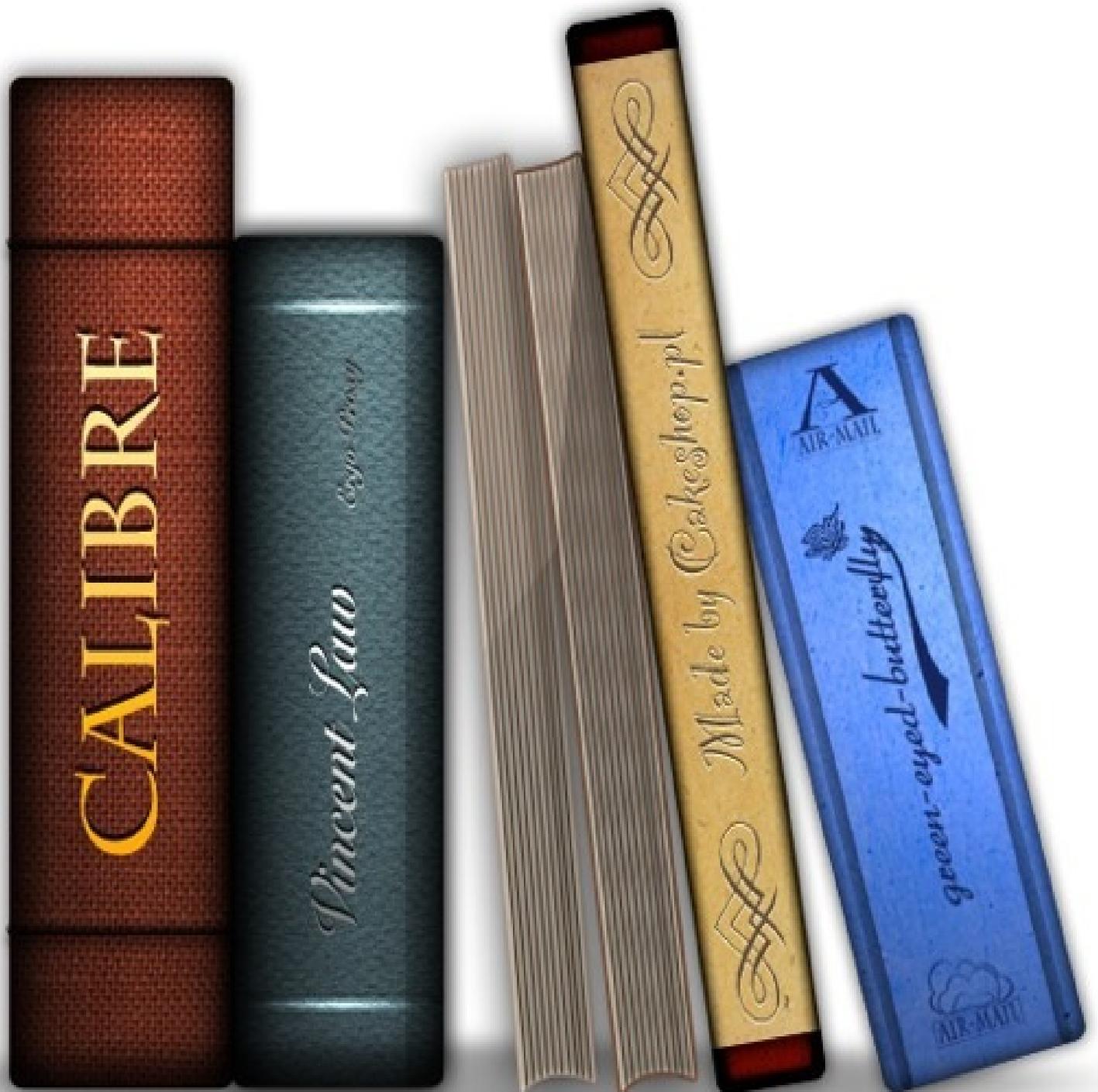


A Touch of Mortality

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A Touch of Mortality

A Meredith and Markby Mystery

by Ann Granger

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1

"There'll be frost again tomorrow, just like there was this morning. A chap in the pub said so," Libby's Uncle Denis had announced the previous evening at the family table.

"They're a mine of information, these men you keep meeting in pubs!" muttered Mrs. Hancock, setting down the teapot with unnecessary force.

Libby had hastened to head off family acrimony. "The frost had turned everything white this morning. Just like a snowfall."

Mopping up this piece of information as easily as he was mopping up gravy with a lump of bread, Uncle Denis had flowed on. "That'll have given the bookies a nasty turn! Every year, you know, people put bets on it snowing for Christmas." He stirred his tea noisily and added as a generous afterthought, "But nasty for you, Lib. Driving on those country roads."

"I'm better off in the van than the people who have the town walks and deliver on foot," Libby had said, hoping that by replying she would stop him clattering his spoon against his tea-cup.

Uncle Denis, as usual, rolled over her comment. His conversations were always conducted for his own benefit.

"Yes, the bookies will get a fright, no mistake!"

He chortled, slurping up tea at the same time, so that he had to put the cup down, coughing. The tips of his moustache, which had been trapped, trickled moisture, and he looked more than usually like a walrus on an iceflow.

His sister and niece both winced. Mrs. Hancock said tartly, "Well, you'd know how bookies' minds work if anyone does!" In a different voice she added, "You'll have to wrap up warm, Libby, if it does keep cold like this. I wish you had a job indoors all the time. I worry about you in the winter, turning out on the dark mornings and everything."

She gave Denis a meaningful look, indicating it would be nice if he had a job of any sort.

Uncle Denis's acquaintance with the betting fraternity was of long duration. Some years ago it had led to his wife divorcing him. Finding himself temporarily without a roof, he had come to stay with his married sister: "As a stop-gap, until I find a place of

my own."

The stop-gap had already lasted two years when Libby's father died. Uncle Denis had then nobly volunteered to go on living with them so that he could look after his widowed sister and her little girl.

The little girl was now twenty-four and Uncle Denis was still in residence. They'd become inured to the sight of his bald head, florid features, drooping mustache and flabby paunch. To say nothing of his fondness for personal jewelry and unsuitably youthful leather bomber jackets. They didn't ask where he got his money. Frankly, neither of them wanted to know. He didn't work. His social benefits, apart from erratic amounts paid to his sister for his keep, went into the pockets of bookmakers and publicans. Occasionally he was, in his own term, "flush" and then he was embarrassingly generous. Nags romping home first past the post would account for this, of course, but somehow Libby didn't think so. Despite assiduously studying form in the sporting press, Uncle Denis didn't appear to have an eye for a winner.

She mused about all these things as she drove the little red post office van carefully along the B road toward the hamlet of Castle Darcy. It would be nice to be rid of Uncle Denis. Plotting ingenious means of *getting* rid of him had harmlessly occupied Libby's mind on many occasions as she made the twenty-five-mile round trip delivering mail to outlying communities. No Denis. It would give her mother a chance to make new friends. Herself, she'd no longer have to dread the way he always embarrassed her in front of hers. And they'd both be spared his table manners.

Uncle Denis's meteorological predictions had proved right. This morning had seen a second hard frost. In sheltered spots where it hadn't melted away from yesterday, a thick white layer had built up, transforming the bare winter countryside. The first sun's rays revealed the silvery lace of spiders' webs veiling the bare twigs of wayside bushes. The outstretched white fingers of oaks and horse chestnuts lining the road glittered like the tinsel branches of Christmas trees in a seasonally dressed store window.

In Libby's fancy the house roofs and gables became the iced gingerbread dwelling of Hansel and Gretel's witch. Right down to bare damp patches in the area of chimneystacks marking the location of early morning fires below. The witch preparing to cook little children. But only in pantomime.

"She isn't real, children!" A voice echoed down the years in Libby's head. Wailing infants in the audience paused in their terror, hesitating, wondering whether to believe the good fairy.

"She isn't real!" promised a chorus of accompanying parents and aunts.

But she looked real. Oh my, yes, thought Libby. A man in drag, of course. She knew that now. A man who, in his own clothes, probably resembled Uncle Denis. But what a witch he made! With the tangled gray hair, striped stockings and pointed hat. But, in

the end, Hansel pushed the witch into her own oven. Hansel's death would have been murder, but the witch's was justice. How we wanted her dead, Libby remembered. How we wanted the threat destroyed! In the end, everything turned out right.

"Christmassy!" said Libby aloud and felt happy.

The council lorry had been along the day before and gritted the road; usually these minor roads were forgotten and turned into something resembling the Cresta Run. Libby was duly grateful. The council had shown itself less efficient with all year around maintenance of the road surface itself. The van bumped its way over small holes and cracks past the first dwellings and came to a halt before a pair of low-roofed cottages set back from the roadside behind long front gardens.

Libby switched off the engine, pulled on the woolly gloves her mother had insisted she bring, and opened the door. Her breath formed vapor clouds on the chill crisp air which seeped in. There was no one about. Most people were still only having breakfast, she thought.

Few households got up at crack of dawn as theirs did. Her job required rising early. People expected their letters to arrive with the breakfast bacon and eggs. Mrs. Hancock was a light sleeper and glad to get up to see her daughter off to work, although Libby had repeatedly begged her not to bother. But there was another reason why Mrs. Hancock was in the kitchen before dawn.

Uncle Denis, thank goodness, found four in the morning an ungodly hour to rise and slumbered on heedlessly. The shared early morning cups of tea and toast in the warm kitchen were treasured by Libby and her mother. The absence of Denis was never mentioned, any more than his presence was. But occasionally, a faint snore from the bedroom above would permeate down and they'd exchange furtive grins.

Libby leaned across to the front passenger seat where she'd deposited the little stack of mail for Castle Darcy. She had put the items for these cottages on the top of the pile. One of them, a package addressed to the right-hand Cottage, had been sent by recorded delivery and required a signature. There was another package secured by an elastic band to a couple of envelopes, which was intended for the left-hand cottage. Libby took them both together with her clipboard and got out of the van.

Her sturdy footwear bruised spikes of frosted grass *en route* to the first gate. As she made her way up the path to the door she heard a faint bleat from somewhere behind the cottage. She wondered whether Mr. Bodicote was out back with his goats and she'd have to make her way around there to get the required signature. She'd been making the postal deliveries for two years now and knew quite a few of her regulars. She rapped on his door.

A curtain twitched at the window. After a moment, a door-chain rattled and a minimal crack appeared. A thin, elderly face pressed against it, showing only one eye and a corner of wrinkled mouth above a whiskery chin.

"Post!" called Libby, adding less obviously, "I need a signature, Mr. Bodicote."

"What for?" The question was issued in a fierce voice.

"Recorded delivery. This package." She held it up and then waggled the clipboard.

The withered lips moved again as an eyelid drooped suspiciously above the visible eye. "Who's it from? Does it say?"

Libby sighed and turned the package over. "A Mrs. Sutton."

"Ah, that's my niece, Maureen." The chain was released and the door opened fully. Mr. Bodicote was revealed.

He must have been a tall man once, but age had shrunk him. The habit which height had given him, of stooping beneath low lintels, hadn't been lost. He hunched now as he moved forward, although it was no longer necessary. He was wearing an ancient jacket stretched over two woolly pullovers and, to be on the safe side, a tweed cap. None of the clothing disguised how thin he was. He stretched out covetous scaly talons, tipped with yellowed nails.

The witch! An echo of her earlier daydreaming returned with a frightening suddenness. Libby's heart gave a leap. Then she grinned sheepishly at the old man.

"That'll be her Christmas present for me." Bodicote sounded much more amiable. "She never forgets me, Maureen. She's a good girl. And she always posts early for Christmas, just like they tell you to."

"Wish everyone did!" said Libby, holding out the clipboard and maintaining the package out of his reach. "Sign here, please, and print your name underneath in capitals."

"I'll have to go and get my glasses." Disappointed at the delay, he padded away into some unseen region. He was gone a few minutes during which Libby stamped her feet and became aware that her post office issue navy jacket wasn't as warm as she'd thought it was. She could see down the cottage's narrow hall straight through into the kitchen at the back. She could make out an ancient stove and, on it, a pan bubbling. A huge pan, too big to prepare any human meal! The witch, the witch ... A strange bran and vegetable odor wafted down the hall to Libby's nostrils.

"The goats!" she muttered. "He's boiling up mash for the goats. Pull yourself together, Lib! You'll be seeing goblins next!"

"Here we are." Mr. Bodicote was back, fixing his spectacles. The tortoiseshell frames were mended with pink sticking plaster. He studied the clipboard and wrote his name carefully. His handwriting was surprisingly clear. He'd learned to write when children were made to practice "hooks." Age had made him a little shaky, but the copperplate

letters were still beautifully formed.

"You'll have to excuse me, my dear," he went on. "Having the door locked up like it in broad daylight. I never thought I'd have to do it, but I've got enemies."

Mr. Bodicote had been pronouncing unlikely statements ever since Libby had been bringing the post.

"I heard the goats as I came up the path," said Libby, overlooking the latest eccentric claim. She exchanged the package for her clipboard. "Cold for them outside this morning."

He was shocked. "They're not out of doors, not today!" He whisked the package from her. "Except for the old billy, Jasper. He starts kicking the door if I don't let him out first thing. I had to put a bolt on the outside of his house. Any kind of latch within his reach, old Jasper can undo. But I haven't let the nannies out. This cold weather don't suit them. They need looking after, do goats, if you want a good yield. I keep 'em in and make sure they got plenty of feed. But the old billy raises merry hell if I don't let him out in the paddock, come rain or shine."

He leaned forward. "I got to keep a close eye on them. Folk have tried to poison them, you know."

"Surely not!" said Libby, knowing that she shouldn't let herself be drawn into this. She had a whole round to get through, several villages. More likely, if the goats had been ill it was because they had nibbled laurel or some other unsuitable plant.

Mr. Bodicote was fortunately distracted, peering at the address on his parcel. "Maureen sent it," he repeated. "And always by the recorded delivery to make sure I get it!" With that, he closed the door in her face. She heard the chain rattle.

Libby retraced her steps, automatically following the imprint left on the crust of frost by her approach. The poor old chap was getting pottier. Such a shame. She crunched down the path to the second cottage, slipping the elastic band from the bundle as she went and checking the address on the two envelopes.

There were clear indications of a different lifestyle here. An adjacent barn appeared to have been turned into a two-car garage. Also an extension had been built onto the side of the cottage itself. The addition was modern, single-story, flat-roofed and spoilt the symmetry of the old building. The builders had left behind a pile of rubble, planks and general debris which was stacked to the rear of the barn-garage, in an angle formed by the garden hedge. The rubbish heap was covered with a white layer just like everything else. Libby glanced at it with mild disapproval. She was thinking how untidy it normally looked, without its frosted blanket, and wondering whether it would stay like that till spring. She rang the bell.

Inside the cottage, Sally Caswell was tightening the top on a vacuum flask of hot

coffee. She looked out of the kitchen window as she did, and noticed that old Bodicote had let out one of the goats, the big brown and white one with the curved horns. Despite repeated requests to the old man to put the animal on a running tether, it was roaming loose about its paddock. She hoped it didn't eat its way through the party hedge and into their garden. Not again. Liam would go mad if it happened again. He'd already threatened to put the matter into the hands of their solicitors and she really thought he would.

Only two days ago that same billy-goat had got through the hedge by dislodging a sheet of corrugated iron from one of the patched areas. It had wandered right up to the new extension where Liam had his study and peered in the window. Poor Liam had looked up from the screen to see a bearded, horned face only inches away, watching him intently from the slit pupils of chalky-blue eyes.

"Enough to give anyone the screaming habdabs!" he'd said afterwards. At the time, he'd let out a yell like a man possessed, rushed outside, picked up a lump of rock from the pile of unused hardcore left by the builders and shied it at the beast.

Unfortunately, old Mr. Bodicote had seen him do it and a very nasty scene had ensued. It was at the end of that exchange that Liam had threatened his elderly neighbor with the law.

Unrepentant and unbowed, Mr. Bodicote had merely observed that, "Town folk like you and your missus have got no business in the country! You wants to go back to London, you do!"

A chance would be a fine thing! thought Sally, a little sourly.

Going back to London or its environs had ceased to be an option, not only with the sale of their tiny Fulham terraced house, but with the other sale of Aunt Emily's rambling mock Tudor Englefield Green villa. Sally had inherited the villa on Emily's death some eighteen months before and was sorry now that they'd sold it. But Liam had been keen to get rid of it. They'd received a fair offer which, so Liam argued, they'd be foolish to turn down. The villa was in urgent need of structural repairs and modernization. The present property market meant that they mightn't get another offer soon. It had been nice, of course, to get the money, but Sally had grown up in that house. It had been a place where she'd been secure, loved and happy. She felt now that Liam had rushed her into selling.

But it was over and done and there was no use moping about it. Holding the flask, Sally set out for the study, but before she got there, the doorbell rang.

"Morning, Mrs. Caswell!" said Libby, handing over the package and the two envelopes. "This looks to have more postage on it than it needs. Someone's guessed instead of taking it to the post office to be weighed. Always best to take things along to the post office and get it right. Might save yourself some money!"

Sally took the padded mailbag indicated and the letters. She didn't recognize the printed handwriting on the package. She had herself sometimes popped things into a postbox with extra postage to be on the safe side, when she hadn't been able to get to the nearest sub post office, which was at Cherton.

"You haven't seen Mr. Bodicote this morning, have you?" she asked Libby. Receiving an affirmative, Sally added nervously, "What sort of mood is he in?"

"All right!" said Libby. "Quite cheerful. No odder than usual."

Sally proceeded on her way to the study, the vacuum flask clasped against her breast as she studied the mail.

Liam was seated at his computer, glaring at the monitor.

"I've brought your coffee," she said. "It's very frosty out there again and a good job you didn't go to Norwich yesterday. I've just heard on the radio there's freezing fog on the East Coast. At least we haven't got that. Just think, if you'd been driving back today!"

"I didn't *not* go to Norwich because of the weather," Liam mumbled, punching at the keyboard. "I didn't go because Jefferson rang up and said he had to reschedule everything. The Russians have been delayed. So there wasn't much point."

"Good job you hadn't set out, then. I mean, ringing up here at the last minute like that!" She held out the mail. "These look like Christmas cards. It's only the first week in December. I haven't even bought mine. The package is addressed just 'Caswell.' I suppose it's for you. I'm not expecting anything. London postmark."

"I can't be bothered with it now!" he said tetchily.

Oh dear, she thought. What's put him in a bad mood? Because he couldn't go off for his scientific beano in Norwich, I suppose. She kept her tone resolutely bright. "Shall I leave it here? By the flask?"

"No!" He spun round. "Take it away! I said, I can't be bothered with it! I thought I heard a goat! Has he let them out again?"

"Well, yes," she admitted. "But only one of them." Hesitantly, she went on, "I suppose he is entitled to let them out into his own paddock."

"But not into my garden!" said her husband through gritted teeth.

It occurred to her that she could have corrected him. It was her garden, actually. She'd bought this cottage. But she said, "He did patch up the hedge again."

"Yes! He patched it with an old bedstead this time! Now it looks bloody awful, worse than the iron sheeting, and the goats will only eat through somewhere else!"

"Shall I pour your coffee?" she asked placatingly.

"No! Leave it there! I'll pour it out when I'm ready!"

"Some sort of problem?" She tried to sound sympathetic.

He grunted. "I'll have to go to Oxford, to the lab, tomorrow. Might even go later on today. We'll have to reschedule everything to do with the Russians' visit." He glanced at the vacuum flask. "Just leave it there. And take away the mail. Deal with it yourself."

"But it's a video." She held out the package. "Although it's a bit on the heavy side for a videotape. But it says so, on the front. Did you order a video?"

"No! It'll be some moronic Christmas present! And I'm not going to stop what I'm doing and run a video right now, am I? Take it away!"

She accepted rejection. It was the easiest thing to do when he was in this mood. "All right. I'm just going to make my hot drink and then I'm driving into work. I'll be back late-ish. It's preview day for tomorrow's sale. I want to talk to Austin about Aunt Emily's things, too. He did say he'd come out and give me a valuation this week but with the sale I suppose he's been too busy."

He grunted and hunched over his computer.

"Oh, and Meredith said she'd call by the saleroom. She wants to take a look. I told her we had some rather nice Victorian wine glasses. She may put in a sealed bid. And then we might have a bit of lunch together."

Liam clutched his head. "For Chrissake! Will you just go and do whatever you want to do and leave me in peace?"

She went back to the kitchen and switched on the kettle to make up her own flask to take into work with her. Her round snub-nosed face was uncharacteristically despondent. She was a healthily attractive young woman. Her flyaway fair hair was secured by an Alice band and she was comfortably dressed in pleated skirt and sweater over a shirt, with thick winter tights and flat shoes. Country lifestyle suited her. She had been instrumental in persuading Liam that the cottage would be ideal. He could concentrate on writing the book, for which purpose he'd arranged to spend only part of his working week at the lab and the rest at home. She, in her spare time, could garden.

But it hadn't really worked out. Liam couldn't get on with the country. It bothered him. The goats were an example. She didn't really mind the goats, although it was true old Bodicote did nothing to prevent them straying into the Caswells' garden. She suspected it was part of a systematic harassment designed to drive away his new neighbors. She'd thought once that the old man quite liked *her*, if not Liam. But then there'd been that unfortunate matter of the turnips.

"Thank God I've got a job to go to!" Sally thought. Immediately she felt guilty. She loved her husband but some days he was impossible. What with Liam hating the cottage and nothing having worked out as hoped, little wonder she'd been suffering from stress. Getting away, going in to Bamford to her job had kept her sane.

She got other occasional breaks when Liam went over to Norwich. Despite being preoccupied with the book, he still kept an eye on the exchange student program run by his Oxford research laboratory and one engaged on similar work in Norfolk. Now events had interfered with his latest trip, probably causing the bad temper, and depriving her of what she'd come to view almost as Liam-free breaks.

She moved across to a worktop on which stood a row of stoppered glazed pottery jars, each carefully labeled. She didn't drink coffee or ordinary tea, but had a liking for herbal tea. Here in the country she could make her own. In the summer she used suitable fresh leaves or flowerheads picked in her garden, poured on boiling water and let the whole mix steep, finally adding a good tablespoon of honey and straining off the resultant brew. Also in summer, she dried racks of leaves in her airing cupboard so that in winter she still had a supply, although the tea lacked the flavor of fresh ingredients. You had to know what you were doing, of course, and be careful only to pick the plants suitable for tea-making.

Liam disapproved of her home-blended teas. But then, Liam seemed to disapprove of most things she did. "You don't know what you're drinking!" he sometimes said. To which she would reply, "Yes, I do. I know better than you do!"

On days when she went into Bamford to her part-time job, she took along her "tea" in a flask, leaving Liam his flask of coffee. She now set about preparing her own brew and, while the kettle heated, sat at the table to open the two envelopes. As expected, they contained early Christmas cards. She must remember to buy a couple of packs whilst she was in Bamford today. She turned her attention to the package.

It was the popular sort of padded mailbag, and addressed simply in printed capitals caswell. The word video was also printed on by hand. She had no idea who'd sent it. There was no indication apart from the central London postmark. She picked it up; gave it an experimental shake. The kettle began to hiss. She glanced at it, then back at the package in her hand, hesitating. The kettle gave a loud click. Sally put down the padded mailbag, got up and started toward the worktop where the kettle stood.

Crump! Behind her came an explosion similar to those she recalled from childhood when the unswept chimneys of coal fires caught alight. What began as a throaty snarl finished as a triumphant rending noise, as if some penned creature had burst loose. It was accompanied by a pressure in her ears. A balled fist hit her in the middle of the spine and pitched her forward to strike her head on the cupboard edge. A bright flash lit up the gloomy winter kitchen. Things were happening all around and all at once, yet she was conscious of each, distinctly. Plates crashed down from a shelf. Small pieces of debris whizzed through the air, one sheering through the window sending shattered shards of glass tinkling down, some outside and some inside the room. Smoke rolled

up from the area of the table, hiding it from view. It filled the kitchen and was accompanied by an acrid stench of melted plastic and scorched wood varnish.

Bewildered and temporarily disoriented, she lay slumped across a worktop, her fingers still clutching the handle of the electric kettle. Miraculously it had remained upright, saving her from being badly scalded. The burning odor increased. Smoke got into her lungs making her cough and retch. She released the kettle and pressed her hands to her mouth and nose. She saw, and for some reason it distressed her more than anything else, that the dried herbs had spilled from the pottery jar. As she watched, the jar itself rolled over the edge of the worktop and crashed onto the floor, breaking into half a dozen pieces, ruined. Through it all she heard her husband's voice. It came from the kitchen door.

"What the dickens have you done now? Am I going to get no peace at all?"

Sally pushed herself upright and turned, leaning against the worktop for support. A trickle of blood ran down her forehead, along the bridge of her nose and dripped scarlet spots on her sweater. Through the smoke she could see his outline in the doorway.

Spluttering, she denied the accusation. "I didn't do anything."

"What's happened here?" He was moving forward, toward the table, his hand outstretched.

She came to life, jerking herself away from the worktop and lurching forward. "Don't! Don't touch it!"

He stopped at the shrill note of panic in her voice and stared down at the pine table in a perplexed way.

"The package..." she croaked. "It was the package..."

"What package?"

That was Liam for you. When he was writing, nothing else registered at all. But perhaps he could be forgiven the question because there was little left of the package. Only where it had lain, a dreadful, sinister burned circle.

She lost her temper in fear, anger and bewilderment. "The one supposed to contain a video! I showed it to you not ten minutes ago! For crying out loud, forget that wretched book for a while! It wasn't a video at all! It was a letter-bomb, don't you understand? Those animal rights' extremists sent you a letter-bomb! The ones who broke into your lab last year! It must be them!"

He opened his mouth and she was sure he was going to say, "Rubbish!" But he couldn't deny that the center of the table was burned black and there were scraps of

smoldering paper and broken plastic and wire lying around.

He seemed to become aware of her appearance. "You all right?"

"I think so. I banged my head." She touched her forehead gingerly. "I was so lucky. Liam! I was going to open it. I even *shook* it, for heaven's sake! The kettle switched itself off and I got up. Otherwise I'd" She fell silent.

He stood with his hands hanging loosely by his sides, his face with the boyish features which always made him look younger than his thirty-eight years, twisted in puzzled disbelief.

"It couldn't be," he said without any conviction.

"It was! Whoever sent it could have blinded you, Liam! You could have been horribly disfigured! We've got to call the police!"

2

Meredith Mitchell had been on sickness leave from her Foreign Office desk for the past two weeks, following a particularly virulent attack of influenza which had struck her down in mid-November. She hadn't suffered from 'flu for years and had forgotten just how devastating it could be. There was no question of returning to work yet. Needless to say, she hadn't sought the preventive jabs earlier in the year.

"Not," said Dr. Pringle kindly, "that it would have made much difference in your case. This is a new 'flu-type. Every few years we get one."

Stay in bed, drink gallons of liquids and sweat it out had been his advice. He'd scribbled out a prescription to alleviate the head and joint aches and that pretty well had been that.

She'd followed his advice, being able to do little else. From her pillows she'd memorized the cracks in the ceiling and formed inchoate plans to get up there and do something about them. There were cobwebs up there too, dangling in the corners and undulating in the draughts. Another thing to do something about. She had grown, during her bed-bound sickness, to dislike the ceiling intensely. It was a memo-pad of domestic chores. No inspirational ideas sprang from it. No encouragement to deep reflections on the Meaning of Life. No ghostly finger obligingly sketched out any portent. No *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*. Just a cracked Victorian ceiling and, probably, some very dodgy wiring in the electric light, all prodding her conscience just when she was least able to resist their nagging.

The final straw had been Mrs. Harmer's cooking. Mrs. Harmer was housekeeper to their vicar, James Holland. James, being currently out of town, had kindly "loaned" Mrs. Harmer to the invalid and, again, Meredith had been too debilitated to resist.

This meant that Mrs. Harmer had arrived at eight every morning, slammed the front door and clumped in winter boots down the narrow hall to the kitchen, bawling, "It's all right, Miss Mitchell, it's only me!"

She had then brewed tea and made porridge for Meredith's breakfast.

"A good breakfast sets you up for the day. Especially if a body is picking at food like you are. At least you know you've got something solid in your stomach."

The porridge was solid, all right, probably just the thing for plastering up those cracks on the ceiling. But it was edible and by far the best item on Mrs. Harmer's invalid menu. The menu had been worse than all the symptoms of 'flu put together.

Not for Mrs. H. the latest notions on nutrition. "Fads!" she called them scornfully. If you were ill, according to Mrs. Harmer, what you needed was plenty of plainly cooked fish. It was good for the brain. Rice pudding was also good for you, it seemed. Poached eggs, horribly underdone and glassy, sitting on soggy toast were excellent. Not so, boiled eggs. "Binding!" said Mrs. Harmer mysteriously.

Coffee was deemed bad for the nerves. "Oxo!" declared Mrs. Harmer, plunking down huge mugs of this nourishing beef extract brew.

During Mrs. Harmer's well-meant ministrations, the house stank of boiled cod, baked milky rice and Oxo. One positive result from all this was that it encouraged one to get better as soon as possible. When the day came that Mrs. Harmer could be dispatched to the vicarage, Meredith had ungratefully felt like cheering.

Now the symptoms had subsided. But they'd left behind a disconcerting weakness in the legs and, unsurprisingly in the wake of all that plain fish and beef extract, a disinclination to eat. Nevertheless, today Meredith was up and about early. Sally Caswell, who worked at Bailey and Bailey, the local auctioneers, had told her that among items to be inspected during today's preview of tomorrow's auction was a set of Victorian wine glasses.

"Just the sort of thing you said you wanted, Meredith."

It was true, she had mentioned Victorian glassware some time ago, and Sally had promised to keep a lookout. Generally, Meredith's cramped end-of-terrace cottage did not lend itself to the accumulation of antiques. Her sole foray to date in that direction had been the acquisition of a Welsh dresser and the adventures attendant on that had perhaps put her off adding to it. But today she was going along to take a look and, afterwards, have a bite of lunch with Sally. Not that the appetite was back yet, but a bowl of soup or something would be nice.

Meredith clattered down the stairs to the kitchen, feeling quite cheerful. She ran water into the kettle and peered through the kitchen window at her backyard. It looked cold out there, but bright. Something moved, catching her eye, a shadow in the far corner

behind the disused coal-bunker, where the frost still lay up. It was the cat.

The cat was a stray and had been around for about two weeks, on and off. Its general condition was skinny and battle-scarred but it was a young animal, a tabby. She liked tabbies.

It might have been around longer and Meredith, away at the office all day, hadn't noticed it. It was only during the enforced sick leave that she'd become aware of it. She didn't know whether it had been abandoned and was seeking out a new and comfortable home, or whether it was genuinely wild, but she suspected that it had been turned out by an uncaring owner. It was nervous. It didn't respond to friendly overtures. But she didn't like to see any animal so thin. Mrs. Harmer had obligingly stocked the freezer with frozen fishsteaks, and Meredith had taken to cooking them up and feeding them, piece by piece, to the cat. This could only be done at a distance because it refused to come near or let her approach, even tempted by the smell of cod. She had to leave the scene. When she returned, the food would be gone. It was an excellent way of getting rid of the fish without wasting it. The cat was definitely a Good Cause.

Meredith took a plastic tub of previously cooked cod from the fridge, opened the back door and stepped out into a biting wind. She scraped the fish onto a saucer and called the cat. But it disobligingly scuttled back over the wall. Meredith retreated, leaving the fish. Presumably, as before, it would come back. Not only that cat, but every other cat in the neighborhood.

Half an hour later saw her driving into the car park of the town's auction rooms. She locked her car and made her way across the irregularly shaped yard toward the open doors of a rambling building of weathered stone. The place showed signs that it might once have been a livery stable. But now above the oak lintel was a sign itself probably two generations old at least which read:

BAILEY AND BAILEY
Valuers and Auctioneers
House Clearances Antique furniture and memorabilia

A poster tacked on a notice board on the wall announced the forthcoming Christmas Auction Sale. Preparations were clearly underway. Passage into the auction rooms was blocked by a bow-fronted walnut chest-of-drawers. On her side of it, outside the building, stood a stocky man in a baize apron, arms akimbo. At the further side of it, inside the building, and only his head and chest visible, was a pale youth wearing a baseball cap.

"We'll have to turn it sideways on, Ronnie!" said the stocky man.

"Take the drawers out," opined Baseball Cap.

"No need to, just run this bit of rope around it, the drawers won't fall out."

"For Pete's sake!" cried a voice from somewhere inside. "Take the drawers out! And mind the corners! That's an early Victorian piece!"

"Don't you worry yourself, Mr. Bailey," rumbled the first man. "You leave it to me and Ronnie."

The walnut chest began to rock as it was heaved "sideways on."

"Right! Lift your end, Ted!" cried Baseball Cap.

"Watch the drawers!" howled the unseen owner of the voice within the building.

"We're putting a rope around her!" shouted back Baseball Cap. "Not you, dear!" he added to Meredith, who stood by as interested observer. He winked and took off his cap long enough to scratch his head. When he did, it could be seen that he was older than his first appearance suggested. The wearing of the cap was less a youthful fashion fad than to disguise thinning hair.

The piece of furniture, secured, was inched through the gap and Meredith followed it inside.

She found herself in a large low room. She blinked and when her eyes had become adjusted to the dim light, saw that stacked around her was all manner of furniture, bric-a-brac, pictures, books and mysterious boxes with unidentified contents. Ronnie and Ted had set down their burden on the farther side of the room and it was being examined anxiously by the owner of the third voice.

He was a tall, thin man, whose gold-rimmed spectacles and collar-length graying hair lent him an academic appearance. He wore a Prince of Wales check suit of old-fashioned cut and, in contrast, a rather jazzy bow tie. Meredith knew this to be Austin Bailey and that he was, despite the legend over the door, the only Bailey at present connected with the business. Clearly he was occupied for the moment.

She left him peering at the chest and made her way through the jumble of furniture, past trestle tables of china and glass, casting an occasional curious glance at begrimed oil paintings and damp-spotted prints, and finally into a tiny office at the rear of the room.

The office was empty. She had expected to find Sally Caswell in it. But she supposed Sally had stepped out for a moment, though the little sanctum had an abandoned air to it that suggested no one had been there that morning. No sign of any personal belongings, no coat hanging on its hook, not even Sally's vacuum flask. The computer was switched off and cold. It was very odd.

There were two stacks of printed sheets on the desk. Meredith took a leaflet from the first pile.

Like the poster outside, it announced the Christmas auction sale and went on to list items of special interest from furniture and books to garden statuary. It included the walnut chest she had just seen manhandled into place. She turned over the next page. All the items to be auctioned the following day were numbered off in lots. She ran a finger down the page until she found the glasses that had interested her. Lot 124. Six Victorian wine glasses. She went back into the main room.

Austin Bailey was now alone, mopping his forehead with a large spotted handkerchief. Apparently the chest-of-drawers had suffered no harm. Ronnie and Ted had departed on other business. Austin looked up and saw her.

"Oh, Meredith! So sorry, didn't see you. How are you?" He tucked the handkerchief in his pocket and held out his distinctly dusty hand. He suddenly became aware of its state and withdrew it before she could grasp it.

"Sorry!" he said. "Been moving stuff around."

"Everything here now?" She indicated their surroundings. It hardly seemed there would be room for anything else.

"I think so. I was expecting a set of chairs..." He frowned. "The woman said she could get them over here today. I told her if she wanted them in the sale ..." He fixed Meredith with a stern eye. "They are listed in that!"

She realized he meant the catalog in her hand. "I was rather interested in the wine glasses," she said. "Where are they?"

He led her past a large Benares brass gong on a stand to a table laden with all manner of glassware and odd items associated with drink. Pewter tankards, stoneware jugs, a pair of Bavarian beermugs with lids, a wooden wine cooler.

Two or three people had come in and were wandering around looking at items, including a bearded man in a sheepskin coat who was examining a small writing desk with the air of an expert fault-finder. Austin Bailey cast him a wary glance.

"Got a green form?" Austin asked Meredith absently. "You can write in a bid on a green form today and you needn't come and bid tomorrow. Unless you want to come and see the fun. You might be outbid in the actual auction, that's the risk. Ten percent buyer's premium, don't forget."

"I'll take one before I go. I actually hoped to see Sally. Isn't she here today?"

The sheepskin-coated man had moved on to a dining table. The other people, a husband and wife, were gazing doubtfully at one of the paintings, nymphs in a glade, yellowed with old varnish and encased in an ornate carved frame.

"It's a bit big for the lounge, Frank," said the wife.

"Show up better, then, wouldn't it?" said Frank.

"I don't know as I want naked women hanging over my fireplace, Frank. It's not nice, somehow."

"That's art," said Frank, the connoisseur.

Austin Bailey sighed. He rubbed his dusty palms together and gazed down at them in a puzzled manner as if wondering why the dirt still hadn't shifted.

"Sally and I'd arranged to have lunch together," Meredith persisted. "So I expected to meet her here."

"Oh, dear." Austin's worried expression became more marked. "I don't think she'll be coming in today. It's a nuisance because of all this ... It's viewing until half past four this afternoon and we need everyone we can get. The public wandering in and out, you see. We need as many bodies on the floor as we can muster."

She understood his security problem and said so, before prompting again, "Sally?"

"Oh, yes. She phoned. That is, she didn't but her husband did. About half an hour ago. It seems they had a bit of trouble at the cottage this morning."

"Oh?" That sounded ominous, especially if it had been Liam who'd phoned and not Sally herself. Liam didn't normally concern himself with domestic matters. Nor had Sally contacted Meredith, despite their lunch date, and Sally was meticulous in that sort of courtesy.

"I think they had a gas explosion or something," said Austin Bailey vaguely. He stared down at his hands again. "I'll have to go and wash these. Excuse me, won't you?"

"Austin!" Meredith dodged the brass gong, a seated stone grayhound and a knobbly, awkward piece of furniture designed to accommodate an Edwardian family's coats, hats, umbrellas and walking sticks. "A gas explosion? Is anyone hurt? I mean, how bad an explosion?"

Whole houses had been demolished by explosions from leaking gas appliances or fractured pipes before now.

"No one's hurt. Only shocked, you know. Sally got a fright, poor dear. But she's all right." Austin assured her earnestly. "I asked Liam. It was in the kitchen. Liam wasn't precise. I suppose they'll have to wait until the Gas Board gets there and sorts it out."

Austin dived into Sally's office which they were just passing and emerged with a green form from the second of two piles of papers on the desk. "Here, write your bid on this and leave it with me or if I'm not around with Ronnie or Ted, no, madam! Don't leave it there!" He hurried away to deal with an emergency.

She hadn't inquired about a reserve price on the glasses. She scribbled the maximum she was prepared to pay, put the lot number, her name, address and phone number, and handed the folded sheet to Ronnie who had just returned. Austin and Ted were gazing at a virulently hued painting of the bridges of Paris, held up by a large lady.

"You sell paintings for people, don't you?" demanded the would-be vendor.

"In principle, yes," said Austin, gazing at the picture with some dismay.

"I've got to go." Meredith said to Ronnie, since Austin was clearly occupied, "Would you mind giving this to Mr. Bailey? Thanks. You, er, you haven't heard anything about Mrs. Caswell this morning, have you?" She pressed the green form into Ronnie's hand.

"Kitchen cooker!" said Ronnie, taking the green sheet and opening it. He pushed the baseball cap to the back of his head and studied what she'd written. Viewed even closer and capless, he now appeared around fifty.

"Is that not enough?" she asked anxiously. "Or too much? I don't know the reserve."

"You never know," he said. "Depends if anyone else wants 'em. Should think it's about right."

"You're sure it was the kitchen cooker?" That did sound serious.

"Either that or the boiler," said Ronnie.

Ted had abandoned Austin and the large lady. He appeared carrying a cardboard box containing what looked like assorted china ornaments.

"Mrs. Caswell?" he puffed. "Bathroom geyser, wasn't it? Here, that woman's brought them chairs. Where're we going to put them?"

It was clear, if she wanted to know what happened at the Caswells' cottage that morning, she had to drive out there herself. Meredith went out and got back in her car. She just hoped everyone was safe and sound.

It wasn't cooker, boiler nor even geyser.

"It was a letter-bomb!" Sally Caswell whispered.

"Hell's teeth!" Meredith said and afterwards wondered she hadn't said anything stronger.

She had, however, been expecting something dramatic. The first thing she'd seen as she drove up to the cottage earlier was a police car parked outside the door and another further down the lane. A white van, which she'd first taken for a Gas Board vehicle, was seen, when she got out of the car, to be marked ominously bomb disposal unit. A

small gathering of villagers hung about at a safe distance, whispering together.

Alarmed, Meredith had hurried to the gate to find her way barred by a police officer. But, just at that moment, Liam had appeared in the doorway and at his insistence she'd been allowed to enter.

Liam had his reason for wanting her there. "Sally's in a state," he said. "See what you can do, Meredith, can't you?"

She'd found Sally Caswell sitting on a sofa in the tiny drawing room before an electric fire. An injury to her forehead had been administered to in a makeshift fashion with a strip of plaster. She was gripping a glass of brandy whilst Liam mooched about scowling in the background. From the kitchen came the sound of voices and movement.

"The police!" she went on in the same low voice. "And explosive experts. Forensics as well. Everyone! They're taking away all the bits of debris. There wasn't much left of the package. But I think they can tell what sort of explosive was used from the way it exploded." She gestured wildly. The brandy slopped in the balloon glass. "They took photographs of the t-table and k-kitchen..."

"Are you sure you're all right, Sally?" Meredith asked in concern. She glanced at Liam as she spoke, but Liam was brooding darkly on his own problems.

Sally croaked, "I'm fine, honestly. Liam stuck on a plaster dressing for me. It had stopped bleeding. I was really lucky. There was broken glass everywhere. I do still feel a bit shaky and for some reason, I'm so cold." She shivered.

"That's shock," Meredith said. "Try and take it easy: Have they been asking questions?"

"They tried. I wasn't much used to them. I really couldn't tell them anything. It was so sudden and I'd turned away just beforeIt was a package just like any other, except that it was addressed simply 'Caswell.' Liam was busy so I opened it."

Hearing his name, Liam announced loudly, "I don't know how I'm expected to get any work done today with that lot swarming over the place!"

Meredith pushed back a hank of dark brown hair which had fallen over her face and glared at him in some exasperation. She had known the Caswells for some years. There had been a gap in the acquaintance during the years Meredith had spent abroad as a British consul. Now back in England for good (unless the FO relented which it showed no sign of doing) they had all met up again.

Meredith liked Sally very much. Liam, she had always found irritating. In the wake of today's events, he was annoying her more than usual. Even allowing for shock, it was difficult to drum up sympathy for him. His wife could have been seriously hurt.