

Neighbours

She took a long walk every day, whatever the weather but she was pleased that today the wind had dropped and she could take the top path over Brown's farm and along beside the river where the path met the road behind the mill, from there she would pass the shop where she could collect some milk for her coffee.

It had been a very enjoyable walk but as she turned towards home, beside the mill race, the wind became surprisingly strong and within seconds it had begun to rain thick heavy drops quickly wetting her hair. She was just on the edge of the land surrounding Martin's mill and the heavy rain caused her to stop, standing for a moment under the overhanging eaves of an outhouse she pulled on her woollen hat and gloves, it had become much colder she realised. A sudden gust of rain made her step back a bit and the door of the old building gave behind her so that she fell, and sat in an ungainly heap on a particularly smelly pile of old, rotting hay. The smell was awful, she a countrywoman used to the ripe odours of the farmyard, clasped her hand over her mouth hauled herself up catching hold of a clasp on the open door to steady herself. As soon as she could she went on her way hardly noticing the sheets of rain, passing the shop without stopping for the milk.

Hanging her coat on a hook behind the kitchen door she saw the dinner plate sized stain. In the warm house the smell emanating from the foul mark filled the room and so she carried the coat to the back porch. Later when the downpour had abated took up her old jacket from the cupboard and decided immediately to go to the shop and use the dry cleaning service offered there. At least it would be out of the house although she doubted the coat would be collected from the shop for a day or so. Even with the coat out of the way the smell seemed to stay with her and she felt she had to change her clothes. As soon as she got back, she put everything into the washing machine and turned it on straight away. It was when the kettle came to the boil that she remembered the milk.

It was two days later when the police arrived, a sergeant and a young constable.

"Miss Harris?" the sergeant asked, although he knew who she was, he had lived in the village as a boy.

"Yes Ryan, I haven't changed my name recently."

She was surprised that the constable had looked towards his colleague with a slightly worried expression.

"I believe you were at the mill on Monday." Ryan Phipps said with a faintly threatening tone.

"Not at the mill, I stopped to shelter from the rain whilst I found my hat. If that is what you mean."

"This is a serious matter, Miss Harris, the body of Jack Martin was found yesterday in a barn up there and our investigations have revealed that you were seen exiting the mill in a hurry, looking perturbed."

She wondered whether there were special language classes for police officers?

Miss Harris was not sure whether her slightly flippant comment, or the answer to a question about washing the clothes she wore on her walk, or the fact that her coat had been discovered at the shop and had been removed for testing was the reason but she was asked to "accompany them to the station, right away."

As she waited to be interviewed she thought about her day, there was no one who could verify any of her movements although somebody had seen her leave the outbuilding at the mill. She wondered whether anyone had seen her earlier and what had Jack Martin been doing in the hut. Jack Martin of all people, everyone knew about her and that rogue Martin and people's memories were long in a village like this one.

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