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Opening Extract from...

The Durnbridge Chronicles

Book 1

Fisher of Men

Written by Pam Rhodes

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» CHAPTER 1 «

It was the spire of St Stephen's that Neil noticed first. In fact, if it weren't for the spire standing head and shoulders above every other roof in the town, he might have needed to keep a closer eye on the map he had balanced on his lap as he navigated round the one-way system which seemed intent on taking him out of rather than into the market town of Dunbridge. Actually, to describe this cluster of houses and shops, some very old, some alarmingly new, as a "town" might suggest more than Dunbridge really delivered. Neil had read that 6,000 people lived here. As he rounded the last corner, he wondered where Dunbridge put them all.

He felt his chest tighten with a mixture of trepidation and anticipation at the sight of the grand old church which stood solidly at the end of the square, looking for all the world as if it were peering down the High Street keeping a benign, unblinking eye on its faltering flock. Neil swallowed hard as he felt beads of sweat spring up on his top lip. Wiping his finger sharply across his face, he firmly reminded himself he had absolutely nothing to worry about. After all, this was just a first visit – to see if the Reverend Margaret Prowse thought he might make a suitable curate in this parish, and to decide if he felt Dunbridge could be a place to call home for three years during his training as a curate.

And wasn't this exactly the moment he'd been working towards for so long? As a soon-to-be-ordained deacon (the ceremony was less than two months away now), those years of longing, of recognizing his call, of study and preparation, had surely all been leading up to this moment – when he finally settled on the parish in which he would start his ministry. Was this the place? Would he become the Reverend Neil Fisher of the Parish of St Stephen in Dunbridge? He rolled the words over in his mind. They had a nice ring to them.

He glanced at the notepad on the seat beside him. “Drive up towards the church, then follow the road round to the right,” Margaret had instructed. “You’ll find the Vicarage down the first turning on the left. You can’t miss it!”

He hated it when people said that. It always made him feel even more of a failure when he proved them wrong.

On this occasion, though, the directions were spot on. A sign on the well-worn gate proudly announced that this was indeed The Vicarage, a large sprawling Edwardian house whose faded glory was camouflaged by a huge wisteria on one side, and a scarlet Virginia creeper on the other. Uncertain whether he should pull into the drive, he decided that it would be more polite to park a bit further up the street, just round the corner from the house, under the arch of a huge horse chestnut. Neil grabbed his briefcase, clambered out and locked the door.

The gate squeaked as he opened it.

“Come round the back!”

The voice came from somewhere above his head. Neil shaded his eyes as he squinted up into the low morning sun.

“Take the path down the side of the house!” came the command again. “The kitchen door’s always on the latch. Daft, really, but I like the idea of an open house.”

Neil could just make out the silhouette of a round, female face surrounded by thick, neat curls leaning out of the upstairs bay window.

“You must be Neil. You’re early! I’ll be down in just a sec. Put the kettle on! Mine’s a coffee...”

And the head abruptly disappeared.

Getting to the back was quite a challenge. Neil clambered over two bikes, a trailer and a hawthorn bush which had very nearly succeeded in its attempt to straddle the narrow path alongside the house. Finally, he made it to what seemed to be the back door, which was not just ajar, but wide open. Closing the door tidily behind him (he just couldn’t help himself), he stepped into a large, alarmingly muddled kitchen in which the table, the worktops and even the hob were piled up with everything from stacks of plates and cutlery to columns of letters, newspapers and magazines. On top of the cooker was a Holy Bible on which was precariously balanced an open copy of the Book of Common Prayer. Neil grinned. Not much doubt a vicar lived here!

Something brushed his trouser leg. He looked down into the calculating gaze of the biggest, fluffiest ginger tom he’d ever seen. He was on the point of leaning down to give the little dear a tickle under the chin when he found himself staring into yellow eyes that gleamed with malevolence. Plainly this four-legged resident didn’t take kindly to visitors, as it did a slow reconnaissance figure of eight around Neil’s legs. He grabbed hold of a nearby stool and sat on it hastily, clasp his briefcase to him and pulling his knees up as high as he could.

“Frank!”

The same voice, sounding twice as loud, rang through the house from somewhere upstairs.

“Tell him where the tea is, there’s a love! I think we’re out of biscuits.”

Intrigued, Neil looked towards the open kitchen door as the sound of slippers padded in his direction. Round the corner came a dapper little man with grey hair but, surprisingly, bushy dark brows. Taking stock of the positions of both man and cat before him, there was a sympathetic gleam of understanding in his eyes as he smiled at Neil.

“Sorry,” he said, “my wife’s only just got back from an unexpected hospital visit. She’ll be down shortly. I’m Frank, by the way. And that’s Archie. Quite harmless really, even if he does look a bit fierce. What can I get you? Tea?”

“No, thanks all the same,” gulped Neil, not taking his eyes off the feline predator below him. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“Oh, the kettle’s always hot in our house,” smiled Frank. “You’ll need to learn that if you’re joining the ranks. Your first appointment as a curate, eh? Well, you’ll be all right here. Margaret will look after you.”

“Frank, have you found him?” That voice again.

“Yes, dear, he’s fine. Archie’s got him cornered...”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, give the poor man room to breathe, Archie!”

The Reverend Margaret Prowse strode into the room, her arms clasped around a large box full of collecting tins.

“Take these, dear, before I drop them. Why Peter left them here when they should be at the Church Centre, I really don’t know!”

There were seconds of confusion while the box was handed over, almost dwarfing Frank, who staggered over to deposit the lot on top of the one pile of papers which was flat enough to perch it on.

“Margaret Prowse!”

Pushing her spectacles further up her nose so that she could peer at Neil a little more closely, she moved towards him, her expression warm and welcoming, her hand stretched out to clasp his.

“How nice to meet you, Neil! Did you have a good journey?”

“Not bad at all. Most of the traffic was going the other way. And I’m very pleased to meet you too!”

Neil became aware that Margaret’s attention had diverted from him, as she suddenly stared at the clock on the wall behind him.

“Heavens! Is that the time?” She grimaced towards Neil. “Look, I know this isn’t ideal, but you’ll soon realize that parish life is never predictable. I hope you won’t think me rude, but I do need to pop out for a short while. I won’t be long, but I had a call early this morning from Violet, one of our regular congregation members. She’s in a dreadful state – bereavement, you know.”

“Oh,” said Neil, “has she lost a family member?”

“Yes – and no. It’s her budgie, Poppet. When you’re nearly ninety and your bird is your only companion, then losing that friend is a dreadful shock. Her daughter is coming over at half ten for the ceremony...”

Neil felt his eyebrows shoot up with curiosity.

“Nothing formal. Not even consecrated ground, although a bit of holy water will soon put that right. No, Poppet is destined to rest in peace in the shade of Violet’s magnolia tree.”

“Have you worked out just what you’ll say, dear?” enquired Frank.

“Not really. I’ll play it by ear. That’s why I was looking in the Book of Common Prayer earlier on, to see if there’s

anything that might fit the bill. Nothing quite right, I'm afraid. Any ideas, Neil?"

"For the burial of a budgie?" Neil loosened his grip on his briefcase, then lowered it to the ground behind his stool as he watched Archie wander away in boredom. "It's difficult, really, when you can't even give a potted history of the life and achievements of the dear departed, as you would for a normal funeral."

"Quite!" agreed Margaret. "But Violet tells me she's written a poem. That might do the trick. And perhaps a hymn? What do you think?"

"'All Things Bright and Beautiful'," suggested Neil. "That's got a line about God making their tiny wings, if I remember rightly..."

Margaret grinned with approval. "Great minds think alike! Exactly what I came up with. And that reminds me. I've downloaded the accompaniment for 'All Things' on to my iPod. A bit of music might add a touch of atmosphere. Where are those speakers we take on holiday, Frank? You know, the ones that work on batteries?"

"In the upstairs cupboard, I think. I'll go and look."

"Great! Meet me with them at the front door. And you..." Margaret turned her gaze towards Neil, "... might like to take a look around the church while you're waiting. I really won't be long. Sorry I can't take you with me, but I don't think Violet could cope with new faces just at the moment."

"I quite understand. And I'd welcome the chance to take a look around the church while you're gone."

"Go straight out the gate at the end of our garden. You can't miss it."

Not again!

"The door's open, but it's a tight fit. Just watch it doesn't

slam shut because it's the devil to open again! Back soon. We can get down to business then. OK?"

Neil nodded, not quite sure which part of the deluge of words he was agreeing to.

But Margaret was already out of the room.

"Frank! Frank, I'm leaving! Where are those speakers? Oh, there you are."

Surprisingly, Neil heard the unmistakable sound of a kiss being planted firmly on a cheek.

"Remember to get those chops out of the freezer. And don't forget you've got to rearrange your dental appointment on Friday. Oh, and the recycling bin needs to go out today. Bye, dear. Bye!"

There was a sudden draught as the door opened, then slammed shut – and she was gone.

"Right," said Frank as he came back into the kitchen. "I've got my marching orders and so have you. The church is that way. Down the garden, through the gate, up the lane a bit – and you're there!"

This time Neil really couldn't miss it. St Stephen's loomed ahead of him the moment he stepped beyond the garden gate. He caught his breath. He'd always loved old buildings, and churches had been a particular favourite even when he was a small boy. That was probably because old churches had been a passion for his father too. There was nothing he'd liked more than coming across a church which he had never visited before. Story books – that's what Dad had called them. Neil remembered so many happy hours when the two of them had wandered around and inside an ancient church, noting a Norman carving here or a Gothic arch there. They would discover masonry marks left by the builders, faces carved in the wooden screen or the christening font, or even at the top

of pillars – faces which probably looked very like some of the congregation members in the artist’s time; towers hung with bells which had been rung every Sunday for countless generations (except during the Second World War, so his Dad had explained); tapestries and fading medieval paintings telling the Bible stories to congregations who couldn’t read or write; even swallows nesting in the eaves, just as they had done for as long as anyone could recall.

Young Neil had listened, mesmerized, imagining the stonemason, picturing worshippers of times gone by, looking up at the great bells which had called the faithful to worship down the years. And to that small boy, it did seem that his father could read the story of each church as if it were a book, noticing details, large and small, which revealed so much of those who’d known the building before them.

“If these walls could only speak...”

Neil could still picture the softening of his Dad’s face as he’d said those words.

“... drenched in all that’s happened here, those walls are. That’s why old churches have such a wonderful atmosphere. They’ve seen it all and felt every emotion. All the worries, hopes, joys and sorrows of the people who’ve come here down the years – these walls have absorbed the lot. What a tale they could tell!”

Neil found his pace slowing as he thought again of his Dad. Fifteen years on, and he still missed him. That final illness had robbed him of his zest for life and his dignity too. At least he was at peace now. Neil gave a wry smile. Well, at peace from Mum’s sharp tongue, at the very least!

It was often said that Neil looked like his Dad – and he could see the likeness in the thick, wiry hair he’d inherited from his father. Nowadays Neil kept his cropped short, so

the tight curls were hardly noticeable – unlike his Dad, who had let his hair grow quite long towards the end, much to his Mum’s annoyance, especially as it turned grey. Father and son had also had the same lopsided grin when they laughed, which was often, because they shared a similar sense of humour – but beyond that, Neil could recognize little of his Dad in himself. His broad shoulders and stocky frame came from his Mum’s side of the family. Her brothers had both been rugby players “for the county!”, as she never tired of telling anyone who’d listen. Physically, Neil was perfect for a scrum half. Actually, the thought of getting anywhere near a scrum was his idea of a nightmare.

The graveyard was nice. A strange thing to think about a graveyard, but he’d always found them fascinating since he’d spent hours wandering around them reading epitaphs as a kid. Taking a quick look at the stones immediately near the path as he walked, Neil was vaguely aware of the church clock chiming noon as he reached the imposing Gothic-arched porch door. In spite of Margaret’s warning, one twist of the round metal handle was enough to release the latch, so that Neil could easily push the door wide enough to slip inside.

He hadn’t realized how much warmth there had been outside in the late Spring sunshine until he stood for a moment breathing in the essence of the building as he walked along the back pew, then turned to make his way up the centre aisle. There was a quiet coolness about the church, an oasis of tranquillity which didn’t entirely cut out the bustle of the surrounding market town. He could still hear traffic noise, children’s voices from a nearby school and even gentle birdsong, but it felt as if a blanket had enfolded the building, filtering everything until it seemed distant and removed from him.

Could this church become his spiritual home? He considered the thought as he walked towards the rail and looked up at the huge carved wooden cross suspended above the altar.

Was this it? Would he be able to bring something worthwhile to this community? Would his contribution as a curate in this church make a difference that was beneficial? Could he be happy and fulfilled here?

Like a sigh, he felt a sweep of cold air brush past him – and at that exact moment, caught by the same sudden draught, the heavy church door slammed shut, shattering the peace and shaking the rafters as it echoed round the old building.

* * *

Frank picked up the phone almost immediately it rang.

“Oh, Frank dear, I’m glad I caught you!” Margaret didn’t bother to wait for any greeting from her husband before she continued:

“This budgie thing is proving to be a bit more complicated than I thought. Violet lives in sheltered housing run by the council, as you know, and because she wants this ceremony to take place as the body is buried, some ‘jobsworth’ is saying we need written permission before the budgie can be interred anywhere on council land! Can you believe it? Well, of course you can! Anyway, Violet is bereft, her daughter is threatening to call the local newspaper – and I need to be here for a while to pour oil on troubled waters.”

“And perhaps even pour holy water on council land sometime this afternoon!” chuckled Frank. “Oh, you poor old thing. Still, if anyone can get things sorted out, you can.”

“It’s just Neil, that new curate – well, hopefully *our* new

curate, if I can persuade him to join us – must think I'm dreadful to be so tied up when he's come all this way..."

"Well, he'll be getting a measure of how busy it is here, and how much he's needed, won't he!" replied Frank.

"Can you explain and ask him to bear with me? Do you think he'd mind holding on for a bit? Tell him to have a look at the minutes of the last few parish council meetings. Give Peter a ring and see if he'll pop round to talk to him about how involved the churchwardens are at St Stephen's..."

"But he's not here! He went over to the church, as you instructed, around twelve o'clock, and although I know I was out for a while, I really don't think he came back. Just to be sure, I did pop down to the church about two to check if he was there. I stuck my head round the door and called out a few times, but there was no sign of him, so I suppose he must have taken himself off home again."

"How strange! From his letter, it sounded as if he was more interested than that. Oh well, he must have taken one look at the church – and us – and decided it wasn't for him, then!"

"His loss."

"Absolutely."

"Odd, though."

"Certainly is."

"Right, I must get on. Good luck with the budgie, dear."

"Oh, I can handle the budgie. It's the council officials who need to be handled with care."

"They've not met you yet, have they? You'll knock them into shape."

Frank could almost hear her smiling at the other end of the line.

"I'll be back as soon as I can. Bye, dear!"

And the line went dead.

The main relief was that he'd found the loo. It was now three hours since the door had slammed shut on him, and in spite of shouting, thumping, kicking – and a lot of praying – the door refused to budge, and he was well and truly stuck. Worst of all was the moment about five minutes after the door slammed when he first realized that his briefcase was still stashed behind the stool where he'd been cornered by Archie in Margaret's kitchen earlier that day. In that briefcase was his mobile. Without his mobile, he was lost.

For one hopeful moment about an hour before, he thought he'd heard someone trying the door. He'd been closeted in the vestry at the time, idly looking through papers on the desk and books on the shelves, for lack of anything else to do. He was just opening a hymn-book, thinking that perhaps a verse of "How Great Thou Art" might make him feel better, when he heard something. The sound of footsteps, perhaps – and was it a voice calling his name? He rushed out into the main body of the church and ran back down the aisle, yelling at the top of his voice, then banged his fists for all he was worth on the unmoving old door which had imprisoned him – but there was nothing. No voice from outside filled with relief to have found him. No sound of a key turning in the lock or a shoulder thumping against the door. No sound at all. Zilch.

Exhausted with frustration, Neil staggered back to lean against the old stone font. How come they hadn't missed him? Why weren't they searching for him? Where was Margaret? Hadn't Frank wondered about him not calling back to the house?

What was it Margaret had said about that door? A tight fit? Something about it being the devil to open? Neil slumped

down into the back pew, exasperated and exhausted by another bout of trying to pull, prise, cajole, punch or even kick the door open. It simply wouldn't budge.

He ran his fingers through his hair and sat for a while with his head cupped in his hands. He just couldn't understand why no one had come looking for him. Could that have been Margaret or Frank he thought he'd heard earlier? Did they just think he'd taken himself off again without even saying goodbye? Surely they'd see his briefcase? An image slipped into his mind of the Vicarage kitchen piled high with bits and pieces on every available surface. He'd tucked his briefcase behind the stool he was perching on. Would they see it there? Surely they'd find it! He frowned as he wondered if they ever found anything in that muddle. But then there was his car! He groaned out loud when he realized how he'd parked it up the road a bit so that it didn't block their driveway. Margaret and Frank didn't even know that car was his, so why would they take any notice of it?

When might the church be opened again? Perhaps for evening prayers? What time would Margaret think about doing that? Mind you, in a small parish like this one, with only one incumbent, evening prayers were often missed because the vicar was just not available to say the office at the right time. Margaret was tied up this afternoon at the budgie's funeral service. How long would that take? Would she find time to fit in evening prayers tonight?

Neil became aware of a deep rumbling noise, then realized it came from his stomach. He was not a man to miss meals without noticing. He remembered longingly his boiled egg and toast soldiers eaten at eight that morning, and glanced at his watch. He'd been imprisoned in the church for nearly four hours. No wonder his tummy was complaining. He

needed food – now! Like a fox out on a night raid, he decided to search every possible nook and cranny for something to munch. There must be some biscuits here, surely. All churches ran on tea and biscuits!

He set off towards the vestry, a man on a mission.

* * *

It was gone six o'clock before Frank heard Margaret's key in the door.

"Mission accomplished," she grinned. "Poppet had a very good send-off quietly after five o'clock, when the council official had knocked off for the day. We sang the hymn and said a few words in Violet's flat, then nipped down and did the deed when he wasn't there to see us."

"Oh, well done, dear. I knew you'd think of something."

"No sign of Neil, then?"

"None at all."

"Odd."

"Very."

"Can I smell those chops in the oven?"

"With baked apple, just the way you like them."

"And roast potatoes?"

"What else?"

"I'm starving! Give me five minutes to sort myself out, and I'll come and set the table."

"How about, as a special treat, having it on our knees in the living room?" suggested Frank. "We can watch the news as we eat."

"Perfect," agreed Margaret, heading upstairs.

Minutes later, when she joined Frank in the kitchen, her nose twitched at the aroma of apples as he dished up the chops

and gave the gravy a final stir. Margaret reached down beside the dresser to grab the padded knee-trays which they could balance on their laps as they ate. Suddenly, she stopped.

“Frank, look!”

Following her gaze, his eyes opened with horror.

“His briefcase! Neil left it here!”

“But why didn’t he come back to collect it?” asked Margaret.

“Perhaps he just forgot.”

The two of them stared at each other for several seconds, obviously registering the same thought.

“Or perhaps,” said Margaret slowly, “perhaps he didn’t leave.”

“He couldn’t still be in the church... I went there. I shouted. There was no reply.”

“Did you look in the vestry?”

“Why would he be in there?”

“Why not? He might have got cold. Or bored. Or needed the loo. Oh, Frank, he can’t still be in there, can he?”

“That blasted door!”

The two of them moved as one, out of the kitchen and down the garden path. It was as they were running through the graveyard towards the church that Frank spotted the light.

“I didn’t leave that on!” wailed Margaret. “It must be him!”

Within seconds they ran into the porch, and Frank grabbed hold of the iron ring which turned the latch on the ancient door. Funnily enough, it worked very easily from the outside. Making it work from the inside, however, was a quite different story. It took practice, a lot of practice, to get the knack just right. Why on earth hadn’t they made that clearer to Neil?

Practically falling through the door, their calls were greeted

by absolute silence. Neil was nowhere to be seen. One small light was on, but the church was quiet and empty.

“Maybe he’s in the vestry?” suggested Frank. “I’ll go and check.”

“Frank.” Margaret’s voice was practically a whisper. “What’s that noise?”

He stopped in his tracks, his head tilted to one side as he listened.

“Whatever it is, it’s coming from in here,” gestured Frank, looking around the main body of the church. “Down the front there, I think.”

“Be careful, dear. It may not be him.”

Frank hushed her by putting his finger to his lips, then he began to tiptoe down the aisle, stopping suddenly as he drew level with the row of seating second from the front. Moving silently along the pew, he slowly leaned over to peer down on the seat in front of him.

“Come and take a look at this!” He turned to her with a smile.

What she saw when she joined him made her smile too. They looked down on a peacefully slumbering Neil, snoring loudly, his mouth wide open, his legs curled up along the seat, and his head resting comfortably on a hassock. On the floor below him was an open box of Communion wafers – or at least, what was left of them. He’d apparently found the Communion wine too, because the silver goblet they used in Sunday services stood beside his dangling arm with just a mouthful of red liquid still in the bottom.

“He didn’t starve, then,” said Frank. “That’s a relief.”

At the sound of their voices, Neil’s eyes shot open, and for a second it was plain he was struggling to remember just where he was.

“Right, then,” said Margaret in that no-nonsense tone he would later come to know so well. “It’s pork chops for tea. Coming?”