



Chills, Kills & Snowflakes

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Dedication

For Eve

Chills, Kills & Snowflakes

‘Merry Christmas, gentlemen,’ the security guard’s words echoed around the marbled reception area of the headquarters of the Kilchester Savings and Loans Bank.

‘Christ almighty,’ Alec muttered under his breath as he stepped out of the lift.

‘Be nice,’ said Bruce, trying not to move his lips as he did so.

Alec plastered a grimace on his face as the two of them moved towards the guard.

‘You too,’ said Bruce as they passed the desk. ‘I left a Christmas card for you upstairs on my desk with a little something in there.’

Alec’s smile flickered.

‘Yes,’ he said once it was re-applied. ‘Me too. Have a wonderful Christmas.’

Bruce stepped toward the glass doors which dutifully slid open, allowing snow to billow in.

‘Did you really?’ said Alec as they stepped into the snow.

‘Of course,’ said Bruce. ‘You don’t mean...’

‘No way. Give him a bonus for sitting on his fat arse? Not bloody likely.’

‘But he’ll find out.’

‘No he won’t,’ Alec lifted the collar of his coat a little higher against the onslaught of the snow. ‘He’ll think that cleaner’s taken it, what’s his name?’

‘Kai?’

‘Kai. That’s him. Fatso doesn’t trust him, you can tell by the looks he gives him. He’ll blame Kai.’

‘You bastard,’ Bruce laughed. ‘Listen, I’m getting a taxi home, you want to share? Maybe pop into the Golden Lion on the way for a swift one?’

‘Can’t. Girlfriend’s been pestering me to get one of those Gold Power-Formers for her son.’

‘And you haven’t got it yet?’

‘Well I told her I have. Thinks it’ll make him start calling me Daddy instead of Alec. Something like that.’

‘And you haven’t heard?’

‘Heard what?’

‘Well, it was on the news a couple of days ago,’ said Bruce with a snigger. ‘Toy shops were selling out as soon as they got them in, everyone

wants them - it'll be the proverbial X-mas miracle if you manage to get hold of one.'

Alec shrugged before grabbing Bruce by the hand and shaking it firmly.

'Have a good one mate,' he said, brushing the snow from his face with his other hand. 'We'll get together before New Year, eh?'

Bruce nodded, disengaged and half jogged towards the taxi rank that loomed out of the blizzard.

Alec turned away and looked over the road to see the one building the snow was not clinging to. The largest toyshop in Kilchester had so much neon on its exterior that the snow melted when it came within three metres of the façade. The result was a bizarre snow-slush-rain combination underfoot that was guaranteed to permeate any shoe that trod in it.

By the time the escalator reached the second floor the combo had done its work and had seeped through to Alec's socks. He scanned the garish displays, searching for some indication of where to look but all he could do was think about the missed opportunity of going to the pub with Bruce. Was this really worth it? All this for her son?

Ladies and gentlemen, the public address system chimed into life, the operator adopting a bizarre sing-song tone to her voice. *We are sorry to announce that due to the weather conditions we will shortly to be closing the store early this Christmas Eve. We would like to ask all customers to make their way to the checkouts within the next thirty minutes. Fankoo.*

From the corner of his eye he noticed a cluster of parents and, sure enough, they were all assembled under a giant cardboard effigy of a PowerFormer. Bloody typical. Fortunately none of the parents seemed to be actively buying anything so perhaps he could just get in and out of this shop after all.

Alec moved through the PowerFormer shelves quickly and purposefully. Some of the toys he recognised, he'd seen them lying around the house or on cartoons on the television but they all seemed to be various shades of blue and grey. No Gold PowerFormer.

And then, at the foot of the cardboard idol, like an offering on an altar, he spotted one. He began shoving forward through the glassy-eyed parents that blocked his way, trying to shift their dead weight from his path but it was not to be. A woman with short-cropped blonde hair picked up the toy and put it in her basket.

'Shitballs,' he said.

The entire crowd of parents and children fell silent as they turned around to glare at him. Alec practically ran off in the opposite direction as the first little voice piped up: 'Mummy what's a shitball?'

No time to answer that, he thought, scanning the aisles for acne and within a minute, he'd found one of the unfortunate assistants. The boy in question was in his mid teens but, perhaps because of the garish uniform he was forced to wear, looked younger. Alec suspected that he was probably paid in toys rather than cash but ploughed on nonetheless, asking if there were any more Gold PowerFormers.

'PowerFormers?' the assistant snorted contemptuously.

Alec nodded.

'Gold PowerFormers? Are you kidding?'

Alec resisted the urge to punch the boy in his sniggering face.

'So there aren't any left, you know... out the back?' Alec leaned in closer to the kid and could smell the result of a polyester shirt and a ten hour shift. 'We could come to some sort of arrangement.'

'What do you mean?' the boy backed away from Alec, stepping into a display of small plastic horses and sending a few of them flying.

'I mean money, you idiot,' Alec snapped. 'I'll give you twenty quid, no – fifty quid if you just nip out the back and get me one of them right now.'

The assistant looked convinced, Alec thought. He was on to a winner here. But then the kid shook his head.

'I would, mate, but I swear, there's none left. Last delivery was this morning and – well...'

'There's a woman over there, she took the last one. Same fifty quid – go and tell her it was reserved, bring it here and the money's yours.'

The kid took another step away, shaking his head slowly.

'I- it's just...'

'Sixty quid then.'

The kid opened up his mouth to answer then stopped and shook his head.

'I can't, mister. If they find out they'll sack me and me Mum'll kill me.'

Alec turned away in disgust. He could see his only chance meandering its short, blonde hair towards the checkout. There was no way she would take money. Aunts are insane, he thought. And then it came to him.

Looking over his shoulder to make sure the assistant wasn't there and no-one was watching he reached forward, broke the glass and pushed the fire alarm button.

The alarm crackled into life, screeching out through the public address system putting an end to the piped Christmas music. Alec moved forward, tracking the blonde woman.

Ladies and gentlemen, said a voice on the public address system. A man this time and obviously pre-recorded. *Would you please leave any goods that have not been paid for on the shop floor and make your way to the nearest fire exit.*

The shoppers feet which had, until this point, being pounding to the beat of Christmas muzak had slowed down, seemingly unable to follow the broken rhythm of *alarm-announcement-alarm*. No-one really seemed to know whether to take the whole thing seriously and allow it to interrupt their commerce or to just keep on shopping.

The pattern continued, *alarm-announcement-alarm* until someone over the age of sixteen finally made their way on to the floor and shouted, telling everyone this wasn't a drill and to make their way outside. And like zombies, that was just what they did. Baskets down, trolleys abandoned and slow marching towards the door.

Alec hovered. Ducked down behind a display of Barbie dolls. Popped his head up just high enough to keep her in sight. To his immense pleasure he watched as the blonde woman followed the other shoppers, placing her basket on the floor and then walking towards the nearest exit. Grinning, he tentatively stepped forward, reached down and plucked the Gold PowerFormer from her basket.

Could it be this easy? That he could just walk over to one of the tills and pop it in a bag? There was only one way to find out. Alec walked forward, gaining in confidence with each step, taking a plastic bag and placing the toy inside it.

No security, no alarms. Apart from the fire alarm that is. Everyone else had their backs to him as they filed toward the fire escapes. Suckers. Alec strode across the now deserted floor and pressed the lift call button. The doors immediately slid satisfyingly open. Stepping inside he smirked again at the 'do not use in the event of a fire' sign. He pressed the button for the ground floor.

Outside the snow had been hard at work and was lying thick on the ground but there was a part of him that still thought he may feel the hand of a security guard on his shoulder. It would be best to keep a low profile, stay out of sight. Alec spotted an alleyway across the road and headed toward it. If the roads weren't blocked by the snow and if he was lucky he might actually find a taxi.

The streetlights shed an unhealthy yellow glow on the snowdrifts as the wind came up again. Alec squinted, running into the flurry and down the alley. Out of the white blur someone running in the opposite direction smashed into him, sending him flying into one of the drifts and banging his brow on something hidden within.

For a moment he could feel himself slipping out of consciousness then back in as the anger welled up.

'Oi!' he screamed. 'Watch out!'

The figure didn't turn around, turning back into the crowds at the end of the alley.

Alec was covered in snow, standing like an incensed snowman but still clutching the plastic bag with the Gold PowerFormer inside it. At least he still had that. Some snow slipped down the back of his collar and ran icily down his back. He shuddered, already soaked and knowing that soon he would be freezing as well when he saw a small shop across the alley.

The lights were on in the window but the snow obscured the name. He would go in there for a few minutes and 'browse', get warm and then find that taxi. Shivering, he opened the door of the shop and stepped inside.

'Oh, shit,' a knee-high avalanche of snow slid into the shop as Alec opened the door. He stepped into the bright glow of the interior, tried to kick some of the snow back outside then gave up. The wind caught the door and it slammed loudly. Alec stared through the glass at the storm then spied a figure's reflection standing behind him.

'Sorry. I'm...' he began as he turned around.

'Think nothing of it my dear man,' the man interrupted. 'You could not have stayed out there.'

Alec turned around to see the shopkeeper standing before him with a wide smile. He was a short man compared to Alec, not a dwarf as such but definitely diminutive. He looked up at his customer, his grey eyes catching the light to twinkle under his pointed eyebrows, the sharpness of which seemed to be mirrored by his pointed moustache and beard, the package all wrapped up in a dark pinstriped suit and spats.

'What is this place?' asked Alec, trying to distract from the fact that he was gawping at the man. 'I mean-'

The shopkeeper smiled. 'You mean you had to come inside to shelter from the storm my sweetheart. That is fine, perhaps there will be something here you will like. Perhaps there will not. You are welcome nonetheless.'

Before he realised what was happening the shopkeeper's hand was on his shoulder leading him towards a beaded curtain and into the back-room, a storeroom of sorts with an open fire and two wing-back chairs.

'And in answer to the question you asked a moment ago this is Venkman's Emporium of Curiosities.'

'And you must be-'

'Mr Venkman. At your service.'

Alec stared at the small man, like a tiny butler and suddenly noticed that he had his coat and shoes in his hands. The coat he hung on a hanger and the shoes he placed on the hearth. Venkman motioned towards an embroidered screen at the far side of the room.

'Please,' the shopkeeper continued. 'There is a robe behind the screen. You are soaking and you must change. I'll pour you a drink, you'll dry out soon enough.'

There was something peculiarly persuasive in the small shopkeeper's manner and Alec

did like the idea of a drink even in these eccentric circumstances.

'What's this odd little trinket, then?' Venkman's voice floated from the fireside over the screen as Alec began to remove his clothes.

'That? Oh, it's a present,' Alec replied.

'Your son?'

'My girlfriend's son.'

'A lucky boy and no mistake.'

Alec stepped out from behind the screen, a dark brown towelled robe wrapped around him. Venkman was already seated in one of the chairs by the fire.

'I hope you don't mind,' Venkman spoke slowly and deliberately. In an accent that Alec didn't recognise. 'I locked the door of the shop. Being back here, it's just safer.'

'No, not at all, thank you. This is all just-'

Venkman reached out and handed Alec a glass of something amber and alcoholic. Alec sniffed it. Whisky. Really, really good whisky.

'Don't mention it. You got here just in time.'

'In time? I've never noticed this place before.'

'Oh it's been here. Always has been. Always will be.'

Alec nodded and sipped the whisky.

'Glad I managed to save this,' Alec gestured toward the plastic bag that held the present. 'Went to a lot of trouble to get that.'

'I can imagine,' Venkman smiled then pointed away from himself to the other side of Alec's chair. 'Take a blanket if you're still cold.'

Alec reached and pulled one of the woollen blankets over his knees.

'You were telling me how you got it. The present.'

Alec sipped the whisky. His insides were beginning to warm with it. He began to speak and it felt like it was flowing like the whisky, his mouth talking, his eyes focussed on the dancing flames of the fire. The words came so easily, telling Venkman about leaving the office, telling him about not leaving a Christmas card, telling him about the blonde woman with the last toy in the shop. It wasn't until he had told him about the fire alarm and walking out into the snow that he looked up to see the small man staring intently at him, frowning and stroking his beard with his left hand whilst his right hand rested on the carved lid of a wooden small box that sat on the table next to him.

They sat in silence the only noise coming from the fire crackling between them, staring at one another until Venkman eventually smiled and poured them both another whisky.

'And the woman?'

'Woman?'

'The blonde one?' asked Venkman. 'What about her?'

'There are winners in this life, Mr Venkman. And there are losers.'

'Oh really?'

'The way I see it...'

'Yes?'

'Well the way I see it is that there's a scale. Like a big cosmic scale. And the company I work for does a lot of work for good causes. I mean like millions and millions.'

Venkman nodded and smiled.

'So the way I see it is that it all balances out.'

Alec nodded and looked to Venkman for confirmation.

Venkman squinted and stared at Alec for a second.

'Can I tell you a story?' he asked, eventually.

Alec frowned and stared back at Venkman. A clock somewhere behind him ticked and tocked. Eventually he nodded.

'Thank you,' said Venkman and topped up Alec's drink before turning his back and walking to a large book-case which loomed from the wall behind Venkman's chair. He reached out his hand and ran his fingertips across the leather-bound spines, gradually slowing until he found what he was looking for and drew it from the shelf.

Alec watched as Venkman made his way back to his chair, sat down and opened the book. From where he was sitting Alec couldn't make out the words but he could see that it was handwritten.

'There is a restaurant I believe gentlemen such as yourself favour at the other side of Killchester; the River View?'

Alec nodded. He had been there several times and spent an obscene amount of money in the process.

'This would have been a year ago,' Venkman continued, his finger tracing the words, looking for a starting point until, eventually. 'The door of the kitchen burst open and the chef, a tall man named Dave, tore the high, white chef's hat from his head.'

Venkman looked over to ensure Alec was paying attention, Alec looked back expectantly so he continued. 'The door struck the tray of an approaching waitress and sent shattered dishes spiralling like snowflakes into the air. Of course, she stumbled backwards, grabbing at some tinsel but it was not to be and momentarily she was sitting on the floor amongst shard of plates looking up at the chef's rapidly reddening face.'

'Dave stalked across the vast expanse of the restaurant. You've been there so you'll know that at Christmas you would be looking at, what, somewhere in the region of two hundred diners. All packed in as close together as was legal and none of these patrons expecting scenes like this to unfold.'

'The Maitre D' of River View at this time was a lady by the name of Sophie. She duly stepped forward and placed her hand on the irate chef's arm, not wanting to allow him to get involved in a fight with a customer. Not on that night.'

'"Can you phone Abigail?" Sophie had said, trying to distract him, telling him that Abigail had tried to call and wanted him to get back to her. Urgently.'

'Dave turned and shot her a look that would have shattered a glass wall. Sophie was no fool and stepped aside, shrugging and directing him to where the offending customer sat. The chef darted forward once more, leaping through the cramped space and coming to rest in front of table thirty-nine. The table was set for two but only occupied by one person; a man.'

'The man in question sat with his back to the chef. His dark, almost ebony hair was greased back and tied with a black ribbon into a tiny pony tail which perched on the collar of a shirt which, in turn, poked up above a beautifully tailored suit. This was a man who could afford to eat alone.'

'Not yet noticing the chef's advance, the man was quite blithely sipping from a glass of wine. Dave stared at his would-be nemesis; the back of his head, the hand holding the glass, the protruding little finger with a

strip of black nail varnish painted down the fingernail. A fingernail which, much to Dave's annoyance, was twice as long as all of his others.

"You wanted to complain?" said Dave, standing squarely behind the man and drawing himself to his full height. "About your meal I believe." He spat the words. Literally. The spit speckling at the corners of his mouth and flinging itself forward.

'The man moved his head slightly. This was the part where he was supposed to turn around and apologise. After all, that was what they usually did. Instead the man tilted his head a little, perhaps twenty or thirty degrees to the left and when he finally spoke he said just two words.

"It's inedible."

'And that was it.

'Inedible.

'The man lifted the glass of wine to his lips once more and sipped. He had paid an inordinate amount of money to dine in the River View and was not about to enter into conversation with members of the kitchen staff.

'Dave, it seemed, was not finished and screamed at the man, the noise bouncing around the now silent restaurant. He knew all too well that he had to do something to get back on top of this, to show the other diners that he was the chef. That he was the one who was in charge.

'And then it came to him.

'He leaned forward, over the man's shoulder and plucked the fork from beside his plate, placed it in the spaghetti which lay, untouched in the bowl in front of him and twirled, flecks of tomato sauce flying and landing on the man's shirt and jacket. He twirled it and twirled it and as he did so, he lifted the whole thing to his mouth and began to chew. Big, open-jawed chews that let dollops of the spaghetti fall from his masticating mouth onto the man's shoulder, into his hair and back down onto the plate.

'Sophie couldn't bear to watch and pulled at Dave's shoulder. He was ruining everything.

"Enough," she snapped.

'Dave nodded and pretended to step away but instead of leaving with Sophie, he turned back and placed his hand on the back of the man's head before pushing it forward with as much strength as he could muster into the spaghetti.

'In the alleyway behind the restaurant a short while later Sophie reached into her apron pocket, took out a pack of cigarettes and offered them to Dave. He selected one before handing the packet back.

'The chef patted at his apron, then his trousers until Sophie extracted a lighter from her apron and handed it to him. He lit his cigarette and inhaled sharply, the fire catching the tip easily then handed the lighter back to her.

'Sophie took the device but fumbled the packet as she did so. It spiralled from her grasp, shooting out cigarettes like some sort of demented Catherine wheel until the remaining contents were evenly distributed in the puddles at their feet.

'Dave began to laugh but his lungs were full of smoke and began coughing instead.

'Sophie took a fresh pack from her apron and unwrapped the plastic film.

'The pair of them stared into the cold night alternately breathing out steam and smoke. Sophie stared at Dave as if looking for something.

""It's the anniversary today isn't it?" said Sophie eventually.

'Dave began coughing once more, the question taking him aback slightly.

""So they told you then?"

""Well, when your predecessor was poisoned..."

'Dave nodded. "So what do you know?"

""He was your best friend, your partner, your Maitre D'..." Sophie took another puff, trying not to go any further.

'Dave stared at the other side of the alley.

'Perhaps sensing it was time to change the subject, Sophie took the opportunity to remind him that Abigail had telephoned. She seemed entirely taken aback by the ferocity of his response, his eyes wide with anger as he began shouting once more.

""Abigail? *His* girlfriend?"

'Sophie's mouth hung open then started flapping, delivering stumbling protestations of innocence.

'Dave breathed in through the cigarette one more time and sighed out the resulting cloud before slowly shaking his head.

'Sophie flicked the remainder of her still-smouldering cigarette, sending it hurtling through the air. It came down quickly and bounced on the concrete, rolled, found a puddle and was finally extinguished. By the time Dave turned back around she had retreated into the restaurant.

'As luck would have it. Or fate, perhaps, it was the anniversary. It had been two years since the poisoning. He took a bottle of water from the pouch of his apron and took a long pull from it then, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he plucked his mobile telephone. He began to dial a number on the telephone but stopped abruptly when a voice boomed out around the alleyway.

""Oi!"

'Dave looked around but he could not establish its origin.

""What?" he said as he continued dialling, half expecting to see the pony-tailed customer he had just dealt with step out to confront him.

""This is just the beginning."

'Dave responded with a lexicon of obscenities and, instead of confronting the terrible taunter, he stepped inside the fire exit of the restaurant and closed it behind him. Rubbing at his throat, he listened to the answerphone go through its usual routine, informing him of his options, how many new messages he had, the usual things one would expect from a device of this kind. He touched under his left ear, then under his right, prodding at his glands. There was an electronic beep that echoed around the storeroom as he pressed a button on the telephone and placed it on a shelf, turning his back on it and opening a refrigerator, checking the contents for something or other as the it began to speak.

""Message received today at..."

'He tapped, with irritation, on the door of the refrigerator with his right hand whilst rummaging inside with his left.

'There was a thundering, hammering on the outside of the fire door and Dave jumped, before hurling fresh obscenities at the assailants of the door. And then, finally, Abigail's voice came from the mobile telephone.

""...please... Please Dave..."

'She spoke in panting, breathy tones. Dave smiled at the sound of her voice and continued rooting around inside the chiller cabinet.

""They found out, Dave..." she continued, her voice crackling from the awful speaker on the mobile telephone. "Christ knows how but they found out."

'And then the tears started. The poor woman sobbing on the phone, panting for breath, wheezing and sobbing.

""You have to help me Dave, please, someone's here, they're here... Oh God no..." the voice echoed around the small utility room and Dave stopped, just listening and staring straight ahead as he heard the sound of Abigail's telephone drop to the wooden floor of their flat. Dave closed the door of the refrigerator and rubbed a splayed hand across his chest,

his own breathing becoming shallower and his heart beating faster as Abigail began to scream and scream. He twisted around, staring at the small, grey device as her quiet choking scream panted quieter and quieter. He grabbed the telephone as Abigail's screams were replaced by a almost inaudible wheezing, straining to hear he pressed his ear closer until he could hear nothing at all.

'And so he stood. Staring. Wondering. Listening. And then there were footsteps in his ear, on the machine, running towards the telephone. Louder and louder, and then a voice...

"It's time, Dave. You're next."

'When the voice spoke again it was coming from the other side of the fire door. "You know how it works, Dave..." it said. Dave dropped the mobile telephone. It hit the concrete floor of the utility and shattered into silence.

'He pushed open the fire door and stumbled outside. The cold of the night hit him again, he inhaled sharply but found himself panting, not quite out of breath but not really able to completely fill his lungs either.

'Have you ever seen anyone poisoned?' Venkman turned to Alec, his eyebrows furrowed.

Alec tentatively shook his head.

'So many ways that poisons can affect you. Headaches, confusion, drowsiness.'

Alec glanced at the glass of whisky in his hand. Venkman laughed a warm, infectious laugh.

'Not you. At least not yet.' Venkman laughed again and poured more whisky into both their glasses.

Alec smiled a nervous smile, not sure what to make of what Venkman was saying.

'It would all depend on the type of poison, of course. Whether you've eaten it, inhaled it, whether you were bitten by a snake. But whatever the poison should you surpass chronic toxicity and receive a lethal dose then you could probably count on vomiting, muscle cramps and then parts of your body would simply begin to give up the fight entirely.

'I am not aware of the exact poison to have entered Dave's system but I am certain that he knew what the poison was as the voice called to him from down the alleyway, taunting him further, telling him that he only had ten minutes until it was all over.

'Dave protested. Who wouldn't? Asking why. Why him? He was not pleased with the response.

“Ten minutes,” the voice seemed to shift, perhaps this time coming from above him. “Tick tock, David.”

‘Tears welled in the chef’s eyes and he screamed out again asking why this person was doing this to him. The answer came as no surprise whatsoever. It was because of what he and Abigail had done to his best friend. He had ten minutes until the poison took him. That was unless he could find a cure.

‘Dave scanned the alleyway, looking for where the owner of the voice could be hiding then sprinted toward the industrial-size dustbins next to the library, the only place a man could have hidden himself. There was no-one behind the bins so Dave grabbed one of the wheeled monstrosities, and hurled open its lid. He took a quick glance inside but there was no-one there either.

‘It was becoming more noticeable now, the shortness of breath that the running had induced was far in excess of what you would expect of a man of Dave’s age. As he stood panting into the empty night air he lifted his hand and began rubbing at his fingers. Fingers that he knew would be the first place to lose feeling, to be taken by the cold.

“Nine,” said the voice.

‘Of course Dave was not the sort of man just to let things happen to him. He had to get the upper hand, to go somewhere the owner of the voice would not expect and to regroup and it was that thought that drove Dave as he kicked hard at the back doors of the library. The doors remained resolutely shut. It should have hurt, given how hard he kicked but instead there was a creeping, icy case of pins and needles that were slowly working on his extremities. He shivered, stared at the doors then ran at them with all his weight. This time it worked, the doors gave way and Dave passed inside.

‘A man inside the library screamed, turning away from the books he was carefully placing onto a trolley to gawp at the panting, sweating individual who had broken into his library.

“Help me,” hissed Dave from the floor and clawed at his collar.

‘The man dived forward and propped Dave against one of the high bookcases before reaching into his pocket and taking out a handkerchief. He mopped Dave’s brow, then his own.

“What happened?”

‘Dave said nothing, just closed his eyes for a second. His shallow breaths seemed to be slowing and his tongue kept darting from his mouth, trying but obviously failing to moisturise his dry, dry lips. With an enormous amount of effort, he lifted his hand in front of his face and

began slowly, creakily to flex his stiffening fingers. He looked at the librarian, grabbed him by the shoulder and hoisted himself into a more upright sitting position.

"The lights of the library were simultaneously extinguished.

"They've found me," said Dave.

The librarian wasn't used to this sort of thing happening and gripped Dave's forearm tightly, the pair of them staring, wide-eyed into the pitch black, trying to make out a shape.

"Who's found you? What's going on?"

"Eight."

The voice was so close Dave could feel the breath on his ear and the breath had a smell. A smell he recognised.

"Who the hell was that?" the librarian hissed, tightening his grip on Dave who wrenched himself free. His eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness and as he stared into it he began to be able to make out the edges of the shelves.

"Who is this?" he stood up, his lungs wheezing as he did so. "Can't we come to some sort of understanding?"

Dave listened. There were no echoing footsteps from the carpeted aisles, no movement at all and no sound but his breathing.

"There must be something I can give you? Money? Do you want money?" Dave shouted.

No reply. Staggering backwards, his hand reached out and grabbed the first book he touched. A romance. The book slipped from his loose grip, spinning to the floor. The cramps in his muscles taking hold, the coldness spreading. His arms, his legs, the poison was gathering pace in his system and he knew he did not have long.

Dave stared down the aisle of books and concentrated on breathing for a moment. He rubbed the index finger and thumb of his right hand together. He couldn't feel them. Touching his face he could feel how cold they were. This wasn't good. He needed to move fast.

There was a crash behind him, he lurched around to look.

The librarian clattered loudly into his trolley, his eyes still not accepting the blackness.

"Seven," the voice shouted from way over the other side of the library.

"Get out of here," Dave hissed at the librarian.

Dave could make out the librarian's arms go up, feeling his way to a shelf.

"Wait."

'The librarian paused, his hand gripping the bookcase.

""Where are the books on poisons?"

""This is fiction."

""What?"

""Fiction. This is all fiction," he let go one hand and pointed. "Reference is way over in that corner."

'Whether he knew it or not Dave was passing the point now. It was becoming harder and harder for him now, as he stumbled forward into the library. Reaching the end of the aisle he looked around for some indication as to how to reach his destination but in the darkness all the shelves looked the same.

'Moving unsteadily down the next aisle, Dave's arms shot out to steady himself on a bookcase but before they could make contact the books flew off the shelf, raining down on him and forcing him to his knees.

""Six, Dave," said the voice from the other side of the bookcase. "Time to give up?"

'Dave hauled himself to his feet, books tumbling away as he did so. He stood, his head nodding slowly then stepped back, propping himself against a bookcase before sliding slowly down into a sitting position, his head connecting sharply with shelf after shelf as he fell. He did not shout out. The pain was no longer as sharp as it should have been. Finally his head dropped forward, his chin resting on his chest.

""Well, chef, I have a confession," Dave could hear footsteps coming from behind the shelves, coming towards him. "Ten minutes was probably a very generous estimate."

'The footsteps stopped in front of him and Dave lolled his head back against the books to look.

""Sophie?" he said. "You aren't here to help me?"

'Sophie shook her head.

""You did this?"

'She smiled kindly and nodded.

'Dave shook his head clumsily and toppled slightly to one side.

""But-" he managed before resorting to shallow pants.

'Sophie knelt down next to him and ran her hand through his hair. All he could feel was the vaguest of sensations now, no real feelings were penetrating. Sophie grabbed a handful of his hair and smashed his head into the bookcase.

""My brother. You killed my brother, Dave. But don't worry about that now, you just sit there and let the cold take you."

'And with that she stood up, staring at the life draining out of the great chef. Sophie put a cigarette to her lips and fired a lighter. For a split second the flames seemed to touch every book in the library then she snapped it out and all that was left was the tiny orange dot of smouldering tobacco. She inhaled deeply then exhaled, blowing the smoke down at Dave, his pants becoming more and more irregular.

'Watching. Waiting for it to be over.

'And, for the most part it soon was.'

Venkman closed the book with some reverence and immediately made his way back to the bookshelf to return it.

'Well, it wasn't a very Christmassy story was it?' Alec said, placing his glass on the table between him and Venkman.

Venkman shrugged slightly. 'And it wasn't a story.'

'Although clearly the bastard had it coming.'

'You think?' Venkman slid the book back into its place on the shelf. He was only just taller standing than Alec was when he was sitting and this close he appeared to have a leathery texture to his skin. Tanned. Like a the leather bindings of his books.

The wind howled, blowing down the chimney and attacking the fire like a petty child and hurled a single ember out into the room. The ember rose into the room then began to fade and fall downward until it landed on the back of the shopkeepers hand which, in turn, rested on the carved lid of the box by his side.

'It's getting worse out there, isn't it?' Alec shivered, somehow unable to lose the chill.

Venkman nodded and continued to peruse the shelves. 'The roads are most likely blocked. It was for the best you came in, I think. Ah, there it is...'

Finally he chose another book, and pulled it with a puff of dust from its home.

Alec picked up his empty glass, raised it to his lips and sucked at the dregs.

'Perhaps,' said Venkman, running his index finger over first his right eyebrow, then his left. 'We should open another bottle before I begin?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' Alec barked, laughing a little too loudly in the small room.

Venkman vanished from view, the book tucked neatly under his arm and Alec heard the opening and closing of cupboards.

'Can I give you something,' said Alec, slightly quieter. 'In return for-'
'I'm sure you will.'

'Pardon?'

'Here we are,' Venkman appeared with a green bottle with a tattered, brown label. 'It has... vintage.'

Alec smiled and nodded.

'Did you see the news? Last weekend.'

Alec watched the drink flowing into his glass on the table. He stared through the glass as the liquid splashed into it, gazing at the carved box that lay on Venkman's table, wondering what was inside. 'Which news?' he said as Venkman finished pouring.

The shopkeeper reached over behind Alec's chair, plucking a newspaper from some unseen spot and dropping it into Alec's lap.

'Last weekend's newspaper.'

Alec looked and saw the headline, a story he recognised.

'Oh yes,' said Alec. "There were two-'

'No,' Venkman interrupted.

'No?'

'Three.'

'No? But I heard that-'

'No,' Venkman snapped as he carefully opened the book. 'Do you want to know the truth?'

Alec lifted the new tippie to his lips and drew some into his mouth. It burned slightly and he coughed under his breath.

'Of course you do.'

Venkman sat back down in front of the fire and began to read once more.

'Samuel Grantham sat in his car and wiped the condensation his breath had fogged on his mobile telephone's screen. He was concluding an electronic conversation of sorts with several of his friends. It was not a conversation about anything in particular, the men simply spent time on their computers and entertained one another in the way you and I may do over a dinner table, perhaps.'

'Like Facebook you mean?' asked Alec.

Venkman scowled at the interruption. 'What?' he said sharply. 'I do not know a great deal about the intricacies of these technologies just that it was a conversation that had lasted so long it had prompted Samuel's girlfriend to call him and enquire not only of his whereabouts but also the whereabouts of the Christmas tree he had promised to procure.'

Venkman's attention turned back to the book, his finger searching for his place in the story.

'Samuel had lied to her, blaming his boss for keeping him until so late an hour but promised to bring home the tree.

'Finally putting the mobile telephone on the passenger seat, he turned the key in the ignition and headed for the street. As the car moved up the ramp towards street level he could hear a noise, a loud, rumbling *THUD, THUD, THUD* then the sound of people shouting.

'As his bonnet nosed into the night he was forced to stop as some sort of parade of people, all dressed as Santa marched past. Pressing his foot on the brake the car momentarily ignored him, sliding forward on a thin film of frost that seemed to glisten on every available surface. Some of the Santas were carrying an enormous Christmas tree.

'Samuel sounded the horn of the car a few times until he noticed there seemed to be some sort of camera crew filming the proceedings so he sat and smiled instead. Once the parade had passed he turned out into the street and accelerated in the opposite direction. It was Samuel's considered opinion that, in all likelihood, the parade had come from the empty lot which was some half a mile down the road. He had driven past it a few times and noticed they were selling trees but when he arrived he found the gates were chained closed.

'This was not, however, the last place in the world selling Christmas trees and he knew there was a good chance he would come across another vendor on the drive home.

'At least, that was his plan. Driving out of Kilchester city centre didn't afford Samuel any opportunities for tree purchase. Even when he reached the suburbs on the outskirts there was nothing and the rapidly descending fog didn't help matters. Once the suburbs gave way to open fields and country there were no streetlights to guide him and he was barely able to see further than a few yards in front of the car.

'It was, he reflected, typical of this to happen, knowing as he did what would transpire upon his return home. His girlfriend's aunt was going to be staying with them for a few days so when he arrived back at the house his girlfriend would just give him a withered look. Samuel hated the aunt. Even his girlfriend hated the aunt. And yet they both had to endure her every Christmas. Samuel was certain that the only reason Lilith endured the spinster's company was that she would inherit her money and her house. One day. One day a long time from today. And of course there would be no other mention of the lack of tree in front of her aunt. That pleasure would be saved for when got into bed when she would hiss abuse into his ear.

'And so the Christmas tree became an imperative. There was simply no way he would return without one. Taking his foot off the accelerator, he sailed along at a more sedate pace, hoping to catch sight of a sign or some small indication of someone still willing to share the Christmas spirit.

'But half an hour of driving later and Samuel wasn't even sure what village he was in let alone where to find a tree. Turning left, then right, all the streets were deserted and the fog just hung there below the lamp posts glaring at him.

'He shook his head and turned up the car's heater. The thought that this battle may have already been lost was beginning to form in his mind. It was time to go home. He touched the accelerator pedal and the car bounded forward at the same time a hooded figure ran from the periphery of his vision in front of the car. He slammed on his brakes and for the second time the car completely ignored him, gliding forward into the mist and into the figure.

'But not quite. The car turned slightly, skating on the ice, the figure kept running, out of the way as the rear of the car continued to turn until it came into contact with a fence. Samuel jabbed at the button on his seat-belt to release it then jumped out of the car.

"Hey," he said as he slipped forward, narrowly avoiding falling down in the process.

'The hooded figure stopped and turned around to face him. It reached up with both hands and removed the hood.

"Sorry mister," said a child, a boy who must have been ten years old with light brown hair. "Just wanted to get home. It's freezing out here."

'Samuel nodded as he looked at the boy then looked at his car. There wasn't any permanent damage but the chain-link fence had badly scratched the paintwork. He sighed and the steam that came out of his mouth hung in the air in front of him. And then he spotted them. Behind the fence were Christmas trees. Lots and lots of Christmas trees.

'Not one to miss an opportunity of this magnitude, Samuel dismissed the offence, saying that he would happily forgive the boy if he helped him get one of the trees into his car.

'The boy squinted his left eye and cocked his head, looking at Samuel, not sure what to make of him.

'After giving the matter some thought the boy declined.

'Samuel did not really know how to respond and so resorted to blackmail, threatening that the boy would have to pay for the damage to the car if he refused to help.

'The boy stared at him, a frown slowly manifesting on his brow.

"'What's the problem,' Samuel sneered, regressing to childish behaviour in an attempt to enlist the boy's help. 'Is he a gypsy? Scared he's going to curse you?'"

'Samuel laughed. The boy didn't.

"'I've seen stuff,'" the kid said eventually.

"'So you're just going to leave me on my own then?'"

'The boy shrugged, pulled his hood back into place and sprinted off into the fog.

'Samuel swore loudly into the thickening fog then turned back to the hole his car had made in the fence. He was certain it would be possible to fit a tree through it.

'Back at home Lilith was worried. Lilith was bored. But most of all Lilith was irritated at Samuel and his constant lack of dependability.

'Christmas traditions were important. Establishing them was important and it had become apparent to her that if Samuel wasn't prepared to commit to them then it was extremely likely he wasn't prepared to commit to their relationship either. She had already decided to end the relationship but had opted to wait until the New Year to do it. On the fifth of January Samuel would receive an unpleasant surprise. Lilith had planned it very carefully, she had taken great pains to ensure that she would have a date for the party she was attending on New Year's Eve.

'And of course there was Christmas itself. A Christmas she would have been forced into spending alone with her spinster aunt if Samuel was not in attendance. That was a prospect she did not relish.

'But then he hadn't appeared.

'Which, as far as Lilith was concerned, either meant that he was taking the procurement of the Christmas tree particularly seriously and wasn't going to return without one. Or that something unspeakable had happened to him.

'Lilith was beginning to worry that the latter may be the case and had taken to staring out of the window, watching for cars. Finally headlights flashed at the end of the cul-de-sac and she snapped closed the blinds not sure whether or not she wanted him to see that she had been worried.

'The sound of the car approaching gave way to the sound of the car pulling onto their driveway confirming her hope that it was, in fact, Samuel. The engine stopped and she galloped to the front door, pasting on her grimmest countenance as she did so and stood in the hallway as he opened the front door, hoping not to find him inebriated.

'Samuel beamed at her and pointed to the car which stood illuminated in the creeping fog by the security light their movement had triggered. Occupying the majority of the car from the rear, through most of the back seat area and into the passenger side of the car was a Christmas tree. Lilith was completely flabbergasted that somehow he had managed to pull it off. It was unprecedented.

'How Samuel had managed to get the tree into the car, Lilith had no idea because getting it out had rapidly become an exercise in self-abuse with her hands now patterned with the pricks of pine needles.

'She tried to quiz him, of course, about how trees were usually sold tightly wrapped in netting as they manoeuvred it towards the front door. Her at the top of the tree and Samuel at the doorstep with the base of the tree as he told her that they had no netting left. She had little reason to believe him but even less to care so they gave the tree one final hoist through the door and it came forward.

'There was sound from inside the house. A shattering sound.

'Lilith dropped the top half of the tree and stormed forward to find her fears confirmed. Her grandmother's vase.

'They stared at each other, the space between them quickly filling with the steam of their breath.

'Samuel began to speak but Lilith turned her back on him.

'The tree lay in the hallway for the next twelve hours, glaring at the pair of them and occasionally prodding pine needles into their extremities. Neither one of them was ready to move it and neither one of them was ready to back down.

'Over breakfast they barely spoke, with Lilith trying her best not to glare and Samuel trying not to make eye contact. The morning ground slowly forward punctuated by a series of monosyllabic grunts from either side to signify commands and responses.

'Samuel knew he had to redeem himself somehow and until a better idea occurred to him, he managed by just complying with the requests. He brought down the Christmas decorations from the attic, moved the furniture in the lounge, put the tree in its stand. A silent impasse.

'He tried giving her a hug as he took the star out of the box ready to put on the top of the tree but she turned at the last second and picked up the lights instead.

'Eventually the silence was broken by the doorbell. Samuel got up immediately, glad of the distraction. Muttering under his breath as he left the room, Samuel could almost be heard cursing Lilith's grabbing of the tree lights instead of allowing them a modicum of reconciliation. As he

reached the front door he had even gone as far as hoping she would electrocute herself on her precious lights. And with that he flung open the door.

“God rest ye merry gentlemen,” a tuneless dirge drifted through the door even before he opened it. “Let nothing you dismay...”

Samuel threw open the door to find a cluster of three young men and a young lady standing in the grey of the morning. A light rain seemed to be hanging in the air, not falling, just wafting gently from side to side. The cold air and the tiny droplets of water hit him simultaneously and he shivered.

“Remember Christ our saviour,” they continued. Samuel stared and tried to smile. “Was born on Christmas day.”

‘He crossed his arms and stood, getting himself comfortable.

“To save us all from Satan’s power...”

‘There was a cracking noise you could feel in the air and Lilith screamed from inside the house.

“When we were gone astray...” one of the carollers managed as Samuel slammed the door in their face and sprinted to the lounge.

‘There, sat by the tree was Lilith, her face taut in a gaping grimace.

‘By the time her aunt arrived a couple of hours later Lilith was resting in bed. Somehow she hadn’t quite managed to communicate to Samuel how she had managed to electrocute herself with the Christmas lights. The electricity had pulled all of the muscles tight into that awful grin but they were starting to relax finally. Unlike Samuel who would now have to deal with her aunt himself and the shrill yapping in the back of the taxi signified that, in spite of his insistence that he would not have the horrible creature in the house, she had still brought it with her.

‘He opened the door of the taxi and dog bolted into the house.

‘The moment he settled her aunt in front of the television with tea and biscuits he was back upstairs complaining to Lilith about the arrival of the hound. Lilith had limited sympathy but once Samuel had started on a subject there was little that could be done to stop him.

“If that bloody dog goes anywhere near my record collection I swear I’ll string it up.”

“You will do no such thing. Is she alright?”

“She’s worried about you. Wants to see you.”

‘Lilith shook her head. And propped herself up in bed. “Samuel, you know that tree,” she began but was cut short by her aunt bellowing from downstairs.

'She nodded to him and Samuel quickly made his way down the stairs to see what the matter was.

'It was the dog. Chewing the tinsel.

'Samuel smiled as Lilith's aunt explained how the dog thought the tinsel was a toy of some description. The dog stopped fighting with the tinsel on the tree for a moment to look at her and then went on pulling and growling. Samuel turned and walked back upstairs.

"I hate your aunt," he continued as he sat back down on the end of the bed.

"Don't worry, she hates you too," Lilith smiled and laughed genuinely for the first time that weekend.

"Are you coming downstairs?" Samuel reached out and touched her on the arm, her skin usually so much smoother than his was suddenly roughened with goose bumps as a second scream came from downstairs.

'This time the two of them leapt from the bed and thundered down the stairs, both instinctively knowing the difference between the moaning-whine of a dissatisfied elderly person and the full throated wail of real terror.

'And when they tumbled over each other through the flimsy lounge door they could see why.

'Hanging from the Christmas tree somewhere near the top was a new ornament, gently pirouetting and spinning and suspended by a piece of tinsel that appeared to be tied into a neat noose.

'The dog's tongue hung out of its mouth as the creature continued to twirl delicately. Lilith ran forward again, this time to the kitchen, her exit punctuated by a retching into the kitchen sink.

'Her aunt turned around to face Samuel. White-faced and shaking, she raised her index finger to point at the blame at him, screaming as she did so.

'Samuel just shook his head and backed away, moving towards Lilith, putting his arm around her.

'Lilith emerged from the kitchen, her gaze firmly avoiding the tree. She put her arms around her aunt and hugged her.

"No, Auntie. He was upstairs with me. What happened?"

'With a large glass of brandy in her hand Lilith's aunt began to tell them an entirely uninteresting tale of Samuel leaving the room, herself running out of tea and going to the kitchen to make another cup before finally returning to find what Samuel was now tasked with burying in the garden.

'Lilith waited until she had seen Samuel put the dog's limp body in the ground, waited until he had put a couple of spadefuls of earth on top of it then she came out to talk to him.

""What happened, Samuel?"

""What do you mean?"

""What do you mean 'what do you mean'?"

'Samuel frowned and threw another clod of dirt into the hole.

""Don't tell me you don't know. Something was off from when you came back."

""Off with what?" Samuel stared at her. She was usually much better at making him feel like he was to blame. He was beginning to suspect there was more to it than that.

'Lilith looked back at the house. Her aunt was watching them. "Keep filling the hole."

'Samuel nodded and did as she bade.

""The tree. There was something off about it from the first second I touched it."

""The tree? Are you insane?"

'Samuel was not likely to admit to anything without a fight if for no other reason than that he did not want to believe it himself.

""Where did you get it, Samuel?"

'Samuel took off his gloves and put them into his coat pockets. The cold of the shovel's handle felt good as he tossed another couple of shovelfuls on top of the dog.

'And Samuel explained the story to her. Told her what the boy had said. Told her that in real life sane people could not believe in a flight of fancy like a gypsy curse. And then he told her how he had wished she would electrocute herself. And how it had come to pass.

'The colour drained from her face and Lilith glanced at her aunt watching from the window. Carefully, she turned so that the old woman couldn't see her face and said quietly to him that she had heard what he said about the dog. And how she knew, she really, truly knew that he had not physically killed the dog. And yet it had happened. Finally she asked him why he would steal a tree? A cursed tree.

'Samuel told her, tried to justify it. It wasn't stealing. It wasn't cursed. He only half believed both excuses himself but when she asked him why again he told the real truth.

""Because I didn't want you not to have a tree," he said, simply.

""And why was that?"

'Samuel pushed the shovel into the pile of earth that lay next to the hole in the ground.

'He stammered and looked away.

'Lilith raised an eyebrow. Then nodded.

""I love you, I suppose." It was the first time Samuel had said it. He hadn't thought it would be over the corpse of a dog.

""Good enough for me."

""That was a test wasn't it?"

""Everything's a test, Samuel, now listen..."

'And Lilith spoke and Samuel listened. It had always been that way really but this time she was compelling, she knew just what she was saying and why she was saying it and Samuel believed every word.

""So if we wish hard enough," Samuel said eventually, having digested everything she had said and patted the earth flat on top of the dog. "That – perhaps, she burned to death..."

""Yes, then she'll be gone, I'll get the money and we will be set. For life. But we need something better than that. Something less... pathetic."

'At half past eleven Lilith and Samuel retired to their bedroom, turned the lights down low and wished. They wished hard that in the morning Lilith's aunt wouldn't wake up. They wished that her heart would stop in her sleep and they wished that she would feel nothing as it did.

'Downstairs the lights on the Christmas tree flickered and a spark jumped from an empty bulb socket onto a paper decoration.

'Lilith kissed Samuel in a way she hadn't for months then turned out the lights.

'The paper decoration did not smoulder for long.'

The shopkeeper reached over and picked up the newspaper that still lay on the blanket in Alec's lap and threw it into the fire. It caught alight immediately, the smoke from it billowing up the chimney as he walked toward the bookshelf to replace the book.

'So what the hell happened then?' Alec blurted. 'What happened in the end?'

Venkman smiled. 'That's what dental records were invented for,' was all he said.

Alec stared at him, looking for some kind of indication that it was all made up, that he was just trying to spook him but the longer he stared into Venkman's eyes the colder he felt. This was not a man who was in the habit of spinning tall tales. This was a man who...

'Did you set the fire?' Alec said and instantly regretted it.

Venkman took off his spectacles and polished the lenses with a handkerchief. Carefully cleaning the first lens then the second, he didn't answer until they were firmly back upon the bridge of his nose and even then all he did was raise his left eyebrow.

Alec shook his head and shivered.

'So how do you know, I mean, how did you find out what happened?'

Venkman stood up and began busying himself with some imagined errand.

'I know people,' he said as he bustled behind Alec. 'Who know people. I have insight beyond what you might call the normal. Tomorrow, perhaps the day after, they will announce they have found a third body.'

'Paid a policeman, eh?' said Alec, his eyes fixed on the wooden box beside Venkman's chair. 'I'm not averse to that on occasions myself,' he said under his breath.

Alec listened as Venkman wandered out of the back room and into the shop.

'You know,' Alec raised his voice to be heard and leaned over to Venkman's chair. 'I really should be going...'

'It's a blizzard out there, you'll not get far,' Venkman's voice floated thinly from some distant part of the shop.

Alec leaned over further and lifted the box into his lap. It was heavier than it looked. His breathing quickened and he could smell the alcohol on his own breath.

'I don't want to trouble you any more than I already have,' Alec shouted as his fingers rested on the lid of the box and his thumbs curled under its lip. He began to tilt the lid backwards.

'And besides,' Venkman stepped into view, reached forward and snapped the box shut. Alec shouted half in shock and half because the pad of his left thumb had been nipped by the box. 'I fear that you still have a lot to learn.'

Alec's face flushed with embarrassment feeling like he had been caught smoking by a teacher at school. 'I- er - I'm sorry. I just...' he trailed off, his words draining from him as quickly as the heat left his cheeks leaving him colder still. He shuffled his chair closer to the fire.

Venkman sat back down and placed the box back beside his chair, patting it as someone might pat a sleeping dog.

He stared at Alec and smiled.

'I worry for you, friend. That is all.'

'No need to worry for me, apart from the cold and the snow I'm fine,' replied Alec.

Venkman idly gestured to the side of Alec's chair where the bag with the present sat.

'It is a slippery slope.'

Alec shrugged, pretty sure that he wasn't required to answer yet.

'It is not about Karma. There is no scale,' Venkman continued. 'And I fear you do not take my stories as seriously as perhaps you should.'

'I don't mean to be ungrateful, it's just-'

Venkman held up his hand then wrapped his knuckles on the lid of the box.

'So you want to see what's in here?'

Alec squirmed in his seat, not really wanting to admit anything but eventually he nodded slightly. Venkman opened the lid of the box, then fixed Alec with a stare. Alec waited, knowing that it was inevitable now and from the box he brought what appeared to be a book.

'This diary came into my possession through one of my... contacts,' Venkman handed Alec what he immediately recognised to be a diary. Alec was surprised at how new it was, half expecting everything in the shop to be covered in dust and leather bound.

This was quite the opposite with last year's date badly embossed on the cover and a tacky leatherette effect on the cover that came off if you rubbed it too hard. Alec opened it up, flicking through the empty pages, unable to find any writing.

He frowned and looked up to Venkman.

'The 25th of December,' said Venkman. 'That's the date he started to write. Read it.'

Alec opened the diary to last Christmas and sure enough that was where it started.

He began to read but Venkman stopped him almost immediately.

'Read it aloud,' he said. 'It is your turn to entertain me.'

'The 25th of December,' Alec began, suddenly extremely self-conscious at the sound of his own voice echoing around the back room.

'It doesn't feel right. Sitting here like this,' Alec continued. 'Feels like I should be doing something more monumental, more Hemingwayish. But I'm not. It's Christmas day and I've spent it alone for the first time and writing in this, my first ever diary in my tracksuit bottoms and a newly curry-stained top.'

'Time to open a can of Stella and let the good times roll.'

'Spoke to my Dad and Mum on the phone. Had to stand at the end of the bloody garden to do it the reception is so bad but managed it. They can't understand why me and Helen are moving out here. Well, Mum

can't. Dad just talked about how the Godfather was on the telly later on. Would watch it if the telly was working.

'Got the keys from the estate agent yesterday and spent the first night in a sleeping bag in what Helen has decided will be the master bedroom. It's a bit weird, the house is so big and empty without the furniture in it. And without Helen.

'She's due back on the third of January so not long really. And lest future me forgets when he reads this in the year 2099, Helen was the one who bought you the diary, old man. Your only Christmas present for this year.

'At least until you unpack some of those cases.

'And another thing, old man, I miss her. We haven't been apart this long since we got together.

'Should probably stop writing now. I'm getting maudlin with the booze.

Alec looked up from the diary to see Venkman smoking his pipe. The shopkeeper took the pipe from his lips and smiled at Alec.

'The 26th December,' Alec continued.

'1pm – Didn't sleep great. Probably the booze or the fact that I'm in a sleeping bag on the bloody floor but whatever it was I woke up at something like six o'clock in the morning and that was it. Job done. Awake.

'Anyway got up and had some toast then started on the DIY marathon. You see, old man, I really want to get at least the upstairs sorted before Helen gets back. There's five, no six rooms up there at the moment and one of them is going to be an en suite if it kills me. Which, at this stage it might. Unpacked some of the things that go in the kitchen. Even put the poetry magnets on the fridge. Helen likes them, moves the words around to make little poems for me and it made me feel like she'd be back a bit sooner.

'10pm – Don't feel that well. Think I might be coming down with something. Probably a cold, or flu. Could be the dust. Knocked a bloody big hole in one of the walls up there in the master bedroom, but very little else was achieved. Have to remember to go out and go to the shops when they open tomorrow. I need a few things like milk and bread but mostly it's just human contact. No phone, no internet, no people... And no Helen. I feel like when I actually meet a human person I'll just unload all of the words I've saved up over the last two and bit days on whoever it is.

'I bet the girl on the checkout of the supermarket will thank me for that.

'Probably going to lay off the booze tonight I reckon, half an hour before I decided to finish I was laying into the wall with a sledge hammer and I stopped, just for a second and I could hear scratching, skittering, scratching.

'I bet it's bloody mice. Or rats. Rats are like my snakes. If I was Indiana Jones and shit. I should probably stop writing now. Maybe I will have a drink after all. Night night.

'27th of December.

'It's something like half four in the afternoon I suppose and my head is hurting like a bastard. Started with the lager then moved on to the vodka. Found it in a box I started unpacking in the spare room. Dad bought it for me. And I drank – all of it I think.

'And the wall. The wall from yesterday. Looking at yesterday's entry it backs up what I thought happened. Sort of. I took the sledgehammer to the wall. The wall in the master bedroom.

'Except it was bigger yesterday I swear. Yesterday it was like the Vitruvian man. I could stand in it. I thought I could. But the vodka. And my head. So maybe not. Now it's half the size I thought it was. But the noise is there. The scratching.

'Rats.

'Why did it have to be rats?

'I tried to do some more work. But every time the hammer connected with the wall my head... it hurt. Just ow.

'Then a man came to the door to connect the phone. And to give me the internet. At last. But he whistled and the whistling made my eyes rattle so I had to go and lie down until he left.

'Then the oddest thing happened. In the bathroom. I'd been sick. In the bath. Didn't make it to the toilet. My arms were hanging in the bath and my head against the side and the rats...

'I heard the rats on the landing. I saw them too. Only out of the corner of my eye they didn't look like rats. They looked, well I suppose it was the vodka and I'd just been sick. And it was just a glimpse wasn't it? But it looked like a kid ran past the door. A girl, actually. No booze for me tonight.

'Went for a walk to clear my head earlier and had a message from Helen. Was good to hear her voice. But then I phoned her back and it went straight to answerphone. Not looking forward to the sleeping bag tonight.

'28th of December.

'Woke feeling better this morning but it was 5am and I was freezing. Took the sleeping bag downstairs and fired up the laptop, sitting in the sleeping bag on the sofa until the fire warmed the room through and just vegetating, watching the internet, doing nothing.

'Eventually I had an idea to catch the rats so I Googled it and found something interesting. This one site was saying that I should put down flour on the ground. Sprinkle it around, I suppose so I could see which way they were going but also to see how big they were. Jumped in the car and went to the 24 hour garage and they sold flour. Put a load of it in the kitchen and upstairs around where I was working. In the bedroom. On the landing.

'Have to admit I was glad Helen wasn't here for this. Rodents didn't freak her out as much as they did me but I think this might have just convinced her to panic. Just the thought of them there, when you're sleeping... moving around you...

'But sleep caught up with me and I had a couple of hours in the warm in the lounge. Woke up thirsty and I hadn't remembered the flour until I stepped in it in the door to the kitchen. It was still before nine so the sun hadn't come up and I flicked the strip light on, not really knowing what to expect on the floor.

'The heat from the lounge hadn't got as far as the kitchen and as the light blinked on I imagined it was snow inside.

'Untouched snow as it happened.

'I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and wandered upstairs in the hope that something would be there but I have to admit I was beginning to think that I might have chosen a pretty crappy website to take my advice from.

'That was until I reached the top of the stairs.

'Coming out of what was to be our master bedroom and stretching to the middle of the landing were footprints. The hairs on the backs of my arms rippled upright as I stared at what was unmistakably the footprints of a small child. I scabbled in my pocket and took my phone out, wanting to take a photo, to prove that they existed before I walked into the bedroom. My eyes were rooted to the prints in the flour and I fumbled the phone, sending it clattering down the stairs.

'After picking it up I held it over the banister and took several photos from different angles before walking alongside them into the bedroom.

'They came from the hole in the wall.

'Or rather they came from where the hole in the wall would be when I eventually finished making it. Right now they came from the actual wall. The first footprint, and you can even see this on the photo, looks like it was made by someone who would have had to have been half in the wall. And so they tread from there to the bed and from the bed to the door and from the door to the middle of the landing.

'And then nothing.

'I emailed the pictures to Helen. When I re-read the email I sent it sounded mad. I don't think I should have used the word 'ghosts' yet.

'29th of December.

'Finished smashing the hole in the wall today. Took a photo on my phone to prove it to myself. Helen emailed back. She thought I was joking and said that the footprints were my own, there was no sense of scale. Wish I'd thought of that yesterday. She always was the clever one. The bitch.

'Was knackered after the wall demolition so just spent loads of time drinking coffee (hurray for the new coffee machine) and looking up ghosts on the internet. Found out today was the feast of the holy innocents, whatever that means. As the afternoon wore on the noises in the walls started. Just quietly but I knew they were there. Couldn't find anything of use on the bloody internet – too many whack jobs making sites about ghosts, weirdos the lot of them.

'Ignored the noises and they went away. Then after I'd eaten a wonderful tea that consisted of a Pot Noodle and half a packet of custard creams it all started again. The security light out the back went on when I was washing up the mug and plate I'd been using and there was a boy in the back garden. Down next to the shed at the far end. Went to investigate and stupidly left the back door open and unlocked.

'He'd run off by the time I got there but one of his mates must have got inside because I could hear them running upstairs. Decided to teach them a lesson so I locked the front and back door and grabbed a bloody big knife from the drawer. Got upstairs and couldn't see the little bugger then caught a glimpse as they ran from the landing downstairs. Well the doors were deadlocked. Keys in my pocket. No way out.

'Downstairs I couldn't find them in the dining room, in the lounge. When I got back to the kitchen the fridge door was open. Just a crack but it was open. I looked around, trying to see where else they could be. Checked the cupboards first but whoever it was was good at this. Must have done it before. I opened the door of the fridge and

'I slammed it closed.

'It was – inside there was – I don't know how else to put it, there was a woman's head. A severed head. The blood looked cold and black and there were – what do you call them? Tendrils? Hanging down from where it had been cut. And the smell, the horrible, metallic smell of the blood dripping into the salad drawer.

'I ran to the sink and I was sick but then I started to think it had to be a trick, there was no way so I opened the fridge again and – in a way I suppose this was worse. It just wasn't there any more.

'I closed the fridge door. Opened it again. Closed it. Opened it. Nothing.

'And then I noticed on the door of the fridge. The magnets, the poetry magnets. Somebody had moved them.

'You are not welcome

This is merely a taste

Of what will befall you

'I took a photograph. To prove what I'd seen.

'30th December.

'Slept in the hall last night. Halfway between the front and back door. If it was a kid who had got in the house I would have heard them leave if they tried. Didn't sleep very well in spite of the location. Troubled dreams. Can't remember exactly but just a bad feeling. Was glad when the sun came up and I had an excuse to get a cup of coffee.

'Tried to get on with things in the bedroom. Get it sorted out. Helen's due back in four days and I want it to be nice. No noises. But by lunch-time I was getting a bit paranoid. Not looking forward to the sun going down. Drank coffee like it was going out of fashion and ended up on the net in the afternoon trying to look up information.

'It started with just trying to see if there was any reason why we got the house so cheap. Emailed the estate agent, that sort of thing. The house was really cheap for the area and if the sites I found were to be believed then it had always been something like half the price of the other houses in the street. For maybe the last forty years. And it had changed hands a lot.

'Emailed my mate Jonathan as well to see if he fancied coming over tomorrow. Didn't tell him about the ghosts and shit. Just seemed like the prospect being on my own on New Year's Eve was becoming more depressing by the second.

'Did some more work in the late afternoon then, while I was having my tea I was sitting messing about on the laptop and came across the

website for the local paper. The site was a nightmare to navigate and it didn't work half the time but eventually I found the archives.

'And that was when I finally found something. A news report that referred to the house. It was about the neighbourhood and only referred to it in passing. *A horrible tragedy. And the poor children.*

'The archives didn't go back any further but there was an email address of somebody who supposedly oversaw them. I sent whoever it was a message asking them if they had any more information on the house or the events but didn't really expect anything in return.

'And then I thought it might help if I talked to them. The ghosts I mean. If they were here to tell them it was alright, that I didn't mean them any harm. That sort of thing. I figured it couldn't do any harm, if they weren't there then no one would know. Except you, old me. But you already know so I suppose that alright.

'I took another photo of the fridge magnets before I went to bed.

'The children had moved them.

'Remember as you walk the halls

We are the children in the walls

'31st December.

'I can't help noticing the house. The little things. The patches of threadbare carpet, the slight peeling of the paint in the corner of a room, a scratch on the wallpaper that's frayed. A scratch I couldn't remember from yesterday.

'I had to fight the urge to photograph it. All of it. Every detail. I'd been taking them of the fridge magnets all day. Even arranged them into a question but whatever was in the house wasn't in the mood for playing that game, instead preferring to scratch. Scratching at the far end of house. No matter where I stood it always seemed to be scratch-scratching from the far end of the house. The point farthest from me.

'Went out to get away from it and buy some supplies for when Jonathan came around and I could still hear it. *Thought* I could still hear it. I'd been trying to believe what Helen had said in her email. It was all in my head. Jonathan would see to that. Or I thought he would have.

'The phone signal at the house was patchy to say the least and while I was at the shops, the checkout no less, the damn thing decided to make its presence felt. I had to wait until I got back in the car to check my messages. Just one message. From Jonathan. Garbled in the signal coming and going but clear in its cancellation. A woman was involved. Which was typical for Jonathan but fair enough I suppose. It ended strangely, saying he might still come around if everything went tits up.

'There was a knock at the door later. I'd had two cans at this point and I was just watching some shit on the laptop, my eyes dropped to the bottom corner of the screen and I noticed that it was the same time I'd organised for Jonathan to come over. I threw open the door, can in hand and a dumb smile plastered on my face.

'Threw it open to an empty path and an empty street.

'There was another knocking. At the back door this time. I closed and locked the door, fearful of a repeat of the events of two nights ago before sprinting out the back, still smiling, hopeful to see Jonathan standing there in the glare of the security light holding a bottle of something that we would both regret in the morning.

'What I found in the garden, in the glare of the security light, at the bottom of the garden by the shed was a woman in loose, white cotton pyjamas. I threw open the back door and stood on the patio staring at her, my breath hanging in the cold air.

'I stared at her, my breathing settling into a more measured pattern and the wisps of breath hanging around me in the windless night. As I gazed at her I became aware that she was not having the same effect on her environment as I was. No breath came from her. I reached into my pocket for my phone, eager to take a picture of her but it was not to be found, left inside by the laptop. My eyes stayed fixed upon her, trying not to blink.

'We stood like that for a minute, maybe two, both of us still, both of us staring at the other until the security light, it's movement sensor obviously not sensing anything, clicked off. A split second later I bounded forward into the darkness, towards the shed and it clicked back on but she had gone. I was left alone on the lawn.

'1st of January.

'Sleep is getting harder. The bed is made up now so I've ditched the sleeping bag and the house is gradually becoming more like a home as the boxes get unpacked. Couldn't stop thinking about the garden, the children, that woman...

'I was beginning to suspect that – well, it seemed almost as ridiculous as the ghosts but I then I got the email. The archives person had got back to me and so, you know, it wasn't as out there any more. I started to really wonder if there might actually be someone buried out there. In the garden.

'The email was short, just saying that he would be happy to get in touch, he would get as much info as he could find and that we could chat on messenger later on. (note to old me – messenger was a primitive

communication method that involved typing messages to one another in real time and has no doubt been superseded by something equally infuriating and useless)

'The archives person was called Dan and not only did he seem to favour the one-finger method of typing but for some reason everything that came out had the same sort of grammar that was achieved with poetry fridge magnets. That said, he was extremely forthcoming but it was just such slow going. At one point I asked him a question then went away to make a cup of tea and the response still hadn't arrived when I sat back down.

'What I did find out I didn't like the sound of. The house had a history and the history was not pleasant. To his knowledge at least two children had been killed in the house although he was still investigating the circumstances and the woman was involved somehow. He thought she may also have been a victim but he wasn't sure.

'After we'd talked for an hour he said he had to go so I thanked him and went to stare out of the window at the shed. There was nothing to see tonight, nothing triggering the security light but nothing seemed to be lurking in the garden. Eventually I started to get pins and needles in my legs and looked up at the clock to see that I had been standing in the kitchen for nearly two hours.

'Came upstairs to bed and wrote the diary in case I forget things. Going to try to sleep now because things keep slipping from my thoughts. Just tiredness but it's irritating.

'2nd of January.

'Slept better last night, except for the dreams. But sleep came at least. Can't imagine I'll sleep as well tonight after what happened this morning. Was walking back from the corner shop with some milk and a paper and an old woman stopped me at the entrance to the estate. Said she didn't recognise me. I resisted the urge to be a smart arse and smiled instead, told her I was new and then we fell into conversation about the estate.

'And the house of course.

'She'd lived here all her life and corroborated what Dan, the archive guy had told me. Apparently she had worked abroad so hadn't been here when it had happened but she knew about the murders. Two children. A boy and a girl. And a woman. The wife.

'She seemed reluctant to go further than that and I told her I was pleased to meet her and if she ever needed anything just to shout. She looked at me like that was the last thing she would ever do and began

walking away. But then she stopped, turned around and walked back to me, put her bony hand on my shoulder and looked me straight in the eye.

““He buried her at the bottom of the garden. The children too, they say.”

I pushed her for more but that was all she would say. As she was speaking, I don't know if it was the wind blowing in her eye that caused it but there was a tear. Just one tear.

‘I asked her what she meant and she shook her head but my hand was on her arm, just lightly but enough to let her know that I didn't want her to go just yet. She thought for a moment and then spoke quietly.

““They say he took each of them by the hand. Said ‘*Come sweetheart I have something to show you*’ and then he led them to the bottom of the garden and... ”

‘She lifted her hand pointed her index finger and drew it across her throat.

‘I just nodded and she walked off.

‘I'm writing this with one eye on the computer, hoping that Dan will be back online tonight but I suspect it's past his bedtime. Still, tomorrow is a new day. Tomorrow is a Helen day and I think I'll be able to make sense of this better when she gets back.

‘3rd of January.

‘Helen isn't coming back.

‘Not today at least. Something went wrong with the contracts on the job she was working on or – oh I don't know, I don't understand her job. All I know is that she's away for two more days. I think she knows I was crying when she told me, she sounded shaken by it. Started to ask me if I was alright and I started to blurt out everything, all the evidence, all the conversations.

‘Everything I wanted to tell her in a scientific and measured way and it just came out. Infodump. Hysterical with it I bet.

‘She totally freaked. Told me to pull myself together, pulled her grown up act on me but she knows me and something must have clicked in her head that I wasn't right because she phoned me back half an hour later. Said she had some spare time and was going to do some proper research herself. Because obviously I can't be trusted, I suppose.

‘But she must have believed me because she told me to leave. To go to a hotel. I said I would. I intended to and then two things happened.

‘Firstly the fridge. The magnets.

‘*Do not go.*

Do not leave us.

We want you to come and play

In the garden, please stay.

'That was bad enough but then Dan was on the computer. Slow-typing at me with the drip, drip, drip of information coming down the line. I could hear them walking upstairs as he was typing but I just screamed at them, screamed to shut up and keep the noise down. I suppose that's what you do with kids isn't it. They stopped so it must have worked. Dan was bleating on about how he had uncovered something; a picture. He had scanned it in.

'I opened it and something happened. I saw it. Just for a second I saw what had happened here. And then the laptop screen cracked from side to side.

'4th of January.

'I stayed in the house. In spite of everything. But today's a new day and I think Helen is probably right, I need to get out and clear my head. They didn't come last night. After everything that had happened. They had done enough and they let me sleep. I didn't get out of bed until noon and when I did I went about fixing up the remainder of the house, doing the jobs I knew needed doing before Helen got back tomorrow.

'She would be in for a surprise when she got back, I would have some things to show her.

'I got rid of the laptop. Just in case there were any questions asked. I would just make something up if she asked. Or I would tell her the truth. Sometimes the truth is just so much more... juicy isn't it?

'Actually now that I come to think of it there really is no reason to leave the house. It would feel wrong to leave them after what I'd seen. I'll text Helen. Tell her to come here tomorrow and when she arrives everything will be okay.

'Everything will get sorted out when Helen arrives.

'It wouldn't be right to leave the house, such horrible things had happened but we had to stay here because we don't have children so the same thing can't happen to us. So I'll just sit here. Sit here and wait for Helen to arrive.

'5th of January.

'I don't think there'll be much more to say in here, much more I will be needing to say. I think I've said it all, everything that's important is documented.

'I have photos after all.

'Helen is back. She was mad at me at first, I wouldn't answer her texts. Telling me to leave, her messages, telling me to go somewhere else. I just sat.

'And waited.

'She's on the phone now but I had to get the evidence. The evidence is so important. You'll find that out from the police when they arrive.

'Helen brought evidence too. She had called the solicitor. Confronted him and shamed him into confirming what I had already found out. Because some witnesses are less believable than others. She trusts the solicitor over me.

'But he told her what I told her. The price of the house. That there was a history.

'And then she phoned the local paper and she *claims* that the person in charge of the archive is a woman called Annie. I told her about Dan but she wouldn't have it and apparently she knows best...

'We will see about that.

'She's on the phone now. To Annie. Checking up on Dan.

'It's not looking good for him.

'Or her.

'But she didn't see the photograph that Dan sent. Dan had a photograph that Annie hadn't seen and Helen hadn't seen but I *had* seen it. And Dan was in the photograph. And the children. And the woman. And I was in the photograph. Or I was reflected in the laptop screen. Or both.

'In a moment she is going to put the phone down and turn to me and tell me that Annie has found out who Dan really is. What Dan really did. And who he did it to.

'But for now she still trusts me so I'll smile and kiss her forehead and just tell my sweetheart to come and follow me because I have something to show her.

'Something in the garden.'

The pages of the diary blew closed and the book fell from Alec's frozen blue fingers. The wind had blown a snowdrift over the right hand side of his body, a frozen rivulet of blood running down his forehead. The wind continued, unabated for a few more gusts until the diary was obscured and then a figure entered the alleyway.

A female figure.

Apparently distressed, she ran through the snow drift to Alec's frozen form and lifted his wrist. Finding a pulse was hard but it was there. Only just but it was there. She dropped his arm to the floor and reached down

to his side. If you were standing in the alley all the you would have been able to see was the back of her short, cropped, blonde hair but when her face came back into view you would have seen that it was smiling.

As the figure began to walk away she was carrying an extra bag. A bag that contained a Gold Powerformer.

The wind whipped the snow from the ground into the air and the clouds gathered quickly to hurl further snow downwards to mix with it.

'Young lady,' a voice penetrated the storm and the blonde woman turned around.

'Come inside, the storm is... too much, please come in,' said the shopkeeper, opening his shop door and allowing the warm light to touch the cold snow.

The woman glanced at the sign above the door.

ium of Curiosities

was all she could make out.

She stepped towards the small man, smiling, hoping he hadn't seen what was obscured by the snow drift.

'I am Mr Venkman,' he said as she stepped into the shop. 'And you are?'

'Er – Sophie,' she said, holding the newly-acquired bag close to her chest. 'My name's Sophie.'

'Of course it is,' Venkman said and closed the door behind her.

Colophon

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About The Author

Adam Maxwell was born in 1976 and spends a great deal of his time in the loft on his own cultivating a fear of crowds. He has a Masters Degree in Creative Writing from Northumbria University, and lives in the wilds of Northumberland. Sometimes he throws things at passers-by.

If you liked this eBook then firstly I would like to congratulate you for your impeccable taste and secondly I would suggest that you visit the website www.adamaxwell.com where you'll find that new stories appear on a monthly basis as well as a short story podcast and loads of other things you might be interested in.

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From the same author on Feedbacks

Dial M For Monkey (2006)

Adam Maxwell's first collection of short stories is inventive, funny, dark, and hugely entertaining. Effortlessly fusing pop culture, gunplay, and simians, *Dial M For Monkey* contains a vibrant mixture of short stories - and short-short stories including 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' which featured in McSweeney's *Internet Tendency*.

The Night Before The Christmas Before I Was Married & other festive tales (2009)

Charles Dickens has dominated the Christmas short story market for too long and he's so bloody depressing... wouldn't you rather read something that was funny, had comedy misunderstandings, people accidentally getting engaged and generally was a lot more entertaining and less depressing? Then you're in luck...

Let's be honest, Christmas can be a pain in the arse (or a pain in the 'ass' if you're from the other side of the pond) and this collection features some stories that I think we can all relate to...

Whether it's becoming accidentally engaged to your ex when your fiancée is coming home for Christmas...

Or perhaps you're spending Christmas with the in-laws, your wife is stupifyingly drunk and you destroy the presents...

No?

In that case you'll want to see what happens when two master hypnotists clash over an argument concerning a Christmas tree... All these things and literally two others are dealt with in this collection of Adam Maxwell's Christmas stories.

He has asked me to tell you that he hopes these things don't happen to you this Christmas. And he also hopes they don't happen to him.

The Defective Detective : Murder on the Links (2010)

Clint had woken up in some strange places in his time. Narcolepsy is like that. But even he had never woken up on a golf course next to a dead body. Until today.

When one of his friends reveals himself to be a detective Clint jumps at the chance to tag along. But his friend is an idiot. And the police are beginning to suspect that he was involved. The identity

of the killer seems obvious but can Clint get to the bottom of the mystery and save his own skin before the stag party catches him? Murder. Intrigue. Alcohol. Detectives. Clues. Golf. Laxatives. What else do you need?

The Defective Detective : Cat Chaser (2010)

It's the first case for Clint, probably the world's only narcoleptic detective, and everything should be going really well. To be brutal, it probably would be going a lot better if he'd managed to stay awake when he was briefed.

With four suspects and clues flying will he be able to find out who's guilty? Or even what they're guilty of?

The Defective Detective : The Curious Case of the Kilchester Courier (2012)

Chasing a parcel delivered to a neighbour, Clint is sucked into a remarkably civilised but mildly deranged crime scene. There he encounters almost-blackmail, not-actually prostitution, probable-sex scandals, genuine-imposters and the very real theft of something incredibly important.

Twice.

Will Clint be able to stay awake long enough to restore what has been stolen to its rightful owner and will he need to resort to his new book 'The Agency's Foundation in Private Investigation : Home Study Edition' in order to solve the case?

These and literally three other questions are answered in the third Defective Detective outing 'The Curious Case of the Kilchester Courier'.



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Food for the mind