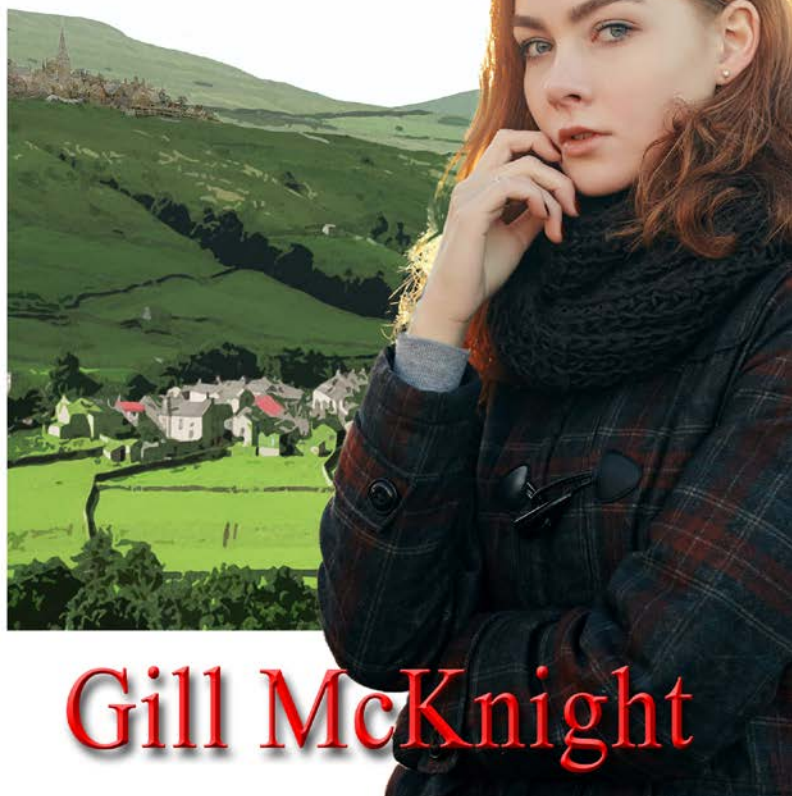




Wendy of the
Wallops



Gill McKnight

CHAPTER 1

“Girl Guides?”

“Yes.” Chief Inspector Marsh frowned.

His face fell into familiar folds that reminded Wendy of a brooding basset hound. Wendy always felt a little cowed when Chief Inspector Marsh frowned. All her colleagues did. His moods were a contagion. It was as if the walls of High Wallop’s police station permeated his deep-rooted disappointment in them all.

“Detective Inspector Patel will fill you in on the details.” He gestured to the plain-clothed officer sitting by his side. His frown slipped from weary disapproval to all-out impatience. He did not like DI Patel; either that or he did not like the job he was about to offload on his community police officer.

Wendy’s stomach fluttered nervously.

DI Patel sat forward and took control of the meeting. She tapped a thick file with *Operation Boiler* scribbled across it. “As CI Marsh already explained, I work for the National Crime Agency. I’m actually seconded to UKPPS—the UK Protected Persons Service. I’m here today to talk to you about this.” With the quick, clipped delivery of an up-and-coming, fast-track professional, she laid out the work Wendy had ahead of her.

“Oh.” A low-key buzz started in Wendy’s head, a side effect of unmitigated excitement. She tried to focus very hard on DI Patel’s next words, which was kind of difficult, as the detective had the most beautiful eyes. They were warm and golden and shone like...like...toffee wrappers.

“...a witness protection scheme...”

Toffee wrappers outlined in a sexy, smoky-kohl pencil.

“...Wallops Valley.”

Wendy blinked and her stupor went pop. *What did she just say? Damn, damn, damn.* She had phased out and missed it.

“...human trafficking out of the Calais area and along our south coast,” Patel continued. “We’re working with this guy.” She handed over a mugshot of a rough-looking individual. “Raymond Banner. He used to drive for the Central European freight outfit we know are up to their necks in this. He’s just dobbed in his old gang in return for a new life elsewhere.”

“Ah.” So this was the protection part, but Wendy still was unsure about the Girl Guides angle.

“Unfortunately, the same week we shuffled him off, his ex-missus went to court and got a CP order against him. Child protection,” Patel elucidated even as Wendy opened her mouth to ask. “Custody of his daughter went to the mother,” Patel continued. “He’s to keep well away, and he wasn’t happy about it, considering this new start he wanted was all about giving his kid a better life.”

“Ah,” Wendy said again, still not quite clear where she stood in all this.

“So, Banner is very attached to his little girl, and now he’s done a runner from the safe house we had him in up north.” Patel pulled a face, showing her opinion about this and slid the *Operation Boiler* folder across the table. “Losing access to his daughter pushed Banner into a complete meltdown. He’s already stressed out to hell and back. It’s a nasty lot he’s grassed on and he’s terrified of them.” She tapped the manila cover with a

perfectly manicured, coral-pink, fingertip. “We’ve lost track of him. So now he’s out there somewhere, acting like a right arse, endangering himself and his family along with him.”

“You think he’s coming back down south to see his kid?” Wendy asked.

Patel gave her a shrewd, complimentary look that gratified Wendy immensely.

“Yes. We reckon he’s on his way back down here to see his little girl. So, two things can go wrong. First, his old gang gets to him up before we can, and that’s that, he’s mincemeat. I mean that literally, one of these guys owns an abattoir.” Patel was grim. “We need Banner alive if we’re to lock this lot up. The other possible fuck-up is that he targets his ex-wife and his daughter for these guys. His old friends would love to have that sort of leverage over him. Either way, it could get very nasty for the Banners.”

Wendy opened the folder, and a school photograph of a gap-toothed girl of about eight or nine years looked back at her. She didn’t recognise the girl. She didn’t recognise the name Raymond Banner. “Where does his ex-wife live?”

“Lesser Wallop, they moved up from Hastings a few months ago. That’s Lexi Banner. Eight years old. Her mum is called Valerie Coots; she took back her old name after the divorce. The kid settled well into her new school. Seems to be clever enough, and popular.”

“And the school staff know what’s going on?” Wendy asked.

DI Patel nodded. “The headmistress knows of the situation. Well, part of it anyway. What I’d like is for someone to keep an eye on Lexi’s extra-curricular activities.”

“Like the Girl Guides?” The penny finally dropped, and Wendy felt caught up with the conversation.

“Yes. Which is exactly why Chief Inspector Marsh volunteered you.”

CI Marsh looked less than enthusiastic. In fact, he looked bored. “If Banner survives long enough to show up here, all we want is to grab him before anyone else can. Befriend the youngster and keep an eye out for her. It’s as simple as that, Goodall.”

There was a moment of silence when Wendy sort of expected him to say, “You’re the best one for the job, Goodall.” Or “This is a good case for you to prove yourself, Goodall.” But he went back to shuffling papers and remained silent.

“Okay, then,” DI Patel broke the awkward pause. She tapped the manila files on the desk before Wendy. “I’ll leave these with you. My contact details are inside, and I expect to drop down at least once a week for a report.” She stood and shouldered her practical, leather satchel. Then, as an afterthought, held out her hand. “Good to have you on board.”

“Thank you.” Wendy also stood and shook hands. It was a relief to finish on a professional note.

“Goodall, send in Patcham on your way out.” Marsh had moved on to other business, effectively dismissing both women.

Wendy and DI Patel moved to the door, Wendy opening it for her superior. In the corridor outside, the newest recruit to the High Wallop police station sat bolt upright in his chair. He was young, in his twenties though not a rookie, having served as a cadet in West London.

“You’re to go on in.” Wendy indicated the vacated office to Officer Patcham.

He gave her a quick smile and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

“Can we grab a coffee?” Patel turned to Wendy.

“Okay.” She made to move towards the tiny back room that served as the station kitchen.

“Not here,” Patel said quickly. “I’d like to see Lesser Wallop. Let’s get something there.”

“Oh. Okay.” Wendy’s mind was racing. She didn’t think it would be right to take her immediate superior to her parents’ place, but maybe The Potted Crab wouldn’t be too busy at this time of day. “Um. Have you a car?” She could hardly ask the DI to sit on the handlebars of her bike—though the thought made her a little giddy.

Since she’d accepted she was gay, Wendy had been having a lot of giddy moments around attractive women. Well, any women really. She was constantly hot and bothered and, unfortunately, more socially awkward than ever.

Patel drove an unmarked BMW X5 in flash black with tinted windows. Wendy tried not to think of her bicycle parked behind the bins. She hoped she’d be offered a lift back to the station, or else she’d have a long walk to collect it.

“Lesser Wallop is straight down the valley,” she directed. “You probably passed through on your way here. Or did you come down through the Surrey Hills?”

“I took the M23 out of London.”

“Ah.” That meant little to Wendy. She hadn’t a clue about London and its ring roads.

“It’s pretty here.” Patel cast a sparing glance at the countryside, as she flashed through it at speeds Wendy found incredibly alarming.

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“A bit *too* green for me. I like steel and concrete, myself. The hustle and bustle of city life.”

Wendy hadn't that much experience of hustle and bustle either, except for St Poe's annual jumble sale—which could get pretty rambunctious once the old girls got started. “We're going to a place called The Potted Crab,” she said. They were already at the outskirts of Lesser Wallop. DI Patel didn't hang around, and if Wendy had been lurking in a side lane as the Beamer flew past, she'd have noted down the number plate for further investigation.

“Does it serve drink?” Patel asked.

“It does a very nice latte.”

“No. I mean, I need a pub. What about that place?” DI Patel screeched to a halt in front of The Winded Whippet. “I want a proper drink.”

“Um. There's The Crooked Mile just down the street.” Wendy pointed it out. “It has a nice beer garden.”

“We're here now.” DI Patel got out and slammed her car door and strode purposefully towards The Winded Whippet.

Wendy fumbled with her seat belt and followed, subduing the urge to point out they were parked on double yellow lines. Something about the rigid tension in DI Patel's back as she pushed through the bar door, made Wendy bite her tongue.

They stepped into the momentary gloom of the main barroom.

“This is nice.” DI Patel glanced around with a quick but totally assessing glance. “Very quaint.”

Wendy was relieved. She found DI Patel's energy a little unnerving. The woman did everything at top speed.

“Hi, pet,” the man polishing glasses behind the bar called over. “You're home early.”

“That’s my dad,” Wendy explained. “He owns the place.”

“Well, why didn’t you say this was your family’s pub?” Patel smiled. “Why bother with The Potted Crab? You gotta look after your own.” She threw herself behind the nearest table. “Order me a pint of something decent. I hear the stuff around here is good.”

Wendy returned with a pint of Aled’s Gold pale ale and a small apple cider on ice for herself. She slid into the chair opposite.

“Cheers.” DI Patel clinked glasses and took a healthy swallow. “This is good.” She eyed her glass appreciatively. “Nice choice.”

Wendy could feel a preen coming on but quelled it. Out of the corner of her eye, she was super aware of her dad watching every move she and her companion made. Wendy did not have casual work meetings like this. She’d already explained this was her new boss, while she placed their drinks order. Now, she could feel the shadow of her dad’s snoopiness lengthening across the room towards them.

“Thanks for considering me for—”

“That was Marsh’s idea, not mine,” Patel said. “But when I read your file I agreed with him. It’s a cross-force operation between the Met and the Wessex regulars, so I have to give the appearance of letting him have some input.” Her smile was vulpine, and she fixed Wendy with her tiger-eyed stare.

Wendy gulped a mouthful of cider, grateful for the click of ice against her teeth.

“I’m Diya, by the way,” Patel announced, a decision made. “I think we might as well be on first name terms. Us girls need to stick together.”

“Thanks...Diya.” Wendy was mildly surprised at being one of “us girls.” Diya Patel did not seem the “us girls” type. She looked

perfectly capable of streaking a solitary path of white light through the upper echelons of the Metropolitan Police, or anywhere she wanted to meteorite her way through, for that matter.

This is one big day for sisterhood, first the Girl Guides and now this. Usually, Wendy's colleagues kept her at arm's length—unless they wanted coffee. She watched Diya take another fast swig of beer.

“So.” Diya placed her glass back on the table with a sharp clink. “Questions. I know you have some.”

Wendy blinked. She didn't. She was too busy wondering if her dad had put this round on her bar tab, and if she should offer a second drink or maybe wait to see what Diya wanted. And how could she have any questions anyway? The manila file was sitting unread under her bag on the seat beside her. She hadn't a moment to so much as peek at it. She wracked her brain for something sensible to say. “You said the school was keeping an eye out for Lexi. Just how much do they know?”

“Good question”

Thank God for that. Wendy sat up straighter.

“We told the headmistress, Miss Drake, to keep an eye out for any strange men hanging around. She is aware one of her pupils could be snatched against court orders by her estranged father. But that's all she knows. Nothing about witness protection or people trafficking gangs, okay? That's dangerous stuff, and the less the public knows at this moment, the better.”

“Miss Drake will be hanging out her office window with her skeet gun if Banner comes within a mile of her school,” Wendy said. “She's a formidable old bat.” As a former pupil, Wendy knew all about “Duckie” Drake and her rule of iron.

“Now that’s exactly what I want.” Diya reached out and gave Wendy a squeeze on her bicep.

It was a curious gesture. More like checking out her muscle tone than being supportive. Wendy wasn’t sure what to make of it. The distraction made her miss the beginning of Diya’s next sentence, which was becoming an irritating habit. “...insider knowledge. You’re perfect for this. Go on. Ask me another question. You’re on a roll.”

The roll was becoming hard work. “The Girl Guides,” Wendy plucked out of mid-air. “I can’t just turn up and be a Brown Owl or whatever. It would look weird. How do I join up as an adult volunteer and still fit in?” It was lame but more or less on target. Though she suspected the answer would be “go find out for yourself, that’s what you’re paid for.”

“See, another good question.”

Wendy was becoming suspicious. That had *not* been a good question. Was she being buttered up?

Diya’s brow took on the mild contraction Wendy was beginning to recognise as her serious thinking face. “We’ve got a contact who can open doors for you there. She’s a pal of the county guiding commissioner and has recently agreed to work as guide advisor for the East Sussex division. Which means she has a say in the direction and management of your local troop, or group, or whatever the hell they’re called.”

“Oh. That’s handy. So, she can let me join as a volunteer helper or something?”

“She’s already agreed to help us. And this lady *does* know what’s going on. We couldn’t sneak anything past her, she’s shrewd. Though I have every reason to think, with her particular background, she’ll be discreet as well as an asset to us.”

“It’s Jane Swallow, isn’t it?”

Diya was stunned. “That’s amazing. You really are perfect for this job.” Though her pleasure seemed more self-congratulatory than directed at Wendy.

“She’s a good friend.” Wendy shrugged. St Poe’s had started up a Girl Guides group earlier that summer, though Wendy hadn’t paid much attention. It was just something Jane did to keep the church active in the community for all age groups. She’d better pop round and talk to Jane about it in some depth now.

“A friend of yours? Even better,” Diya crowed and finished off her pint with a swirling flourish. “Okay. I’d better get back. I’ll call for an update before the week is over. Meanwhile, you have all my contact details.” She indicated the folder under Wendy’s bag. “So...keep in touch.”

They stood up awkwardly together with the table between them. Wendy was unsure what to do, so she stuck out her hand. “Have a good journey,” she said and felt stupid. It was only a two hour drive up the road to London. She made it sound like she was at the airport wishing Diya a safe transatlantic flight.

Embarrassment made her drop Diya’s hand like a burning coal. Up close, her perfume was subtle and spicy. It compelled the opening of lungs to breathe the fragrance in. Wendy did and blushed hotly when she realised her deep inhalation had been noted.

Diya stepped back, an inscrutable look flitting across her golden eyes.

“Later, then.” She shouldered her bag and headed for the door, only to hesitate on the threshold, turn her head, and shoot Wendy a tight smile as enigmatic as the look that took her in from head to toe.

“Has your friend gone?” her father called over, even though he had witnessed the goodbye.

“She’s my new boss, Dad,” Wendy told him again. She brought over their empty glasses “Not a friend.”

Once again, she felt that awkwardness that came over her ever since she “came out,” if telling only your two lesbian friends you were gay could be termed as coming out. Nowadays, if a woman so much as looked sideways at her, Wendy had a quiet freak out. She spent most of her day feeling anxious and slightly nauseous. Her evenings were passed in her bedroom, listening to Melissa Etheridge, reading trashy lesbian romances, and fantasizing about moving out of her parents’ house and finding a place of her own so she could “be herself.”

“She seems nice,” her dad said.

What does he mean, nice? What does he mean? Wendy dropped the empty glasses onto the countertop. “Yeah. She is.” She grabbed at the rolling pint glass and hoped she looked cool.

“Looking forward to working with her, are you?”

“Well anything is better than what I’m doing now. All that paperwork is driving me mad.” She turned around and beat a hasty retreat, feeling his gaze on her back all the way to the door.

CHAPTER 2

“I need a lift up to the station to collect my bike.” Wendy swooped past Jane Swallow into the hallway of the tiny cottage on Rectory Row. “Oh. And you have to tell me all about the Girl Guides. The ones who meet in St Poe’s parish hall, I mean, not the entire East Sussex movement. I know you’re some county bigwig, but I’m only interested in the local ones.”

“And hello to you, too.” Jane closed the door with a snip that matched the one in her voice.

“Please, tell me there’s a pot of tea on the brew.” Wendy ignored the sarcasm.

“Renata,” Jane called down the hall to her partner. “Put the kettle on, we’ve a demanding guest who stinks of strong liquor.”

“I only had a cider. I was on police business.”

“All you lot do nowadays is sit around the pub and wait for the bad guys to show up and spend their ill-gotten gains. I’m surprised you weren’t down the bookies’, too.”

“Actually, I was in the bookies’ the other day.”

“Oh?”

The bubble of a kettle coming to the boil drew them down the hall, parading slowly behind Whistlestop, Jane’s greyhound. His nosiness had dragged him out of his bed to investigate the newcomer. He immediately lost interest on seeing Wendy and, instead, chose to amble at a snail’s pace before them, escorting them all the way to the kitchen.

“Mrs Ford thought it was the taxi cab office,” Wendy said, as she fixed her pace to Whistlestop’s nonexistent one. “And she refused to leave in case she lost her place in the queue. She sat for over an hour, watching the horse races on telly, then complained about the wait so loudly they had to call me. She was banging her umbrella on the counter by the time I got there.”

“What did you do?” Jane asked.

“Hi, Renata.” Wendy took a seat at the kitchen table, while Renata put together a pot of tea and presented her with a plate of homemade biscuits. “I got John Pilchard to give her a lift up to the supermarket in a police car and ordered a proper cab to take her back home.”

Renata put the teapot on the table beside the biscuits and slid in opposite Jane and Wendy. “Hey. Get your snout off the table, mister.”

Whistlestop’s long nose slid reluctantly away from the biscuit plate. “He’s the right size for snaffling off the tabletop,” Jane observed. “It was kind of you to get Mrs Ford a lift there and back, Wendy.”

“I’m not so sure.” Wendy watched as her tea was poured. “We were called over to the supermarket twenty minutes later, cos she was badgering the checkout girl for her winnings.” Underneath the table, she secretly slid Whistlestop a Garibaldi. His whiskery mouth gently tickled her fingertips. “Seems she placed a bet while she was in the bookies. So I had to take her back down there, and that’s when we saw she’d walked out with a bag full of shopping without paying, so then it was back up to the supermarket again.”

“She’s a mad old bat,” Renata declared and bit into a lemon swirl.

Jane tutted at the blunt statement and turned back to Wendy. “Did you call Trevor?”

“He’s coming down at the weekend.”

“I’ll pop over and see him. He has to face facts; his mum needs more help. It’s so sad.” Jane sighed.

Renata rolled her eyes. “She’s already in an air ambulance to cloud cuckoo land.”

Wendy giggled.

Jane glared at them both. “Dementia is a terrible thing. It could happen to any of us.”

“Not me,” Renata said. “If I ever start to lose my marbles, I’m drinking the local tap water for a quick, if undignified, exit.”

“You don’t know how you caught gastroenteritis,” Jane said. “You can’t blame the water.”

“I bloody well *do* know. Drinking the water here is akin to assisted suicide. Who needs to go to Switzerland when you’ve got colon-stripping acidics straight from the tap?”

“My mum always buys bottled water,” Wendy said. “She says you can’t trust the local water board to do anything right.”

“If we ever find St Poe’s sacred well, I hope it’s sufficiently regulated for you both,” Jane responded tartly.

“Damned if I’m touching it. I just want to make it famous. Other dopes can drink it,” Renata said.

“How’s that going?” Wendy asked. “Amanda seems very happy these days.”

Renata smiled. “That may be more to do with Chubby Benson than her research, but I’m pleased to report both endeavours are going well.”

Wendy nodded. Amanda did have a certain pep about her, and Wendy was glad her friend had finally found romance. Then her mood darkened slightly, as she remembered the circumstances under which Chubby and Amanda had met and the ongoing workload she had because of it.

“So...St Poe’s Girl Guides,” Jane changed the subject.

“I’ve got to join it for—” Wendy flicked a quick glance at Renata, “you know why.”

“Hey. I can go and leave you two with your dirty little secrets. See me rise above it all.” Renata lifted her cup. “Nice to see you, Wendy. Drop by mine this Saturday, and we can watch the footie on my new *sixty-inch* TV.” This was said with a smug smile.

“Sixty-inch? Wow.”

“It takes up an entire wall.” Jane was very disapproving. “It makes the dividing wall in the hall vibrate. I can feel it with my hand.”

“Who stands in the hall feeling up a dividing wall? I’m surrounded by freak neighbours,” Renata told Wendy, as she swished out of the kitchen. “The inhabitants of Rectory Row don’t appreciate it’s the twenty-first century and technology has moved on some. If it doesn’t weave clothes, nobody around here wants to know.”

“Is it really so loud the walls vibrate?” Wendy turned to Jane once Renata left.

Jane shook her head. “It’s not that bad, but it’s the ugliest thing you could stick on a wall. It’s enormous. And she has these speakers all around the room so you get blasted from every damned direction. I forgot what a geek she is. You’ll probably love it.”

“Is it weird hooking up again after all these years?”

“Yes and no.” Jane twiddled distractedly with her teaspoon. “Things emerge that I’d completely forgotten about, like the love of expensive, blingy gadgetry; so there’s this strange resonance going on, a sort of emotional déjà vu.” Her lips tilted into a small, mischievous smile. “And then there’s a ton of annoying new stuff like you’d find out with anyone new in your life.”

“But overall, you’re happy. I mean, I can see that you are,” Wendy rushed to explain. “You and Amanda both seem to be in good places.”

Jane reached out and rubbed Wendy’s arm. “You’ll find your own good place soon enough. I know you will.”

Wendy blushed. “I’ll have to go up to London for that.”

They were silent for a moment, contemplating the quagmire of coming out in a small rural community.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Jane shrugged after a moment. “Look at big, brave me. Now I’m out, *again*, most people leave me alone to run my daily business. There’s always Colin buzzing away in the background, but then he always was the hornet at the picnic.”

Wendy’s brow furled at the mention of Colin Harper, the vicar of High Wallop Anglican. He was an acquired taste, to put it kindly. Luckily today, he was the least of her problems. “Yeah. But I need to have the *conversation* with Mum and Dad first. I’m at the start of all this business, you sort of double dipped.”

“Okay. Talking of business.” Jane smiled. “The Guiders. What do you need to know?”

“I spoke to DI Patel today. Have you met her?” Wendy felt her face heating under Jane’s quick gaze.

“No. I spoke on the phone to a very brusque Detective Sergeant Smith, late last week. He said he was part of the UKPPS team and explained the situation.”

Wendy nodded and felt her face cooling, as she focussed on what she needed to know. “What can you tell me about the volunteer adults working with the group, and can you figure out a way for me to join it as quickly as possible, like for the next meeting?”

“That’s easy. The pack is so new they have no helpers, only the leader, Kiera Minsk. She approached me earlier this summer about starting up a Girlguiding group using the parish hall, and I jumped at the chance. Those are the type of activities St Poe’s needs to keep going. Kiera needs all the help she can get. I can easily sell you to her.”

“Minsk. Is that a Polish name?”

“I think it’s a city in Russia, so most likely not.”

“So, who is this Kiera Minsk? I’ve not of heard of her before, and I know nearly everyone in the valley. What does she look like? Is she a local? Well, I suppose she has to be, doesn’t she?”

“She lives out at Tinkers Field, the nice side of it. She moved down from London, late last year, to look after her mum who was terminally ill. You knew her, Mary Brattle. She had ovarian cancer. Unfortunately, she passed away in May. Kiera decided to stay on here.”

Wendy remembered Mary Brattle. A frail woman who had never enjoyed good health. “Okay. So, what does she do? I mean what does she work at?”

“Kiera? She’s an artist. She does those pretty pictures you see on greeting cards. I think she gives night classes, too, down at Cross Quays Community College.”

“Oh.” Wendy hadn’t known greeting card painting was an actual job, but why not, she supposed someone had to do it. “What’s she like? How can I join without making her suspicious?”

“Well. Kiera is more or less new to the Wallops, so she doesn’t really know her way around for the pioneering badges and stuff like that. Plus, she’s already told me she needs another troop leader for the Brownies, the slightly younger girls. Girlguiding proved very popular this summer. It was slow to get started, but now all the little girls are clamouring to join. The uniforms are available at Grenfell’s, in Cross Quays; it used to be you had to go all the way to Brighton to buy one.”

“I’ll have to wear a uniform?”

“Seems like your lot in life.” Jane patted the navy serge cuff of Wendy’s jacket.

“Is Kiera Minsk the sort who’d get suspicious if I don’t know much about the dyb-dyb stuff? I mean, I was never in the Girl Guides when I was a kid. We only had The Pony Club around here.”

Jane hesitated a moment. “I think if I recommend you as exactly what she needs, then it should be fine.”

“When can you do that?”

“I’ll call her tonight and get back to you.” Jane frowned then asked. “Wendy, Lexi will be all right, won’t she? I mean, I know her mother, Valerie, and they’re trying for a new start here. They’re not in any real danger, are they?”

“This is just a belt-and-braces operation,” Wendy assured her. “Her dad mixed with some nasty people. I mean a really nasty lot. Those guys who left those people to suffocate in the back of a lorry.”

Jane paled at the reminder of the horrible event that had shaken the south coast that summer. Fifteen bodies, two entire families, found dead in a freight container. The driver had been arrested, and the police were looking for the rest of the traffickers.

“With luck, they’ll pick him up before he gets anywhere near his family. Everyone from here right up to Birmingham is on the lookout for him. He’s not that smart, so he’s bound to do something stupid and get himself caught.” In Wendy’s opinion, the stupidest thing he’d done was run out on his protection programme.

“As long as his ‘something stupid’ doesn’t endanger Valerie or Lexi.”



“I’ve been told I’m working with you on a series of mop-ups.” Peter Patcham came over to her.

Wendy looked up from the corner desk she usually grabbed to catch up on her paperwork, or anything else that was thrown at her.

“Ah. Okay, Peter.” She wondered what he had done wrong to be lumbered with this particular sack of woe. He’d not even been there a week, so he’d had to move fast to pee off Boggy Marsh so quickly.

“Call me Pete.” He pulled up a seat opposite. “What exactly are these mop-ups?”

“Boggy didn’t explain?” Wendy’s heart sank. She was going to look like a pillock before the new guy.

“Wendy.” Officer Pilchard came over. He was on front-desk duty, not his favourite thing as it involved working with the public, and therefore, he was suitably grumpy.

“Yes, John,” Wendy said pleasantly, ignoring his rude interruption.

“Can you check this over for me, sweetheart,” he said and offered her a report. “You know grammar isn’t my strong point.”

He gave her a grin that was meant to sugar-coat the laziness of his request.

Wendy silently held out a hand. She could run her eye over it in seconds and see the litany of errors that passed for John's writing. She knew she could just mark them off for him to fix, she used to do that, but he always found some slippery way to dump it back on her desk, so she ended up doing the corrections, too. As always, it was an ugly, unresolvable tussle she hadn't the energy for. She'd go over his paperwork later and correct it herself, it was the easiest and most peaceable course of action. Anything to do with John Pilchard ultimately exhausted her, so it was best to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

"Thanks, love." He turned away but not before she caught his sly, sideways glance at Pete. There was something seditious about it that she didn't understand.

Pete did not look in John's direction at all, instead, he lounged in his seat and waited for the older man to leave.

He watched carefully as Wendy tucked the report underneath her own paperwork to look at later. "Can't he dot his own i's and cross his own t's, then?"

Wendy shrugged, on alert that both men had bad feeling towards each other and unsure of what this new dynamic meant in the small police station they all worked in.

"So," he continued, adroitly accepting her no comment and getting their conversation back on track. "Who's Boggy?"

"Boggy Marsh, of course." Wendy indicated the chief inspector's office. "He comes in every second week of the month. We're just one of many police stations he oversees in the Sussex area. Though I think 'we of the Wallops' are the biggest pain in the backside for him with our charming, laid-back, rustic ways."

Pete smiled. “Boggy suits him. After two minutes with him, my brain felt like it was sinking into a mud hole. God, but he’s got such a boring voice. He could hypnotize sheep. So, what’s this mop-up stuff about, then?”

Wendy relaxed. “The mop-ups are a sort of penance I have to do.” She set down her pen and considered how to continue. “Look.” She moved to the grey filing cabinet and brought out a file. “This is my report on an incident that happened at St Poe’s church in Lesser Wallop on 6th August, last month. The mop-ups are the witness statements I need to follow through on with the affected church parishioners. Read this and then we’ll talk.”

She left him to it and went to make them both a drink. He could find out all about the cannabis-laden caravan and the stoned parishioners for himself. She was tired of being the laughing stock of the station, or Boggy’s whipping boy for that matter, for innocently getting high on the damned stuff.

Pete’s laughter greeted her on the way back up the corridor. Wendy balanced the two cups of coffee she was carrying and steeled herself. When she turned the corner, he was grinning at her with a wild mixture of outright glee and inappropriate admiration.

He held up the manila folder. “This is a hoot. And you helped catch the lot of them. Excellent.”

Wendy decided she liked this new guy. “Okay then.” She placed his mug on the desk before him. “The mop-ups are the witness interviews I still have to work through.”

“About this?” He tapped the *St Poe’s August 6* interview folder.

Wendy sighed. “Yes. God help us.”



“So, Mrs Agnew.” Wendy’s pen poised over her notebook. There was a cup of tea at her elbow, and the low light from the lamp on the side table lit the page enough for her to see clearly. “I’ll just read this back to you, and you can correct me if anything doesn’t sound right, okay?” She gave Mrs Agnew a long stare that she hoped would be a clue.

Mrs Agnew nodded solemnly. Her hands were crossed on her lap, and her eyes gleamed with excitement.

Wendy supposed this was the first time Mrs Agnew had ever been interviewed by the police. It must be an entertaining diversion for the snoop little widow.

She began to read out Mrs Agnew’s statement, “I was admiring the flowers I’d arranged that morning for St Dunstan’s, except the Reverend Harper told me I had to take to *that* church instead, when the Lord spoke to me but not in a voice but in colours I’d never seen the like of.”

Wendy could feel the sofa tremble as Pete Patcham, sitting beside her with his own cup of tea, tried to suppress his laughter.

“And He told me things I can’t quite right remember but mostly about the Reverend Swallow being...well, not right around the ladies and all that. And He reminded me of all the nice things she had done for me, like flower cuttings and carrying my shopping and the recipe for those caramel fancies I like so much, and I said ‘But Lord, I gave her back one of *my* best recipes for ginger fingers,’ and He said, ‘That’s not the point, Mavis.’ And I remember being surprised He knew my first name, and then I remembered this was God, and of course He knew my first name, He knows everything, and then those soldiers were lifting me up off the pew, but I wanted to stay and chat with the Lord.”

The sofa shook harder.

Wendy threw Pete a warning, sideways glance which he missed, as he had his face buried in his teacup. In the lamp light, she could make out the gleam of unshed tears in his eyes.

“So,” she continued reading, “I fought the soldiers off as best I could, but they lifted me on high, three of them. Right up there on their shoulders, and all I could do was grab the flowers, because I wasn’t leaving them behind. I mean, a decent bloom costs so much these days. They can’t all come from the garden.”

Pete spluttered into his cup, and Mrs Agnew gave him a suspicious stare.

“And the soldiers took me outside to the car park, where I was wrapped in tin foil like a Sunday roast, and there were firemen who said there’d been a fire behind the church, but I imagine that’s how the Lord works—in mysterious ways.”

Wendy looked up. “And are you happy with that, Mrs Agnew?”

“Word for word that is the truth of what I experienced on that Sunday.” Mrs Agnew laid a hand across her heart.

Wendy quickly stood. “I’ll go back to the station and type this up and at some point come back and ask you to sign it.”

Mrs Agnew nodded approvingly and stood too. “Is he all right?” She pointed to where Pete struggled up off the low settee to join them.

“Oh yes, Mrs Agnew,” he said solemnly. His eyes were a little damp, and he looked vaguely emotional. “It’s just that I was moved. You see, I had a similar experience when I was younger. Much younger.”

“Oh?” Both Mrs Agnew and Wendy spoke at once.

“Yes. I was at The Redeemers in Brixton, when *I* had an out of this world experience, too. I still remember all those beautiful colours you were talking about, and I called on God more than once that night.”

“Mm. The Redeemers.” Mrs Agnew mulled this over, not looking very happy her sacred experience was a seemingly shared one. “Which church is that?”

“Oh, it’s long gone. It’s a night club now,” Pete said smoothly.

Mrs Agnew tutted at this, then relaxed. “It’s nice to see young people drawn to the church. Would you like another cup of tea, Officer Patcham?”

“Thank you, no, Mrs Agnew,” Wendy replied hastily for him. “We really do have to get back to the station. Loads to do.” She waved her little notebook as evidence of the mighty workload awaiting them and began retreating for the door.

Pete followed hard on her heels.

Once in the police car, they collapsed in giggles.

“I thought I was going to have a heart attack.” Pete exploded. “Are they all like that?”

“Most of them translate it into a religious experience.”

“You don’t tell them they were singing songs of praise in a dope cloud?”

Wendy shook her head. “Boggy said to keep to the bare essentials. There was *a fire, an arrest, and did they see anything suspicious beforehand.*” She tapped the laminated card he’d supplied. “That’s all I’m allowed to ask.” Which in her opinion was a blessing. Most townsfolk blamed vandalism for the caravan burning down. No one knew what was in it.

“What a joy to work in a place like this.” Pete looked like he’d had an epiphany of sorts. He leaned back on the headrest and

gazed out the side window at the night sky. “It’s bloody beautiful here. I mean, look up there. I can actually see the stars.” He sounded mystified.

Wendy wiped the last of the laughter from her eyes. “You think it’s a joy working here?”

“You bet I do. The Wallops is a fabulous place, Wendy Goodall.”

“Hah. You came down from West Central, you’ll be bored in no time.”

“Nope. I need to be somewhere like this to unwind a little. This is a good place for me. I can tell that already.” He gave her a luminous smile.

“Okay.” Wendy started the car and moved away from the kerb, a little bemused at meeting her polar opposite.

“Are most of the residents like that?” he asked, nodding back to Mrs Agnew’s cottage.

“Like what?”

“Oh, never mind.” He settled into his seat looking even more content.

CHAPTER 3

Grenfell's was on the corner of Great Yawl Street in Cross Quays. Wendy glared at the dressing room mirror and drew herself up to full height. She looked like the sort of honest, responsible person any caring parent would be happy to leave their darling daughter with. The pale-blue blouse and navy shorts looked fine, though the shorts did come a little far up her pale, freckled legs. She had a scarf, or neckerchief as she preferred to think of it, to knot around her neck. All she needed were the correct badges on her sleeve, and she was ready to "Go-a-Guiding."

"Come out and let me see." Jane's voice carried through the curtain.

Wendy contemplated the Girl Guide uniform one last time and immediately had a completely opposite point of view. With her straggly, reddish-brown hair scraped back from her face, and her shoulders slightly hunched in sudden self-hate, she looked angular and freakish, not at all the type of adult a Girl Guide should aspire to emulate. She was like something from the "Stranger Danger" posters she gave out to local schools. With a maudlin set to her jaw, she viciously swept back the curtain and stepped out onto the shop floor.

"Oh," Jane managed. "Anger badge already. Sew it on, sister."

Renata had a more robust, "Shouldn't you say trick or treat with a face like that?"

Wendy turned around and stepped back into the cubicle.

"Come on," Jane ordered. "Let's look at you."

“This whole Guides thing is a stupid idea.” Wendy surrendered and came further into the shop. “I’m not going to fool anyone. I’m not Guider material.”

“Yes, you are. And anyway, that’s something you learn as you go along.” Jane tugged the blouse into better shape. “It’s a nice uniform. Much nicer than when I was a girl. Not that my dad allowed me to join, or anything.”

The male sales assistant drifted over. He had been loitering at a polite distance from the changing rooms and now moved in for the kill. “Perhaps madam would prefer the leggings as well?”

“There’s leggings?” Wendy and Jane echoed together.

“Go get them, man, and save my eyesight,” Renata muttered and wandered off to look at a stand of equestrian riding hats. “I’ve seen better knees on a heron.”

“Your knees are far, far better than hers,” Jane whispered to Wendy.

The purchases were placed in a paper bag decorated with the Grenfell logo, and they left the shop in search of lunch. Inordinately pleased that step one of her undercover operation had gone reasonably well, Wendy found her step lighter and the day brighter as they moved along the pavement to The Parson’s Nose, a local pub popular with midday diners.

“Keep an eye on that, will you?” She set her package by the table and left Jane and Renata to peruse the menu, while she made her way to the restrooms.

There were two cubicles in the ladies’, both unengaged. Wendy pushed the first door open only to freeze along with its seated occupant. She was a young woman with a plain, broad face and large grey eyes. There was a spilt second shared in a blink of

surprise, before Wendy thought to back off and apologise. In that spilt second, the young woman reacted faster.

“I have never been so violated!” she shrieked.

Wendy started. She gave another surprised blink and her apology stuck in her throat. Her mind tumbled back over the last few seconds to see if she had been in any way inappropriate. This second spilt second allowed the stranger to wrench open her blouse exposing a hot-pink bra and creamy décolletage, and give another mock scream.

Wendy ricocheted out of the restroom and hurried back to her seat, her face ablaze.

“What happened to you?” Renata looked over the top of her menu.

“A strange woman showed me her bra in the loo!”

“What? You’ve only been ‘out’ five minutes.” Renata surged to her feet. “Where is she?”

Jane grabbed Renata’s forearm and pulled her back onto her seat. “You are not going in there.” Then she turned her attention to Wendy. “Do you mean she was exposing herself? Are you going to arrest her?”

“Did you see any...you know?” Renata asked.

“Huh?” Wendy hadn’t considered taking police action. She’d been too shocked to even think about it.

“Tit.” Renata expanded on her theme.

“Really, Renata.” Jane glowered. She began to look around the room. “Is she here?” she asked in a stage whisper.

Wendy did a quick 360-degree reconnaissance. “No. I can’t see her.”

Renata made to stand again. “She must be still in the loo.” And made off towards the restrooms before Jane could stop her.

“You should have told her off. Maybe there’s a Guide badge for admonishment.”

“I hope not. I got the impression it was all a bit of a lark. Like she was laughing at me.” Wendy was sure of it. The woman was playing with her for some unapparent reason. Wendy wracked her brains and was sure she hadn’t seen this person before. She’d certainly remember her now.

“They’re empty.” Renata returned looking disappointed. “Our bird has flown. Well, Wendy’s bird.” She gave Wendy a lewd wink.

“Stop teasing,” Wendy said. “She freaked me out. Cross Quays is filling up with weirdos and hippies these days.”

“Yes, stop teasing her,” Jane told Renata. Then, “Oh look, it’s Dr James.” She raised her hand in a small wave to someone over Wendy’s shoulder. “Hi, Lea.”

“Hello, Jane.” Dr James came over to greet the table. Dr Lea James ran the Wallops Valley outpatient practice. Her team, Let’s Get Quizzical, always trounced everyone at the Lesser Wallop quiz night. They almost always led the score board.

Wendy burned crimson as the doctor approached.

“Got the day off?” Jane asked.

Lea James nodded. “Yes, so I’ve spent it shopping, when I should have been in the garden.” She hefted the numerous bags in her hands.

Renata indicated the empty chair. “Join us for a cuppa,” she said and winced as Wendy’s toe tapped at her shin.

“Sorry, but I’m meeting my mother.” Lea didn’t seem to notice the wince. “Perhaps another time.” With a small smile, she moved towards the back of the bar to a table of elderly ladies.

“What did you kick me for?” Renata rubbed at her shin.

“It was a gentle toe tap, stop overreacting.”

“What’s going on?” Jane asked.

“Wendy has a crush on the good doctor and went into meltdown in case she had to pour her a cup of tea,” Renata said.

“I have not got a crush on—”

“Pardon me, but my big purple bruise says otherwise.”

“You have a crush on Lea James?” Jane pinned her with a curious stare.

Wendy felt sweaty. “No. I admire her as a doctor, that’s all.”

Renata snorted. “You can admire her doctoring when she checks out my limp.”

“I never knew you had a thing for Lea,” Jane said thoughtfully. She turned to Renata. “When did she tell you?” There was a slight rebuke in her voice, as if they’d both withheld from her.

“I haven’t—” Wendy began.

“She didn’t. I merely joined the dots in violent patches of colour on her cheeks whenever the doctor’s name is mentioned.”

“You’ll be joining the dots on your bruises,” Wendy huffed, put out at her own transparency. She did have a crush on Dr James, but she’d had it forever, long before she’d realised what lay behind it.

“My, my,” Jane tutted into her tea cup. “Lunch has certainly proved revelational.” She eyed Wendy over the rim. “What with all these secret crushes and bathroom exposés, I see, now you are ‘out,’ you’re quite the dark horse, Officer Wendy.”



“I think I know what this is about,” Jill Fry, the church organist and Wendy’s soon-to-be sister-in-law, said carefully and gave them a shy smile.

“Oh? Well...” Wendy was unsure how to respond. She shot Pete a quick look.

The merest twitch of his lips showed that he was unsure, too.

“It’s okay.” Jill hurried to assure them. “Jane and I are discreet about what happened. All we want is for St Poe’s to stay open and be available for the Lesser Wallop community.”

Wendy flipped open her notebook. “Okay. Are you ready?”

Jill nodded, so Wendy launched into her much-rehearsed spiel as laid down by Chief Inspector Marsh. “On Sunday, 6th August, there was an incident during the morning service at St Poe’s church in Lesser Wallop, where a stationary vehicle parked outside the church caught fire. This was an act of arson and led to the evacuation of the church by the fire service and various volunteers.” Here she looked Jill squarely in the eye. “Do you recall anything about that particular morning that could have any relevance to pending charges of arson against Zoe Catharine Blair of 239 West Charlton Street, Brockley, London?”

“I was the church organist that morning,” Jill said, “and I can remember the slow infusion of smoke into the church. It was a hot day and the upper portal windows were open. I didn’t see it as much as I smelled it. At first, I thought it was a bonfire. There are a lot of farms nearby. I was inside playing the organ, so I didn’t actually see a thing. Sorry.”

Wendy scribbled on for a moment after Jill had finished speaking. “Don’t apologise,” she said.

“And you didn’t feel...funny, or anything?” Pete asked.

Wendy frowned at him. This was a departure from Boggy’s script.

“No,” Jill answered in a confident and cool voice. “Not at all. I was happy to be playing such a beautiful instrument. But then,

Gill McKnight

I'm always happy when I'm playing in church. I expect to feel elated." She gave them both a keen look.

"Okay." Pete quickly let this line of enquiry go, and Wendy again took the lead.

"I'll type this up, and you'll be called to the station to sign it, okay, Jill?"

"Do I have to go to the station? Can't you bring it here next Thursday? Or have you forgotten Will and I have invited you over for dinner?"

Wendy had forgotten.

Jill tutted. "Don't you dare be a no-show. Will wants to talk to you about something important, so you'd better turn up."

"Of course I'll be there." Wendy gathered up her police hat and stuffed her pencil and notebook into her breast pocket. "I'll bring your statement and some wine."

Jill showed them to the door of the first-floor flat.

"How do you know her?" Pete asked, as they pounded down the stairwell to the front door of the old Edwardian house.

"Jill's engaged to Will, my brother. They're getting married next June."

"Your soon to be sister-in-law is the church organist, and your best friend is the vicar?" Pete was surprised. "And Boggy's okay with you doing these interviews?"

Wendy nodded. "You live here long enough and you'll get to know everyone, too. It's not like you can divorce the job from the community."

Pete looked thoughtful for a second. "Maybe I kind of like that."

Back at the station, things were unsurprisingly quiet. It had gone past seven o'clock, and aside from Wendy and Pete dropping off their paperwork and grabbing their coats, there was only one man on duty.

Tonight, it was Sid Chervil. He sat at the duty desk reading the newspapers people had discarded throughout the day shift. A cold cup of coffee sat at his elbow. He barely looked up as they came in.

"John left some reports on your desk," he said by way of welcome to Wendy and completely ignored Pete.

John and Sid mucked about together and had been part of High Wallop's police station for what felt like forever. Wendy still remembered the year he'd joined the station. Her mother had taken an instant dislike to him when he started stopping by The Winded Whippet for a dram while out on patrol and didn't see why he had to pay for it. Paula Goodall soon put a stop to that. She was damned if she'd stand by and watch a freeloader sup away *her* profits.

Wendy wandered over to her desk to find a sizeable pile of files sitting on the corner. All John's.

Pete came up behind her and casually lifted the lot and dumped it onto another desk. "What?" he said, when he caught her startled look. "I share this work space, too. We have to hot desk while John has this whole, enormous desk to himself. So, his paperwork can go there, where it belongs, okay?"

Sid's head snaked around to watch. His gaze was flat and unfriendly, and totally directed towards Pete. He said nothing, though.

Gill McKnight

“Come on. We’re off duty now.” Pete nodded to the clock. “How about a pint? Being as I’m a city lad, Boggy said I had to get my head around how a rural community works and get to know the geography, pretty sharpish,” he said. “He also said I was to talk to you, that you are the local expert.”

Expert? Wendy wasn’t sure about that.

She was certain of one thing though, she appreciated how Pete had her back. She needed that, working with the likes of Sid and John. Now, she had an ally and perhaps the start of a tenuous new friendship.

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WENDY OF THE
WALLOPS

BY GILL MCKNIGHT

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