

The Village Green Affair

Rebecca Shaw

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The stranger was already sitting on the bench outside the Royal Oak when the first bright streaks of dawn appeared in the east. It was a typical early morning in that part of the country: a slight mist lying over the fields; cows already in their milking parlours; the cocks crowing; the early traffic booming along the bypass; and the birds singing their morning hymn. Malcolm the milkman, who didn't speak until he'd been delivering milk for at least two hours, gave him the briefest of nods as he left a full crate outside the pub door.

Beginning his schedule of opening up the Village Store, Tom propped the door wide open. Blinds up, lights on, newspapers heaved in from the door step, coffee machine started up for those who bought their breakfast in the Store before leaving for work in Culworth, and finally a general look around to make sure everything was in smart order for the day.

The stranger stretched his long legs out in front of him, locking his ankles together, and observed the ancient village waking up. He noted the geese by their pond beginning to take notice of the new day by flexing their wings. Yes, this *was* the place, he thought. The thatched roofs and the cottages crouching round the green would attract everyone, and the best part about it was there were no signs of the twenty-first century; not an aerial, not a lamppost, not a billboard, not a house number, not a telephone

line, nothing to mar the beautiful thirteenth-century ambience. Best of all there were the stocks. Believe it or believe it not, they were complete, top and bottom, and untouched by any modern repairs. In addition, the whole of Culworth was waiting just eight miles away to make it a success. The pub, not yet stirring, would provide the victuals. Very handy, that. The punters always needed food and drink.

In the man's inside pocket was information which would knock the villagers sideways if they tried to stop him. That was the advantage of being a lapsed historian. He knew exactly where to go to find old deeds and agreements; old, very old, information about the land. He slipped his hand into the inside pocket of his corduroy jacket and pulled out a copy of the fourteenth-century deed agreed by one of the first Templetons at the Big House. He smoothed his fingers over the old writing, relishing the antique spelling and the elaborate language, a smile curving his long mouth, illuminating his face.

A shadow flashed past him and a loud 'good morning' broke the peace. God! He was a big chap.

The stranger hailed him. 'Good morning to you. You're on the road early.'

The runner broke step, turned back and looked down at him.

The man on the bench was shaken by the runner's expression. It was ... he'd have liked to use the word 'heavenly' or even 'angelic' but that was ridiculous. Compassionate, perhaps, sounded more realistic. Whatever it was, it shook him.

'Good morning, sir. Nice village you have here, sir.'

'Indeed. Can't stop, though. Just starting my morning run.' The runner took in the beard, the dark brown corduroy trousers and jacket, the slightly frayed tweedy shirt, the ancient walking boots. 'I see you're not inclined to my way of greeting the day.' He smiled.

And again there was that strange feeling of otherworldliness. 'Not my scene.'

‘A visitor, are you?’

The tall man got a nod for his answer. He smiled again. ‘Well, must be on my way or I shan’t be back in time for breakfast.’ He nodded a goodbye and left, picking up his pace without effort.

The stranger watched him circle the green and continue on down ... now what was it? Ah! Yes, that was Shepherds Hill.

But someone else took his eye. She was opening the gate into the school playground. A well-rounded woman, short and energetic, wearing trainers, bright red cropped trousers and a sleeveless matching top, just right for the promise the weather held for the rest of the day. Caretaker, no doubt. He’d wait a while longer though, see what the day still had to bring.

There was a continuous stream of people entering the Village Store. First a trickle of shoppers collecting their newspapers and bits and pieces, carrying their takeaway coffees and rolls to their cars, then the mothers, after dropping their children off at the school – that made quite a rush – then a steady stream, and quite a collection of people who stayed to gossip outside on the pavement where a seat had been placed and the post box stood. The local bus stopped briefly right outside the Store, the driver clearly impatient to be off to the bright lights of Culworth. Now that was handy, a bus right where he needed it. And, yes, the Store was a big draw. He rubbed his hands in glee. Turnham Malpas was more active than he’d realized; all to the good, so far as he was concerned.

His long reverie was broken by the drawing back of the bolts on the pub door, allowing a short, thin chap to put out a sandwich board on the pavement announcing they were serving coffee. Like Tom in the Store, he propped open the door and, at the same time, took in the crate of milk. The man on the bench felt that was somehow symptomatic of the whole village, a certain openness. Coffee! Now that was an idea. Languidly he picked up the small haversack he’d dropped beside the bench and went in to the pub.

From the outside he could see that it was very old, and he almost dreaded going in because he feared being disillusioned

by finding the pub had been modernized inside. To his relief it hadn't. The huge inglenook fireplace was genuine, and the horse brasses, the warming pan and the farm implements on the old brick walls looked as though they'd grown there. Genuine through and through. Wonderful. Because of all that, he liked the publican even before he spoke to him; evidently he had good taste. He found a settle, took off his cap, pushed his fingers through his hair and called across, 'A coffee, landlord, if you please.'

While he waited he ran his hand along the gleaming well-worn table in front of the settle, feeling, as much as seeing, the history which felt to ooze from every joint. It shone smooth with years and years of polishing. He ran his fingers along the curved arm of the settle several times and fingered the small bowl of flowers, which proved to be genuine. Miraculously, a tray appeared, tastefully laid with a small silver coffee pot, silver cream jug and sugar basin, and a paper napkin.

Dicky discreetly left a bill with the tray, saying, 'Enjoy,' before he made to disappear.

'Landlord! I don't suppose you have a fresh croissant to go with this?'

'Name's Dicky, and yes we have. New round here?'

'I am.'

'Won't be two minutes.'

The coffee was gloriously welcome and the croissant, when it came, was so fresh it might have been served in a pavement café on the Champs-Élysées. Utterly wonderful.

The stranger picked up a menu from the table. It was a clear attempt to wheedle you from the bar into the small restaurant, signposted by an arrow and the name Georgie's Restaurant fastened to a low-lying beam above the bar. He began to smile. The licensed trade was obviously very much alert to modern day needs. No fly-blown pork pies on a doily for them, nor yesterday's egg and cress sandwiches under a plastic dome. He thought he might try lunch there. Just a chance to meet people, see what

made them tick before he launched this new project. His spirits rose.

Just then the outside door burst open and a woman entered backwards, staggering under the weight of a large cardboard box.

‘It’s me, Dicky,’ she shouted. ‘Brought you the flyers for the Scout jumble sale, Neville brought them home last night.’

Then she let the door slam shut after her, and, as she turned round, he saw her full face. He was stunned, staggered almost, by what appeared to him to be her startling good looks. She wasn’t classically beautiful, but wholesome and, he sensed, spirited. This was the first time since... Marie... he’d felt so enthralled by a woman. He gave no outward sign of his shock, though unexpectedly, his heart bounded, but she, on the other hand, didn’t seem to notice he was there.

Dicky appeared through the door that led into the back. He took the box from her. ‘Thanks, Liz. I was coming across for them later, once I’d set up. Thank Neville for me, greatly appreciated.’

‘Not at all, it’s a pleasure.’ The Liz person waved cheerily. ‘Au revoir! Must get back to the nursery. Be seeing you!’ She left at speed.

The stranger, quietly eating his croissant and drinking his excellent coffee, was left alone to still his racing heart.

Liz Neal sprinted back to the church hall to begin story-time. She loved this part of the morning, when the children gathered round her and her assistant Angie Turner put out the mid-morning snacks for them all. Running the playgroup might not be the occupation thought appropriate for the smart wife of the premier chartered accountant in Culworth, but she’d given up worrying herself about that. She loved doing it, and it was the nearest she would ever get to being qualified at anything because the years had gone by and Liz hadn’t bothered herself about a career when she was growing up. Her mother had said, ‘An attractive girl like you will have a husband and a nice house and a family. You don’t need to train for

a career.’ So she hadn’t, and at nineteen she’d met Neville Neal, an ambitious, self-obsessed newly qualified accountant. Her parents had lent them the money for him to set up his own business and they’d never looked back. Well, at least Neville had never looked back, but occasionally Liz did and wished . . . oh, how she wished.

She picked up the story of Goldilocks from the book corner because the children knew it and loved the lines they could repeat without her help, and adored the illustrations.

“‘Who’s sleeping in my bed,’ said Baby Bear?’ they all bawled.

By the time the story was finished the children were ready for their milk and fruit, and Liz and Angie for their coffee.

Angie slurped a good mouthful from her mug before she spoke. ‘I know some of them can be naughty just like my twins were – are – full of energy from morning to night, but you can’t help but love ’em, can yer?’

‘No. Have you thought any more about that course I want you to go on?’

‘Is that kind of thing for me? Really, I mean . . . they’ll all be so clever.’

Liz raised a disbelieving eyebrow. ‘And you’re not?’

Angie looked embarrassed. ‘Well, you know I never did well at school, not ever. I’d make a fool of myself.’

‘Angie Turner! You would not. You took to this job brilliantly. Within a week you were making constructive suggestions. Remember? Your finger right on the pulse. So I’m putting you forward.’ She glanced round the children to check that they were happy just in time to see one of the girls pour all her milk over Toby.

‘Sara! What are you thinking of? Toby has his own milk, he doesn’t need yours.’ Angie had already pulled a clean shirt from the ‘spares box’ and was stripping off Toby’s soaking shirt.

‘See what I mean?’ said Liz. ‘I’m definitely putting your name down. The very best thing of all is that you never lose your temper.’

Angie grinned at her. 'All right then, I'll give it a turn.' Secretly she was delighted by Liz's conviction that she would do well.

Liz smiled her delight at Angie's decision. 'Well, there we are. That's good. You see, I might change my mind and decide to leave the nursery, and then you could step into my shoes.'

'Me? In charge? I don't think so.'

'You've got to have some belief in yourself. Where were you when self-worth was given out? Right at the back of the queue, I guess. Well, forget it, now's the time to move forward. Children! Toilets and then out to play. Off you go. Come along.'

'I'll clear up.'

Liz shook her head. 'No, I'll clear up, you go and supervise them.'

While she rinsed the plates, threw the paper cups into the bin and wiped the tables, Liz remembered that Neville, unusually, would be home for lunch. Neville. If she could have seen her own face Liz would have been horrified. The mention of her husband's name had made her look to have sucked hard on a lemon. Her lovely brown eyes had gone hard, her sweet mouth painfully twisted and her nose wrinkled with disgust. In two weeks it would be their silver wedding anniversary, and the huge affair Neville had made of it was embarrassing. A quiet get-together at the George with close friends would have been enough for her, but no, seventy guests, many she didn't even know, a small band for dancing, a bar, gifts for every one, a table to display their own gifts. Liz shuddered ... And there was nothing at all to tempt Hugh and Guy to attend, for there were no invitations to a few of their twenty-something friends to make it more enjoyable for them.

'No, no, we don't want your friends there being noisy and ridiculous,' Neville had said.

Hugh had protested, 'But, Dad, our friends aren't like that. OK, they like a drink, but they wouldn't be so thoughtless as to get drunk at an occasion like a silver wedding anniversary. Well, I'm sorry, I shan't be there.' And he'd left the dining table in a hurry.

Guy had said exactly the same, and he too had left and they'd heard the front door slam as the two of them departed for the flat they shared in Culworth. So most of the pleasure of the party was gone for Liz. In fact, Neville would have baulked at the idea of Peter and Caroline being invited had it not been for the fact that Peter was the Rector and Neville felt the need to keep a foot in the door of heaven.

Wryly Liz decided that was because of his nefarious dealings with the town councillors, especially those on the planning committee. She knew for a fact that brown paper envelopes passed in a one-way stream from Neville to a weasel called Kevin who worked in the planning office and always had his ear close to the ground and not just about planning. No doubt Kevin would have ingratiated himself on to the guest list, a list Neville was in charge of and she had never seen.

Angie shouted from the church hall door, 'We're ready to come in. OK?'

'Yes. Everything's ready.'

Liz repeated exactly those words to Neville when she'd got the lunch ready later on.

'Everything's ready,' she'd said, as Neville roared in from some meeting or other and immediately disappeared, giving Liz a bird-like peck on her cheek as he rushed by.

'Just got this to finish, won't be long.'

But he was twenty minutes long. He then bolted down his sandwiches and salad, grabbed his briefcase, waved aside the fresh cheese scones she'd baked between leaving nursery and him coming home, and away he went without exchanging a pleasant word with her. It would be the same that evening; a draught of air from the front door as Neville sped into the house. Later, after working in his study all evening, he'd have a slow walk by floodlight round his meticulous garden making notes of things to remind the gardener about, a whiskey in the sitting room with Liz and then bed.

Their first early years, filled as they were by the arrival so close

together of their two boys, had been happy enough, but gradually, as the boys grew, he'd killed by neglect any passion she might have had for him, for there wasn't room in his life for close contact of the sexual kind, not even at Christmas. Liz blamed herself; she'd grown bored with his passion by numbers. She'd once overheard someone in the village call him a 'cold fish', and they were absolutely right, he was.

She'd cleared up, opened the post that had come after she'd left for the nursery that morning and wondered what to do next.

The phone rang. 'Caroline here, Liz. I'm home early. Cup of tea?'

'Yes, please.'

'In the garden? Bring a cardy.'

'Lovely. I'll be two minutes.'

The Rectory door stood open so she pushed the door wider and called out, 'It's me.' Then she walked down the hall into Caroline's kitchen and immediately felt warmed and caressed by it. It always had that effect on her, and heaven knows she'd come into this kitchen often enough over the last fourteen years. And there was Caroline the creator of this kitchen and its atmosphere, putting tea things on a tray. The back door was already open, beckoning her out into Caroline's beautiful garden. When they'd first moved in, the garden had been nothing more than hard, rock-like dry soil decorated with stones and a few parched bushes but now it was a triumphantly luxurious country garden, which, summer and winter, never failed to thrill her. At the back of her mind Liz compared it with their own garden at Glebe House, which was regimented, stark, and stylish. No leaf was out of place, no bush was allowed to fling itself over the edge of a wall, whereas Caroline's garden seemed to wallow in freedom.

'Isn't it a lovely day for late April?'

'Liz! Hi! Bring the biscuits.' Caroline led the way into the garden, which, although she admitted it to no one, was her pride and joy.

‘I know I ask this each time I see you, but how about the twins? How are they progressing? I saw Alex out the other day helping collect for the Scout jumble sale.’

‘Truth to tell, they are both doing very well indeed. No problems, so far as we can tell. Beth hasn’t had a nightmare for weeks and weeks, and as for Alex, he’s fine. He reminds me from time to time how much Beth needs reassurance and what he calls “looking after”.’

‘You never say *why* she needs looking after. What does he mean?’ Liz asked but didn’t get an answer. She knew she wouldn’t but still she asked. They told each other everything, and it was so unlike Caroline to evade the truth.

Caroline froze for a moment, then relaxed and asked Liz if she needed the sugar. When Liz shook her head Caroline grinned, ‘You’re still dieting then.’

Liz nodded and then asked, ‘Well?’

‘After that business with Andy Moorhouse, I mean.’ Caroline hated lying but she had to; no one must know the real reason for their problems. What had happened out in Africa had almost been the end of the twins. She put Liz’s cup of tea in front of her and asked, ‘How’s Neville? I haven’t seen him for days.’

‘As right as he ever is.’

‘That doesn’t sound any too happy.’

As Liz put down her cup it rattled slightly in the saucer, and Caroline raised an eyebrow.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Do I ever complain about Neville?’

‘Not in my hearing you don’t.’

‘Well, I am now. I need to tell someone.’

‘About how unhappy you are?’

‘You get first prize for being so perceptive. Yes, about how unhappy I am. We married when I was only nineteen, all stars in my eyes and as naive as it was possible to be. Hugh and Guy coming so close together definitely sharpened me up. I was on a high

and Neville at least noticed I existed then. But there's no need for mothering now they're grown up, and I haven't got Neville any more, either. I've fallen into a great void.' Liz got out a tissue and blew her nose.

Caroline reached across the table and patted her hand in sympathy.

'You see, now the twins are so much better you've got doctoring to go back to, and you feel valued outside your home. I've nothing.' Tears welled in her eyes and she gave a small apologetic smile. 'Sorry for being so feeble. I managed to squeeze in making some cheese scones between getting home from nursery and Neville coming in for lunch, but he just waved them aside, as if they were of no consequence, and rushed out of the door. I was so upset. How pathetic can you get?'

'I'd no idea ... you always seem so confident and full of verve ... so *happy*.'

'I'm going to confide in you now, not because you're the Rector's wife, but because we've been friends for so long ...' Liz looked up. 'We never sleep together, not any more.'

Caroline, as the Rector's wife, was the target for more intimate disclosures than you could shake a stick at, but this, from someone who appeared to her to be a sophisticated, up-to-the-minute woman, came as a shock. She was struck dumb, and Liz didn't know what to do or where to look.

Finally Caroline said, 'Well, maybe that's right for you. Nowadays, unless one is rampaging round the bedroom two or three times a night one gets the idea that one's marriage has failed miserably. But it's not like that, not really. Every night or twice a week suits some people, whereas twice a month is perfectly satisfactory for others.'

'It's not even once a year.'

'I see. That is a bit ... well ... miserable.'

Liz began to feel foolish. She should never have said a word about it. After all, Caroline had never suspected anything was

wrong with her. Which there wasn't, not really. But he was so cold, and even more self-obsessed than when they married. How she'd admired that early ruthless ambition of his, but in truth it was that very ambition which had killed their marriage. If someone didn't match up to his expectations, he dismissed them as worthless and of no use to him in his meteoric rise to ... what? Wealth? Position? Adoration? Yes, he loved adoration, and she, his wife, no longer adored him. In fact, in some ways, she despised him.

'Ummm? Sorry, I didn't catch what you said.'

Caroline repeated her piece of advice. 'I said, a holiday, that's what you need, on your own. With space to think, to refresh mind and body. How about it?'

'But how would Neville manage on his own? He has difficulty finding the kettle.'

Caroline burst out laughing. 'Finding the kettle? You've been too thoughtful over the years, Liz. Much too kind.'

From their spot in the garden they could hear movement in the kitchen.

Alarmed someone might have overheard their conversation, Liz whispered, 'Is that Dottie? I thought we were on our own otherwise I wouldn't have—'

Peter appeared in the doorway. 'Hello, you two. Is there any more tea in the pot?'

'You're back! Sorry, darling, we've drunk it all. Shall I ...?'

Caroline made to get up.

'Stay where you are. I'll make a pot and drink it in my study. I've got notes to make.'

'OK. Good meeting?'

'If a quarter of an hour discussing the merits of horse manure for the Dean's recent venture into rhubarb growing and the best time of year to apply it, has anything at all to do with applying to the lottery fund for money for the Abbey bells, then yes.' Peter stood quite still for a moment, smiling and admiring Liz and Caroline sitting there in the sun in their bright frocks.

Liz sat there admiring *him*. Being 6ft 5in he'd had to step out of the doorway onto the garden path in order to stand upright and, with the sun catching his strawberry-blond hair and emphasizing the extraordinary blue of his eyes, she didn't think there was anyone more gorgeous than Peter Harris, Rector of this parish. Then she saw the loving expression on his face when he looked at Caroline, and almost choked; the glow of deep love between them seared her heart. It was all too much. Much too much, and she felt sick with dissatisfaction at her particular plight. If Neville looked at her like that *for one single moment* she'd be satisfied. Liz daren't look at Caroline because if she did she'd have to leap up, rush home and break down in tears. The Harrises' pleasure in each other, compared with the stark emptiness of her life at the moment, was unbearable.

Peter turned to go inside and for a while the only sound was of birds twittering in the beech hedge along the bottom of the garden. Eventually Caroline cleared her throat and said, 'We'll talk about this another time, eh?'

Liz said, 'Yes. Yes, of course. Sorry for burdening you with it all. Just nonsense really. Well, no, it isn't. It's very real. I've tried the candlelight supper and the wine and the sexy nightdress – but it makes no impact at all. I'm appalled, *appalled* I've sunk to such ridiculous levels. It's pathetic. I realize we've completely and absolutely lost contact. Just forget it.' Liz got to her feet. 'Must go. Remember how lucky you are, you know.' She nodded towards the house. And left.

Caroline heard Liz call out to Peter to say she was leaving and at the same time heard the kettle reach boiling point. That was clearly how Liz felt – close to boiling over, she thought, and that was a dangerous place for a wife to be.

Within a couple of hours of leaving the Rectory, Liz drove into Culworth to meet Neville for a drink. It was something she'd rarely done before but somehow she thought that doing the unexpected

might revive something. Might shock him into looking at her properly, instead of just checking if she reached his standards of what was appropriate for a leading accountant's wife. Why he imagined he should be *considered* a leading accountant she couldn't imagine; after all, Culworth was a minor country town, not in any way the level of a leading accountant in the City of London. Sad really, she thought.

Having parked her car, she marched along the High Street and into the glossy offices of Neville G. H. Neal and Company Chartered Accountants.

'Good evening, Penny,' she said to the girl on reception. 'Mr Neal available?'

'May I ask who's enquiring?'

Liz, in her present mood, was determined not to tolerate this rudeness. 'Well, Penny, it's his wife, Liz Neal. You and I have met on several occasions. We talked for quite some time at Christmas at the staff party, remember, and we met by chance in the Abbey coffee shop one Saturday morning not long ago, and we talked when I collected Mr Neal after he'd had that horrific time at the dentist and didn't feel able to drive himself home.'

'Oh! Yes, of course. Sorry.' She didn't bother to check the diary, however, just said offhandedly, 'He's busy.'

'With a client?'

'No, but he's too busy to see anyone.'

'He'll see me.'

Penny got to her feet in haste. 'It's more than my life's worth if I let ...' But Liz was already heading for Neville's office. She tapped lightly on his door and went in without waiting for a reply. He was leaning back in his chair, his feet propped up on the edge of his desk reading a sheaf of papers. 'I did say no ... Liz! What on earth ...?' He sat up straight, putting his feet on the floor at the same time. 'Is there something the matter?'

'Has it come to such a desperate state of affairs that my coming to the office creates waves?'

‘No, no, it’s just that you don’t usually—’

‘Time I did something surprising then, Neville.’

His ice blue eyes widened, his narrow nose appeared more accusative than usual, and his voice was thin with a hint of a whine to it. ‘You’ve chosen a difficult time. I’ve got these figures to run through for tomorrow. What have you come for?’

‘To have a drink with you.’

‘Oh! I see. Why?’

‘I might even step right outside my box and suggest a meal out.’

‘A meal out! Well, if you wait till I’ve finished—’

‘No, Neville, I won’t wait. I won’t. This time you’re putting me first. Put those papers in your briefcase now – you can read them when we get home.’

Neville hesitated. This really wasn’t on. He checked the solid silver clock on his desk. It was ten minutes before the office would close and he was never seen leaving so early. Bad example, he always thought for the owner to be witnessed leaving before time. Begrudgingly he muttered, ‘Let’s wait till half past then. I never leave early.’

Liz flung her arms wide. ‘Oh, my God! The world’s come to an end!’ She went round his desk, reached a hand out and snatched the papers he held, then stuffed them into the briefcase standing at the side of his chair.

‘There we are, that wasn’t difficult. Your spectacles, let’s have them.’ She pulled them from his face before he had a chance to do it for himself, forced open his case, put them in and snapped it shut, almost trapping her fingers. ‘Now, off we go. I quite fancy that new bar and restaurant up the Headrow.’

Neville watched her set off for the door with his briefcase and didn’t know what to do. No glasses, no figures – there was no point in staying on. Furious anger welled up inside him. He’d been press-ganged, commandeered, taken prisoner almost and, most importantly, he’d lost control of his life. He set great store by his strong control.

Liz called out, 'I've kidnapped your boss, Penny. Goodnight. Make sure everything's locked up when you go.'

Neville followed her, his face unfathomable, his eyes unwilling to meet Penny's. Instead they slid away from her and focused on Liz, whom at that moment he hated more than anything in the whole world for putting him in this intolerable position.

Once they were outside he said through gritted teeth, 'Give me my briefcase.'

'No.' Liz tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and steered him up towards the Headrow.

This was the modern bit of the Culworth shopping area, a road unfamiliar to Neville because he still shopped where he'd always shopped – in the traditional old part. Not only was he furious he was also uncomfortable, because he didn't recognize where he was.

'I won't go another step. I'm not moving, Liz.'

'If you want to look a fool being dragged along by your wife then be my guest.'

Making an exhibition of himself didn't fit with being an important figure in the community, so he followed Liz. The area was full of bars and just busy enough to make it feel full of buzz. When they sat down at a table in a spanking new bar they were handed a vast menu with all the drinks listed plus the food for later.

'Now,' said Liz, smiling sweetly, 'isn't this pleasant?'

Neville, leaning towards her, snarled, 'Have you bloody taken leave of your senses? You're making me look a fool.'

She ignored him. 'A spritzer. What would you like? A whiskey as usual?'

'Do you listen to a thing I say?'

'All the time, Neville, all the time. It's a whiskey, then, is it?'

'Double.'

'Steady, now. Stepping out of your square like this could be dangerous. However, a double whiskey it is.'

Liz saw someone she knew and twinkled her fingers at them, a gesture she knew Neville hated.

‘As if being in this place at this time in the evening isn’t bad enough, do you also have to draw attention to yourself? I am so angry I can barely speak.’

Liz patted his knee and said gently, ‘Neville, she’s just someone I know. She runs a nursery the other side of Culworth. What’s the harm in me acknowledging her? It’s an exceptionally pleasant spring evening, your glamorous wife is beside you, and all you have to do is enjoy yourself.’

‘I haven’t time to enjoy myself.’

‘I’ve made you time to enjoy yourself. Get your whiskey down you and, as Dicky would say, “Enjoy!” Life’s too short.’

‘Now I know you’ve gone raving mad. This is not me. I don’t sit in bars, especially bright, shiny bars like this, with you quoting Dicky Tutt at me. He’s a brainless fool who mistakenly imagines he’s a stand-up comic. Dicky Tutt indeed.’

‘Dicky does the human race more good in one week than most people do in a year.’

‘With the Scouts you mean?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘And where’s that going to get him in this world? I can tell you – absolutely nowhere. He’ll never be rich.’ Neville was at his most sneering.

Liz wondered how it had happened that he could be so bitter. ‘It won’t bring him wealth, that’s for certain, but he’s well loved and that counts for a lot. Do *you* feel well loved?’

Neville drank his whiskey right to the bottom of the glass. ‘Of course I am,’ he muttered. ‘You love me, anyway. Don’t talk about such things in public; it’s embarrassing.’

As it sometimes can happen in a busy place, a sudden silence fell just as Liz said, ‘Well, to be honest, I don’t feel I love you *right now*.’

A woman spluttered with laughter, and Neville thought he

heard another say, 'Not surprising!' He was so blinded by anger at the humiliation of it all that he banged his fist on the table with such force that Liz leapt from her chair. She knocked over her spritzer, which spilled across the table, and Neville narrowly missed a stream of it running off the table and down his trousers. He jumped up, muttered some expletive, which was completely out of character, and stormed out of the bar.

Liz paid their bill but, by the time she was outside on the pavement, Neville had disappeared.

Standing outside and wondering what she should do next, Liz remembered his briefcase. Had he taken it with him? She couldn't remember. Should she get it for him, or cause him even more aggravation by making him have to come to collect it tomorrow?

A waiter stood in front of her holding it aloft. 'Your ... husband's, madam?'

'Thank you, thank you very much.'

He was already home when she got there, but that was because she'd stopped at a fish and chip shop and sat eating in the car, feeling sorry for herself and wondering if she really wanted to be in the explosive situation that she'd deliberately created.