

## November Newsletter 2021

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Hi All,

As there are some new subscribers this month, I'll start with a reminder that any time you want to opt out, all you have to do is reply to [info@heatherpeckauthor.com](mailto:info@heatherpeckauthor.com) to say so. But I hope you'll stick with us and enjoy the news and free short stories etc.

Last month I promised some exciting news. Well, very exciting for me anyway! As some of you will know, my second book 'Glass Arrows' has been shortlisted for the East Anglian Book Awards fiction prize. It's a shortlist of only three, so I feel very honoured and am looking forward to the next phase when the category winners are announced on 6 November. Please keep your fingers crossed for me!



Book number 3, 'Fires of Hate' is now with the printers and I've started on number 4. I have a tentative title in mind, which I may share next month if I'm feeling more confident about it.

But for now, here is the short story I promised last month. I hope you enjoy it.

All the best

Heather

## Halloween Cries

For the second time in an hour, traffic was stationary on the A17. Greg was surveying the road ahead with what Chris felt was remarkable calm.

'No finger tapping on the steering wheel? No tuneless whistling? No impatient flicking through the map book, printed 10 years ago, for an alternative route?' she enquired. 'Are you sure you're genuinely male Greg? This behaviour is downright abnormal.'

Greg turned with a smile.

'Sarky.' he replied cheerfully. 'What do you want me to say? That I'm the perfect man that casts all others into the shade? Or the truth? That after waiting 8 weeks to have a weekend away with you, nothing can dent my happiness.'

Chris returned her gaze to the congested road ahead with considerable smugness and a feeling somewhere in her middle that was closely akin to melting chocolate.

'The latter will do,' she said.

With all the delays, it was after 6pm by the time they had towed their cases along the river bank from St Mary's car park to their central York hotel, and a long drink in the bar was beckoning.

'Do you mind if we postpone our trip down your memory lane until tomorrow,' asked Chris.

'Just what I had in mind,' replied Greg. 'We can hit the streets of York revitalised in the morning.'

Chris was watching the blueberries rise and fall in her glass of Prosecco. 'Just like one of those old lava lamps,' she said, mind absent from current proceedings. 'I wonder why they do that?'

'Sup up,' said Greg briskly, 'or bring it with you. I want a steak and then bed.'

Their room overlooked a courtyard and beyond that a street lined with pubs and restaurants.

'This isn't going to be very peaceful, at least not until closing time. Especially tonight. Window open or closed do you think?'

'Why especially tonight?' enquired Greg.

'Don't tell me you hadn't noticed the bright orange pumpkins and fright masks, oh master detective!' exclaimed Chris. 'It's Halloween you dozy lad. There'll be parties everywhere.'

'Well I'm not suffocating for anyone,' replied Greg, 'and I doubt anything will keep you awake for long, so open I'd say.'

'Not for long, that's true,' said Chris with a wicked grin, and earned 'thank you very much you cheeky mare,' in response.

It was around 3 in the morning when they were wakened by a shout.

'Oh hell. Oh F... hell. I've found her. She's. Oh hell.'

There was silence and Chris turned over to peer at Greg through the gloom.

'That doesn't sound good,' she said.

'Just what I was thinking,' he replied, and shifted uneasily in the bed. 'D'you think I should take a look?'

'Could be just a cat he's found,' said Chris, hoping but not really believing it. There'd been something in the voice. 'But not our patch so not really our problem Greg.'

More sounds came through the window, muffled voices this time, with words indistinguishable. Then the noise of running high heels and

'Did you say you'd found her?' followed by a piercing scream. Greg was out of bed in seconds and pulling clothes on. Chris wasn't far behind.

'Can't ignore that,' he said, and snatching up his wallet with his warrant card, he opened the bedroom door and ran down the stairs to the emergency exit. Chris followed with the room key safely in her pocket.

A small group of young people were milling about near the pile of casks from the restaurant bar. Chris counted three, with a fourth being sick in the corner by the bottle bank. Greg was already in their midst.

'I'm a police officer,' he announced, waving his warrant. 'Make some space here,' then, as one or two showed signs of trying to melt away he added sharply, 'no one leaves!'

One figure bumped into Chris as he tried to ignore Greg's instruction.

'And I'm another one,' she said. 'Don't make me arrest you. Stand over there.' She pointed to the hotel wall and stood between the four young people on their feet and their route to the road beyond. On the ground was a fifth, but this one was lying in the moonlight, prone on the damp and grubby flagstones by the empty casks. A discarded witch's hat lay by her side.

Greg knelt briefly by the body, just long enough to check for a pulse. It was a young woman with long purple hair, and the stains on the stone beneath her were copious quantities of blood. He noted the knife handle protruding from her breast and stood up sharply.

'Anyone dialled 999?' he asked.

'I have,' replied the shadow nearest him. 'A few minutes ago.'

'And you are?'

'Jeff Randall.'

'And the name of the victim? I take it she's known to you?'

'Yes,' replied Jeff, running a shaking hand through his short blonde hair. 'It's Imogen Fairbrother. She's a friend of ours. We came looking for her when she didn't come back into the club. I found her.' He was interrupted by the sounds of a siren and blue flashing lights. A patrol car made it to the gates of the courtyard from one direction, a fraction of a second before an ambulance arrived from the opposite, in contravention of both the one way street system

and the pedestrianised route.

Suddenly there were a lot of people in the yard, the crowd increasing by the moment as hotel staff and even a few part-dressed guests joined the throng. The damp air carried smells of cooking and wine from the breath swirling round them. Greg didn't know the two uniformed officers from the car, but they noted his ID with surprise and accepted the list of four students handed them by Chris with some bemusement and thanks.

'It's not up to me,' said Greg with authority, 'but if I were you I'd get scenes of crime here ASAP and concentrate on keeping this area uncontaminated until they arrive.' He called over to the paramedics making their way through the growing crowd, 'the casualty is dead. It would be a great help if one of you could confirm that, then clear the area. This is a police matter now.'

'And the assailant?'

'No idea. Either long gone or mingling with this crowd I'd guess,' replied Greg.

One of the constables reappeared from the car carrying two rolls of tape. He swiftly strung the red and white tape round the section of the yard which held the body, then established a second line with the blue and white tape which encompassed the whole courtyard, pushing sightseers and the four students before him into the hotel foyer.

'No-one crosses this line,' he instructed, and with a nod to Chris, ushered the four friends of the casualty into the hotel lounge. He turned to address the crowd.

'All hotel guests, please return to your rooms. We'll speak to you in the morning.'

The crowd evaporated up the stairs leaving a small group of hotel staff in possession of the foyer.

'You,' he said, 'names and addresses to,' he turned to Chris and said, 'if you don't mind carrying on until reinforcements arrive?'

'Sergeant Mathews,' she said, 'and no, I don't mind.'

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The early morning saw a very bleary-eyed Greg and Chris enjoying a massive breakfast in the corner of the bar. Other hotel guests seemed to be giving them a wary wide berth, so they ate in peace, at least until joined by a sturdy figure familiar to Greg.

'How do,' said Sergeant Gary Horsfall, 'this must be your Chris. Pleased to meet you love. I thought this was supposed to be a weekend off, not a few days moonlighting for North Yorkshire police.'

Chris surveyed the balding head and cheery grin of Greg's old sergeant and decided she liked him.

'Pleased to meet you too,' she said. 'Good to meet the man who kept this one on the straight and narrow when he was up here.'

'A job which I gather you've taken over lass,' he replied. 'Just as well. He needs a deal of looking after.'

'I am here,' complained Greg, 'when you two've finished. So, what's the news about last night?'

'Off the record?' said Gary, pinching a slice of black pudding from Greg's plate with his fingers. 'The overnight post mortem says killed by a single stab straight to the heart, with some suspicion that she may have been doped beforehand. Her friends say she left the club across the street with a new friend after consuming a couple of glasses of something bought by him. We're checking for rohypnol.'

'Is that a problem here,' asked Chris.

'There've been complaints, mainly from students,' replied Gary.

'So the thinking is, an attempt at date rape that went wrong,' said Greg.

'That's right. But one thing's bothering me. She was wearing a small bag. Not much bigger than a mobile phone with a strap that went across here,' he indicated what he meant on his own substantial torso and 'a cross-body bag' said Chris.

'Sounds about right. Anyway, all it contained was a mobile phone, a house key and a couple of pills in a zipped pocket on the back of the bag.' He paused and

Greg asked,

'Es?'

'That's what you'd expect wouldn't you. They're being checked as we speak, but no, I don't think they were Ecstasy. They're grey/green and still in a blister pack. They look like rohypnol to me. But why would a woman going clubbing be carrying rohypnol? That's a new one on me.'

They were interrupted by an altercation from the direction of the kitchen, followed by the abrupt ejection of a young man through the swing door. He stumbled against the edge of the bar, looked round with puzzled gaze then staggered off in the direction of the stairs. One of the chefs, to judge from his whites and apron, stood in the doorway with an exasperated expression.

'I've told him to leave,' he hissed at the waitress at the till. 'I can't have drunks and hangovers in my kitchen. Sort it.' And he slammed back through the mistreated swing door.

Gary stood up and went over to the bar.

'Everything alright sir,' said the waitress, then 'Oh!' as she spotted his warrant card. 'Was that lad here last night?' he asked.

'Mike? Yes,' she said. 'He's not usually like that,' she added, 'but Chef's right, you can't have people who aren't quite with it around the kitchen. It's not safe.'

'If he was here last night, replied Gary, then he's not going anywhere yet. We need to interview everyone before they leave. Give him a black coffee, there's a love, and sit him down with the rest. We'll get round as fast as we can.' There was a clatter from the hall and raised voices. Greg took a step in that direction then turned to Gary.

'Looks like you might have another casualty,' he remarked. 'He's collapsed into the arms of your constable.'

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Late afternoon and a trip round the Jorvik Centre later, Greg's phone was

buzzing. 'It's Gary,' he said. 'Wants to know can we meet for a drink? Do you mind Chris?'

'Of course not. I'd like to know how he's getting on. Part of the reason for coming here was to meet some of your old mates. '

'Preferably not as part of a busman's honeymoon however,' replied Greg, making arrangements for a meeting in a quiet pub on the outskirts of the city.

They got there first and had already lined up a pint of Black Sheep ale for Gary by the time he arrived, hot and in a hurry. Without a word he seized the glass and downed a full half pint in one swallow before he sat down with a long sigh and wiped some stray foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

'I needed that,' he said. 'Thanks.'

'Busy day?' asked Chris sympathetically.

'Busy,' he gave a hollow laugh. 'And then some. And if I've been shouted at by one set of parents, I've been shouted at by 20! All their little darlings are potential Nobel prize winners not to mention candidates for sainthood, and how dare I question them about drinks being spiked, let alone a murder. Don't I have any proper detecting to do? And the trickiest of the lot were the victim's parents.'

'Well they're bound to be upset,' said Greg, surprised. 'You used to be good with families Gary.'

'Huh! I hope I still am. The problem here's the news I've had to give and the questions I asked.'

'Which were,' prompted Chris. 'Come on, don't keep us in suspense!'

'Those pills *were* rohypnol. That was the first issue. Of course, she could have picked them up anywhere, or been told they were something else. But there's no trace of rohypnol in her body. Or anything else for that matter, except a moderate level of alcohol. On the other hand, that kitchen assistant who collapsed, he was so out of it they had to call an ambulance and the hospital found that he, he *had* taken rohypnol.

'Second problem. The victim's friends,'

'What was her name,' interrupted Chris. 'You can't keep just calling her the victim. She was a person.'

'Sorry,' said Gary, 'it's been a long day.' Then to Greg, 'she keeps you up to the mark I bet.'

'And then some,' said Greg with a grin.

'So,' said Gary, 'the victim was a performing arts student named Imogen Fairbrother. According to her friends she was one person on stage and another off it. A good to middling character actress but lacking in confidence when playing herself. Not one of the glamorous leading-lady types, by all accounts.'

'Did she have a boyfriend?' asked Chris.

'Apparently not. And had never had a relationship, at least not since coming to York. Not that she wasn't keen on the idea, but just never seemed to click with anyone. They said she was a bit depressed about it. But, the thing I was trying to tell you is,' he paused for another swallow of beer and this time emptied the glass. 'Another round please,' he bellowed to the barman then went on, 'the friends have identified the kitchen porter, Mike Stannard, as the chap she went off with.'

There was a pause as a further round of drinks were delivered and the table wiped very thoroughly by a man trying to find an excuse to linger and eavesdrop. At last he went back to his station behind the bar and Greg said,

'and Mike Stannard is the one who was doped with rohypnol.'

'Exactly. And is claiming he can remember nothing about the night after drinking in the club with, and I quote, "a big broad with long purple hair and a pointy hat".'

A long pause, then Gary added, 'you can see where I'm going with this. And why Imogen Fairbrother's's parents are upset with me.'

'Let's get this straight,' said Greg. 'You think that Fairbrother spiked the kitchen porter's drink with rohypnol then took him back to the hotel, where at some point there was a struggle and he stabbed her while under the influence of the drug. I see two problems with that as a theory. One, what would be the point? I'd have thought once drugged he wouldn't be any use to her anyway. Two. Where did the knife come from?'

'As to the effects of rohypnol, perhaps she didn't know what the effect would be. Or didn't care. Perhaps she just wanted to spend the night with someone. As to the knife, there's some evidence it may have come from the hotel kitchen. It's a large knife suitable for chopping veg, the same brand as those used in the hotel. And the spot where we found her body was only a few yards from the kitchen emergency exit. Moreover, one of the sous chefs says that in warm weather it's not unusual for them to prep veg and the like at the table in the yard. And that a knife could have been left there.'

'Is there one missing from the kitchen?'

'They don't know for sure. They don't seem to be very certain how many they should have. And Chef is keeping quiet because he can see criticism heading his way for failure to secure a bladed weapon.'

'Prints? DNA?' asked Chris.

'Not so far. Still checking.'

There was a silence as they all sipped their pints, then Chris said thoughtfully,

'I foresee a third problem. Assuming for the moment that you can identify the knife and CPS will go with a prosecution, Mike Stannard has a good case for a plea of not guilty on the grounds that he didn't know what he was doing owing to a defect of reason.'

Gary choked on his beer and spat a not insignificant quantity over the table.

'You what,' he gasped once he had his breath back.

'A defence we've come across recently,' said Greg. 'It didn't succeed. Chris is right though, I think it might run in this one, and then the best you could hope for would be manslaughter.'

There was a pregnant pause, then as Gary opened his mouth to respond his phone rang.

'Yes,' he snapped, then listened in silence. 'Well,' he said, putting the phone down. 'They've found CCTV footage from the pub opposite. It's a bit blurry but it shows Imogen Fairbrother leading Stannard across the road. He's stumbling and seems rather out of it. They've also found some prints on the knife. Most

are impossible to ID, but there's one near the top of the blade that they're still working on.'

'Wasn't it wiped by the blade entering the body?' asked Greg.

'Not quite. The knife was broad bladed and the top inch or so nearest the handle didn't enter the body. Anyway, they think there's a chance.. Ah, this may be it,' as the phone rang again.

Another wait in silence and then,

'Bingo,' said Gary. 'The fingerprint on the knife blade is Fairbrother's'

'From an attempt to remove the knife from the wound?' asked Chris.

'SOCO says not. It's pointing the wrong way. She'd break her wrist getting her fingers on the knife like that while it was in her chest. On the other hand, the prints *are* where you'd expect to find them if someone snatched up a knife from a table in the dark, and got their fingers partly on the handle and partly on the blade.'

'So your theory is?' asked Greg.

'Fairbrother dopes Stannard's drink, then leads him across the road to the kitchen entrance to the hotel. There she finds he's a lot less docile than she hoped and some sort of fight ensues. Unfortunately, someone has left a kitchen knife on the table near the door and she picks it up. He takes it off her, and in the struggle she's stabbed.

'You're a bit short on evidence,' said Greg critically 'and you're unlikely to get a confession if he can't remember anything.

'True.' Gary leaned his chair at a dangerous angle. 'But I'm wondering how much that matters. There's no evidence Stannard went looking for anything other than a good night out. He just seems to have been unlucky in his choice of drinking companion. There's certainly no evidence he planned any of this. None of it seems to have been premeditated. Apart that is, from Fairbrother's use of the rohypnol in the first place.'

There was a long reflective pause. 'A knife in the chest is a tough penalty for drugging someone,' remarked Chris.

'And a lengthy prison sentence is a pretty tough outcome to a few cocktails with a friendly girl who spikes your drink with a powerful tranquilliser,' replied Gary.

'Which makes me glad, yet again, that all we have to do is catch them. Judgments, thankfully, we can leave to others,' responded Greg, leaning back in his chair to catch the barman's eye. 'Let's have another.'