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## *Valentine's Day*

As always, Martha Storm was primed for action. Chin jutted, teeth gritted, and a firm grip on the handle of her trusty shopping trolley. Her shoulders burned as she struggled to push it up the steep slope toward the library. The cobblestones underfoot were slippery, coated by the sea mist that wafted into Sandshift each evening.

She was well prepared for the evening's event. It was going to be perfect, even though she usually avoided Valentine's Day. Wasn't it a silly celebration? A gimmick, to persuade you to buy stuffed furry animals and chocolates at rip-off prices. Why, if someone ever sent her a card, she'd hand it back and explain to the giver they'd been brainwashed. However, a job worth doing was worth doing well.

Bottles chinked in her trolley, a stuffed black bin bag rustled in the breeze and a book fell off a pile, its pages fluttering like a moth caught in a spider's web.

She'd bought the supermarket's finest rosé wine, flute glasses and napkins printed with tiny red roses. Her alarm clock sounded at 5:30 a.m. that morning to allow her time

to bake heart-shaped cookies, including gluten-free ones for any book lovers who had a wheat allergy. She'd brought along extra copies of the novel for the author to sign.

One of the best feelings in the world came when she received a smile of appreciation, or a few grateful words. When someone said, "Great job, Martha," and she felt like she was basking in sunshine. She'd go to most lengths to achieve that praise.

If anyone asked about her job, she had an explanation ready. "I'm a guardian of books," she said. "A volunteer at the library." She was an event organizer, tour guide, buyer, filer, job adviser, talking clock, housekeeper, walking encyclopedia, stationery provider, recommender of somewhere nice to eat lunch and a shoulder to cry on—all rolled into one.

And she loved each part, except for waking people up at closing time, and the strange things she found used as bookmarks (a nail file, a sexual health clinic appointment card and an old rasher of bacon).

As she rattled past a group of men, all wearing navy-and-yellow Sandshift United football scarves, Martha called out to them, "Don't forget about the library event tonight." But they laughed among themselves and walked on.

As she eventually directed the trolley toward the small, squat library building, Martha spied the bulky silhouette of a man huddled by the front door. "Hello there," she called out, twisting her wrist to glance at her watch. "You're fifty-four minutes early..."

The dark shape turned its head and seemed to look at her, before hurrying away and disappearing around the corner.

Martha trundled along the path. A poster flapped on the door and author Lucinda Lovell beamed out from a heavily filtered photo. The word *Canceled* was written across her face in thick black letters.

Martha's eyes widened in disbelief. Her stomach lurched,

as if someone had shoved her on an escalator. Using her hand as a visor, she peered into the building.

All was still, all was dark. No one was inside.

With trembling fingers, she reached out to touch the word that ruined all her planning and organizing efforts of the last couple of weeks. *Canceled*. The word that no one had bothered to tell her.

She swallowed hard and her organized brain ticked as she wondered who to call. The area library manager, Clive Folds, was taking his wife to the Lobster Pot bistro for a Valentine's dinner. He was the one who'd set up Lucinda's appearance, with her publisher. Pregnant library assistant, Suki McDonald, was cooking a cheese and onion pie for her boyfriend, Ben, to persuade him to give things another try between them.

Everything had been left for Martha to sort out.

Again.

"You live on your own, so you have more time," Clive had told her, when he'd asked her to take charge of the event preparations. "You don't have personal commitments."

Martha's chest tightened as she remembered his words, and she let her arms fall heavy to her sides. Turning back around, she took a deep breath and forced herself to straighten her back. *Never mind*, she thought. There must be a good reason for the cancelation, a serious illness, or perhaps a fatal road accident. Anyone who turned up would see the poster. "Better just set off home, and get on with my other stuff," she muttered.

Leaning over her trolley, Martha grabbed hold of its sides and heaved it around to face in the opposite direction. As she did, a clear plastic box slid out, crashing to the path. When she stooped to pick it up, the biscuits lay broken inside.

It was only then she noticed the brown paper parcel propped against the bottom of the door. It was rectangular and tied with a bow and a crisscross of string, probably left there by

the shadowy figure. Her name was scrawled on the front. She stooped down to pick it up, then pressed her fingers along its edges. It felt like a book.

Martha placed it next to the box of broken biscuits in her trolley. *Really*, she tutted, the things readers tried to avoid paying their late return fees.

She wrenched back on the trolley as it threatened to pull her down the hill. The brown paper parcel juddered inside as she negotiated the cobbles. She passed sugared almond-hued houses, and the air smelled of salt and seaweed. Laughter and the strum of a Spanish guitar sounded from the Lobster Pot and she paused for a moment. Martha had never eaten there before. It was the type of place frequented by couples.

Through the window, she glimpsed Clive and his wife with their foreheads almost touching across the table. Candles lit up their faces with a flickering glow. His mind was obviously not on the library.

*If she's not careful, Mrs. Fold's hair is going to set on fire*, Martha thought, averting her eyes. *I hope there are fire extinguishers in the dining area*. She fumbled in her pocket for her Wonder Woman notepad and made a note to ask the bistro owner, Branda Taylor.

When Martha arrived home, to her old gray stone cottage, she parked the trolley outside. She had found it there, abandoned a couple of years ago, and she adopted it for her ongoing mission to be indispensable, a Number One neighbor.

Bundling her stuff out of the trolley and into the hallway, she stooped and arranged it in neat piles on the floor, then wound her way around the wine bottles. She found a small free space on the edge of her overcrowded dining table for the brown paper parcel.

A fortnight ago, on a rare visit, her sister, Lilian, had stuck

her hands on her hips as she surveyed the dining room. “You really need to do something about this place, Martha,” she’d said, her eyes narrowing. “Getting to your kitchen is like an obstacle course. Mum and Dad wouldn’t recognize their own home.”

Her sister was right. Betty and Thomas Storm liked the house to be spic and span, with everything in its place. But they had both died five years ago, and Martha had remained in the property. She found it therapeutic, after their passing, to try to be useful and fill the house with stuff that needed doing.

The brown velour sofa, where the three of them had watched quiz shows, one after another, night after night, was now covered in piles of things. Thomas liked the color control on the TV turned up, so presenters’ and actors’ faces glowed orange. Now it was covered by a tapestry that Martha had offered to repair for the local church.

“This is all essential work,” she told Lilian, casting her hand through the air. She patiently explained that the shopping bags, plastic crates, mountains of stuff on the floor, stacked high on the table and against the wall, were jobs. “I’m helping people out. The boxes are full of Mum and Dad’s stuff—”

“They look like the Berlin Wall.”

“Let’s sort through them together. We can decide what to keep, and what to let go.”

Lilian ran her fingers through her expensively highlighted hair. “Honestly, I’m happy for you to do it, Martha. I’ve got two kids to sort out, and the builders are still working on the conservatory...”

Martha saw two deep creases between her sister’s eyebrows that appeared when she was stressed. Their shape reminded her of antelope horns. A *mum brow*, her sister called it.

Lilian looked at her watch and shook her head. “Look, sorry, but I have to dash. I’ll call you, okay?”

But the two sisters hadn't chatted since.

Now Martha wove her way around a crate full of crystal chandeliers she'd offered to clean for Branda, and the school trousers she'd promised to re-hem for her nephew, Will. The black bin bags were full of Nora's laundry, because her washing machine had broken down. She stepped over a papier-mâché dragon's head that needed a repair to his ear and cheek after last year's school Chinese New Year celebrations. Horatio Jones's fish and potted plants had lived with her for two weeks while he was on holiday.

Her oven door might sparkle and she could almost see her reflection in the bathroom sink, but most of her floor space was dedicated to these favors.

Laying everything out this way meant that Martha could survey, assess and select what to do next. She could mark the task status in her notepad with green ticks (completed), amber stars (in progress) and red dots (late). Busyness was next to cleanliness. Or was that godliness?

She also found that, increasingly, she couldn't leave her tasks alone. Her limbs were always tense, poised for action, like an athlete waiting for the pop of a starting pistol. And if she didn't do this stuff for others, what did she have in her life, otherwise?

Even though her arms and back ached from handling the trolley, she picked up a pair of Will's trousers. With no space left on the sofa, she sat in a wooden chair by the window, overlooking the bay.

Outside, the sea twinkled black and silver, and the moon shone almost full. Lowering her head towards the fabric, Martha tried to make sure the stitches were neat and uniform, approximately three millimeters each, because she wanted them to be perfect for her sister.

Stretching out an arm, she reached for a pair of scissors. Her

wrist nudged the brown paper parcel and it hung precariously over the edge of the dining table. When she pushed it back with one finger, she spotted a small ink stamp on the back.

“Chamberlain’s Pre-Loved and Antiquarian Books, Maltsborough.”

“Hmm,” she said aloud, not aware of this bookshop. And if the package contained a used book, why had it been left at the library?

Wondering what was inside, Martha set the parcel down on her lap. She untied the string bow and slowly peeled back the brown paper.

Inside, as expected, she found a book, but the cover and title page were both missing. Definitely not a library book, it reminded her of one of those hairless cats, recognizable but strange at the same time.

Its outer pages were battered and speckled, as if someone had flicked strong coffee at it. A torn page offered a glimpse of one underneath where black-and-white fish swam in swirls of sea. On top were a business card and a handwritten note.

*Dear Ms. Storm,*

*Enclosed is a book that came into my possession recently. I cannot sell it due to its condition, but I thought it might be of interest to you, because of the message inside.*

*Best wishes,*

*Owen Chamberlain*

*Proprietor*

With anticipation making her fingertips tingle, Martha turned the first few pages of the book slowly, smoothing them down with the flat of her hand, until she found the handwritten words, above an illustration of a mermaid.

June 1985

To my darling, Martha Storm

Be glorious, always.

Zelda

x

Martha heard a gasp and realized it had escaped from her own lips. “Zelda?” she whispered aloud, then clamped a hand to her mouth.

She hadn’t spoken her nana’s name for many years. And, as she said it now, she nervously half expected to see her father’s eyes grow steely at its mention.

Zelda had been endlessly fun, the one who made things bearable at home. She wore turquoise clothes and tortoiseshell cat’s-eye-shaped glasses. She was the one who protected Martha against the tensions that whirled within the Storm family.

Martha read the words again and her throat grew tight.

*They’re just not possible.*

Feeling her fingers slacken, she could only watch as the book slipped out of her grip and fell to the floor with a thud, its yellowing pages splayed wide open.