Heaven Sent

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Extract

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Chapter One

Clemmie Coddle fell in love with Guy Devlin on the same day as she set fire to her feet.

Last May Day morning, in the shed at the back of Coddle's Post Office Stores in Bagley-cum-Russet, Clemmie's incorrect measure of aluminium and carelessly haphazard lighting of a portfire had ignited her safety boots when she'd least expected it.

Last May Day evening, at Fern and Timmy Pluckrose's wedding reception on Fiddlesticks' village green, Clemmie, hobbling around with bunny slippers on her scorched feet, had clapped eyes on Guy Devlin for the very first time, and – whoosh! – had rocketed dizzily through each of the seven heavens and sky-high into all-consuming love.

As Fern and Timmy's magical celebratory evening culminated in a superb musical firework display provided by The Gunpowder Plot – Guy's company – Clemmie's fate was sealed. Her throbbing feet were forgotten.

She and Guy Devlin were *meant* to be together.

He was not only heart-achingly gorgeous, but also a pyrotechnician par excellence; *she*, while not so totally convinced of her physical attributes, had been obsessed with the breathtaking rainbow magic of fireworks for as long as she could remember, and had dabbled with making her own mixtures of exquisitely coloured gentle explosives since receiving a chemistry set for her eighth birthday.

It was, as far as Clemmie was concerned, a lifelong firework match made in the heavenly periodic table.

Now, more than five months on from both incendiary incidents, Clemmie's feet – merely lightly fricasseed and, like her fingers and eyebrows and hair, used to being similarly mistreated over the

years – had healed remarkably quickly. Her heart, on the other hand, was still showing no inclination whatsoever to join in.

Behind the reception desk of Hazy Hassocks' Dovecote Surgery on a chilly October morning, carefully arranging a couple of dozen buff folders into a house of cards while lost in her favourite recurring fantasy of exploding rainbow fireworks with Guy Devlin choreographing her very own pyrotechnic inventions to the strains of Rossini, Clemmie lifted another batch of patient notes and smiled wistfully to herself.

Just one more folder … There! Fantastic! Best ever! Three storeys and not even a wobble …

Clemmie had been well aware of Guy Devlin and The Gunpowder Plot before May Day, of course. Everyone was. That is, everyone in Winterbrook and Hazy Hassocks and Bagley-cum-Russet and Fiddlesticks and – well, all of her native Berkshire and probably most of Hampshire and Oxfordshire too. The Gunpowder Plot was the best-known fireworks company for miles around, and Clemmie had watched the genius-level pyrotechnics with a mixture of admiration, awe and envy, on many occasions.

Guy Devlin democratically fired jaw-dropping displays for both the rich and famous and the broke and unknown across the south of England. Guy Devlin, Clemmie already knew from the local girlie gossip, was allegedly stunningly good-looking and drop-dead sexy and had hordes of beautiful women falling at his feet and all points north.

She'd heard all this many times, but still nothing could have prepared her for her first glimpse of the six foot plus, lean, black haired, blue-eyed, simply stupendous reality on May Day. Nothing could have prepared her for not just his beauty, but his outrageous flamboyance. He looked, Clemmie thought carefully, like a madly romantic cross between a Johnny Depp pirate and Adam Ant in his dandy highwayman guise

As pyrotechnicians, by necessity, remained mostly invisible during their work, Clemmie reckoned spotting Guy Devlin for the first time was as thrilling as for a dedicated twitcher catching an inaugural and unexpected glimpse of a pair of practically extinct Squeaking Frilly Wood Chuffs.

The fact that Guy Devlin hadn't actually noticed her – either on May Day or any day since – was a bit of a blow, but not a major

stumbling block. He would, she knew he would, just give him time and opportunity …

Of course there was also the additional drawback of the tall, raven-haired, glamourously sultry woman who had been practically glued to his side on May Day evening. All black leather, killer heels, batwing eyelashes and glossy pout, she'd looked like an updated Mrs Peel. Clemmie sighed again. Still, given Guy's reputation, by now the latter-day Avengers-woman was bound to be a fling of the past.

Oooh, one more folder and she'd have managed four storeys! That would make it a record … There, steady … Oh, yesss!

'Clemmie!' The eldritch shriek of Bunty Darrington, Dovecote's head receptionist and harridan, screeched round the doctors' waiting room. 'Clemmie Coddle! What exactly do you think you're doing?'

Clemmie, rocketed out of her reverie, jumped and groaned as the house collapsed and folders scattered untidily across the desk. 'What? Oh, sorry …'

'*Sorry*?' Bunty Darrington roared. 'And what exactly is *sorry* supposed to mean? Do you mean "excuse me?" or "I beg your pardon?" Or was that supposed to be a one word apology?'

At the first sign of a verbal fracas, the patients in the Dovecote Surgery's holding area all looked up in eager anticipation. This was clearly something to take their minds off the biting October wind outside, their ailments, the posters on the wall which listed symptoms they certainly hadn't had when arriving but knew they had every one of now, and the high-pitched wails of three small children dressed like divas all trying to fit into the Wendy House in the corner.

'Well?' Bunty quivered inside her tweed two-piece. 'I'm waiting.'

'Then you're in good company and in exactly the right place,' Clemmie said brightly, 'seeing as this is a waiting room. No, sorry – er – I mean – that was a sort of joke, Bunty. A joke.'

Bunty Darrington's ginger eyebrows rose into her grizzled ginger fringe. Bunty didn't do jokes. 'Really? Was it? I can't hear anyone laughing, can you? And let me remind you that this is neither the time nor the place for levity. And I asked you a question.'

The waiting room leaned forward.

‘Actually you asked me loads. But I only remember two: what I was doing and what I meant by sorry.’ Clemmie flipped through the tumbled folders. ‘Sorry was an apology – although I’m not sure what for. And I was filing.’

Bunty Darrington’s lips stretched themselves with difficulty over her large teeth. ‘*Filing*? Don’t you give me filing, my girl! You were playing – *playing* – with those folders! Confidential folders! Highly confidential patient notes! And you were daydreaming again, weren’t you? Admit it.’

The waiting room was agog. Sore throats, creaking knees, aching feet and gippy tummies were forgotten. Even the mini-divas had stopped tugging at one another’s candyfloss pink tiaras to stare.

Clemmie gazed down at the demolished house of folders and sighed. Bugger Bunty. Caught in the act. Daydreaming was possibly a hanging offence in the Dovecote Surgery. She beamed. ‘Well spotted. Not much gets past you, does it Bunty? Sorry – again. Oh, and that’s sorry as in apology just in case you were in any doubt.’

‘And that’s insolence of the first order!’ Bunty stomped up to the desk on her cushion soles. ‘Not for the first time, either. I’m sorry Clemmie, but I’ll have to report this.’

A ripple of lights on the desktop intercom momentarily spared Clemmie from any further vitriolic onslaught. Flicking switches, she listened, ticked her lists and cleared her throat. ‘Cynthia Avebury for Dr Murray. Alec Smart for Dr Khan. Beyonce Winterbottom for Dr Lowry.’

No one moved. The youthful Beyonce Winterbottom, one of the mini divas in the Wendy House, preened and flounced at the mention of her name, but her equally youthful and equally multi-sequinned mother made no attempt to claim her daughter. All eyes were still riveted on the reception desk.

‘Come along!’ Bunty clapped her hands. ‘Don’t keep the doctors waiting! Mrs Avebury! Mr Smart! Hurry along there! And you, too – er – Beyonce.’

Reluctantly, the three patients disappeared through the archway towards the surgeries.

As the remainder of the waiting room regrouped, Bunty Darrington straightened her extremely tight jacket. ‘I shall go and see Ms Peacock this very minute, Clemmie. She will be sorely

disappointed. She's championed you ever since we took you on. No one else thought you were suitable. No one else here wanted you.'

Thanks. Clemmie pulled a face as Bunty waddled self-importantly away towards the practice manager's office. Thanks a bunch …

It was true, of course, and she knew it, but it still wasn't the sort of thing a girl needed to hear.

The remaining patients, aware that the floor show was temporarily over, went back to snuffling and coughing and staring at the information-plastered walls, clearly wondering if they now had the beginnings of a goitre, something virally rampant, or if that scarily anatomical diagram could possibly relate to their own bodies. Clemmie tidied the scattered folders, pushed her wayward dark red hair back into its barrette, disentangled a few chestnut strands from her large hooped earrings, and awaited her fate.

She didn't have to wait long. Bunty waddled back to the desk, smirking.

'Ms Peacock will see you now – no, don't fiddle with those notes. I'll take over here – and I don't suppose you've answered one phone call have you? And what about Mrs Jenkins? Is she still in the lavatory? Have you checked? She's probably gone to sleep again. It doesn't take thirty-five minutes to produce a sample, especially not at her age.'

Aware that the remainder of the waiting room was again watching her humiliation with a sort of gruesome glee – it was clearly far better than reality telly – Clemmie squeezed past Bunty and headed for the practice manager's office.

'Come in!' Pam Peacock shouted.

Clemmie shut the door behind her and smiled. 'Sorry about this, Pam. Bunty's on the warpath again and I know she's—'

'Sit down, Clemmie,' Pam Peacock peered through her varifocals. 'I'm not going to be able to sweep this one under the carpet. Please sit down, dear.'

Clemmie sat, the folds of her long velvet skirt pooling round her boots, the trailing lace cuffs of her boho blouse hiding the nervous crossing of her fingers.

Pam Peacock, sadly misnamed Clemmie always thought, being one of those wispy beige women who thought wearing a touch of muted taupe was daring, pulled a doom-laden face.

‘There have been too many complaints for me to ignore them. True, mostly from Bunty; but she does hold sway here, as you know.’

‘But the other receptionists—’

‘Haven’t complained, no,’ Pam fiddled with her spectacles. ‘Not individually, that is. And certainly not directly to me. However, they’ve had several little grumbles to Bunty on the quiet I believe. All grist to her mill, I’m afraid. You know how much Bunty dislikes your, er, individual way of dressing and your cheerfully irreverent attitude – she’s been gunning for you for a very long time. And, sadly, not entirely without reason. You’ve been here for just over six months and in that time …’

Pam proceeded to list a catalogue of Clemmie’s wrong-doings from the personnel file in front of her. Clemmie, who’d heard it all before, didn’t really listen. Individually, she knew they were only minor misdemeanours caused by square-peg syndrome, but no doubt lumped together they sounded far worse. It was better not to hear them. So as Pam’s voice faded into the background, Clemmie allowed her attention to stray.

She’d never intended to become a doctors’ receptionist. Like most things in her life since the age of fifteen, she sort of drifted into it. When she was fifteen, the firm her dad worked for had relocated from rural Berkshire to Thurso on the northernmost tip of Scotland. It had been mutually decided that Clemmie should remain in Bagley-cum-Russet, living with her aunt and uncle, so as not to disrupt her schooling.

Clemmie, unfashionably enthralled by chemistry, a genius at science and OK-ish at everything else, had happily moved into the Post Office Stores, retaining the continuity of her life in the village. She’d vaguely imagined that after A levels (all sciences; all As), or maybe after uni (Cambridge), she’d move north to be with her parents again. It simply hadn’t happened. It had been so much easier, after gaining her degree, to simply come back to the place she’d always known as home, to be with the friends she’d had since babyhood. There was, of course, the issue of making the most of her impressive education; but as Clemmie didn’t want to really do anything with her life except invent decorative explosives, the opportunities were limited.

As the majority of the world’s fireworks are now made in China and shipped globally for the pyrotechnic companies to buy in

ready-built bulk, her thesis and lifelong expertise in concocting chemical cocktails wasn't anyone's urgent must-have.

So, after university and before the Dovecote Surgery, she'd been briefly, and on various occasions, a waitress, a barmaid, a filing clerk, a taxi driver, a data inputter, a lollipop lady, a cleaner, a kitchen hand, a trainee estate agent, a dental nurse, a lab technician – and, of course, a shop assistant in Bagley-cum-Russet Post Office Stores.

With her first-class degree in chemistry she should have gone straight into ploughing some sort of research furrow at best, or teaching science to bored teenagers at worst. If only she hadn't gone back to live with her aunt and uncle in Bagley-cum-Russet after university and lost her momentum … If only she'd really wanted to do something other than make fireworks … If only she'd never lived in Bagley-cum-Russet to start with … If only Sukie and Chelsea and Phoebe and Amber hadn't persuaded her to go to Fern and Timmy's wedding reception … If only she'd never fallen in love with Guy Devlin …

'… and so, unfortunately …' Pam had the look of someone who is going to tell you've failed your driving test, your blood tests are positive, you owe a fortune in income tax, and your husband's run off with your best friend all on the same day. 'Unfortunately, Clemmie, I'm left with no alternative but to issue you with a written warning. Is there anything you'd like to say?'

'Loads.' Clemmie smiled sadly. 'You've always been lovely to me, Pam. And I'm really grateful to you for getting me this job, but—'

'Your heart's never been in it?'

Her heart? Clemmie shook her head. No, her heart had never been in the Dovecote Surgery. Her heart was currently rampaging somewhere in Winterbrook – the nearest largish town to Hazy Hassocks – at The Gunpowder Plot with the beautifully mad, deliciously bad and definitely dangerous to know Guy Devlin, inventing the most wildly sensational firework displays ever staged.

'Something like that,' Clemmie said. 'And honestly, Pam, Bunty and I are never going to be able to work happily together, are we? And I'm probably going to commit some other perceived clerical sin pretty soon and then, because of the written warning, you'll have to sack me – which will be awful for us both, so shall we just cut out the middle man?'

‘There’s no need—’

‘There’s every need.’ Clemmie stood up. ‘Thanks for being such a good sport. I’ll miss you. I’ll just go and clear my desk – metaphorically, of course as I don’t actually have one.’

‘I’m so very sorry.’ Pam stood up and offered a pale, beige hand. ‘I personally think you’ve been a breath of fresh air and the patients love you. I do wish there was some other way. Good luck, Clemmie. Have you any idea what you’re going to do next?’

‘None at all,’ Clemmie said, far more breezily than she felt. After all, at almost thirty a girl should surely have some sort of life plan mapped out, shouldn’t she? ‘It’s quite exciting in a way.’

Out in the waiting room, the remaining patients immediately perked up as Clemmie emerged.

Bunty, perched on the stool behind the reception desk with her tweed haunches overflowing, looked up in quivering anticipation. ‘Right. Now, young lady – you get back here and knuckle down. I hope Ms Peacock has put you straight on your behaviour. First, you file all these notes, then go and check in the lav for Mrs Jenkins, and after that you can man the phones over lunchtime, then—’

‘Sorry to interrupt you.’ Clemmie beamed, shrugging into her ancient oversized mauve mohair cardigan. ‘But you’re going to do all that yourself. I’m off.’

‘*Off*?’ Bunty’s shriek vibrated round the walls. ‘I think not, young lady. You’ve forfeited your right to a coffee break, I’m afraid. And Julia won’t be on until one so you’ll just have to—’

Clemmie gathered her few possessions together and shoved them into her battered bejewelled basket. ‘No Bunty. I mean I’m OFF. Leaving, packing it all in, departing this surgery. I am now an ex-receptionist.’

The waiting room was agog.

‘She sacked you?’ Bunty howled. ‘Nooo! She wasn’t supposed to sack you! How am I supposed to manage out here without a full complement of staff! You can’t go!’

‘Can and am.’ Clemmie swung happily towards the door. ‘But please don’t blame Pam for this. She didn’t sack me. I quit. ’Bye, Bunty.’

The waiting room, rising to its feet, gave Clemmie a rousing Hazy Hassocks cheer as she left the surgery.