

Mystery at Wentworth Park

Chapter 6

Blood and Inspector Bridger had strolled into the village to get some dinner at the local pub, *The Dog and Whistle*.

“What are you thinking?” asked Inspector Bridger over a steaming steak and kidney pie.

“About the dog?” said Blood, his mind elsewhere as he dipped his fork into an Irish stew.

The right side of the inspector’s mouth curled into a smile. “Yes, the dog. What else would I mean?”

The inspector was spot on. Blood had allowed a sad pair of oval eyes, framed with dark lashes to distract him. He cleared his throat.

“I met my wife on the job,” said Bridger with a cheeky grin. “She was a witness in a robbery.”

Blood frowned at his companion, pretending to be affronted. “Now, now inspector. The beautiful nurse may prove diverting but don’t let your imagination run away with you.”

“My apologies, sir. I thought I saw a mutual—never mind.” He filled his mouth with the light brown, flaky crust.

Blood cleared his throat. “A dog and a cat go missing. No one sees any strangers or hears anything. It’s not much to go on.”

A group of rowdy regulars were yucking it up in a dark corner of the room.

“Perhaps we should question the other cook—the one who came to visit. Maybe she saw something as she was arriving or leaving.” Inspector Bridger took a long pull on his beer.

“That is an idea. I’d also like to look into the jewel theft. It’s nagging at me. We could ask about that at the same time.” He glanced at his watch. “If we time it right, we can arrive after the dinner is served upstairs.”

Inspector Bridger scraped his knife across the plate, wiping up the rich gravy. “Got time for pudding, sir?”

“Yes, I think so.”

The inside of the pub was paneled in dark walnut that absorbed any sunlight that managed to penetrate the small windows. The whole interior was dark and smoky.

“Apple pie or apricot crumble?” Bridger asked as he headed back to the bar.

“Apricot, thanks.”

He looked around at the customers as he finished off the stew. Mostly working men spending all their wages on beer. There were one or two younger women, obviously out on the town with their young men. They looked happy. He thought back to the dimple in the nurse’s smile. Perhaps he *was* ready to settle down.

“Here you go!” said the inspector, placing a bowl of crumble, covered with thick yellow custard, in front of Blood.

“Thank you.”

As Bridger dug into the pie, he said, “If you don’t mind me saying so, sir, I was surprised how young you are for a chief inspector.”

Blood slid his eyes to Bridger over the top of his glass. “I suppose I am. I don’t spend too much time thinking about it.”

“How is it up at HQ?” Bridger was sporting a fine hops mustache and wiped his hand across his top lip.

“Lots of red tape,” replied Blood with a smile.

“I can only imagine,” said Bridger. “I’ve been a policeman for almost twenty-five years now. It’s an interesting job. Every day different.”

“Do you have a family?” asked Blood.

“Oh yes! The wife and I have three boys. The oldest two are adults now. One is a copper. The other a car mechanic. The youngest is still at school.”

“How does your wife feel about your work?”

“Depends. She’d like me home at a regular time for dinner more often but on the whole she doesn’t mind. I bounce ideas off her when I’m stumped about a case I’m working on. Full of common sense my wife, is. Many’s the time she has said something that has led me in the right direction.”

This was a thought that had never crossed Blood’s mind—collaboration on cases with a wife. A trusted partner.

“How about you, Chief Inspector? Ever thought of marriage?”

“Not until very recently, no. I always thought it would be too hard on a wife. The travel, the long, irregular hours.” He looked at the inspector. “But your perspective has me thinking along different lines.”

Bridger leaned back in his chair, hands crossed over his ample stomach. “If I didn’t have Enid to go home to—well, it’s a steadying influence in a man’s life,” he said. “When the day has been hard, she’s there to comfort me. Nothing like it.”

Finishing the crumble, Blood laid down his spoon and wiped his mouth. “And the boys. Do you get to spend enough time with them?”

Bridger wagged his finger. “They are my pride and joy, sir. My life’s work really. Anyone can do this job when I’m retired but no one can be the father to my boys. I wasn’t always able to be there for them, but can any father? We all have to work, don’t we? I was there enough. I love my boys and I know they love me.”

Except for the weekly dinner at his mother’s, Blood had no one.

“Lookey who’s here,” said Bridger, rousing Blood from his reverie. “If it isn’t your nurse.”

As Blood looked up, he spat out, “Not *my* nurse, Bridger.”

“Sorry, sir. Forgive my familiarity. I can’t help myself sometimes.” He chuckled, not sounding the least sorry.

A ray of the setting sun was shining on Nurse Farthing’s coppery hair that had been freed from the cap, forming a frame of curls around her pretty face.

Bridger waved his hand to get her attention. When her eyes landed on Blood, her whole face lit up.

His pulse ticked up as he saw that she had trouble tearing her gaze away from his to direct her words to his companion. “Inspector Bridger. How nice to see you here.”

Blood jumped up almost spilling his drink “Can we get you something?”

“I’d like that,” she said. “Gin and tonic please.”

He strode over to the bar, aware that his heart was beating a strange tattoo.

When he returned to the battered table, the inspector and the nurse were laughing about something.

“Here you go.” He placed the small glass on the table and sat next to Nurse Farthing.

“I don’t suppose you have found out anything about my cat?” The smile had fallen and her forehead was creased with worry.

He felt an urge to reach out and touch her hand. “Not yet. We’ll contact you as soon as we hear anything.” He picked up his glass and swirled the amber liquid around.

“You mentioned something about a jewel theft a few miles away. We were wondering about it. Can you tell us anything?” Blood asked.

Nurse Farthing frowned. “Really? What on earth would that have to do with this?”

“I’m not saying it does. You mentioned it and the story peaked out interest.”

“Well, I don’t know much. Lady De Courcy had a special diamond necklace made for her sixtieth birthday which was in the spring. She gave it to her lady’s maid to clean before a special dinner with the ambassador to France. As I heard it, the maid put it in a cupboard, planning to polish it when she had a minute but when she went back it was gone. She was fired.”

I don’t doubt it. “When was that?”

“Saturday, I believe.”

Interesting timing.

Nurse Farthing checked her watch. “Are you expecting someone?” Blood asked.

“I’m meeting my sister, but I’m early.” She smiled at him, and for a moment, the other people in the room faded away.

“Do you enjoy your job, Nurse Farthing?” he asked.

Bridger cleared his throat and mumbled something about settling the bill.

“I worked in a hospital before this. On my feet all day, busy all the time. Too many patients. This job is a welcome relief.”

“You think you’ll stay?”

“Not long term. Her ladyship is quite young still, but certainly for a couple more years. Then I’d like to go abroad and do some nursing in Africa.”

“Really? What led to your interest in that?”

“I have a friend, a doctor, who leads humanitarian trips over there. He’s been asking me to go for a while now.”

Blood huffed and his mood took a downturn. *Of course she’d have an admirer.* The sun suddenly looked a little less bright.

She took a sip from her glass unaware that she had just trampled all over any hopes he might have entertained about getting to know her better. “What about you, Chief Inspector? Do you like fighting crime?”

“I find it fulfilling as I am sure nursing is for you,” he began. “I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“What are your ambitions?” She tipped her head and the long, red curls fell over her shoulder.

“I don’t really know. I just keep working and trying for promotions when they come.” He grasped his glass with both hands.

“Well, do you want to be the commissioner one day?”

Blood chortled. “I can honestly say I have not thought about it.” His face relaxed into a deep smile and he saw a change in her eyes.

“But why not?” She laughed and the delightful sound was like fairies celebrating.

Bridger returned and standing behind Nurse Farthing, tapped his watch.

“Time for me to go,” Blood said, pushing back his chair.

Nurse Farthing held out her hand. “Thanks for the drink.” He took her warm hand and it fit in his like the proverbial glove.

“I want to assure you that we *are* looking for your cat too,” he said, warmly.

She looked up at him through her lashes. “I appreciate that, Chief Inspector.”