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Vanishing Point

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It was one month earlier. The start of the year; early January and biting cold. Cabbages, turnips, carrots, beets: traditional Flemish fare, with celeriac thrown in as a special treat. Frankie was in charge of the vegetable garden. She planted them, hoed them and yanked weeds out between them, then bodily wrenched them from the soil and sluiced them down at the standpipe in the courtyard. At this time of year it was not pleasant work; her hands were raw and chapped, with swollen knuckles. Her chilblains ached so she couldn't sleep and now she was fairly sure she was getting arthritis. The only thing going for this arduous lifestyle was that, all things considered, it beat prison.

It was Magda who had coaxed her into making this decision, Magda to whom she also owed her life. When her sentence was up and they let her go, Frankie, facing a total abyss, had seriously considered ending it all. She was tired of having to keep battling on, had died when he did, at least in spirit. But the older woman, doing her job, had kept her under close

supervision and, by not letting her out of her sight, had stopped her harming herself. Later, when they talked about it and Frankie revealed the depths of her despair, it was Magda who'd urged her to take herself in hand and not waste the precious gift of life on something that should, by now, be over and done with.

'You learnt your lesson and you paid the price. Now is the time for a fresh start.'

Frankie couldn't really argue; what Magda said was true. She was twenty-four and had nobody else, except the mother who had betrayed her and this brusque, compassionate Polish woman on whom she had learnt to depend. So when Magda had first mooted her plan – worn out by the prison service herself, she felt in need of a total change – Frankie had gone along with it. Together they'd moved to Lier, outside Antwerp, where they now shared a cramped but picturesque cottage. Not just a cottage but part of the Beguinage, an exclusive commune that was mainly a spiritual retreat.

When Frankie thought back to her privileged childhood, it still amazed her that life could have altered so much. The prosperous Wirral, where she had been raised, had in no way prepared her for hardship like this. Her family home had a tennis court; she had even owned her own pony. Her life had been rosy and much indulged, until she had done the Terrible Thing after which she'd become a social leper, entirely ostracised. Why, Chad had asked her, that first time they met, had she risked so much to make a rebellious

statement? She had been through it all, many times before, and never come up with a plausible answer, but his eyes were amused (she'd say even admiring) and the smile he flashed had entirely melted her heart. Because . . . she had started to say, then faltered. It was to be several weeks till she told him the truth.

The walk from the station had soaked her right through but she was now well inured to constant discomfort. Her boots were leaking, her woollen mitts sodden; all she wanted to do was rip off her clothes and soak herself in a steaming tub. With piping-hot chocolate, whipped cream on the side, and someone to towel her dry. No chance of that; her smile was fixed as she raised the latch of the barn and pushed open the door.

Of the seventeen inmates, eleven were fixtures and most of them present this wintry afternoon. The barn, still with its original beams, was vast and draughty and smelt of lingering smoke. There were hurricane lanterns placed here and there, to cope with the rapidly vanishing light, and a cluster of beeswax candles in the hearth, not yet lit.

'You're back!' said Magda, looking up with a smile. 'Can it be that time already?' Her bobbins clacked as her skilful fingers worked at the intricate lace. Sister Mary broke off her reading while Sister Agnes was working in clay. An audiotape of pan pipes enhanced the feeling of harmony. A group of women working with their hands, united in a close sisterhood. Suddenly Frankie felt safe.

They asked, as they always did, about the market, and this time she could report complete success. She felt like a child before her elders as she proudly related what she had achieved. 'The onions were a particular hit. I could have sold many times more if I'd had them with me.'

'So learn,' said Magda, regrouping her pins. 'And next time you'll know to take more. Perhaps when the truck is back on the road. Would anyone care for tea?'

Later, once they had laid aside their work, they all moved closer to the hearth while Berthe scrabbled around in search of matches. They took it in turns to prepare the evening meal and two of their number were already in the kitchen, chopping carrots and jointing rabbits for the stew. Berthe found the matches and lit a taper.

'Excuse me,' said Frankie, suddenly chilled. 'I must go and change my clothes or I'll catch pneumonia.'

Despite all the therapy she had been through, the sound of a striking match still made her feel faint.