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A Cornish GIFT

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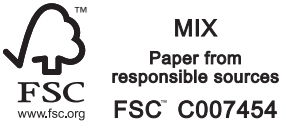
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A Cornish CAROL

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'Darling!' Helen dashed out of Gull's Cry and threw her arms around her daughter-in-law Terri as she headed up the path to the cottage door. Sean, Helen's son, was behind her, carrying their daughter, Summer, in her car seat.

Summer's chubby face split into the sunniest of smiles as she saw Helen. 'Gan Gan!' she cried joyfully and reached out her little hands for a cuddle.

'I can't believe how much you've grown!' Helen exclaimed. 'And is that a new tooth I can see?'

'Yes, and it's unbelievable the trouble that one tiny tooth has caused,' said Sean as they headed indoors.

He placed the car seat on the floor and started to undo the clasp that held Summer safely in

place. The moment her granddaughter was free, Helen swept her up and showered her with kisses, which were returned enthusiastically.

This done, and after more hugs and kisses all round, they made their way into Helen's cosy sitting room, where Sean and Terri sank into the comfy armchairs with relief. The tell-tale signs of disturbed nights and fraught days were all too obvious to Helen as she took in the dark circles under their eyes.

'Teething can be a rotten old business for everyone,' she concurred, gently stroking Summer's flushed cheeks. 'Well, the good news is that Granny is here to take some of the strain. This Christmas, the only things you'll need to worry about are eating, drinking and making merry. We've got Piran on chef duty – he's a much better cook than me and he can't bear having me in the kitchen with him, which means I'll have more time to spend on you three.'

'You have no idea how good that sounds,' said Terri, gratefully. 'The cottage looks amazing by the way.'

'Thank you,' Helen preened.

Interior design was a passion of hers and she

had lovingly devoted the last few days to making sure that her cottage really looked the part this year. The windows and doorway were wreathed in branches of fir adorned with twinkling lights, while giant candles flickered in storm lanterns on the window ledges. The banisters and mantelpiece were decorated with more fir branches and holly, and there were beautiful handcrafted wicker reindeer dotted around the room. Taking centre stage, the tree by the fireplace was utterly gorgeous; decorated sparingly with hand-painted sea-glass decorations that twinkled and cast dancing reflections of the crackling fire in the stove. The combination of fairy lights and candles gave the room a warm ambient glow, and the aroma of pine mingled with oranges and cloves scented the air.

'It's absolutely heavenly,' sighed Terri, sinking deep into the armchair.

Tempting as it was to lean back and enjoy the chance to relax, Sean forced himself to his feet. 'I'll just grab the last of the bags and then I'll be ready for one of your legendary winter warmers, Mum.'

'I've added a dash of sloe gin to the mulled

wine this year and I've got some mince pies warming in the oven – not home-made, I'm afraid, but they are from the new artisan bakery in Trevay and they're scrummy.'

'Amazing.' Sean gave his Mum a peck on the cheek and set off to get the rest of their luggage.

'You're all in the big bedroom!' she shouted after him.

'But that's your bedroom,' Terri protested.

'It's got more space and Piran and I will be quite happy in the little one, it'll be very cosy.'

'How is Piran?'

'Oh, you know.' Helen smiled ruefully, thinking about her grumpy, difficult, enigmatic, yet oh-so-magnetic boyfriend. They had chosen not to live together, both valuing their independence. He could be infuriating and unreadable but at the same time generous, exciting and sometimes completely magnificent. Lately, however . . . Helen couldn't put her finger on it, but he'd been far more withdrawn and brooding than usual. Probably the full moon, she told herself. Nothing to worry about – yet . . .

Helen checked her watch. It was gone five o'clock.

'Hope you both fancy a good laugh tonight. We've got tickets for the local am-dram panto – they're doing *Aladdin*.'

Sean struggled in with the luggage. 'Oh, great. All wobbly sets and fluffed lines as usual?'

Helen laughed. 'Guaranteed! I wouldn't miss it for the world!'

*

It was a packed house at the church hall. There were only three performances of the panto and tonight's would be the last. Helen's best friend, Penny, had landed the plum role of Aladdin. Penny was a hotshot TV producer and owner of Penny Leighton Productions, best known for her worldwide success with the *Mr Tibbs Mysteries* series and for her work on the Oscar-nominated film *Hats Off, Trevay!*. Helen knew that Penny would rather be chewing her own arm off than getting sucked into yet more village bother, but she also knew that Penny took her role of vicar's wife very seriously indeed and that meant supporting the panto, all proceeds of which went to support the church's charitable work.

Also wanting to do his bit, Simon Canter, Penny's husband and the father of their daughter Jenna, had gamely taken on the role of Widow Twanky. Much as she adored him, Helen couldn't help but feel that Simon had been hopelessly miscast. He was a wonderful person – kind, decent and a thoroughly good egg – but there was no denying that he lacked the requisite bawdy humour essential for making the part sing. The topical jokes he'd been given about Kim Kardashian's bum and 'twerking' had fallen flat in the first act. And watching him now, holding two melons and doing a 'nudge nudge, wink, wink' over a 'lovely pair' was quite painful. It was hard to escape the thought that this was all rather inappropriate behaviour for a vicar. Penny was doing her best to carry the show, but she was far above her material, Helen thought.

Sean had opted to stay at home with Summer, who was a bit grizzly, so Helen had ended up sitting between Terri and Piran. A happy and animated Jenna was bouncing on her knee, shouting out loudly and eagerly every time her mummy and daddy came on stage.

Helen risked a glance at Piran from the corner of her eye. He'd barely said a word all evening, except to ask them what they wanted to drink during the interval, returning with plastic cups of orange squash. While everyone around them was laughing at the antics on stage, Piran's head was lowered and his piercing blue eyes stared disdainfully from hooded eyelids. His hand covered his mouth as if trying to stop angry words from escaping and he jiggled his leg impatiently. Clearly, his mood had not improved. Helen sighed and turned back to the performance.

Aladdin and Princess Lotus Blossom – who was being played by Lauren, one of the village girls – were making their escape on a magic carpet while murdering, or at least committing grievous bodily harm on 'Up Where We Belong', accompanied by the children of Pendruggan Juniors, who were pretending to be a flock of birds. What might have looked good on paper was somewhat let down by the execution. Firstly, the 'flying' carpet was supposed to appear suspended mid-air, not draped across one of the trestle tables normally reserved for serving biscuits and tea at church

coffee mornings. Lauren was a well-fed lass and when she began giving it her all and belting out the lyrics, the table became decidedly unsteady. Secondly, the children shuffling onstage weren't quite progressing with military precision. Some were standing around looking bewildered, a couple of little boys were gurning at each other, and one little girl broke off and wandered to the front of the stage to tell her mummy she needed a wee-wee.

While the audience stifled their laughter, Aladdin and Princess Lotus Blossom continued gamely emoting about eagles crying on a mountain high, but their dirge was finally cut short when the shaky table leg gave way. Titters tuned to guffaws as Princess Lotus Blossom went arse over tit and ended up on her bottom, skirts in the air, with her frilly pink thong on show.

Tears of laughter streaming down her face, it was all Helen could do to hold on to Jenna, who was on her feet, screeching enthusiastically at the sight of her mummy rushing to help Lauren to recover whatever was left of her dignity. Rocking with mirth, Helen turned to say something to Piran, but the words died

on her lips as she saw his stony face, eyes dark with displeasure.

*

'Well, that went off really well!' said Simon, happily supping at his post-panto pint of ale in the comfort of The Dolphin's cosy saloon bar and seemingly oblivious to the general consensus that this would go down as one of the most shambolic village pantos in living memory.

Penny turned to her husband, incredulous. 'Were you performing in the same play as the rest of us?'

Simon's good humour wasn't to be dented. 'I'd say it was at least as good as last year's *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Arguably, that was a lot worse. Don't you remember?'

'Oh, yes.' Penny shuddered at the memory of Queenie, who'd been playing Old Mother Hubbard, setting fire to the stage curtain while having a sneaky fag in the wings.

'Exactly! And we've raised over a thousand pounds from the box office, which will certainly go a long way to help with the

funds for the trip to Canterbury Cathedral at Easter.'

'That's what I love about you, Simon – you're always able to see the positives in everything.' Penny gave her ruddy-cheeked, balding and bespectacled husband a loving kiss on his nose.

Helen couldn't help smiling at the display of affection. It was just the four of them in the pub; Terri had gone home to relieve Sean of babysitting duties, and little Jenna had fallen asleep, exhausted, and been carried home by Penny's brother, who'd come down with his family for the holidays.

'You're very quiet, Piran,' said Simon. 'How did you rate the performance this year?'

Piran kept his morose gaze firmly on his pint. 'No comment.'

'Not tempted to sign yourself up for next year?' Simon added playfully. 'Perhaps we could put on *Peter Pan* and you could play Captain Hook. You've got the perfect temperament for it and everyone loves a baddie!'

Piran glowered. 'Is that supposed to be a compliment?'

'No, no, I just meant—'

'I know what you meant!' Piran snapped. 'We haven't all got the urge to prance around like bloody fools for the merriment of others. Some of us have better things to do.'

Helen was shocked at the sharpness of his tone. 'Simon was only having a bit of fun, Piran.'

This earned her a fierce scowl, too, then, muttering darkly under his breath, Piran pushed his chair back and stalked off to the bar to buy another drink.

'Perhaps Prince Charming would be a better fit?' Helen said to his retreating back.

'I heard that *Beauty and the Beast* were casting.' Penny gave her friend a wry smile.

At this point, Audrey Tipton, the village busybody – a woman Helen always thought of as the love-child of Margaret Thatcher and Mussolini – came striding into the pub, with her husband Geoffrey, otherwise known as Mr Audrey Tipton, trotting along in her wake. Spotting Simon, Audrey held up a finger to her husband, as if commanding a dog to stay, then made a beeline for their table while Geoffrey hovered timidly by the pub entrance.

'Ah, Reverend Canter. I'm glad I found you.'

The sight of Audrey crossing The Dolphin's threshold had everyone's jaws dropping. She wouldn't normally be seen dead in anything quite so vulgar as a public house.

Simon got to his feet uncertainly. 'What can I do for you, Audrey? Would you and Geoff care for a drink?'

'No, thank you, Reverend,' she answered briskly. 'I'll make this as brief as possible. As you know, the Bridge Society Christmas luncheon was to have been held in the church hall tomorrow, but I've just been there and the hall is in a complete state of disarray. This really is quite unacceptable. If our annual luncheon suffers any disruption as a result, I shall hold you responsible.'

'Now, Audrey,' Simon's tone was conciliatory, 'you know that the panto has only just finished. I'm sure that Polly and all of the helpers are doing their best to get everything shipshape . . .'

'Well, their best clearly isn't good enough!'

'Give them a chance, Audrey!'

Over Audrey's shoulder, Helen caught sight of Piran returning from the bar. She was dismayed to see that the dangerous look in his

eye had taken on new fire as Audrey Tipton delivered her rebuke. He and Audrey were old adversaries, their hostility mutual and frequently gladiatorial.

'Audrey.' Piran gave her a tight nod of the head.

'Ah, Piran Ambrose. Pendruggan's answer to Blackbeard!' Audrey turned to Simon again. 'Perhaps, Reverend, if you spent more time attending to church matters and less time frequenting drinking establishments with undesirables, this sort of problem wouldn't occur.'

'Now listen here—' Penny was on her feet, ready to defend her husband, but before she could say more, Piran placed his pint of Cornish Knocker on the table and rounded on Audrey.

Sensing what was coming, Helen put her head in her hands. Of all the times for Audrey to go rattling the bars of his cage . . .

'Now, Audrey, us undesirables don't care much for what other people think,' said Piran, his voice quiet but each word carefully enunciated and delivered with venom. 'What's more, we say what's on our minds. So here's

what I've got to say to you, and you're gonna listen. I've had just about enough of your complaining, your constant interfering and moaning. No one gives a toss about you and your bridge lot – a bunch of stuck-up fusspots, thinking you're better than anyone else. Not one single person in this village likes you or wants to have anything to do with you. You're nothing but a dried-up old fruit – even your husband probably can't bear the sight of you, 'cept he's too scared to say so. So why don't you do us all a favour and take your bleddy whingeing and your bleddy whining and stick 'em right up that fat arse of yorn.'

The table sat in stunned silence as Piran's words hit home. For a moment, Audrey's mouth formed into a perfect O. She tried to speak but could only manage a strangled whimper, and Helen was horrified to see that there were tears in her eyes. As if hoping that they would leap to her defence, Audrey turned helplessly to the others at the table.

Simon was first on his feet. 'Audrey, it isn't true, we're all so grateful to you for all the things you do . . .'

But Audrey stepped away from his outstretched hand. With great difficulty she found her voice. 'Well. Good evening, Reverend. Thank you for your time.'

And with that, she walked slowly and with great dignity towards her husband. Geoffrey, who'd been too far away to hear the exchange, registered that something was wrong and hurried towards her with a concerned look on his face. Audrey merely shook her head in response to his questions and made for the door, head bowed. With one last questioning glance at their table, Geoffrey followed her out.

Aghast, the three friends turned as one to Piran.

'How could you?' Helen found it hard to believe that the man she loved could be so cruel.

'You went too far there,' agreed Penny. 'Poor Audrey. I know she can be a complete pain, but she isn't a bad person and she didn't deserve that.'

Piran turned to Simon, waiting for him to add some rebuke, but he remained silent. The two men looked at each other for a moment

and then Piran picked up his woollen hat and coat and walked out of the pub without another word.

'I just don't know what's wrong with him lately,' said Helen, as much to herself as anyone else. This wasn't boding at all well for Christmas.

While Penny and Helen wondered aloud what could have caused Piran to snap that way, Simon sat in silence, staring at the door that had closed behind his friend, keeping his thoughts to himself.