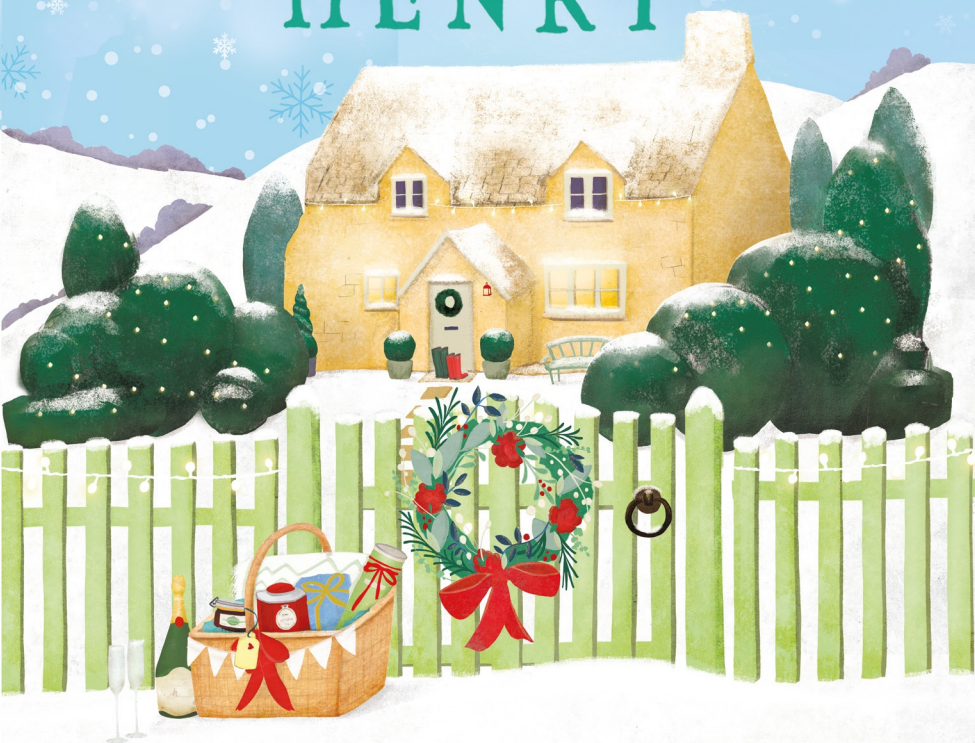
A Country CHRISTMAS

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Honeycote: the holiday starts here…

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A single bell tolled out with authoritative finality. Eye-watering winter sunshine drenched the little churchyard at Honeycote, highlighting the dewy cobwebs that stretched from grave to grave. A mound of earth indicated the most recent, the latest in a line of Liddiards that stretched back hundreds of years.

He craned his neck to assess the turnout. They were all there. Patrick, seemingly unperturbed, the only betrayal of any emotion being the speed at which he smoked his cigarette before tossing the nub end into the freshly dug hole. Sophie and Georgina stood behind him, unnaturally pale in their black school coats, lending an air of Victorian melodrama to the tableau. He thought this was probably their first funeral, if you didn't count the elaborate arrangements they'd made for various guinea pigs and goldfish over the years. Kay was chic in rigidly tailored black, a huge hat and impossibly high heels – he knew she'd be wearing stockings. Lawrence was at her side, etiquette requiring them to be united. Even Cowley was there from the bank, in a shapeless suit, his Christmas Biro clipped into the top pocket, no doubt luxuriating in a morning away from his desk: this was about as much fun as Cowley ever had.

And Lucy. She'd rejected widow's weeds in favour of palest grey, her only concession to mourning a black velvet ribbon that held back her curls. She was wearing a pearl necklace he'd given her the Christmas before, an over-generous gesture he hadn't been able to afford. As ever.

As she arrived at the graveside to stand beside his brother James, there was just time for him to notice her slipping her hand into his before the vicar started intoning the familiar words.

As the first clod of earth began to hit the coffin, Mickey Liddiard summoned up every last drop of energy from his bones and pushed. But the lid of the coffin was stout, hewn from a mighty oak, and wouldn't give . . .

'Mickey! Mickey!'

Lucy anxiously shook her husband awake. She could feel his heart hammering as he thrashed beside her. He sat bolt upright, drenched in sweat, and looked at her in alarm.

'You've had one of your dreams again.'

Mickey slumped back on the pillows, relief that it was all over flooding through him. But Lucy could still sense anxiety.

'What on earth were you dreaming about? You were tossing and turning—'

'I don't know.' Mickey feigned puzzlement. He could remember only too well. 'You know what dreams are like. You wake up and they're gone.'

It was the third time this week he'd had the dream, or one like it. He'd wondered about having it analysed, but thought perhaps the meaning wasn't all that hidden

and that quite simply he had a fear of dying and nobody giving a toss. He screwed up his eyes to look at the clock. 'What's the time?'

Lucy stretched out her arm and turned the miniature carriage clock to face her. 'Nearly six.' She frowned as Mickey threw back the blankets. 'You don't need to get up yet, surely?'

'I need a shower.'

She watched his shadowy outline pad across the room and pull back the heavy, interlined curtains, letting the very first fingers of early morning light in. She could see him clearly now. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and with still no sign of a middle-age spread despite having celebrated his forty-third birthday six months before. He had just enough gravitas in his features to stop him looking boyish, but he had a bloom of youth that he didn't deserve and that his contemporaries resented given his lifestyle and no thinning hair as yet, not even a sprinkling of grey in his thick brown hair.

He was definitely a handsome man in anyone's books, but as he gazed out of the window there was a frown marring his features that Lucy didn't like. She suddenly felt a need to reassure both him and herself. This wasn't the first time she'd woken him from a nightmare lately. She patted the empty space in the bed beside her.

'Come back to bed.'

Mickey shook his head. He was wide awake now, the adrenalin from the dream still pumping through his body, and his head was already whirling with the problems the day held in store for him. He reflected grimly that he had no respite these days, only a brief half-hour after the first few glasses of wine, in that mellow period between being

relaxed and becoming totally plastered. Why could he never stop at that point? Why did he insist on getting completely out of it, so he became melancholy, his fears waxed rather than waned and his sleep was troubled?

He turned to look at his wife. She was wearing the necklace she'd had on in the dream, and didn't look a day older than the day he'd married her. But then why should she? She had nothing to worry about. She knew nothing of his problems, that was for sure.

'What are you doing today?' he asked her.

'The girls are breaking up for Christmas tomorrow, I've got to hit the supermarket and do a big shop.'

Big shop. Big bill.

'Why? Sophie's always on a diet and Georgie only eats treacle sandwiches—'

Lucy grinned. 'Well, I've run out of treacle. And I need to start stocking up for Christmas. I'm not going to get caught out again this year.' As soon as she said it, she had a vision of herself at the end of a huge queue in Sainsbury's. It was her annual ritual, resolving to be organized and failing. But there were always better things to do than make lists and fill the freezer.

Mickey walked over and dropped a kiss on her forehead. She caught a whiff of the sweat that had now dried on him. It smelled of panic, not exertion, and she suddenly felt glad he'd chosen not to come back to bed. Lucy wasn't fastidious, but the smell was unfamiliar on him. It unsettled her.

Moments later, as the warm water washed away the remnants of his dream, Mickey considered the day ahead. He resolved to be positive and confront his problems for a change, instead of seeking out one of the displacement

activities he was so fond of, the ones that helped him avoid the real world. He'd get to the brewery early, try to get on top of the mountain of paperwork he knew was waiting for him. It was unlikely to have disappeared. It had been there for months.

As it was still so early, he decided to walk. He usually drove, which was pretty inexcusable as the brewery was scarcely three-quarters of a mile from the house, but today he thought the exercise would do him good; it might clear his head a bit. He could always get Lucy to pick him up later if he couldn't face the walk home.

It was a brewing day, which meant scruffy clothes rather than a jacket and tie, so he pulled on jeans and one of the dark green polo shirts he'd recently had made up with the brewery logo on the left breast. They'd been an attempt to establish some sort of corporate identity at Honeycote Ales; make it look as if he had his finger on the pulse and was in control. It was funny how something so simple managed to paper over the cracks. Everyone had been very impressed.

Lucy had fallen back to sleep, so he slipped out of the bedroom carrying his boots and went down into the kitchen. It was unusually quiet, this room that was so very much the heart of the house. He knew that in an hour or so's time it would be full of life. Sophie would be filling the liquidizer with fruit and yoghurt, making one of her revolting smoothies, bemoaning their lack of a juicer. Georgina would be toasting thick-sliced white bread on the Aga, while Patrick, always the last up, would be drinking thick black coffee, unable to communicate until he'd had his fix of caffeine. Mickey didn't relish the unnatural silence – he found it disconcerting rather than relaxing

– so he grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl, picked up his waxed coat from the back of the chair where he'd left it the night before and slipped out of the door. Thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, he walked down the drive and out of the gates of Honeycote House, turned right and carried on at a brisk pace until he reached the village.

There were a surprising amount of inhabitants abroad even at this early hour. A suited executive drove past in his BMW, en route to Eldenbury two miles away; the little market town boasted a much-coveted station on the main line to Paddington, which brought London within a commutable ninety minutes for those who wanted to retreat to the Cotswolds each night. A brace of young workmen in a battered van set off for a building site just outside Evesham six miles the other way. There they were employed on yet another estate of the characterless homes that seemed to be springing up everywhere. The postman was hurrying through his round so he could get to his second job, tending the gardens of the wealthier inhabitants of the village. He found he could charge what he liked for keeping the lawns and hedges manicured, because he was reliable and knowledgeable and wasn't too ruthless with his pruning.

Honeycote had gone the way of many other villages in the area. The school and the police house had each closed down and been converted into picturesque homes. The post office remained valiantly open and stayed so only by means of constant diversification. But despite these casualties, other businesses had emerged in their place. A young mother had started a mail order children's clothing company, providing outwork for many other women in the village who were handy with a sewing machine. An

old chapel was stuffed to the gills with reclaimed furniture and artefacts of the kind people moving to the country felt their houses should be furnished with, and did very well. There was certainly a style of entrepreneurialism thriving in Honeycote, but it was a sad fact that many of the locals who had been born and bred here could no longer afford to buy the higgledy-piggledy, gingerbread cottages that lined its streets.

At the far end of the village, Mickey passed the Honeycote Arms, the very first of the brewery's tied houses to have been purchased by his great-grandfather when he'd first hit on the idea of changing from farming to brewing. The pub was looking tired and ramshackle, in need of love and attention, though not even the peeling paintwork could detract from the loveliness of the mellow stone from which it was built. Nevertheless, it was hardly a good advert, and Mickey averted his gaze as he walked past. Apart from anything, he didn't want to get into conversation with Ted, the landlord. He didn't feel like exchanging niceties.

A little further up the road a sturdy set of pillars were topped by a wrought-iron arch proclaiming the words Honeycote Ales. The driveway continued for a hundred or so yards before dropping steeply down into a bowl in which the brewery nestled.

Had it not been contained within this bowl, the tower of the brewery would have dominated the village, hanging over it as if to remind the inhabitants of its importance. As it was, the steeply pitched lead roof with its trademark weather vane could only just be seen from the main street, if one knew where to look. At the bottom of the drive there was a cobbled courtyard, surrounded on three sides

by the brewery buildings. The heart of the operation was the tower in the centre, four storeys high, with the malt-house to the left and the offices to the right, behind which were further outbuildings, garages and stables, mostly now defunct. A pair of lorries painted with the green and gold Honeycote livery were parked up in front of the entrance to the cellar, awaiting barrels of beer to be taken to the brewery's ten tied houses. They were mostly small country pubs, all within a five-mile radius of Honeycote, scattered along the nearby border between Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. They probably consumed less beer in a week between them than one town centre theme pub on a Saturday night.

It was in this rare moment of calm that Mickey was able to survey his legacy. In a couple of hours' time the place would be a hive of activity, as the giant steam engine that powered everything burst into life and another day's brew would begin. Soon the air would be filled with a rich, malty fug that could be smelled as far as the village – an enticing vapour that encapsulated years of tradition and know-how. It was all very well, he thought, being handed a business like this on a plate, but he hadn't inherited his great-grandfather's pioneering spirit, nor his grandfather's long-sightedness and careful planning, nor his father's efficiency and capacity for hard work. Which was why he was in such a mess now.

He stopped and looked into the room that served as a common room-cum-canteen for the twenty or so staff he employed – nothing grand, but somewhere warm they could boil a kettle for a cup of tea or chew on their sandwiches. He noticed a couple of balloons stuck on the wall and a banner proclaiming 'It's a girl!', and remembered

that one of the young lads who drove for them had had a baby the week before. Mickey was reminded all too clearly of his responsibilities. Another mouth to feed, albeit indirectly.

As he approached the entrance to the offices, he looked at the brass plaque commemorating the brewery's centenary forty-nine years before. There had been a huge village party to celebrate – free beer for everyone (of course), a pig roast, music, dancing, fireworks – all paid for by Mickey's grandfather. Each Honeycote pub had built a huge beacon, and there was a point, high on Poacher's Hill just outside the village, where each fire could be seen twinkling.

Mickey calculated that if they could limp through another eighteen months, they could celebrate a hundred and fifty years purveying ale, but he strongly doubted there would be any cause for celebration. If there were to be any fireworks, it would be the outrage caused by mass redundancies – for he wasn't the only one whose family had been dominated by the brewery for generations. He had a couple of young lads working for him whose grandfathers had worked for his own grandfather. In some ways, Honeycote Ales was a big extended family in itself. Brothers and sisters, fathers and sons, husbands and wives had all trooped up the lane from the village to take their place shifting barrels, cleaning pipes, answering phones.

He heard someone whistling and realized he wasn't alone. It was Eric Giles, the engineer, whose front teeth had been knocked out in a village hockey match and never replaced, but who, according to local legend, had the body of a god under his boiler suit. Eric had learned to tend the steam engine in the boiler room from his own

father, and could turn his hand to mending anything. He loved his work, adored the engine, and Mickey knew he could bank on Eric's loyalty well past his retirement. He was in there now, checking the engine over, polishing her up, happy as anything. It made Mickey envious, and for a moment he fantasized about swapping jobs. Until it occurred to him that he wouldn't have a bloody clue how to go about Eric's work, and that Eric would probably make a far better job of running the brewery than he was.

It was with a heavy heart that he climbed the stone steps to his office and slid the key into the lock, for his problems at the brewery were only the tip of a rather large iceberg . . .