

ELIZABETH GEORGE

The Punishment She Deserves



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 78661 3  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 78662 0  
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 78663 7

Typeset in Plantin Light by  
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

Why lay yourself on the torturer's rack of the past  
and future? The mind that tries to shape tomorrow  
beyond its capacities will find no rest.

Rumi

The moment's depth is greater than that of the  
future. And from the fields of the past, what can  
you harvest again?

Rabia of Basra

15 DECEMBER

*Baker Close  
Ludlow  
Shropshire*

The snow began falling on Ludlow town in the evening, while most people were doing their post-dinner washing-up as a prelude to settling down in front of the television. If the truth be told, there wasn't much else to do in the town after dark beyond tuning in to one programme or another or heading out to a pub. And since Ludlow had, over the years, become more and more the choice of pensioners seeking tranquillity and early bedtimes amidst the mediaeval buildings and cobbled byways, very few complaints concerning the dearth of evening entertainment ever occurred.

Like so many others in Ludlow, Gaz Ruddock, too, was doing the washing-up when he first noticed the snow. He stood at a sink whose window looked out at the darkness. Mostly, he could see his reflection and the reflection of the old man who wielded the tea towel next to him. But a light in the narrow back garden illuminated the flakes as they began to come down, and he saw them. Within minutes what had seemed to be only a gentle dusting altered to a real curtain of the stuff, waving in a developing breeze that made it look for a moment like lace curtains.

'Don't like that, do I? I keep saying. Fat lot of good it's doing me, though.'

Gaz glanced over at his companion of the tea towel. He didn't think the old bloke was talking about the snow, and he saw that he was correct since Robert Simmons wasn't looking at the window but rather at the washing-up brush that Gaz was using on one of their plates.

'In't sanitary, that,' old Rob said. 'I keep saying and you don't change over like I want.'

Gaz smiled, not at old Rob – he generally thought of his housemate with that adjective preceding his name as if there were also a young Rob in the house with them – but rather at his own reflection. He and window Gaz were sharing a knowing look. Old Rob nightly complained about the washing-up brush, and Gaz nightly reminded him that it was far more sanitary than filling a basin with soapy water in order to swirl glasses,

crockery, cutlery, pots and pans round it as if the water miraculously redeemed itself after every dunk of something into it.

‘Only thing better than this,’ Gaz would say, with a shake of the washing-up brush, ‘is a dishwasher. You say the word and I’ll fetch us one, Rob. Easy as anything. I’ll even install it.’

‘Bah,’ old Rob would reply. ‘Got to the age of eighty-six and counting without such a thing and I expect I can make it to the grave without one just as well. Mod cons, bah!’

‘You’ve a microwave, mind,’ Gaz would point out.

‘Different, that is,’ was the curt reply.

If Gaz asked why possession of a microwave was different from the purchase of a dishwasher, old Rob’s answer was always the same: a huff, a shrug, and a ‘Just is, is all,’ and the discussion was finished.

It mattered little to Gaz. He wasn’t much of a cook so there was never very much to wash up. Tonight the meal had been jacket potatoes stuffed with chilli con carne from a tin, with a sweet corn and lettuce salad on the side. Half of the meal had been prepared via microwave and the tin hadn’t even required an opener, possessing a ring-pull instead. So all there was to wash was two plates, one wooden spoon, some cutlery, and two mugs from which they’d drunk their tea.

Gaz could have done the washing-up and the drying on his own, but Rob liked to help. The old gent knew that his only child Abigail phoned Gaz once a week for a report as to her dad’s well-being, and Rob intended Gaz to declare that his charge was just as full of piss and vinegar as on the day he’d moved in. Even if Abigail’s phone call hadn’t been a regular feature of their life together, Gaz suspected Rob would still have insisted on doing his part, though. It was the only way he’d agreed to admit someone into his house in the first place.

Once his wife had died, he’d gone on living on his own for six years, but his daughter thought he was becoming too forgetful. There was his medication that wanted taking twice each day. There was also the concern that if he fell, there’d be no one in the house to find him. Abigail needed someone to be in charge of her dad, she had declared, and faced with the choice of sharing his home with a carefully selected stranger or leaving Ludlow for a life with Abigail, her four children, and a husband whom Rob had disliked from the day he appeared on the doorstep to take his only daughter clubbing in Shrewsbury, old Rob had pounced on the idea of a housemate like the life raft it was.

Gaz Ruddock – given name Gary – was that housemate. He had another job as Ludlow’s PCSO, but that was nearly always just during the day and since he generally walked or cycled his beat like a 1920s bobby, he could stop in and check on Rob during the day when necessary. It suited him down to the ground anyway: his wages as the police community support

officer were meagre and acting as old Rob's live-in companion gave him not only free accommodation but a small salary as well.

His mobile rang as Gaz was wiping down the draining board and old Rob was neatly folding the tea towel on to the rack above the cooker, where it would dry. Gaz shot the mobile a glance to see who was phoning. He gave thought to ignoring the call as Old Rob gave him the eye. They'd lived together long enough for Rob to know what would happen next. A phone call in the evening usually meant a disruption to their plans.

'Nearly time for *Strictly*,' old Rob reminded him, naming the programme he favoured above all others. 'An' Sky has a Clint Eastwood film's well. The one with that barmy woman.'

'Aren't they all barmy?' Gaz decided to let the mobile go to voicemail. He needed to get old Rob settled with the telly and the remote.

'Not like this one,' the old man said. 'This's the gel who wants that radio song played for her. You know. Then she 'cides that Clint Eastwood must be her man – maybe there's been a bit of how's-your-father or somethin' but I don't recall 'cept men are that foolish when it comes to women, eh? – and she breaks into his house and chops up his belongings.'

'Play *Misty for Me*,' Gaz said.

'You recollect it, then?'

'Oh that I do. It put me off women altogether, that film.'

Old Rob laughed, which segued into a cough that didn't sound good to Gaz. Rob had been a smoker till he was seventy-four when a quadruple bypass had finally convinced him to give up the weed. But that didn't mean that the sixty years of smoking which had preceded the bypass hadn't done enough damage to fell him with cancer or emphysema.

Gaz said to him, 'You all right there, Rob?'

'Course I am. Why wouldn't I be?' Old Rob gifted him with a glare.

'No reason, 'f course,' Gaz told him. 'Let's get you settled with the telly, then. Need the loo first?'

'What're you on about? I know when I have to piss, boy.'

'Not suggesting you don't.'

'Well, when I need someone to shake off my—'

'Point taken.' Gaz followed the old gent to the sitting room at the front of the house. He didn't much like the tilt to old Rob's gait or the hand he put on the wall to steady himself. He needed to use a walking stick, he did, but Rob was a stubborn bastard. If he didn't want a walking stick, he was going to be Gibraltar when it came to anyone's recommendation that he use one.

Once in the sitting room, old Rob lowered himself into his armchair. Gaz switched on the electric fire and closed the window curtains. He excavated for the telly remote, and he found the right channel for *Strictly*

*Come Dancing*. Five minutes before the programme would begin, he saw, enough time for him to make the Ovaltine.

He found old Rob's night-time mug in its place in the cupboard, decorated with a transfer picture of his grandkids gathered round Father Christmas. This had faded with subsequent washings, and the ivy and holly wreath that formed the handle of the mug was chipped. But Rob wouldn't hear of having his Ovaltine from anything other than this particular mug. He made a big thing out of muttering complaints about the grandkids, but Gaz had learned soon enough that old Rob properly adored them.

Ovaltine in hand, Gaz returned to the sitting room. His mobile began to ring again. Again he ignored it in favour of getting old Rob settled. *Strictly Come Dancing* had just begun, and its opening moments were the special ones.

Old Rob loved to gaze upon the ladies, those who were contestants and those who were the professional dancers meant to teach the bloke contestants the cha-cha, the foxtrot, the Vienna thingy, and whatever else. Old Rob ate up the costumes with a spoon because they were fashioned to display a good mile and a half of cleavage and the sight of those ladies shaking their tits was a blessed reminder that, at eighty-six and counting, Robert Simmons was still alive.

'Lookit them, will you, lad?' Old Rob sighed. He held his Ovaltine up in a salute to the television screen. 'You ever seen knockers pretty as those? 'F I was even ten years younger, I'd show those ladies how knockers like that are meant to be used and wouldn't I just?'

Gaz chuckled, but it was in spite of himself as where he came from, women were worshipped, up on a pedestal and all of that. They were sexual, sure. But they were sexual because of God's plan for them, and that plan didn't include making themselves available to men for purposes of displaying their 'knockers', especially on telly. But there was no changing old Rob, who was a randy bloke, and *Strictly Come Dancing* was the highlight of his week.

Gaz fetched a blanket from the back of the sofa. He tucked it round Rob's the sapling legs. He checked the *Radio Times* to make sure *Play Misty for Me* was actually showing later on in the evening, and when he saw it was, he left old Rob chortling at the inane conversation going on between the presenter and the judges on the dancing programme.

He'd left his mobile in the kitchen, and he took it to the table where he flopped into a chair. He had an uneasy feeling about the call. It was the end of autumn term at West Mercia College. With students readying themselves for the Christmas holiday, loud parties and binge drinking were probably going to be on the night's agenda.

He tapped on the mobile to return the call. Clo answered at once and said to him, 'We've snow here, Gaz. What about you?'

Gaz knew that she wasn't interested in a report on the topic of the weather, but it was a way to begin a conversation that, he also knew, was going to progress towards a request that Clo knew she probably shouldn't give voice to. He wasn't going to make it easy for her. He said, 'Here, too. It'll make a dog's dinner of the roads, to be sure, but at least it'll keep everyone inside.'

'End of term, Gaz. Kids won't be inside. They don't care about snow, sleet, rain or whatever when it comes to the end of term.'

'They're not delivering the post,' he pointed out.

'What?'

'Snow, sleet, rain. Postmen?'

'Believe me, they may as well be postmen. The weather isn't going to stop them.'

He waited, then, for what was coming. It took her only a moment.

'Would you check on him, Gaz? You can make it part of a regular round. You'll be doing a round anyway, won't you? Considering the weather, I expect you're not the only PCSO being asked to go out tonight to check on young people in the pubs.'

Gaz rather doubted that. West Mercia was the only college in all of Shropshire, and it was hardly credible that the rest of the PCSOs in the other communities were going walkabout in the snow with no reason for doing so. But he didn't argue the point. He cared for Clo. He cared for her family. Although he knew she was playing on those feelings, he could easily go along with her request.

Still, he said, 'Trev's not going to like it if I do this. I expect you know that, eh?'

'Trev's not going to learn about it because you're not going to tell him. And I'm certainly not going to.'

'It's not me you should be worrying about when it comes to grassing, though, is it.'

There was a pause as she took this in. He could visualise her. If she was still working for some reason, she'd be sitting at a desk, which would be perfectly neat and orderly in the way she was neat and orderly. If she was at home, she'd be in the bedroom, kitted out in something that she deemed wife-appropriate, and this would be for her husband's benefit. She'd told him more than once in joking that Trev liked her soft, sweet, and compliant, all characteristics that weren't exactly natural to her.

She said, 'As I said, end of term, streets getting icy, kids engaged in booze-ups . . . No one is going to question why you're out and about, making sure everyone's safe, Finnegan included.'

That wasn't unreasonable. Besides, being out and about did have benefits beyond mere exposure to bracing air. He said, 'All right. Will do. But

it only makes sense if I'm out there later on. Just now? No one's going to be up to anything.'

'Understood,' she said. 'Thank you, Gaz. You'll let me know what he's up to?'

'Course,' he told her.

*St Julian's Well  
Ludlow  
Shropshire*

Missa Lomax gazed upon the clothing that her friend Dena – commonly called Ding – had laid out on the bed. Three skirts, one cashmere pullover, two silk blouses, a top hung with silver dangly bits akin to icicles. She'd removed all this from a capacious rucksack, saying, 'The black one's the best, Missa. It's real stretchy.'

Stretchy was necessary. The clothing all belonged to Ding, and she and Missa did not exactly share a similar physique. Where Ding was petite and curvy, possessing a woman's full body but not much height, Missa was pear-shaped, given to hips if she wasn't careful about her weight, and she stood six inches taller than her friend. But she had brought nothing with her to Ludlow that would serve as a festive outfit for a night out. She'd not even considered nights out when she'd joined the college because she'd not come to Ludlow to party but rather to study biology, chemistry, maths, and French prior to attending university.

She said, 'These'll all be too short for me, Ding,' and gestured to the skirts.

'Short is the style and what difference does it make?'

It made plenty of difference to Missa, but all she said was, 'I won't be able to ride my bike.'

'No one's riding a bike in this weather.' This was said by Rabiah Lomax, who came through the door to Missa's bedroom, a purple tracksuit hanging on her lithe frame and nothing at all on her feet save polish on her toenails, appropriately red and green for the season with the big toe additionally decorated with a golden tree ornament painted upon it. She went on to say, 'You'll be going by taxi. I'm paying both ways.'

'But Ding's come here on her bike, Gran,' Missa pointed out. 'She won't be able to—'

'Completely foolhardy, Dena Donaldson,' Missa's grandmother countered. 'You can go by taxi and fetch your bike at another time, can't you?'

Ding looked relieved. She said, 'Thanks, Mrs Lomax. We'll pay you back.'

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Rabiah said. “Paying me back” will be your going out and having a good time.’ To Missa she went on with, ‘Enough of studying for at least one evening. Life’s about more than schoolbooks and keeping your parents happy.’ At that, Missa glanced at Rabiah but said nothing. Her grandmother continued briskly. ‘Now. What have we here?’ She walked over to the bed. She took in the clothing with a single glance and chose the black skirt. Ding, Missa saw, beamed with pleasure.

‘Put this on,’ Rabiah ordered. ‘Let’s see how it fits. I’d lend you something of mine but as I’ve reduced my wardrobe mostly to my dancing kit and my running kit, I’ve nothing suitable. Except, perhaps, for shoes. You’re going to need shoes.’ She fluttered her fingers and went off in the direction of her bedroom as Missa stepped out of her trainers and her jeans and Ding rustled round in the chest of drawers for, she said, ‘a pair of tights that don’t look like something from Oxfam.’

Missa eased herself into Ding’s skirt. The fact that it stretched made it wearable although it still bit into her stomach like a ligature. She said, ‘Ooof, I don’t know, Ding.’

Ding turned from the chest of drawers, having scored a pair of black tights. ‘Fabbo!’ she cried. ‘It’s just the thing. Lads’ll melt when they see you in that.’

‘I don’t especially want lads melting.’

‘Yes you do. It doesn’t mean you have to *do* anything with them. Here, take these. I’ve got something special to show you.’ She handed over the tights and went for her rucksack from which she brought forth a lacy bra.

Missa said, ‘There’s no way that’ll fit me.’

‘It’s not mine,’ Ding told her. ‘It’s an early Christmas gift from me to you. Here. Take it. It’s not going to bite.’

Missa never wore lacy bits of anything. But clearly Ding wasn’t having any as far as refusals went.

‘Now that thing’s gorgeous,’ was Rabiah’s comment when she saw what was dangling from Ding’s fingers. ‘Where did it come from?’

‘My gift to Missa,’ Ding told her. ‘She’s going to graduate from vests.’

‘I *don’t* wear vests,’ Missa said. ‘I just don’t like . . . lace is itchy.’

Rabiah said, ‘Small price to pay for . . . Dena Donaldson, is that a push-up bra?’

Ding giggled. Missa felt her face going hot. But she took the bra, turned her back modestly, and tried it on. She looked in the mirror and what she saw of the mounds of her breasts made her face hotter.

‘Here, here, here!’ Ding scooped up the icicle top whose neckline showed off the products of the push-up bra to best advantage when Missa cooperatively donned it. ‘Fabbo-licious,’ she declared. ‘Check it out. And, oh Mrs Lomax! Gorgeous! Are those for Missa as well?’

She was referring, Missa saw, to the shoes. She gave them a look herself

and wondered when her grandmother had last worn them. The Rabiah she knew generally wore running shoes or cross trainers when she wasn't barefoot or dressed for square dancing. She'd given up anything remotely fashionable when she'd retired from her teaching job at the comprehensive. But this pair of shoes looked older than any that would have come from the days of Rabiah's teaching career. These had to have come from her earlier dancing life in New York.

'I don't know,' she said doubtfully.

'Horse manure,' was Rabiah's reply. 'You can walk in these as easy as anything. Put them on. Let's check the fit.'

They fitted, just. Rabiah declared that Missa would wear them and 'no nonsense about it. It's not as if you're hiking all over town in this weather anyway. Now, Dena Donaldson, I suspect you've brought make-up in that rucksack of yours, so see to Missa's beautification while I ring for a taxi.'

'Should I tweeze her eyebrows as well?' Ding enquired.

'We're requiring everything,' Rabiah told her.

*Quality Square  
Ludlow  
Shropshire*

It wasn't a taxi, as things turned out, but rather a minicab. Missa's gran made an extremely big deal out of paying for it all in advance – going into the town centre *and* coming back – so, as she put it, everyone would be absolutely clear on what was owed at the end of the evening: nothing.

'I hope you see that, my man,' Rabiah said pointedly to the minicab driver.

The man barely spoke English which didn't give Ding much faith that he'd get them to Quality Square in the first place, let alone back to St Julian's Well. But he nodded at Rabiah, and he created a supremely serious show of seeing that both Ding and Missa were belted into the back seat of his Audi.

An Audi, Ding reckoned, suggested that business wasn't half bad. On the other hand, the fact that it slid around the corner on the icy road suggested that it needed better tyres. Still, she settled back, gave a squeeze to Missa's hand, and said, 'We're are going to have a wicked good time. We both totally deserve it.'

Of course, the truth was that it was Missa who totally deserved it since

Ding made certain she herself had a good time as often as possible. But things were rather different for Missa.

It had long been Ding's habit to Google every person with whom she thought she might want to strike up a friendship, and just three lectures into their mutual maths course, she'd decided that the attractive mixed-race girl with the perfect skin and the charming little gap between her front teeth might be someone she'd want to know. So she'd checked her out via the internet, she'd followed a link or two, and that was how she'd discovered that Melissa Lomax was one of three daughters and the middle daughter had passed away ten months previously. She also knew where Missa was from: Ironbridge. Her dad was a pharmacist, her mum was a paediatrician, and her gran Rabiah was a former Rockette, a retired teacher, and a current champion London marathon runner in her age group.

Ding liked to know things about people. She assumed everyone else was the same way. It was always a surprise to her when she learned that others didn't sleuth round the internet upon considering someone girlfriend or boyfriend material. To Ding, doing the sleuthing bit saved a lot of time. It was always good to know if someone had previously displayed a tendency towards psychopathy.

The ride from St Julian's Well to Quality Square wasn't a long one although the falling snow made it longer than usual. Because of the weather, virtually no one was out and about – which was unusual at the end of term – but Corve Street and then the Bull Ring were brightly lit, and the seasonal fairy lights outlining shop windows created a cheerful atmosphere in which one half-expected to see Dickensian carollers on every street corner.

Ding wasn't looking forward to Christmas. She hadn't looked forward to any holiday in years. But she was willing to put on a face of merriment if she had to, so she said enthusiastically, 'Gorgeosity in the *extreme*. It's like being in fairyland, isn't it.'

Missa gazed out of the window, and Ding could see on her face the doubts she had: not about the beauty of the scene through which they were driving but rather about the partying that Ding intended them to experience. 'D'you think anyone else's even going out tonight?' she asked.

'End of term? There'll be plenty of people, especially where we're going.'

Ding had a good idea of the best spot since she lived not particularly far from any of the faculties of West Mercia College, and she'd spent a significant number of evenings having a booze-up with her other mates at the same pub: the Hart and Hind in Quality Square.

The minicab was taking them as close to this spot as it could reasonably get. They were in the oldest part of Ludlow, working their way past mediæval buildings and through narrowing streets towards Castle Square, where the twelfth-century castle ruins looked out upon a lengthy rectangle

of cobbles and gravel. Here open-air stalls had, for hundreds of years, offered everything from pork pies to porringers at daily markets. Here also was a tangle of lanes overhung with shambling buildings that represented shops, accommodation, cafés, and restaurants.

By using King Street, the minicab was able to deposit them at the only access to Quality Square. This was a short passage through which braver drivers could pilot their cars should they wish to do so. However, since once inside the square there was no exit other than through the passage once again, the only souls who took on the challenge of getting inside the place by vehicle were the residents who lived above the shops, boutiques, and galleries that formed three of the quadrangle's four sides.

A cobbled lane formed the fourth side. It led to a large terrace, and it was towards this that Ding intended to lead Missa once the minicab driver handed over his mobile number, which they were to ring when it came time to fetch them. Ding said, 'Come on, girl' as Missa took the card with a grateful smile and tucked it into her shoulder hag. 'We have some serious partying to do.'

They ducked into the passage and took care with the cobbles since walking in this area in anything but flat-soled shoes was to risk turning an ankle. Beyond, lay the square, where the snow made the stones slippery and the pavements difficult to negotiate. They manoeuvred between two residents' cars and passed a gallery outside of which a lacy-dressed metal sculpture of a woman wore a mantle of snow. The branches of the evergreen shrubbery surrounding it were beginning to droop with white weight.

They weren't alone in their choice of destination, as Ding had reckoned they wouldn't be. When they turned into the lane that formed the square's fourth side, they saw on the terrace ahead of them that despite the snow, a large group of smokers were balancing their drinks on the window ledges of a pub, while others sat on blankets at tables above which outdoor heaters were warding off the chill.

This, Ding informed her friend, was the Hart and Hind, a sixteenth-century coaching inn and the favourite gathering spot for boozers attending West Mercia College. While there were, she admitted, plenty of other pubs in the town, this one had long been everyone's pub of choice not only because one could stop there directly one's lecture or tutorial ended so as to get pissed, but also because the proprietor was willing to turn a blind eye to the occasional money changing hands for 'mind-altering substances of the illegal kind'.

Missa said, 'Ding, I'm not taking any drugs.'

'Course you're not,' Ding agreed. 'Not when you've never even had a drink.' She went on to confide that, 'There's some bedrooms upstairs 's well. 'Course, there would be as it's an old inn. But he doesn't let them out.'

‘Who?’

‘Jack. Bloke who owns the place. There’s two of them – bedrooms, I mean – and if you’ve got the cash, you c’n use them for a bit if you want to.’

Missa frowned. ‘But if he doesn’t let the rooms out . . . ? What’re they for?’

Ding nearly said, ‘*You* know, for God’s sake,’ but the truth was that Missa wouldn’t understand unless you spelled it out for her.

Ding had learned early on that Missa made a Very Big Deal about her virginity. She was like someone from another century, saving herself so that when her prince came along, bearing a ruby slipper and looking for a virgin, she’d be the only one within one thousand miles and two continents.

Ding herself had lost her virginity when she was thirteen. She’d tried for it earlier, but no one was interested till she’d got decent breasts. When it happened, the act was a meganormous relief: just to get the deflowering of herself over and done with in order to have one less thing to worry about. She didn’t know what Missa was saving it for anyway. Her memory of the Big Moment began with her horrified albeit drunken, ‘You’re going to put *that* in me?’, continued with the uncomfortable positioning of her body on the seat of a wooden pew near the back of St James’s church not far from Much Wenlock, and ended with her suitor thrusting nine times and grunting with completion on the tenth.

The pub door opened as they approached it through the crowd. A blast of music assaulted them. Bee Gees, Ding thought. Good Lord. Abba wouldn’t be far behind. She grabbed Missa’s hand and pulled her inside, where a long corridor panelled in ancient black oak was packed with bare shoulders, bare legs, spangles, sequins, glitter, tight trousers, and a heaving throng of dancers taking advantage of ‘Stayin’ Alive’.

The corridor opened into the public bar. Music was shaking the floorboards. This was meant to promote dancing which was meant to promote thirst which was meant to promote the purchase of lager, ale, cider, cocktails, and the like. Ding had to struggle to get through the great glomerations of kids who were gyrating to the music, texting, or taking selfies and the equally great glomerations of kids who were crowding the bar where the publican and his nephew were doing their best to keep up with orders.

Ding could pick up only snippets of shouted conversations:

‘He didn’t *ever*.’

‘He bloody well did!’

‘. . . *and* he missed the loo by a mile. Blokes are *so* . . .’

‘. . . over hols and I’ll let you know if . . .’

‘. . . bloody coast of *France* for New Year’s and don’t ask me why . . .’

‘. . . actually thinks if I fuck him, he can . . .’

Ding almost lost hold of Missa’s hand in the middle of the crowd, but she managed to hang on to it long enough to see one of her two male housemates sitting at a table beneath a slew of old pictures of Ludlow in *Bygone Days*. This was Bruce Castle, Ding’s frequent bedmate. Eternally called Brutus in humorous contradiction to his diminutive size, he was, she saw, swilling cider. If the two empty pint glasses in front of him were anything to go by, she knew what he was up to: he wanted to become drunk enough to have an excuse if some girl tried to slap him into next week for sticking one of his hands up her skirt.

Brutus was dressed to the nines, as usual, and when Ding and Missa joined him at the table, the first thing the boy said was ‘*Very* hot,’ to Missa, in obvious reference to her figure-hugging clothing. ‘Sit here so I can feel the flesh.’

Ding sat down next to him and pulled Missa on to one of the other chairs. She said to Brutus, ‘Shut your gob. D’you think women actually *like* to be talked to that way?’

Brutus wasn’t embarrassed. He merely went on with, ‘I dunno where to grab her first: arse or tit,’ which earned him a punch on the arm, delivered accurately where it would hurt. It prompted a ‘Jesus, Ding! What’s crawled up *your* arse?’

Ding said, ‘Go get us a drink.’

Missa said, ‘Oh, I don’t—’

Ding waved her off. ‘It’s not a drink like in a *drink*. It’s just cider. You’ll like it.’ She gave Brutus a look. He heaved himself upwards and lurched through the crowd to the bar. She watched him, frowning. She didn’t like it when he got drunk. Tipsy was fine. High was OK. But Brutus was never the real Brutus when he was drunk, and she couldn’t understand why he’d got himself soused so soon into the evening as that had not been part of the plan at all.

Missa, she saw, was gazing round the pub, taking everything in: the jostling, laughing mass of scantily dressed females and the boys standing as close as they could, trying to chat them up. She wondered if her friend was catching the action near the bar. There, the publican Jack Korhonen was tossing a room key to a boy who had his arm round a staggering girl in a sequinned tube of a dress. The boy caught the key in one hand. He turned the girl towards the stairs.

Brutus returned. He had three pints. When he set one down in front of Missa, Ding watched carefully as her friend took a sip. She waited to see if Missa would note the alcoholic nature of the drink. She did not. It was carbonated and very tasty, a pleasant way to get happy that didn’t take long.

Brutus scooted his chair closer to Ding, said into her ear, ‘You smell

like a goddess tonight.’ He slid his hand on to her thigh. It began to travel upwards. She caught his fingers and sharply bent them backwards. He cried, ‘Hey! What the hell is *wrong* with you tonight?’

Ding didn’t have to answer because they were joined just then by the third member of their little household, who said, ‘Fuck, Brutus. Try romance next time.’

Brutus said, ‘But that’s what I want. Someone to fuck Brutus.’

‘I’m howling at that one, lad.’ Finn Freeman yanked a chair away from a nearby table, ignoring a girl who cried, ‘Hey! We’re *using* that.’

He plopped on to it, grabbed Brutus’s cider, and took an excessively large swig. He grimaced, saying, ‘Fuck’s sake. How c’n you *stand* that shit?’

Missa, Ding saw, had lowered her gaze in reaction to Finn’s coarse language. That was another thing about Missa that Ding found endearing. She didn’t ever swear, and she made no effort to hide her embarrassment when someone swore in her presence.

Ding knew that Finn meant nothing by it. He was generally all right for someone who’d shaved one half of his head in order to tattoo his skull. This wasn’t a particularly appealing look, but the way Ding saw things, it was a case of *whatever*.

‘Who wants to buy me a Guinness?’ Finn asked the table at large.

‘Speaking of shit,’ Ding commented airily.

Brutus cooperated, though. If he hadn’t done so, Ding knew that – no matter how he had evaluated the cider – Finn would down Brutus’s and move along to Ding’s or Missa’s. He had a bit of a problem with the drink, but as Ding had learned in the past few months, it was only one of his problems.

The biggest one was his mum. He called her the Hovercraft for her propensity towards monitoring his life, like someone working for GCHQ. It was because of her that Finn had come up with a plan to avoid the Christmas hols at home and instead take off for Spain to spend the time with his grandparents. Trouble was, he didn’t have the necessary money to get there and when he’d phoned his gran to ask for the funds, he’d ended up speaking with his granddad instead. Unbeknownst to Finn, once Granddad had agreed to the dual request of an invitation to Christmas in Spain along with a ticket to get there, he’d then rung Finn’s mum to make certain it was fine for her only child to skip Christmas in the bosom of his parents.

That had put an end to that. He’d managed to get his mum to agree to two extra days in Ludlow by lying to her about a children’s holiday programme he was meant to attend, one put on by a local church. Only God knew why Finn’s mum had gone for that story, but she had done. Two days of post-term freedom, however, were all that Finn was going to be allowed. He wasn’t happy about that.

‘So,’ he was saying to Missa, ‘how the hell did Ding get *you* to come out? You always got your head in a book, as far as I could tell.’

‘She’s a *serious* student,’ Ding informed him.

‘Unlike you,’ was Finn’s reply. ‘I never seen you studying *anything*.’

Brutus returned with Finn’s Guinness. He said, ‘You owe me.’

‘As usual.’ Finn saluted them with the drink. He said, ‘Seasonal bah humbugs,’ and poured a quarter of it down his throat. ‘Let’s get serious, you lot,’ was his next remark. ‘Our mission: complete obliteration.’

Ding had to smile. Finn didn’t know it, but they were actually on the very same page.

*Quality Square  
Ludlow  
Shropshire*

The troubles with binge drinking had always been manifold. They were represented by girls sicking up in gutters, boys having a piss wherever and whenever the fancy took them, rubbish scattered all over the pavements, broken bottles lying in the streets, property damage in the form of trampled gardens and overturned rubbish bins. Shrill arguments, cat fights replete with hair-pulling and eye-gouging, fist fights, handbags stolen, smartphones snatched . . . The list of what accompanied binge drinking went on and on, although it was worse in the big city centres where late-night clubs allowed young people to drink themselves into folly till dawn.

In a town like Ludlow there were only pubs, but Gaz Ruddock had discovered that the lack of late-night clubs made no difference when it came to bingeing. In his first week as Ludlow’s PCSO he’d come to learn that, faced with a population swollen more and more each year by pensioners, the pub owners had learned to attract and accommodate the kind of crowd who regularly kept far later hours.

It was after midnight when Gaz finally reached Castle Square. He’d worked his way from pubs on the outskirts of Ludlow because he reckoned that if Finnegan Freeman wanted to engage in a truly proper booze-up, he wouldn’t be so stupid as to do his drinking in the pub nearest West Mercia College, where he was a student. But Gaz was proved wrong, as things turned out.

He parked the panda car in front of Harp Lane Deli, which as usual had entered the town’s seasonal window-dressing competition. It had taken first prize during Halloween, and from the look of things, it was going to take first prize again if a half-size Father Christmas with a line of similarly

sized children waiting to climb upon his lap was any indication. At one of his shoulders stood a perky-faced elf with a pile of gifts in his arms.

Gaz shoved open the car's door and swung himself out. Snow had begun to heap on to windowsills, and it formed a pristine carpet down the length of the market square. In the distance the lights that shone on the castle walls made the scene look like an enormous snow globe. It was quite beautiful and Gaz would have admired it had he not been bloody cold and equally anxious to have his search for Finnegan Freeman over and done with.

Gaz strode into the passage that led from the market place to Quality Square. Once through, he could hear the noise. Music, loud conversation, and laughter reverberated in the square as if the pub stood within an echo chamber. He wasn't surprised to find five understandably angry residents gathered outside their homes in parkas and hats and scarves and boots. Two of them approached him as he walked into the first pool of light from a streetlamp. It was, he learned from them, 'about bloody time that *someone* had arrived to do *something* about this.' *This* didn't need clarification.

He advised them to go indoors and told them to leave the situation up to him. Considering the noise, there were going to be a good number of drinkers both inside and outside the pub, so moving them along would take some time.

He rounded the corner. Striding towards the open terrace, he encountered some two dozen drunken young people hanging about beneath outdoor heaters. They were swilling down lagers, ale and ciders; they were leaning against the pub walls; they were having a snog in the multitude of shadows. The acrid odour of marijuana grew stronger as he approached the pub door.

He blew his police whistle shrilly, but it was practically impossible for it to be heard over 'Waterloo', which was blasting through the open door of the pub. He would have to deal with the music first, so he went inside. There, in the entrance corridor, the condition of two young ladies was welcoming five well-dressed boys to grope them while betting each other – in language that Gaz wouldn't have repeated even to old Rob – just how far along the road they were going to get before the girls understood what was happening.

Gaz's face pinched up. He bloody hated this sort of thing. He forced his way into the group and broke up the action. One of the boys swirled round on him, ready to give him a taste of something he had no appetite for, but when he saw Gaz's uniform, he dropped his fist.

'That's right,' was Gaz's remark. 'Clear out of here and take your mates with you.'

He kept a firm grip on each of the girls as he forced his way through the crowd and into the public bar. He caught the stench of someone's

vomit nearby, and he dropped the girls into chairs at the table from which the stench appeared to be coming. That would sober them up or prompt them to be sick. Either was fine with him.

The publican Jack Korhonen was chatting up a girl at the bar. She looked to be in the vicinity of fifteen years old. He didn't see Gaz till Gaz had his hand on the back of the girl's neck and was barking 'Underage,' into her face.

'I'm eighteen!' was her slurred defence.

'You're eighteen like I'm seventy-two. Be on your way before I haul you home.'

'You can't—'

'Can do, have done, will do again. You can tiptoe inside Mum and Dad's house with them none the wiser or have me banging on the door to hand you over to them personally. What'll it be?'

She graced him with a nasty look, but she also took herself off. He watched till she disappeared into the corridor that would take her outside, and he was satisfied to see five girls of similar age and appearance follow in her wake. He turned to Jack who held up his hands in a don't-blame-me gesture. He said to him over the noise, 'Turn it off. Time to shut things down.'

'Not closing time yet,' Jack protested.

'Make it last orders, Jack. And who's upstairs in the rooms?'

'What rooms're those then?'

'Right. What rooms, eh? Tell whatsisname over there –' with a nod at Jack's nephew – 'to knock them up and let them know the fun is finished. Seems that'd be better than myself breaking in on whatever's happening. Are you going to turn off the music or am I?'

Jack sneered, but Gaz knew it was merely for effect. He did as he was told. Shouts of protest rose at the cessation of Abba, but into it Jack called, 'Last orders. Sorry.'

More protest followed. Gaz ignored it and began to move amongst the tables. He still had to have a look for Finnegan Freeman, and he found him at a far table against the wall. At the moment, his head was in his arms which were themselves crossed on the table top. Next to him was a nattily clad boy holding a smartphone at arm's length while a mixed-race girl leaned into him and together they laughed at something they were watching on the smartphone's screen.

Gaz strode over to the group but stumbled when he got to them. He glanced down to see what was on the floor, and there he found another girl relaxing sleepily against the wall. He recognised her: Dena Donaldson, Ding to her friends. To Gaz she was someone developing a very serious problem with the drink.

He bent and, his hands in her armpits, jolted Dena to her feet. When

she saw exactly who was gripping her, the sight appeared to be enough to sober her up. She said, 'I'm OK, I'm OK, I'm perfect.'

'Are you now?' Gaz enquired. 'Happen things don't look that way. Happen this could well be the time I cart you straight home so Mum and Dad can have a proper look at—'

'No.' Her face hardened.

'No, is it? So you're thinking Mum and Dad—'

'He's *not* my dad.'

'Well, love, he is whoever the hell he is and he might be interested in seeing how little Dena spends her evenings. Don't you agree? Or not? And *if* not—'

'I can't leave Missa. I promised her gran I'd stay with her. Come *on*,' and she struggled to get away from the grip in which he held her. She called out, 'Missa, let's go. You got that bloke's card for the minicab, right?'

Missa looked up from whatever she was viewing. So did the boy. Both of them clocked the PCSO. The boy said to Gaz, 'Hey. She's not hurting you. Let her go. Pick on someone—'

'Fuck it *all*, Gaz.' This came from Finnegan. He'd raised his head and, of course, he understood in two seconds what Gaz was doing in the pub.

'Get up now, Finn,' Gaz told the boy. 'Got to get you home and tucked up in bed.'

Finnegan came straight up at that. He reared back against the wall. 'No bloody way!'

The rest of them looked confused by the exchange as well they would since it would have been out of character for Finn to tell them that he had more than a passing acquaintance with the town's PCSO. Gaz said, 'I don't mean Worcester, do I. I mean home here, tucked up in your bed here, and whatever else you require *here*. Hot cocoa if you want it. Bourneville. Ovaltine. What you will.'

'You *know* this filth, Finn?'

The other boy had said it, and Gaz's blood bubbled, quick as could be. He hated kids who dripped privilege, and he turned towards him.

Dena said, 'Brutus,' in a tone that apparently told the boy to back off. He shrugged, went back to his smartphone, and continued watching whatever was on it.

Gaz snatched it out of his hand. He had it into his pocket before Brutus – and what sort of name was *that* for a kid who looked to be the size of a university coxswain? – knew where it had gone. He said to him and to the rest, 'You lot are going home as is everyone else in this place.' He shouted, 'Last orders, like you heard. And I'm giving you five minutes to down them.' He was gratified to see some of the kids already leaving. He was equally gratified to see four kids coming down the back stairs in the wake of the younger of the barmen. They looked dishevelled and in need

of a talking-to, but Gaz had enough on his hands with the four in front of him.

To Dena he said, 'You best think about your choice, missy.'

To Finn he said, 'I'm taking you home.'

To the others he said, 'And you two scarper before I think of something else to do with you.'

Dena said, 'Fine. I'm choosing. You can take us all,' and before Gaz could inform her that he wasn't running a bus service for the likes of this group, she announced, 'We live together, as if you didn't know. I'm happy for the ride, and my guess is everyone else is as well. You lot coming?' she asked her friends airily as she reached for her coat and scouted round the floor till she came up with some kind of ancient evening bag. 'We can carry on our partying at home which is what, I believe, this officer is suggesting. Isn't that *right*, Constable?' she asked him.

Gaz heard the harmony that accompanied the melody of her final question. It spoke of triumph at having bested him. Yes. Well. They would see about that.

*Also by Elizabeth George*

*Fiction*

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