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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Village Newcomers**

Written by Rebecca Shaw

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# *The Village Newcomers*

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# Chapter 1

Caroline heard the familiar bang of the front door that told her Peter was back from his prayers and his three-mile run.

‘I’m back! Going for a shower.’

He said the same words every single morning, and she wondered why, after twenty-seven years of marriage, he still felt the need to say it. But she still loved him as much, if not more, than the day they married, so, as far as she was concerned, he could carry on saying it until the end of time.

The breakfast table had everything it needed. Ah, no. Beth’s muesli. That was another thing that hadn’t changed over the years, although the brand was different. At the moment it was Jordans. Caroline smiled. She loved her twins more than life itself. As their grandmother frequently said, ‘They are such splendid children.’

The sound of rushing footsteps told her Alex was on his way. Never one for lazing in bed, he appeared in the kitchen at the speed of light, flung himself down on his chair and shook cornflakes briskly into his bowl until there was scarcely room for the milk.

‘What’s happening today, Mum?’

‘Anything you like. It’s the last day of the holidays, so it’s your choice.’

‘Oh, God. Sixth form tomorrow.’

‘I don’t believe you’re not looking forward to it. With results like yours they’ll be putting out the red carpet for you.’

‘Not just for me, as you well know. They’re all so competitive

it takes some keeping up to. Getting down to work again will be hard. We've had such a good holiday. Best ever. We loved it in Greece, and being at home. Dad back?

'He is.' Caroline sat down, poured herself coffee and began eating her cereal.

'Is he free today?'

'I don't expect so, but he'll be down shortly.' They both heard the heavy thud of the morning post arriving through the letterbox.

Alex leapt up and went to the door. There was a pile of letters, mostly to do with Church, so he put those on his dad's desk in his study and took the rest of them, bills and such, into the kitchen.

Curiously there was a letter for Beth and one for him, both addressed in the same unfamiliar handwriting.

His mum began opening the bills and Alex tore open his own envelope, unfolded the sheets of notepaper and looked at the signature at the end. '*With love from your mother*', it said. He knew he should fold it up and read it later, on his own in his bedroom where his mum couldn't see, but he was so torn to pieces by the very first letter he'd had from his birth mother in all his sixteen years that he immediately wanted to see what she'd written. In his excited state of mind he knocked his spoon out of his bowl, spinning cornflakes and milk on to the cloth and down his pyjamas.

'Blast!' He rushed to get some kitchen roll, dropped the letter on the floor and swore as the cold milk soaked through to his chest.

'Alex! Please!' Caroline bent down to pick up his letter and a cold chill circled her heart. The handwriting was a blast from the past and she couldn't think . . . She put the letter on the table and allowed her mind to wander. Whose writing could it be?

Alex, having cleared up the mess he'd made, sat back down, first carefully putting his letter under his chair cushion, and

carried on eating as though nothing had happened. The letter would have to wait.

Peter came down, showered, shaved and dressed for the day in his cassock with his silver cross tucked into his leather belt, his strawberry-blond hair still damp, his face glowing with health and peace of mind.

‘It’s a Church day then, Dad?’

‘It is, otherwise I’d spend it with you. I’ve got Penny Fawcett market day first as it’s Monday, and then on into Culworth for a meeting at the Abbey, lunch with them all and hospital visiting afterwards.’

‘You couldn’t take Beth and me into Culworth, could you? We’d come back on the bus.’

‘Of course, and what’s more I’ll give you twenty pounds to spend seeing as it’s your last day. Save me time if you come to the market with me, though; then we can go straight to Culworth on the bypass.’

‘Done. I’ll go and tell Beth to get up.’ As casually as he could, Alex surreptitiously picked up Beth’s letter, took his own from under his chair cushion and went upstairs.

Caroline said nothing until she’d taken Peter’s boiled egg from the pan. After she’d sat down she looked hard at Peter, wondering whether or not to tell him what she suspected. He preferred openness so she decided to tell him. Her anxiety made the news burst out of her in a rush.

‘I think the children have had a letter each from their mother.’

‘From their ... You mean Suzy Meadows?’

She nodded.

‘I see.’

‘Alex has taken both letters upstairs. He checked the signature on his, then folded it and never read it. I expect they’re both reading them right now.’

Peter took the top off his egg and then put the spoon down. ‘I see. What makes you so sure?’

‘Because when Alex looked at the signature he was so upset he spilt cereal and milk on the cloth and himself, and the letter fell to the floor. I picked it up and put it back on the table, but he seemed to think I hadn’t noticed. I couldn’t recall whose writing it was, and then I remembered. I’m sure I’m right, otherwise why would he be so secretive?’

The old wounds opened up for Caroline, but she had to credit Peter with his discretion; he never said ‘Suzy’ but always ‘Suzy Meadows’, as though to put a distance between them. But it wasn’t Meadows any more. Having remarried, she was now Suzy Palmer.

‘He’d only be secretive because he didn’t want to cause you any pain.’

‘I know that. What worries me is what the hell does she want after all this time? No birthday cards, no Christmas cards, nothing. Then a letter each. And not one to both of them but one *each*.’

‘In their own good time they’ll tell us.’

‘They’ll tell you and then ask if they should tell *me*.’

‘They are both very sensitive about ... well, about me being their biological parent and you not. They’re so careful not to hurt you, and it’s right they should feel like that. I wouldn’t have it any other way.’

‘You see, Peter, when they’re newborn and completely helpless, and needing love and tenderness and caring, one forgets about them growing up into separate people, actual individuals, and the problems that will bring.’

‘You don’t regret adopting them? Of course you don’t. I’m being ridiculous even to ask.’

‘I don’t, not for a single second, but this ... They’re *ours*, not hers. She has no rights. What’s she doing writing to them? What does she want? Sending them letters, right out of the blue ...’ Caroline put her finger to her lips then called out, ‘Hello, Dottie. Good morning!’

Dottie Foscett stood in the doorway. Now she was not only

doing cleaning jobs but also working with Pat Jones, helping her manage the catering events at the Old Barn, Dottie had put on weight these last two years, having more money for food. But putting on weight had not dulled her hearing, and as she'd walked down the hall into the kitchen she'd caught Caroline's last two sentences.

'Good morning, Reverend. Good morning, Doctor. Wish I'd put a warmer coat on.'

'I think autumn's on the way.'

'Exactly, Doctor. The usual Monday things? Not nothing extra?'

'The usual. Oh! Except the bed linen in Alex's old room needs changing. We had a visitor over the weekend.'

'Righteo. No sooner said ...'

Dottie had strict rules about information at the Rectory. Not a word crossed her lips, much as she was dying to tell people what she knew, because if ever Caroline found out she'd been telling confidential tales that she could have known only through the Rectory, that would be the end of the best job she'd ever had in all her life.

She liked best the days when the Doctor was doctoring all day so she had the Reverend's lunch to make before she left. She loved knocking on his door and calling out 'Lunch, sir' and taking it in, finding a place for the tray on his desk, and him looking up so lovely at her to thank her and her heart melting at his sincerity. And dusting all his books, then she wouldn't understand if she spent a month trying, but she loved the idea of all that learning and sometimes wished she'd paid more attention at school. And that photo of him at Oxford in his cap and gown, looking so handsome and head and shoulders above most of the other students, and him such a lovely man in spite of all that hobnobbing with those toffs.

She began her morning's work by stripping the bed in Alex's old room.



Beth put her head round the door. ‘Morning, Dottie. How are you?’

‘I’m fine, thanks, Beth. And you? You don’t look too chipper today. Not looking forward to going back to school?’

Beth hesitated and then blamed it on the weather. ‘We’re going into Culworth this morning, she added. ‘Anything you need?’

‘No thanks, dear.’

So she was right. The twins had got letters from someone, and it had upset Beth and the Doctor, so therefore the Reverend too.

The children didn’t have an opportunity to discuss their letters until the two of them were in Culworth in the Abbey coffee shop.

Beth had chosen hot chocolate with foaming stuff on the top. Alex refused to call it cream because it wasn’t, he said, not when it came out of a tin. But Beth persisted in choosing it despite his scorn. Alex had chosen espresso, which Beth declared tasted like lavatory cleaner, not that she’d ever tasted lavatory cleaner. Having sorted out their differences, both of them brought out their letters and compared them.

Apparently Suzy Meadows’ second husband had died of cancer, and she now lived by herself with time to spare as all three of her girls – Pansy, Daisy and Rosie – lived away from home. This drove a dagger through Beth’s heart. Was loneliness a good enough reason for wanting to see them both? Alex’s letter told him how like herself Beth was. ‘*That time when I saw you both at the reunion for the village school’s 150th Anniversary, I couldn’t believe how like me she was.*’

Beth rapidly folded her own letter and pushed it into her bag.

Alex said, ‘I haven’t finished reading yours yet. Let me see it.’

‘I shall throw it in the first bin I can find.’

‘Beth! That’s not fair. At least read it and let me read it, please.’

She spooned some of the cream into her mouth. ‘All right, then.’ She gave him back the letter.

Alex smoothed it out and read on. ‘Now we’re sixteen going on seventeen, she wants us to stay with her at half-term when she isn’t teaching.’

‘I read that bit at home. You can go. I’m not. Ever. Ever. Never.’

‘She did give birth to us.’

‘Yes, and then handed us to Dad as though we were a couple of parcels. We’re not, we’re real people, not fantasy figures, which is what this letter makes me feel like.’

‘Yes, it does feel like that.’ He stirred his espresso, now thick with sugar. With his head down he said, ‘You and I have Mum and Dad to think about. She doesn’t mention their feelings, does she?’

‘Typical. Only hers, not even ours.’ Beth drank steadily from her glass, and waited for Alex’s answer. She knew he’d see both sides of the argument, just as their dad always did. Well, he could do as he liked. She was *not* going. She’d said so and she meant it. She did not want complications in her life which would screw up everything she held most dear. Beth had never forgotten that day when they met this Suzy at the school’s 150th anniversary, how she’d been utterly, utterly unable to speak to her. Nor that smooth, softly-spoken man, whom she’d disliked immediately. Everyone had said he had been headmaster at the school for years, which she couldn’t believe. Even if he was dead she still wasn’t going, and no amount of persuasion could make her. Though she had to agree, she, Elizabeth Harris, looked very much like her, but that still wasn’t a reason . . .

‘Thing is,’ said Alex, ‘do we tell Mum and Dad about these letters? Mum knows we got a letter each this morning but not who they were from.’

‘And she won’t ask. You know what she’s like about people’s privacy.’

‘Exactly.’ Alex downed the last of his espresso and wondered about ordering another.

‘So we could not tell her and save her a lot of heartache. You’re not having another of those gut-rot coffees, are you?’

‘I’m just wondering about having an early lunch. What do you think?’

Beth answered him with another question. ‘What would she mean by a few days? Is that all she can spare? Or is it a sop to our feelings? To make us feel more comfortable that it wouldn’t be for long?’

‘Both, I expect.’

‘Oh, help, there’s the Bishop’s wife. She’s spotted us. She’s coming across.’ Beth waved enthusiastically, remembering her good manners just in time.

The Bishop’s wife dashed towards them with her familiar overwhelming gusto.

‘How lovely it is to see you both! Last day of the holidays, eh? My word, Alex, you’re going to be taller than your dad. As for you, Beth, you get prettier by the day.’ She plumped down on the spare chair and, resting her elbows on the table, said in a low voice, ‘A little bird’s been telling me how wonderfully well you’ve both done in your GCSEs. Peter and Caroline must be so proud. What was it – ten As each? Brilliant! What are you hoping to do, Beth?’

Beth shrugged. ‘Don’t know, haven’t decided.’

‘Well, there’s plenty of time. And you, Alex, do you know yet?’

‘I’ve chosen sciences for my A-levels, so I might choose medicine or scientific research of some kind.’

‘Good luck to you both. Your dad’s coming in here for his lunch with the others after the meeting. Are you staying? I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you joined them.’

Both Alex and Beth promptly squashed that idea with an emphatic ‘no’.

‘Very well, then, I’ll leave you to it. Enjoy, my dears, enjoy.’ The Bishop’s wife saw someone else she knew and leapt away, determined they weren’t going to escape her.

‘I’m going before they get here,’ Beth said. ‘I can’t talk to Dad as if nothing’s happened. Let’s be off.’

They scuttled out of the coffee shop as fast as they could, ate a sandwich for lunch in a café by the river and then spent the afternoon in the cinema avoiding the issue. Two and a half hours not thinking about it resolved nothing, and with school tomorrow they wouldn’t have time. So that was that for the moment. But they promised each other that neither of them would mention it without the other being present.

Monday was a busy day for Dottie. In the morning she was at the Rectory and in the afternoon she was a fully paid-up member of the village embroidery group from 2 p.m. until 4 p.m. Then she called in the Village Store for any bits and pieces, and caught the late-afternoon bus back down Shepherd’s Hill – sometimes she walked down if there wasn’t much shopping to carry – and to add to the usual there was a business dinner tonight at the Old Barn and she was booked to help out. No need to cook at home tonight.

Dottie had joined the embroidery group more for the company than any particular artistic bent, but after a few weeks she’d found herself enjoying it so much she had become a keen member. At the moment they were all working on a tapestry as part of the refurbishment of a block of offices in Culworth. It was to be placed in the main entrance hall behind glass and its finished length would be eight feet. It was the biggest project they’d tackled and sometimes they got a case of en masse nerves and had to put it away for fear they would make terrible mistakes which couldn’t be rectified.

Dottie felt today had been a bad day, and she wasn't entirely sure she was in the right frame of mind this afternoon with this worry about the twins and their upsetting letters. But there was nothing she could do about it, and she certainly couldn't let on about the matter.

She was just on time. Their teacher, Evie Nicholls, had put everything out and Dottie's spirits rose when she saw the wonderful colours of the wools they were using and the part-finished tapestry on its frame. It was a picture designed by Evie, illustrating the kind of work the company was involved in, so there were rivers, boats, cranes and quaysides, men working, men idling, chimneys and smoke. Dottie regarded it as her contribution to the beauty of the world and the only one that would outlast her.

'Good afternoon, everybody! Still cold.'

'It is. Glad you've come, Dottie. I want you to work on that background piece in the duck-egg blue you started last week. It'll have to be done before we can do the next lot of fiddly bits.'

She grinned, did Dottie. 'I always knew I had a place in life: Dottie, the specialist in backgrounds. It'll look good on my epitaph.'

Evie looked crestfallen. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't ...'

But Dottie was laughing and so Evie was relieved.

There were five of them working this particular afternoon: Evie, Dottie, Sheila Bissett, Bel Tutt and Barbara, one of the weekenders. They all worked together very well. The person most likely to cause friction was Sheila Bissett. She'd never been the same since her Louise and Gilbert had lost that premature baby. She'd always longed to be slender, had Sheila, and now she'd no worries for she was as slim as a wand and could wear anything she chose and look good in it, but it hadn't improved her attitude.

'They've moved in,' she said.

‘Who?’

‘The new people in Glebe House, of course.’

There was a disappointed chorus of, ‘No! I never saw the van.’ Missing someone moving in? How had that happened?

‘The van didn’t get here until nearly midnight last night, due to a breakdown, and believe it or believe it not, they unloaded there and then in the dark. Needed the van for another job, apparently, and had to speed off about three this morning.’

Dottie looked up from threading the duck-egg blue on to her very best tapestry needle. ‘Seeing as how you live in Little Derehams, how come you know all this and we don’t?’

Sheila grinned. She’d always loved being first with the news. ‘Because I ran out of milk and came to the Store by half past seven this morning to get some for Ron’s breakfast, and *she* was in there buying their breakfast – bacon, eggs, the whole works. So at last, after all the speculation about who had and who hadn’t bought Glebe House, now we know.’

The words not spoken were: ‘What’s she like?’ But they didn’t need to ask because Sheila was bursting to tell them.

‘She’s big and blowsy – all money and no taste. Her husband is retired, something big in metal he was, apparently, and has so much money he doesn’t know where to spend it next, or so she says.’

‘What’s she called?’ asked Bel, who often worked in the Store and was always mindful that she must remember names because Jimbo liked it that way.

Sheila drew in a big breath. ‘She *says* her name is Mercedes and his is—’

‘Toyota? Nissan? Skoda?’

There was an outbreak of giggling at this, and Dottie laughed the loudest at her own wit.

Sheila couldn’t reply for laughing. When she did speak she said, ‘Ford. Ford Barclay.’

Then they really did have to stop sewing, and their peals of

laughter could be heard by Zack the verger who was grass-cutting behind the hall.

‘Now, just stop it, Sheila, and tell us the truth,’ Dottie said.

‘It is the truth,’ Sheila protested. ‘He was born in the States and they use the name Ford a lot. It’s quite common apparently.’

‘So’s he by the sound of it. And her!’

This brought more peals of laughter, then Evie suggested she made a pot of tea to give them all a break. They never sewed and drank tea at the same time for fear of a spill, so they all moved their chairs over to a small table they put out for the very purpose of drinking tea.

Evie came back with the tea-tray and as she put it down she said, ‘We shouldn’t be so cruel, you know. They may be very nice people.’

‘You’re right as usual, Evie, but even you must admit ...’ That set them off again. It was a while since such juicy gossip had come their way and they intended to make the most of it.

‘He sings, she says—’

‘In the bath?’

‘No! Sings, on the stage, and he fancies joining the church choir, she says.’

Evie said she thought that would be lovely, as Gilbert was short of adult male singers. ‘I wonder if he’s tenor or baritone?’

‘She didn’t say.’

Barbara the weekender spoke up. ‘I bet Ron thought you took a long time getting the milk.’

‘He did. He was sure I must have broken down.’

‘You did – laughing!’

‘You should see her rings! Diamonds as big as peas.’

‘Ah!’ said Barbara. ‘But are they real?’

‘They looked it.’

‘But then the lights in the Store are very bright; that would make them sparkle.’

‘There was one that looked just like Princess Diana’s

engagement ring – you know, that giant sapphire with the diamonds all around it.’

Thinking about the new owners of Glebe House reminded Bel of Liz, who had moved out. ‘Poor Liz, going all that way to live with her mother, and leaving such a beautiful house, and Neville killing himself like he did. Who’d have thought it? Certainly not me. I wonder how she’s going to manage.’

Sheila said, ‘I think Neville doing what he did was the last straw for her. I expect she feels so guilty, but then those who are left behind after a suicide always do feel guilty, don’t they? Could I have done more? Why didn’t I realise? Everlasting questions.’

Bel changed the subject. ‘By the way, Michael Palmer died. You know, the old headmaster at the school. Jimbo had a letter from Suzy Meadows-that-was only this morning. Very sudden apparently.’

Sheila said how sorry she was. ‘I liked him. A bit old-fashioned but an excellent disciplinarian, wasn’t he? Such a surprise when he married that Suzy. I always thought they were a funny match.’

‘She’ll be lonely, I expect. All her girls will have left home and now him gone, too.’

Dottie kept very quiet but then couldn’t avoid answering Sheila’s question: ‘Dottie, you remember him, don’t you? Him and Suzy.’

‘Only vaguely. Didn’t have much to do with them.’

‘Her first husband committed suicide. Funny man. He was all shut in and avoided your eyes. You must remember them.’

‘Vaguely, like I said. Anyway, back to work or else it’ll be a wasted afternoon.’

Had she got her answer to the riddle of the twin’s letters? She wondered. Maybe, maybe not.

Evie knocked on the window to tell Zack that his cup of tea was waiting for him, and they heard him switch off his ancient mower.



Zack, known for being a man of few words, nodded to them all, poured out his cup of tea and gratefully sank on to a chair. He enjoyed watching them embroidering. It seemed so right in an ancient church hall, doing tapestry. It fitted somehow. Peace descended, and that was what Zack liked – peace. No women nattering on.

Then he said, quite suddenly, ‘They’ve bought a plot.’

‘Who? A plot of what?’ Evie queried.

‘Them what’ve bought Glebe House came round to see me before they moved in to buy a grave. One of the last. They intend staying here for ever, it seems. Going to make some big changes round here, I understand.’

‘Oh! So they might think. New brooms indeed! Well, we’ll show ’em if we don’t like their ideas. Big changes indeed! My eye!’ Sheila huffed and puffed her annoyance.

‘Been here less than a week and he says he’s buying me a new mower for the churchyard. Says it’s an antique I’m using. He reckons it was bought before the war. Amazed, he is, that I’m still using it.’

‘So are we, Zack. I don’t know how you keep it going. It’s too much to expect,’ Sheila said sympathetically.

‘I reckon he doesn’t know how expensive they are nowadays, though. I don’t suppose such good luck will come my way. He’ll never buy it.’

None of them noticed Zack finish his tea and carry the tray into the kitchen for them. They were too busy speculating about what Ford and Mercedes might do with their money. Afterwards, when they’d concentrated on the tapestry for over an hour, Dottie suddenly broke their silence. ‘The twins did well with their GCSEs. Never told you with it being holidays right through August. Ten each they got.’

‘Ah!’ said Barbara. ‘What grades, though? Cs Ds? What?’

‘All As, both of ’em. They’re that bright.’ She couldn’t help but shake her head in genuine amazement.

Somewhat deflated by this statement, Barbara said, being thoroughly unpleasant as she often was, ‘Ah, well. Just goes to show what happens when you can afford to pay for their education, and him only a vicar.’

‘He’s called a *rector* in these parts. It’s their money, so surely they can spend it how they like?’ Dottie began to get annoyed.

‘It’s not fair.’

‘Life isn’t fair, is it? You’ve got two houses – what’s fair about that when some people have none?’

This comment shut Barbara up, which was just what Dottie intended. Then she made a mistake in her stitching and swore. Evie decided that today was not the day for peaceful stitching and they’d better stop before things got too nasty. You had to be at peace to stitch effectively, she always thought. ‘It’s only half past three but I think we should stop. We’re not in the mood. I’ll do some myself during the week to catch up. See you next Monday.’

Dottie stayed behind to help clear up. ‘Sorry, Evie, about getting annoyed, but they’re such lovely children. Well, I call them children but they’re not, are they? More young adults. I only wish they were mine. I’d be so proud.’

‘So would I. And they are – lovely, I mean. So well-mannered.’

‘Indeed. They treat me like gold, they do, not like a skivvy, which I am, and I can’t stand by and see ’em criticised. Sorry.’

‘You’re not a skivvy, nothing like. Don’t worry, Dottie. Can you bring the case with the wools and I’ll—’

‘Oh no you won’t. I’m carrying the frame – it’s too heavy for you, slip of a thing that you are. I expect Tom carries it across usually, does he?’

‘Well, yes, he does, but he’s gone to the wholesalers this afternoon, so I can’t ask him.’

‘It’s dry today, so we’ll cross the Green with it. Ready?’

It was far heavier than she'd thought and Dottie was glad to reach Orchid Cottage.

Tatty, Evie's little dog, launched himself out of the door the moment it was opened and greeted them ecstatically.

Evie tried to get past him and couldn't. 'Move, Tatty, move! You silly dog! We can't get in.'

'He's so well since his operation, isn't he? Hardly any limp at all.'

'Exactly.'

'There we are. Is it all right to leave it here? Bye then, Evie. Thanks for everything.'

Dottie left for home, deciding to leave her shopping until tomorrow, and wondering if the twins had worked out what to do about the news in their letters. It had nagged at her all afternoon, and it was thinking about them that had made her so bad-tempered with that Barbara. If she could solve the twins' problem for them she would, because she wouldn't have them hurt, not for the world.

Had she known that they hadn't solved it, or let on about it to either Peter or Caroline, and were facing their first day in the sixth form with it still casting a shadow over them, she would have been even sadder than she already was.