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Opening Extract from...

All Things Nice

Written by Sheila Bugler

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FRIDAY

Face too close, his mouth shouting words she couldn't hear. Too many other sounds competing with
his voice. A hand on her arm, pulling. She tripped, Merlot sloshed out of her glass, wetting the cuff of
her black Donna Karan sweater. Outside. The night air cold after the intense warmth of the house.
Smoking a fag with Ginny and some guy. Dermot. Big face and shouty voice.

'What are we celebrating?' he asked.

'Charlotte's birthday.' Ginny grabbed Charlotte and planted a wet kiss on her cold cheek.

Charlotte's glass was empty. Where had all the wine gone? She held it up, waved it in front of
Dermot's face.

'We need more wine.'

He frowned. 'What was that?' Turned to Ginny, laughing.

'You've got your hands full with this one.'

Back in the house. Music. Loud. A woman she doesn't know shouts 'Happy Birthday'. Lots of people she doesn't know. What are they all doing here? Then a familiar face. Freya. She smiles, steps forward to say – what? Doesn't matter. By the time she reaches the other side of the room, Freya has gone.

Up on Blackheath now. How did she get here? She's with some guy. Can't remember his name. Declan, maybe. He's got his body pressed close to hers and she can feel his erection pushing against her leg.

She shoves him away, but he's not happy about it. Like she cares. Young enough to be her son. What is it about her and younger men? He's shouting at her but she's turned away from him, staggering towards home. A sudden twisting inside her gut and she's leaning over, puke pouring from her mouth.

When it's over, she stands and wipes the back of her hand across her mouth. The air is rich with the stink of what her body has expelled. No sign of Declan now. He's lucky she didn't puke all over him. She giggles, imagining his face if she'd done that.

She's cold. Shivering. Clasps her arms around her body and starts walking. It's lonely out here. The empty blackness of the heath stretches away from her on all sides, its edges lined with the twinkling lights from the windows of the tall Georgian houses.

She can see her own house in the background. Brighter than all the others, light pouring from every window in defiance of the dark night. She wonders if Freya is still there. Her mind flashes to her daughter's boyfriend. She doesn't want to think about him but his face is there, inside her head the whole time.

She tries to think if she's seen him this evening. Wouldn't be surprised if she went back inside the house and found him in there. For all his so-called principles, he's always been more than happy to eat her food and drink her alcohol.

Freya needs to leave him. The realisation hits her square in the stomach. She bends over, thinking she might be sick again. Retches, but nothing comes up. She staggers forward, moving faster now, knowing she has to hold onto this moment of clarity, find her daughter and tell her what a piece of shit her boyfriend really is.

A shape moves forward, appearing from nowhere out of the shadows. She lurches back, shouting out with fear. For one crazy moment she thinks it's him; he's come out here to find her.

'Charlotte! There you are. We've been looking for you everywhere.'

Ginny. The fear subsides. Ginny grabs her arms, starts pulling her towards the house, saying something about a cake and candles. Time to make a birthday wish. She remembers the noise and the heat and the people and she pulls her arm away. But Ginny is insistent and Charlotte's too tired and sick to fight.

The house is too bright and too warm and the people are too loud and too close. Bodies pressing against her, voices shouting at her. She pushes through it all, looking for her daughter.

Freya is in the kitchen. Standing by the sink, drinking a glass of water. A sour look on her face, like she's eaten a lemon. Or just seen her mother.

'He's a bastard.'

Freya frowns and Charlotte tries again.

'Kieran.' She's slurring, so she grabs Freya's arm and shouts because this is important.

'Kieran's a bastard.'

Freya pushes her. Hard. She staggers back, bangs into the kitchen table, hurting her hip bone.

'He doesn't deserve you,' Charlotte says. It's difficult getting the words out, but she forces them through her thick tongue. She thinks Freya's going to say something but she doesn't. She puts down the glass of water and goes to leave. Panic grips Charlotte's throat and chest.

'No!' She lunges. Grabs Freya and pushes her against the wall, pressing herself into her, determined now. One hundred percent focused on getting Freya to understand.

'He doesn't love you. Wouldn't say it if it wasn't true, but it is.'

She wanted to say more but Freya was screaming at her now, pushing her away. Charlotte's hands reach out to calm her down but her arms are all jerky and she hits Freya in the face by mistake.

She tried to say sorry, but Freya was still screaming and calling her a bitch. Charlotte tried to tell her that wasn't true but it was true, wasn't it?

'Come on, Lottie. Let's get you away from this.' Ginny's arm around her shoulders, steering her away from Freya. She looked back. Saw Freya still standing there but her face was blurred because Charlotte was crying. Couldn't stop.

'Is she okay?' someone asked.

'A bit too much to drink,' Ginny said. 'She'll be fine in a second, won't you, Lottie? We haven't done the cake yet. Come on.'

She couldn't face that now. She wants them all to go home and leave her alone. She's trying to tell this to Ginny, but Ginny isn't listening. Ginny is patting her back and telling her it's okay, it will all be okay.

Charlotte shakes her off, pushes her way out of the house and then – finally – she's free. Running up the hill and across the heath, running from the song she can hear. Except no matter how fast she runs, she can't get away from it because it's there, inside her head. The tinny pitch of the doll's voice rising the faster Charlotte runs.

'Sugar and spice and all things nice

Kisses sweeter than wine

Sugar and spice and all things nice

You know that little girl is mine.'

SATURDAY

ONE

An early morning jogger discovered the body. The killer had made no attempt to conceal the corpse. The victim – white, male, mid-twenties to early thirties – lay at the bottom of St Joseph’s Vale, a quiet laneway off Belmont Hill in Blackheath. Beside the dead man, a congealed puddle of vomit from the unfortunate jogger.

‘Lucky it’s a Saturday,’ Abby said. ‘Otherwise it might have been a poor kid who found him on the way to school.’

‘I’m not sure lucky’s the word I’d use,’ Ellen said.

She was kneeling down beside the dead man, examining the body. His eyes were open. Wide and empty and staring right at her. Light brown irises, turning black at the edges. Nothing like Billy Dunston’s but reminded her of him all the same. Dirty-blond hair, a short beard and strong features. The sort of guy you might look at twice if you saw him in a bar or passed him on the street and were in the mood to look twice at a good-looking fella young enough to be your son.

He was wearing jeans and a pale denim jacket. A grey tee-shirt underneath the jacket, stained black across the chest. The point of injury. A knife, Ellen guessed, although it was impossible to tell for sure without lifting the sweatshirt and looking at the wound. Something she couldn’t do until the pathologist arrived.

She looked again at the dead man’s eyes, imagined there was a question there. Knew it was her mind playing tricks with her and turned away from him before she did something stupid. Like talking to him.

She stood and stretched. She knew this road. Her brother Sean had gone to the Catholic boys’ school that gave the road its name. St Joseph’s Vale connected with Heath Lane, an affluent road in an area of affluent roads in and around Blackheath village south-east London. The body lay in the dip at the bottom of two hills, where both paths met.

‘Looks like he’s been here a while,’ she said. ‘Four hours or more.’

‘It must have been a shock,’ Abby said, nodding in the direction of the jogger, giving his statement to a uniformed WPC. ‘No wonder the poor bloke chucked his guts.’

‘I wish he’d thought to do it somewhere else,’ Ellen said. ‘God knows what it’s doing to the crime scene.’

Abby tutted her disapproval at Ellen’s lack of sympathy. Ignoring her, Ellen looked again at the body. He was young. Too young for it all to be over. Another poor soul to add to the growing list of corpses that crowded her dreams and clustered in the shadows of her waking hours. They were here now, the names and faces and finished lives of all those dead people. A line of them that started with her sister and ended with this unknown man on a quiet back-road between Lewisham and Blackheath. Except it wouldn’t end here. There would be more bodies after this. The knowledge depressed her beyond belief.

Questions crammed their way into her head, demanding details she didn’t yet know about the dead man. Details that would make this harder than it already was when she knew about his life and his family and the people he’d left behind.

The immediate area was already sealed off and uniformed officers had been assigned to each end of the lane, ensuring no one came or went without Ellen’s permission. For now, the only people inside the cordon were the five white-uniformed SOCOs scouring each centimetre of ground for evidence.

Ellen and Abby wore the same protective clothing. In the muggy May sunshine, the additional layer felt heavy.

A trickle of sweat tickled down Ellen's spine. More sweat broke out across her forehead. She wiped it away, irritated.

'At least it's dry for once,' she said. 'Let's hope the SOCO crew can get through here before any more rain comes.'

'Forecast is dry for the rest of the weekend,' Abby said. 'Rain's due again on Monday, though.'

Ellen sighed. Another conversation about the weather was the last thing she felt like right now.

The constant rain of the last few weeks was all anyone seemed to speak about.

'Where the hell is Mark?' she asked.

As if on cue, the tall, gangly figure of Mark Pritchard, the pathologist, appeared at the top of St Joseph's Vale. Relieved, Ellen walked up the hill to greet him.

'Ellen, my love!' Mark grabbed her and planted a kiss on each cheek. 'Suspected stabbing?' He held her for a moment then released her, examined her face. 'You're looking good. Much better than the last time we met. Life treating you well, I assume?'

Ellen smiled. Mark's enthusiasm for life and all it offered was infectious. Being with him always made her feel better. Even during those grey, endless weeks following her husband's death, Mark had always managed to say or do something that made her smile. She realised she'd never told him how important that had been. Not just for her but for the children as well.

'Not too bad,' she said. 'Better now you're here.'

'Of course,' Mark said. 'That's always the case. Lead me to him, then. Haven't got all day, you know. Ah, DC Roberts. Wonderful. What a day this is turning out to be. And here's our poor victim. Any idea who's vomit this is?'

'A man found the body earlier,' Ellen said. 'Jogger. He'd obviously eaten before coming out for his morning run.'

'Who eats before they go jogging?' Mark asked. 'What time was the body found?'

'Call came through at seven minutes past seven,' Ellen said. 'Looks like a stabbing.' She pointed to the stain across the dead man's chest. 'No sign of any knife, though. Not yet.'

'Okay,' Mark said. 'Let me take a closer look. If you two wouldn't mind stepping away? A bit further, that's it. Thank you.'

While Mark got to work, Ellen and Abby moved outside the cordoned-off crime scene. Once they'd ripped off their protective outer layer, they walked up Heath Lane, passing pairs of uniformed officers performing the standard door-to-door enquiries, gathering statements from the residents in the hope of uncovering some vital piece of information that would help them track down a killer.

'You could almost forget you lived in London in a place like this,' Abby said. 'It's beautiful.'

'Beautiful and way out of your league,' Ellen said. 'You'll have to change career if you harbour any ambitions of living somewhere like this one day.'

'Or find a rich man,' Abby said.

Ellen was saved from thinking up a suitable response by the appearance of a pair of uniforms coming out the gate of an elegant red-brick Queen Anne-style house.

'Anything so far?' Ellen asked.

'Couple at the top of the road had a party last night,' the male officer said. 'Noisy affair, by all accounts. Went on until the wee hours. Old dear in there,' he pointed his thumb in the direction of the house they'd just come from, 'says there was music blaring – her word, not mine – half the night.'

'Which house?' Ellen asked. 'A party means lots of people and the more people there were, the more chance we have that someone saw something.'

'The first one on the right as you come into this road,' the man said. So far, his female companion hadn't said a word. Ellen wondered if that was because she had nothing to say or if she was used to being talked over by her partner.

'PC McKeown, isn't it?' Ellen asked, turning her attention to the dumpy blonde.

'That's right, Ma'am,' McKeown said, blushing.

'I'd like you to head on up to the house where the party was. Find out who lives there, what was the reason for the party and see if you can get a list of names of everyone who was there. Okay?'

McKeown smiled. 'Of course, Ma'am. Absolutely.'

Ellen nodded. 'Good. You,' she pointed at the man, 'carry on with the rest of the houses. Think you can do that on your own or do you need someone else?'

'I'll be fine,' the man said. 'Ma'am.'

If he was pissed off he hid it well, and Ellen gave him credit for that. Maybe she'd misjudged him.

'Baxter, right?'

He nodded.

'Good work,' she said. 'Well done. Now on you go, both of you. Abby, let's get back and see how Mark's doing.'

Mark was already on his way to find them as Ellen and Abby made their way back down the hill.

'Single puncture wound on the left side of his body, underneath the heart,' he said. 'Knife wound, I'd guess. Another stabbing I'm afraid, detectives. No outer sign of any other injury. Although I won't know more until I examine him properly. I'll organise a tox test, too. But you won't get the results of that for at least a week.'

'How long has he been there?' Ellen asked.

'He was killed somewhere between midnight and one-thirty, I'd say. Although again ...'

'I know,' Ellen said. 'You can't say for definite until you've done the post-mortem.'

'Mobile phone in his jacket pocket,' Mark said. 'And he had his wallet on him. Almost two hundred pounds cash inside. Which makes me think it might not be a robbery. There's something else too. I can tell you who he is.'

'You're joking,' Ellen said.

Mark shook his head. 'A student card in the inside pocket of his jacket. His name's Kieran Burton. Lives in Ennersdale Road, Hither Green. I'm assuming you'll want the full address?'

Kieran Burton. They had a name. Soon, they'd have a history. It had begun.