

Honeycote

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A single bell tolled out with authoritative finality. Eye-watering winter sunshine drenched the little churchyard at Honeycote, highlighting the dewy cobwebs that stretched from grave to grave. A mound of earth indicated the most recent, the latest in a line of Liddiards that stretched back hundreds of years.

He craned his neck to assess the turnout. They were all there. Patrick, seemingly unperturbed, the only betrayal of any emotion being the speed at which he smoked his cigarette before tossing the nub end into the freshly dug hole. Sophie and Georgina stood behind him, unnaturally pale in their black school coats, lending an air of Victorian melodrama to the tableau. He thought this was probably their first funeral, if you didn't count the elaborate arrangements they'd made for various guinea pigs and goldfish over the years. Kay was chic in rigidly tailored black, a huge hat and impossibly high heels - he knew she'd be wearing stockings. Lawrence was at her side, etiquette requiring them to be united. Even Cowley was there from the bank, in a shapeless suit, his Christmas biro clipped into the top pocket, no doubt luxuriating in a morning away from his desk: this was about as much fun as Cowley ever had.

And Lucy. She'd rejected widow's weeds in favour of palest grey, her only concession to mourning a black velvet ribbon that held back her curls. She was wearing a pearl necklace he'd given her the Christmas before, an over-generous gesture he hadn't been able to afford. As ever.

As she arrived at the graveside to stand beside his brother James, there was just time for him to notice her slipping her hand into his before the vicar started intoning the familiar words.

As the first clod of earth began to hit the coffin, Mickey Liddiard summoned up every last drop of energy from his bones and pushed. But the lid of the coffin was stout, hewn from a mighty oak, and wouldn't give . . .

'Mickey! Mickey!'

Lucy anxiously shook her husband awake. She could feel his heart hammering as he thrashed beside her. He sat bolt upright, drenched in sweat, and looked at her in alarm.

'You've had one of your dreams again.'

Mickey slumped back on the pillows, relief that it was all over flooding through him. But Lucy could still sense anxiety.

'What on earth were you dreaming about? You were tossing and turning — '

'I don't know.' Mickey feigned puzzlement. He could remember only too well. 'You know what dreams are like. You wake up and they're gone.'

It was the third time this week he'd had the dream, or one like it. He'd wondered about having it analysed, but thought perhaps the meaning wasn't all that hidden and that quite simply he had a fear of dying and nobody giving a toss. He screwed up his eyes to look at the clock. 'What's the time?'

Lucy stretched out her arm and turned the miniature carriage clock to face her. 'Nearly six.' She frowned as Mickey threw back the blankets. 'You don't need to get up yet, surely?'

'I need a shower.'

She watched his shadowy outline pad across the room and pull back the heavy, interlined curtains, letting the very first fingers of early-morning light in. She could see him clearly now. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and with still no sign of a middle-age spread despite having celebrated his forty-third birthday six months before. He had just enough gravitas in his features to stop him looking boyish, but he had a bloom of youth that he didn't deserve and that his contemporaries resented given his lifestyle - no thickening middle or thinning hair as yet, not even a sprinkling of grey in his thick brown hair.

He was definitely a handsome man in anyone's books, but there was a frown marring his features as he gazed out of the window that Lucy didn't like. She suddenly felt a need to reassure both him and herself. This wasn't the first time she'd woken him from a nightmare lately. She patted the empty space in the bed beside her.

'Come back to bed.'

Mickey shook his head. He was wide awake now, the adrenaline from the dream still pumping through his body, and his head was already whirling with the problems the day held in store for him. He reflected grimly that he had no respite these days, only a brief half-hour after the first few glasses of wine, in that mellow period between being relaxed and becoming totally plastered. Why could he never stop at that point? Why did he insist on getting completely shit-faced, so he became melancholy, his fears waxed rather than waned and his sleep was troubled?

He turned to look at his wife. She was wearing the necklace she'd had on in the dream, and didn't look a day older than the day he'd married her. But then why should she? She had nothing to worry about. She knew nothing of his problems, that was for sure.

'What are you doing today?' he asked her.

'The girls are breaking up for Christmas tomorrow. I've got to hit the supermarket and do a big shop.'

Big shop. Big bill.

'Why? Sophie's always on a diet and Georgie only eats treacle sandwiches —'

Lucy grinned. 'Well, I've run out of treacle. And I need to start stocking up for Christmas. I'm not going to get caught out again this year.' As soon as she said it, she had a vision of herself at the end of a huge queue in Sainsbury's. It was her annual ritual, resolving to be organized and failing. But there were always better things to do than make lists and fill the freezer.

Mickey walked over and dropped a kiss on her forehead. She caught a whiff of the sweat that had now dried on him. It smelled of panic, not exertion, and she suddenly felt glad he'd

chosen not to come back to bed. Lucy wasn't fastidious, but the smell was unfamiliar on him. It unsettled her.

Moments later, as the warm water washed away the remnants of his dream, Mickey considered the day ahead. He resolved to be positive and confront his problems for a change, instead of seeking out one of the displacement activities he was so fond of, the ones that helped him avoid the real world. He'd get to the brewery early, try to get on top of the mountain of paperwork he knew was waiting for him. It was unlikely to have disappeared. It had been there for months.

As it was still so early, he decided to walk. He usually drove, which was pretty inexcusable as the brewery was scarcely three-quarters of a mile from the house, but today he thought the exercise would do him good; it might clear his head a bit. He could always get Lucy to pick him up later if he couldn't face the walk home.

It was a brewing day, which meant scruffy clothes rather than a jacket and tie, so he pulled on jeans and one of the dark green polo shirts he'd recently had made up with the brewery logo on the left breast. They'd been an attempt to establish some sort of corporate identity at Honeycote Ales; make it look as if he had his finger on the pulse and was in control. It was funny how something so simple managed to paper over the cracks. Everyone had been very impressed.

Lucy had fallen back to sleep, so he slipped out of the bedroom carrying his boots and went down into the kitchen. It was unusually quiet, this room that was so very much the heart of the house. He knew that in an hour or so's time it would be full of life. Sophie would be filling the liquidizer with fruit and yoghurt, making one of her revolting smoothies, bemoaning their lack of a juicer. Georgina would be toasting Mother's Pride on the Aga, while Patrick, always the last up, would be smoking and drinking thick black coffee, unable to communicate until he'd had his fix of nicotine and caffeine. Mickey didn't relish the unnatural silence — he found it disconcerting rather than relaxing - so he grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl, picked up his wax coat from the back of the chair where he'd left it the night before and slipped out of the door. Thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, he walked down the drive and out of the gates of Honeycote House, turned right and carried on at a brisk pace until he reached the village.