

F R I D A Y

## 5 February

When the phone rang, she almost missed it. She was down in the cellar, digging out crepe paper supplies for the Sunday School youngsters, and although she heard it ring, Helen ignored it. Clive was in—let him get it.

By the time she realized he was ignoring it too, and she'd climbed over the cat basket and a line of wellington boots to clamber up the stairs, Helen was breathless as she grabbed the phone.

'Hello, St Michael's Vicarage, I'm sorry!'

'I'm not,' said a woman's voice, with a slightly musical lilt to it. Was it Scottish? 'St Michael's Vicarage is what I'm after. Is the vicar there?'

'Well, he should be,' said Helen, craning her neck to peer into Clive's study, 'but apparently not. What time is it? He's got a funeral at ten-thirty this morning—he's probably gone over to the church. Can I help? I'm his wife.'

'I'm sure you can. I'd like to fix a time to come and chat to him. I'm going to be down your way on Wednesday afternoon—I just wondered if he's got any time free then?'

Definitely Scottish, Helen thought.

'Well, I don't know of anything booked for that afternoon, but that doesn't mean a thing. I'll get him to ring you back, if you like. Can I tell him who called?'

Helen tucked the receiver under her chin as she reached for the pen, attached with sellotape and string to the phone, and searched for a corner of paper that wasn't already written on.

'My name is Jan Harding. I'm a Producer at the BBC. I want to look into the possibility of doing a "Songs of Praise" from Sandford.'

Helen's pen came to a halt in mid-air.

'Can I leave my number, and perhaps your husband—it's the Reverend Clive Linton, isn't it?'

'That's right.'

'Do you think he could ring me later today? I'd like to get things moving.'

Helen seized the pen again, and scribbled down the number. 'I'll pass the message on. He'll probably get back to you in an hour or so. Bye.'

Helen replaced the receiver, and stared at the phone. What an extraordinary call! 'Songs of Praise', here? Sleepy little Sandford, population eight hundred, and shrinking? Sandford, on a road that probably went somewhere once, but no one could quite remember why. This was a backwater, a place seldom found except by accident—and for most of the locals, except perhaps the ones who wouldn't mind a bit more B & B business, that was just fine.

Helen chuckled. Wait till Bunty heard! Think how she'd set up four committees just to organize the summer fête! Something like this would keep her happily harassed and indispensable for weeks!

That reminded her—the Parish Magazine. Bunty had already rung twice, first to remind, and then to demand, that Clive get his intro over to her by yesterday at the latest. This morning, he'd promised he would closet himself in the study first thing, and get it done.

What was the time? Helen glanced at her watch. Five to ten. Wherever was he?

Dear Clive—so well-meaning, so willing to offer, so often to disappoint. For a man whose life was structured by services and meetings, time seemed to have surprisingly little relevance. He just forgot. As his thoughts took him on to heady spiritual heights, the worldly business of getting on with the day simply faded from his mind. He never meant to let anyone down, or cause confusion. He hadn't a hurtful bone in his body. He simply forgot. And what he forgot, Helen—good old reliable Helen—always remembered, and organized around him.

Helen reached for her coat, and glanced at her reflection in the hallstand mirror. Her cheeks were flushed. Simmering frustration

always left her that way, and nowadays, it seemed to her that frustration was all she ever felt where Clive was concerned. What an old grouch she was becoming! She gave herself a stern look in the mirror, grabbed the funeral service sheets Clive had probably meant to take with him, and dropped the key, as usual, into the black flowerpot before pulling the front door shut.

Had he been forgetful when she'd first met him, she wondered, as she walked towards the church? He probably was, but it hadn't mattered then. At twenty-four, in his last year of a theology degree, Clive's search for truth, and his certainty of answers in the Christian faith, made him a compelling, mesmerising companion. She admired his clarity of thought, his passion, his vision. She found herself watching him, asking about him, wishing she knew him better. And even before he ever really noticed her among the gaggle of students who often hung around together, she was probably already a little in love with him.

It had been the Christian Fellowship that finally brought them together. He suggested they invite along a well-known evangelical minister to one of their meetings. She volunteered to write the letter, and do the publicity. He had chaired that meeting, and introduced the speaker. She had arranged the tickets, the chairs, and given the vote of thanks from the floor. A week later, he received a card thanking him for organizing such a stimulating and thoroughly enjoyable evening. She was rewarded by the warm glow of friendship in Clive's eyes, a warmth that over the months, steadily grew into love.

'Oh, Mrs Linton!'

Helen's thoughts were jolted back, as she saw the comfortable, coated frame of Mrs Hadlow waiting at the church door.

'Oh, Mrs Linton. I am glad to see you, dear. I didn't bring my key, you see, because the vicar said he'd be here. Just thought I ought to spruce things up a bit, well, for poor John, of course. So sad. Never really knew him well, but he seemed nice. Lonely, I think, all by himself, since Maisie died. His heart must have been broken. I told George, I thought it must have been broken, he missed her so much. Poor John. It's a real shock. We'll miss him.'

Helen smiled to herself, as she turned the key in the lock. 'It's

kind of you to bother, Mrs Hadlow. I'll just come and switch the lights on, and light that fire in the vestry. I'm sure Clive will be over in a while.'

'I've brought my own tin of polish with me,' said Mrs Hadlow, as she eased herself through the door. 'I never really think you get a proper shine from a spray. It doesn't smell right. I popped up to take a look in John's garden this morning, to see if his daffs were out. His always seemed to be the first, and I thought he might like his own flowers in church this morning. Too early, though—but he did love his garden! Whatever's going to happen to that garden now? Did he and Maisie have any family, do you know? My Rosemary, she did breakfast at The Bull this morning—well, it's Thursday, so she always does—she said there's a couple staying there, come for the funeral today. Do you think they're relatives? Poor man, kept himself to himself. I never really knew him well.'

Helen headed back towards the door.

'Oh, leave the door on the jar, would you, dear? Mrs Murray said she'd pop over. Did you hear her leg's bad again? Those pills really aren't working. I keep telling her she ought to go back and ask, but you know how she hates making a fuss. Anyway, she'll want to come and pay her respects. We all do, poor man.' And as Mrs Hadlow began a cheerful, tuneless hum, Helen slipped away.

So, Clive wasn't at the church. She headed for the next most logical place.



The Reverend Clive Linton was rarely happier than when he was in his greenhouse. Standing big and lopsided at the end of the long garden, the greenhouse took him out of the rectory, and into another world, a world of endeavour and miracles, of death and resurrection, of peace and perfection. He sometimes thought he felt closer to God here, than he ever did in the pulpit. As his hands busied themselves with planting, pruning and spraying, his mind wandered free. His best sermons were born here. His keenest insights were glimpsed here. Those nagging irritations of jobs to be done faded into comfortable obscurity, as he marvelled again and again at new life, creation at close hand.

‘Darling, look!’

He turned a beaming face towards Helen, as she opened the door. ‘The amaryllis, you know, the one from last year? It’s about to flower again. Do you remember what a splendid colour it was? Would you like it in the house now, the hall perhaps?’

The years have hardly touched him, Helen thought. Oh, he’s greyer, more thickset—but his gentle features and warm eyes have hardly changed at all.

‘It’s lovely. I’ll take it through. You’ll want to get your robes on, I expect. They’ll be starting to arrive for John’s funeral pretty soon. The service sheets are on the back pew, by the way.’

Reluctantly, Clive brushed the dirt off his hands.

‘Oh, and Clive, when you’ve a moment, there’s a number for you to ring on the pad. A lady from the BBC—she wants to come down and talk to you about perhaps doing a “Songs of Praise” here.’

Clive’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Well, I never. On the pad, is it? I’ll ring right now.’

‘You know, there are some people staying at The Bull. They’ve come specially for John’s funeral. I wonder if they might like a word with you before the service. They might do.’

‘Oh yes, of course. I’ll get ready straight away. His niece, probably, I think. She rang earlier in the week, to talk about hymns. Mrs—what was her name? Oh, never mind. I’ll know her when I see her.’

And picking up the amaryllis, Clive headed for the house.



As funerals go, this one was quiet and dignified. There were only a few seats filled, mostly by locals—the Hadlows, next to their friend, Ivy Murray, whose beige raincoat matched her beige hair, and her pale face. Ivy gave the occasional martyred sigh as she tried to find a comfy position for her leg.

Behind her, Jack Diggins sat, slight and wiry, neat and reserved in his best suit. He hadn’t needed to wear a suit since he had retired from his job in accounts, but old habits die hard. He was never seen without sharp creases in his trousers, matched by a sharp, precise

knot in his tie. At first glance, he looked younger than sixty-six, although slivers of silver gleamed in his thick hair. He spoke to no one. He wasn't one for conversation. He wasn't one for church, either. He was only here because he felt he should be. John hadn't been a 'friend' exactly, more of a companion. Since the death of John's wife, Maisie, Jack, the retired bachelor, and John, the widower, had often teamed up for cards, and the odd pint, just to pass away an evening or two. They didn't really talk, well, not about anything much. John hadn't been a man with a lot to say. They could sit in The Bull comfortably for an hour, and not feel the need for conversation at all. John had seldom mentioned Maisie, or adjusting to life without her. As Jack listened to the familiar words of the funeral service, he wondered whether John was happy now, to be with Maisie again. Somehow, he thought not.

Marriage had never really been an option for Jack. It wasn't that he avoided it, or wouldn't have liked the sense of belonging that he thought must be part of family life. It just never came his way. Did women frighten him? Jack considered this. Not 'frighten' exactly. They intrigued and confused him. Lately, well, for the last twenty years or so, he'd simply kept his distance. Until he left, he had found his accounting job in Ipswich much easier when he kept his door shut—quieter, more orderly. He liked figures. Reassuringly logical.

Jack glanced forward to look towards the three unfamiliar faces at the front of the church. There was an older man Jack had a feeling might have worked with John—his boss, perhaps, at the ironmongers in Stowmarket? Although John rarely spoke about his work, Jack felt he would have been very conscientious in all he did. Jack's gaze moved on to the other two visitors, a man and woman in their twenties. Relatives? John had never really mentioned his family.

It was over. The congregation stood to leave, respectfully allowing the newcomers to lead the way. By the time they reached the door, Clive, now out of his robes, was waiting for them.

'Thank you,' said the young woman. 'We spoke on the phone, I think. Mrs. Monro, John's niece.'

Monro, thought Clive with relief. That was the name!

The young woman was still speaking. ‘You made it very personal. It sounded as if you knew him quite well.’

‘It’s a small village, Mrs Monro, so we are inclined to live in each other’s pockets. John liked to keep to himself, though, so this whole thing has taken us rather by surprise. He always seemed a fit man. A sad business. Had you seen him recently?’

‘Well, no, I’m afraid we haven’t. Uncle John was never one for visitors—and we live so far away. The trip from Yorkshire takes three hours, you know, so it’s been difficult. I feel awful that we didn’t make more of an effort now.’

She looked at her shoes, and in the awkward silence, her husband put his arm around her.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s get started. There’ll be a lot to do. Thank you again, Vicar. Goodbye.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Hadlow, as she reached the church gate. ‘That’ll be his niece then. Come to clear up his things, I shouldn’t wonder. It was his house, was it? Now, there’s a thing. Whatever will happen to that house now? Poor man. So sad.’ She took Ivy’s arm, and together they set off down the lane, with George Hadlow, as quiet as a shadow, following dutifully behind.

‘Oh, Charles!’ Clive called out to the Church Warden as he emerged into the cool sunshine. ‘Some news for you. Well, it might be news. Someone from the BBC rang, about doing a “Songs of Praise” from here. I’m just going over to ring her back now.’

At this news, Charles Waite, a large, imposing man, drew himself up until he seemed a whole inch taller.

‘“Songs of Praise”, eh?’ His glasses sank further down his nose as he peered at Clive. ‘Well, if that’s the case, there’s a lot we must take into consideration, a lot to discuss.’

He paused, looking at Clive.

‘Would you prefer me to handle the call, Vicar? This really is a matter for the whole Parish Council, you know.’

‘Kind of you to offer, Charles, but I can manage perfectly well, thank you. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear more about it.’

‘Straight away,’ replied Charles. ‘We’ll need a meeting. It must be fully discussed.’

‘What must?’ Hearing mention of a meeting, Bunty Maddocks’

antennae were jangling. The round, beaming woman joined them, pulling her three-quarter length lilac-coloured jacket snugly around her. ‘What must be discussed?’

‘It seems,’ said Charles, ‘that the BBC plan to take over our church for a “Songs of Praise”.’

Bunty’s eyes widened, but before she could open her mouth to comment, Charles went on.

‘As you know, I’ve had experience of television people before. This could be very disruptive. It needs careful handling. It’s essential that the PCC are kept informed. We must lay down the ground rules.’

‘Oh, but that’s wonderful!’ Bunty managed to squeeze in at last. ‘Wonderful, exciting news! When? When will it be?’ She turned to Clive.

‘I don’t know anything about it, until I get back and make that phone call to the producer. Do excuse me, won’t you.’

‘Well!’ Bunty’s eyes were shining, as she turned to Charles’ wife, Betty, who had just come out of the church with her arms full of sheet music and hymn books. ‘Did you hear that, Betty? “Songs of Praise”—it’s coming here!’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Charles. ‘It needs to be discussed.’

‘Oh, but Betty, that means you’ll be playing our organ on TV. Will they let you choose the hymns, do you think?’

‘It’s all to be decided. It needs to be discussed,’ repeated Charles, and taking Betty firmly by the arm, he led the way home.’



‘Thanks for ringing back’, said Jan, when Clive introduced himself. Her Scots accent was quite pronounced, especially on the phone. ‘I’d like to come and have a proper chat with you. Obviously, we’re only putting out feelers at the moment, but we are planning to do a programme from somewhere in East Anglia, and I noticed your church when I was driving around the area a couple of days ago. Sandford is a beautiful village.’

‘Well, we like it—and we’d certainly like to talk about your idea. Wednesday? Was that when you thought you might come?’



‘That would be best for me,’ Jan flicked through her diary. ‘About three-ish?’

‘Best day to choose. My afternoon off,’ replied Clive. ‘I’ll get my wife to drum up something special for tea.’