

No 3

Part 4 CHRISTMAS

The house down the hill looks worse than ever. Tiles have gone from the roof, the brickwork looks terrible and all in all, it gives the impression it might fall down of its own volition. It seems strange to feel sorry for a building but there are moments when No 3 definitely makes me feel sad.

The spring garden was gorgeous. Summer came and went and I harvested the plums again, making goodies with them for whoever it was leaving the requests. Then, the autumn set in with all the beautiful colours cheering us before the onset of the bad weather. We had loads of those beautiful crisp, bright days you only get at that time of year.

Since the viewing, in spite of the strange things that were still happening, I'd lost some of my nervousness about the house. I knew it was empty and there could be simple explanations for everything, even if I couldn't work out what they were. I never went in, of course, but admired the garden every so often and took a peek at the outhouses to see what was happening to them. The recording studio was obviously in use, with things being moved around, boxes of new CD cases appearing on the floor, furniture being rearranged to make access more straightforward. Who was using it was anyone's guess. The library had changed as well. A small table had appeared with a chair and one of those battery powered lamps. Someone must be taking advantage of the wide variety of literature and reading in there. Very occasionally, a book would be left out but it didn't happen much. The reader was a lot more careful about keeping it tidy than the recording technician. Or maybe it was the same person, just with different attitudes to the two places.

I got no nearer to finding out about either No 3 or its owner and got used to the fact that I'd never know, but whoever it might be, he or she was benevolent and not going to hurt me.

I'd been walking my neighbour's dog, a gorgeous, elderly crossbreed called Juniper. She'd been found wandering, emaciated and frightened but had been rescued and rehabilitated to become what she was now - a much loved pet. Her 'mum' had broken a leg and a rota was in place. Because I worked at home, I did quite a lot more walking than the others but I didn't mind at all. I loved our walks and so did she. We met lots of new friends and some really sweet dogs on our trips out. No-one disliked Juniper. She was gentle, stately and very easy to take to.

We were sitting on the somewhat uncomfortable bench by the boating lake one afternoon, Juniper drinking very elegantly (*not*) from the water bowl provided by some thoughtful dog lover, me just watching the world go by lost in a little world of my own, when I realised we were sharing the seat with a guy carrying binoculars. We'd seen him before (mostly in the woody area), exchanged the usual pleasantries about the weather and the need for more dog waste boxes and how the world seems more intense when the temperature drops. He admired Juniper and she flirted outrageously with him; then he went on his way again. Over the next few days, we bumped into each other a lot and ended up strolling around together, admiring the shapes of the leafless trees and the surprising number of flowers around even at that time of year. He taught me loads about the birds on my regular routes, even helping me with their songs. Have you ever tried to learn? So many things to take into consideration but I can tell the difference between blackbirds and starlings now, can recognise robins singing and was surprised to discover that wigeons sound like those squeaky toy things you buy for your pets. It'd never really crossed my mind that watching birds is easier in winter when the trees are bare but when you think about it, it makes sense. I quite liked

him, to tell the truth, but you don't really think there's much chance of romance once you're out of your thirties, do you, and that decade was well and truly gone, so I told myself not to think along those lines. Still, it was nice having someone to chat to and learning more about birds was a massive bonus.

Idling away the time in my garden, the thought occurred that a few Christmas decorations would look good on the plum trees at No 3. I like having a project and it was fun rooting through the charity shops, finding things that'd be waterproof and look Christmassy. I wondered what the gardener would make of them but we so rarely bumped into each other, there was no chance to ask. I still don't sleep well, so there were nights when the darkness saw me beavering away in my back room making festive adornments for the fruit trees down the hill. Fiona helped me put them up and when we'd finished, they looked pretty good.

On my way to the supermarket the next day, I glanced over at the house half expecting to see some bits and pieces left out for me to make things but there was nothing. Maybe whoever had been leaving it all had moved on or lost interest in what was going on altogether. Who knows? I worried sometimes that it'd be bought and demolished to make way for half a dozen small houses or even a block of flats. I know people need and deserve a roof over their heads, but I'd come to love the garden and the plum trees. They were part of my life now and one that I would miss if it were taken away.

I'd just been to the RSPCA shop in the High Road and was making my way to my favourite coffee house when I saw the bird watcher come round the corner and disappear inside. Well, I was a bit concerned that he might think I'd deliberately followed him, but they know me well, so I went in anyway. They'd made it lovely, really cosy and welcoming. Bird watching man was fine, even seeming quite pleased to see me. We met up fairly regularly, either going to look for birds or popping into a café for a coffee and cake, sometimes both. Chatting about our Christmas plans, we reminisced about the carol concerts we'd been to over the years. Well, it doesn't matter how much you hate singing, whether or not you celebrate the season as a religious festival, even if you just wish it would all go away - at Christmas, we love to sing, don't we? The music is lovely and if nothing else, it reminds a lot of us of disastrous plays at primary school, parents and carers rooting for us (even though we're rubbish), Christmas markets, naff crackers and so many other minutiae that mark the passage of time. It's not a happy occasion for everyone, I know, and if it's not like that for you, I'm sorry. It can't be pleasant hearing me bang on about how much we love it. But for me and most of the people I know, it's an important landmark in the year, even when it's mixed up with sadness or regret.

Anyway, he asked me if I'd like to go to a concert with him. I said yes but as he doesn't drive, I suggested I pick him up if he could tell me where. His answer didn't really surprise me, to be honest.

'I live at No. 3.'