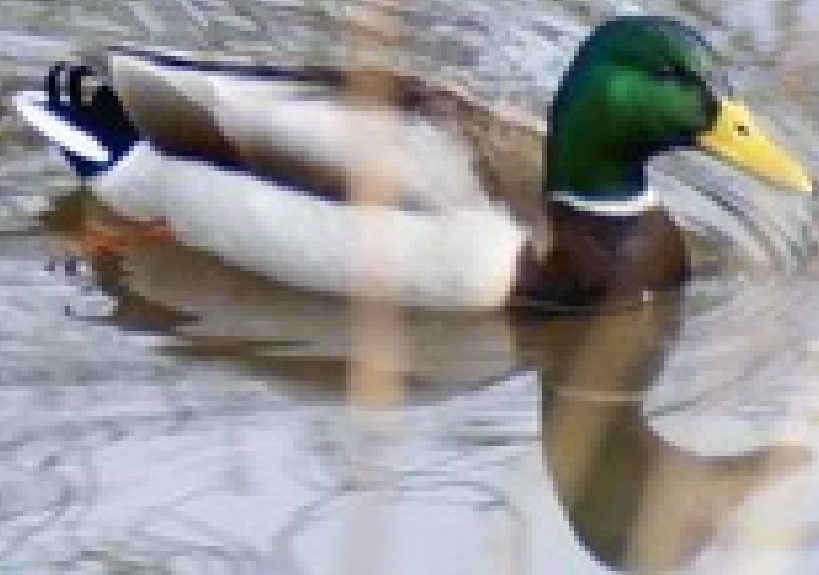


A Reformed Character

Cecilia Peartree



A Pitkirtly Mystery

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Chapter 1 The tyranny of the triple word score

Christopher was secretly pleased when a knock at the door interrupted their game of Scrabble. Playing Scrabble with Amaryllis was more of a journey through her past than a game, with arguments about whether the names of various kinds of weapon were in the dictionary or not. Her placing of 'Uzi' on a triple word score was particularly contentious.

'Don't answer it,' she suggested, peering at the board.

'I can't leave them outside in that downpour.'

It was because of the downpour that they were playing Scrabble in the first place. It was the only thing to do apart from listening to the rain battering at the metal roof of the caravan.

He pushed open the door. The person who had been standing on the step just outside fell off with a yelp.

'Sorry,' said Christopher, peering out. Surely it couldn't be dark this early in the afternoon? 'I don't know why the doors open outwards.'

Someone else darted forward to help the first person up. Christopher wondered uneasily if he should have listened to Amaryllis and not opened the door in the first place. They didn't know anybody here. These people might have knocked on the door with sinister intent. On the other hand, if that turned out to be the case he could rely on Amaryllis to stop them carrying it out.

'Mr Wilson?' said the young man, staring up at him through strands of wet hair. He had the hood of his sweatshirt up, and it was hard to see -

'Darren?'

'Yes.'

'What are you doing here?'

The girl who had helped Darren climbed the two steps and held out a hand to Christopher. Even in the twilight he could see that she was very pretty, with dark hair and big brown eyes. 'I'm Victoria,' she said, shaking his hand and smiling.

'Victoria,' he repeated.

'So - what brings you two here?' said Amaryllis, who had moved to Christopher's side lithely and silently as was her custom.

'You'd better come in,' said Christopher to Victoria. 'It's no use standing around out there getting drenched.'

'We're drenched already,' said Victoria, but she moved into the caravan anyway. Christopher extended a hand down to Darren and urged him up the steps. He edged his way past Amaryllis, who was watching like a cat. They stood in the middle of the lounge area, dripping all over the cream-coloured carpet. Christopher wondered if Mrs Stevenson had actually chosen cream or if it had been foisted on her by the caravan manufacturers. The colour didn't seem as if it would appeal to her.

Victoria was even prettier in the light. Her skin was olive and her features small

and neat.

Darren looked about the same as he had when they encountered him the previous year under difficult circumstances.

'You'd better take off your coats and shoes and dry them by the fire,' said Christopher.

Once they were all sitting down again - one thing the caravan had in ridiculous abundance was squashy seating - there was an awkward silence. Christopher knew from experience that Amaryllis believed in the power of the awkward silence to reveal secrets, but it just made him feel very uncomfortable. He said to Darren, 'I can't believe this rain! Where's it all coming from?'

Darren looked at him as if he had gone mad, Christopher felt stupid and Victoria came to his rescue.

'There's flooding on the railway track at Burntisland,' she said, nodding. 'The train only just made it through.'

'Oh dear,' said Christopher. 'Would you like something to drink?'

A hot drink. And maybe some toast. Refreshments would definitely smooth the social path.

He was on his way towards the kettle when Darren spoke.

'I'm on the run.'

Christopher's natural reaction would have been to say 'Wha-a-at?' or 'On the run?' in a stupid voice, but he forced himself to wait and see what Amaryllis said. Of course she said nothing. Darren looked from one to the other and at last added, 'From the police.'

'I hope you haven't brought them here with you,' said Amaryllis.

'I'm not that daft,' said Darren.

Amaryllis stared at him with an 'Oh, really?' expression until he said crossly, 'I'm not!'

'They won't think of following him here,' said Victoria. 'They'll never work it out.'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that,' said Christopher. 'You'd be surprised what the police can work out.'

'Well, never mind that just now,' said Amaryllis. 'What have you done this time?'

'I never done nothing - anything,' said Darren. 'I never done anything before either. They just blamed me for it. I've been going straight.'

'So you expect us to believe you didn't set fire to the village hall last year? Even though you appeared smelling of petrol just after the fire started and your prints were all over an empty fuel can found near the scene?' said Amaryllis.

'Amaryllis,' said Christopher quietly. She glanced round in surprise as if she had forgotten he was there.

'Aren't you supposed to be making toast?' she said to him. He got the message. He was to make toast and leave questions to people who knew how to do interrogations. He hadn't yet found out how many interrogations she had actually carried out during her career as a secret agent, but he could imagine the level of ruthlessness she could reach if the situation demanded it.

The rain increased in intensity and a gust of wind made the caravan shake. Christopher turned away to put the kettle on and start the toast. He tried not to think

about how precariously the caravan was perched, high on the cliffs above Kinghorn. Was this the kind of night when King Alexander III had accidentally ridden over the same cliff to his death?

‘They think he killed somebody,’ said Victoria into the sullen silence produced by Darren and Amaryllis both sulking at the same time.

‘Killed somebody?’

Christopher forgot himself and turned back towards the little group. He frowned, irritated that it had taken such a short time for him to butt in with a stupid question.

‘Toast,’ said Amaryllis.

He opened the bread-bin, still half-turned to see what was going on.

‘So, what makes them think you killed somebody?’ said Amaryllis to Darren. He hung his head.

‘He knew the person who died,’ said Victoria.

‘Who was it?’

‘A friend of his.’

‘A friend?’

Victoria shrugged, which Christopher noticed she did elegantly. ‘Just one of the gang.’

Amaryllis paused for a moment.

‘It’s not really a gang,’ said Victoria. ‘Not in a bad way. They’ve all been friends since they were at school.’

‘So this killing was within the gang – and the police think Darren had something to do with it? ‘Why’s that?’ said Amaryllis.

Christopher poured tea into the cups and saucers that had come with the caravan. They were cream-coloured too, with a ring of small flowers around each saucer. Again, he couldn’t imagine Mrs Stevenson choosing something so bland. From what he had seen of her house, the décor was a riotous clash of colours, much like her taste in woolly hats really. He found a tray, waited a few moments for the toast, and when it was ready he carried the refreshments over to the table, moving the Scrabble board to one side while being careful not to disturb the words already in place. He noticed that Amaryllis had managed to put ‘KGB’ on a double word score, presumably while he had been answering the door. He would have to remember to challenge that later.

Darren and Victoria still hadn’t answered the question when Christopher said brightly,

‘Tea and toast?’ We might even have some jam in the cupboard.’

Victoria daintily accepted a cup of tea and Darren grabbed a piece of toast as if he hadn’t seen food for days, although stuffing it all in his mouth in one go could have been a strategy to prevent him from being able to answer any more questions for a little while.

‘Who was this friend of Darren’s?’ said Amaryllis to Victoria.

She took a sip of tea.

‘Have you got any sugar?’

‘No,’ said Amaryllis.

‘It was Alan Donaldson. He’s a joiner – he works with his dad. He was a joiner, I mean.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘They found him in one of those new houses – at the edge of the wood. Up the hill a bit. He and his dad were working in there. He’d been stabbed – somebody said with a screwdriver, but I don’t know about that.’

She took another sip of tea.

‘So why should they think it was Darren?’ enquired Amaryllis.

Victoria glanced at Darren before replying. Christopher thought the boy shook his head slightly, but she pressed on anyway.

‘He was there when it happened.’

‘There on the scene?’ said Amaryllis.

‘Sleeping in the house,’ said Victoria. ‘He didn’t have anywhere else to go.’ She glanced protectively at Darren, who was slouched in the corner, a hand over his eyes as if he didn’t want to see the problem. ‘He didn’t know anything had happened though. He was still asleep when the police came.’ She looked from Amaryllis to Christopher and back. ‘He really didn’t do this, you know! I’m not just saying that. They’ve just picked on Darren because he’s been in a bit of trouble before and it was easy.’

‘Hmm.’ Amaryllis seemed unconvinced. She didn’t actually use her ‘oh, really?’ look this time but Christopher imagined she was having trouble suppressing it.

‘I wouldn’t do anything like that,’ mumbled Darren. ‘Alan was a friend of mine. We’d been through some – well, some trouble together. He was a mate. One of the guys. A pal.’

‘Yes, I think we understand that,’ said Amaryllis. ‘So – are you really on the run? Did they arrest you? How did you get away from them?’

‘I helped him,’ said Victoria in a small voice.

‘You do realise you’ll be in trouble too?’ said Amaryllis sternly.

Victoria nodded. ‘My dad’ll kill me.’

‘He’ll have to catch you first,’ Amaryllis observed.

She uncurled from the settee in one lithe movement and started to walk round the caravan interior. Christopher thought this was when she was at her most cat-like, although she didn’t have a herd of deer or even a flock of sparrows to stalk. The caravan was quite spacious but even one deer would have been a crowd.

‘How did you do it?’ said Christopher, sitting down beside Victoria. He knew it would take a little while for Amaryllis to work through all the implications and hidden potential in the situation. Better if nobody interrupted her while she was doing that, even although it was tempting just to watch her movements as she prowled around.

‘It was when they were taking him out of the house to get him into their car. I distracted them, and Darren ran,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t that hard. I didn’t even mean to do it - it just happened.’

‘And what made you come here?’

‘It was your friends. Darren said you all hung out at that pub down near the water -‘

‘The Queen of Scots,’ said Christopher helpfully.

‘Yes, that one. Well, we went in there and spoke to your friends. The great big fat guy, and the wee old woman with the funny hat.’

Christopher recognised Big Dave and Mrs Stevenson from this rudimentary description, although he didn’t think either of them would exactly be flattered.

‘Mrs Stevenson,’ said Darren, coming back to life and starting to smile. ‘She’s a good laugh. For an old woman.’

‘She told us where you were,’ said Victoria. ‘Then we came here. Before the police could catch up with us.’

‘But what made you think of coming to us in the first place?’ said Christopher, genuinely bewildered.

‘Darren said you were good at solving mysteries,’ said Victoria. ‘Like the Famous Five. Or - ‘ she stretched a point, ‘ - Sherlock Holmes. Or Miss Marple.’

‘Solving mysteries? But - ‘

‘He’s right,’ nodded Amaryllis, coming to a standstill in front of them. ‘That’s what we do.’

At this propitious moment, the caravan door opened again and, just as Darren slid under the table, presumably in a futile attempt to hide, Jock McLean burst into the lounge.

‘Here!’ he exclaimed, as the door banged shut behind him. ‘You’ll never guess who I thought I saw - ‘

His voice, which had started breathless either with excitement or with the after-effects of going for a smoke, tailed off as Darren pushed himself back on to the seat and looked up at them. ‘It is him,’ Jock finished lamely.

He cheered up almost at once. ‘You’ve caught him. Before he does whatever he’s planning to do.’

‘All he did was knock on the door,’ said Amaryllis.

Jock caught sight of Victoria.

‘Victoria!’

‘Mr McLean,’ said Victoria gloomily.

‘What are you doing here? You’re not - oh dear, oh dear.’ Jock shook his head. ‘You’re not with young Darren, are you?’

‘Yes,’ she admitted.

‘You got a problem with that?’ growled Darren.

Christopher, sitting next to him, could sense the aggression that was building up in the boy.

‘It’s OK, Jock,’ he said. ‘Darren’s already on the run from the law. He isn’t going to do anything bad here - he just needs our help.’

‘On the run? Have you ‘phoned it in to the police yet?’

He delved into his jacket pocket. Before he got his hand out again, Amaryllis lunged at him.

‘Don’t you dare!’ she said, grabbing the mobile phone he had brought out, and throwing it across the room. He stared at her, then shook his head again.

‘There’ll be trouble,’ he said.

As if the violent action had brought the phone to life, it started to ring.

They all stared at it as if they had never seen a mobile phone before.

Chapter 2 Band of outlaws

One reason for their surprise, Christopher realised as he considered whether to go over and pick it up or not, was that Jock had chosen 'YMCA' as a ringtone. Unfortunately he started to picture Jock dancing to the song, and then couldn't get the image out of his head.

Meanwhile Amaryllis went and picked it up, wordlessly handed it to Jock and left him to it.

'Hello?' said Jock.

He listened for a moment, then sat down with a thud on the settee. 'He's here... Yes. I know... What did you tell him that for?.. Nothing to do with me... I don't know!'

He switched off the phone. 'Never mind family emergencies,' he muttered. 'They'll just have to wait.' He looked round at them all. 'Jemima Stevenson. She was ringing to warn us that you two were on your way. Left it a bit late, didn't she?'

Christopher found the image of Jock dancing with the Village People had receded slightly, elbowed out by a vision of Jock as a garden gnome with a garishly painted mobile phone in one hand and his pipe in his mouth. Why was he having all these visions of Jock, anyway? He must be over-tired.

Amaryllis was frowning. 'They'll track us down. It's only a matter of time. We'll have to make the most of this breathing space. Tell us everything you know about Alan Donaldson,' she said to Darren.

Darren wrinkled his forehead, which evidently meant he was deep in thought. After a few moments, he said, 'He was at school with me. We used to hang out when we both had ASBOs. We went round to some house his dad was working on and had a few pints.'

'Did he have other friends? A girl-friend?'

Darren narrowed his eyes as well as wrinkling his forehead this time, as if the question was even more difficult.

Eventually he said, 'He was one of the guys. He once went out with Kylie McDougall. But she was a slag.'

'Kylie McDougall?' said Victoria. 'He never went out with her. It was Kimberley Davidson!'

'Never mind all that,' said Amaryllis hastily. 'Anything else? Was he involved in your recent activities?'

'Recent activities? What's that supposed to mean?'

'In the last year or so. Did he help you to burn down the village hall, for example?'

'I told you, I didn't - ... No, he wasn't interested in that. Said he was busy that night.'

'Busy with what?'

'How should I know?'

'Ha!' said Jock. 'Wait till the police get their hands on you. You'll know then, all right!'

‘He can’t remember things he didn’t know in the first place!’ cried Victoria. She put her hand over Darren’s and glared at Jock. The glare made her brown eyes harden like rain-washed pebbles. Christopher blinked and reminded himself she was young enough to be his daughter. He had never thought of himself as a cradle-snatcher before.

‘How’s that brother of yours?’ said Jock suddenly to Victoria. ‘What was his name again? Carlo?’

‘Giancarlo,’ she said brusquely. ‘He’s fine.’

‘What do you know about the family?’ said Amaryllis to Jock.

He jumped. ‘We’re not at Guantanamo Bay now, you know. Keep your hair on... They were in my so-called guidance group. At school. Guidance! You couldn’t guide some of that lot with a Border collie and a cattle prod!’

‘What about Darren?’ said Amaryllis.

‘Never saw him in the school,’ said Jock. ‘The truancy woman practically lived on his doorstep.’

Darren and Victoria glared in unison.

‘It wasn’t his fault,’ said Victoria. She pushed a strand of curly black hair aside with a slender hand, and turned to smile at Darren. Even if Christopher hadn’t already had bad experience of the youth, he would have started to have evil thoughts on seeing that smile. What had Darren ever done to deserve it?

‘Wait a minute!’ said Amaryllis suddenly. ‘Giancarlo and Victoria – what’s your last name?’

‘Petrelli,’ said Victoria, not even looking round.

‘I know your mother – and your grandma,’ said Amaryllis. ‘From Cosy Clicks.’

‘Cosy what?’ said Christopher. He had never thought of Amaryllis as at all cosy, or indeed as a member of some women’s group – they had laughed often enough at Maisie Sue McPherson and her quilting friends.

‘It’s a knitting and crocheting group,’ said Amaryllis.

‘It sounds like some sort of weird dating agency,’ growled Jock.

Amaryllis laughed.

‘It’s all women, and we just knit and crochet and chat.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Jock. ‘It’s one of those excuses for women get together to gripe about men. It’s all they ever talk about – apparently.’

‘Is Mrs Stevenson in the group?’ said Christopher. He couldn’t imagine any other reason for Amaryllis to attend.

‘No,’ said Amaryllis. ‘She said she couldn’t stand the nastiness of it. Thought it would be disloyal to Big Dave for her to take part. Said she had enough to do with her scrapbooks.’

‘Then why - ?’

‘I’ll tell you about it later,’ said Amaryllis firmly. She smiled at the young people in a way that was possibly intended to be benevolent, but was in fact, Christopher thought, slightly scary. It was the kind of smile an interrogator might use just before delivering the coup de grace, after which he (or she) would indulge in a burst of insanely evil laughter. Or the smile on the face of the crocodile as it prepared to jump out of the slimy river and bite your head off.

Where were all these weird ideas coming from? Had Amaryllis spiked his drink

earlier when he was distracted by seeing 'alqaida' on the Scrabble board?

'They own the ice-cream shop down near the harbour,' said Jock. 'Petrelli and Son. Is Giancarlo the son?'

'No – my father was the son,' said Victoria. 'My grandfather came over from Naples and set up the business in the first place.'

'Is any of this relevant?' said Christopher, although he would have quite liked to pretend nothing untoward had happened and spend the rest of the evening listening to tales of old Naples and watching Victoria fiddle with her hair.

'It's background,' said Amaryllis.

'Deep background,' said Jock, nodding in agreement.

'But let's try and fill in the foreground now,' said Amaryllis. 'Why were you sleeping in the house, Darren?'

'He had a fight with his mum,' said Victoria.

'Darren?' said Amaryllis.

'What?'

'Have you got anything to add to that? When did you have the fight with your mum? What was it about?'

Darren looked down at his feet in their rather impressive trainers. 'Nothing,' he mumbled.

'What sort of nothing?' said Amaryllis.

'She wanted me to go and ask Alan's dad for a job.'

'Alan Donaldson's dad? You mean a job on a building site?' Amaryllis sounded slightly incredulous, as well she might, thought Christopher. It didn't seem like the ideal job for someone with a history of arson.

'She thought I should learn a trade.'

'Quite right too,' said Jock McLean with spirit. 'There's far too much time spent in schools these days on ethics and self-confidence and computers, and not enough on practical stuff. If kids even bother to turn up to school at all, that is.'

As often happened, Jock's argument had gone round in a circle and ended up biting him in the foot.

'So she wanted you to ask Alan's dad for a job, and you didn't want to, but you went to the house where he was working anyway?' said Amaryllis. When she put it like that, it sounded extremely suspicious. Christopher wasn't surprised that the police hadn't looked any further than Darren.

Darren shuffled his feet without looking up. 'Sort of. Yeah.'

'Did you speak to Alan's dad?'

'No way.'

'Did you speak to Alan?'

'No - not really... Well, yeah.'

'What do you mean?' Amaryllis looked at her watch. Christopher didn't think she was used to villains giving her the runaround. Probably they just caved in right away before she shot them. He wondered how close she might come to wanting to shoot Darren. He suddenly remembered she usually went to the on-site fitness suite at about this time of day. She would be getting restless by now, muscles aching to have a good stretch - at least, so he imagined, as someone who wouldn't even dream of setting foot in the fitness suite, or anywhere with the word 'fitness' in its name. The only reason he

could imagine how she felt at all was that he knew what it was like to need a mental stretch after being cooped up with certain people for any length of time. 'Certain people' included but were not limited to members of the public he encountered in his job at the Cultural Centre, Council officials of any shape or form, and the woman who used to work at the glitzy furniture shop in Pitkirtly High Street until it closed down amid rumours of people smuggling.

'Alan and me went out together. For a drink. Down the old railway yard.'

Victoria scowled, doing that as elegantly as she did everything else. 'I told you not to go there any more.'

Darren sighed. 'I need a drink now.' He glanced up at last. 'Got any beer?'

'No,' said Amaryllis. 'But if you answer a couple more questions we can heat up the microwaveable Chinese banquet for you.'

The microwaveable Chinese banquet had been a bone of contention all along. It sat in the small freezer like Edgar Allan Poe's telltale heart, containing in its noodles and bean sprouts the story of an argument over sleeping arrangements that had ended with her purchasing the ready meal as a joke peace offering. Well, it had really ended with Christopher having to share a very small bedroom with Jock McLean.

Darren started to kick the table-leg. 'Don't like Chinese,' he complained.

Victoria punched him on the arm. 'That's rude,' she said. 'We're guests here - we should eat what they give us.'

'What happened at the old railway yard?' persisted Amaryllis.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'That's just where we go - used to go.'

'To hang out with other friends?'

'Yes.'

'So what happened?'

Darren began to look puzzled. 'We had a drink or two. There were four of us - maybe five....Dunno.'

'Dunno? What's that supposed to mean?'

'Don't know,' he said. 'Can't remember.'

'Can't remember? How long ago was this?'

'Day before yesterday,' said Victoria.

'Brain like a sieve,' Jock McLean interrupted. 'That's what you get for skiving off school, young man. Wasting the best years of your life.'

'Just go through exactly what you can remember,' said Amaryllis. 'Maybe it'll all come back to you... Why don't you two start the meal?'

She gestured to Christopher and Jock.

'I'll nip out for a smoke first,' said Jock. He smiled in that evil way of his. 'Unless you want me to light up in here?'

'Got a spare ciggy?' said Darren hopefully.

'I'm a pipe-smoker. You wouldn't like it. Only grown men appreciate the joys of a pipe of good tobacco,' said Jock, and went out, causing a gale to blow rain through the lounge. Christopher let his glance loiter on Victoria as she wiped a spot of moisture from her face with one delicate hand; then he forced himself to turn away.

He wasn't really watching the others or listening to them, but he had a sense of huddles being formed and voices being lowered as he went about the mundane task of preparing the microwaveable Chinese banquet. Amaryllis could be simply running

through Darren's account of the gathering at the old railway yard, but she might try and use the opportunity to further a more sinister, hitherto unsuspected purpose of her own which just happened to overlap with what Darren and Victoria wanted. He was used to that, and had learned to ignore it, blotting out all probable consequences from his mind. He just hoped she wouldn't end up getting young Victoria involved in her machinations. The Petrelli family might get the wrong end of the stick about what had happened here and they might even blame him for any fallout..

Jock burst in again. For a moment Christopher tensed, fearing some drama such as a police siege, but then he realised it was impossible to come through the door in this weather without seeming to burst in.

'Is it ready?' said Jock. He came into the kitchen area and started poking around among the boxes. 'Why have you done the rice first? What's this stringy thing? Why aren't there any prawn crackers?'

If I can get through the next ten minutes without losing my grip, thought Christopher, I won't be so tempted to kill Jock. He relaxed slightly and breathed in deeply, which was not necessarily a good idea in such a confined space.

In the end Darren and Victoria demolished most of the banquet. It was about as unappetising as it had always sounded, but Victoria confessed that they hadn't had anything to eat all day – they had been afraid to stop moving for long enough to eat. How could Darren put Victoria through that? Christopher asked himself. As he was clearing up, he heard Amaryllis trying to get the others to agree to an evening stroll. The idea was strongly resisted by Darren, who seemed to feel safe in the caravan, but Amaryllis eventually prevailed, as she usually did. Jock said he would sit and read the paper, since he had already had fresh air during his recent smoking break.

The gale blowing outside was certainly enough to get rid of any cobwebs, but it had stopped raining, and Christopher noticed a pale half moon, its light glinting on the wild sea in a bright riot of pattern. He could hear the waves crashing to the shore somewhere below them. No gulls – who were presumably sound asleep – and no children shrieking. Apart from the fact that they were harbouring a fugitive and would almost certainly be in more serious trouble than ever before when the law caught up with them, it was practically idyllic.

Then above the sound of the waves came another noise – a screeching, wailing in the distance that got louder and louder – and the pale moon was almost eclipsed by the flashing of blue lights.

'Police! Run!' said Amaryllis, and Darren and Victoria took off, darting in and out between the rows of caravans, tripping once over a fiddly ornamental fence, bumping into a clothes-line, heading closer to the edge of the cliff all the time.

Christopher couldn't help himself. He had already started after them by the time they disappeared over the edge. For once he didn't care what Amaryllis thought, or did, or discerned from his actions. He had to see what was happening, he had to try and help even if it meant putting his life on the line.

Chapter 3 Smile - you're on camera!

Of course if Darren and Victoria had had any sense they would have gone over the edge in a place where the land sloped down towards the centre of the bay in a gentle unthreatening expanse of green, punctuated only by clumps of gorse bushes. But when Christopher arrived at the place where Darren and Victoria had vanished, he groaned aloud. It was a sheer drop.

They had chosen to clamber down the rocky headland on this horrible night when if the wind didn't blow you off the cliff face, you would slip on the wet rocks and crash to a messy death like King Alexander III. He could see two pale shapes down there on the left, moving along at a fair speed. Of course they were younger and perhaps more desperate than he was. But maybe if he demonstrated his bravery by following them on their perilous journey, they would repay him by agreeing to give themselves up to the police. He suspected Amaryllis of suggesting this way of escape to them. She had appeared to consider herself outside the law on several occasions in the past; she was certainly capable of aiding and abetting fugitives, or obstructing the police, or whatever it was called nowadays.

At that moment he thought he heard someone speaking through a megaphone. He risked a glance behind him.

Flashing blue lights surrounded a caravan in the middle distance; as he watched, horrified, he saw its door open and a figure appear with its hands up. Jock McLean? The siege hadn't lasted very long. He hoped Jock would stand his ground and deny everything. It hadn't been his fault, after all - he was just an innocent bystander.

Behind him he heard someone shouting; then a yelp from below galvanised him into action. Had Victoria slipped? Should he rush to her rescue?

Christopher slithered over the edge, feeling the wet grass under him and then wet slippery rock. He had no idea whether there was a foothold or not. He slithered a bit further and to his relief, his foot knocked against something. It might be a ledge or just a knobbly bit of rock. He lowered himself until he was standing on it. It must be a ledge, though by the pale moonlight he couldn't tell how long or how wide it was. He began inching along, back to the rocks, walking sideways and peering into the night for a sign of the others.

The ledge ran out and he still hadn't seen them again. He was worried about the yelp, but he hadn't spotted any ominous bundles of anything down on the beach under the cliffs, so he hoped whatever was wrong it was just a minor thing, a temporarily twisted ankle, a scraped wrist. He had already suffered from both these minor injuries. He imagined he could feel blood trickling down his hand from the wrist scratch. What if he bled to death out here, or got hypothermia? Blood loss would almost certainly make hypothermia more likely. He stood still, afraid to move. He had come to his senses, too late to stop himself from doing this at all and just in time to make himself look stupid in everyone's eyes. Well, all right, in Amaryllis's eyes. The only comfort was that she had already seen him looking stupid on a number of occasions, and they were still friends - just about. And this was all her fault anyway.

Sliding down to sit on the rock shelf - the moon had brightened now and he had

established his refuge was big enough to sit on - Christopher thought he saw another ledge a little below and to the left of where he was. Or maybe it was just a dark place in the cliff. But he could try and use it to get closer to the others. It would be silly to get this far and fall short. He rewound his thoughts and erased the word 'fall'.

He reached out with his left foot and thought he felt something solid. Now all he had to do was put his weight on that foot, swing his other -

The ledge he imagined he had seen turned out to be nothing more solid than a clump of grass. His left foot slipped on it, his whole body swung round and suddenly he was facing the rocks of the cliff face, one foot on the first ledge and the other swinging in mid-air, unable to move. He clung to an uneven patch in the rock with one hand, while finding a clump of grass just to the right and grabbing on to it with the other hand.

'Christopher,' said a voice above him.

He cricked back his neck to try and see something, but the rock overhung just enough to prevent him from doing so.

'It's me,' said the voice.

'Amaryllis?' he croaked. His voice sounded so thin and cracked that he could hardly hear it himself, so he wasn't sure if she had been able to make out that one desperate word.

'Yes. Hold on. I'll get you out of there, but just one thing...'

'What?'

'I apologise in advance. There's no excuse for what I'm going to do next. It's too good an opportunity to miss, but you'll probably kill me.'

'I'm not the one who goes around armed to the - aagh!' said Christopher, getting a mouthful of earth and small stones as she dislodged some loose bits and pieces at the top. What was the woman talking about? Was she planning to get him arrested? To leave him there all night? To send Jock down to join him?

He clung on, more apprehensive by the minute.

A commotion above made him tense up and cling on even more tightly. He panicked about entrusting his life to Amaryllis - not that she had ever let him down before, but they had been arguing a lot over Scrabble words. Was she any more reliable than a clump of grass?

'Christopher! Don't do it!' he thought he heard her shout, but in a voice that was almost unrecognisable: high, light, girlish.

'Keep hanging on, sir,' said a deeper, calmer voice up above him. 'No need to do anything silly now.'

'Can't - much longer.' puffed Christopher.

'We can sort things out!' called Amaryllis. 'Just don't do this!'

Yes, fine for her to say that, thought Christopher crossly, when she got me into this mess in the first place - as usual.

He waited. A discussion seemed to be going on up there, but he couldn't make out any of the words. Why didn't they send someone down the way he had come? What was taking so long? He thought he saw the faint echoes of blue flashing lights in the dark sky - was he hallucinating, or would that really happen?

After a while - it seemed like at least an hour but he didn't think it could possibly be that long - it was as if someone switched the lights on. The whole cliff face was lit

up. When he turned his head to one side and the direction of his gaze downwards, he could see right down to the sea. It looked closer and more menacing than before. He hastily turned his gaze upwards.

‘Don’t panic, sir!’ shouted someone from above. ‘We just need to see what we’re doing. Health and safety rules.’

What about my health and safety? fumed Christopher to himself. That seems to come last in everybody’s calculations.

At last there was movement from the top of the cliff. Because his head was now turned to the wrong side and he didn’t dare move a muscle in case he dislodged himself and fell, Christopher couldn’t see what was happening, but a few minutes later someone said, almost into his ear, ‘Hold tight while I get this rope round you - you’re not going to jump, are you? You’d take me with you if you did, and I’ve got a young family so you wouldn’t want to do that, would you?’

While the low voice rambled on, Christopher realised the rope had been tied round him, and soon he felt himself lifting into mid-air. For another moment he clung to his hand-holds, and then he released them, hoping he hadn’t hallucinated the comparative security of the rope.

He was hauled up and over the edge in an undignified manner, and fell in a heap at the top. Amaryllis ran over and flung her arms around him.

‘Thank goodness!’ she said.

He couldn’t quite unravel himself as quickly as he would have liked, in order to stand up, but then he realised someone else was speaking anyway.

‘... from the cliff top at Kinghorn, where a swift, efficient rescue operation has just taken place... ‘

‘You’re live on 24 hour news,’ Amaryllis murmured into his ear. She gave him a quick hug which he chose to interpret as a warning, and let him go.

‘Well, this really is an extraordinary sequence of events,’ said the voice he had heard before. ‘The West Fife police have rounded off their evening by rescuing a would-be suicide from the top of the cliffs at Kinghorn. I’m just about to see if I can have a few words with him.’

Christopher stood up at last, swaying a little in the wind. Rain spattered his face, and voices seemed to come and go as words were whisked away and lost for ever in the air.

There was a circle of men in police uniforms around him, and Jock McLean stood in the middle distance, apparently speaking on a mobile phone. He gave Christopher a thumbs-up sign. A young girl who looked about sixteen advanced through the ring of policemen with a big furry microphone in her hand. A young man of about eighteen followed with a large camera. The lights were in Christopher’s eyes.

‘What am I going to do?’ he muttered to Amaryllis, who seemed intent on staying by his side throughout. He hoped this was to protect him, but he knew it could equally be so that she could sell his story to the media.

‘Say as little as possible,’ she advised.

This proved to be quite easy. They only wanted a few words from him, after all, and he knew they would probably distort even those. It must have been a slow day on the 24 hour news channels.

‘How did they get here so quickly?’ he asked Amaryllis an hour or so later, when

the reporter and photographer and police had left at last, and they were back in the caravan eating toast. Christopher wasn't sure that the police were entirely convinced the three of them hadn't harboured a fugitive and perverted the course of justice - that was the phrase he had been trying to think of earlier - but apparently they were satisfied for the moment.

Amaryllis smiled. 'The news team didn't come here for you. They're ambulance-chasers.'

'Ambulance? Has somebody been hurt?'

'No, in this case they were following the police around, covering the murder case. They arrived about two minutes after the police cars.'

'Jemima and Dave saw you on the telly,' said Jock, nodding with satisfaction. 'I got her to put on News 24 and she was just in time. Said you looked like a ferret in the lights... Or maybe it was a rabbit.'

'How did the police get here so quickly anyway?' said Christopher, ignoring Jock and hoping that if he pushed the idea of being on television out of his head, not only would he forget the whole incident but so would everyone he knew. He didn't want to be walking down Pitkirly High Street one day and have everyone pointing at him and laughing about what an idiot he had been.

'They put out an APB,' said Amaryllis, 'and the local policeman noticed Darren and Victoria getting off the train at Kinghorn. They don't get many strangers here at this time of year. He called it in, and they checked with the caravan park and found somebody walking their dog had seen them knocking at our door and told the manager because they thought Darren was up to no good... Dog-walkers! Why do they do it?'

'What?' said Jock. 'Have dogs, or be vigilant about what's going on around them, as public-spirited people are meant to do?'

Amaryllis gave him a sour look. 'They're always getting in the way and seeing things they're not meant to see... and the dogs aren't much better.'

'Did you tell Darren and Victoria to go over the cliffs?' said Christopher. He had been mulling over this ever since he had been rescued.

She shrugged. 'It was only an idle suggestion. It was up to them whether they actually did it or not.'

'They should have given themselves up,' said Christopher. 'But I don't suppose you've got any sympathy with that point of view.'

'It's a point of view,' said Amaryllis. 'I can see why you think that.'

'Did you find out any more from them about what happened?' said Christopher. He could have got cross with Amaryllis for organising his rescue in such a melodramatic way. But she had apologised, after all. There was really nothing more to be said about it. They were all still alive. A small nagging voice that wouldn't be silenced kept reminding him of Victoria, out there in the storm, and asking him if he thought Darren would really look after her, but he got used to it after a while and then found he couldn't hear it any more. 'At the murder scene. Or in the railway yard.'

'Yes! Lots!' she said. 'There were four of them then - and now there are three.'

Chapter 4 Four men, three men, two men and their dog, Spot

Christopher shivered. Jock crunched a piece of toast. They gazed at Amaryllis very much, she thought, like children starved of stories.

'I know who was there,' she said. 'In the yard, that is. I still don't know about the murder scene - Darren was a bit vague about that. He didn't seem to be able to remember even going to the house, although he was quite clear about waking up there this morning.'

'He'd be too drunk to remember anything,' said Jock with grim satisfaction. 'That's what they do - drink themselves senseless to dull the pain of everyday life and the prospect of death.' When the others stared at him he added, 'I've not got personal experience of that kind of thing, mind you - it's just what I've heard.'

'So - what happened in the yard?' said Christopher.

Amaryllis's eyes gleamed. 'We've got several lines of enquiry to follow up. There were four of them in the yard that night - five if you count Victoria.'

'Why wouldn't you count Victoria?' said Christopher indignantly.

She gave him a sidelong, mischievous glance and carried on. 'The four I'm counting are

Darren, Alan Donaldson himself, a friend of theirs from Aberdour who used to live in Pitkirtly called Zak, and another boy they used to know at school called Stewie. Victoria came along towards the end of the session - in time to help Alan Donaldson get Darren back to the house. She said she was afraid they would leave him lying in the yard all night.'

'She's far and away too good for him,' said Jock.

'The beauty of it,' said Amaryllis, 'is that I happen to know Zak's mother. Penelope Johnstone - with an e and a t.'

'Cosy Clicks?' said Christopher.

'Exactly... There's nothing like joining a Cosy Clicks group for really getting to know what's going on in a place.'

So that was what was behind her sudden interest in affairs of the needles. Christopher hoped that meant she had given up her old hobby of prowling around at night observing things around Pitkirtly. He had often worried about her doing that, although he tried not to let her sense his concern in case it made her even more reckless - as if she still had anything to prove.

'The trouble is,' she continued, 'we might need to go home a day early - Friday's Cosy Clicks day, and I don't want to miss it this week. They'll be talking about the murder, and I want to hear what they've all got to say.'

'Go home a day early?' said Christopher. 'I think I can cope with that.'

Suddenly he felt almost light-hearted. One less night of lying awake in that confined space listening to Jock McLean making strange mumbling sounds in his sleep; one less day of playing Scrabble in the caravan while the rain battered on the roof, or of looking in shop windows in Burntisland and wondering if anyone was

going to buy the cake with the cerise icing. Spending an impulsive out of season week in Mrs Stevenson's new caravan had seemed like a wild, impetuous, fun thing to do at a moment's notice - now it just seemed insane. Of course, thought Christopher darkly, Jock McLean hadn't been meant to come with them. He had invited himself along by simply turning up at the bus stop as they were leaving. Without him it could all have been quite different... leisurely walks with Amaryllis, long dark cosy evenings, intimate dinners for two... He dismissed these fantasies from his mind. There was no way spending a week in Kinghorn in a caravan in March would ever have turned into a romantic Caribbean idyll, and he was fooling himself if he had ever imagined it might.

'No disrespect to Jemima Stevenson,' said Jock McLean the following morning on the way to the station, 'but I wish she'd chosen somewhere better for a holiday home.'

'Jemima's very pleased with it,' said Amaryllis reprovingly. 'She said she'd always dreamed of having a holiday caravan of her own.'

'But why didn't she get one further away?' said Jock. 'Dunoon - Pitlochry - Malta.'

'I don't know that they have caravans in Malta,' said Christopher. 'What's so great about Malta, anyway?'

'Dunno.' Jock shrugged his shoulders. 'What have you got against it?'

'It's an island,' said Christopher darkly. 'Once you're there, you've got to stay there. Trapped. At the mercy of the people you're with.'

'You might just as well say that about here,' pointed out Jock. 'And it rains as well.'

'At least when we get home I won't have to put up with you two bickering all the time,' said Amaryllis. 'It's like taking two primary school kids away on holiday.'

Jock McLean sulked for most of the journey home, which at least meant they didn't have to listen to any more of his ramblings about Malta.

Pitkirtly was much the same place as it had been when they left it five days before. Or at least, when they got off the bus Christopher thought it was the same place. But on the way up the High Street something suddenly seemed different. He glanced at the others sideways to see if they had noticed anything.

There was a large talking ham outside the butcher's shop. As they got closer it turned into the butcher's assistant wearing a ham-shaped outfit that seemed to be made of pink spongy stuff. His arms and legs were sticking out incongruously.

'Cram in some ham!' he said as they passed. There was a banner across the shop window saying 'Have a Sandwich for National Ham Week.' The talking ham tried to hand them a leaflet, which Amaryllis avoided by the simple expedient of pushing the others off the pavement.

'Look out!' complained Jock. 'There could've been a car coming.'

'There wasn't,' said Amaryllis. 'Anyway, do you really want to be given a leaflet by a talking ham?'

The ham stared mournfully after them. Christopher, glancing back, wondered whether to run back and take a leaflet.

'Don't do it,' said Jock, reading his mind. 'It'll only encourage them.'

Whatever next? thought Christopher. Talking knitting needles outside the wool shop, prodding and poking at passers-by until they gave up and went in; fragrant

people dressed up as perfume bottles outside the chemist's, polluting the air for miles around with wildly conflicting scents. Talking books outside the library might be an idea, though... Hmm.

He had only been home ten minutes when the door-bell rang.

'We wondered if you were all right,' said Mrs Stevenson. 'After your ordeal.'

Obviously she wanted to get the low-down on their stay in the caravan. Big Dave, just behind her solid as a rock, gave an apologetic smile. Christopher couldn't do anything but graciously invite them in.

'It was great, thanks,' he said as they invaded his kitchen. Dave opened the cupboard and took out the biscuit tin.

'A bit wet, wasn't it?' he said.

'Not that bad,' lied Christopher.

'You get a lovely view on a clear day,' said Mrs Stevenson.

Christopher couldn't remember having experienced any clear days while they were in the caravan.

'So what did you do with yourselves?' Mrs Stevenson continued after a pause.

'Don't be silly, Jemima,' said Dave, filling the kettle. 'What do you think Christopher and Amaryllis found to do with themselves stuck in a caravan when it rained all the time for a week? What if it had been you and me? What would we have done?'

Christopher struggled to prevent a blush spreading right up his neck and over his face. He sprang to his feet. 'Here, let me do that,' he said, wresting the kettle out of Dave's hands. 'Would you like some toast?'

Mrs Stevenson went very quiet for a few moments. Surely she wasn't imagining the same thing that had popped into Christopher's head?

'Played Scrabble?'" she said at last. Dave and Christopher both roared with laughter, possibly for quite different reasons.

'What was it like being on the telly?' said Dave later, as they sat round the table eating biscuits.

Christopher shrugged his shoulders.

'There was nothing to it really,' he said. 'Going down the cliff was the scary part.'

'Why did you do that?' said Mrs Stevenson. 'Was it Amaryllis?'

'What do you think?' said Christopher. 'She made me go after Darren and Victoria.'

Dave shook his head. 'Oh, man,' he said. 'One of these days you'll have to stand up to that woman. You don't always have to do what they tell you, you know.'

'Oh, no?' said Christopher, looking from Dave to Mrs Stevenson and back sceptically.

'You looked awful pale and washed-out on the news,' said Mrs Stevenson.

'It was the lights,' he said.

'I thought so,' she said, nodding as if she were an expert in the technicalities of television reporting. 'You looked like - '

'A frightened rabbit,' said Christopher. 'I know.'

'I thought I said hedgehog,' said Mrs Stevenson, puzzled.

'So does Amaryllis not think Darren did it, then?' said Dave. 'Or was she just making trouble as usual?'