

Velvet Claws

The night was filthy. The piercing sou'wester swirled the thick mizzle purposefully through the orange streetlights. The granite cottages were soaked and could absorb no more. Rivulets drained through cobbled pavements, gurgling down to the harbour.

High in the lee of a chimney stack a pigeon stirred and ruffled his plumage, condensed droplets flicking free, before burying his head deeper. Two roofs away the black queen cat froze with her paw raised. The rain seemed to not touch her, just as the light disappeared without trace into her sleek black flanks. Her lithe shoulders imperceptibly flexed, staring eyes wide and penetrating the darkness.

The hands on the old Seafarers Mission clock slowly slid together like arthritic arms stretching aloft. With a metallic scraping of gears, the dull bell coughed apologetically twelve times. By the third strike the cat sensed a shift in the salted air. The wind whistled and clanked the boat rigging by the quay. One after another, doors and gates up and around the village stealthily opened and closed with well-practiced hands. In ones and twos, bulky shapes materialised out of the misty night. They followed the water down through the streets, strolling, limping or striding according to their ability. Umbrellas, hats, scarves and hoods bobbed along behind walls and fences and around corners. Wrapped in thick coats, mackintoshes, shawls and one pashmina, they converged at the cottage below the roosting pigeon. In turn and without knocking they pushed open the door with the sign *Mini Wind* on the lintel.

The frowzy scrum inside the cottage kitchen ensued as it did every Tuesday. Outer garments were removed and discarded onto coat hooks or the backs of the chairs arranged around the cosy room. The hubbub of familiar greetings swelled as the women hugged and patted arms, cheeks flushed and hair askance. The room smelled of damp woollens, woodsmoke and casserole. Most wore pyjamas or nighties under their coats, but some had pulled on rough old breeches that were stuffed into the tops of work boots.

The matriarchs, business owners, fisherwomen, mothers and great aunts of all the village families were represented here among the dozen. Naturally the efficient, safe and productive running of this thriving rural idyl could not be entrusted to the feckless, childish and egotistical menfolk. Men could barely look after themselves let alone a community fit for raising healthy, bright and happy children. The “Tuesday Tipple” - faithfully and regularly supplied by Mrs Bishop the pharmacist - was duly administered before bed to husbands and fathers guaranteeing oblivion and continued secrecy.

‘Welcome all, welcome sisters,’ sung out the prim host Theodora, wife of Bertrand the Town Mayor. ‘Does everyone have tea?’ she asked, sloshing more boiling water into the pot.

‘I’ll have some rum in mine’, called back one of the matrons, as everyone chuckled and found a perch.

‘I’ve bought a new shortbread recipe for you to try,’ said young Daisy, wife of Jack the newest trawler captain. The tin was passed around and the sweet, buttery biscuits crumbled deliciously to much nodded approval.

‘Alright then, we’ve got a lot to discuss’, Theodora began. ‘Lent is finishing soon and we need to begin preparation for Easter’.

Before she could draw breath there was a rapid hammering at the street door. The women froze, each looking with alarm at Theodora. She straightened-up slowly next to the fire, clutching her notebook to her chest and stared at the door. No-one was followed, surely? All careful precautions had been taken as usual. Hinges and latches greased and damped. Were they discovered? Some attendees began to fret and were shushed by their elder comrades who had endured such circumstances before.

The hammering repeated, just four rapid strikes then a last one that seemed desperate.

‘Open the door will you, Daisy?’ Theodora calmly requested. She glanced at the stairs leading up to her sleeping husband. Hands raised to mouths; at least one gasped.

Apprehensive eyes followed as Daisy shuffled in her thick socks, pyjama trousers and old brown jumper over the damp flagstones to the outside door. She raised her hand as the room held its breath. Grasping the handle she paused, glanced at Theodora for a moment before pressing her thumb down hard and clicking open the latch. A sudden gust of wind thrust the door wide, billowing curtains, coats, hair and papers all around. A soaked pathetic figure in a cheap blue cagoule seemed to land in the middle of the group. Daisy wrestled the door shut with a thud.

‘Is this the *Mini Wind* group?’, the figure sobbed, pulling the hood back, a mess of straggled straw-coloured hair shielding her face. Staring at the ground she sniffed fluidly and wiped her dripping sleeve over her mouth and nose. No-one moved.

‘Who wants to know?’ Theodora returned sternly. Though not without care, for this was clearly someone in dire straits.

‘*Christine?*’, asked Daisy stepping carefully toward the intruder. ‘Is that you, from the convenience shop?’

The figure turned back toward Daisy, raised her sad grey eyes, nodding as she shook her hand free from grasping her soaked cuff. She pushed her hair off her face, revealing an angry red and purple bruise covering her cheek and blackening her eye.

‘Oh my God, what’s happened to you?’, Daisy gasped taking hold of Christine’s hands as the others stood and came forward to see. She arched her neck away from caring hands, frightened of being crowded.

‘Come, child, sit by the stove. Give her room, sisters.’ Theodora beckoned her over, frowning and examining the livid wound in the brighter light. Christine’s young, fragile, pale face showed cares beyond her years.

‘It’s Sid’, she began in a whisper, a cloud passing over her face, ‘my boyfriend who drives the delivery truck.’

‘Go on’, encouraged Daisy, crouching by her side.

‘I left my home to come and live with him here. My folks didn’t want me to, and said if I left, I could never go back. I love him, really. I don’t want to see him arrested again!’ She anxiously clawed at the chair arms, pleading to Theodora.

‘I know he loves me, but... I saw something,’ she paused unwilling to continue. Daisy squeezed her hand. ‘I think he was delivering drugs to someone in his truck and caught me watching. He got home from the pub tonight pissed or high. So angry... Says it’s all my fault.’

She sobbed and shook her head staring into the flames.

‘I didn’t know what to do, but I heard some old dears whispering about the *Mini Wind* group the other week in the shop. I figured it must be here, so I hid outside all evening waiting for someone to come. What are you?’ She asked looking around the women, who sat in rapt attention.

‘Ah,’ explained Theodora. ‘We are the MidNight Women, Immediately - Not Dreckly’, emphasising the syllables.

‘The what?’

Theodora sighed, ‘Well it means we meet in the early hours, and actually get on with things, not leaving them until later, unlike the menfolk.’

‘Aye’, chimed in the lady who added rum to her tea. ‘We actually get things done, proper like!’

An hour later, the night still putrid, the women all quietly left the cottage. High above, the cat was crouched within a yard of her unsuspecting prey, muscles taught with anticipation.

The next afternoon, recently aroused with a thumping hangover, burly Sid stamped down to the shop, fuming, hungry and late for a delivery. Scowling in the bright silver air, he was unshaven, greasy and dishevelled. Sid wanted to give Christine a piece of his mind and help

himself to some sausages. He crashed through the door, his rough chin and bomber jacket pushing through a gaggle of nattering women. He approached the familiar slim figure wearing a blue shop coat and headscarf.

‘Here, what do you mean bugging off without waking me?’ he snarled, grabbing her arm and spinning her around. In shocked disbelief he stepped back, ‘You ain’t Chris! What’s going on?’

Daisy glared at him, rubbed her arm and advanced. Sid was confused, paranoid eyes darting around, suddenly surrounded by a thicket of tough, muscular women who knew him.

‘She’s not here. She’s gone home to see her folks,’ Daisy leant forward, jabbing at his blotchy red nose. ‘Gone to put a steak on that beautiful face of hers’.

Sid spluttered but Theodora grabbed him. From all sides tools and pokers appeared from nowhere and prodded him sharply, making him yelp.

‘Now you listen well, Sid Baker,’ Theodora spat, all cold menace, ‘you touch her again and you’ll be up in front of the magistrate before you can blink.’

Sid’s mouth was sour and sweat beaded on his forehead in the press. ‘No, you wouldn’t dare, interfering old cows.’

‘Wouldn’t we now?’ chirped the rum lady. ‘He’s my *bleddy husband!*’

Sid wriggled free and scuttled away chastened, hugging his bruised ribs, almost stepping on the carcass of a half-eaten pigeon.