

RUTH WARE

The Death of
Mrs Westaway

VINTAGE

A note to readers:

The Death of Mrs Westaway begins in contemporary Brighton, but readers familiar with the town will notice one discrepancy – the West Pier is still standing. I hope Brightonians will enjoy the resurrection of this much-loved landmark, if only in fiction.

*One for sorrow
Two for joy
Three for a girl
Four for a boy
Five for silver
Six for gold
Seven for a secret
Never to be told*

29 November 1994

The magpies are back. It's strange to think how much I used to hate them, when I first came to the house. I remember coming up the drive in the taxi from the station, seeing them lined up along the garden wall like that, preening their feathers.

Today there was one perched on the frost-rimed branch of yew right outside my window, and I remembered what my mother used to say when I was little and whispered 'Hello, Mr Magpie' under my breath, to turn away the bad luck.

I counted them as I dressed, shivering next to the window. One on the yew tree. A second on the weathervane of the folly. A third on the wall of the kitchen garden. Three for a girl.

It seemed like an omen, and for a moment I shivered. Wishing, wondering, waiting ...

But no, there were more on the frozen lawn. Four, five ... six ... and one hopping across the flags of the terrace, pecking at the ice on the covers over the table and chairs.

Seven. Seven for a secret, never to be told. Well, the secret may be right, but the rest is wide of the mark. I'll have to tell, soon enough. There'll be no choice.

I had almost finished dressing when there was a rustle in the leaves of the rhododendrons in the shrubbery. For a minute I could not see

the cause, but then the branches parted, and a fox slunk quietly across the leaf-strewn lawn, its red gold startlingly bright against the frost-muted winter colours.

At my parents' house they were quite common, but it's rare to see one in daylight around here, let alone one bold enough to cross the huge exposed stretch of lawn in front of the house. I've seen slaughtered rabbits, and split bags of rubbish left from their scavenging, but they are almost never this bold. This one must have been very brave, or very desperate, to stalk in full sight of the house. Looking more closely, I thought perhaps it was the latter, for he was young, and terribly thin.

At first the magpies didn't notice, but then the one on the terrace, more observant than the others, registered the shape of the predator easing its way towards them, and it flew up from the icy flags like a rocket, chak-chakking its alarm, the warning loud and clear in the morning quiet. The fox had no hope after that. The other birds took to the sky, one by one, until at last only one was left, sitting on the yew, safely out of the fox's reach, and like a stream of molten gold, it slunk back over the grass, low to the ground, leaving the solitary magpie on the branch, crowing out its triumph.

One. One for sorrow. But that's impossible. I will never feel sad again, in spite of everything, in spite of the storm that I know is coming. As I sit here in the drawing room, writing this, I can feel it – my secret – burning me up from the inside with a joy so fierce that I think it must sometimes be visible through my skin.

I'll change that rhyme. One for joy. One for love. One for the future.

Chapter 1

The girl leaned, rather than walked, into the wind, clutching the damp package of fish and chips grimly under one arm even as the gale plucked at the paper, trying to unravel the parcel and send the contents skittering away down the seafront for the seagulls to claim.

As she crossed the road her hand closed over the crumpled note in her pocket, and she glanced over her shoulder, checking the long dark stretch of pavement behind her for a shadowy figure, but there was no one there. No one she could see, anyway.

It was rare for the seafront to be completely deserted. The bars and clubs opened long into the night, spilling drunk locals and tourists on to the pebbled beach right through until dawn. But tonight, even the most hardened partygoers had decided against venturing out and now, at 9.55 p.m. on a wet Tuesday, Hal had the promenade to herself, the flashing lights of the pier the only sign of life, apart from the gulls wheeling and crying over the dark restless waters of the Channel.

Hal's short black hair blew in her eyes, her glasses were misted, and her lips were chapped with salt from the sea wind. But she hitched the parcel tighter under her arm, and turned off the seafront into one of the narrow residential streets of tall white houses, where the wind dropped with a suddenness that made her stagger, and almost trip. The rain didn't let up; in

fact, away from the wind it seemed, if anything, to drizzle more steadily as she turned again into Marine View Villas.

The name was a lie. There were no villas, only a slightly shabby little row of terraced houses, their paint peeling from constant exposure to the salty air. And there was no view – not of the sea or anywhere else. Maybe there had been once, when the houses were built. But since then taller, grander buildings had gone up, closer to the sea, and any view the windows of Marine View Villas might once have had was reduced to brick walls and slate roofs, even from Hal's attic flat. Now, the only benefit to living up three flights of narrow, rickety stairs was not having to listen to neighbours stomping about above your head.

Tonight, though, the neighbours seemed to be out – and had been for some time, judging by the way the door stuck on the clump of junk mail in the hall. Hal had to shove hard, until it gave and she stumbled into the chilly darkness, groping for the automatic timer switch that governed the lights. Nothing happened. Either a fuse had blown, or the bulb had burnt out.

She scooped up the junk mail in the dim light filtering in from the street, doing her best in the darkness to pick out the letters for the other tenants, and then began the climb up to her own attic flat.

There were no windows on the stairwell, and once she was past the first flight, it was almost pitch black. But Hal knew the steps by heart, from the broken board on the landing to the loose piece of carpet that had come untacked on the last flight, and she plodded wearily upwards thinking about supper, and bed. She wasn't even sure if she was hungry any more, but the fish and chips had cost £5.50, and judging by the number of bills she was carrying, that was £5.50 she couldn't afford to waste.

On the top landing she ducked her head to avoid the drip from the skylight, opened the door, and then at last, she was home.

The flat was small, just a bedroom opening off a kind of wide hallway that did duty as a kitchen, a living room and everything else. It was also shabby, with peeling paint and worn carpet, and wooden windows that groaned and rattled when the wind came off the sea. But it had been Hal's home for all of her twenty-one years, and no matter how cold and tired she was, her heart never failed to lift, just a little bit, when she walked through the door.

In the doorway, she paused to wipe the salt spray off her glasses, polishing them on the ragged knee of her jeans, before dropping the paper of fish and chips on the coffee table.

It was very cold, and she shivered as she knelt in front of the gas fire, clicking the knob until it flared, and the warmth began to come back into her raw red hands. Then she unrolled the damp, rain-spattered paper packet, inhaling as the sharp smell of salt and vinegar filled the little room.

Spearing a limp warm chip with the wooden fork, she began to sort through the mail, sifting out takeaway leaflets for recycling and putting the bills into a pile. The chips were salty and sharp and the battered fish still hot, but Hal found a slightly sick feeling was growing in the pit of her stomach as the stack of bills grew higher. It wasn't so much the size of the pile, but the number marked *FINAL DEMAND* that worried her, and she pushed the fish aside, feeling suddenly nauseous.

She *had* to pay the rent – that was non-negotiable. And the electricity was high on the list too. Without a fridge or lights the little flat was barely habitable. The gas ... well, it was November. Life without heating would be uncomfortable, but she'd survive.

But the one that really made her stomach turn over was different to the official bills. It was a cheap envelope, obviously hand-delivered, and all it said on the front, in biro letters, was 'Harriet Westerway, top flat'.

There was no sender's address, but Hal didn't need one. She had a horrible feeling that she knew who it was from.

Hal swallowed a chip that seemed to be stuck in her throat, and she pushed the envelope to the bottom of the pile of bills, giving way to the overwhelming impulse to bury her head in the sand. She wished passionately that she could hand the whole problem over to someone older and wiser and stronger to deal with.

But there was no one. Not any more. And besides, there was a tough, stubborn core of courage in Hal. Small, skinny, pale and young she might be – but she was not the child that people routinely assumed. She had not been that child for more than three years.

It was that core that made her pick the envelope back up and, biting her lip, tear through the flap.

Inside there was just one sheet of paper, with only a couple of sentences typed on it.

Sorry to have missed you. We would like to discuss you're financial situation. We will call again.

Hal's stomach flipped and she felt in her pocket for the piece of paper that had turned up at her work this afternoon. They were identical, save for the crumples, and a splash of tea that she had spilled over the first one when she opened it.

The message on them was not news to Hal. She had been ignoring calls and texts to that effect for months.

It was the message *behind* the notes that made her hands shake as she placed them carefully on the coffee table, side by side.

Hal was used to reading between the lines, deciphering the importance of what people *didn't* say, as much as what they did.

It was her job, in a way. But the unspoken words here required no decoding at all.

They said, we know where you work.

We know where you live.

And we will come back.

The rest of the mail was just junk and Hal dumped it into the recycling, before sitting wearily on the sofa. For a moment she let her head rest in her hands – trying not to think about her precarious bank balance, hearing her mother’s voice in her ear as if she were standing behind her, lecturing her about her A-level revision. *Hal, I know you’re stressed, but you’ve got to eat something! You’re too skinny!*

I know, she answered, inside her head. It was always the way when she was worried or anxious – her appetite was the first thing to go. But she couldn’t afford to get ill. If she couldn’t work, she wouldn’t get paid. And more to the point, she could not afford to waste a meal, even one that was damp around the edges, and getting cold.

Ignoring the ache in her throat, she forced herself to pick up another chip. But it was only halfway to her mouth when something in the recycling bin caught her eye. Something that should not have been there. A letter, in a stiff white envelope, addressed by hand, and stuffed into the bin along with the take-away menus.

Hal put the chip in her mouth, licked the salt off her fingers, and then leaned across to the bin to pick it out of the mess of old papers and soup tins.

Miss Harriet Westaway, it said. *Flat 3c, Marine View Villas, Brighton*. The address was only slightly stained with the grease from Hal’s fingers, and the mess from the bin.

She must have shoved it in there by mistake with the empty envelopes. Well, at least this one couldn’t be a bill. It looked

more like a wedding invitation – though that seemed unlikely. Hal couldn't think of anyone who would be getting married.

She shoved her thumb in the gap at the side of the envelope, and ripped it open.

The piece of paper she pulled out wasn't an invitation. It was a letter, written on heavy, expensive paper, with the name of a solicitor's firm at the top. For a minute Hal's stomach seemed to fall away, as a landscape of terrifying possibilities opened up before her. Was someone suing her for something she'd said in a reading? Or – oh God – the tenancy on the flat. Mr Khan, the landlord, was in his seventies and had sold all of the other flats in the house, one by one. He had held on to Hal's mainly out of pity for her and affection for her mother, she was fairly sure, but that stay of execution could not last forever. One day he would need the money for a care home, or his diabetes would get the better of him and his children would have to sell. It didn't matter that the walls were peeling with damp, and the electrics shorted if you ran a hairdryer at the same time as the toaster. It was home – the only home she'd ever known. And if he kicked her out, the chances of finding another place at this rate were not just slim, they were nil.

Or was it ... but no. There was no way *he* would have gone to a solicitor.

Her fingers were trembling as she unfolded the page, but when her eyes flicked to the contact details beneath the signature, she realised, with a surge of relief, that it wasn't a Brighton firm. The address was in Penzance, in Cornwall.

Nothing to do with the flat – thank God. And vanishingly unlikely to be a disgruntled client, so far from home. In fact, she didn't know anyone in Penzance at all.

Swallowing another chip she spread the letter out on the coffee table, pushed her glasses up her nose, and began to read.

Dear Miss Westaway,

I am writing at the instruction of my client, your grandmother Hester Mary Westaway of Trepassen House, St Piran.

Mrs Westaway passed away on 22 November, at her home. I appreciate that this news may well come as a shock to you; please accept my sincere condolences on your loss.

As Mrs Westaway's solicitor and executor, it is my duty to contact beneficiaries under her will. Because of the substantial size of the estate, probate will need to be applied for and the estate assessed for inheritance tax liabilities, and the process of disbursement cannot begin until this has taken place. However, if, in the meantime, you could provide me with copies of two documents confirming your identity and address (a list of acceptable forms of ID is attached), that will enable me to begin the necessary paperwork.

In accordance with the wishes of your late grandmother, I am also instructed to inform beneficiaries of the details of her funeral. This is being held at 4 p.m. on 1 December at St Piran's Church, St Piran. As local accommodation is very limited, family members are invited to stay at Trepassen House where a wake will also be held.

Please write to your late grandmother's housekeeper Mrs Ada Warren if you would like to avail yourself of the offer of accommodation, and she will ensure a room is opened up for you.

Please accept once again my condolences, and the assurance of my very best attentions in this matter.

Yours truly,
Robert Treswick
Treswick, Nantes and Dean
Penzance

A chip fell from her fingers onto Hal's lap, but she did not stir. She only sat, reading and rereading the short letter, and then turning to the list of accepted forms of identification document, as if that would elucidate matters.

Substantial estate ... beneficiaries of the will ... Hal's stomach rumbled, and she picked up the chip and ate it, almost absently, trying to make sense of the words in front of her.

Because it *didn't* make sense. Not one bit. Hal's grandparents had been dead for more than twenty years.