

Whispers in the Village

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Published by Orion

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Chapter 1

So, now they'd all got over saying *au revoir* to Peter, Caroline and the twins, and the rectory had stood empty and abandoned for a week, there were lights on once more. Some of the villagers had caught a glimpse now and then of her emptying the van she'd hired to transport her belongings and they had introduced themselves, but tonight everyone was going to a 'get-to-know-you' party in the church hall.

It had been a serious shock when they found out their locum rector was a woman. A *woman*! They'd narrowly escaped having their own railway station, tolerated the coming of the wireless, then the telephone poles and TV, they'd embraced computers, mobile phones – and a blessed nuisance they were on the Saturday shopping bus – and digital this and DVD that, but a woman rector! This was one step too far.

'She'll have to be blinking good to replace Peter,' someone could be overheard saying in the pub, at the table nearest the bar.

But then someone else added, 'No one living could replace Peter. He was one in a million. And so was Caroline.'

Sylvia Biggs dabbed at her eyes and sniffed loudly. 'Well, there's one thing certain: I shall miss them. I've worked at the rectory since the twins first came home from the

hospital; they're like my own grandchildren, and I'm worried to death. All that heat and them nasty crawly things. They could catch anything in a blasted hot place like Africa.'

'They'll be all right, kids is resilient.' Willie patted her arm comfortingly. 'Don't fret yourself.'

'They're not any old kids, they're *children*, Willie, *my children*, and very sensitive. I shan't need to make their favourite for twelve whole months.' Sylvia dabbed her eyes again.

'What is their favourite?'

'Pecan pie now. It used to be Farmhouse Delight and then it was Crunchie.'

'Well, make it for me instead if things get desperate.' By now Willie had an arm around her shoulder, because he could feel his Sylvia was about to cry. 'Now, come on, love, there's worse things at sea.'

'Not much. When they come back they'll have grown, and they won't be mine any more.'

'Of course they will. I bet they'll be asking for pecan pie as they walk in the door.'

'As for missing the rector and Doctor Harris . . . ' Sylvia gulped. 'It doesn't bear thinking about.'

Vera Wright, squeezed on the settle between her Don and Sylvia, said, 'Still, you'll be able to keep an eye on things, won't you, while they're away? Dust Doctor Harris's ornaments and such?'

Sylvia shook her head. 'Says she couldn't dream of having someone to clean when she's perfectly capable of doing it herself. So, I'm out of a job.'

'You'll miss the money.'

Sylvia drew herself up tall. 'Actually it's not the money I'm missing, it's them. And dusting the flatback Staffordshire pottery Doctor Harris collects. Lovely, it is. We wash 'em

together, her and me. They won't get that kind of attention, not now.'

'Never mind, you can always give 'em a good do when they get back. Well, if we're to get something to eat at this get-to-know-you party, we'd better be off.' Vera picked up her bag and said to Don, 'Come on, love.' Don stood up, then forgot why he had and sat down again. 'Don, we're off to the party. Get up.'

'Yes, that's right.' The two of them, thinking Willie and Sylvia were following them, set off for the door.

But Sylvia remained there, staring into space. Willie began to worry; she'd sat staring into space far too often these last few days.

'We've got to face it, love, they've gone, but if we keep busy, they'll be back before we know it. It's only for a year and, like you said yourself, all four of them need a complete change. Young Alex and Beth especially. They seemed to grow up overnight after—'

Sylvia turned on him, eyes blazing and fists clenched. 'Don't mention *her* name in my presence. She might have given birth to them, but she isn't and never will be their mother. She needed horse-whipping, turning up like she did to meet the twins. It upset Doctor Harris something terrible. It's all because of her they left and this party's on tonight. Damn her. And damn and blast this Anna whatever-she's-called. If you think I'm going to speak to her you've another think coming, because I'm not.'

'Now see here, my Sylvia, it's not her fault she's been sent to look after us all. She didn't ask to, she was *sent* from the Abbey, so you've to put a good face on it and smile. Maybe she's dreading this evening as much as you.'

Sylvia didn't answer. Her hurt was far too deep to speak about. No one, not even Willie, knew how crushingly sad

she felt. When your whole world has crashed about your ears, when you feel as though you've a raw, open wound inside yourself, it's hard to carry on as though your world is hunky-dory. She got to her feet and led the way out, waving here and there to friends, hoping none of them could see the gaping hole inside her.

The church hall was agog when she and Willie arrived. The new rector was standing at the door greeting everyone, with Sir Ralph at the side of her, introducing them all. So there was to be no avoiding her.

'The rector and I've already met, Sir Ralph.' There was a finality in Sylvia's voice, which left nothing for anyone else to say.

Ralph came to the rescue. 'Of course you must have. You know, Anna, the rectory has relied on Sylvia since the twins first came home from the hospital. She was Caroline's right-hand woman, weren't you, Sylvia?'

'I was. And proud to be, too.'

Anna's grip on Sylvia's hand was firm, which instantly gave the impression she was a force to be reckoned with. 'Delighted to see you again, Sylvia. And you, Willie.'

Willie shook hands. 'You've a good memory for names.'

'One needs it in this game.'

Willie was captivated by Anna's green eyes; they looked so directly at him, giving the clear-cut impression she had nothing to hide. He liked that. Her dark hair and flawless complexion were very attractive, though she wasn't beautiful at all. Then she really smiled at him and in a split second had won him over.

'There's tea and refreshments in the small hall, and they look delicious. Help yourselves.'

'Thank you, we will. We both of us is looking forward to enjoying your time with us. See you soon.' Willie shook

hands with her again and turned to allow Sylvia to do the same, but she'd already left his side and was heading for the refreshments. As he went after her he thought he'd better play his cards close to his chest. He wouldn't tell her how wholesomely good the new rector appeared to be to him.

Anna Sanderson ran a finger around her clerical collar as though it felt tight. 'I'm afraid Sylvia is upset about me. But I can't help it. I'm one of those people who needs their own space to retreat to, and Sylvia cleaning for me wouldn't help to make the rectory my own.'

'Don't worry, please. A year off won't harm.'

'There'd always be comparisons, you know.'

'Of course.' Ralph introduced the people who'd just arrived. 'This is Sir Ronald and Lady Bissett.'

Anna only just stopped herself from commenting on Lady Bissett's outfit. It was startling to say the least; a leopard-skin fur coat (Was it real?), leopard-patterned dress (more suitable for a cocktail party), and a pair of faux leopard-skin shoes, which Anna was sure she'd last seen on TV at one of the party conferences.

'Delighted to meet you, Lady Bissett, and you, Sir Ronald. So pleased you could come.'

Sheila Bissett gushed her greetings. 'We wouldn't have missed it for the world, so looked forward to meeting you. A pleasure to see a lady in a clerical collar. I'm all for it.' She glanced sideways at Ron and saw the sickly grin on his face. Well, really!

Ron said, holding Anna's hand for longer than was necessary, 'Pleased to meet you I'm sure.' And when he let go of her hand he stood there, speechless, looking an idiot.

'Everyone calls me Sheila and I'd be pleased if you did the same.' She nudged Ron into action. 'We'll head for the

refreshments, if you don't mind. Don't want to hold up the queue.' Ron trudged after her, noting from her back view that she was furious with him.

While they stood queuing for the gateaux and coffee, Sheila said, 'Well?'

'What?'

'What do you think of her?'

'Seems OK to me.'

'There was no need to gawk. Made yourself look a right fool, you did. I knew you were impressed, but I think she's very ordinary. Not a patch on Peter for charisma.' She dwelt silently on Peter's good looks and magnetism, and remembered the time when her heart had gone head over heels as he'd held her hand while appealing to her better nature. He'd truly brought out the best in her. Well, this Anna wouldn't be bringing out the best in her, because she wouldn't give her the chance. Not likely. 'She'll have to earn her Brownie points as far as I'm concerned. But at least her eyes are not as perceptive as Peter's. He knew my every thought, I'm sure.'

Ron said, 'Look, there's Don.'

'So there is. Vera's determined to make it look as though everything's all right, but it isn't. How he drives that car I don't know, I'm sure it's illegal, him as he is.'

'Wonder he survived, falling from that height.'

'You're right there. I feel sorry for Vera; she's not quite in our class but she means well. For heaven's sake, shove up, Ron, you're holding the queue up. And you've chosen the creamiest, richest cake on the table. Will you never learn sense? No wonder your gut is like it is.'

Ron ignored her bullying as he always did. It was no good her pretending the two of them were from the higher echelons. He was a pragmatist and knew he only had his title

because it was the easiest way to get rid of him from his union, 'for services rendered, thirty years a union man, a champion of the underdog, always the peacemaker, his valued contributions . . . ' And so it went on. He knew exactly where he stood, very close to the bottom of the pile, but if it pleased Sheila to think otherwise then why not let her? Kept her off his back. He glanced at her and decided she wasn't such a bad old thing, although she hardly ever got her clothes right.

Relieved, Ron spotted his son-in-law. 'Gilbert!' Now here was someone who called a spade a spade and never pretended anything else. 'Gilbert!' He waved furiously and at last Gilbert saw them. He strode across, another one who didn't know how to dress. Here was he, Ron, in his countryman's ginger tweed suit, itched to death by the roughness of it, and strangled by his collar and tie, all worn to please Sheila. But Gilbert pleased himself and he was dressed casually as he always was except on Sundays when he wore his choirmaster's outfit. Tonight it was a brick-red shirt, open almost to his navel, with a pair of black cord trousers, fitting where they touched and his everyday open sandals without socks. But he had presence, had Gilbert.

Holding his cup and saucer and the plate well away from his mother-in-law, he kissed her on both cheeks and would have hugged her if he could.

'Mother-in-law, lovely to see you! How's things?'

'Fine. How's Louise? She's not with you?'

'No. Young Gilbert has a temperature. Nothing serious, but she didn't want the babysitter having to cope.'

'She doesn't get out enough.'

'I know but it is difficult with five children so young.'

'Mmm. I don't know where she gets it from.'

'What?'

‘Having all these children. All Ron and I managed was two, with difficulty, and that felt like two too many.’

‘In that case, I won’t tell you our news.’ Gilbert’s dark eyes shone with amusement.

She’d seen that look on his face before and had grown to dread it. Sheila’s hand trembled, her coffee threatened to spill over. Her throat felt to close up. All she could find to say was, ‘Not again.’

Gilbert nodded.

‘But that’ll be six.’

Smiling, Gilbert counted on his fingers. ‘Yes. It will. It’ll be six and then we’re stopping.’

Sheila was reduced to silence. She was damned if she was going to be enthusiastic about it. That’d be six children and the eldest only just seven. It was disgusting. Ron, who liked Gilbert and was deeply envious of his ability to father beautiful children in such rapid succession, clapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘Wonderful news! Wonderful! You make me very proud.’

‘Louise is thrilled to bits.’

Ron answered, ‘I’m sure she is. You’ve worked miracles with that daughter of ours. Miracles. She’s a different woman since she met you.’

‘Thanks.’ Gilbert bowed slightly in acknowledgement of Ron’s praise, adding, ‘And you, Sheila, how do you feel?’

‘How do I feel? You ask me that? Three was quite enough, but six! It’s indecent of you. Absolutely disgusting! You’re worse than rabbits.’

Taken aback by the comparison Gilbert replied with a sharp edge to his voice, ‘I don’t care a damn what people think and neither does Louise.’

Sheila, speaking before she had engaged her mind, almost shouted, ‘She used to care what people thought before you

charmed her into your bed. Well, there's one thing for certain: I shan't be rushing to tell people, and I shan't know where to look when they all find out. They'll be sniggering, all of them, behind our backs. It's so embarrassing.' Sheila downed the rest of her coffee, slapped the cup and the remains of her gateaux on a table, and stalked off, avoiding people's eyes in case they'd heard her outburst.

Ron remarked, 'She'll get over it. I'm pleased, but I really think six is enough, if only from the money point of view. They all have to be fed and clothed, you know.'

'I agree. We just love our family life. Love it. I was an only one and very, very, lonely, and when I see our boys playing together I realize what I missed. Being one of a large family rounds off the corners, makes one more able to fit in, if you know what I mean. Louise keeps everything so well organized, but then she always has been good at organization, hasn't she? What do you think to our new rector?'

Ron's eyes swivelled round the room, searching for Anna and found her standing in the doorway to the large hall, deep in conversation with Lady Templeton. Well, Muriel, as they all knew her. No edge to Muriel but sometimes she innocently spoke the truth when it wasn't altogether the moment to do so, but what she said, was without any malice. From the look on Anna's face he thought she might be doing that very thing right now.

'... You see, my dear, and I say this with trepidation but it has to be said, Peter was an angel sent from heaven. Shock waves went through the village when we heard they were going to Africa. We were all devastated. So all I'm saying is tread carefully; they're all very touchy about him and guard very jealously all the things he did for us when he came. And Caroline and the twins. Very touchy.'

'From what I've heard, he isn't the angel everyone might think he is.'

'I beg your pardon!'

'Well, is he?'

Eyes wide with surprise, Muriel didn't have to think even for a moment. 'Yes, he is. I can't fault him on anything at all.'

'At the Abbey they always spoke of him as the Turnham Malpas Casanova.'

'Casanova!' Muriel was shocked to the core. 'He was no such thing! He couldn't help being handsome and attractive; if anyone did the running it certainly wasn't him.'

'The Village Show secretary? The sports organizer up at the Big House? They all laughed about him and his harem.'

Trembling with indignation, Muriel retorted, '*They* were running after *him*. He didn't do a thing to encourage them. He and Caroline were the happiest couple one could ever meet. And I shall be glad if you did not bring up this matter again. Casanova indeed. It's shameful of you. Listening to gossip, and you a member of the clergy.'

'Not gossip, Muriel, stark fact. Sorry to have upset you. I shan't mention it again.'

'Indeed not. Because it isn't true. Though—'

'Yes?'

Muriel changed her mind about what she was going to say. Instead she decided to retire gracefully. 'I'd better circulate, I have people to meet.' She patted Anna's arm by way of an apology and retired to contemplate the impression those at the Abbey had of Peter. What a scandalmongering lot of cassocks they were. How cruel. She felt so angry and wished Ralph were free to calm her nerves, but he was organizing the chairs with Dean Jones, ready for Anna to address them all.

When they were all seated, Anna gave a perfectly splendid speech, full of promise and energy, which went a long way to relieve the anxiety and resentment some of them had. While various members of the church were getting up in their turn to welcome her, Muriel's mind wandered and her eyes alighted on Dean Jones. Cambridge had certainly altered him. He had so much more poise and confidence now, a far cry from the mumbling, embarrassed teenager he had been. She could see him almost full face from where she sat and she saw then that he was gazing raptly at Anna, his face alight. What with, though? Muriel's mind shied away from the truth; she lit on the word 'fascination' and left it at that, though a blush tinted her cheeks and took a while to subside.

Anna stood up to speak again so Muriel pulled herself back from where she'd been and listened.

'Thank you everyone for such a splendid welcome. I know I shall be making changes, to the services perhaps or to the societies and clubs belonging to the church, but please believe me when I say this, anything I do will be for the good of the church as a whole and not to satisfy my ego. The church is patently a vibrant living part of this community and that's how I shall keep it. Goodnight and God bless you all. See you in the morning. Goodnight.'

They found out what she meant at the ten o'clock service, and Ralph was livid.