

Chapter Twenty Four

Shortly after construction work on the new bridge had started in earnest, Kevin received a surprise invitation from Bret. The two men had been hard at work aligning the details of the construction schedule when Bret had suddenly stood up and stretched.

“Kevin, you remember that I said that I was brought up not so far from here?”

“Yes,” he replied, slightly disorientated by the sudden change of topic.

“Well, my parents still have the old place. They’ve been questioning me closely about our work on the bridge, and they would very much like to meet you. So, would you care to come for dinner one evening – say, tomorrow night?”

Kevin felt extremely flattered, and immediately agreed.

“Wonderful,” Bret enthused, “In fact, why don’t you bring your things and stay overnight?”

“Well, if it’s not too much trouble...” Kevin started.

“Not at all, really. If I know my parents, they will probably insist on plying you with far too much to eat and drink anyway, so why not relax and enjoy it all?”

“Well, OK, thanks very much.”

“Great. I’ll get Ricard to arrange for transport for us both.”

Later that day, as he walked back to the Mainland with Ricard plodding stoically along at his side, Kevin did his best to recall details of Lyndesfarne society from another of the numerous NISSA orientation lessons he had received. As far as he could remember, people on the Island exhibited a tendency towards a more social style of living than he was familiar with. Apparently, it was commonplace to find large groups sharing a single residence, and there was a very strong sense of extended family across the generations. He had also been told that there was less gender differentiation in role and behaviour in many situations, although Kevin was not entirely clear exactly what was meant by this statement.

He turned to Ricard.

“Did Bret talk to you about tomorrow evening?”

“He did,” Ricard replied promptly. “I’ve spoken to the transport people, and made arrangements for the two of you to be picked up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Just the two of us?” Kevin queried.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ricard confirmed.

“So, I’ll have an evening without you?”

At this remark, Ricard looked surprised, even shocked, but after catching sight of Kevin’s smile, he relaxed almost immediately.

“Please do not worry about me. I have other things I can do.”

The following afternoon, Bret encouraged Kevin to complete his work a little early, and leave while the sun was still high in the sky.

“It’s a fair distance,” explained Bret, “and I would like to be able to get there in good time. Perhaps half an hour’s travel time?”

This was another ride by horse and trap, with a taciturn driver Kevin did not recognise. Kevin had become familiar with this mode of transport over the past few months of working on the Island. It was very pleasant clip-clopping along in the late summer sunshine in companionable silence, following a well-surfaced road through a heavily wooded area. The road wended its way uphill, in and out of the shade of the trees and passing occasional rocky outcrops, with the horse obviously having to work quite hard to keep the trap moving.

The road emerged in a more open area of farmland, and they moved at a steady trot between well-tended fields separated by low hedges. Kevin could see that, in some fields, the crops had already been taken in, while others were waiting for harvesting. Even so, he could see no movement, no people. He wondered vaguely how farming was carried out here.

“Here’s our village,” announced Bret, suddenly breaking into Kevin’s thoughts.

The village gave a first impression of being a rural hamlet from several centuries ago, but this was misleading. Everywhere was scrupulously clean, tidy and well tended, with clear signs of wealth in the buildings’ size and construction. Closer to some prosperous part of Oxfordshire, thought Kevin, and quite definitely more Middle England than Middle Ages.

All of the houses had neatly cultivated gardens, usually surrounded by stone or brick-built walls. The walls were often adorned with a variety of climbing plants that Kevin, who was not a gardener and indeed thought of himself as having brown thumbs rather than green fingers, did not recognise. Some of these plants seemed very unusual, he thought, do they actually grow on the Mainland at all?

The garden walls also seemed to enclose large areas of lawn, and the smell of newly-mown grass-clippings came unbidden to Kevin’s nostrils. This was an aroma that took him back to his younger days:

the smell of grass in the sunshine while he was lazing around waiting for his innings at school cricket and, a little later in life, savouring warm beer, pork pies and guitar blues music at a summer picnic.

Kevin wondered how the grass was cut. He could make out a soft clipping sound which he took to be grass-cutting in progress, but there was no sound of motors or machinery. He turned to Bret with yet another question.

“How’s the grass cut?”

Bret swivelled around, and pointed at a low shape on a nearby lawn, in the shade of a mature and spreading tree. Now that Bret had pointed it out, Kevin could see that the dark shape was moving slowly over the grass.

“What is it?” he asked in astonishment.

“Well, I guess it translates as ‘lawn-bug’,” replied Bret, “Many people keep one to keep the grass down. It floats over the lawn, trimming off the tops and, um, digesting the results. Although it’s not really alive. I suppose you would call it a machine.”

The lawn-bug was tear-drop shape, if seen from above, and domed up to a height of perhaps four inches – a hand, Kevin remembered. It was coloured in mottled shades of brown and green. Kevin watched it, fascinated. It looks, he thought, just like a large insect decked out in military fatigues.

Kevin dragged his attention back to Bret, who pointed in the direction of a house approaching on their left.

“Home at last,” he said.

They turned in through open gates, the clip-clop of the hooves and the rumble of the wheels changing their sounds on the gravel drive. Bret’s home was a single-story building of relatively modest side, surrounded by a garden every bit as mature and well-kept as those of its neighbours.

As the trap drew up by the front door, it was flung open, and a tall and well-built woman wearing floor-length robes in deep blue, swept out of the door to greet them. She had silver-grey hair, worn long and tied back in a way that closely resembled Bret’s, and bright blue eyes. Kevin could see the resemblance between Bret and his mother immediately.

Bret waved and jumped down from the trap before it had stopped moving, and enthusiastically hugged his mother. Bret disengaged himself from the embrace and waved at Kevin.

“Come and meet my parents,” he called.

Bret’s mother was followed out of the house by a very large man with a bushy beard and a toothy grin, and wearing a well-used

butcher's apron. Kevin came forward to shake the man's hand; only then did he realise just how big Bret's father actually was. He towered over Kevin, his friendly grin widening into what Kevin would discover to be his usual hearty laugh. The parents ushered him into the house, Bret following behind carrying Kevin's rucksack.

At such short notice, Kevin had not had much of an opportunity to get a gift for his hosts. He was not sure just what would be socially acceptable, and wanted to make sure he found something that would not disintegrate when transferred to the Island. After some thought, he located a teddy bear mascot he had originally purchased in London, complete with Busby and union jack T-shirt, which had been sat in the glove compartment of the Volvo for a while. The bear was in a presentation bag of brightly-coloured paper. Better than nothing, mused Kevin, I hope they do not mind.

It turned out that both of Bret's parents spoke extremely good English. Kevin retrieved his rucksack and presented his gift from the Mainland. This was received with much ceremony and many thanks, and unwrapped, and then greeted with what Kevin felt was gratifying amusement.

It was almost certainly a well-practiced anecdote, judging by the way the storyline was passed deftly between them. Bret's parents explained that, before they had met, each of them used to travel to England, his father on foot and his mother in a horse-drawn cart. They had both been engaged in selling articles from the Island in Kevin's world, as well as trading them for items likely to be saleable in Lyndesfarne. They had actually met each other in a market in Berwick, not far from the old bridge, each trying to pass themselves off as a native of Kevin's world.

With introductions and reminiscences completed, Bret's father excused himself, explaining that the kitchen needed his immediate attentions.

"Let me show you around," Bret suggested, "Would you like the full guided tour?"

The house turned out to be much bigger than first appearances suggested. Most of the ground floor was a large open-plan area which doubled as a dining room and lounge, with exposed beams and windows that Kevin thought probably worked without the aid of magic. There was a seating area with several sofas and numerous slightly worn but very comfortable-looking armchairs, clustered around what appeared to be an open log fire, although Kevin would later notice that the logs never seemed to burn down or need replenishing.

The building had two lower floors, underground, where bedrooms and what Bret rather quaintly translated as “bathing-rooms” were located. There seemed to be an astonishing number of rooms in the lower levels, but all those that Kevin glanced into seemed to be snugly warm and comfortably lit.

A small but comfortable bedroom had been set aside for his use, right next door to a bathroom. Both rooms were equipped with the “magic windows” that Bret had introduced to Kevin a few months previously. Bret took great pains to ensure that Kevin was entirely familiar with the gestures required to operate the bathroom, the windows and the lighting.

As they returned upstairs, Bret’s mother unprompted poured the two of them large glasses of white wine, and handed them over. Bret’s father busied himself in the kitchen, as Kevin could see through the open door, preparing what seemed to him to be an immense quantity of food. Meanwhile, Bret’s mother chattered away brightly, while bustling around a large dining table set with ten places. It must be quite a party this evening, mused Kevin.

Seeing that he was getting on so well with his mother, Bret stood and announced, “I’m just going downstairs to change. I won’t be long.”

His mother smiled, and spoke in a fashion that Kevin suspected many mothers used with their children regardless of their age.

“Be quick. Dinner will be ready soon.”