

## Making the Best of Things, or, Five Stay Home for Christmas

### Part 1 - 27<sup>th</sup> November

“Fliss! Fliss! Put that child down and come here.”

“Aww, Missus Matchum, don’t be mean. She’s lovely. I think she might follow me home.”

“From your mouth to God’s ear, son. Fliss’ll follow anyone home, if she thinks there might be food or a cuddle in it. Get over here, ye daft bitch. Heel.” The white bulldog trots reluctantly back to Agatha Matchum’s side as the child runs off down a side street.

“Did you win, then?” Annette is curious. Surely the name issue has already been settled, and not in Aggie’s favour.

“Win what?” Aggie flicks her iron grey bob behind her ears and hauls at the leads, positioning one bull terrier on each side of her. The dogs eye one another round the swing of her tweed skirt and leather boots and elect to behave. For now.

“The Royal versus Fliss argument.”

“Argument? There is no argument. He says, okay, Max is my dog, but the female is his, and he wants to call her Royal. I say: if I’m the one walking her, then I’m the one naming her. She got her shots last week. It says Fliss Matchum on the bill, and I don’t notice him rushing to pay it.” Aggie’s brother Malcolm lives with her, in between stints on the oil rigs. Hardy souls have been known to remark that he’s worked his way through a series of careers, each of which takes him further away from his sister. More charitable (or cynical) types note that he always comes home again.

Aggie puts the dogs in gear and marches forward. Annette’s shepherd bitch, Saf, falls obediently into line and the two women set off uphill towards the bus stop. Annette is dark and plump, and wears her hair in a braid. She’s fond of loose, comfortable clothing in flower prints and bright colours, which conceal her figure and make her look like the ageing flower child she is. She finds Aggie brash and overbearing, and they make an odd couple, but nonetheless they’re best friends. Annette can’t imagine life without her. Ahead of the two women a howling arises, interspersed with yips. The dogs pant and strain at their leashes. Company is waiting.

Near the top of the hill two women are huddled together in the bus shelter, trying to keep out of the wind. In front of the shelter a small, white bundle jumps up and down excitedly, yapping at the top of its voice. Above its head a worn leather lead juts horizontally into the street. One end is attached to the collar of a beautiful samoyed, gleaming white, lovingly brushed and frothing with the effort of pulling against the lead. Inside the shelter Val Collins braces herself against her dog’s pull as she carries on her conversation. Every now and again her voice floats out over the sound of barking.

“Sit, Karma. Sit now, there’s a dear.”

Her voice has no effect on the dog, whose eyes are bulging as it chokes itself against its own collar. Fortunately, Aggie and Annette reach the others just before Karma collapses from asphyxia. The dogs mill round together, sniffing each other’s bottoms and tangling the leads. Karma collapses into a white, hairy pile in the roadway and pants ferociously, saliva dripping from his tongue. Sugar finally ceases yapping and piles into the fray, whining and nipping at the larger dogs. Saf bears her patiently, shouldering her away from time to time, while Max and Fliss ignore her altogether. They are too busy licking up the pools of Karma’s saliva from the gutter.

Eventually, the women get the leads sorted out and start off along the ridge.

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Chantelle closes the oven door and straightens, rubbing the small of her back. Steam has condensed on her fringe and it hangs limply in front of her eyes. She pushes it back behind her ears and shouts. “Jared? It’s your turn to walk the dog.”

There’s no response from upstairs, but the rocker on the floor under the kitchen table begins to wail softly. Chantelle reaches out one foot and pushes the rocker into motion again. The baby quiets, while she continues preparing the dinner.

“Jared?” It’s no use. It looks as though she’ll be walking the dog again. Funny how ‘family dog’ inevitably becomes ‘Mum’s dog’ when it comes to exercise. The potatoes come to the boil and she turns them down to simmer. She decants a pile of chopped green beans into the pot with the carrots and pushes the hair out of her eyes again. With luck there’ll be just enough time to change Alice, feed the dog and persuade the twins to lay the table before serving up. Daisy’s walk will have to wait until after bedtime, as usual.

Chantelle sighs. Things seem to be getting harder every day. It’s at times like this that she really misses having another adult around the place – even though he’d been pretty useless when it came to household chores. She misses having someone to keep an eye on the baby while she nips out to get the washing in, or to take the chicken out of the oven when the timer goes (and stop the dog from eating it) while she rounds up the troops.

Sometimes she feels it needs the skills of a Sergeant Major to keep five kids and a dog in line. That was another of Gary’s complaints. “You’re always telling me what to do. You’re so grumpy all the time.”

“You just try keeping a household of seven (plus dog) in order by yourself, Gary MacEwan, she mutters, kicking the table leg. Bloody coward. He’d been fine in the early days - caring and

helpful during her pregnancies, patient and loving afterwards – and there’s no doubt at all that he loves the kids, especially Jared once he’d become old enough to be interesting - but somewhere along the line the spark had gone out of their marriage, and he hadn’t cared enough to help her keep it alight.

It’s understandable, she thinks. After all, by the time they had four children she’d been pretty well exhausted, and the work is hard. There isn’t much room for romance in her life. But right now, with ten year old Jared, eight year old Georgie, twins Tim and Luke (six) and the baby, she really can’t do it all on her own.

She smiles down at Alice. She’d been the baby that Chantelle had hoped would restart their marriage, and bond them all together. It hadn’t worked out that way. Instead, by the twenty-week antenatal check she’d been doing it all on her own, while Gary was away across town in his new house, with his new girlfriend and soon enough his brand new baby. Little Molly is a model baby with yellow curls who never cries, or keeps her parents awake all night with colic. To add insult to injury, she’s two weeks older than Alice – a fact that causes Chantelle to fantasize about scratching Gary’s eyes out whenever she remembers it.

The front door opens and closes again, sending a cold draught down the hallway and banging the kitchen door shut. It opens, and a pretty girl with brown hair in braids peers round the doorway.

“Hello Georgie, how was Guides?”

“Really good. I’m nearly ready to sit my First Aid badge.”

“That’s great.” Chantelle unbuckles the baby’s safety strap and lifts her, releasing a distinctive smell of dirty nappy.

“Give her to me, Mum. I know what to do.”

“Georgie, you’re a star. What would I do without you?”

Georgie takes the baby to the bathroom, and Chantelle drags the twins away from their computer game, to screams of anguish as the screen goes black. With identical scowls they stomp around the kitchen, slamming plates down on the table and pretending to stab one another with forks. One stands on Daisy’s paw and she yelps, jumping out from under the table, and taking refuge in the utility room, coincidentally ending up right next to her food bowl. Chantelle takes the hint and feeds her, closing the door to shut the dog away from the family dinner. The chicken ought to be about ready by now.

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### Part 2 - 5<sup>th</sup> December

“And then Lionel says to me, ‘it’s all sorted. You’re to stay with Anne on Christmas Eve, and either I or Liz will have you on Christmas Day, and the other one on Boxing Day. The only thing you have to arrange is your Travelodge on the journey, and tell Anne what time you’ll arrive.’ It’s typical.”

Val has been in full flight for ten minutes, long enough to walk up the lane and cross into the road that runs past the church. Annette’s beside her, listening, with an occasional sympathetic grunt to let Val know she’s still being listened to. Not that Val would notice if she stopped responding.

“I know exactly what the problem is. None of them want me. Christmas is ‘family time’. As if I’m not family. Anne must have got in quick and volunteered to do Christmas Eve, and now Liz and Lionel have to slug it out to see who has to have Mother on Christmas Day. I’ve a good mind to book a package holiday in the sun and tell them I’m not coming. That would serve them right.”

All the time that Val is talking, Karma pulls ahead, at the full stretch of his lead. His eyes bulge as he wheezes, trying to get one more centimetre of stretch out of his collar. Every now and again he makes ugly choking noises and Val releases another inch or two of the extendable lead, but he’s almost at the limit of it now. Saf is trotting beside him. Like a worried mother escorting a fractious toddler, she nudges him occasionally to break his stride. The distraction causes Karma to stop pulling for a moment, and gives him the chance to catch a much needed breath before he starts to choke himself again.

“I thought I might go to New Zealand. It’s supposed to be gorgeous there at this time of year. But you should see the prices they’re charging for air fares. Daylight robbery. I can’t believe they’re allowed to charge that much money for shoving you into a tiny seat, between a screaming kid and a shoebomber. Have you seen how many people they get into one of those 747s? Criminal. Anyway, I can’t afford it. I’ll be lucky if I can afford Portugal, the way things are going, that is if I still have a job in the New Year. Gone are the days when you put up with low Council wages for the job security. Nothing’s secure anymore.”

Behind the two women, Aggie strides up the hill, flanked by twin, white, bullet-shaped figures, each trying to veer in a different direction. They wear full harnesses, so pull as they might there’s no risk of choking. All that happens is that every now and again Max pulls a bit hard and Aggie yanks him back into line, momentarily lifting him off his feet. Each time this happens, Fliss

barks at him. This ever-repeating scenario forms a percussive backdrop to the endless drone of Val's voice. Aggie moves a bit closer and interrupts.

"Didn't I see Sara Fraser at the bus stop with you again?"

Val takes no notice, but Annette turns her head while continuing to walk.

"Yes. That wee white dog is her Sugar."

"West Highland Terrier, isn't it?"

"That's right. She's a little darling. Bit jumpy and yappy for me, though. I prefer a big dog."

Annette looks complacently at Saf, who hasn't needed a lead for years. On rare occasions when one is required (such as when walking at a beach or park adorned with notices specifying that 'dogs must be on the lead') she puts the lead on Saf and then gives her the end of it to hold in her mouth. Saf is perfectly happy to lead herself, and if anyone comments (as busybodies sometimes feel they have the right to do) Annette can point out that her dog is clearly on the lead, and the law has been complied with, to the letter.

Val is still talking. "I might just as well stay at home. At least then I wouldn't need to worry about Karma. He doesn't travel well, and I'm not sure kennels are the right place for him. They don't appreciate his needs." Karma pauses in his relentless struggle with the lead, to sniff an interesting deposit in the road before eating it. Saf sits on her haunches and looks at Annette. Eating another dog's poo is definitely beyond the pale, as far as she's concerned. Karma wags his tail and looks pleased with himself. Another successful foraging expedition. His face smiles as he pants, tongue lolling, and waits for them all to catch up.

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Sara runs the duster over the glass shelf above the TV. She lifts the ornaments one by one, wipes and replaces them. Wafting the cloth over the bookshelf exhausts her and she sinks onto the sofa and picks up the remote control. Flicking through the channels, she leans back into her seat. Sugar whines hopefully and jumps into her lap.

With the dog draped across her knees, Sara settles down to watch. The other day she saw a pretty sapphire necklace she really wanted. Maybe today there'll be something else she likes. Maybe today she'll phone the number on the screen and order one. She knows she won't, though. What would be the point of buying pretty things to wrap round such an ugly body?

Sara knows she's ugly because her husband told her so, many times, before he died five years ago, still complaining. Before marriage, it had been her mother who told her what a

disappointment she was. Now that her girls have grown up and left home, there doesn't seem to be any point in trying to stay strong. She's free to wallow.

On screen now, a massively obese woman is walking across a park accompanied by a fit looking man in shorts and a vest. Whatever he's saying to the woman is drowned out by the little voice in the back of Sara's head. "Pull yourself together, girl. How do you expect to find a man looking like that?" *I got one*, she thinks to herself. *I got one all by myself*. But she can hear Paul's voice too, never satisfied, always wanting to improve her. "If you lost thirty pounds you'd be a goddess."

Instead, she put the weight on, more and more of it, and now it's a struggle to haul herself out of the chair and get back on her feet again. She does it: the program's crap, and anyway she needs a cup of tea. On the way to the kitchen she takes one chocolate from the bowl in the corner. It's only one. That doesn't count.

While the kettle's boiling she washes up the dishes from last night's dinner. This is good. She's in control of her life. Sugar sits adoringly at her feet, eyes fixed on her face, head moving to follow every movement. Sugar loves her. If it wasn't for Sugar she thinks she might have just laid down and died when Kelsie left home.

Merys and Kelsie are Sara's wee girls. Not so wee, these days: Merys is living in Dubai with her business consultant husband, and Kelsie's at university in Glasgow. Kelsie's going to spend Christmas with her boyfriend's family in Aberdeen. They're getting on with their lives. She's glad of that: it proves she was a good mother. Neither of them is making the mistakes she did.

It's lonely, though, now they're gone. Some days it hardly seems worth getting out of bed, except for Sugar. With a sudden burst of energy, Sara gets the collar and lead and pushes her feet into her boots. It's not fair on Sugar to keep her shut up at home. She needs a walk. Today Sara's determined to make it all the way to the bus stop and back. There's a flip-up seat in the bus shelter, so she can take a rest before heading up the hill to home again. She can do this. She's doing it for Sugar.

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### Part 3 - 16<sup>th</sup> December

“Halloo...” The voice rings in the crisp, still air. Val stops mid-sentence and turns to look. Behind them, Chantelle is striding up the road, dragging a reluctant Daisy at the end of her chain. Daisy wants to stop and sniff things. Everything.

“Hello, Ladies. May I join you?” Chantelle is pink-cheeked and breathless. She wears a multi-coloured woollen helmet that looks as though it belongs to one of her kids. Her tiny feet are encased in purple, knee-length boots and she wears purple gloves and a navy raincoat. Wisps of auburn hair escaping from the hat frame her face. She makes the other women feel old and frumpy.

“Sure.” Aggie’s gesture encompasses her friends. “The more the merrier.”

Daisy introduces herself to the other canine members of the group, by bounding over to them and licking each in turn. The dogs sort out their complex, scent-based pecking order with a minimum of fuss, apart from Karma, whose contribution to the communication web seems to consist mostly of howling. Saf nips him on the ear in a minatory fashion and he subsides, tongue lolling.

Today’s walk takes them up round the top of the old cemetery. Beyond its lichen-painted walls a wide, empty pasture stretches away to the skyline. The dogs are happy to slip their leashes and run, gambolling and frolicking in the December twilight. The women talk quietly among themselves. Daisy rushes back to nuzzle Chantelle’s fingers, hoping for a treat, and stays to have her ears ruffled and flanks patted. She walks at heel, without instruction, copying Saf who has stuck close to her mistress’s legs, uninterested in cow pats and rabbits.

Fliss, Max and Karma have chased off the rabbits, but they’ve worked out that at least one is hiding in the warren on the edge of the hill. Karma is beside himself with excitement, and keeps rushing at the hole, in the hopes of flushing some game. The rabbits are having none of it. They know exactly what to do when dogs as big and stupid as this are about: you sit still and wait. The dogs will get bored soon enough. It’s the little ones that a rabbit needs to watch out for: terriers and the like; dogs that are bred to go down a rabbit hole and haul out whatever they find there. These dogs are no problem.

Aggie whistles and shakes her bag of tricks. Fliss and Max respond instantly, charging down the hill to arrive, skidding into place in a tangle of legs and muzzles, precisely at Aggie’s toes. Saf is already there, eyes focused on the bag, and Daisy is quick to spot the opportunity of free food. Aggie

makes her two wait while she feeds the others: one treat each, and Fliss and Max have to beg for it. They know what's expected of them, and perform perfectly. Karma is still up at the warren.

Aggie shakes the bag again, just as Val calls. "Come, Karma. Come." Neither action elicits any response, but Saf barks suddenly, and Karma's head goes up to listen. One more shake of the bag and Karma finally gets the message, inhaling his treat as Val clips the lead back onto his collar.

As they round the top of the cemetery and approach the road again, a figure is seen to be waiting by the lych gate. Sara smiles shyly as the others come abreast of her, and Karma lunges at Sugar. The two dogs go into a paroxysm of mutual delight as Val takes charge.

"This is my friend Sara. I invited her to join us, because she's trying to build up her walking each day. We met at a ...thing... we both go to."

Annette and Chantelle are too polite to say anything, but Aggie has no such compunctions. She snorts. "Weightwatchers, you mean." A flicker of irritation crosses Val's face. Everyone in the group has heard about that 'last five pounds I just can't shift', but the truth is that the weekly Weightwatcher's meeting is a fixture in Val's diary. She loves to meet her friends, gossip about their week, and commiserate with those who, like her, have once again failed to shift a single pound.

Sara's been doing better. She's losing a regular one or two pounds a week, and she's already succeeded in walking to the bus stop and back without a break. Her aim is to get to the point where she can walk right down the town to the shops, and back again. Val's taken Sara under her wing – there's only so much mothering Karma can take, and there's plenty more where that came from. It's Val's idea to introduce Sara to the group, and she's quite nervous about it. She walks along quietly at the back of the group, as Val propounds her latest Christmas plan.

Annette interrupts. "What is everyone doing for Christmas, anyway. We know Val's going on a Portuguese coach tour, but what about the rest of us?"

Aggie snorts, as Val retorts. "I only mentioned that as a possibility. I haven't made up my mind yet."

"I'm fine," says Aggie. "I'll be doing Christmas dinner for Malcolm, then he'll go down the pub and I'll take our four-footed kids for their walk. He can do the dishes."

"I'm on my own this year," volunteers Chantelle. "All my kids are going to my ex's house, and he says he's taking the dog too. I won't know what to do with myself." She falls silent as the truth of this washes over her. She can't remember a Christmas that wasn't full of kids, and husband, and work. What will she do with herself?

"It'll just be me," says Annette. "Michael's around, but he's working all day, and then he's going to stay over at his boyfriend's place. Saf'll be there. We're used to our own company. I did have an idea, though."

Aggie interrupts. "What about you, Sara?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, what will you be doing on the day? Got any romantic plans?" Annette winces at Aggie's lack of tact, but it seems to suit Sara. She squares her shoulders and answers more confidently. "As a matter of fact, I'll be by myself on Christmas Day. I was thinking about eating out."

"That's exactly what I was thinking." Annette grins at Sara, who smiles back, suddenly feeling more welcome. "I think we should all go out together for Christmas lunch. Who's with me?"

"I'll join you," says Chantelle. "It sounds like a great idea."

Val's less certain. "I might not be here," she points out. "But I'll do it if I decide not to go away. What about you, Sara?"

"I'd love to. If that's okay with everyone."

"Of course it is." Val blithely speaks for everyone. "What about you, Aggie?"

"I've already told you, I'll be feeding Malcolm and walking the dogs. You can join me for a walk in the afternoon if you want. Go ahead and eat together – it's no skin off my nose."

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"Hello, may I speak to Michael, please?"

"Who is this calling?"

"It's his mother."

"One moment."

Saf bumps Annette's leg and she strokes the dog absently, waiting for Michael to come to the phone. She doesn't like to call him at work. You never know what urgent task you might be interrupting. However, two in the afternoon is a fairly safe time – midway between the busy points of lunch and dinner.

"Mum, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Michael. Listen, I'm hoping you can help me with something. Is Donald opening up on Christmas Day?"

"Yes, just from one to three in the afternoon. Late lunch. Christmas trad with all the trimmings."

"Does he have many bookings?"

"Only two so far, I think."

"Good. Could you pencil me in for a party of four. No, better make that five. Will you join us? It is your birthday, after all."

“No thanks, Mum. I’ll be pretty busy. Donald needs me, and anyway it’s a good day to get tips.”

“Please yourself. I’m sure you can spare your old mother five minutes for a birthday kiss. So – a table for five.”

“Care to share?”

“Oh, just an idea I’ve got. Tell Donald I’ll let him know by the end of the week if the booking’s definite.”

“Will do. Love you, Mum.”

“Love you too. Bye now.”

Annette walks slowly back into the living room and sinks into an armchair, positioned by the window looking out over the bay. Her hands run slowly through Saf’s coat, over and over again. It might just work. The others are mostly on board already. Aggie’s likely to be the most difficult. As always. Aggie will resist just for the sake of it. Perhaps the best approach is for Annette to pretend that she doesn’t care whether her friend joins the party or not: a bit of reverse psychology.

If she really thinks they don’t care, she’ll be moving her plans to make sure she is included. Aggie can’t bear to think she might be missing out. Annette grins to herself. *You are a wicked witch, Annette Miller.* The sun goes down behind the hills across the harbour, and the clouds glow crimson and gold as she stirs herself into action. Time for tea.

## Making the Best of Things, or, Five Stay Home for Christmas

### Part 4 - Christmas Eve

Val sets the phone back on its charger and sinks down on the chair in the hall. A fat tear rolls down her nose and drips onto the floor as she puts her head in her hands. That's it, then. All her family Christmas calls over and done with.

She didn't at all mind turning down the invitations from her eldest children. Their houses, and their lives, are cold and unwelcoming to her. Neither chick nor child between them – two arid marriages focused around work and money. She's sorry not to be seeing Anne, though. That home is warm and welcoming, an untidy clutter of children and domestic disorder that's somehow comforting.

Of course, she can visit Anne anytime, and will probably see her early in the spring, but it isn't the same as seeing the kids at Christmas. At least she doesn't need to worry about the gifts – she'd sent money to Anne, to buy what the wee ones most needed. They'll get their presents tomorrow, all gathered together with Anne's parents-in-law, who live next door.

Chatting to Anne today, and hearing the children's voices down the phone, has reminded her how lonely it's going to be tomorrow, waking up to Christmas alone. Still, it's far too late to change her mind now. Besides, there's lunch to look forward to, and the company of her friends. It could be far, far worse.

Pulling herself together, she takes her coat down from its hook and calls Karma. A walk will serve to clear the cobwebs away.

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It's dank and bleak up on the hill, and the women's breaths puff white in the cold air. The weather is still and calm, though thick, yellowish cloud on the horizon promises fouler weather to come. Four of them stand, conversing quietly, in a tangle of dogs and leads, as Aggie forges up the hill towards them.

She's holding both leads in one hand, and a plastic shopping bag in the other. Just for a change, Max and Fliss are not barging each other or jostling for attention. They trot side by side, tongues lolling, all their attention focused on their mistress. They are so interested in the bag she is carrying that they pay no attention to the other dogs, even when Karma lets off a ghastly howl.

As they come abreast of the group, all the dogs begin to show interest in the bag. Aggie holds it high as Sugar leaps at it.

“Oh, no you don’t. This is for your Mum. You don’t get it till later.” Pulling open the bag, she distributes four Christmas parcels, wrapped in brightly coloured paper and labelled with the names of the dogs. She distracts the dogs by offering each of them a treat in turn, and they line up obediently to receive it.

All except Karma – who takes advantage of the other dogs’ absence to lunge at his owner. Val jerks back, but Karma has managed to get his teeth into the parcel. He pulls away and begins to growl as he worries at the parcel, shaking it fiercely.

The parcel breaks open, and its contents fly into the air. A confetti of bone-shaped treats scatters over the roadway, and the pack of dogs descends on it, gulping the treats down before anyone can stop them.

Moments later, the road is clean, and six very happy dogs are sitting at their owners’ feet, bright-eyed and satisfied. Karma wears a doggy grin the size of Christmas. Val shrugs. “Oh, well, I suppose that’s one way of handing them out!”

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Saf comes bounding in from the garden, and pokes her freezing wet nose into Annette’s palm. She runs her fingers through the dog’s ruff and, feeling wetness, grabs the dog towel and gives her a quick pummelling. Saf leans against her and huffs in pleasure.

As she straightens up, Annette looks out the doorway at the gathering darkness. Streetlights and Christmas lights punctuate the night, but the sky is low and heavy without any stars. There’s a wet smell on the wind, and she wonders what the weather will bring tomorrow. Surely those are snowflakes swirling in the garden?

Later, in the deep, small hours of the morning, Michael rises quietly and sets off to work. A cold curl of wind enters the house as he leaves and disturbs Annette’s sleep, but she only rolls over and begins to snore again. Snow deposits a coating of white on his shoulders as he begins his walk down the road towards the harbour.

## Making the Best of Things, or, Five Stay Home for Christmas

### Part 5 - Christmas Day

Yawning, Annette throws back the bedclothes and puts her feet out onto the mat. It has been snowing most of the night. She opens the curtains and peers out into the morning twilight. A few flakes are swirling in the air outside her window, and the clouds are low and sullen, with a yellowish tinge that presages more snow to come. She hopes it won't spoil their lunch plans.

Saf is well settled in her corner. During the night she'd pulled part of her fleece blanket over herself, and now peers from under a tartan counterpane. Annette shuffles out to the kitchen and makes a cup of tea. She leans against the kitchen bench while she drinks it, watching the light gradually increase outside and the snow flurries come and go. Everything is coated in white, and the houses and yards of the town are softened by snow. It's a picture-perfect Christmas scene. The Bartholomew kids are out in their back yard, trying to roll the snow up into a snowman-sized lump, but its consistency is slightly too wet and it keeps collapsing. They give it up and begin to throw snowballs instead.

Saf emerges, grumbling, and eats breakfast, while Annette pulls on her clothes, and hunts out a warmer scarf. Just one visit this morning; then she can settle in to a good book, before it's time for lunch.

Aggie's already opening the door before they reach the end of the path. Behind her, two black noses poke into the cold air, twitching like fury as they read messages on the wind. Saf whines a greeting, and they reply with yips. Max sits back on his haunches and scratches behind an ear, and Aggie steps to the side to allow Saf to enter.

"Greetings of the season and all that," she says, as Annette makes her way into the hall and pulls off her hat and mitts.

"You too." Annette hugs her friend, briefly. It's about as much affection as Aggie can stand. "All set for the day? What time do you think Malkie will emerge?" Aggie's brother is not known for his early rising habits.

"He's not here." Aggie's comment is short, and clipped back, as if there's more she'd like to say but she's resisting the urge to say it.

"What happened? Is he okay?"

"What happened is that he phoned me at nearly midnight last night, merry as Old Nick, and told me he was staying with a mate in Glasgow. "Sorry, Ags, got a better offer. Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy whotsit etcetera etcetera."

“Oh, Aggie. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Better off without him, the little git.”

“So, you can come out to lunch with us, then?”

“No, I’ve made my plans. I intend to stick with them. There’s no point in letting all that food go to waste.”

“Oh, Aggie. Don’t spend the day on your own. Come out and enjoy yourself with us. The food will keep until tomorrow.”

“No. I’ve made up my mind.” Aggie’s expression is obdurate. Annette knows that face well. She’s pushed things as far as she can. The best move now is to back down and walk away quietly, leave Aggie to mull things over on her own. She breaks the tension of the moment by pushing a parcel into Aggie’s hands. “You shouldn’t have.” Aggie stumps into the living room and picks up a package from under the tree, beautifully wrapped with a handmade card. Like everything Aggie does, this parcel has been thought out and planned over, to the last curl of ribbon.

She sees her friend to the door, Saf following without demur. Annette sets off down the path, holding her hand up in front of her face to waft away the snow, which is already falling more thickly. At the gate she turns and looks back, but Aggie’s already closed the door and gone back in.

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Outside, the pub looks the same as always, or perhaps a little cleaner on account of its coating of snow. The street lights are orange halos in the greyness of the afternoon, the light already beginning to fade out of the sky and the snow clouds thicker than ever. Annette’s pleased she decided to leave Saf at home. It wouldn’t have been fair to make her sit in the cold porch while she was inside enjoying herself. The dog is happy enough tucked up in bed with a bone to gnaw.

In a corner of the porch, half-hidden under the coats on the rack, is a wire cage with a dog bed inside it. Sugar sits there, wearing a fetching tartan coat with a sprig of artificial holly hanging off her collar. She’s pleased enough to see Annette, and comes forward for a tickle around the gills, but she soon settles back into her cosy spot. Her spot is well sheltered from the draught, and she seems quite content to sit and wait for Sara’s return.

As Annette pushes open the door into the bar, a warm fug of hearth fire, whisky and dinner wafts out to meet her. Sara’s there, tucked in at the head of the table, and seated with their backs to her are Val and Chantelle. Their party is set up at one end of a solid wooden table that could easily seat ten. Annette sinks into the seat opposite Val and waves her hand at Michael, who is waiting on the adjacent table.

“Hi Mum. What’ll you have?”

“Blackcurrant schnapps for me. What will you have, ladies?”

“We’ve ordered our own,” says Val. “We talked it over before you arrived and decided we’d each keep our own tab.”

“Fine.” Michael bends down and kisses her cheek, and she reaches up to stroke his arm. “Happy Birthday, Mike.” He swans off to fetch her order, detouring to a woman on the far side of the room who has her hand up. The room is almost full. Their table is the only one that could possibly fit in another party, and Annette hopes selfishly that no-one else will be joining them. It’s nice to have the table to themselves.

The appetiser is a shared plate of titbits, both hot and cold, and by the time the four of them have cleared it up the blackcurrant schnapps has made a warm pocket in Annette’s tummy. She pours herself a few centimetres of wine from Val’s bottle, and sits back to await the main course. Turkey trad with all the trimmings is how Michael had described it, so she’s not expecting any surprises, but she’s looking forward to it nonetheless. Half the pleasure of eating out, anyway, is not having to do the cooking yourself. She doesn’t mind how mundane the meal turns out to be.

The lights dim and Michael appears, holding back the swing door from the kitchen. A procession of people emerges, bearing serving dishes. The other diners ooh and ah as the procession passes them: both waitresses, the sous chef, and Donald himself, followed up by Michael with a bottle of claret and a corkscrew in one hand, and a gravy boat in the other. Donald carries the largest dish, on which rests a resplendent roast goose. The others carry a small ham, studded with cloves and an assortment of roasted and steamed vegetables.

With a flourish, Donald places the goose in front of Annette, and gestures to his staff to set down the other dishes. The four women are agog; Val’s grinning from ear to ear. “Donald, you’ve done yourself proud,” she says, reaching out to snag a chestnut.

“Not my doing, Missus.”

A small, cold draught crosses the room as the outer door is opened and shut, and a moment later Aggie Matchum slides into the seat next to Annette’s. Michael is there, ready to lay out her cutlery, and offers her the claret to sample. She nods her thanks at him, and he fills her glass and sets the bottle down on the table.

Aggie pulls a little, ruby pot of cranberry sauce from her pocket and plonks it down on the table, then looks round at the faces of her friends. “What?” she says. “It’s not like I could eat it all myself.”