A DEADLY INHERITANCE

JANE MCPARKES

Copyright© 2023 Jane McParkes

Published by Pencreek Publishing 2023
ISBN 978-1-7393149-0-3

Cover design by Ken Dawson

Typeset by The Book Refinery Ltd
www.thebookrefinery.com

The right of Jane McParkes to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically, including photo copying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without either prior permission in writing from the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No parts of this manuscript may be reproduced or used in any manner without the permission of the copyright owner.

This book was produced using papers which are manufactured from sustainable sources and FSC accredited paper mills.



A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

For my mum.
Who taught me to read and to love books.

1

It had been another night of frantic, desperate dreams, but this time when Olivia forced her eyes open, her body was still swaying, still fighting the waves that had been pulling and spinning her round all night. She lifted her head and immediately regretted it. Even the room was swaying now. Like she had the worst hangover in the world. And yet she hadn't even had that much to drink the night before. Had she?

A surge of nausea propelled her out of bed and across the wooden floorboards to the bathroom, wincing at the early morning light forcing itself between the closed shutters.

'You are not going to vomit. You are not going to vomit . . .' She told herself, easing open the window and inhaling carefully. The salty, Cornish air edged with a hint of seaweed helped a little, but as she stood there, memories of the previous day began to download in her mind. Fragments of the Trustees' meeting, Libby's snarky attitude towards her, and then the vicious words she'd hurled at her afterwards, rushed into her throbbing head.

Oliva stumbled into the shower, her face turned up to the pounding, hot jets as she tried to coax her body and brain back to life and wash herself clean of Libby's harsh words. More

snippets of the evening began to surface. Martin had appeared by magic, ready to help as she'd rushed away from the Goods Shed and everyone who had witnessed her humiliation. His kind face and gentle tone had weakened Olivia's resolve to stay strong and cope with the fall-out by herself. They had come back to Tresillian, where they'd eaten supper together and she had drunk enough wine to loosen her tongue and confide in Martin about feeling as if everything was falling apart. She remembered swallowing a third glass of Malbec, but after that everything was a blur.

Olivia turned the temperature dial to cold and forced herself to stand there for ten seconds, then dried herself and shuffled back to the bedroom. Two pairs of round dark eyes observed her solemnly from the bed. Lowering her head gingerly, she kissed each dog gently on the nose.

'I don't suppose you guys can tell me what happened last night?' Two feathery tails wagged tentatively as she eased on her black running tights and top, still careful not to make any sudden movements. 'No, I thought not. Okay, let me just make one of Mollie's cure-alls and then we'll go deal with this crap the way we always do.'

★★★

Five minutes later Olivia was sipping a mug of milk thistle tea sweetened with honey while she watched the dogs rush around the garden, checking out the new smells that had arrived overnight. The rich nutty flavour of the tea was working its magic and Olivia pulled on her running jacket and slid her

feet into her trail running shoes; even managing to bend to tie the laces without feeling too sick. The thought of scraping her thick curls up into a scrunchie was a step too far, and she settled for her running headband instead. Letting herself out of the back door she whistled to the dogs and set off, slowly at first, into the bright light of the Cornish dawn. Once she reached the lane, she picked up speed, slowly but steadily, and began to feel better. She could do this. Running was the one thing that settled her mind, and she much preferred the burning in her lungs and the screaming of her muscles to the cocktail of emotions that had taken up residence in her stomach for the last eight weeks.

Subtle streaks of pink, orange and yellow spread across the sky above her as she ran down the quiet lane which wound its way along the south bank of Penbartha creek. For once, Olivia was impervious to the sounds, sight and smells of a spectacular sunrise, but excited barking soon brought her out of her worries. A familiar, elderly figure, carrying a posy of flowers was marching towards her. Olivia groaned. Normally, she was happy to listen to Mrs Chynoweth's reminiscences, but today she did not feel up to small talk. And this old lady, who had run the village post office for the past sixty years could talk for Cornwall.

'Morning Olivia!' The cheery greeting cut through the fug of her receding headache. 'How are you feeling today, my bird?'

Unable to avoid or ignore her, Olivia slowed her pace to a gentle jog as they met on the path. While the older woman bent to fuss the dogs, Olivia used the time to recover her breath and take a sip of water from the bottle in her running

belt. She forced a smile onto her face that quickly faded when Mrs Chynoweth launched into the morning's news.

'Your blazing row with that piece of work from upcountry was all over the village by eight o'clock last night.' Mrs Chynoweth straightened up slowly. 'I couldn't believe what my grandson told me about the way Libby spoke to you, after all you've done since you got back. And to suggest you'd let George and Mollie down? What a cheek! I'm not surprised you shouted at her.'

A mixture of hurt and anger swirled around Olivia's stomach. She'd forgotten that super-fast broadband had nothing on the speed of gossip in these small villages, with everyone adding their own spin, opinions and little extras. She avoided the old lady's gaze by shaking out her arms and legs to keep her muscles warm and closed her eyes.

'Can't say I was surprised though.' Mrs Chynoweth stepped closer. 'She hasn't really grasped the way we do things down here. Always coming into my post office acting proper teasy and expecting the impossible for her fancy business deliveries. Or complaining when something she's ordered hasn't arrived yet. I've tried to explain that even Amazon won't guarantee next day delivery for our postcodes.' She paused for a moment and Olivia jumped in, anxious not to fan the flames.

'Libby's okay. It just takes some people time to adapt to the slower pace of life down here.' She spoke with feeling. 'And we both said things in the heat of the moment that we probably shouldn't. We'll sort it.' Olivia was now more embarrassed by being the subject of village gossip than she was by her outburst, and hastily changed the subject. 'You're out early this morning, Mrs C.'

Mrs Chynoweth gestured at the posy. 'Just going to put these on my Alan's grave. It's his birthday today. He'd have been eighty-five.'

'Really?' Olivia managed a smile. 'Mr C was always so lovely to me when I was little.' Her smile grew as she remembered. 'He'd slip a little white paper bag full of chewy sweets into my pocket whenever he could and say I need feeding up.'

She could feel Mrs Chynoweth's gaze looking her up and down. It was still as sharp as in the days of Olivia's childhood when she could spot a potential child shoplifter as soon as they walked through her door and fix them with a glare that quickly changed their mind. Olivia tuned back into the comforting thick Cornish accent rolling over her words.

'You still do. You've spent too many years in New York. All the women there are too thin if you ask me.'

The dogs were now sniffing in the hedgerow and Olivia whistled to them to hide her smile. Mrs Chynoweth nodded at the smaller of the two dogs at Olivia's heels

'Unlike young Zennor here. She's putting weight back on nicely, I'm glad to say. It was so sad to see her grieving after George died, I thought she'd fade away.'

Olivia bent and patted Zennor. 'It's all the steamed chicken, fish and rice I'm feeding her. She much prefers that to the kibble she was on before.'

'I bet she does! You're a kind girl, Olivia.' Mrs Chynoweth's face wrinkled into a smile. 'And it's true what they say . . . My Alan's been gone five years now and I still miss him every day. But time heals.'

Olivia remained silent. She wasn't so sure.

'It's only been eight weeks, Olivia. You'll heal too. Trust me.' The sharp eyes held hers for a moment. 'That nice Carol on the telly just said we'll be getting a storm today and by the look of those clouds coming in, she was right. There'll be a mist as thick as a hedge before long, you mark my words. And I must get back . . .'

'You'd better hurry then.' Olivia pulled out her water bottle for another sip. Last night's argument and wine were still leaving a nasty taste in her mouth.

Mrs Chynoweth took a few steps and then stopped and turned back, a worried frown on her plump face. 'I know you've been finding things a bit tough since you got back, but I just wanted you to know that Mollie would be proper proud of you.' She must have seen the tears pooling in Olivia's eyes as she hurried on. 'She always knew she could depend on you to do the right thing.'

Olivia gulped. 'She did?'

'Yes, my bird. Whenever I asked how she coped with you living in different places all over the world, she'd just smile and say that you were looking for your place in life and that you'd come back. And you always did. More often than some folk who only live in Plymouth. And now you're back where you're most needed.'

The old lady cocked her head on one side, her eyes bright. 'And don't you worry about what happened last night. No one who matters around here'll take any notice of what was said. A few loose words can't do that much harm, can they?' She waved her posy at Olivia. 'Look on the bright side, bird. At least no one died.'

Mrs Chynoweth was right. No one had died. But the reason she was so upset, Olivia admitted to herself as she ran on, was because Libby had questioned her integrity. And her timing had been terrible. Olivia needed all the members of the Goods Shed and the trustees to have faith in her ability to see the next phase of the Penbartha station renovation through. Yes, she was mad at Libby, but she was also angry with herself for losing her temper rather than calmly refuting all the accusations thrown at her. She picked up her pace subconsciously. She hadn't lost her temper like that for years and it couldn't have happened at a worse time.

By the time Olivia and the dogs reached the end of the lane, patchy sea mist was drifting in and curling itself around the trunks of the ancient trees and bushes lining the creek. They turned inland along the disused railway line that formed part of a network of well-maintained paths popular with walkers, cyclists and runners. As predicted by Mrs Chynoweth, the mist had begun to thicken into a dense fog, rolling silently in from the creek and covering the landscape in front of her, suffocating all the usual sounds of the distant water and the cries of the seabirds. Olivia briefly considered taking the path to her right, where the air was still clear, to head into the safety of the village. Alternatively, she could stay on the main track, which would lead her to the old Penbartha railway station buildings and the source of her most current worries. Her hesitation was only brief. She ran this way every morning, come rain or shine. Libby Walsh wasn't going to stop her doing what she loved. No matter what she said.

The fog swirled around Olivia's body and sucked at her face, getting heavier with every step. She ran on, caught in its cold, suffocating grip, through a silent and empty, alien landscape.

Then, suddenly, she was lost. The old station buildings she thought were in front of her had vanished. Even the huge trees that lined the track were invisible. And where were the dogs? Panic rising and heart pounding, Olivia stopped. She spun round and called out, her voice high-pitched and anxious. She felt a rush of relief as two cold, wet noses butted her legs and she bent to pat them, running her hands through their damp fur and talking calmly to them, as much to convince herself as them that everything was all right.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened up and peered ahead into the gloom. For a fanciful moment, she could imagine she had slipped through the mist into another time, back to the heyday of this once busy railway line when the trains ran through Penbartha to the larger stations at Falmouth and Truro. How good would time travel be, if she could have another attempt at yesterday? Boy, would she have done things differently . . .

Cursing Libby and herself again, she pulled up her hood and forced herself to press on along the walkway, aware only of the dogs' collar tags tinkling beside her. Before long, Olivia's eyes fastened with relief on a high yellow smudge of light in the distance as the first of the station buildings slowly loomed into view. Her relief plummeted when she realised the light was coming from the Signal Box. Of all the people to be up and about, did it have to be Mr I-know-it-all Trevithick? Thank God there were no trustee meetings scheduled for today so she wouldn't have to face him in person. She put her head down and ran on.

As expected, the renovated Goods Shed, which comprised the heart and hub of the Penbartha Station Heritage Trust,

was in total darkness as she approached. Few of the members made it into the workplace this early, but a light seeping from a window of the nearby Weighbridge Hut was most unusual at this time of day. The Studio, as its tenants officially called it, or the Hut, as it was more commonly known, was Libby Walsh's workplace.

The shadows created by the dim light from the Hut window mingled with the mist and hung heavily across the walkway as she got nearer. The dogs ran eagerly ahead to the main door, knowing Libby would have treats for them. Olivia called them away. She had no desire to attract Libby's attention and risk a repeat performance of last night's hostilities. Not until she'd worked out what to say.

Both dogs sniffed at the door and whined, heads on one side expectantly, tails wagging. Olivia's instinct was telling her to keep running and get home and out of her damp gear, but a part of her wondered whether Libby, too, had been unable to sleep and was regretting their argument. She stood for a moment, unsure. Then she knocked lightly on the door and listened. The dogs, bored with waiting and now thinking of their breakfast, whined more loudly.

'Just a minute, guys. You stay out here. Let me see what's going on.'

She tried the handle. The door was open. *Weird*. Knowing Libby would never leave her workplace unlocked, Olivia pushed her cold, wet hood down, nudged the door wider and stepped inside the studio. Her gaze swept the two tan leather sofas facing each other in front of an exposed brick wall full of photographs of successful events, weddings and parties. A vintage silver wine cooler sat on the low coffee table, alongside

empty bottles of wine and two cut glass wine goblets on a tray. Eventually her gaze reached the slouched figure of Libby, sitting at her desk by the far wall, beneath artfully festooned mood boards planning future events. She had fallen asleep in her chair, with her head resting on the chrome and glass desk. Olivia thought back to her own wine consumption the previous night and frowned. By the look of it, Libby had also drowned her anger in wine.

'And I'm the one who's the complete waste of space, am I?' Olivia muttered, as Libby's words sliced through her again. 'Which of us is functioning right now?' She turned away. 'Oh, forget it. I'll leave you to sober up.'

No longer caring whether her actions woke Libby, she strode across the studio to turn off the music playing in the background and gradually realised that apart from her own footsteps on the polished concrete floor, there were no sounds in the room. A thousand hot pinpricks began marching up Olivia's spine, through her neck and into her hair. Something was wrong.

She reached out an unsteady hand and touched Libby's back. There was no movement. No body warmth. No breath.

'Shit. Libby!?' Olivia whipped her hand away and jumped back.

Forcing herself nearer, she moved the swivel chair round with a squeak. For a moment she just gaped, short sharp breaths escaping through her mouth, looking away and back again, hoping the scene in front of her would change.

It didn't. Libby's silver jewel-encrusted letter opener, fashioned in the form of a stiletto dagger, was embedded up to its hilt in her ribs.