonish a little boy who was about to douse the girl sitting next to him in orange squash. 'Oh, I expect the rain put Cassie off,' she said, once she'd told the boy he was heading towards getting sent home in disgrace. 'I don't think I'd have come to help if I didn't live right across the road.'

'But Cassie isn't like that, and she'd made Petal a super fancy-dress costume,' Molly shouted back.

Brenda heard the anxiety in the younger woman's voice, and felt like barking back at her that she should just enjoy herself and stop fretting about other people. But Molly Heywood took everyone's troubles on board and always tried to help people, which, considering how bleak her own life was, made her almost a saint.

Molly had wanted to go on the village coach trip to London

to see the Coronation procession, but her father hadn't let her go. Brenda knew most people would say that a young woman of twenty-five should just ignore what her father said and go anyway, but Jack Heywood wasn't the kind to be disobeyed: he had a vicious temper, and he would make Molly pay dearly for it if she went against his wishes.

Brenda had been the landlady of the Pied Horse for twenty years and, as Jack, the village grocer, came in every single day, she knew just how cantankerous, stubborn and mean-spirited he could be. It was a common knowledge that his older daughter, Emily, had left home after a beating and had never been home since. His wife, Mary, was a sweet-natured woman who was well liked by everyone, but she was a bag of nerves and too weak to stand up to such a bully.

Aside from the men who had been called up in the war, most of the residents of the Somerset village of Sawbridge had never been more than ten miles from their homes in their whole lives. Even going into Bristol or Bath was a challenge for them. So, in the main, they tended to be narrow-minded and insular, making assumptions based on nothing but their own limited experiences.

Their assumption about Molly was that she was as weak as her mother and something of a doormat, but this wasn't the case. Her fault – if it could be claimed to be one – was that she had a kind heart. She didn't oppose her father in order to protect her mother from further stress. She liked to help people, to be at the centre of things, so when she couldn't go on the trip to London she took on the role of street-party organizer. She wanted to make the occasion very special, to ensure that every child in the village remembered Coronation Day for the rest of their lives.

Molly deserved praise for her efforts. The high street was decked out with bunting, much of which she'd run up herself on the sewing machine. Apart from bullying just about every adult in the village to make cakes, sandwiches or jellies, she'd also planned races on the cricket ground, a treasure hunt and the fancy-dress competition. But when the day began with rain and showed no sign of letting up, there was no alternative but to drag all the trestle tables and chairs in from the street and quickly decorate the village hall. There was a suggestion that the bunting put up the previous day should be used for this, but it was dripping wet, and too difficult to get down.

Considering that all the new decorations for the hall were borrowed Christmas ones, and many were past their best, it looked quite jolly. Brenda thought that, after all Molly's efforts, it was churlish of so many of the adults to stay at home, merely sending their children to the hall for Molly and anyone else who was mug enough to be willing to entertain them.

But those adults were missing out on seeing forty-five children between the ages of two and fourteen staring wide-eyed at the spread before them. After years of deprivation both during and since the war, the government had given everyone a very welcome, bigger sugar ration because of the Coronation. The village women had pulled out all the stops to flaunt their cake-making skills. Most of the younger children here today, born during the war or since, wouldn't even have known their mothers were capable of baking such wonders.

The fancy-dress competition had created almost as much excitement and competitiveness. Looking around, Brenda could see several queens, King Arthur, the Pope, a Pearly King, and a Queen of Hearts playing card. The latter was finding it hard to reach around her stiff card costume to eat

her sandwiches, and Brenda predicted that the costume would be torn off before long.

There had also been a competition for the best village shop-window display. Molly should have won it for her effort at Heywoods, the grocery shop. But, of course, she wasn't allowed to win, not when the competition had been her idea.

It was marvellous. The centrepiece was a big plaster-of-Paris cow she'd found in a shed. She'd painted it white, made a crown out of card and tinsel with fruit gums for jewels and draped it with a purple coronation cloak. Then, in straw all around it, she'd invitingly placed various British food items: a large Cheddar cheese, baskets of eggs, punnets of local strawberries, stone flagons of cider and pots of jam, marmalade, chutney and honey.

But, right now, Molly didn't look a bit happy. She may have been responsible for the glee on the children's faces but she was worrying about the one child who was missing.

'Cheer up, Molly,' Brenda said, slinging her arm around the girl. 'You know Cassie is a law unto herself – she'll have taken Petal somewhere else, somewhere more exciting maybe. She's too good a mother to just sit indoors and look at the rain.'

Brenda had always had a soft spot for Molly. There was something about her sweet, country-girl face, rosy cheeks, soft blue eyes and lovely smile that brightened any day. She was the reason Heywoods grocery shop was always busy; she was warm, funny and a great listener, too. Jack Heywood believed the shop's success was because of him but, in truth, if Molly ever left, he'd lose most of his customers overnight.

'She wouldn't do that, Brenda,' Molly said with a shake of her head. 'She spent days making Petal's costume, and even

if she hadn't done she would've come just to support me, as I organized the party.'

Brenda remembered how everyone had talked when Cassandra March arrived in Sawbridge village two years earlier. They had looked at the voluptuous redhead with deep suspicion. She wore no wedding ring and had a half-caste four-year-old girl in tow. That the child was called Petal only raised more eyebrows. After all, what sort of person would give their child such a name?

'She'll be a whore,' Jack Heywood announced that night in the Pied Horse and, even though Brenda firmly believed that you should never label anyone before getting to know them, she had to admit that the woman's flaming red hair, pencil skirt, tight sweater, high heels and excessive make-up conformed to the image of a fallen woman.

No one had imagined Cassandra March would want to stay in the village; it was assumed she'd come to see someone here and that, once that was done, she'd leave. But, to everyone's amazement, she began looking for a place to rent.

It was no real surprise that Molly befriended her – even as a young girl, she'd collected up the kids that everyone else shunned. But, to be fair to Molly, Brenda also found there was a lot to like about this mysterious young woman who didn't appear to give a fig for what people thought of her. And Petal was a bewitching little girl, with her big eyes, toffee-coloured skin and shiny, curly hair. She was a poppet. Even some of her mother's most voluble critics passed on outgrown clothes and toys from their own children to Petal.

Somehow, against all the odds, Cassie had managed to persuade cantankerous Enoch Flowers to let her live in an old farm cottage he owned in the woods. A rumour went around

that she'd offered him her body for it, and perhaps she had. But Brenda thought it was more likely the old man let her have it as he found the idea of a city girl living in isolation, cooking on an open fire and using an outdoor privy very amusing, just as most people in the village did.

Yet they were all wrong about how she would cope with country life. She made the little cottage a home and she stayed. The high heels and tight skirts were brought out only for trips into Bristol, but Cassie still managed to look like a pin-up girl in a cotton frock, with a scarf tied around her head and wellington boots.

'I'm getting really worried now,' Molly admitted to Brenda. 'I saw Cassie yesterday when she gave me some bottles of orange squash as her contribution to the party. She promised me she was coming today – she said Petal had had her costume on and off about a hundred times. Cassie had even got a new dress to wear. So why aren't they here? What if one of them is ill or has had an accident?'

'Oh, no. It won't be that.' Brenda patted Molly's cheeks affectionately. 'Most likely she was put off coming because they'd have to tramp through mud to the village. Or maybe they went to someone's house this morning to watch the ceremony on television and decided to stay on there. Stop worrying. There's enough to do here to keep us all on our toes!'

She was right about that: two six-year-old boys were pushing cakes into each other's faces, and Brenda rushed off to separate them.

Molly handed round some sausage rolls, astounded at how quickly the huge tray was emptied, but her mind was on her friend. Cassie wasn't normally too keen on joining in village

activities because, even after two years, she was still treated with suspicion by many people. But she would've braved it today for Petal, as the little girl was excited about dressing up as Britannia. Cassie had scoured the shops in Bristol until she found a suitable helmet and had sewn the dress by hand.

Mud would never have put them off; Cassie would just have packed the costume into a bag and changed Petal when they got to the village. As for watching television at someone's house – who was there? The few people who had televisions – and Molly's own parents were part of that select group – wouldn't invite someone like Cassie to watch it with them.

As it was, Molly had only watched the actual crowning in Westminster Abbey, because there was too much to do for the party for her to see anything more.

She caught hold of Brenda's arm. 'Look, I must go up to Cassie's, to satisfy myself that Petal and her are okay,' she said. 'I'll go on my bike, so it won't take long.'

Brenda pursed her lips. 'If you feel that strongly, I suppose you must. But you'll get drenched,' she said, looking anxiously at Molly's new blue gingham dress with its full skirt and her white, strappy sandals.

'I've got my raincoat and my wellingtons in the cloakroom,' Molly assured her. 'I'll be back long before we start the party games, and I'll enjoy them then without worrying.'

Taking one last look around the crowded village hall and satisfying herself that there were enough mothers helping, Molly put a few sandwiches, sausage rolls and cakes in a cardboard cake box, found a spare party hat, flag and hooter, then rushed off to fetch her raincoat and boots.

It was hard to cycle up Platt's Hill in the driving rain, and her raincoat kept blowing open, so her dress was getting

soaked, but Molly reminded herself it would be easy coming back down. She was always cycling up this hill to deliver groceries for people, but the narrow, rutted lane which led down to Stone Cottage, where Cassie lived, was almost at the top of the hill, well past the last of the village houses. From there on, it was only fields and woodland.

On reaching the little lane and seeing it was too muddy to ride down, she left her bike and, carrying the box of party food, made her way gingerly down to Cassie's house.

In sunshine, Stone Cottage and the surrounding woodland looked idyllic; a place of utter peace and beauty. More than once Cassie had told Molly that it made her heart glad every single morning she woke here. This suggested to Molly that Cassie had lived in a very bad place before, but Cassie wasn't one for confidences. Molly wondered if this was because her father was a tyrant, much like her own, and had thrown her out when he discovered she was pregnant. Admitting such a thing would be hard for someone as proud as Cassie.

But whether this was the case or not, Stone Cottage was still lovely even in the rain, albeit with a slightly sinister tinge, because the birdsong halted and the tree trunks took on a fairy-tale menace.

Molly came out into the clearing, Stone Cottage was to her left, built with its rear against a solid rockface. Presumably, when the cottage had been built a hundred or more years ago, it made good sense to utilize this wall of rock, and the roof began where the rock ended. Ivy and other plants had crept up and over the cottage roof, hiding it, so a stranger coming down through the wood above the cottage wouldn't know it was there until they found themselves stepping on to the roof.

Cassie had often mentioned that she'd heard badgers and other night creatures walking around on it.

It was a simple little place, one room down and one up, the staircase between the two floors little more than a ladder. Four windows to the front, two on each floor, either side of the front door, which was framed by a dilapidated rose-covered porch. On the side of the cottage was a second door, with the pump beside it and a well-worn brick path to the privy, which also leaned against the rockface. This door had clearly always been the preferred way in and out of the cottage. Cassie had been unable to open the front door because the lock had seized up with lack of use.

'Cassie!' Molly yelled out as she got close. 'Where are you?'

There was no reply, but Molly noticed the side door wasn't shut properly, only pulled to, the way someone might leave a door if they were indoors or had just popped out for a minute.

Molly had been brought up to respect other people's homes. When she was delivering groceries, she would never walk into someone's kitchen uninvited. Cassie had often teased her about the way she always hovered on the doorstep, even if the door was wide open, never stepping over the threshold until she was asked in. In this case, though, it was unlikely Cassie was outside in the rain and, furthermore, Molly had a slight feeling of unease, which made her push the door open a little further and call out again, louder this time.

No reply. All Molly could hear was dripping rainwater and the wind in the trees. She couldn't see much through the partly open door, as there was an old sofa covered in a multi-coloured crocheted blanket with its back to the kitchen area. It struck her that she'd never known Cassie go out before without locking the door, even though nearly everyone in the

village left theirs unlocked. But then Cassie had come from London, and it was said people were very different there.

Putting aside her usual reservations in the interests of leaving the party food in a dry place for Petal, Molly pushed the door open further and went in, placing the box on the uncleared table.

The first thing she noticed was Petal's Britannia costume on a coat hanger on a hook on the stairs, the silver-coloured helmet gleaming brightly. Judging by the bread, plates with crumbs, teapot and two dirty cups on the table, something or someone had interrupted Cassie before she could clear the table. As Molly walked past the sofa into the main part of the room, she saw Cassie on the floor and screamed involuntarily.

She was sprawled, on her back, one leg slightly twisted. Her head was on the hearth and her blood had spilled out across it on to the floorboards in a shiny, dark-red pool.

Molly clamped her hands over her mouth to stop her scream and stared in absolute horror, not really believing what she was seeing. This was something which happened in films, not in real life. And, although she had never seen a corpse before, she felt absolutely certain Cassie was dead.

She was wearing the old floral print dress she wore most days and she still had a few curlers in her red hair, as if she'd been in the process of taking them out. Her arms were splayed out and her blue eyes were wide open.

'Cassie, Cassie, what happened?' said Molly, dropping down to her knees and taking her friend's wrist to feel for a pulse. Tears ran down her cheeks unchecked when she found no none. Cassie's skin felt very cold, too, so whatever it was must have happened some time ago. She knew she had to run to get the police, but horror rooted her to the spot.

She'd had so many laughs and in-depth conversations here in this cottage. Through Cassie, she'd learned so much about the world outside this village – about people, books, art and music. So many evenings with Petal sitting on her lap reading to her, or playing board games. Cassie was, without doubt, the best friend Molly had ever had, but more than that, too: she was her teacher, confidante and soulmate.

Then, all at once, it occurred to her that Petal wasn't here.

Where was she?

Petal was a shy child, nervous of people until she got to know them, and Molly had never known her to stray far from her mother's side. But, surely, if she'd seen her mother fall and all that blood spurting out, she would have run for help?

'Petal!' she called out. 'It's me, Auntie Molly. It's okay, I'm here now, and you'll be safe.'

But when there was no reply, not even a little whimper of distress, a dreadful thought crossed Molly's mind.

Was Cassie attacked and Petal so terrified that she ran to hide?

Molly forced herself to act, running up the narrow stairs to look in the bedroom. She was distraught, tears almost blinding her. Her whole being wanted to run away from this scene; she couldn't deal with it.

There was a double bed at one end of the room and a small single at the other. Both were neatly made, and Cassie's new red-and-white dress was lying on the double bed ready for her to put on. But Petal wasn't there. Molly looked under the bed, but there was nowhere else Petal could hide herself.

She went back down the stairs and checked the child wasn't hiding in the privy or the woodshed, calling loudly, even though her voice was croaking with emotion. But there was

nothing, not a rustle of leaves or a crack of a twig, to break the quiet in the woods.

Molly's stomach heaved and she vomited again and again into some undergrowth. Nothing in her life so far had prepared her for something as bad as this and, somehow, the fact it had taken place on a day the whole country was celebrating their new queen being crowned made it far, far worse.

'The police,' she said aloud, and forced herself to straighten up, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand. 'No time to lose.' Staggering, and with the heavy rain mingling with the tears streaming down her cheeks, she began to make her way back up the muddy track to her bike.