

EVANS TO BETSY

A CONSTABLE EVANS MYSTERY

RHYS BOWEN



*Evans
to
Betsy*

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Glossary of Welsh Words](#)

[Also by Rhys Bowen](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

We Are at One with the Dark Earth.

We Are at One with the Mother

With the Oak Tree and the Yew

With the Deep Pools and the Wells

With the Rushing Streams and the Crag

With the Meadows and the Woods

With the Sky and the Sun

With the Stag and the Eagle

With the Dolphin and the Whale

With the Creeping Things That Live in Darkness.

The life force of the universe flows through all of us.

Awen, life force, essence, spirit,

Awen flows through us.

We are one with the universe.

—Rhiannon, *The Way of the Druid*

Chapter 1



“Llanfair.” The driver read out the battered sign beside the road. “I thought this might be a good place to start.” He changed down a gear and the Jag slowed with a discontented growl. The village appeared ahead—a mere cluster of cottages, nestled under the steep, green walls of the mountain pass.

The woman in the passenger seat leaned forward to peer through the windscreen. It was hard to tell her exact age—the long straight hair and lack of makeup, coupled with the jeans and T-shirt, made her look, at first glance, like a teenager, but a closer inspection put her in her thirties. She studied the gray stone cottages, the sheep on the high hillsides, the mountain stream dancing over rocks as it passed under the old stone bridge. “It’s worth a try,” she said. “Certainly remote enough. No supermarket, no video store, and no satellite dishes on the roofs. And it’s got the proverbial pub where jolly locals meet.”

The Jag slowed to a crawl as they approached the square black-and-white-timbered building. A swinging pub sign outside announced it to be the Red Dragon. “I don’t see too many jolly locals around right now,” he said. “The place looks deserted. Where is everybody?”

“Perhaps it’s the Welsh version of *Brigadoon*. They only come out once every hundred years.” She laughed. “Oh, wait a second. Here’s somebody.” A young girl with wild blond curls had come out of the pub. She began hopefully wiping off the outdoor tables, although the sky was heavy with the promise of rain. A loud yell from across the street made her look up. There was a row of shops directly opposite the pub. G. Evans, Cyggyd (with the word “Butcher” underneath in very small letters), R. Evans, Dairy Products, and then, preventing an Evans monopoly, T. Harris, General Store (and Sub Post Office).

A large, florid man in a blood-spattered apron had come out of the butcher’s shop, and was now shouting and waving a cleaver. The two occupants of the car looked at each other uncertainly as the cleaver-waving and shouting continued.

“Jolly locals?” He gave a nervous chuckle.

The young girl appeared to be unfazed by the tirade. She tossed her mane of blond hair and yelled something back and the butcher burst out laughing. He waved the cleaver good-naturedly and went back into his shop. The young girl glanced at the Jag, then gave the last table a half-hearted wipe before going back into the pub.

“What the hell was that all about?” The woman in the car asked. “Was that Welsh they were speaking?”

“I don’t suppose it was Russian, honey. We are in the middle of Wales.”

“But I didn’t realize people actually spoke Welsh! I thought it was one of those ancient languages you study at Berkeley. You might have warned me. I could have taken a crash language course. It’s going to make things more difficult.”

He put out his hand and patted her knee. “It will be fine. They all speak English too, you know. No wonder why don’t you hop out and test the waters, huh?”

“You want me to get hacked to death by a cleaver? Do you suppose they’re all violent up here in the mountains? I’d imagine there’s a lot of inbreeding.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” He grinned as he gave her a gentle nudge. “And this was your idea, remember.”

“Our idea. We planned it together.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “I have missed you, Emmy.”

“Me too. I didn’t think it would take so long. I’m damned jealous, you know.”

“You don’t have to be.”

An elderly man in a cloth cap and tweed jacket came down the street at a fast pace and disappeared into the pub. A couple of women walked past, deep in conversation, with shopping baskets on their arms. They wore the British uniform for uncertain weather—plastic macks and head scarves over graying hair. They paused to give the car an interested glance before settling at the bus stop.

“I should get out of here,” the man said. “I shouldn’t be noticed. There’s a big hotel higher up the pass—you can’t miss it. It looks like a damned great Swiss chalet—ugly as hell. I’ll wait for you up there, okay?”

“All right. Give me about an hour.” She opened the door and was met by a fresh, stiff breeze. “Get it’s freezing up here. I’ll need to buy thermal underwear if we decide that this place will do.”

“Start at the pub,” he suggested. “At least we know somebody’s there.”

She nodded. “Good idea. I could use a drink.” Her thin, serious face broke into a smile. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” he said. “This is a crazy idea, Emmy. It damned well better work.”

Chapter 2



The big car moved up the street. Emmy pushed her long dark hair out of her face as she opened the heavy oak door and went into the Red Dragon pub.

She stepped into a warm and inviting room. A long, polished oak bar ran almost the whole length of one wall, and the matching beam above it was decorated with horse brasses. A fire was burning in a huge fireplace at the far end. The girl with the wild blond hair was standing behind the bar, talking to the old man and a couple of young men in mud-spattered work overalls. The low murmur of conversation in Welsh ceased the moment the stranger was noticed.

“Can I help you, miss?” the girl asked in lilting English.

Emmy joined the men at the bar. “Sure. What beer do folks drink around here?”

“That would be Robinson’s,” the girl answered. “Although some like their Guinness or a Brain even though it comes from South Wales. I don’t know why we stock it, personally.”

“Weak as water,” the old man muttered.

“Okay. I’ll take a half-pint of Robinson’s then.”

The barmaid glanced at the men. She was looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, but ladies usually drink in the lounge, if you don’t mind. Why don’t you go through and I’ll take your order.”

“Okay.” Emmy managed a smile. This wasn’t an occasion for making waves. “Would you mind directing me to the lounge?”

“It’s through that doorway.”

Emmy went through the open archway and found herself in a much colder room dotted with several polished wood tables and leather-upholstered chairs. There was a fireplace in this room too, but the fire wasn’t alight. Along one wall there was a long oak bar. Emmy was amused to realize it was the back of the same bar where the men were standing. The girl with the hair had turned to face her.

“Found it all right, did you then?”

“Is this some sort of law in Wales?” Emmy asked. “The women in one bar and the men in the other. I mean.”

“Oh, no,” the barmaid said. “Not the law exactly. It’s just the way it’s always been, isn’t it? And the men don’t feel they can chat properly when there are ladies present. They might use bad language or want to tell a joke.”

Emmy smiled at the quaintness. “So the ladies sit alone in here and discuss knitting patterns?”

“To tell you the truth, the ladies don’t come to the pub very often on their own. And if they’re with their man, why then they all sit together in the lounge.” She turned back to the elderly man leaning on the bar. “Isn’t that right, Charlie? I was saying that women don’t come to the pub much on their own.”

“They don’t come much at all,” Charlie replied, “seeing as we’re usually here around the time when they have to be home, cooking our dinners. Besides, most women don’t like the taste of beer. My Ma says she’d rather drink medicine.”

The barmaid had finished drawing the half-pint and put it in front of Emmy. “That will be one pound, miss, if you don’t mind.”

Emmy got out the coin and put it on the counter. “Thanks. Well, cheers then. How do you say ‘cheers’ in Welsh?”

"Tyched da," Charlie and the other men said in chorus.

"Yacky dah?" Emmy tried it, stumbling over the pronunciation, and making them all laugh.

"We shouldn't leave her all alone in that cold old lounge," one of the young men suggested. "I wouldn't do any harm to have her come and drink with us."

Emmy noted the muscles bulging through the threadbare T-shirt and the unruly dark hair. *Not bad*, she decided. *This assignment may have hidden perks.*

"Harry wouldn't like it," the barmaid said firmly. "Besides, she wouldn't want to hear the kind of language you use sometimes, Barry-the-Bucket—it would make her blush, the kind of things you say."

"Me? When do I ever say something that makes you blush, Betsy *fach*?"

"Well, I'm used to it, aren't I? I have to put up with you all the time."

She turned back to Emmy with an apologetic smile. "Don't mind him, miss."

"What did you call him?" Emmy asked, fascinated.

"Barry-the-Bucket, on account of he drives the bulldozer with that big scooper thing in the front."

"Barry-the-Bucket. I like that."

The men were now all leaning on the bar, watching Emmy with interest as she took a long swig of her beer. She was tempted to drain the glass in one go, as she had learned to do in college, but it was important that she create the right image. She took one swig, put the glass down, and smiled at them. "It's good," she said. "Nice and full-bodied."

"You like beer, then, do you?" Barry asked her. "Do they drink beer in America? It is America you come from, isn't it?"

"That's right. Pennsylvania. And we drink quite a bit of beer, although you'd probably find it too weak and cold."

"That very pale stuff, fizzy like lemonade. I had some once. Bud—wasn't it?"

Barry turned to his mate, who nodded agreement.

"Here on holiday, are you, miss?" Charlie asked.

Emmy noted with amusement that apparently it was okay if the men talked to her through the barmaid rather like a convent with a grille, she decided. "Actually, I'm here to do research," she said. "I'm a grad student at the University of Pennsylvania, doing a Ph.D. in psychology, and my thesis is on psychic ability."

"Fancy!" The barmaid gave the men an impressed glance.

Emmy had worked on the speech long enough and now the words flowed out easily. He'd be pleased with how it was going so far. "I'm over here because Celts were famous for their psychic abilities. If there are any pure-blooded Celts left, it would have to be in an area like this. So I'm here to look for anyone with psychic power."

"Like reading the tea leaves, that kind of thing, you mean?" The barmaid leaned forward, eagerly.

"Yeah, that kind of thing. Seeing the future, having prophetic dreams, sensing danger—the ancient Druids supposedly possessed all of those abilities."

"Pity my old *nain* passed away a couple of years ago," the barmaid said.

"Nine what?" Emmy was puzzled. She knew that nine was a significant number in Celtic mythology, but ...

"*Nain*—oh sorry, I mean my grandmother. *Nain's* how we say it in Welsh. I get mixed up sometimes."

"So your grandma was psychic?"

"Oh, indeed she was, wasn't she, Charlie?" Betsy turned to the older man. "She even saw the Derin Corff a couple of times, or was it the Cannwyll Corff?"

"What are they?" Emmy got out her notebook and started scribbling.

"Well, the Derin Corff is the bird of death and the Cannwyll Corff is the candle of death. They're

the same really—you see them when somebody's about to die.”

“Fascinating,” Emmy said. “And your grandma saw them?”

“Oh, she did. I remember she came home late one night and she said to us, ‘Huw Lloyd won’t la the night. There was the Derin Corff perched on his shed roof.’”

“That was probably only the Lloyd’s old rooster,” Barry-the-Bucket commented, chuckling.

“You be quiet, Barry,” Betsy said and slapped his hand. “Whatever it was, she was right. Huw w gone by morning. And so was the thing she saw on the rooftop.” She shuddered. “It still gives m goose bumps to think of it. And she was a dab hand at reading the tea leaves too, was my *nain*.”

“Did she ever tell you that you’d go out with a good-looking bloke from the village this Saturda night?” Barry asked, leaning across the counter until his face was close to hers.

“Yes, but Constable Evans hasn’t asked me yet,” Betsy replied smoothly. “Even though I’ve give him enough hints.”

The older man chuckled. “She’s the match of you, boyo.”

“And she’s wasting her time mooning over Evan Evans,” Barry replied with a sniff.

“I don’t see why.” Betsy’s gaze was challenging.

“You know very well why. You let Bronwen Price get a hold on him, didn’t you? You’ll not shake him loose from her now.”

“We’ll have to see about that, won’t we?” Betsy smoothed down her tight sweater. “I’m going to g my chance someday, and then I’ll show him what he’s been missing—even if I do have to pus Bronwen-Bloody-Price off a mountain first!”

The men laughed and so did Betsy. Then she seemed to remember Emmy standing alone at the oth bar and turned back to her. “Sorry, miss. Don’t mind them. Always teasing me, they are, because I’ve got my heart set on our local policeman.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Emmy said. “So tell me about your grandma seeing the future, Bets That is your name, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, miss. Betsy Edwards.”

“Hi, Betsy, I’m Emmy.” She held out her hand and Betsy took it awkwardly. “So go on about you grandma.”

“Well, she was well known in the village for having the sight, wasn’t she, Charlie?”

“She was,” Charlie agreed. “If she dreamed something was going to happen, then it did.”

“Wonderful.” Emmy beamed at them. “You haven’t inherited her talent by any chance?”

“Me?” Betsy blushed. “Oh no, I don’t think so. Although ...”

“Yes?”

“I do sometimes know the phone’s about to ring just before it does. Stuff like that.”

“There you are. You probably have the psychic ability but you’ve never tried to use your power yet.”

“Her ‘powers.’” Barry-the-Bucket nudged his mate.

“You be quiet, Barry,” Betsy said. “We’re having a serious conversation here. So you think I migh have inherited my granny’s gift of the sight, do you?”

“It often goes in families,” Emmy said. “Through the female line. You’re not a seventh child, b any chance, are you?”

“No, I’m an only child. And my mother was an only child too.”

“Perfect,” Emmy said. “That’s the strongest connection of all. Only daughter to only daughter Couldn’t be better.”

“You really think?” Betsy stammered. “My, but that would be wonderful, wouldn’t it? Imagine if could really see the future!”

“You could let your dad know what horse was going to win in the two-thirty at Doncaster.” Barry

dug his silent mate in the side again.

"If you have powers like that, you have to use them for good," Betsy said solemnly. "Not for winning horse races."

Emmy was flicking the pages of her notebook. "Look, let me take your name and phone number, okay? I'd like to get together with you and do some testing, if you're willing."

"Testing?" Betsy looked at Charlie uneasily.

"We have to test psychic ability in a controlled environment"

"I wouldn't want to go to any hospital," Betsy said.

"Oh, nothing like that." Emmy smiled. "I'm going to be working at a place called the Sacred Grove. Do you know it?"

"I can't say that I do," Betsy said. "Is it in Wales?"

"That big place on the coast near Porthmadog, isn't it?" Charlie interrupted.

"Used to be a private estate, built by that crazy English lord. Tiggy, or something, isn't that the name?" Barry asked.

"It's Bland-Tyghé," Charlie said, "and it's pronounced 'tie,' you ignorant burke."

Barry grinned. "They're all round the bend, aren't they? Didn't the old man used to walk through the village in his pajamas, spouting poetry?"

"Didn't I read that his daughter has turned it into some kind of hospital or sanitarium?" Charlie said.

"Loony bin, more likely," Barry commented. "You want to watch out, Betsy. If they take you in there, they might never let you out again."

"I'm not going to any loony bin," Betsy said anxiously.

"No, you've got it all wrong," Emmy interrupted hastily. "It's a New Age center."

"New age center?" Charlie asked. "Like an old folks home, you mean?"

"New Age," Emmy repeated. Really, these people were just perfect. Totally clueless. "They're into all kinds of cool stuff—alternative healing, psychic research. That kind of thing. I haven't been there yet, but I've been in contact with them and they sound like they've got great facilities and staff." She smiled hopefully at Betsy. "I've only just arrived in the area. I need to get settled in and then maybe you and I can go take a look down there. See if it's the kind of thing you'd like to do, okay?"

"Okay," Betsy said. "I don't mind going to take a look."

"I'd better get going," Emmy said. "I've got a lot to do. I need to scout out all the other villages for people with psychic ability, and I need to find myself a place to stay. The hotel's too expensive. You don't know of any good B-and-Bs that don't charge an arm and a leg, do you?"

"We don't go in for tourism too much up here," Charlie said. "There's the holiday cottages up on what used to be Morgan's farm, but they're not cheap, I hear."

"I'd rather just find a room somewhere, and someone to cook me breakfast," Emmy said. "I imagine I'll be working pretty hard."

"I know a room that's going to be empty," Betsy said suddenly. She gave the men an excited glance. "Well, there is, isn't there? If Evan Evans moves into that cottage, Mrs. Williams will have a room free."

"Has he really decided to move out?" Charlie asked. "I know he was thinking about it, but he might change his mind at the last moment, seeing as how Mrs. Williams looked after him so well."

"If he says he's going to do it, he will," Betsy said firmly. "Anyway, we'll ask him next time he comes in."

"Fantastic," Emmy said. "I've got your phone number, so I'll call back and see. That would be so convenient if I could get a room in Llanfair." She pronounced it *Lan-fair*.

The other occupants of the bar smiled.

“What?” Emmy demanded.

“It’s called *Chlan-veyer*,” Betsy said. “That’s how we say it. But don’t worry about it,” she added. “No foreigners can get it right.”

“*Chlan-veyer*,” Emmy repeated. “I’ll get it right next time. You’ll have to clue me in, Betsy.”

“Okay, miss.”

“Call me Emmy.” She gave another warm smile. “I’ll be in touch, Betsy.”

She had just come through the archway into the main bar when the door opened and the butcher came in, now without his blood-spattered apron. He looked around the room and his gaze fastened on Emmy. As he let out a torrent in Welsh, Emmy moved hastily out of the way. She had forgotten about this cleaver-wielding maniac, who might make living in this village hazardous.

Betsy answered him back in Welsh and he relaxed as he came up to the bar.

“Sorry, miss,” Betsy said, “but Evans-the-Meat is a little out of sorts this morning. A little matter a bet we had over the football match last night. He was betting on Manchester United but Liverpool won, like I said it would.”

“A football match?” Emmy couldn’t help smiling.

“Mr. Evans thought the ref was unfair. He gave their best player a red card when it wasn’t a foul,” Betsy said. “But now he’s going to pay up like the gentleman he is.”

Evans-the-Meat gave a sheepish smile. “It breaks my heart to see a quality team like Manchester United beaten by a load of louts like Liverpool, that’s all. Oh, well, nothing we can do about it now, there? So you’d better make it a pint of Robinsons then, Betsy *fach*.”

Emmy slipped out of the pub as Betsy poured the beer. She hurried up the village street, past the rows of identical gray cottages, each with a brightly painted front door, shining brass letter box, and white scrubbed front step. Some had boxes of spring flowers growing outside—splashes of yellow daffodils and blue hyacinths against the gray stone. *All very nice and bright and quaint*, she thought. *Cut off from the real world*. Wouldn’t he laugh when she told him they hadn’t even heard of New Age?

She passed a schoolyard with a school building beyond it. Through an open window she heard the sound of young voices chanting. It sounded suspiciously like times tables, although it was in Welsh, of course. Beyond the school were the last buildings in the village—two chapels. They stood across the street, mirror images of each other in solid gray stone. Each of them had a notice board outside announcing them to be Capel Bethel and Capel Beulah. Each notice board had a biblical text on it. One said, “Whoever asketh, receiveth,” while the other stated, “Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter into the kingdom.”

Emmy smiled to herself as she walked past. They really were clueless up here in the boonies. Presumably they hadn’t even realized that the two biblical passages contradicted each other.

The hotel he told her about dominated the crown of the pass. It was, as he described it, a hideous giant chalet, complete with gingerbread trim and geraniums in boxes—completely out of place on bleak Welsh mountainside. The discreet stone sign had the words “Everest Inn” carved in gold letters. The car park beyond was dotted with expensive cars so that the Jag didn’t look out of place. She walked up to the car and got in.

He looked up expectantly. “Well?”

She pushed back her hair and a big smile spread across her face. “We hit pay dirt in one. She’ll be just perfect.”

Chapter 3

Excerpt from the book *The Way of the Druid*, by Rhiannon

Who Are the Druids?

To many outsiders the word Druid conjures up a white-robed, bearded gentleman offering a sacrifice on Midsummer Night at Stone Henge. However, this picture does not represent the truth. Stone Henge was built long before the first Celts set foot in Britain and there have always existed Druid priestesses as well as priests. And while Druids did offer sacrifices, they were not blood hungry.

Who then were the Druids? In the golden age of Celtic spirituality, they were a priestly ruling class advising warlords, predicting the future. They were the keepers of the ritual but far more than priests. They were involved in politics as well as sacrificial ritual, prophesy, and control of the supernatural world. They were the teachers, the keepers of the oral tradition. They were the philosophers, shamans, physicians, and judges. They were feared and venerated.

Julius Caesar wrote of them, “They have the right to pass judgment and to decide rewards and punishments.”

We know from ancient writings that Druids underwent a twenty-year course of study before they became fully fledged priests.

There were three subcasts to the order of Druids:

Bards who were the poets, singers, musicians, genealogists, and historians;

Ovates, who were the diviners and read the omens;

Druids, who were the priests and judges.

Caesar also wrote: “they know much about the stars and celestial motions and about the essential nature of things, and the powers and authority of the immortal gods, and these things they teach their pupils.”

In many ways they were similar to the Hindu Brahmins and the Chaldean astronomers of Babylon. They were then, as they are now, the bridges between the two worlds—seen and unseen.

“Please don’t cry, Mrs. Williams.” Constable Evan Evans reached out awkwardly and patted his landlady’s large shoulder. This gesture only made the generously built woman sob into his handkerchief even more loudly.

“I feel like I’m losing a son,” she said. “The son I never had, you were.”

“It’s not like I’m going far. Just across the street, isn’t it? And you’ll be able to see me every day. I might even drop in for a cup of tea and a chat.”

“But it won’t be the same.”

“Come on now.” He put a tentative arm around as much of her shoulders as he could reach. “It’s time I moved on, isn’t it? I can’t go on being spoiled by you all my life. I’ve got to learn to stand on my own two feet.”

Mrs. Williams made a supreme effort to collect herself. A big shuddering sigh went through her body. “I suppose so,” she said. “I knew it would have to come someday.”

“Believe me, I’m not completely thrilled about it either,” Evan said. He bent to pick up a cardboard box of possessions from the floor of his room. “Cooking for myself after eating your good food for over a year—that’s going to take some getting used to. I’ll probably be as thin as a rake within a month.”

“You could come back here for your dinner anytime you wanted. You know that,” Mrs. Williams said.

“I know.” He smiled at her fondly. “But that’s not the point, is it? Bronwen won’t make any commitment until I’ve had a taste of living on my own.” He hoisted the box onto one shoulder and started down the stairs. “She’s perfectly right, of course. I went from my mother’s cooking to yours. I’ve never really lived alone before. How can I hope to be a husband and father someday if I don’t know how to look after myself?”

“So you’ve made up your mind? You’re thinking of marrying Bronwen Price and settling down, then, is it?” Mrs. Williams’s tears were forgotten. She hurried down the stairs behind him. “We all knew you were courting her, of course, but ...”

“I’m thinking about it,” he said. “I’ve turned thirty, haven’t I? About time I settled down.”

“You could do worse, I suppose,” Mrs. Williams said grudgingly.

“Worse? I don’t think I could do much better. She’s a lovely girl, isn’t she?”

“I won’t deny that. A nice-enough girl. Sensible too. But a little too serious, if you ask me. A man needs some fun in his life. He needs to go dancing from time to time. Let his hair down a little after a hard day’s work.”

“Are you saying I should be dating Betsy then?” He knew perfectly well what she was hinting. She had dropped the same hint, none too subtly, at regular intervals since he moved in.

“Betsy Edwards? Betsy-the-Bar? Escob annwyl! Indeed, I am not suggesting a thing like that. Betsy’s too flighty to make any man a decent wife. What you need is someone who is a good homemaker and knows how to have fun too.”

She reached around Evan to open the front door for him. A swirl of cold wind flapped the pages of a book on top of the pile. “Now, I know you haven’t liked to ask out our Sharon while you were living with me. I can understand that. A young man likes some privacy in his romantic dealings. He can’t go courting when the girl’s grandmother is supervising. But now you’ll be living on your own, why don’t you take her out—with my blessing? Then you’ll see—a lovely little cook, Sharon’s turning out to be and a lovely little dancer too.”

Evan was glad his back was turned to his landlady so that she missed the involuntary wince. Sharon, Mrs. Williams’s granddaughter, giggled like a schoolgirl at everything he said, and she was too enthusiastic, all over him, constantly pawing at him. It was like fending off a Saint Bernard puppy.

“I’m sure she’ll make some man very happy, Mrs. Williams,” he said, “but you know me. I’m a quiet sort of bloke. I don’t go in much for dancing and that kind of thing. Bronwen suits me quite nicely, thank you.”

He stepped out into the blustery day, holding onto the objects on top of the pile that the wind threatened to snatch away. It was supposed to be spring, he thought gloomily, and yet there was another dusting of snow on top of Mount Snowdon last night. He glanced up at the mountain as he crossed the street, but the peak was hidden under a heavy blanket of dark cloud. On the other side

the street was a long row of terraced gray stone cottages, typical of any mining village. Evan put down the box outside the door of number 28. The only thing that distinguished it from numbers 26 and 27 was that it had a red front door. Such splashes of outlandish color were frowned upon in rural Wales. The last inhabitant, a widow called Mrs. Howells, had always been considered flighty on account of the red front door. She hadn't shown any other signs of exhibitionism during her fifteen years of tenure, but the local women were still apt to speak of her as "Mrs. Howells Number Twenty-eight, you know, the flighty one with the red door."

Now she had gone to live with her daughter in Cardiff, of all places—another sign that her judgment was slightly off. Evan had heard through the grapevine that the cottage would be vacant and he had jumped to take it. Not that there would have been too many others waiting to fight over it. The population of Llanfair, like that of most other Welsh villages, was aging and shrinking. No work since the slate mines closed and no prospects for young people apart from waiting tables and making beds at the nearby hotels.

He fitted his key into the lock, turned, and pushed the door open. He picked up the box and stepped inside, conscious of the damp-cold feel of an empty house. It was so different from the warm friendliness of Mrs. Williams's front hall that he looked back longingly across the street. He wondered how long it would be before he could turn this place into a home. So far he had a couple of saucepans and some mismatched china, courtesy of Bronwen, a vinyl-topped table, two chairs from the discount hardware emporium in Bangor, and a single bed. Hardly a promising start.

Evan carried the box through to the back room, which would serve as his living/dining room, and put it on the floor. The brown, pockmarked linoleum made the room feel even colder and gloomier. A rug would be one of his first purchases. Maybe he'd go down to Bangor or Llandudno this afternoon and do a rapid tour of the thrift shops. With his police constable's salary he couldn't afford to buy the kind of furniture he'd like all at once. He reminded himself this was just a temporary measure. With any luck the permits would come through for him to rebuild the old shepherd's cottage in the national park above the village. This was his dream and he had been waiting patiently for several months with no word from the national parks people. When he finished building his own cottage, then he could start furnishing it the way he wanted—he corrected himself—the way Bronwen would want it. She had already expressed her willingness to live there, although she hadn't mentioned anything about marriage. Neither had he, for that matter. It was still a hole in the ice around which they skated cautiously.

He wished that Bronwen were here to help him. But his department was on a cost-cutting drive and had started scheduling him to work every other weekend. This meant he was doing this on a Tuesday when Bronwen was teaching at the village school. Evan took out a lamp, looked around the room for somewhere to put it, then stood it, for want of anywhere better, on the mantelpiece. He was just heading back to Mrs. Williams's when the front door opened and Bronwen burst in.

"Haven't got very far yet, have you?" She stood in the doorway, looking around disapprovingly. She was wearing a navy fisherman's sweater that made her eyes look almost the same color, and her cheeks were pink from walking in the wind. Strands of ash blond hair had escaped from her long braids and blown across her face.

"What are you doing here?" Evan asked, his face lighting up. "You haven't abandoned your pupils to come and see me, have you?"

Bronwen grinned. "It's lunchtime and I've got two volunteer mothers on lunch duty, so I thought I'd pop over and see how you were doing." She pushed back her wisps of hair as she surveyed the room. "Oh, dear. I hadn't remembered it as quite so dreary."

"That's because last time you saw it it was full of Mrs. Howells's furniture. And this floor was hidden under a rug," Evan said. "I think a rug better be one of my first purchases, don't you? As we

as pots and pans, chairs and tables, a wardrobe, chests of drawers—oh, and food.”

“They’ve given you a raise then, have they?”

“I thought I’d go down to Bangor this afternoon and have a look at the charity shops. It’s the only way I’ll get this place furnished.”

Bronwen nodded. “And you don’t want to spend a lot on stuff that might not fit in the cottage someday.”

“If the permission ever comes through.” Evan sighed. “There’s some old codger on the board who thinks that all national park property should be allowed to return to wilderness.”

Bronwen came across and wrapped her arms around his neck. “It will come through. Just be patient. And in the meantime you’ll be gaining valuable experience at survival techniques.”

“You make it sound as if I’m about to cross Antarctica on foot.” Evan chuckled. “Of course, with my cooking, I may die of starvation pretty rapidly.”

“Get away with you.” Bronwen released him and gave him a playful slap. “You know very well that you’ll be eating at my place half the time, and Mrs. Williams will be popping round every day with a little something she’s baked, just to make sure ...”

“She already invited me to dinner any night I felt like it,” Evan said. “But I’m going to be strong and resist temptation. And no take-aways and frozen meals either. I’ve got that cookbook you gave me for Christmas and I’m going to learn to cook. You’ll see.”

“I’m very proud of you,” she said. “I shall expect to be invited to dinner in the—”

She was interrupted by the beep of Evan’s pager. He took it from his belt and grimaced. “Oh, no. That’s all I need. HQ on the phone for me.”

“That’s not fair,” Bronwen said angrily. “First they take away half your weekends and give you two useless weekdays off instead, and then they phone you on your days off too.”

“I am a policeman, Bron,” he said. “It goes with the job. If there’s some sort of emergency, days off don’t count.”

“But I hardly ever see you these days,” she said. “I’m busy marking papers all week and you’re working all weekend. I had to do that lovely hike over Glyder Fach by myself.”

“We could always solve that,” Evan said, slipping an arm around her. “I could give up trying to make this place habitable and come and live with you instead.”

“Oh, yes, that would go down very well with the locals, wouldn’t it!” Bronwen laughed. “Imagine what fodder that would give the two ministers for their Sunday sermons. Besides,” she reached up and stroked his cheek, “we’re doing this for a purpose, aren’t we?” She gave him a hasty peck on the cheek. “Got to go,” she said. “If I don’t get back, those kids will be running wild.”

Evan followed her out and watched her run up the street before he made his way down the hill to his little sub-police station.

“Oh, Constable Evans. Glad we found you,” Megan, the dispatcher, came on the phone. “Sorry to be disturbing you on your day off, but the chief inspector would like a word with you and he’s off to Birmingham for a conference in the morning. It’s all about this reorganization he’s planning. He’ll come up with a solution to making you more—upwardly mobile, shall we say.”

“Is he there to speak to me now?”

“He’d like you to come down so that he can speak to you in person. Is that all right? I know it’s your day off, but ...”

“I’ll be there in half an hour,” Evan said.

He put the phone down and went out to his old clunker of a car. It started on the third attempt. Community policemen were not equipped with police cars. Mobile units were sent as backup from Caernarfon when needed, so the car was his own—had been his own for many years now. “Upwardly mobile”—what could that mean? And she had sounded so enigmatic when she said it, too. Did she

know something he didn't—a promotion maybe? His transfer at last to the plainclothes division? He put his foot down and the engine growled in protest as he drove out of the car park.

“Ah, Evans. Good man.” It was Chief Inspector Meredith's standard method of greeting, unless one had done something wrong, in which case it was just “Ah, Evans,” with the “good man” part omitted. So he knew he wasn't in trouble.

“Glad you got here so quickly.” This was also part of the standard welcome. “Pull up a pew.”

The chief inspector was in his customary rolled-up shirtsleeves and Evan noted that the room was pleasantly warm. No cost-cutting attempts with the central heating going on here.

“So how are things up at Llanfair?” The chief inspector pronounced it awkwardly, not able to get his tongue around the double l, like all non-Welsh speakers. He was from North Wales, but from the coastal city of Llandudno, which had always considered itself gentrified and where Welsh-speaking was a rarity.

“Oh, about the same as usual, sir.” Evan perched himself on the hard wooden visitor's chair and wished the chief inspector would cut the small talk and get to the point. The anticipation was killing him.

“No bodies for a while? You must be getting bored.” He laughed—a polite little *ha ha*. Evan smiled and wisely kept silent. He knew that his apparent knack for solving murder cases had not always gone down well with the top brass. In fact, he sometimes wondered if his track record was what had prevented him from being selected for detective training.

“I expect it's pretty quiet up there in Llanfair at this time of year, isn't it? No tourists around yet to get lost or stranded or lose their keys.”

“That's right, sir.”

The chief inspector leaned forward in his chair. “Look here, Evans. You probably know that we've been given a directive from Colwyn Bay to cut departmental costs considerably. One of the suggestions, of course, was to do away with the smaller outstations and consolidate our personnel at headquarters.”

“I thought that had been tried before, sir, before I got here. I thought they discovered that having an officer on the spot was a great crime deterrent.” (*As if anyone with any sense hasn't already figured that out, he thought.*)

“True, but then the population out in the villages is shrinking all the time, isn't it? In a few years they will only exist for the tourists—a sort of Walt Disney re-creation of Wales as it used to be. Beaches and breakfasts, craft shops, ye olde blacksmiths—that kind of thing.”

“Not for a while yet,” Evan said. “We must have at least a couple of hundred people in Llanfair and we're one of the smaller villages.” He looked directly at the chief inspector. A sinking feeling was growing in his stomach. He had rushed here, filled with expectancy, dreaming of possibilities. He didn't like the way the conversation was going. “You're not thinking of closing the Llanfair station, are you?”

“Not for the moment. However, I can't afford to keep officers where they are not fully utilized. I know you have periods when you're busy up there. I know there have actually been some major incidents since you joined our force and your presence has been most—” Evan thought he would say “instrumental,” but instead he said, “—useful in solving them quickly. Then, on the other hand,” he picked up a logbook, “there are days when you seem to do little more than answer phone calls and make cups of tea.”

“It's not quite as bad as that, sir,” Evan said. “I catch up on my paperwork when there's nothing to do. And I imagine there are days down here when you're not exactly run off your feet either.”

The chief inspector managed a smile. Evan couldn't stand the suspense any longer. “So what a

you planning to do with me?" he blurted out.

"Expand your territory," Chief Inspector Meredith said. "At the moment you are confined to an area you can cover on foot. I know you're a fine climber and you've been able to get up to accidents on the mountains, but the response time is naturally slow. We're going to make your job easier by issuing you a motorbike."

"A motorbike?" Evan couldn't have been more surprised, or disappointed. "I've never actually ridden a motorbike, sir."

"No problem. There will be training, of course. And that way we can justify keeping the Llanfaelrhon substation open. You'll be able to patrol the territory from Llanberis on one side to Beddgelert on the other and the most frequently used mountain paths as well. Everyone carries cell phones these days. If we get a call from a climber or hiker in distress, you'll be able to whiz straight up to them." He beamed as if he was giving Evan a wonderful present.

"So—uh—when do I get this—motorbike?" Evan asked. He tried not to let his feelings show in his voice. He had never actually wanted a motorbike, even when his teenage friends were pleading with their parents to get one. They had always looked cold and uncomfortable. He saw no point in getting wet in the rain in his face when he could be safely inside a car. Now he pictured himself riding up mountains in rainstorms in search of stranded tourists. It wasn't a pleasant prospect.

"It's already over at the motor shop, being checked out," the chief inspector said. "There are five of you constables who are being turned into mobile units, so we have to find time to schedule each of you for training. Go and look at the master schedule in dispatch and see when you can fit in a training session. We want it done as soon as possible, so you can be out and about before the tourists show up en masse."

Evan got to his feet. "Will that be all, sir?"

The chief inspector stretched, leaning back in his chair, extending his arms, and cracking his knuckles. "Yes, that's about it. Off you go then. And no doing wheelies when we're not looking!" He chuckled again.

Evan started for the door then turned back. "About my request, sir. My transfer to plainclothes. Any idea what chance I've got?"

"None at the moment with all the cost cutting going on, I'm afraid," Chief Inspector Meredith said. "Plainclothes is having to pare down to the bare bones, just as we are. And I'm in no hurry to lose a good man, either."

Evan came out into the hallway and made for the front door. He didn't even feel like stopping at the cafeteria for a chat and a cup of tea. Megan, the cheerful carthorse of a dispatcher, poked her head through the window as he passed. "Seen the chief, have you? Did you like my little joke? Upward mobile, get it?"

"Very funny," Evan said, and pushed the swing door open.

Chapter 4



It had started to rain, the fine Welsh misty rain that locals sometimes described as “soft day.” You didn’t notice it as much, Evan thought, but it soaked you just as thoroughly as the heavy stuff. He didn’t even bother to turn up his collar to keep it out. It matched his mood. Megan’s laughter rang through his head.

He swung away from his car and instead walked through the car park to the maintenance shed beyond where the new motorbike would be waiting. Might as well get it over with and take a look at it. He couldn’t understand why he had such a negative feeling about motorbikes. He had never owned one. None of the friends of his youth had ever owned one either. So why was he so sure he’d hate riding one? It wasn’t the cold and rain in his face that was worrying him. Anyone bred in the Welsh mountains was used to cold and rain in their faces. He’d had plenty of experience of it in his life waiting for school buses or playing rugby. And he never even minded the weather when he was hiking or climbing. It had to be something more than that Evan racked his brains. He had never been a speed freak, but then he’d never been too worried by speed either. An image came into his head of a motorbike leaning over at an impossible angle as it rounded a sharp curve. When had he ever seen ...

Then all at once it came back to him. He was on holiday with his parents on the Isle of Mann and they had gone to watch the motorcycle grand prix race held there every year. Evan couldn’t have been more than five or six at the time. He remembered climbing up on the fence to see over. The bikes had flashed past, engines screaming, going so fast that they were a blur of bright color. He’d thought that was the most exciting thing he’d ever seen. He couldn’t wait to get home to his new two-wheeler and pretend that it was a motorbike. Then it had happened—one of the bikes took the bend too fast. It was leaning at an impossible angle, the rider’s head only inches from the tarmac. It had been raining and the surface was slick. Suddenly the motorbike was over and sliding into the other bikes. There was a horrible crunch of metal and then a great ball of flame shot up. Evan didn’t think that anyone had actually been killed, but the image was still sharp and clear in his mind. He heard his mother saying, “Promise me you’ll never ride one of those dreadful things. Promise me.” And he had promised.

She had made him make similar promises about anything that frightened her, and extracted similar promises from his father too. But it hadn’t done any good. His father had promised, over and over, that he would be careful and yet he had fallen in a hail of bullets one night, trying to intercept a drug transaction.

Evan hoped his mother had forgotten about the grand prix incident, but he didn’t think she would have. He’d have to remember not to mention the motorbike in their weekly phone conversations.

His new machine, with four others, was standing in the garage, next to a dismantled squad car. It didn’t look nearly as big or impressive as Evan had feared. It was a lightweight contraption with big knobbly tires. He let out a sigh of relief.

A head poked out from under the squad car and Dai, the mechanic, emerged. “Hello, Constable. It’s Evans, isn’t it? Come for your bike then?”

“I just came to take a look at it today. I’m supposed to sign up for training before I’m allowed to ride it.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to it,” Dai said, grinning. “Any ten-year-old could ride this bike. It couldn’t get

fast if it tried. Made for off road, really, like all the farmers have around here for rounding up the sheep. See the big tires. You'll be able to take it up to the top of Snowdon if you've a mind to. Ever ridden one before?" Evan shook his head. "Go on then. Hop on and get a feel for it. I'll run you through the basic controls. After that there's nothing to it. You could take it out for a spin today if you wanted."

Evan climbed onto the bike. It was small and compact, a pony not a race horse. "You switch on here," Dai said, "and your throttle is there on your handlebar. Go on, try it."

As the machine sputtered into life, Evan was conscious of two figures standing in the garage doorway.

"Would you take a look at that, Glynis?" Sergeant Watkins said, grinning to his partner. "It's King of the Road. Don't tell me that Hell's Angels have invaded the motor pool."

"Give it a break, Sarge." Evan smiled, hastily switching off the engine and climbing off the bike. "Did you hear I've been assigned one of these things?"

"I heard something about it, yes," Sergeant Watkins said. "Not a bad idea, really. You'll be able to respond more quickly when some stupid Englishwoman drops her purse down a mountain, won't you boyo?"

"I think it looks like fun." Glynis Davies, the young detective constable, gave him one of her dazzling smiles.

Not as much fun as doing your job, Evan thought. *The job I applied for but you got*. He tried to push the thought from his mind. He knew it wasn't her fault that she'd received the promotion before him. She was smart and able; also a woman at a time when they'd been directed to hire more female detectives. But it still rankled.

"Are you allowed to carry passengers?" she asked.

"I've no idea what I'm allowed to do yet. I only heard about it a few minutes ago."

"If you are, I'm first in line for a ride," she said. She glanced across at Sergeant Watkins. "Have you heard the other news yet?" Evan thought he noticed Watkins give her a warning look, but she didn't stop. "Our chief is taking early retirement."

"The D.C.I.?"

"That's right. And guess who is going to take his place?"

"Not D.I. Hughes?" Evan sounded incredulous. "You're not serious. That man couldn't detect a fried egg sitting on top of his toast."

"He knows the right people," Watkins said, "and he was the only choice, really, unless they brought someone across from Colwyn Bay."

Evan nodded. Why should he worry? It wasn't as if the change of power at the top of the plainclothes ladder affected him.

"So they'll be doing without a D.I. then, will they?" he asked.

Watkins's face turned bright red. It was the first time Evan had ever seen him blush.

"Sergeant Watkins is being sent for training," Glynis said proudly. "He's in line to be promoted to inspector."

"That's wonderful, Sarge," Evan said, giving his hand a hearty shake. "Congratulations."

"Let's wait until it actually happens, shall we?" Watkins muttered. "With all these cost-cutting measures, they'll probably decide they can't afford to promote me." He turned to Dai, the mechanic. "That's why we're down here. Cost-cutting measures again. They're resurrecting old cars that should have been sent to the scrap heap years ago and we've been assigned this beauty. I take it it's not going anywhere for a while, Dai?"

"You can say that again, Sergeant," Dai said. "A proper mess, if you ask me. It's going to cost them a fortune in new parts to get it back on the road. And you should see the rust in the chassis. You'll be

lucky if it doesn't fall to pieces while you're driving."

"Thanks a lot. Very encouraging," Watkins said. "Looks like we might have to ask Evans for a ride on the back of his motorbike after all."

"You're out of luck. I'm not taking it anywhere yet. I've got to sign up for training sessions first."

"Training sessions?" Watkins chuckled. "What are they going to do—start you out with training wheels? Our Tiffany could ride that thing. You should have seen her at the go-cart track at Rhyl the other day. Proper little speed queen she is. Am I glad she can't get her driving license until she's eighteen!" He put a hand on Evan's shoulder. "We might as well get a cup of tea in the cafeteria then. Coming, boyo?"

"All right, why not?" Evan left the workshop with them and crossed the wet parking lot.

"Isn't it supposed to be your day off today?" Glynis asked him. "I was planning to come up to see you, but then I looked at the duty roster and saw you were off."

"I was supposed to be, but the chief inspector called me down here to tell me the wonderful news about a person."

"Wonderful news?" Glynis asked innocently.

"About my motorbike."

"I gather you're not too thrilled," Watkins commented.

"I thought it might have been better news," Evan said.

Watkins nodded. "It will come."

"So what did you want to see me about, Glynis?" Evan asked, steering the conversation to safer areas.

"You know about youth hostels and things, don't you?" she said. "I thought you could help me. I've got to put up flyers in all the local youth hostels. We're trying to locate a missing girl."

"Staying at a local youth hostel?"

Glynis shook her head. "No idea. She's an American college student, doing some kind of course at Oxford University. The course finished before Christmas. She called her parents and said she'd like to stay on over here and do some traveling before she went home. She promised she'd be home by Easter, in time for her spring term at university over there. Her parents haven't heard anything since February and she didn't show up for Easter. They're worried sick, naturally, and they've come over to look for her."

"What makes them think she's been around here?"

"Her last postcard said she was going to Wales. That's all they've got to go on."

"I see." Evan frowned. "Tough order. She could be anywhere. I presume there are other police forces looking into this too?"

Glynis nodded. "The police in Oxford, obviously, and the Met as well. She stayed at a friend's flat in London over the Christmas holidays."

"I'll be happy to put up flyers for you at the youth hostels," Evan said. "She was an outdoorsy type of girl, was she? Might have come here to hike or climb?"

"No, she wasn't. That's the strange thing," Glynis said. "Very quiet, studious, socially conscious. She played the violin. But a good sense of humor. The last postcard she wrote to her parents said, 'Gone to Wales. Got a date with a Druid.'"

"And that's all you've got to go on?"

Glynis nodded. "Not much, is it?"

"And if she's been wandering around since Christmas, she could be long gone by now. We'd be lucky to find anyone at a youth hostel who remembered her. These kids wander around for a month or the most then disappear again."

"That's exactly what Rebecca's done—disappeared," Glynis said. "She never showed up at home."

friend's flat to collect the rest of her stuff."

"Doesn't sound too good, does it?" Evan said. ~~"The flyers have a picture of her on them, do they?"~~

"Yes, but not a very good one. I'm hoping for a better one when we meet the parents. They're due up here in a few days, working their way from the North of Wales to the South, leaving no stone unturned."

"Poor people," Evan said. "I've always thought that must be the very worst thing—not knowing. People can take bad news as long as they know the truth."

Glynis nodded. "You're right. I'll bring Mr. and Mrs. Riesen up to meet you when they get here. You always know the right things to say."

"All right." Evan smiled. She was a nice girl. If she wasn't dating the chief constable's nephew and he didn't have Bronwen in his life, he might well ... he stopped short as they got to the police station door. "I've just remembered," he said. "I don't think I'd better stop for tea with you. I'm moving house today. I've got a ton of things still to do and I wanted to go round the charity shops before they shut. I've got to furnish the place somehow."

"So you finally did it?" Watkins grinned. "You cut the cord and moved away from your landlady. Well, good for you, boyo. Now you'll find out what life is really like. It will be beans on toast and washing your own shirts like the rest of us."

"I'll have you know that I plan to become a gourmet chef," Evan said. He tried not to smile when Watkins nudged Glynis. "No, seriously. I've got a fancy cookbook that Bronwen gave me and I'm going to teach myself to cook properly."

"We'll expect a dinner invitation, won't we, Glynis?" Watkins said.

"Absolutely." Glynis Davies's large brown eyes held his.

It was with some regret that he watched them go through to the cafeteria. In spite of everything he had to admit that he still found her fascinating.

Chapter 5



A few days later Evan headed out of Caernarfon on the new bike. He had passed the course, ridden around cones without knocking them down, and knew how to start and stop. He was ready to become a motorcycle cop. He grinned to himself at the term, imagining himself involved in the kind of high-speed chases that always seemed to happen in places like Los Angeles. The only high-speed chase around Llanfair would be with a sheep that had wandered onto the road.

He left the last of the urban sprawl behind him and let out the throttle as the bike began to climb the pass. The engine gave a satisfying roar. The first of the zigzag bends approached. He was supposed to lean into it, but it seemed such an improbable thing to do. He felt gravity pulling at him, leaned, and smiled to himself as the bike hugged the curve. Very satisfying. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all. He couldn't wait to try it off road, but after several days of steady rain, he'd better let the hillsides dry out a little first.

Llanfair appeared ahead of him, nestled between green slopes. It was late afternoon and the village was bathed in sharp, slanting sunlight, making the gray stone of the cottages glow pink. The stream that flowed from the mountains was almost spilling over its banks, passing under the stone bridge with a thunderous roar and sending up droplets of spray to dance in the sunlight. Everything always looked its best after rain. All fresh and new. Just the sort of evening for a brisk hike. Instead, he had to finish painting the living room. Evan sighed. He had found a bright and cheerful rug for the living room, but it wasn't enough to lift the gloomy, damp feeling, which even a roaring fire couldn't drive away. The brown wallpaper on the walls hadn't helped, so in a fit of enthusiasm that first night, he had started to tear it down. It had peeled off in satisfying strips and now he was left with bare walls. So he had started to paint the whole thing sparkling white. Only after he'd done a couple of walls did he realize that the whole cottage hadn't been painted in half a century. Everything looked dirty and dingy in comparison. The ceiling needed painting too, and after the living room the front hall, the kitchen, the stairs ... he had let himself in for a major project. For the first time he appreciated Sergeant Watkins' constant complaints of weekends being filled with do-it-yourself projects.

He felt daunted by the whole prospect as he pulled into the police station yard. He was about to dismount when there was a shriek and someone sprinted across the street, arms waving.

"Constable Evans!"

It was young Terry Jenkins, the local tearaway who had been mixed up in one of Evan's former cases. His face was lit up with excitement. "Is that your bike? Did you just get it?" He stroked the chrome handlebars lovingly as if the bike were a living thing. "It's beautiful, isn't it? Will it do a ton?"

Evan laughed. "Nothing like a ton, Terry. It's not meant to go fast. It's just so that I can get around my beat more easily."

"I bet it can go pretty fast if you really try. And with those tires, you could do motor cross—you know how they come flying over the hill—whee—airborne!"

"It's a police bike, Terry," Evan said, grateful he wasn't going to have to show off his nonexistent motor cross talents. "I won't be doing any stunts."

"Pity." Terry's face fell. "Still, you'll have to go fast if you're chasing a crook, won't you? Like

that guy in the red sports car that time.”

“I don’t think anything like that is going to happen around here for a while.” Evan put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Come on, help me wheel the bike under cover in case it rains.”

After a disappointed Terry had gone home, Evan let himself into number 28. It still felt cold and inhospitable and he thought longingly of the smell of cooking that had greeted him when he opened Mrs. Williams’s front door. Now if there was going to be any cooking smell, he’d have to produce it. And after last night’s effort he wasn’t so sure the result would be edible. He had tried making a steak and-kidney pie. He had followed the recipe faithfully, but the steak and kidney had ended up as unidentifiable shriveled morsels and the pastry crust needed a chisel to puncture it. Maybe he was being too ambitious, he decided. Maybe he should stick to egg and chips until he knew his way around a kitchen.

He took out a couple of eggs and started to peel a mound of potatoes. It took a while to cut them up so he started heating a block of lard in a saucepan. Then he realized he should have lit the fire in the living room first if he wanted it to be habitable by mealtime. He went through and coaxed newspaper and kindling to life. They started smoking merrily, instantly filling the room with the smell of burning. He’d let them get going well before he put on coal. As he returned to the kitchen, he saw where the smell of burning was coming from. Smoke was billowing from the saucepan and as he approached, it sent up a great sheet of flame with a *whoosh*. Evan grabbed a saucepan lid and managed to drop it over the pan.

“*Pfew*, that was close,” he muttered, pushing back his hair from his face with a sooty hand. “Smoke alarm,” he wrote on the growing list on the fridge.

He had renewed admiration for Mrs. Williams, who could turn out a whole meal without apparent effort. It seemed pointless to start over with new fat and he had gone off the idea of chips anyhow. Scrambled eggs then. They were edible, if a little rubbery, but he was still ravenous. None of the cans in the pantry looked appetizing. There was nothing for it but to admit defeat and go over to the pub for bangers or a meat pie. Besides, he needed to get away from the smell.

Having checked that the fire now glowing anemically in the fireplace wasn’t about to burn the house down, he put on his raincoat and crossed the street to the Red Dragon. Inside, it was as warm and welcoming as ever, the big fire glowing in the grate and the air heavy with smoke and conversation. Evan pushed his way to the bar. Instead of Betsy’s welcoming smile, Harry-the-Public bald head poked up over the counter.

“What do you want then?” he demanded.

“And good evening to you too, Harry *bach*.” Evan looked at the men standing around the bar for some explanation of what was wrong. “I’d like the usual Guinness and something to eat if it’s not too much trouble.”

“It is too much trouble,” Harry said. “Guinness you can have. Food’s not on tonight.”

“Why, what happened? Where’s Betsy?”

“You tell me,” Harry snapped as he drew Evan’s pint of Guinness. “She was due to work at five wasn’t she? Where the devil is she?”

“It’s not like her to be late,” Evan said. “Have you phoned her place?”

“Yes, and there’s no answer. Her dad says she went off with some woman this morning.”

“Some woman?”

“I know who that would be.” Evans-the-Meat put down his empty glass and indicated that he’d like it refilled. “That foreigner who was in here the other day.”

“English person, you mean?” Harry asked.

“No, American, Betsy said she was. Over here studying.”

Evan’s ears pricked up. “American girl, studying over here? Her name wasn’t Rebecca, was it?”

“How would I know?” Evans-the-Meat demanded. “And I don’t think I’d call her a girl either. Mutton dressed up as lamb, if you ask me.”

“So what was Betsy doing with her?” Harry asked, smoothly refilling the pint and putting it down in front of the butcher.

“I’m not really sure. I only came in at the end of it. A lot of nonsense about Betsy having special powers and second sight, from what she said.”

“Always was daft in the head, that girl,” Harry commented. “She’d believe anything you told her.”

“Still, I hope she hasn’t come to any harm.” Evan looked around uneasily. “Where was that American supposed to be studying? At Bangor?”

Evans-the-Meat shrugged. “Ask Barry-the-Bucket. He was there. He might know.”

Heads turned to where Barry was chatting with his friends in the corner by the fire. “Hey, Barry the boyo,” Evans-the-Meat called. “You were there, weren’t you? When that American woman came into the pub and talked to Betsy.”

Barry left his corner and came across to the bar. “I was,” he said. “Real brainy type with all kinds of degrees. Not a bad looker either—bit on the scrawny side but she’d be okay with some fattening up. I bet she’s the kind that eats nothing but nuts and rice.”

“So where do you think Betsy might have gone with her?”

“That place she was going to be studying. You know, that estate down on the coast built by that crazy lord Tiggy. What do they call it now? That’s right. The Sacred Grove. That’s what she called it. From what she said the lot that own it now are even crazier than that old lord—she was going to find out if Betsy had the second sight.”

“Like reading tea leaves, you mean?” Harry asked.

“I’d imagine so. Seeing into the future, anyway. This woman told Betsy that Celts used to have that ability and she thought Betsy might still have it, seeing that her old *nain* used to see the Derin Corff.”

Harry let out a chuckle. “Well, if that isn’t one of the daftest things I’ve ever heard. And Betsy believed her, did she? She would. But she’s got no more knowledge of the future than the chickens in my back garden, and they’re the daftest creatures on God’s earth. If she could see into the future she’d have helped me pick the right horse in the Grand National, wouldn’t she? And I wouldn’t have lost my ten quid.”

And she’d have foreseen that old Colonel Arbuthnot was going to be murdered that night he left the pub, Evan thought. If ever there was a moment for second sight, that would have had to be it. Betsy was so anxious to be noticed that she’d say and do anything.

“I can tell you haven’t got the second sight of the Celt, Harry,” Barry-the-Bucket said, banging his glass down on the counter, “or you’d have seen that I was dying of thirst, waiting for a refill.”

Harry opened his mouth to answer this when the door opened and Betsy stepped in, her blond curls windswept but her eyes sparkling with triumph.

“Sorry I’m late, Harry,” she said, pushing through the crowd of men to reach the bar, “but I wanted you to know that you’re talking to someone who may be a real live psychic.”

“So your psychic ability didn’t tell you that you were late then? You didn’t pick up the negative vibrations in the air from me being ticked off at you?”

Betsy gave him a dazzling smile as she opened the swing section of the bar and came through, taking off her coat as she walked. “I thought you’d understand, just this once. This is a special day in my life, Harry. You won’t believe the things that I’ve seen today. It’s like another world down there.”

“You were abducted by aliens, were you?” Barry leaned on the bar, grinning at her.

“You have no idea, Barry-the-Bucket,” Betsy said. “If you saw what I’ve seen today, your eyes would pop right out of your head. It’s like another world.”

“Well, go on then, tell me what I’m thinking if you’re a real psychic,” Barry teased.

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