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The Ashgrove

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Prologue

The night air was chilly, clinging as a misty drizzle fell steadily. The child clung to her mother's skirt, afraid of the dark, afraid of the night sounds, cold and miserable. She began to whimper, her quiet tears escalating into wails.

At once her mother turned and hushed her with such unaccustomed sharpness that she gulped a rising wail and stuffed one small fist into her mouth, while the other closed more tightly on the rough wool of the skirt.

"Be quiet, like a good girl," hissed her mother again, "and stay here." She tried to move away, but the child's grasp on her skirt held her back.

"Let go," the mother whispered harshly, and with some force uncurled the little girl's fingers from the skirt. She knelt down so her face was level with her daughter's, though neither could see more than the outline of the other in the darkness. "I need you to stay here, pet," she said, more gently. "I'm just going to fetch something. I'll be back in a moment, I promise. Just stand still here. I won't leave you." She leant forward and touched her lips to the child's damp cheek and smoothed her wet hair comfortingly, before moving off into the night.

Terrified, the little girl stood rooted to the spot, her wide eyes staring into the black emptiness where her mother had been. She strained her ears to listen for her mother coming back, but all she could hear was the sound of the rain dripping off the nearby trees and a quiet rustling in the grass near her feet. The hoot of an owl

above her startled her into a cry, but she stayed where she was. She was afraid of the dark night and what it might hide, but she was even more afraid that her mother wouldn't find her if she moved. Another sound made her jump, but this time it was her mother creeping through the dark night towards her, carrying something.

"Rosemary, are you there, girl?" came the quiet whisper.

"Here I am, Mam." Her reedy voice cracked with fear and relief.

"Good girl. Stay put."

There were more sounds then, a shovel breaking the earth, grunting and panting as the metal bit into the ground.

"What are you doing, Mam?" whispered the little girl.

"Just be quiet, there's a love," replied her mother softly, "and I'll show you in a minute."

The digging sounds went on for several moments and then the little girl felt her mother's hand on hers. "Come over here." She followed the pull of the hand until she was standing at her mother's side, safely within the circle of her arm. It was still raining, but there was the faintest moonlight breaking through the ragged clouds, and with her night vision now well established, she could see a small hole had been dug in the wet ground. Beside it stood a tiny tree, ready for planting.

"Now, Rosemary," said her mother, "we're going to plant a tree for your dad, just like the other ladies and gentlemen did this afternoon. Remember?"

Rosemary nodded in the darkness. She had seen the group of grown ups standing round one end of the village green earlier in the day, planting trees.

"Those are for the poor soldiers who didn't come home from the war," her nan had told her as they stood at a distance and watched the ceremony. "Each tree's got a name beside it, see, so that everyone remembers."

"Well, they didn't know to plant one for your dad," murmured her mother, now, "so we're doing it ourselves, just you and me." She

reached for the little tree and carefully placed it into the hole she had dug. Holding it steady she whispered, "Push some of the earth back into the hole, Rosy."

The little girl knelt down and pushed some of the wet, muddy earth into the hole. It stuck to her fingers, thick and gluey, and smelt of damp leaves. She didn't like the feel of it and pulled her hands away, holding them out, but instead of wiping them as she would normally have done, her mother ignored them and whispered, "That's it, good girl, just a bit more." Looking across her daughter's head, she scanned the darkness nervously. Reluctantly the child pushed more of the heaped earth in round the tree roots, until her mother said softly, "That'll do." She picked up the spade and quickly filled the rest of the hole, smoothing away the extra earth so that the heap disappeared. Scraping together some leaf mould, she spread it round the base of the tree, so that the new tree was no more conspicuous than the other eight ash saplings that had been planted earlier in the day.

She put down the spade and reached for the big, black handbag, which she had discarded when they'd arrived and pulled from it a small photo frame attached to a wooden spike. Behind the glass, written in neat, black capitals on a piece of card, were the words *FOR THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER*. She put it into her daughter's hands. "The writing on this is for your dad," she explained, "so we'll put it in the ground beside the tree." She placed her hands over the child's and together they pushed the long wooden prong on the base of the frame, into the ground beside the little ash tree's trunk.

"God bless you," she murmured, "we'll never forget you." She pulled her daughter, and his, into her arms, and their tears mingled in the darkness with the falling rain. For a moment they stayed together kneeling on the wet ground and then the mother got to her feet. She bent and kissed her daughter's wet cheek. "This is our secret, pet," she said gently. "You mustn't tell anyone about us planting this tree for Dad. It's our secret?"

"Not even Nan and Gramp?" asked the little girl. She was not

surprised at this prohibition, Mam never talked to her about her dad when Nan or Gramp was there.

"Not even Nan and Gramp," replied her mother. "Only you and me in the whole world will ever know who this tree is for, and who planted it. Promise?"

"Promise," answered the little girl solemnly. "In the whole world...ever!"

The moon sailed out from behind the bank of cloud, and the two hurried away, anxious not to be seen by any curious eyes, but that night the mother went to bed with a quieter mind than she had known for nearly four years.

The ninth tree stood peacefully in the moonlight, an extra tree in a new-made grove of remembrance.

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Over my dead body," Cecily Strong declared roundly. "That's the Ashgrove!"

"The Ashgrove?" Mike Bradley, managing director of Brigstock Jones the developers, for once in his life was at a loss. "I'm sorry, madam, if you could...I mean of course I..."

"The trees at the end of the green," Cecily said patiently. "You can't fell those trees to make a road! That's the Ashgrove."

"Madam, I do assure you..." Mike Bradley began, wondering who the hell this weird old bird was, and angry at being attacked like that by an old dear who was ninety if she was a day, "that if there was any other..."

"And do you know what the Ashgrove is, my good man?" Cecily continued calmly, as if he hadn't spoken. "No, of course you don't. You haven't a clue."

"Well, it's, um..." began Bradley who indeed hadn't a clue.

Cecily interrupted him again. "It's a memorial," she said. "That's what it is."

All through the meeting there had been shuffling and muttering, even while the main speakers were on their feet, but now you could have heard the proverbial pin drop, all eyes were on Cecily.

"The Ashgrove was planted eighty years ago, in 1921," Cecily said, "as a memorial to those from our village who died for their king and country in the Great War. For our boys who didn't come home. Each tree was planted for a man who died, and one of them was my brother, Will." Cecily's eyes were fixed firmly on Mike

Bradley as she spoke. "I'm ninety-three next June. My brother, Will Strong, was just seventeen when he went, and he was dead before he was eighteen, blown to bits by a shell. All that's left of him now is that tree planted in his memory, all that's left of him and the other boys who went. If the only way you can put your road in, is by cutting down those trees, destroying the memorial to those boys, then I tell you this, Mr Bradley or whoever you are," she glared up at the platform, "you'll do it over my dead body!"

Mike Bradley had been hard at work all evening trying to sell Charlton Ambrose the proposed development of its allotment site, hard at work as the village was divided over the proposed development of the old allotments. When Cecily Strong had finished speaking, the meeting, which had been rumbling ominously all evening, finally erupted. The momentary silence that greeted her words was shattered as everyone started to talk at once. Ignoring the stir she had caused and with great dignity, the old lady grasped her zimmer, walked slowly through the hall and out into the night.

Mike Bradley was on his feet at once, and with the very force of his personality quelled the uproar in the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "ladies and gentlemen, I can assure you that the memory of the war dead will not be dishonoured. My company will, of course, erect a stone monument in their memory, a permanent memorial to their courage and sacrifice."

"They've got a permanent memorial now," called out someone angrily, "till you go and cut it down, that is."

The noise erupted again, people calling out, trying to make themselves, and their views about this latest development, heard. Mike Bradley sat down again, his face red with anger, furious that he had been ambushed like this. Why hadn't he been told about these memorial trees? Someone at the office hadn't done his homework properly and whoever that was, his head would roll. Mike Bradley did not like being in situations he could not control.

Access across the village green to the site was critical to the whole project, otherwise he'd never have agreed to replace this

tatty village hall as an essential part of the deal. Bradley glowered round the room, but he was forgotten in the uproar.

It was quite clear to Paula Sharp, chair of the parish council, that the meeting would go no further this evening and she banged again with her gavel, trying to bring some order.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Strong has brought up a matter which will concern several families in the village, and I am sure must be discussed in some other forum than this. I thank Mr Bradley for his offer to replace the memorial trees, but clearly we can proceed no further this evening, and so I declare the meeting closed."

Rachel Elliot from the local newspaper, the *Belcaster Chronicle*, had been sent by her editor to cover the meeting. The brief note Drew had left her simply said, "*Public meeting, Charlton Ambrose village hall. 7.30. Proposed housing development.*" When she had arrived, it was to find the little village hall humming with expectation and Rachel felt with a tingle that there must be more to this public meeting than she had anticipated.

As the evening had progressed, the split in the village over the proposed "Charlton Ambrose Enhancement Scheme" had polarised into two distinct camps and, despite an occasional voice of reason, feelings were running high.

Rachel had never met Mike Bradley before, but his reputation as a hard-headed business man preceded him and she had watched with interest when he rose to his feet. An impressive man in his late forties with thinning sandy hair and a florid complexion, there was a sharpness in his pale hazel eyes, an underlying ruthlessness, which Rachel recognised had brought him to his present position. She felt those eyes rest on her for a moment, taking in her reason for being there, as she waited, pen poised for him to speak.

Confidently and rather patronisingly, Rachel thought, Mike Bradley explained his planned development of the old allotment patch that he had bought from the parish council. Deftly he fielded questions about the number of starter homes, the size of the other, executive homes and the proposed new village hall. As she made

notes on what he said, Rachel had to hand it to him, it was a thoroughly professional performance from a man who knew what he wanted and was determined to get it. He remained calm and unruffled in the face of a fair amount of acrimony from the anti-development lobby, and it wasn't until Cecily Strong dropped her bombshell that Rachel saw him lose his cool. Then the flush of red creeping over his collar and the gleam of anger in his eyes would have warned all the staff in his office to keep their heads down; nor were these signs lost on Rachel. She watched with interest as, entirely forgotten by those talking excitedly around him, Mike Bradley rammed his papers into his briefcase and prepared to make a swift exit. Clearly, all he wanted to do now was to get out of this dreary hall and find out who had cocked things up.

Rachel intercepted him as he stepped off the platform. He scowled at her as she barred his way, but she'd been in her job long enough not to be intimidated by his bully-boy tactics.

"Mr Bradley," she smiled up at him. "I'm Rachel Elliott, from the *Belcaster Chronicle*, and I wondered if I might ask you a few questions..."

He forced his face into the semblance of a smile and said, "Certainly, Miss Elliott, any time. Just give my secretary a call." He reached into his inside pocket and extracted a card, which he handed to Rachel. "I shall look forward to seeing you. Now if you'll excuse me..." He didn't exactly push her out of his way, but as she later told Drew Scott, her editor, "He just barged past me and headed for the door."

She had stowed the card into her pocket and glanced at the platform where Paula Sharp was still deep in conversation with David Andrews, the planning officer. Rachel knew where to find each of them when she wanted to, so she turned back to the body of the hall to talk to one or two of the Charlton Ambrose residents. It was beginning to empty now, but she saw that one of the more vociferous of the "anti" lobby, who had identified himself to the meeting as Peter Davies, was still chatting to a tall man in his early thirties, and she went over to him.

"Excuse me, Mr Davies?"

Peter Davies looked up and said gruffly, "Yes. Who might you be?" He was a short, stout man, probably in his fifties, but looking older, with a round face and untidily cut grey hair hanging over the collar of his old tweed jacket. He scowled at Rachel, the lines round his eyes and mouth indicating that this was an habitual expression, not that he was particularly annoyed with her.

"Rachel Elliott, *Belcaster Chronicle*. I just wondered how you felt about this proposed development...in principle I mean. I gathered from your comments this evening that you have reservations."

"Reservations!" Peter Davies gave a harsh laugh. "I'll say I have, and what I want to know is how that bloke Mike Bradley's got as far as he has with it. How's he managed to get his hands on our allotments, for a start? How come the parish council can sell them from under us?"

"I imagine because they belonged to the parish council," replied Rachel lightly, "but I shall be asking about that, don't you worry." She smiled at him and said, "Can you tell me any more about those trees? About the Ashgrove...is it called?"

"That's right, the Ashgrove. Well, them was planted after the first war, see. In memory, like. Two of them is for two of my great uncles, Uncle John and Uncle Dan, my grandfather's brothers."

"Are they?" Rachel was fascinated. Peter Davies had made no mention of the trees himself whilst expressing his opposition to the development and, Rachel thought wryly, he probably hadn't given them a thought until Cecily had spoken of them. "So you won't be keen on those trees being cut down."

"I will not," Peter Davies said firmly. "We have to show respect for our dead. Them trees has been there for nigh on eighty years, and no developer," his tongue rolled round the word, "no developer is going to march in here and cut them down."

"How many trees are there?" asked Rachel with interest.

"Eight," answered Peter Davies, "or nine."

"Who are the other ones for...I mean, in memory of?"

Peter Davies shrugged. "I can't remember," he said. "One of them's for old Cecily Strong's brother, that's for sure. You'll have to ask about, though I shouldn't think there's many left what knew any of them now. Except Cecily, of course. Cecily'd probably remember. She's a bit queer in her attic these days, but she does remember stuff from when she were a girl."

"I'll ask her," said Rachel. "Can you tell me where she lives?"

"Yew Tree Cottage, next to the church."

"Thank you very much, Mr Davies, you've been a great help."

She turned to the other man, smiling. "I'm afraid I don't know your name," she said, "but I'd be very interested to hear what you think of the village enhancement scheme."

"Nick Potter," said the man. He held out his hand and his grip was firm. He was tall, well over six foot, with broad shoulders, and as Rachel shook his hand she was aware of a controlled strength. He had a thatch of fair hair, worn a little too long, and his eyes, smiling at Rachel now, were a deep-set blue.

"Mr Potter," she said easily, "I remember, you spoke at the meeting..." her mind raced as she tried to hear again in her head the words that voice had spoken earlier "...about how much of the village green might be lost."

"That's right, I did."

"And how do you feel about the proposed development?"

Nick Potter replied, "I am actually in favour of it, in principle. We do need more housing in the village, especially more affordable homes for young couples, but it needs to be considered carefully, and to be done in the right way."

"And what about the Ashgrove?" asked Rachel.

"Well, I knew nothing about the trees until this evening. I'm a relative newcomer to Charlton Ambrose..."

"Blow-in," muttered Peter Davies, who was still standing beside them.

Nick Potter glanced across at him and grinned. "Yes, Peter, a

blow-in. But it is my home nonetheless and I don't want it ruined with over-development, or development badly planned."

"And you think this plan would be over-development?" Rachel asked.

"I'm not sure," Nick Potter replied. "Clearly Brigstock Jones have to build enough houses to make it worth their while at all, especially if they also have put in the road and build a new village hall. But a housing estate of that size could well change the character of the village, and must be given serious consideration before it's approved. I shall be writing to the planning authority with some questions that I think should be taken into account."

"Including the trees?" asked Rachel quietly.

Nick Potter shrugged: "Well, if I don't, others will. Clearly they are going to be extremely important to some people."

The lights began to go off in the hall and Rachel looked round to find that the three of them were the only ones left and that the caretaker was hovering at the door.

"I think that's a hint we should go," said Nick Potter with a grin.

"I think you're right," agreed Rachel. "Thank you for your time." She handed them each one of her cards and added, "If you think of anything more about all this, please do give me a call."

They left the hall then, the two men heading off together into the darkness of the village, Rachel to her car.

When she got home, Rachel drew the curtains against the cold damp of the night and poured herself a glass of wine before she switched on her computer.

What an evening it turned out to be, she thought. I was expecting a very dull meeting and it was fireworks all the way.

It was exactly such unpredictability that Rachel loved about her job. On the *Belcaster Chronicle*, no day was like another; no day boring. Though many of the jobs were routine, mundane even, Rachel loved talking to people, and learning their perception of the world. Hearing what was important to them, fascinated her. If she had the

sniff of a story, she was like a terrier, worrying at it until she had discovered all and made it her own.

"And there is a good story here, I know it," she muttered as she waited for her screen to come up, and looking through her notes she began to consider how she would tackle it.

There were several aspects to be considered, and she soon realised that there was enough here for more than one article. She needed far more information, but if she could get it, she knew the story would continue to run. She certainly needed to talk to Cecily Strong, but there had been no point in chasing out after her this evening.

I need to see her in her own home if I can, Rachel thought. I want her to be at ease when we talk. She's the one who'll know about the Ashgrove and the men it commemorates.

Rachel spent most of that night working at her computer. Her piece on the meeting in Charlton Ambrose was the easy part. She settled for a factual account, offering each side of the "development" argument as it had been presented, before that was, everything had been complicated by the Ashgrove. Of course Cecily's revelation was the high spot of the evening, and Rachel explained the problem posed by the trees, but she decided she wanted to research the Ashgrove and its history in depth before following that part of the story any further. Here was a chance to build a story on her own, to develop it and follow it through. It was a chance she intended to seize. There were plenty of angles that needed following up, and Rachel wanted to get them mapped out in some detail before she put them to Drew Scott.

So, she worked all night, listing the things which had caught her attention, small things needing further exploration; expanding the notes she'd made, both at the meeting and afterwards, when talking to Peter Davies and Nick Potter. Determined to put everything down while it was still fresh in her mind, Rachel finally crawled into bed as the red figures of her clock radio flicked to four-forty-five.