

*Stark*

“Now, some announcements,” Kate said, peering over her reading glasses at the congregation. She really should get varifocals, she knew, but they were expensive and she feared that they would allow her to see clearly just how sparse her little flock was. She ran through the notices: the funeral of a man she did not know; a retiring collection for a charity irrigating a patch of desert in the Horn of Africa; another request for more volunteers to do the church flowers (they never produced results). “And finally,” she said, laying aside her papers, “I am pleased to tell you that our church’s theme for the annual Festival of Light has been decided.” She paused for effect. “It will be—angels.”

There was silence, except for some rustling as Mrs Freeman dug in her handbag for another mint humbug and unwrapped it. She sat in the front pew, always, and sermons were punctuated by the clack of confectionery against false teeth.

“As you know, angels were present at the most significant moments of our Saviour’s life. Matthew tells us that the angel at the empty tomb had a countenance like lightning and a raiment white as snow, and in much art, they are depicted as radiant, shining creatures, so I think that they will fit very well into the Festival.”

Mrs Freeman sucked vigorously and the humbug rattled into the continuing silence.

“And so, our final hymn today is number three hundred and forty-one, *Let There be Light*.” The first thunderous chords of the organ drowned out Mrs Freeman’s teeth and the congregation stood.

Much later, in bed, which was the only guaranteed private time they got together, Kate and Tom talked about the town's festival, now in its fourth year.

"My worry is that the New Age lot will hijack the angels," Kate's husband said. "They will get mixed up with moondust and tarot and healing crystals."

"Well, perhaps that's better than the terrifying creatures they really are. Remember the angels riding chariots of fire who protected Elisha?"

"*Chariots of Fire.*" He started humming the film's theme tune, until Kate poked him in the ribs, rather hard.

"Did I tell you," she said, "that Elinor and Lucia are visiting next week?"

Tom yawned. "Yes. Twice." He turned out his bedside light. "How about we..."

The doorbell rang, twice, three times, short sharp rings which suggested, at nearly midnight, an emergency. Tom swore and Kate wearily rose and pulled on her dressing gown.

The emergency was Robbo. He had fallen down the flight of stairs leading from the church porch, and was lying, bleeding, on the pavement. Kate knelt beside him.

"How did this happen?" she asked him.

"Stark," Robbo said, thickly, partly because his lip was split, partly because he was quite drunk. "Stark, up there."

"Stark?" Kate asked. "Did he do this to you? Push you down the steps?" She looked up, but could see no one in the church porch now. Robbo lapsed into mostly incoherent mutterings and refused to answer any more questions. Kate had no idea who Stark might be. Another homeless man, perhaps? Had they quarrelled over who would sleep in the church porch? There was no need. It was easily big enough for two, and she ensured that there were two clean sleeping bags there each night.

Paramedics arrived and decided that Robbo's injuries needed attention. He was loaded, protesting, into the ambulance and Kate went back to Tom. He was snoring, gently.

Elinor McQuaid and her wife Lucia arrived ten days later. Kate had been at the Slade with Elinor before she had yielded to her

vocation as a priest and left Elinor to, eventually, recognition and huge success. One of her installations had been short listed for the Turner prize. Lucia specialised in street art.

“Angels?” Elinor said, fiddling with her dreadlocks. “Are you sure? They’re a bit New Age aren’t they, like...”

“Moondust and tarot and crystals. Yes, I know,” Kate replied. “But it was the decision of the committee, and I like to think we are a democratic parish.”

“So, who else takes part in the festival?”

“Oh, everyone: the other churches, of course, and the schools, and most of the High Street businesses do something. And there’s a candlelit market, and ghost walks, which the rural dean says I should not approve of, and street music, and a firework display. It’s all quite jolly.”

“And what sort of angels will you be offering?”

“Well, so far the committee have come up with angel cake, stained glass sun catchers, which Baz will do, he’s an art teacher, and angel greetings cards. Mo Scrivener will do them. She’s terribly good at caricatures and will do commissions if you want your loved one’s face on the angel.”

“Hmm. None of them are very radiant, are they?”

“No, not really, except for the sun-catchers.”

“And that’s just reflected light. Look, would you like me to do something? Not for sale, but to bring people into the church?”

“Oh, Elinor, would you? That would be marvellous.”

“What I have in mind is a seraph. They have six wings and are very fiery. I saw one in a Giotto fresco last month in Assisi. Oh, is that Lucia coming in?” Her wife had gone into town, to explore she said, though Kate warned her that there was not much to see.

Lucia put her head round the door. “Any chance of tea?” she asked. “Oh, and there is a man outside singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*.”

“That will be Robbo. It’s his hymn of choice after a couple of extra-strength lagers. Later it will be *Amazing Grace*, but he generally forgets the words by that stage. I’ll go and see if he’s okay.”

Robbo was on a bench next to the vicarage with a blue plastic bag of cans next to him and one in his hand.

“Wiv the cross of Jeeezuz, goin’ on before.” He was starting to slur and *Amazing Grace* was not far off, Kate thought.

“Hello Robbo. Are you feeling better now?” His lip was still swollen and he had the remains of a black eye. “We haven’t seen you much lately.”

Robbo took a swig from his can. “Bin away,” he said, waving his can airily. “Look, I got given a present.” He reached under the bench and hauled out a small black mongrel dog, which wagged its skinny tail at Kate and rolled over on its back. Kate sat down next to Robbo and stroked the animal.

“E’s called Satan,” Robbo said.

“Why?” Kate asked. “He doesn’t look like the Prince of Darkness to me.”

“Dunno. Vat’s what the bloke I got ’im off said ’e was called.”

“Tell me about Stark, Robbo.”

Robbo threw his now empty can into the road in front of a passing cyclist who was obliged to swerve. “Piss off. I got better fings to do van talk to you effing do-gooders.” He tried to stand, sat down again and on the second attempt rose to his feet. He gathered up his bag, untied Satan from the bench and shuffled off, slightly erratically, towards the town centre. Kate sighed. Robbo’s moods were mercurial, and he could switch from cheerful to abusive in a second and for reasons known only to himself. She went back indoors, where Elinor was sketching a seraph for Tom and Lucia.

When their guests had gone back to London, Kate made some enquiries about the man called Stark. None of the other homeless men who frequented the town centre knew him, but they could all testify to the fact that Robbo had been badly scared that night when he had fallen, and none of them would now risk sleeping in the porch, preferring the hospitality of the Methodists and Catholics. The Police Community Officer also drew a blank, but said he would make enquiries.

Kate also met up with the church’s ad hoc committee for the Festival of Light, self-selected members of the church parish council: Baz, Mo and Roger Mainwaring, who had once exhibited at the Royal Academy an oil painting of a dead fox and who was rumoured to be very rich. The rural dean, with whom Roger was

on good terms, had hopes that he would leave money to the church when he died, and since he was over eighty, this might be sooner rather than later, so Kate was under orders to keep him happy.

Kate told them about Elinor's seraph. Baz was ecstatic.

"A McQuaid installation. Here? In our church? I will think I've died and gone to heaven, if that isn't a blasphemous thought, Kate."

"Well, you might very well see seraphs in Heaven," she replied, "so, no, not blasphemous." Baz was new to the church, indeed to Christianity, and needed constant reassurance that he was doing it right. He had undergone a religious experience while cleaning paint brushes with turpentine substitute. God had spoken to him, he said, through the GCSE class's global warming collage. What the Almighty had said remained a mystery, but Baz was a convert from that moment. He was now one of only three regulars at morning prayer, which he attended wearing cycling tights for a quick getaway afterwards.

"A seraph?" Mo asked. "Bit scary, isn't it? What's wrong with cherubs and nice guardian angels?" She added wings and a halo to the caricature of the rural dean that she was doodling. He was notoriously holy.

"Nice isn't Elinor's thing," Kate said.

"Clearly not," Roger said. "How big will the blessed thing be, anyway?"

"Oh, I didn't think to ask. Perhaps I should have done."

"Yes, very probably. And where will it go? We don't want the church looking like a Catholic shrine, do we? Ecumenism is all very well once a year or so, but we don't want to take it too far, in my humble opinion."

Kate thought of the rural dean's great expectations and swallowed her reply. "It will need careful thought," she said instead, before moving the conversation on to the Mother's Union which had suggested that angel-shaped gingerbreads as well as angel cake could be made for sale at the church and at the WI market.

The Festival of Light was always held over the first weekend after Hallowe'en to provide a more uplifting counterpoint to the Night of the Dead. It was still six weeks away, and Kate was confident that the committee's plans were deliverable on time. The seraph would

be the *pièce de résistance*, and Kate contacted the local press to tell them that the church was to be the temporary home of a McQuaid work of art. The response was, as she had expected, enthusiastic, and a senior reporter (the word senior was stressed) was despatched to the vicarage.

Kate showed the reporter Elinor's sketch of the seraph and explained the creature's importance in the heavenly host and its traditional quality of fiery light and its three pairs of wings. She told him how the artist herself would be present for the grand unveiling and available for photos and, if she was in a good mood, which was not a given, for a brief interview. The reporter beamed. He foresaw a centre-page spread under his by-line, the acme of an otherwise lacklustre career covering council meetings and magistrates' courts.

"Now," Kate told him, "there is one thing you can do for me. I need to find a man called Stark."

She told him the story of Robbo's fear, and his fall, and more recently, his disappearance from the town. His friends put this down to Stark. When even *Amazing Grace* had failed him, Robbo could still be heard muttering "Stark. Stark." He had driven Robbo away, they said. Two men claimed that they had also seen Stark in the church porch, but their accounts were at odds. One said he was tall, wearing a blue shirt and smoking a cigarette. The other reported that he was of medium height, heavily built and tattooed. The Community Officer said that people's recall was often hazy, and that anyway, neither man could be sure that the person he had seen really was Stark since they had not asked him his name.

The senior reporter was more than happy to help, and true to his word, the next edition of the paper carried, as well as a prominent article about Elinor's seraph, a smaller but still quite detailed report about Stark, the so-called mystery man, who had been frightening homeless men seeking shelter in the church porch. Kate, for once, was quoted accurately as saying that she did not wish any harm to Stark, but only to ask him why he did what he did, and to offer help if he needed it. Kate emailed a link to the online version of the paper to Elinor, who replied with a succinct elucidation of her opinion of the press, but agreeing to a photo, at least.

That was the week the wall paintings started appearing. On

disused hoardings at first, small-scale depictions of the silhouette of a man, tall, saturnine, wearing a long, dark overcoat and a hat pulled low over glowing eyes, caught in the yellow beam of an invisible torch; underneath, the single word: Stark. Then a couple more appeared on the dilapidated side doors of boarded-up shops and finally, just before Hallowe'en, a fifteen-foot high version on the gable end of a house. Rumour was rife: were they, or were they not the works of Lucia, or, as some thought, merely an imitation? The answer would have more than artistic significance: a genuine Lucia was worth a great deal of money.

The seraph arrived at the church on the Friday morning before the festival began. Several burly men carried the huge box in which it lay up the steps, like undertakers at the funeral of a titan. Inside, it was carefully opened and the figure unwrapped. Elinor supervised its mounting on a plinth of chrome. Although the festival did not start until the next day, the unveiling was to be that evening, as the seraph really had to be seen in the dark. The Catholics and Methodists were, not unreasonably, upset that Kate seemed to be stealing a march on them, so she had invited their leaders and members of the congregation to a reception in the church hall afterwards to meet Elinor, though she had not yet mentioned this to the artist herself.

She was back in her own kitchen with Tom and Elinor when Lucia, who had been delayed in London, arrived, with a small, black dog in tow. It looked familiar.

"Isn't that Satan?" Kate asked.

"Certainly not. He is now Nathan. He doesn't notice the difference, and it's a much nicer name."

"How on earth did you come by him?"

"I'm looking after him while Robbo is in the detox ward. He's due out today so I said he could come and see Nathan before he goes into the hostel I found for him. When he gets a place of his own, they can be together again."

"Oh, so that's where he got to. That's great. Do you really think he can..."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Lucia said but Kate did not reply. Faith she had, but experience, too.

"So," she said, changing the subject, "is the street art yours? Have

you been visiting us in the night?"

"No, it's a wicked rumour," Lucia said, though Kate did not believe her. "The real news is that I know all about Stark."

"No! Do tell."

"You must wait." She would not be drawn further.

The unveiling was to take place at six that evening. Kate was at the church early, welcoming the guests: Baz, looking about him constantly, trying to spot Elinor; Mo and Roger, who eyed the shrouded seraph askance and sat together in a back pew, whispering; the ladies of the Mother's Union, providers of the spread in the church hall; Mrs Freeman who proffered a bumper-sized bag of mint humbugs to all new arrivals; the Catholics and the Methodists with their ministers. The rural dean arrived rather late and becassocked and flamboyantly embraced the Catholic priest, a diminutive Philippino who visibly cringed. He was thwarted from repeating the gesture with the Methodist minister who side-stepped at the last moment and offered a doughty handshake instead. Lucia came with Robbo, neatly dressed and apparently sober. Kate stood as near to him as she reasonably could and surreptitiously sniffed, but could detect no alcohol on his breath. He accepted a mint humbug from Mrs Freeman and sat quietly with Nathan at his feet between the senior reporter, who was having the most fun he had ever had in a church and Tom, who simply looked proud.

And then, finally, Elinor, queenly in scarlet and orange robes. Kate introduced her to the audience and signalled to the church warden, hovering by the door, to dim the lights. The church was black as midnight for a few seconds. Someone, Kate thought it was Lucia, said, "It's alright. I'm here." Perhaps the dog was frightened.

Then Elinor pulled the gauze from the seraph and pressed the discreet switch which lit it up. There was a communal gasp. Nine feet tall, its faceless head bowed, with lustrous furled wings of chrome and copper, the creature was hollow and through the snarled barbed wire of its body glowed a myriad of crimson and golden lights. Its beauty was terrifying.

It was also very short-lived. With an audible 'phut', all the lights were abruptly extinguished and the church was back in darkness. The churchwarden could be heard in the silence flicking the light

switch on and off, but without results.

“Sorry, looks like the whole circuit’s blown,” he called out into the gloom.

A woman cried out, and there was the sound of a chair being scraped back. The dog barked, and above it all a man’s voice: “Stark. It’s Stark. Please, please, no.”

All hell broke loose. Elinor swore, loudly, eloquently and blasphemously. People tried to leave, but could not find the door. Others shouted—*stay calm, stay calm*—the woman continued to cry out—*where’s my bag? I can’t find my bag*—the dog, trodden on, yelped and whined—a man cursed—*where’s the bloody mains box?*—another woman—*do you mind? Kindly watch where you are putting that*—until finally someone had the presence of mind to light the altar candles with one of the matches kept there for the purpose. The flickering glow illuminated a chaos of overturned chairs, bewildered faces and dog poo.

The reception was a muted affair. The rural dean remembered a pressing engagement and left early; Mo and Roger formed the centre of a clique congratulating themselves on their prescience in predicting a fiasco, even though none of them had; the Catholics and Methodists were kind, but Kate thought she detected a certain *schadenfreude* in their condolences. Only Elinor was upbeat. After the outburst of profanity, which was so shocking that half the audience had left without waiting for the reception, she was now entertaining Baz and Tom to some rather ribald insider gossip about the fashionable artists she knew. She had, however, told the senior reporter that she had no intention of talking about the unfortunate events of this evening, and he was making liberal use of the free bar, being determined to salvage something from this disaster.

Kate sat with Lucia and Robbo. The dog, exhausted by his earlier terror, slept at their feet.

“It was really quite obvious, once I’d thought about it,” Lucia said. “I went up to the church porch while we were staying here, and I thought about the way Robbo talks when he’s had a few and the penny dropped. I visited Robbo in the detox place and put it to him. He wasn’t saying ‘Stark’ at all. He was saying ‘it’s dark’, weren’t you, Robbo?” Robbo nodded, his mouth full of pork pie. “So, I asked

him if he was afraid of the dark, and he said he was.”

“Then Stark doesn’t exist?” Kate asked

“No, but I decided to use him in the wall paintings as a personification of the dreadful things that rough sleepers face every night.”

“Where did you get the idea? He looks quite terrifying.”

“From another man in the detox ward. The poor soul thought the devil was sitting on the end of his bed. DTs, I think. He described him quite clearly and I made a sketch.”

“But, I still don’t understand. It’s not dark in the church porch. We leave the light on. Tom.” She waved to her husband who came over. “We do leave the light on in the church porch, don’t we?”

“We did,” he said, “until someone kept smashing the bulb and leaving broken glass on the floor. In the end, I just took it out. I’m sure I told you.”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t remember. I get so tired my brain sometimes runs out of space. Who would do something like that?”

Tom had no chance to reply. Behind him, the door opened, bringing with it a gust of cold night air and another guest.

“I would,” the newcomer said, clearly enough to be heard across the room, “I would.”

The hubbub of chat stopped. In the silence, everyone turned to look at him, though none would meet his gaze. Only the dog, roused from sleep, trotted over to him, making happy snuffling noises of recognition.

“Hello, Satan,” the man said. “Come back to your master.”

Robbo whimpered, stood, shook off Lucia’s restraining arm and followed the dog.

“Who are you?” Kate asked, though she knew. She could not see his face between the hat pulled down over his forehead and the upturned collar of his long, dark coat, but she could see his eyes, which burned like coals.

“Stark.” He bowed slightly. “At least, that is one of my names. Never, ever, think that I don’t exist.”