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The Reverend Richard Coles is a writer, broadcaster and an Anglican priest. He co-presented *Saturday Live* on BBC Radio 4 for a number of years and appears, from time to time, on *QI*, *Have I Got News for You* and *Would I Lie to You?* He has won *Christmas MasterChef*, *Celebrity Mastermind* twice and captained Leeds to victory in *Christmas University Challenge* in 2019. A contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing* (2017) and a third-place finalist on *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!* (2024), he exhibits huge bravery.

He writes regularly for the *Sunday Times*, and is the author of half a dozen books, including a bestselling autobiography, *Fathomless Riches* and the bereavement bestseller *The Madness of Grief*, written after the death of his partner, David Coles. The first three books in the Canon Clement series have all been no.1 *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

Also by The Reverend Richard Coles:

Fathomless Riches
Bringing in the Sheaves
The Madness of Grief

The Canon Clement Mystery Series:

Murder Before Evensong
A Death in the Parish
Murder at the Monastery
A Death on Location

MURDER UNDER THE MISTLETOE

A Canon Clement Mystery

The Reverend
RICHARD
COLES

W&N
WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON

Chapter One

It was a crisp, cold morning that Christmas Eve, and the remains of a light dusting of snow lay over Champton St Mary, like icing sugar on gingerbread. The parish church was gloomy, save a faint light that flickered at the east end, and it was locked, for what was happening in that flickering light was not something that could be made public, or not yet.

A couple were kneeling together at the altar rail. How many couples had knelt where they knelt in the seven centuries or more of hatching, matching and dispatching, generation after generation after generation? This couple, however, were perhaps the unlikeliest.

Canon Daniel Clement, tall and greying, usually so calm, was anxious. Next to him was Detective Sergeant Neil Vanloo, fifteen years younger, looking like he had just come from rugby training.

Then Daniel said, 'I can't do this.'

'Yes, you can.'

'I *can't*.'

Neil grimaced. 'You can. We've been through this.'

'But I can't.' Daniel stood up. 'Every year the same. The tree goes up and the decorations come down. Every year I dress it with – if I may say so – impeccable taste. Every year I festoon it with little white lights. All I want is little white lights, shining steadily, like stars in the night sky. And every year I can't stop them from twinkling like Santa's grotto.'

They were each holding a little plastic box with a switch and two green, twisted cables that led to the tree, or rather to the two strings of Christmas lights that Daniel had carefully wound round it.

Among the relentlessly twinkling lights hung plain silver baubles 'donated' by the Motcombe Hotel, or rather by the Honourable Honoria de Floures, who was a wedding planner there when it suited her, and quite often resident at Champton House, half a mile from the rectory and her family's seat since the Norman Conquest.

'We need to apply method,' said Neil. 'First, let's find the "off" position.'

Daniel knelt again and they pressed and pressed the switches on their respective boxes until the lights were extinguished altogether.

'Good,' he said, 'now ...' But as he spoke one strand began slowly to light up. He pressed the switch again, and Daniel pressed his switch again, and another erupted into fast blinks. They pressed and pressed again and soon the tree looked like it was infested with furious fireflies.

'Oh, blast,' said Daniel, 'and it's Christmas Eve ...'

'Leave it with me, Dan. It's a blue job, not a pink job.'

Daniel, irritated, switched off the plug board and the tree was suddenly extinguished. 'What are blue jobs and pink jobs?'

'Blue jobs: fixing, electrics, self-assembly furniture. Pink jobs: mince pies, sermons, choir practice. Your sort of jobs. Can't you go and fetch out the three kings or something?'

'I suppose so. I really don't like to, though; they're not meant to arrive at Bethlehem until Epiphany.'

'When's that?'

'Sixth of January.'

'Bit late.'

'Not according to the ancient tradition of the Church. Christmas begins at midnight tonight and lasts until Epiphany, twelve days later.'

'Tell that to Braunstonbury Woolworths. They had the reindeer out on Remembrance Sunday.'

'I did a funeral last week and they'd put Christmas decorations up on the crematorium gates. I was sitting in the hearse with a grieving family in the car behind and when we drove through the gates Santa's sleigh lit up and played "Jingle Bells".' Daniel got up, a bit creakily, and flexed his knees. 'If you sort out the tree, I'll get Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior and then maybe you could help me do the stable?'

'Blue job,' said Neil, switching on the Christmas tree lights' unpredictable flicker again.

Daniel went to the flower room, inviolable domain of the Flower Guild, where his predecessor had expended a considerable amount of goodwill wresting some space on top of a cupboard from its baleful suprema, Stella Harper. Eventually she had agreed to accommodate the three kings for the 353 days of the year when their attendance was not required, but under protest: 'Where am I supposed to keep the oasis and chicken wire?' she had complained. 'In your vestry, Rector? No, I thought not. And it's really not suitable for the Kings . . . they're plaster, aren't they? It's a wet environment, a *working* environment . . .'

There had been another kingly contretemps in his own day, after Bob Achurch, the

verger-cum-sexton-cum-tower captain, went on a course intended to stimulate children's ministry and came back unusually inspired. He decided to delight the youngest members of the congregation, and build anticipation for Christmas, by bringing out the three kings and – former Royal Marine that he was – deploying them in a strategic approach towards the crib, altering their position for each Sunday in Advent.

Daniel, caught between the rock of his punctiliousness and the hard place of wanting to look like he was empowering lay ministry, endured a fortnight before Anne Dollinger, Deputy Chairman of the Flower Guild, fortuitously fell over Balthazar and got rather nastily pricked by the basket of holly she was carrying. A health-and-safety assessment stalled the kingly progress and they went back to the top of the cupboard until Epiphany

He unfolded the mini stepladder, marked 'PROPERTY OF ST MARY CHAMPTON FLOWER GUILD' with DYMO tape, and brought the figures down. He unwrapped them on the counter: Caspar with his long white beard and gift of gold for a king; Melchior's beard grey, annoyingly chipped, with frankincense to mark the divine presence; Balthazar with myrrh for the tomb the baby would one day

lie in. Balthazar, in this set, was black, following an ancient tradition, only the artist had made him look more like Al Jolson than a prince of Yemen; worse, he was presented in a crouch of obeisance, which Daniel's brother, Theo, last Christmas said would have pleased the KKK.

Time to retire him, Daniel thought; time to get someone to donate a new trio they could arrange around the crib without inviting that sort of criticism. He knew better than to put this to the Parish Church Council, which would immediately be roused by the criticism, defending the traditional set for no other reason than it was the traditional set and change was always bad. No, better if an unhappy accident befell him.

'Daniel?' Neil appeared in the doorway. 'I've done it.'

In the sanctuary, the tree's illuminations shone with an unblinking white light.

'Whatever you do, don't touch them,' said Neil. 'It's harder to sync than the Last Night of the Proms.'

'I'll leave them on,' said Daniel, taking out the little block of Post-it notes and the felt tip he kept in one of the capacious pockets in his cassock. 'DO NOT TOUCH' he wrote in capitals and stuck it on the control box. 'Shall we do the stable?'

Bob Achurch had fetched the stable from the shed outside in which it was stored along with the lawnmower, the maypole and the May Queen's garlands, which had rather withered in their forty years of fluttering. For convenience, the stable broke down into pieces, which could be stored flat, but putting it together was as complicated as assembling Chippendale's Diana and Minerva commode, and the method known only to Bob, who guarded such knowledge zealously.

The stable stood to the north of the chancel arch, uninhabited, with some straw strewn on the floor and an empty manger in the middle. A row of lights concealed by the gabled roof shed light on the Nativity scene that would soon occupy the space.

Together, Daniel and Neil collected the remaining cast of characters awaiting installation: Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the ox and the ass, and some woolly sheep – not original to the set but which had been added to it by a long-departed Sunday School teacher in the Sixties, who had also introduced a gonk and a stuffed owl for a time until they were retired.

Together they placed them in a circle round the manger, adjusting them to get the sight lines right after Daniel noticed that Melchior was adoring the

ox rather than the Christ Child – or rather, the space where the Christ Child should be.

‘Where’s the baby Jesus?’ said Neil.

‘The bambino doesn’t appear until Midnight Mass.’

‘Bambino?’

‘The infant Jesus – in Italian. It’s a High Church affectation I haven’t quite been able to shake off yet.’

‘Just one bambiiiiinooo . . .’

‘He’s here.’ Daniel took out a bundle of bubble wrap and newspaper containing the plaster figure of the infant Jesus, surprisingly white and blond for a native of the Middle East – another anomaly that should be corrected. ‘We need to put him somewhere safe until his big entrance.’

He was looking around for a suitable spot when suddenly the door from the vestry burst open. Two red-brown creatures, as sleek as otters, came barrelling into the chancel and ran in circles round Daniel’s feet, squeaking with excitement, their tails wagging.

‘Cosmo! Hilda! How did you get in?’

He had left the rectory dachshunds in the kitchen, whining at the back door when he left for church, put out that they would not be accompanying him to Matins. ‘Stay!’ he had said. ‘It’s Christmas Eve,’ as

if that were sufficient explanation. ‘Be a good boy and a good girl!’ he’d cooed, in the baby language he used for no other creature in all creation.

Their entrance was followed by his mother’s, Audrey, wearing an apron so floury it gave what looked like a little puff of smoke when she patted it down. ‘Daniel!’ she said. ‘Emergency!’

Half a mile away at Champton House, at the centre of the parkland that separated it from the rest of the village, Lord de Floures and the Honourable Honoria de Floures, the favourite of his three children, were sitting at either end of the splendid dining table in the Rudnam Room, named after the de Floures estate in Norfolk and hung with paintings of a former Lord de Floures’ prized shorthorns. The table, which could seat fifty at its fullest five-pedestal extent, was currently configured to its shortest length, lest their guests at breakfast should feel isolated at its middle. On Bernard’s right was a pale woman with immaculately set hair the colour of artisanal honey, dressed – or rather overdressed – in a Bill Blass pink pinstriped suit and rather more jewellery than was suitable for breakfast. She was trying to smother a grimace. Opposite her was a man once handsome, you could see, although the

weight he now carried blurred his former sharpness and symmetry. He was wearing a three-piece suit in tweed that looked like the sort of thing an American might think was standard uniform for a winter visit to an English country house. The look was undone, however, by a pair of penny loafers that stuck out from his turn-ups as incongruously as clown shoes on a coroner. His hair – glossily black – also seemed wrong, too resistant to the years that had aged the rest of him.

The lady was Bernard's cousin Jane, who had grown up at Rudnam, left it as soon as possible, married into a fast set in London, then remarried into a faster set in New York and now lived with the man sitting opposite her, her third husband, Victor Cabot, on the Upper West Side, 'between Columbus and Amsterdam', which made Bernard think of galleons rather than brownstones. Her Christmas at Champton was quinquennial, or thereabouts, to spend time with her English cousins and refresh her sense of the grandeur and antiquity of her heritage. It was also intended to remind her husband of his great good fortune when she consented to be his wife – a pearl beyond price, or very nearly beyond price. Jane had never been a low-maintenance kind of girl.

She was grimacing because Bernard, or Bunny

as she alone called him, had invited them to join the family in their pew at church on Christmas morning.

'Such a celebration,' she said, 'and so *exhaustive*.' Last night they had endured the annual Champton House carol concert. A choir with a small but noisy brass ensemble had been crammed onto the great staircase, its banisters lit with candles, to entertain the tenantry, or rather the lawyers and surveyors and businesspeople who had replaced them in the houses and cottages the estate had sold off. Miss Wood LRAM, doyenne of the Braunstonbury Music Society, was in charge of the concert, and while rigorous with regard to repertoire, she was relaxed with regard to recruitment, so an ambitious programme was not always fulfilled thanks to the very mixed ability of her players and singers. It was an especially taxing 'We Three Kings' that had erased what shreds of seasonal goodwill Jane had managed to muster. There had been a stand-off between congregation and performers when they got to the *O-oh* preceding the chorus, which Miss Wood, quite properly, took without any *rallentando*, but for which the congregation slowed down in one of those few moments when it can seize control from the conductor, so the tempo was lost and the