***Christmas is coming***

Three old friends meet for a coffee and to share their news...

Bruce, the semi-retired accountant, was alarmed. ‘Leo, what’s the matter? You’re drinking black coffee instead of hot chocolate.’

 Leo was always trying and failing to keep to a diet. ‘It’s working for the church that does it. Since we moved, I’m busier than ever. Now the minister wants me to organise a Christmas lunch for all the singles and oldies. Tell the truth, it’s a bit overwhelming. Dora thinks I’m doing too much, but . . .’ He shrugged. ‘Eating so much chocolate was slowing me down, so I decided to come off it for a while. It’s . . .’

Bruce tuned out Leo’s voice to consider the third member of the group.

Kerry’s gentle, lined face, was turned towards Leo. But was he listening?

Leo finished up with, ‘. . . I think we ought to have made the move years ago!’

‘I’m so glad,’ said Kerry, blinking himself back from . . . whatever it was he’d been worrying about. ‘And you, Bruce? Is your sister-in-law still trying to organise your life?’

Bruce pulled a face. ‘She wants us all to go and stay at a hotel for Christmas, but . . .’

Kerry nodded and disconnected.

Bruce was alarmed. It was traditional for Leo and Bruce to take their families to Kerry’s for lunch on Christmas day. Had he not understood what Bruce had said?

Leo hadn’t noticed. ‘How’s it going, Bruce? I know your dear wife didn’t want to have anyone in to clean the house till you insisted. How’s that working out?’

Bruce said, with his eyes still on Kerry, ‘I can’t say she likes it, but she’d rather spend time in the garden or the greenhouse than cook or clean. I’ve got some more accounts to do so she’s accepted that I can’t do everything. Her winter flowering thingies – don’t know the proper name for them, but they’re very colourful – are amazing.’ He leaned forward. ‘Kerry, something’s wrong?’

Kerry said, ‘It’s nothing, really. Turning my big old house into accommodation for university students has worked well until now. We’ve had our ups and downs, but I felt I was filling a need.’

Bruce nodded. ‘I know you were. You’ve helped some who might well have gone to the bad if it hadn’t been for you, not to mention the comfort you offer the homesick and those unfortunate enough to be troubled in mind.’

‘Yes, but this new intake of students doesn’t want what I’m offering. Perhaps it’s a generation thing? I can’t get through to them. They think it’s hilarious that I should believe in God. They brush aside my objections to their offensive language. As if that weren’t enough, from the very first week they’ve ignored the house rules about no smoking and drinking. They’ve had two written warnings but there’s been no improvement, so I’m going to give them notice to quit. I realise that I can’t keep the house on without students, but perhaps it’s time for me to sell up and move into sheltered accommodation.’

Leo was shocked. ‘But everyone relies on you . . .’ He shook his head at himself. ‘That was me being self-centred. Kerry, you’ve the patience of a saint. Running a hostel for students must be like herding cats, but—’

Bruce said, ‘Kerry, it’s not like you to give up so easily.’

‘It hasn’t been easy. Let’s change the subject. Do I understand that you’re both deserting me this Christmas?’

Leo shook his head. ‘It’s your call.’

Bruce said, ‘I agree. Is there any way we can help, Kerry?’

‘Pray for me, my friends. Pray for me.’

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Kerry reached the half way point up the hill, and paused for a rest. It was a fine winter’s day. The early morning mist had cleared and sun had broken through the clouds. From a distant park he could hear the shouting from a football match.

 ‘Dear Lord, help me to be grateful for whatever you have in store for me. Let me be used for you. Let me be laid aside for you. According to thy will.’

 He rested a while, enjoying the beauty of the day, and the peace. He dreaded returning to the house. This group of students played music at top volume. The house stank of cigarettes, and there were empty cans of beer and broken bottles in the trash every morning. His attempts to discover who was responsible had been met with insolence and mocking denials. ‘Who cares, for Christ’s sake! Not me!’

The big kitchen where he’d once provided supper for any who wanted it, was deserted. This intake preferred to eat takeaway meals which cost more and were less nutritious. Kerry understood that they were experiencing what they thought of as personal freedom. They turned night into day, and partied till they’re incapable of putting themselves to bed. He feared that drugs would appear next.

The ringleader was a handsome, charismatic youth called Jake, a couple of years older than the rest. From a wealthy background, Jake declared, often and loudly, that Christianity was rubbish. Every day he thought up new terms of abuse for Kerry such as ‘The Great Believer,’ ‘Great-Grandaddy,’ and ‘Mr Old-fashioned.’

Kerry had consulted the head of student accommodation at the university, who said that yes, Jake could be difficult, but once he’d settled down . . . Unfortunately Jake had not settled down. Kerry knew that if the students broke house rules, he had the right to give them notice but that if he did so, the university couldn’t guarantee to find him replacements. In consequence he might well lose the rest of the rental for that term and, possibly, the remainder of the year.

Kerry had identified the students who were keeping their distance from Jake and tried to get through to them. One or two had responded well at first, but Jake had been swift to drag them back into line. ‘You don’t want to live in Great Granddaddy’s pocket, do you?’ And of course they didn’t.

Kerry recognised that the atmosphere of the house had changed. Swear words entered every conversation. He’d put up notices about carol-singing and Christmas services. They’d been defaced or torn down. That had been the last straw, so today he would give the whole lot notice to leave. If he lost his income and couldn’t pay the bills, well . . . that was the sacrifice he must make. Perhaps God was telling him to stop work and sell up?

‘Dear Lord, I can’t let them continue to mock You, never mind breaking house rules. Give me strength to say, Thus far and no farther.’

He sat on in the sunshine, trying to praise God for all that was good about the day.

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Leo arrived back home to find his wife Dora in a state. ‘Leo, it’s too bad. I waited in all morning for the man who was coming to build in some shelves for us and he didn’t come. The supermarket delivered everything but the joint we need for tomorrow, one of the grandchildren wanted me to pick up something from the shops for her . . . and I couldn’t leave the flat. If you’d been here—’

 ‘You know I always meet Kerry and Bruce on Saturday mornings. I’ll do the shopping for you this afternoon . . . Oh, I forgot. I promised to look in at the church to tidy up after the Craft Fair—’

 Dora raised her hands. ‘Enough! Morning, noon and night, they ring from the church and off you go. Never mind that you promised we could spend more time together once we’d moved. And I’m left here alone to deal with everything. It’s not good enough!’

 ‘You’re right, Dora. I’m sorry. Being property steward is all very well and I enjoy it in a way, but it’s turning out to be more of a job than I expected.’

 ‘And that’s another thing. I know you like to be hospitable, and I don’t mind cooking a Christmas dinner here for the family – though I prefer going to Kerry’s – but I really can’t provide a Christmas lunch for twenty or more at church.’

 Leo opened his mouth to point out that he’d said they’d do it, and closed it again. She was right. What ever had he got himself into?

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Bruce went home to find his Sally in distress because the cleaner had smashed a vase.

 ‘There, there,’ he said. I’ll get you another.’

 ‘Don’t bother. I never liked it. But my sister came round and said it served me right for letting someone else loose on our parents’ things when I should be doing the housework myself, which you know I hate doing, and I’m really no good at. Honestly, Bruce, I don’t think Fiona liked the vase herself because she insisted on my having it when we divided things up after my mother’s death.’

 Bruce tried not to laugh. ‘Fiona has a knack of making you feel guilty about being alive.’

 Sally reached for a tissue. ‘You’re right. Silly me. But it’s just . . .’

 ‘Just Fiona. I know.’

 ‘I really don’t want to go to a hotel for Christmas, but she’s so insistent that—’

 ‘Neither do I. I’ll tell her I’ve already made other arrangements, shall I?’

 ‘Have you?’

 ‘No, but I will. I think Kerry’s going to need somewhere to go this Christmas. He can come here. I’ll cook, and all you’ll have to do is look pretty and tell me what a wonderful husband I am.’

 ‘Now I know why I married you . . .’

 ‘To deal with your sister?’

 ‘And the income tax, the shopping and the cooking, and organising a cleaner . . . and to giving me a cuddle when I need it.’

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Jake barged into Kerry’s office without knocking. He stank of cigarettes, and held a can of beer in one hand. Kerry knew that if challenged, Jake would say Kerry was being an old fusspot, or worse.

 ‘About the holidays,’ said Jake, leaning against the door. ‘I’m staying on, and so are some of the others, but we won’t be wanting a Christmas lunch. As for going to church and carol-singing – you’re having us on, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Yes,’ said Kerry. ‘It would be for heaven’s sake.’

‘What?’ said Jake, who hadn’t made the connection. ‘We’re going to celebrate our way. We’re going to black out the hall windows, invite some people in and have a Dark Side Disco on Christmas Eve. With plenty of wine and beer. You can’t possibly object to our drinking on that one night of the year, for God’s sake.’

‘For God’s sake?’ said Kerry.

‘Whatever. Just thought I’d let you know.’

Kerry braced himself. ‘Your plans are not acceptable.’

Jake clapped Kerry on the shoulder. ‘You’ll get over it, old man. I won’t invite you to join us, because you’d scare the pants off the girls with your long face. Mr Misery Guts, eh? Just keep out of the way, right?’

 ‘Wrong,’ said Kerry. He handed Jake an envelope. ‘Notice to quit. I’m closing the hostel in a week’s time. For good. You’ll have to find somewhere else to stay for the Christmas holidays and the rest of the year.’

‘What! You can’t do that!’

‘I can. You signed up to the house rules, and have broken them. I’ve given you two written warnings, so now you must go.’

‘You’re joking! Just because we want to live a little . . .! You can’t throw us out.’

‘You signed a copy of the house rules in exchange for a key.’

‘I never even bothered to read your ridiculous rules. You can’t seriously imagine we’d agree to put up with such a load of rubbish? That we’d live like monks and worship some non-existent God? You are totally out of date, man!’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Kerry. ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, who died to save my soul . . . and yours, too, come to think of it. You may mock me if you wish, but you may not mock my Saviour.’

‘Just because we poke fun at—’

‘At God? At first I thought you were merely careless in your speech, but no! You intend to be offensive. As a Christian, I have to say, “Stop!” You may leave as soon as you like, but I warn you that the locks will be changed in a week’s time.’

Jake screamed with rage. He swept all the papers off Kerry’s desk. ‘You’ll be sorry for this!’ And left.

Kerry breathed out, slowly. His hands were shaking.

After a while he bent down to pick the papers up off the floor.

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Bruce set aside the newspapers, and cleared the breakfast table. ‘If you don’t mind, Sally, I think I’ll pop over to see Kerry this morning after church. He’s got a spot of bother on at his place.’

 ‘What can you do?’

 ‘I don’t know. But I feel I must go.’

 Sally looked out of the window. ‘Give him my love. I thought I’d start bringing the azaleas in from the greenhouse this afternoon. Provided it doesn’t rain. You won’t forget to fix up something for Christmas Day?’

 ‘Trust me.’

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Leo prepared to leave early for church. ‘Dora, I’ve been thinking. I’m going to ask the church council to find someone else to take on some of my workload. I know that there are people called to work full-time for the church and that it fulfils them, but I need to keep my contacts going in the community as well.’

 ‘Common sense at last. And you’ll tell them we can’t do their Christmas lunch?’

 ‘They’ll have to rethink that plan, yes. I realise I’ve been neglecting you and I promise that that will change, but this afternoon I want to call in on Kerry. He’s in a right mess, with students revolting all over the place. Well, not actually revolting, but you know what I mean. I have no idea what I can do, but he asked us to pray for him and I did so. I want to see for myself what’s going on and offer support. That is, if you don’t object.’

 Dora patted his shoulder. ‘You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t try to help. Give him my love. Don’t be late, though. We’ve got the family coming for supper.’

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Bruce and Leo met at Kerry’s house.

‘You, too?’ said Leo, and rang the bell. He frowned. ‘Sounds like a riot.’

 Bruce said, ‘Sounds as if we’re just in time.’

 The door opened the door onto a tense scene. Kerry, straight-backed but standing very much alone, was trying to speak while Jake, backed up by a number of the students, was shouting and shaking his fist at the older man. ‘You are not going to turn us out and that’s flat. If you try, we’ll complain to the university that you’re not fit to run a lunatic asylum, never mind a hostel. And if you try to enforce this notice, I’ll personally sue the pants off you, right?’ And then, seeing the newcomers, he demanded, ‘Who are you and what do you want?’

 Bruce could put on an air of authority when he chose. ‘I’m Kerry’s accountant. I’ve come to see that he doesn’t lose financially by closing the hostel for a while.’

 ‘And I,’ said Leo, using his height and his bulk to even up the odds, ‘am here to see fair play.’

 ‘You want to see your friend bankrupted, is that it? He can’t turn us out or he’ll lose his income. Term’s well advanced, and he won’t be able to find any other students to take our rooms if we go. And I’ll make sure everyone else hears what a rotten place this is. He’ll never get anyone else interested.’

 ‘Nonsense,’ said Bruce. ‘There are plenty of people on the housing list who’d be delighted to move in, and pay full whack.’

‘Jake, you’ve overlooked something else,’ said Kerry. ‘It’s true that I may have some difficulty filling my rooms at this time of year, but you’ll be in the same boat. Where will you be able to find another place to stay?’

 It was clear that some of them had already thought of that. There was a general shifting of people who now realised they were standing too close to Jake.

 ‘As if I wanted to stay in this God-forsaken place!’ said Jake.

 ‘God is everywhere,’ said Kerry. ‘And he has certainly not forsaken this house. Go in peace.’

 ‘Peace, old man? I’m going to smash every stick of furniture in the house before I go.’

 ‘No, you won’t,’ said Leo, suddenly realising what part he could play. ‘I’m going round the house to take a picture of what each room looks like now. I will do the same on the day each one of you leaves. Remember, all damages have to be paid for.’

 There was a further shifting away from Jake’s proximity. He looked wildly around. ‘Come on, you’re not going to let him get away with this, are you?’

 ‘On mature consideration, yes,’ said one spectacled youth, walking round Jake to stand in front of Kerry. ‘I know I ought to have spoken up ages ago. I’d forgotten that God is everywhere, and here. I’d like to sign another copy of your house rules and stay on, if you’ll have me.’

 ‘Me, too,’ said a girl with long, blonde hair. ‘And, I can sing a bit. I wouldn’t mind going carol singing with you if the offer’s still open.’

 ‘Me, too, and I’ll bring my guitar,’ said a boy built like a heavy-weight boxer.

 ‘I’m going home for Christmas,’ said a tall, thin girl, ‘but I’d like to come back next term, if I may.’

 ‘Well, I’m not staying!’ said Jake. He put his arm round a pretty blonde, who seemed to enjoy his attentions. ‘We’re leaving, now. I wouldn’t stay in this prison camp of a hostel in this second-rate university if you paid me. My father will find us somewhere better for the New Year.’

 Kerry was distressed. ‘My dear boy, if you abandon your course–’

 The bespectacled youth said, ‘It’s a first-class university, Jake. The problem with you is that you don’t like obeying other people’s rules.’

 ‘Shut your mouth! All of you! Slaves, that’s what you are!’

 Leo said, ‘I’ll help you two pack, shall I?’

 One by one the others lined up to sign the house rules again. One even asked if he might drop in for a chat later that night, if Kerry were free.

 When all was quiet again, Kerry offered his friends a cup of tea in the kitchen. ‘Thank you, both of you. Your coming turned the tide.’

 Bruce said, ‘Confronting evil always looks harder than it turns out to be in the end.’

 Kerry sighed. ‘I shall be sorry to lose Jake and his girl.’

 The three friends considered the fate of those who had turned against society, and against God. ‘Perhaps he’ll reconsider,’ said Leo.

 ‘But,’ said Bruce, ‘Even if he does, you wouldn’t really want him back, would you?’

 ‘I shall pray for him,’ said Kerry. ‘The lost sheep.’

 Leo smiled. ‘Forget the sheep. Let’s talk turkey, instead. I’ve got a problem about Christmas. Kerry, we want to come to you as usual on Christmas Day – that is, if you’ll have us. But, can you show me how to provide a meal on another day for the people in our church who live alone?’

 ‘I’ve earned more than I expected to this year,’ said Bruce. ‘I’ll pick up the bill for the food. What do you think, Kerry?’

 Kerry smiled. He began to sing, ‘Christmas is coming, the turkey’s getting fat, please to put a penny in the old man’s hat.’

 ‘And God bless us all,’ said Bruce. ‘Amen.’

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Veronica Heley’s latest book is FALSE DIAMOND, from Severn House.