

S'no Mystery by Sue Fairclough

Since daybreak, the snow had been drifting down in large, lazy, flakes from a jaundiced sky. Alice had replenished the bird feeders, then cleared an area on the lawn for the scraps of biscuit and pastry she had been saving for the robins. Her footprints were now mere indentations in the snow blanket. She watched from the kitchen window, marvelling at the transformation before her. Each branch of oak, each spray of holly, each tangled network of hedge had its own sculpted line of white. An architectural maze where once there had been only dark, indistinguishable bark and evergreen.

She returned to her desk and her laptop. Sometime later her mobile pinged:

'Hey! How's things?'

'Dan – good morning. Fine thanks, although the snow's getting quite deep here.'

'Yep, here too. Some drivers never think to slow down – just as well the road's been salted. Listen – how about I come over later?'

'Not tonight. I've got Pilates this evening - if it's running; and I want to make sure I have finished this piece of work, the Board are expecting it tomorrow morning. The council never get around to salting my road – s'ppose I'm too far out of the town. Travelling might be difficult later.'

'Mmm – I was hoping it might be so deep, I would have stay at yours'

'Dream on! Besides, I don't have enough food in the house for your appetite!'

'We can feed on the food of lurv – '

'Oh, go away and let me get on! Speak later.'

'Yeah. Bye.'

By early afternoon the snowfall became sporadic, the leaden sky lifted and a weak sun filtered through the cloud. She could not stay in all day. The report was almost complete, and the novelty of snow was not to be ignored. She pulled on boots, an extra jumper underneath her wax jacket, gloves, hat, pocketed her mobile phone and checked the battery on her camera. Sunlight cast long shadows as she padded on the soft snow up the lane to the bridle way that wound through the wood. In the normally dark interior, the snow lit the moss-covered trunks with their coating of icing sugar, and disguised the bramble tendrils under foot. It was usually quiet here, but now the silence was tangible, every footfall and breath muffled as though by goose down. The world seemed in a dream-like thrall.

There was a small clearing where two trees had fallen, their gnarled roots gesturing to the sky. Here the snow had been disturbed, leaf litter and earth scuffed and scraped. Camera poised, she hunted for footprints of fox or deer. All she found were boot marks on the margins of the clearing. As she wandered around the perimeter she could not detect where the boot marks left it, and there were none on the snow-covered path ahead of her, nor any the way she had come, except her own prints showing smudged in the snow. A pheasant crowed its two-tone alarm somewhere in the depths of the wood. It would be

wonderful, she thought, if she could get some photographs of a cock pheasant against the shroud of snow. The light would be better at the far side of the wood. Her mobile pinged.

'Found anything in the woods?'

'Dan? How do you know I'm here?'

'I'm psychic – didn't you know?'

'No I didn't! Seriously, how did you know I was in the woods?'

'Just call it a hunch. Must go, boss is calling me on the other line. I'll call you again.'

Eventually she reached the point where the bridleway petered out as it traversed fallow fields. Here she struck out towards one corner where a brook formed an ox-bow. Her breath writhed in soft clouds as the cold, antiseptic air hit her throat. She experimented with camera shots, trying to capture the patterns of leaves with their white delineated contours, the desiccated remnants of blackberry - each with its own snow cap. There were signs in the snow where animals had tried to clear it away to find hidden nourishment, and feathered marks where birds had tried to land. The brook glinted black against the white banks, whilst young whips of an osier tree glowed orange. As she approached, a flock of winter thrushes – fieldfare - issued their throaty "schack-schack-schack" as they moved away through the trees. Gathering clouds were beginning to dim the light, even here in the open.

Again, the ping of the mobile. 'What do you want this time?'

'Oh, just wondered whether the little stream was frozen?'

'OK, this is getting tedious. How did you know I was looking at the stream?'

'My secret.'

'I don't like secrets. Dan, how did you know?'

'I told you – I'm psychic.' He rang off.

Thoroughly annoyed, she turned and began to retrace her footsteps to the path that would lead her home again. What had got into Dan? She was aware that he liked to know what she was doing and where she was going. Ever since they had met up after making contact on the dating website, he had shown interest in her, how she lived, worked, what she ate – it had been quite refreshing after other dates, whose whole world revolved around themselves. She had assumed Dan was just being protective. But today it was irksome. It almost felt as though – no, that was a stupid thing to think. She shut the thought from her mind and turned her attention to her surroundings.

Sunlight slanted low through the trees. She could see the trail of her footprints receding into the gloom. There were other footprints too, showing dark beside her own prints. She realised the new prints ended where hers had turned to walk across the field. She cast around to see where the other person's trail had gone. Just as earlier at the clearing, she could see no sign of where the prints went. They merely stopped at the end of the bridleway. She started back down her own trail into the wood, scanning the ground. There were her prints and the other set beside hers. She glanced behind her - her footsteps were now following her first trail. With the other set of prints pointing in the direction of the fields. Oh well, she thought, whoever it was must have climbed or jumped over the

undergrowth and she had merely missed where they had left the path. The wood was now very dark with just a glimmer of light from the horizon shining through the trees. She reached the clearing. Perhaps it was the dim light, or the snapping of twigs which she heard as she approached. The skin on her neck prickled. Her senses felt, rather than saw, shadows amongst the trees.

Ping! She took her phone out of her pocket, hesitated, then swiped the screen.

'Dan?'

'Yes, it's me – who else were you expecting?'

'No one – why should I? What's got into you today?'

'Oh, just a bit stir crazy I guess.'

On an impulse she asked: 'Do you know where I am?'

'Yes – in the clearing in the centre of the wood... must be getting dark in there by now.'

'How do you know I am here?'

'GPS tracking, sweetheart. What did you think?'

'I think you are stalking me, that's what I think. And I don't like it, please stop.'

'Ok, sorry. Bit of a geekish thing to do and I should have told you. Anyhow, don't you like to know that there is someone watching over you? How about I make it up to you by bringing a take-away over tonight? Alice, Alice can you hear me?' There was no reply.

Sue Fairclough

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