

When fate takes a hand



A short story by Emma Kent

As Martha stood looking out of the kitchen window at the lawn covered in a heavy frost, her mug of coffee clasped in her hands, the decision was made. She must stop being the recluse she had become and venture back out into the world. She looked down into the eyes of the two faithful companions watching her and said, "The time has come boys; let's go for a walk." For many those words would hold little meaning other than it was time to take the dogs for a walk, but this would be the first walk on her own after the sudden death of the husband she had shared her life with for over forty years. The leaded window she looked out of was the same window they had looked out of nearly all their married life, having bought the cottage at the beginning of their life together. It was to have been the home where they planned to raise their family but sadly the joy of children of their own was never to be, but as teachers they had both greatly influenced many young lives until they both retired last year.

Placing the now empty cup into the dishwasher, Martha then crossed the kitchen and lifted the latch on the door which led to the space they called the boot room, which was in reality the small lobby where the wellingtons and outdoor coats were kept and two beds, for muddy dogs returning from walks, had found space next to a radiator. Lifting her coat from its hook she paused and then hung it back – not an act of changing her mind about the walk but simply about which coat to wear. This day was going to be difficult and some comfort was needed to help her through it so she reached for his coat and held it to her, taking in the smell of the wax and corduroy mixed with the familiar smell of his cigars. As they had both been tall, or 'elegant in stature' as her mother used to say when she complained as a young girl about being taller than all her school friends, his coat fitted her too and as she placed her arms through the sleeves it was as though his arms were hugging her to say yes, it will be OK. She put her feet into her wellingtons, a red scarf around her neck and gloves on to keep out the early morning chill.

Gathering up the leads, she opened the back door and went up the few cobbled steps to cross the lawn towards the back gate, their own private entrance into the wood which backed onto their home. Upon reaching the green-painted heavy wooden gate she called the dogs to her and clipped the leads to their collars and then her hand stopped as it reached out towards the bolt holding the gate locked. A deep intake of breath and her hand moved the bolt across and she opened the gate, taking the first steps out of her home and garden since she had returned from the funeral nearly two months ago. She had been thankful after his death for the Internet with its supermarket ordering and delivery systems, the emails to be able to reassure friends that she was alright but didn't need visiting and the remoteness of the cottage which meant that unexpected callers were deterred also. They had always walked the dogs in the woods together and she had not been able to perform what to others was a daily chore since he died, being fortunate that the dogs had enough space in the large garden to expend their energy every day.

Martha walked the short path their feet, and the dogs' paws, had created over time to meet up with one of the many footpaths running through the woods so popular with other dogs, their owners and families out getting some fresh air. She walked a short distance along the gravel path before letting the dogs off their leads so they could run around to check out what new smells were in the undergrowth since their last visit. As she walked each step became less traumatic and the familiarity of the wood also provided its own comfort with the sun shining through the trees in bold shafts of light to lift anyone's spirit.

Then the first encounter happened. She had been dreading seeing anyone, particularly if it was a regular walker and someone who recognised her, dreading the question or the look of 'Where is he? On your own today?' as they never walked the dogs alone, it being something they always shared. Walking towards her was a young man, probably in his early thirties, whom she recognised as having seen before and with him two little girls who as they got closer she could

see were twins, their curly blonde hair held in place by colourful earmuffs which matched their scarves and gloves. As they came closer there was a crashing sound as paws came racing through the trees towards the path and her excited, and already very muddy dogs, suddenly appeared right into the path of the girls, bringing them to a sudden halt quickly followed by the grasping of the young man's hands and even quicker by shrieks of, "Daddy! Daddy!"

She rushed up to reassure the startled family that the dogs were friendly, at the same time commanding the dogs to sit, which they instantly did. "Are you OK?" she asked the girls, and as she also directed this question to their father she looked at his face and recognised the look of loss in his eyes too. She clipped the dogs onto their leads as he replied in an Australian accent, "Other than a little mud I think we are OK, thank you," pointing to his daughter's coat where a large splash of mud decorated the bottom edge. "I am so sorry, they are a little excited today; it's been a while since they were in the woods." As the words left her mouth she regretted saying them as now would be the 'Oh, why?' etc conversation she wanted to avoid. "Yes, it's been a while since we have been here too," he replied. "Daddy, Daddy," one the girls started saying as she tugged his hand. "Daddy, I need the toilet," she whispered, trying not to wriggle also. "You will have to wait until we get home," he replied, knowing that also involved the walk back to the car and drive home. "I live just over there," Martha found herself saying as she gestured towards the direction of the trees through which she passed to get to her gate. "In those trees?" asked the other little girl, who had been silently stroking the dogs whilst her sister had had the attention of the adults. "Oh, no. The back of my garden is through a gateway hidden down a path through the trees over there," Martha explained. "What, a secret garden door like in the book?" came the reply, to which Martha could not help but smile as the book had always been a favourite as a child and she had often referred to it herself over the years.

"Oh, we don't want to bother you," the father replied

Solent Life Page 14

in that polite way of saying "That would be great if we could". "Oh, please, it's no bother and I can get the mud off your little girl's coat at the same time." So they followed Martha back along the path, through the 'secret gate', across the lawn and into the boot room. "The toilet is just through there," she said, indicating to a small door on the left, "and come on through to the kitchen after. Would you like a coffee? Hot chocolate?" to which the girls quickly replied in unison, "Oh, yes, please!" Their father tried protesting again, but Martha, feeling more comfortable than she expected with her first visitors in nearly two months, insisted that it was her pleasure and placed the kettle on the Aga to seal the deal.

Very soon they were all sitting around her large pine kitchen table, the girls with not only mugs of hot chocolate but homemade chocolate chip biscuits too. The father seemed a little more at ease and as he sipped the coffee said, "Thank you, this is very kind of you." They then fell into conversation about the girls and their love of the woods and then it all seemed to just flow. Martha found herself telling him about her husband and his recent death and then Paul, as he introduced himself, told her about the recent loss of his wife, the girls' mother, and how he had no close family in this country as his wife had been an only child and her parents died before he even met her and his own parents were in Melbourne, Australia, and although they had offered to come over to help he knew that they would find the cold and damp of the English winter too much to bear in addition to coping with two very lively granddaughters. He explained that the girls would be returning to school

soon and that he was hoping to combine working from home with child-rearing, but was concerned that that would result in neither getting the best from him. He suddenly looked at his watch and explained that they should be going as they had a dentist appointment in a little while. The young family gathered their belongings and thanked Martha for her kindness and she, after making sure that they could remember the path back, thanked them for their company and hoped they would meet again soon.

A few days later as she ventured out of the gate to the woods she found a little note attached to the frame. It said in childlike but neat writing

"Dear Martha

We wanted to say thank you for the hot chocolate and biscuits and helping with the muddy coat. We would like to visit you again soon.

Love

Emily and Hannah xx"

Each girl had signed her own name and the page was decorated with images of the dogs, her house and cups with steam coming out of the top. There was also a short postscript from Paul containing more thanks and his phone number.

When she returned from her walk she took the note and held it, looking at it as if it would tell her what to do; should she call or should she just leave their future meeting to chance? She went into her sitting-room and as she sat by the open fire which was ablaze with colour from the logs burning there one of the dogs wandered in with something in his mouth. As she looked she noticed it was a small glove which could only belong to Hannah or Emily; fate was

taking a hand again. She picked up the phone and dialled the number on the note and as he answered she said, "Paul, it's Martha. We met in the woods." The conversation again flowed without effort and arrangements were quickly made for another visit and collection of the stray glove.

As the weeks went past Martha, Paul and the girls met on many occasions, taking walks in the woods together, often followed by more hot chocolate in Martha's kitchen, and visits to Paul's home which was on the other side of the village. One day Martha was sitting on the large sofa in the lounge, but as often was now the case she was not alone but squeezed between two blonde little girls listening intently to her reading *The Secret Garden* to them. Hannah and Emily had adopted Martha as a grandparent and Paul was starting to accept her help with childcare and meals. Martha knew that this was the beginning of a new chapter in her life and that of her adopted family. Fate had given her a new path in life and she was happy that, hopefully, these two children's lives may stay part of her own for many years. ■

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Suite 10 Webb House, 20 Bridge Road, Park Gate, Southampton SO31 7GE

Fax: 01489 583803

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