

# Sweet Vengeance

by

Peter Wales

‘Vengeance is mine’, saith the Lord, ‘I will repay.’

‘Now what does this mean?’ said the priest, a tall Scotsman with greying red hair.

‘Does it mean that the Lord is waiting up in heaven keeping track of everyone who’s ticked him off so he can zap them at an appropriate time? Noo it does not.’

‘Does it mean that the Lord is waiting up in heaven keeping track of everyone who’s ticked *you* off so he can zap them? Noo it does not.’

‘What it does mean is that God is good. He is a God of justice. What is wrong will be made right. What has been done in darkness will be uncovered. Knowing some of you, that might be the last thing you want.’ This was said with a broad smile so everyone knew they were meant to think about it, but not be insulted. The congregation, mostly widows in their sixties and over, tittered flirtatiously.

Fifteen minutes later the sermon came to an end. After another twenty minutes the Communion service was over, and parishioners filed out shaking hands and chatting.

‘You’re new. I’m David.’

‘Hi. I’m Clara.’

‘Welcome!’ The priest shook her hand. ‘You’re a little young for this congregation.’

She laughed. Clara was in her mid forties. ‘Thank you. I enjoyed your sermon.’

‘Did you now? And what did you like about it?’

Clara looked confused for a second. ‘Oh. You actually expect me to think. Well, you had one main point, it was a point worth making, you didn’t wander off track too badly, and you used a few well-chosen illustrations.’

David smiled. ‘Thank you. You do realise that if you’re planning to think on a regular basis you’re going to be in a pretty small club?’

‘That’s a little unkind, isn’t it? To the rest of your parishioners.’

‘Hmm. No. I’d like them to think, but there’s no point pretending they do when they don’t. That doesn’t mean they’re any less likeable, or any less valuable in God’s sight or mine. And who’s this?’

He bent down so as to be at eye level with the small boy who had appeared from behind Clara’s legs, and now looked at him curiously.

‘This is David.’ Clara said. ‘And this is David.’

‘Well.’ Said David ‘That’s a fine name you’ve got. And I’m very pleased to meet you.’

He put out his hand for the boy to shake. The smaller David looked up at his mother uncertainly. She nodded, and he reached out to take the offered hand.

‘Well done,’ said David, smiling. ‘You’re a brave lad.’

He turned to Clara.

‘Listen, I’d better go and mingle. Stay for a coffee if you can. It’s atrocious, but they’ll like you more if you let them quiz you a bit. Fill in this card and give it back to me before you go. And I’m glad you’re here.’

A few days later there was a knock at Clara’s door. Glancing through her lounge window on the way to the door she was surprised to see someone dressed entirely in black, and was relieved to find it was David.

‘Hello again.’ He said. ‘I thought I’d come and see how you were settling in.’

‘Why on earth are you dressed like that?’ She asked.

‘Well, I’m a priest.’

‘Yes, but I thought... Oh. I’m sorry. Please, come in.’

She led him through the hallway to a surprisingly large and well-equipped kitchen. There were brightly polished copper pans hanging above a central island bench, where a block of very knives sat in business-like complacency.

‘Do you actually use those?’ He said, looking at the pans. ‘Or are they just for show?’

‘No, I use them. For milk or sauces, mostly. They heat evenly. And they do look nice. Would you like a coffee?’

‘I’d love one. Thank you.’

She ground some coffee beans in a mill style grinder that sat next to a small stainless steel espresso machine. When the buzz of the grinder had finished, she filled the machine with rain water and returned to the pantry to get some almond and ginger biscotti. He took one and tasted it cautiously. A look of delight spread across his face, and he took an enthusiastic bite.

‘These are superb. Did you make them?’

‘Yes. Thank you. How do you like your coffee?’

‘Black. No sugar. What were you thinking?’

‘Pardon?’

‘When I came in you asked me why I was dressed like this. And then you said “But I thought ...” So what were you thinking?’

‘Oh. Well, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a priest actually dressed as a priest except on Sunday. Or at some official thing. Gathering. Function. You know what I mean.’

He laughed. ‘Yes. Well, it’s like a uniform. So people can recognise me. I guess for me there’s less point in wearing it at church or an official function than day to day. Because at those places everyone already knows who I am.’

‘OK. That makes sense. I was just surprised. But does anyone you don’t know actually stop you, or ask for help, just because you’re dressed like that?’

Clara put two cups of strong black coffee on the table. David picked his up and inhaled with obvious enjoyment before taking a sip. He looked at her with admiring appreciation.

‘Wow! This is the best coffee I’ve had for years. What is it?’

‘Lavazza Oro, mostly. A little double roasted high Columbian for extra depth. I was asking whether anyone does actually stop and talk to you because of the uniform.’

‘Oh yes. Tediously often! Sometimes it’s hard to get around Woolworths without someone I’ve never seen before stopping me to tell me in gruesome detail the story of their recent operation. And I shouldn’t have said tediously. That wasn’t fair. If I didn’t mean for that to happen I wouldn’t do it. But anyway. What about you? How do you come to be in Cuddle Creek?’

‘I’ve lived in Melbourne for the last twenty five years. My husband was a human resources manager. He died three years ago. I never really felt at home in our house after that, but just didn’t have the energy to move. Then my daughter Amanda moved up here at the beginning of the year for her first teaching job. After six months she decided she was going to stay, so I moved up to be close to her.’

‘And David’s her son?’

‘No, mine. I would never call him an accident, but he was certainly unexpected. David and I ...’

She looked up, slightly embarrassed.

‘Your husband’s name was David too?’

‘Yes. We never used any sort of contraception. Amanda was conceived after we’d been married for just over a year. We wanted more but it just didn’t happen. Then, when I was forty...’

Her voice trailed off.

‘We were overjoyed, both of us. But then just a couple of weeks later David was diagnosed with cancer. He went down very quickly. By the time David was born, he’d had been gone for over a month. We were going to call him Thomas David. But I changed it to David Thomas. Just. I don’t know. To honour him, somehow. It sounds silly when I say it.’

‘It doesn’t sound silly at all. It sounds right. You loved your husband. David will be proud to carry his name.’

‘Yes, that was what I hoped. Thank you. No one else here knows about that. I’m never quite sure how it will come out – what people will think.’

‘I wouldn’t worry. No one else needs to know. And even if they did, I don’t think anyone would make any judgements about it. Where’s Amanda teaching?’

‘St Andrew’s. She likes it there. She always wanted to teach in the Catholic system. She’s been talking with Fr Harry about converting. I don’t mind. I’ve sometimes thought about making the same move myself. What about you? How do you come to be here?’

‘In a way a similar story to yours. I was in a city parish in Adelaide. My wife was killed in a car accident on the way home from work. She was a teacher too. I tried to keep going, but I just couldn’t do it. It was too hard coming home to an empty house, one that we had shared. Eventually I took long service leave and I didn’t go back. A couple of years ago a friend told me that Cuddle Creek had been vacant for over a year, and that they would take just about anyone, so I rang the bishop and asked if I could come over for a look and a chat. And that was it.’

‘I’m sorry. About your wife, I mean.’

‘So am I. She was the best friend I ever had. There’s not a day goes by I don’t miss her.’

Their eyes met for a moment.

‘It’s so hard when someone you love goes, and you don’t have a chance to say goodbye.’ Clara said.

‘Yes. It was, is, hard. But our last words to each other were kind. I said goodbye and told her I loved her. The funny thing was it was me who was driving a long distance that day. She told me to take care. I didn’t even think about her having an accident. She had driven to work on the same road, only about three kilometres, for the last two years.’

He hesitated.

‘I sometimes think it’s even harder to see someone you love go downhill and suffer, and not be able to do anything to help.’

‘Yes. I felt so useless most of the time. I like to think I’m fairly capable, but not then. But at least we had a chance to prepare, and to say goodbye.’

The conversation continued for another fifteen minutes, touching on church, books, where to get your car serviced, schools, sport, all the things that make up small town life. When David got up to go, Clara wondered whether she should invite him for dinner. She didn’t though. She wondered whether that would give him the wrong impression. And then immediately wondered whether it really would be the wrong impression.

‘Get a grip, woman.’ She told herself. ‘You’ve only been in town two weeks and already you’ve got designs on the parish priest.’

David stopped and looked at her. She blushed. Surely he couldn’t tell what she was thinking?

‘Do you know about the cake stall next Saturday?’ He asked.

‘Oh. Yes.’ She sighed, immensely relieved. ‘I’ve promised to make something. I’m not sure what yet. And I’m on the cleaning roster.’

‘Ah yes.’ He replied. ‘The first step on the road to social success. Well. It’s been lovely talking with you. And thank you for the coffee and biscotti. They were wonderful.’

On Sunday morning all the talk was of next week's cake stall. The Ladies' Guild earned nearly ten percent of the parish's total income, which was almost enough to balance the books. There was a Spring Fair, a quiz night, a movie night (there were still complaints about the last two choices, but no one was willing to challenge Mrs Farquhar for this task), a couple of raffles, and two cake stalls. The women cooked, of course, while the men were responsible for setting up tables and making sure it didn't rain.

Mrs Lonergan had a list. Clara's name was on the list. But so far no promises of cakes were recorded next to her name. Mrs Lonergan advanced with a tattered clipboard in hand.

'Mrs Linton?'

'Yes. But Clara's fine.'

'I'm Mrs Lonergan. Guild secretary. You offered to cook for the cake stall. What did you have in mind?'

'Is there anything you would particularly like? I can make most things.'

'Can you? Scones always go well. You'll make them with lemonade?'

This last question was half question and half order.

'With lemonade? What for?'

Clara had never heard of such a thing.

'It makes them lighter. People like them.'

Clara couldn't imagine that putting lemonade in a scone mixture would have any such effect. And anyway, she never put sugar in her scones.

'Well, I'd be glad to have that recipe. But I was thinking of something else. Perhaps an iced orange cake? Or a coffee cake?'

Mrs Lonergan regarded her doubtfully.

'Whatever you like. Scones go well, though.'

'All right. I'll make some scones as well. And they need to be here at eight on Saturday?'

'Yes. And you'll stay to help at the stall?'

Clara hadn't considered this. She had already arranged to have morning tea with her daughter.

'No I can't. I could come back about eleven.'

'We'll be packing up by then. But if that's the best you can do.'

'Yes it is. I'll drop the cakes in at eight, and be back at eleven.'

Mrs Lonergan looked disgruntled, but Clara was not going to be swayed. She had come to Cuddle Creek to be able to spend time with her daughter, and she wasn't going to break her promise. Mrs Lonergan went in search of the next person on her list.

Clara began to walk toward the church hall, looking for David. Both Davids. A voice that was somehow managed to be sharp and throaty at the same time called out behind her. It was Sandra McCulloch.

'Mrs Linton! We were just talking about you. How glad we all are that you've come to join our little community. My daughter Maree is getting married in a couple of weeks and I'm hosting a bridal shower on Sunday afternoon. Would you like to come?'

Sandra was not the eldest or longest standing member of the congregation, but her status was enhanced by the fact that her husband 'Ox' McCulloch was mayor of Cuddle Creek. He owned a trucking company which he had built up from a single delivery van to a million dollar business, but more importantly, he owned a grazing property which had been in his family for three generations.

'That's very kind of you,' said Clara.

An invitation from Sandra meant that she was on the way to being accepted as part of the community. Or perhaps she was just being invited out of curiosity. But either way, it was a good sign, and she was pleased.

'I'd love to come. What time on Sunday?'

'2pm.' Sandra gave her the address.

'Do they need anything in particular?' asked Clara. 'As a gift, I mean.'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' said Sandra. 'Just come along. We're looking forward to your company.'

'No, I'll bring something. What about some linen? Tablecloths. Or some towels? And please, call me Clara.'

'All right. And you call me Sandra. Some towels if you like. I think they'd be able to use those.'

'OK. Well, that sounds lovely. I'll see again you before then of course. Thank you for thinking of me.'

Clara looked around for her son, and noticed the older David looking at her curiously. He made his way across the car park, alb over his arm and a prayerbook in his hand.

'Everything OK?'

'Yes. Why wouldn't it be? Sandra just asked me to her daughter's bridal shower next Sunday.'

'Ah.'

'What does that mean? "Ah." I thought you'd be pleased. I am.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. It might be fine. People are often difficult to get to know. In some ways more here than in the city. They'll be friendly, but without ever becoming friends.'

He hesitated as if unsure how much more to say.

‘OK,’ said Clara. ‘And?’

‘It’s not surprising. Many of these ladies have been here all their lives. They have people here they grew up with, went to school with. It takes a lot of emotional energy to become friends with someone. Taking risks. They see people come and go. It’s not that they want to shut people out. They wouldn’t even be conscious they’re doing it. Most people take the easiest way, emotionally. It takes a generous person and even then a deliberate decision to try to make a real friend of someone from outside.’

‘And ... what? Sandra is someone who does this?’

‘Well, no. Not usually. That’s why I was wondering. But look, it might be perfectly fine. It probably will be, and I’m probably being completely unfair.’

Clara looked at him.

‘It’s OK. I appreciate the thought.’ And, she realised, she did. He was concerned about her. That meant he cared about her. Of course it was his job to care about her, and everyone else. So a little concerned attention was not really a great compliment. It reminded her of a bumper sticker she had seen once. ‘Jesus loves you. But then Jesus loves everybody.’

She didn’t have time to follow this train of thought any further, because her son David appeared around the corner of the hall, looked around for her with a cheeky grin on his face, and then disappeared again, as if daring her to chase him. She decided she would let him run around the hall once more before trying to catch him.

David said goodbye and got into his car to drive to the later service sixty kilometres away at Sinclair.

A group of women was standing nearby. Clara turned her attention to their voices, wondering whether she should go and join them. But it quickly became obvious they had not seen her, and that she was the topic of conversation.

‘Why should you have to invite her if you don’t want to?’ This from a woman Clara did not yet know.

Sandra replied. ‘I don’t think I’ve got any choice but to invite her. It’s the Christian thing to do. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.’

‘She seems nice enough,’ said the third woman in the group. ‘And her grandson is well behaved.’

‘Yes, but it’s not her grandson, is it?’ said Sandra. ‘I heard her tell Marjorie Cox that the boy was her son. And what does that mean? In her forties, no husband, she turns up from nowhere with a three year old son, and just waltzes into the church like any respectable woman. I know we have to be charitable, but like I said, that doesn’t mean I have to like it.’

‘I didn’t know that,’ said the third woman. ‘That does make a difference. I wonder what her story is.’

‘Pretty obvious, isn’t it?’ said the second woman. ‘Why would you leave your home with a small child unless you were in trouble? Her husband must have caught her out, so she’s come out here because she thinks no one will know her, and we’ll all be too stupid to work it out.’

The other two nodded.

‘Yes. That’s what it is.’ said Sandra. ‘You can tell by the way she dresses. Completely inappropriate for a woman her age. But like I said, we have to be charitable. Anyway, after this I will have done my duty. I certainly won’t be inviting her to anything else.’

Clara felt as if she had been physically struck. It was this community of people, her church family, that she had hoped would form the core of her new life in Cuddle Creek. She turned and walked towards the hall, looking for her son, needing to get away, to think. She had hardly moved when David ran up to her, laughing, and almost crashed into her knees. He hadn’t got the knack of stopping yet. She picked him up and held him, and he struggled to get away, full of life and energy.

‘Time to go home.’ She said, putting him down and leading him to the car. But she wondered if this would ever be home. If anywhere could ever be home.

The following Saturday Clara was up early. David had been vomiting and had stomach pain and a fever. She had called the medical centre on Friday night and been able to get an appointment for him at 8.30am. At 6.00am she was in the kitchen, creaming butter and sugar, and making fresh coffee, some of which she drank, while the rest went in the cake. The scones would only take fifteen minutes to bake. They had to go in the oven before 7.30. The coffee cake had to be out well before then. Icing a cake while it was still warm was not ideal, but she didn’t have any choice. David had demanded all her attention last night. By the time he was settled she was too tired to stay up any longer. But it would be all right. If the cake went in at 6.15, it would have half an hour to cool. That would be just enough.

Just before seven, Clara opened the oven door and poked a thin skewer into the cake. It was done. She put on her oven mitts and reached in carefully. Just as she picked up the cake, David crashed into her from behind, utterly unexpectedly. He had been asleep when she checked on him only ten minutes before, and normally didn’t wake till 7.30. She dropped the cake. It slid off the baking tray, hit the oven door, and landed upside down on the floor.

‘Get back, David, it’s hot!’ she yelled.

David began to cry, the crash of the cake on the floor and the loudness of his mother’s voice pushing him over the edge from whining to sobs. Clara felt like joining him. Tears welled in her eyes. It was too much.

‘It’s all right David. I’m not angry with you. Are you OK?’

‘Tummy hurts, mummy.’ He said.

She left the cake on the floor and got him a teaspoon of children’s paracetamol syrup, with half a glass of milk to wash it down.

‘Go back to bed darling, for a little while. I’ll make you some breakfast soon, and then we’ll go to the doctor. He’ll make it all better. OK?’ She picked him up and took him back to his room. He seemed to settle, but she knew he would be back up in ten minutes. Fifteen if she was lucky.



Now what to do? The scones would be no problem. But after her conversation with Mrs Lonergan, she couldn't just turn up with scones. She had promised a cake, over Mrs Lonergan's palpable doubts, so she had to take one to the cake stall. She had no cake mixes, and a cake bought from a shop would be too obvious.

Clara looked again at the mess on the floor. It would never be edible. But it might just be repairable. Enough to look convincing, anyway. If she could buy it back herself straight away. No, that wouldn't work. And anyway, she was only just going to have time to drop the cake and scones off at the cake stall and then get David to the doctor's. But perhaps Amanda could do it. Clara made up her mind. She would put the cake back together, decorate it, and get Amanda to go to the cake stall as soon as it opened and buy it. If she couldn't get hold of Amanda, well, she would have to swallow her embarrassment and just take the scones.

The outer part of the cake, where it lined the circular tin, was still mostly intact. Clara ran a thin knife around the edge and eased it out of the tin. It would do. She had some broad masking tape which would hold it together. But the middle of the cake was a crushed and broken mess. She would need to find something to put into the centre of the cake to build up so it could be decorated.

She stood at the door of her pantry, willing something to appear that would do the job. After a moment her eyes fell on a package of two rolls of unbleached organic toilet paper. She had bought them in a frenzy of environmental fervour, which had lasted exactly until the moment she first used it. Clara had decided it was a perfect example of 'John Wayne' toilet paper – rough and tough and taking no crap from anyone. She hoped it might be useful for cleaning up kitchen spills, but it seemed to have all the absorbent qualities of a pig's ear. The two rolls had sat accusingly in her kitchen for the last eighteen months, somehow making the trip from Melbourne with her. One whole roll remained. If she used that, she would feel less guilty about throwing the remainder of the other away.

It was the perfect size and height to fit into the centre of the cake. Clara filled the gaps with crumbs, and used the larger pieces to make a more or less smooth upper surface. She made some quick setting chocolate icing, adding a few swirls of white chocolate. Scones, scones. She mustn't forget. She left the icing for a moment, and added milk to the scone mixture which had been sitting in a large bowl on the bench. Rolling the mixture to about half an inch thick, she cut out round shapes with a jam jar. She brushed the tops of half of the scones with milk, and sat another scone on top of each, now brushing the whole thing with milk. They would rise soft and high and separate easily – perfect for jam and fresh cream.

Back to the icing, but now David was awake again. She gave him a quick cuddle, sitting him at the table with a bowl of cornflakes and some orange juice. The icing spread easily and the irregularities of the reconstruction were soon smoothed over. She sprinkled a few coffee crystals on top, and added some little chocolate flowers. It looked wonderful. Ring Amanda! Nearly forgot. Clara picked up the phone and dialled.

'Hello.'

'Hi darling, I need to ask you a favour.'

'Oh. Hi Mum. Are you OK?'

'Yes. I've got to take David to the doctor's, and I need to drop some things off at the church cake stall on the way.' She explained the problem. 'I need you to go into church and be there when the stall opens at 8.30. You'll recognise the cake. It's a coffee cake with chocolate icing, and some of your little chocolate flowers.'

Amanda could see the cake in her mind. It was one of her favourites. She was highly amused at the thought that something that looked so delicious was nothing more than a decorated toilet roll with some crumbs of cake that had been sitting on the floor, held together with masking tape.

‘OK. I can see how that could be embarrassing. I’ll be there just before 8.30. Will I see you later for morning tea?’

‘Yes. I’ll call around once we’ve been to the doctor’s. Probably about 9.30, depending how late they’re running. You don’t mind David sleeping on your bed for a while?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘OK. Well, thanks. I’ll see you later. Bye.’

The scones were ready now. Clara took them from the oven. A couple were a bit lop-sided, so she took these and put them aside. They would taste just as good, and be fine for morning tea at Amanda’s, but she would not offer them for sale at the cake stall. For this first time, at least, everything had to be perfect. She wondered whether men felt the same kind of pressure about cars, or football, the feeling of needing to appear capable to gain acceptance.

She turned her attention to David. He was clearly not well. Normally a healthy eater, he had finished only half his cornflakes, and barely touched his juice.

‘Hey, sweetheart. How are you feeling? Do you want something else to eat?’

Clara glanced at the clock, hoping David’s answer would be ‘Yes’ for his sake, and ‘No’ because time was running short. He shook his head.

‘A glass of Milo?’

‘OK.’ He nodded.

She mixed a couple of large spoons of Milo with a little warm water, then half filled the glass with cold milk. As a second thought, she added a little sugar. It was usually sweet enough, but she wanted to encourage him to drink it all. He sipped the cold drink, normally something he loved.

‘Thank you Mummy.’ He looked at her with large pale eyes. He took another small mouthful, as if trying to please her.

‘I don’t want any more.’

‘OK. Let’s go and get dressed.’

Half an hour later, at about five past eight, they pulled into the church car-park. Mrs Lonergan was checking the various offerings against her clipboard. She looked at Clara as she got out of the car, a neutral expression on her face, as if uncertain whether to be pleased about Clara’s produce, or complain because she was slightly late. In the end, the sheer beauty of Clara’s coffee cake won her over. She almost gushed.

‘That looks absolutely beautiful dear. We should be able to put ten dollars on that.’

Clara was slightly taken aback. The ingredients alone were worth almost that much, and the same cake had sold for \$30 at church and charity sales in the city. But never mind. She reminded herself that Amanda would be paying for it anyway.

‘Thank you. Where would you like me to leave them?’

‘The cake goes on the trestle table under the verandah. That’s Sandra’s table. She’s around somewhere. The scones...’

She looked at them doubtfully.

‘Are they scones?’

Clara assured her they were.

‘They go on the trestle near the office.’

Mrs Lonergan looked around as if Sandra’s absence from her cake table was an inexplicable lapse. Clara explained that she didn’t mind, but had to go, because she had to get David to the doctor.

Clara wasn’t sure what she was going to do about the bridal shower tomorrow, but was glad Sandra was nowhere to be seen. She felt tired and harassed, and was not up to a polite chat with Sandra at the moment. She left the cake, and took the scones over to the other trestle, greeting a couple of ladies working arranging and pricing scones and lamingtons. Jams and preserves, flowers, homemade bread and slices all had tables of their own, in positions which they had undoubtedly occupied for years. Clara gave Mrs Lonergan a cheery wave goodbye as she left.

Although David was only Dr Brandt’s second patient, he was already running twenty minutes late. Clara wondered how this was possible, and prepared herself to be annoyed at the doctor’s anticipated bumbling inefficiency. However, Dr Brandt was polite and business-like, apologising that he had been late because of a flat tyre on the way in from his property. He examined David with care, asking Clara what the first signs of illness had been, talking with David about how he felt, where it hurt, at the same time checking pulse, temperature, blood pressure, and feeling for swollen glands.

‘How long has he been like this?’

‘He may have been a bit listless on Thursday, but only complained of pain and started vomiting yesterday afternoon. That was when I noticed the fever.’

‘Did he say where the pain was?’

‘Just his tummy.’

‘OK. Well it’s certainly localising to the lower right now. He’s very young, but it may be mild appendicitis. I’ll take some blood now, and schedule him for an ultrasound on Monday. In the mean-time I’m giving you a prescription for a broad spectrum antibiotic, which I want him to start taking immediately. Go to the pharmacy as soon as you leave here. Let him rest, and don’t try to make him eat if he doesn’t want to. Try to get him to drink, though. Orange juice is fine. If the pain gets worse, or the fever, take him up to the hospital and tell them you’ve seen me already. We’ll make another appointment now to see you on Tuesday.’

‘Will he need to have surgery?’

‘I hope not. Even if it is appendicitis, it will probably settle with the antibiotics. If it doesn’t, and that is a possibility, then we can probably remove the appendix laparoscopically. Keyhole surgery. A couple of days in hospital. He’ll be fine. Call me if you’re worried.’

He wrote his home number on a card and gave it to her, along with a prescription form. Blood was taken from David’s arm with hardly a murmur of complaint. Dr Brandt spoke to his receptionist and asked her to arrange the ultrasound and the appointment for Tuesday. Clara left reassured by his care and thoroughness but still feeling concerned.

Amanda opened the door. She looked worried.

‘How’s David?’

‘I’m not sure. He might have appendicitis. I’ve got some antibiotics, and we have to go back in for an ultrasound on Monday, or to the hospital if he gets worse.’

‘OK. Not good. But he’ll be all right? He looks tired. Are you tired David? Do you want a drink, or a lie down?’

After a half a glass of milk, David was settled onto Amanda’s bed, where he went to sleep almost immediately.

A few minutes later, the kettle boiled, and Amanda made a pot of Russian Caravan tea. Clara put jam and cream on the scones she had brought.

‘Did you get the cake?’

‘Oh. No I didn’t,’ said Amanda. ‘I was so worried about David I forgot. Not forgot to go, just forgot to mention it before. I went there just before eight-thirty, but there was no sign of it anywhere. I even asked the lady at the counter whether there were any cakes not on display, but she said no. So, I don’t know what happened.’

Clara was horrified. Could she get out of this without being completely humiliated? The person who bought the cake was sure to complain. Clara was reasonably sure no one had seen her put the cake on the table. But Mrs Lonergan had looked at it closely. She would almost certainly realise it was Clara’s cake that was the cause of the complaint. But Clara knew that even if that didn’t happen, her own sense of right and wrong meant that she would have to own up, apologise to whoever had bought it, and try to explain.

Anyway, there was no point in worrying about it now. She asked Amanda if she could babysit David tomorrow morning so she could go to Church. Amanda had been going to Mass at St Andrew’s, but that was later in the morning. But Amanda was in the school staff netball team, and she explained that the team they had been due to play this afternoon had had a minor bus accident. The team was fine, but the bus was not drivable. The game had been rescheduled for Sunday morning. She had already agreed to be there because the new time was early enough for her still to be able to get to Mass.

‘I’m sorry.’ She said.

‘That’s fine. You’ve made a commitment, you need to keep it. What about the afternoon?’

Clara explained about the invitation to Sandra's daughter's bridal shower, and the conversation she had overheard afterward.

'What a cow,' said Amanda. 'What a bunch of cows, in fact. Are you sure you want to go?'

'Well, yes. It'll be hard, but the only way I'm going to be accepted is by making the effort to get involved. I'm not going to judge everybody because of the nastiness of a few. And in a way, I feel like going even more just because I know Sandra doesn't really want me to.'

Amanda laughed.

'Yes, I know what you mean. I'll come over about one thirty.'

Sunday morning was peaceful at Clara's house. David slept late. He was plainly still not well, but the anti-biotics seemed to have taken the edge off his fever. Amanda arrived at one thirty as she had promised, and after checking on David, told Clara about the morning's netball victory. At ten to two, Clara picked up the towels she had wrapped as a gift for Sandra's daughter and future son-in-law, and followed the directions she had been given to Sandra's house. She arrived just on two pm.

There were about a dozen cars in the driveway and parked along the road, but no one else seemed to be arriving. Clara checked her watch. She was definitely there at the right time. Perhaps the practice in Cuddle Creek was to arrive early for social events, instead of the customary half hour late in Melbourne (a custom she had always thought was inconsiderate – if you invite people to arrive at a particular time, that's when they should arrive).

Clara knocked on the door. It was opened by a woman she did not recognise. She was led through to the lounge room where about twenty women were gathered.

'Oh, Clara' cried out Sandra. 'Everybody, this is Clara, she's new in town. I'm so glad you could make it. We started at 1.30, you know.'

Clara was slightly taken aback.

'I'm sorry. I thought you said two o'clock.' In fact Clara knew she had said two o'clock.

'Well, never mind,' said Sandra, 'at least you bought a present.' She gestured towards a table covered in gifts.

Was this woman deliberately trying to embarrass her, Clara wondered? Telling her to come at the wrong time, telling her not to bring a gift? She steeled herself to be friendly and polite.

'Thank you for inviting me. This must be your daughter Maree?'

Sandra smiled uneasily and introduced Clara to her daughter, but pointedly, Clara thought, not to any of the others. She was directed to a chair, and the group continued playing party games. One woman, Josie, Clara thought her name was, squealed with excitement when she won a chocolate frog for being the first to remember that the animal on a twenty cent coin was a platypus.

After an hour of this, including periods of giggling about how naughty they were for adding a little brandy to the punch, Sandra announced she had a special surprise for Maree.

'A little advance on the wedding day.' She disappeared into the kitchen.

A few minutes later she returned carrying a cake with a candle in the shape of a bride and groom on top. She was singing 'Happy wedding day to you, happy wedding day to you...' to the tune of happy birthday.

Clara looked with horror. It was her cake, the cake with a toilet roll stuck in the middle.

'Sandra!' She called. 'Stop!'

But her voice was drowned out by the other women singing along or gushing with compliments.

'Sandra how beautiful.'

'What a wonderful idea.'

'That looks delicious!'

Then, just as Clara leapt up to try to talk to her privately, Sandra shouted over the noise:

'Thank you. I made it myself.'

The cake did look delicious, and Sandra's friends rushed to congratulate her. She sunk the knife in to try to cut it, and Clara sat back in her seat.

'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' she thought. 'And oh, how sweet that vengeance can be!'

Two days later David called. He asked about young David's health. He was fine. The antibiotics had worked, the scan was clear, and there would be no need for surgery.

'I hear there was some excitement at Sandra's place on Sunday.'

Clara told him the story. He laughed out loud, tears coming to his eyes, but Clara was not so happy.

'I actually enjoyed watching her being humiliated in front of her friends. I've always thought of myself as a kind person. Always wanted to be, anyway. But now I think perhaps I'm not. It's cruel to enjoy someone else's suffering, no matter how much you think they deserve it.'

David looked more serious.

'You're right, of course. There wasn't anything you could have done to prevent it – it was her lie that caught her out?'

Clara nodded.

'So it's just that you enjoyed what happened after the lie that is bothering you?'

'Yes.'

'OK' said David, thinking carefully. 'Perhaps there is something you can do. Sandra will find it hard to regain acceptance among her friends after this. Cuddle Creek is a small town. People

will still be telling this story in ten years time. You could try to befriend her, invite her to coffee with a few other people, bring her back into the circle.'

'Yes.' said Clara 'That's a good suggestion. Thank you.'

'But there's another problem.' said David, 'I need a penance as well, since I enjoyed hearing about it, and thinking of the look on Sandra's face as much as you did. Can you think of anything?'

'Well.' Said Clara. She hesitated for a moment. 'My lawn needs mowing, and I don't have a lawnmower.'

'Done!'

'Just one more thing.' Clara said.

'Yes?'

'What's the story with the Scottish accent? The first Sunday I heard you preach there was definitely a highland lilt in your voice, but I haven't heard it since.'

'Och! Aye. Weel, ye've certainly caught me out their lassie!'

They both laughed.

'It's genuine enough.' Said David. 'I was born in a little place called Nethy Bridge, in the heart of the Highlands. But I've lived in Australia since I was a wee lad, and the accent only appears now when I'm tired, or for dramatic effect.'

'So Cuddle Creek is home for you now?' Said Clara.

'Yes.' He looked at her. 'And for you?'

She thought for a moment.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think perhaps it is.'