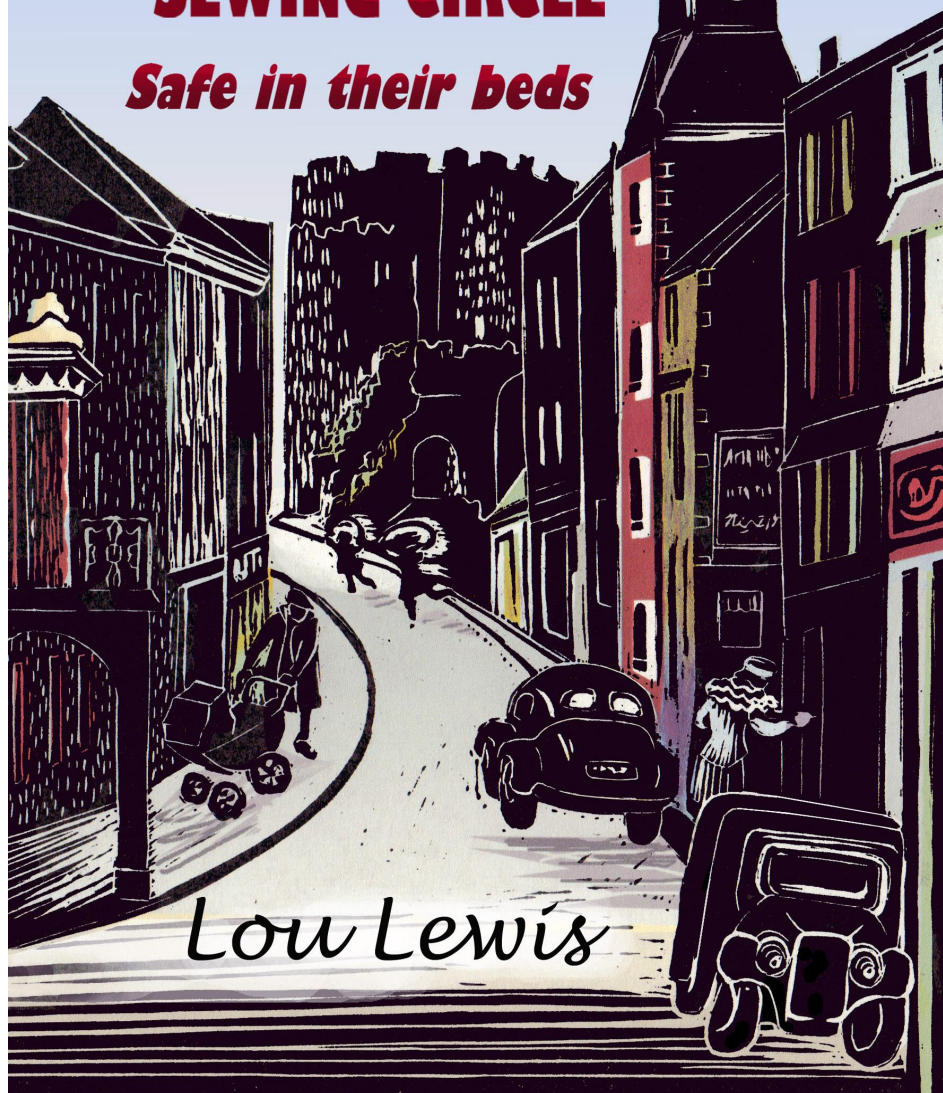


THE STATION ROAD SEWING CIRCLE

Safe in their beds



THE STATION ROAD SEWING CIRCLE VOLUME 2

SAFE IN THEIR BEDS

The Thirteen stalwart members of the Sewing Circle continue to solve mysteries and put wrongs to right.

Their craft-disguised meetings and frequent tea-laden visits to their favourite café provide them with the secrecy that their investigations demand.

Carol from Chapel discovers that regular amounts are being stolen from the collection box. The Sewing Circle quickly exposes the main suspect - a member of the Chapel choir. Will they need to strike a note of disharmony amongst the choristers in order to recover the much needed funds?

The Sewing Circle are stranded in a remote mountain village during a disastrous day out. They stumble upon a blackmail plot which is destroying the lives of a local craft group. How can Beryl the Will draw upon the Circle's resolve to put an end to the postal puzzle before their return journey beckons?

A rare bird alights on the millpond during the breeding season. Amongst the visiting hordes of genuine twitchers there is a plot being hatched to steal the valuable chicks. Can Auntie Sian lead the Sewing Circle through deep waters to protect the innocent and send the criminals into flight?

How can these dedicated detectives possibly keep Pembroke tidy and the townsfolk safe in their beds without revealing their own identities?



Cover Design by Judith Stroud



THE STATION ROAD SEWING CIRCLE

Safe in their Beds

Lou Lewis

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REVIEWS FOR VOLUME 1

Some of the many five star reviews for the first volume of *The Station Road Sewing Circle*.

I loved this book from beginning till end. It really gave me a sense of Pembroke in the 1950s and how all the women spent their time sorting out each other's business. I laughed out loud at quite a lot of it. Once you read this, you'll want someone else to read it too. As they say, 'once you hear good news, pass it on'. In a dark world, this book lifts the spirits and makes you smile.

A beautifully crafted collection of short stories by a genuine Welshman. Leaving you with a 'feel good factor'. I look forward to learning more about these lovely thirteen women.

A really enjoyable read, with good believable characters, which you get to know through their own individual stories. The author, makes you feel you are part of the hallowed surroundings of the sewing circle, without the need to pick up a needle! It made me want to keep on turning the pages to read just one more story! I hope there is a second book.

I loved these stories, they were light hearted and full of wonderful Welsh humour. I'd recommend it to anyone who needs to escape to a simpler age.

Settle down with plenty of tea and cake and let these stories wash over you. A lovely group of women chatting over their needlework and solving the town's problems without upsetting anyone. Just the right side of 'nosy' I reckon!

Some Leaders are Born Women.

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The Circle Members

Their Significant Relationship

Bessie the Law	- Wife of Police Sergeant Evans
Bron the Books	- Town Librarian
Megan the Signals	- Wife of Railway Signalman
Myvvi the Dead	- Wife of Undertaker
Maria from Milan	- Wife of Milkman
Auntie Sian	- Auntie of Blacksmith
Maggie the Shop	- Wife of Local Grocer
Beryl the Will	- Wife of Town Solicitor
Glenys the Coal	- Wife of Coal Merchant
Penny the Photo	- Assistant to Town Photographer
Carol from Chapel	- Wife of Baptist Minister
Florrie the Fire	- Fire Station Clerk
Joan the Tip	- Wife of Dustbin Lorry Driver

More than a Speedy Recovery

Bessie the Law was conducting a last-minute sweep of the main street of Pembroke. Any morsel of news was welcome, whether collected in brief exchanges outside shops, encounters at front doors or indeed fragments carried across the road from the more vocal inhabitants of the town. Not to be confused with gossip mind you; the intelligence gained by Bessie was solely intended to assist her and the twelve other ladies in the Station Road Sewing Circle. Their weekly meetings were openly dedicated to various handicraft pursuits, alongside their continued influence on the well-being of the town. Their covert missions being aimed at all times, to keep the streets tidy and the people of Pembroke safe in their beds.

She reached the Lion Hotel under the shadow of the Norman castle at the seaward end of the town and looked with intent at her watch and tapping the glass facing. She noted that it was time to go. It would not do to just turn around and walk straight back to where she had just come from. She took a deep breath and straightened her close fitting Windsmoor jacket. It had been a grand investment a few years ago with a subtle two-tone green check and golden thread running through it. Bessie liked to be turned out looking smart, always in keeping with her standing in the town as the wife of Sergeant Evans, the town's solitary policeman. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the chemist's window, drew up her shoulders and patted her hair. She smiled with satisfaction at herself and with that, turned on her heels and strode back up the street. No-one could possibly describe her as a ditherer.

It was time to consolidate the collection of other people's business and agree with the ladies where their efforts could best be used to give a helping hand from afar. She started to re-trace her steps up towards the station at the other end of town for the meeting at St Michael's church hall. Her own news gathering had been meagre that

day so she wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary from the others. Her mind wandered onto today's topic by Auntie Sian, a long-time member, who was going to share with the group the art of tight knitting home-spun Welsh wool into a crew necked jumper. Many a fisherman setting out from nearby Milford Haven for the stormy waters of the Irish Sea would pay testament to their water-repellent qualities and comforting warmth.

Bessie was stepping around the brushes and buckets on the pavement outside Beddoes the Ironmongers when Carol from Chapel shot out of the shop doorway and cannoned into her. Bessie stood her ground; she was not known for giving way to either mind nor matter. She took hold of the arm of her apparent assailant.

"Goodness me girl, what's going on?" She looked at the metal cash-box clutched tightly by Carol. "Surely the Baptist minister's wife hasn't resorted to a smash and grab raid?"

Carol gathered her breath; she has a bit of trouble with her chest you see. She gasped. "So sorry Bessie, I didn't see you there. In a bit of a hurry I am. I didn't want to miss the start of our meeting!" She looked down at the cash-box with its shiny unused key taped on to its lid. "This is the solution to one of the problems I'm going through at the moment, but the other one will certainly call for the involvement of our Sewing Circle. I'll be bringing the whole sorry situation in front of you all during our meeting this evening.

Bessie smiled. "Well now, you'd better come up with me, I'm on my way there."

"If you don't mind, I'll go into chapel first, see to a bit of business there and then explain everything at our meeting. Mark my words girl, I'm going to need all the help I can lay my hands on."

Bessie tried to look unhappy for Carol but she had to smile. "There I was, thinking we'd be stuck on handicrafts for the entire meeting. Just goes to show, there's always something about other peoples' business that needs attending to."

Carol was looking anxiously up the Main Street prompting Bessie to let go of her friend's arm. The Minister's wife scurried off towards the Baptist chapel. Bessie picked up her stride also, eager to find out more about the, yet to be revealed, mystery just set out before her.

Carol from Chapel stood up; she looked quite settled really. Surprising what a good cup of tea and having a large piece of angel-cake inside you can do. It had been agreed that they would have refreshments first and that Auntie Sian's talk on her all-weather woollen jumper would be just as enlightening at the following meeting.

The Minister's wife set the scene. "The congregation place their offerings every Sunday into the embroidered tapestry covered pouches kindly donated by this sewing circle a few years ago. We have however, put two of the old wooden collection boxes to good use. We keep them in the vestry. One of them contains the amount we put away each week towards the Sunday School outing which we go on every summer. We call it the 'Outing box'. I know we have plenty of beaches around here but there is something special in getting all the children on to a double-decker bus which then takes them to Saundersfoot."

She took a breath.

"The other one which we call the 'Poor box' is used to hold small donations made to help the less well-off in our congregation. Because we put it to good use as soon as we can, there's never more than a few pounds inside it. My husband used the box about a month ago when delivering a sermon on helping each other out. In particular, he stressed that doing a good deed doesn't always need to be shouted from the rooftops. He also pointed out that not everyone would want people to know that they had been needy."

She paused to ensure she had the entire room's attention. "That's when the money started to disappear!"

Maggie the Shop couldn't help herself, "The thieves must be pretty desperate or worse to steal from the very box intended to help others."

Carol raised her hand. "Not that box Maggie, it's the other one. For the last month there's been money taken from the 'Outing box'. To be exact, to the sum of one shilling and sixpence each week."

Bessie waited for the round of disbelieving gasps to complete their journey around the room. "Before we rush out to find the master criminals behind all this, let's look at the bigger picture." She turned to Carol. "I see now why you were buying a cash-box earlier, but surely you are now six shillings down on your money to pay for the children's outing?"

Carol nodded. "Too right girl. If this had carried on, I wouldn't have enough to take them out to the local beach at Freshwater East for the day."

Beryl the Will was more interested in how access to the 'Outing box' had been achieved. "Who would be able to get into the vestry when your husband wasn't there?"

Carol responded, "I've thought about that, the only people in the chapel without me or my husband present would be the choir. Trev the Nev, our organist, has them in to practice every Wednesday night."

Maggie suggested. "If Carol has now put the outing money in a cash-box that would stop the thefts but it'll not take us any closer to the culprit. Shouldn't we put things back to where they were and set a trap?"

Bessie summarised. "She's right, let's concentrate on working how to flush out this possibly despicable person." If Bessie was anything at all she was fair. She continued. "Then we can apply ourselves to replacing the money to ensure that the children have an outing they won't forget in a hurry."

Maggie had been thinking. "We've some sherbet dips in the shop, yellow crystals they are. If you get it on your fingers, it's the devil's work to get it off. Let's mix some with margarine and put a small dab of it underneath the corners of the 'Outings box' lid. Carol could pop in at the end of choir practice and look for the plain evidence of any wrongdoing."

Everyone left the meeting happier than when Carol had first shared her sorry situation. Only thirteen people would know of their decision to put this wrong to rights. It had all the makings of yet another covert mission for the Station Road Sewing Circle.

Auntie Sian's presentation on her sea-going jumper was well received albeit in near silence. Everyone was waiting to hear how Carol from Chapel had got on with her secret efforts to identify the 'Outing box' raider.

Her voice was shaking. "I popped in at the end of the choir practice on Wednesday when they were having their refreshments.

Trev the Nev says that they can't get their true voices out on a full stomach. I handed out biscuits from a Huntley and Palmer Christmas selection tin. They were left over from the Spring Festival you see. The Bourbons and the Garibaldis went in a flash."

The entire room was prepared to wait for the real report to emerge; you've got to give the girl a chance.

Carol had found her voice by now. "I watched every single hand that dipped in for a biscuit. I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing when the yellow dotted fingertips appeared. Yes, ladies our trap had worked. The person responsible for stealing from the Sunday school outing box is none other than Widow Meredith's eldest. The boy is only fourteen; since his voice broke last year Trev has put him in with the tenors."

Megan the Signals has a good gasp on her. "Not the Meredith's again, I've banned their name in our house; her youngest two children have been showing off their new summer plimsoll shoes and it's weeks to the holidays. I've told my three they can wait to get them from Drysdale's on the first Saturday of the holidays like everyone else."

Beryl the Will, her husband is a solicitor you know as well as being the Town Clerk, contributed. "To be fair, Mrs Meredith has worked wonders since her husband was lost in action the day before the armistice. She has several jobs to keep her family fed and clothed. My husband has said that on the few occasions she has been offered help from the town's hardship fund, she has refused it; she is a very proud woman."

Bessie pulled things together. "We need a few more facts on the table before we arrive at any conclusion. Knowing how things are tight for Mrs Meredith, it does look like the outing fund might be putting the summer shoes on two of her children." She turned to Megan. "I know this won't come easy for you and by all means keep your ban on the Meredith's name in your house but I think you should call on her."

Megan's face was a picture however, knowing Bessie well, she waited for the request to be justified. Bessie went on. "You can honestly pop over and say that your children would love to have the same play shoes as her youngest. She's a good soul and will probably invite you in. At the very least you can find out where she has bought

them. If your luck's in, you might learn how she can afford them. The evidence is stacked against her son, but we need to sort out the facts from the frilly bits before we carry out any more of our secret intentions."

Carol wasn't really satisfied. "It's all very well dropping in for a cup of tea. In the meantime, my 'Outing box' is losing one shilling and sixpence every week.

Beryl piped up; her Swansea accent made you wait on every word. "I would like to suggest that we hold a jumble sale and announce that the proceeds will go towards local and needy children. When the people of Pembroke learn of our deserving causes, items for sale will pour in. We can fill any shortfall in Carol's outing fund and send off the rest to the NSPCC headquarters in Cardiff."

Murmurs of approval around the room confirmed that many present would prefer to be getting on with addressing at least part of Carol's problem rather than waiting for the outcome of Megan's gentle interrogation of Mrs Meredith.

Megan the Signals was sat at the small kitchen table in the back-room of number forty-seven. Mrs Meredith had invited her in before she had even managed to state the purpose of knocking the door. Megan finished off the modest slice of fruit cake which accompanied the favoured Glengettie tea served in a barely-used china cup. She looked around the tidy room and wondered out loud how her host managed to keep the place nice with three children and all. It was only when Mrs Meredith said that her eldest boy was as good as gold around the house that Megan got down to business.

"There is something that's been puzzling me since my two youngest said they loved the new plimsolls your children are wearing. I looked in Drysdale's window and they're not on display yet. Did you get them from the Littlewoods catalogue?"

Mrs Meredith seemed happy to explain. "Three things persuaded me to buy them at the door. My children had started to wear their school shoes out to play because their toes were coming through last year's plimsolls. Terribly scuffed they were, not the plimsolls but their school shoes. As you've said, Drysdale's hadn't got their summer

shoes in yet but best of all, I was able to make the weekly payments due to the travelling salesman at the door through the kindness of the Baptist Chapel where my boy is in the choir.”

Megan swallowed at the nerve of the woman but pressed on.

“I didn’t know that the Chapel was handing out grants for shoes!”

Mrs Meredith was quick to correct her. “I’m afraid I would never accept a grant; this is a loan. To be fair, it’s a new scheme, that’s why you probably haven’t heard of it. The minister only announced it last month. We can draw the money down from the ‘Poor box’ I think my son called it, as we need it and we are able to pay back every penny as soon as we can. It couldn’t have come at a better time. We needed the shoes; my son leaves school in about four weeks when he’s fifteen and I’ve lined him up with a job as a tea-boy on a building site. We’ll be able to pay back the loan and that’ll be the end of it.”

Megan swallowed again, this time to allow her hasty condemnation of Mrs Meredith to evaporate into a sympathetic commiseration. It was becoming clear to Megan that all of this was the Meredith boy’s doing.

“It looked at first that Mrs Meredith is in on it! She is very proud of her son for what he is doing!” Megan announced. The Church Hall descended into chaos with exclamations being expounded from every corner. ‘Now that’s what I call a fallen woman’, ‘Talk about a family affair!’ and ‘It’s official then – the Mafia has arrived in Pembroke.’ Bessie called them all to order, Megan’s aim to get the Sewing Circle’s attention in her first few sentences had been achieved.

She then went on to recount her visit and how although at first the widow appeared to be complicit, it was her son who had organised it all. Megan then went on to say that the boy’s mother clearly wouldn’t have touched a penny of it if she had thought it was charity, even though her children were coming out of their shoes.

Maggie the Shop ventured. “If we stop him in the middle of it all, it’ll come out which will be the end of his mother. It’s plain to me that as well as being the apple of her eye, he has done this as part of taking on his duty as the man of the house.”

Megan agreed. “Not to mention that they will fall behind with the payments and knowing half the doorstep salesmen here in Pembroke,

they'll take the plimsolls back, right off the children's feet."

Carol was fighting her instincts to put this chapel wrongdoing to rights and not to heap shame on the rest of the boy's family. "What if the boy really did misunderstand my husband's sermon and thought it was acceptable to borrow from what he thought was the 'poor-box'? I haven't always received a clear message myself from the pulpit, even from the sermons I've helped my husband to write."

Bessie smiled, then chipped in. "I think we must let this whole scheme run right to its end. Whether the lad knew exactly what he was doing we'll never know, but I'd be very surprised if the moment he was bringing in a wage, he didn't start to pay off the loan. Above all though, he needs to know that he's been found out. Let's not allow him to grow very much older thinking you can take what isn't yours in life, in the name of a good cause."

Carol nodded and turned to Bron the Books. "I'll be able to work out which choir night his last payment will be due. That would be the best time to put him nicely in his place. I'm sure Bron and me can come up with something in plain Pembroke speak which will put the right finish on his escapade."

Auntie Sian acknowledged the satisfied nods and smiles. "Now then girls, as you well know that's half of the story. We still need to replace the money taken; his payments won't come in until later. I've brought over the first batch of bags filled to bursting with jumble which needs sorting. Our announcement across the Pembroke grapevine has produced a huge response. There's loads more waiting at home. On Saturday week, we'll have this hall packed and I wouldn't be surprised to find we'll more than raise the amount needed to send the children on their Sunday School outing."

The two double-decker buses, teeming with excited children and already worn-out adults trying to keep them in their seats, drove carefully down the twists and turns leading from the Carmarthen Road to the village of Pendine with its seven miles of glorious sandy beaches. The offer from the Sewing Circle members who didn't have offspring to help with the herding of several Sunday School's worth of children, had been gratefully accepted by Carol from Chapel. Bron

the Books had closed her library for the day and Penny the Photo had been given leave of absence by her employer, Pugh the View – Pembroke’s finest, then again, only photographer. The solitary wedding photographs to be taken that day were of a registry office ceremony with a total gathering of seven. There would have been less if both Mr Llewellyn’s wives, previous and present hadn’t insisted on attending to give his daughter a decent send-off.

Bron and Penny were sat at the back, upstairs on the leading bus keeping an eye on the older children. The children were in the main, well-behaved and allowed the two friends to catch up on things in general.

Penny had missed the last meeting, so was keen to know how the Meredith boy had been brought to his senses. Bron explained. “Carol kept an eye on the payments of one shilling and sixpence which had started to be returned as soon as the boy left school. On the evening that the final payment was due, I wrote on a card and we put it in the box which he still thought was the ‘poor box’. I’ve kept it to show you.” She pulled it out of her handbag.

Penny smiled as she read it.

*Well done Boy.
Please ask next time.*

Bron took the card back. “On top of that, the jumble sale raised enough to invite several churches and chapels to join us today and also to send off a sizable donation to the NSPCC.”

Penny declared. “So, it’s the full coffers at the Sunday School that we have to thank for coming to Pendine instead of Saundersfoot!”

The buses pulled in to their parking spaces, a short walk from the beach. The occupants of the top deck of the bus needed no encouragement to disembark.

Penny picked up her bag and a box from under the stairs of the bus. “All we need now is for the day to run smoothly and for any missing children, and there will be some, to be found before the buses leave. They waited for the stampede to finish and then stepped off the bus into the bright summer Saturday.

They were passing a large green shed when a loud explosion

caused Bron to jump and throw the box of beach game props into the air. Rounders bats, skipping ropes, marker flags and a long tug-of-war rope were strewn up the road. The dense black smoke coming out of the door made them cough as they picked up the scattered items. Penny went over to a small window and peered in. She waved Bron over. "Listen to these two!"

Two men were stood looking at an over-sized motorcycle. They were both in oil-stained overalls. The older man, thickset with very little hair sighed. "Let's face it Frank, if that baffle hadn't blown out of the exhaust this morning, we would have had been alright for a decent attempt this afternoon." He waved at the wall behind him, the smoke was clearing revealing an array of tools, spare parts, chains, sprockets and belts. He held up a small finned metal object. Penny thought it looked like a miniature Christmas tree. The man sighed again. "If we'd only brought the right size of this replacement or indeed been able to find the original baffle down on the beach!"

The tall and gangly man was sympathetic enough. "I'm as upset as you Eric. You, me and Bob have been working towards this attempt for five years now. From our results this week, I know we would have had the record in our hands."

Bron mouthed to Penny. "A motorcycle land speed record?"

Eric moved towards the door. "There's nothing for us here. Let's go back to our lodgings to give Bob the bad news. Then we'll start packing up this lot up ready to head back to England." The two men walked up the road with nothing further to say. Their slumped shoulders told anyone who might be interested that they were carrying a world of weariness between them.

Bron stood up first. "That's settled then, the first game down the beach will be a treasure hunt."

Penny smiled. "Put them in teams and the first one to find the missing miniature Christmas tree wins the big bag of sweets. I've had a peek inside. Mrs Foreman the Sweetshop has done us proud; there's rhubarb and custards, barley sugars and pear drops. It'll keep the winning team quiet for a week. The other teams will get a Mars bar each, in slices mind you."

They turned in unison, Bron picked up the game props and together they practically ran in step down towards the beach.

The children loved the treasure hunt. They were in their teams

proudly wearing their coloured sashes. They had formed a continuous line from the edge of the sand, right down the beach almost to the sea. They moved slowly across the beach from the start line. Every time an object was found, the detector would raise their hand. Bron would race down the line and take the object from its finder. Penny was moving up and down the long line of children keeping them as straight as possible.

Considering that the searchers had no clear description of what they were looking for, they diligently handed in every found item. Bron had accumulated in her sack a collection of seashells, two small flags which had once graced the top of a sand castle and fivepence in change. No Christmas tree was in sight. The searchers had moved a mere fifty yards from the start line when another hand went up. Penny was nearest. She caught a glint of sunlight and plucked the errant baffle from the girl's hand. "Well done, we have a winning team!" She threw the shining piece to Bron who promptly sprinted up the beach.

The door of the green shed was unlocked providing her with a clear entrance to a workbench covered in discarded and oil-smeared motor-cycle parts. Bron cleared a space and sat the prized part where it would be seen by anyone coming through the door. Strolling back down towards the beach, she could hear the treasure hunt celebrations. The Station Road Sewing Circle, well two of them really, could do no more.

Races had been won, sandcastle competitions had been judged and tug-of-war teams pulled off their feet. The children, finally exhausted were sat in their teams finishing off the remnants of the mountain of food and fizzy drinks brought by the adults. Joan the Tip's youngest boy, his mouth filled to capacity with one of his mother's spiced sausage rolls, saw the cavalcade first. He could only point. In the time it took to turn a head, the entire visiting party could only stare with open mouths, including Joan's youngest at the large motor cycle descending down the slipway on to the beach.

At the rear were two men in overalls pushing the heavy projectile. Steering at the front was another man in white overalls wearing a

white crash helmet. He seemed to be in charge of the proceedings. Bringing up the rear was an increasing crowd of locals who had been reliably informed by the Pendine bush telegraph that the final run of the day was about to take place.

Bron joined the cheerful assembly and walked alongside a lady in a pinafore with her hair still in curlers and flour on her arms up to her elbows. She had clearly dropped everything to be a spectator. If she didn't know what's going on thought Bron, no one will. "You're not new to all this then?" Bron ventured. Mrs Pinafore replied in a broad Carmarthenshire accent. "These boys are regulars, down here every year chasing the title. Held by a German gentleman it is. They haven't had much luck; that said, this is the first year that young Bob Berry hasn't crashed. An Italian team is due next week, so this is the last chance they'll have."

The children were ushered up on to the raised sand dunes to give them a clear and safe view of the goings on. The two mechanics, Frank and Eric, synchronised their watches before Frank pulled a battered bicycle from behind a small beach hut and rode off across the sand.

The roar of the Brough Superior's engine as Bob piloted it down to and beyond the start line was deafening but eventually it faded with distance. Eric took up his position on the start line and the entire Sunday school outing waited with bated breath for the unexpected event of the afternoon to unfold in front of them. There's a disappointment Bron thought as the motor cycle moved across the hard-packed sand at high speed in front of them with very little sound. It was only when the shock wave hit their faces that Bron could hope that the efforts of the children were not to be in vain. The motorcycle had disappeared and Eric had walked back to the beach hut. Nothing much was happening. A lone voice, a young child's called out "Is that it then?" The only response was a speck at first becoming larger second by second. Bron could then make out the long arms and legs of Frank furiously propelling himself and his bicycle towards the beach hut.

Eric walked quickly towards him; Frank jumped on to the soft sand leaving his bicycle to run into a low wall. They stood side by side comparing their stop-watches before Frank gave out an almighty cheer. He hugged his fellow mechanic and started to jump up and

down. He turned realising that the visitors from Pembroke were struggling with the image of two men one tall and gangly, the other short and round dancing on the sand.

He turned and shouted. "He's only gone and done it – One hundred and eighty-three miles an hour. Our United Kingdom holds the motorcycle land speed record once again!" Their two-person celebration was joined by the Sunday school children and adults alike waving and shouting, not really knowing why, but somehow feeling that they had been a part of something exceptional. The festivities continued until a beaming Bob rode up on the gently burbling motorcycle and with the realisation that he had broken the world record, he joined in with the antics of his two mechanics. It was only then that Carol from Chapel realised that it was time to call it a day.

Even a special day such as this one had to come to an end. A headcount was conducted and much to everyone's surprise, the children were all accounted for. Penny led the very happy crocodile of chatterers off the beach and up to the Double Decker buses. Bessie the Law supervised the clear up on the beach applying her usual standard of leaving anywhere that she had visited cleaner than when she had arrived.

Bron and Penny set out for the Sewing Circle in St Michael's Church Hall to share the significant part they had played in the events of the previous Saturday. In the middle of the applause, Bron found herself saying aloud. "It's what we do isn't it!"

Bessie raised her hand and held up the afternoon edition of the Western Mail. "I'm delighted that the result of your exploits have made the sports section." They could all see a photograph taking up most of the page. Bob, Eric and Frank were standing proudly behind their motor-cycle and in the background was the entire Pembroke Sunday School contingent and it seemed most of the inhabitants of Pendine.

Bessie then read out Bob's quote. "It has been a long road to this achievement and we certainly needed a turn of fortune. Today Lady Luck smiled on us and we found the vital part which allowed us to break the world record on our final run."

Bessie added. “Now then girls, we would have to say that two other ladies, Bron and Penny here, played an important part in all of this. However, because everything we do is in secret the real facts will stay with the thirteen of us.”

Maria from Milan came in from the kitchen bearing a large plate of small sponge cakes filled with lemon pastry cream topped with a sweet glaze. Before she could explain that they were called Sospiri in her native Italy, more than several had been sampled and gained approving nods and murmurs of absolute delight.

A Tale of Two Marriages

If you had asked Penny the Photo if she was more than excited, she would most likely say she was at seven-eighths. Her initial enthusiasm had been ignited by being given her first solo venture into a photographic assignment. Her employer Pugh the View, Pembroke's premier photographer, that is to say the only one in the town, had often stated that if he had to dress up like a penguin to take on an evening job, then he'd just as well go on to audition for a zoo.

She had gone along to the Lion Hotel to gather as much information as she could about the event in question. The celebration was for fifty years of marriage by the couple who had between them built an empire of ice-cream parlours across the seaside towns of West Wales. It was to be the grandest event in Pembroke for many a year. All of the couples who ran the ice-cream parlours had been invited along with family members. There wasn't a spare room left in the Lion Hotel including the linen room which had been hurriedly emptied, kitted out with a bed, a chair, a large mirror and a sign which directed the occupants to the bathrooms down the corridor.

It was only when she was leaving, more than satisfied with her background work complete that she bumped into Cerys the Cook in the entrance hall. The head of the hotel kitchen had a face on her. A few utterances from Penny soon coaxed out her concerns.

For several weeks now, the cook had not been able to find a smattering of the special cake-making ingredients in her vast larder. She was proud to say that since the war, she had restored the stock to its former glory. At first, Cerys thought it was simply misplaced items or she had forgotten to re-order. But when the money turned up on a shelf in front of her, exact to a penny to the value of the missing items, she could not make head nor tail of it. Her only hope she said was that by the time the anniversary celebration came around, she had enough ingredients to bake the large iced cake which had been

requested. It was this uncertainty about the centrepiece of the event that prevented Penny from totally looking forward to her assignment.

The Station Road Sewing Circle had decided that nothing less than a new evening frock would do for Penny's posh event. A team of pattern makers, cutters and stitchers would ensure that she looked the business. When Penny shared her concerns about what was going on in the hotel kitchen they wanted to know more – nothing would be allowed to spoil her special evening.

Penny explained. "I agree that we should look into this. I know it's pilfering, but then again, it's not true theft because the ingredients are being paid for. If this celebration goes badly and it will without a magnificent cake in the middle of the room, our reputation as a town in which to spend a special time with your family and friends will go out of the window."

Bessie the Law knew how to lead her Circle forward. "As this is all to do with cake making, in particular a cake worthy to be looked at and then eaten by a large gathering, I'd like to invite Myvvi the Dead to help Penny investigate this further." She clarified her suggestion. "Not because of her extensive knowledge of looking after the departed, being the wife of our town undertaker, but because she understands the things that have to go right when making a cake fit for the masses. She has often reminded us that there is a firm connection between mourning and the need to get a nice piece of comforting cake down you." The warm glance from Myvvi was well received.

Penny had one other request. "Cerys said she thought that these goings on always occurred in the early hours. She confirmed that there are only two people up and about then. The night porter, Rip Davies, so named after Rip van Winkle and his ability to take cat-naps through the night without letting his guard down. The other person is Barry the kitchen boy. Pardon my smile, he's in his seventies but a hard worker! He very often works on clearing up well after a late evening event. If we bump into them, I'm sure I can handle Rip, awake or not! But Barry, who Cerys thinks is Italian, doesn't have much English. Could I ask Maria from Milan to help us out there?"

Maria's broad smile signalled her commitment to the emerging mystery. There hadn't been much call for her native language since she had joined her husband in Pembroke some fifteen months ago. As the newest member in the Sewing Circle, she was determined to add more to the group than just revealing the secrets around creating ornamental Venetian lace from raw silk thread on twenty-four concurrent bobbins.

Penny arrived early in St Michael's church hall. She was carrying a Neapolitan block of ice-cream wrapped in newspaper to keep it cool in the yet another warm September evening along with a packet of wafer biscuits. She thought the delicious treat of vanilla, strawberry and chocolate ice-cream would set the meeting of the Sewing Circle up nicely ahead of the three reports on the mysterious disappearing ingredients in the kitchen of the Lion Hotel.

As agreed between the three investigators, Myvvi the Dead stood up first. "I popped in to see Cerys to finalise the fillings of the sandwiches to be provided in the back function room for the wake of the unexpectedly departed Jimmy Eynon. He was only eighty-three, no age these days girls. His wife had specifically requested that there would be no fish paste involved due his sudden demise being connected to a badly filleted mackerel he had bought in Milford Docks that morning. Where was I? Oh yes, when we had done the wake business, Cerys was more than eager to share with me the goings-on in her larder. She said that the missing ingredients didn't add up to anything. I asked her to write out a list to see if I could help her to make any sense of it. I have it here."

She waved a piece of torn-off grease-proof paper. "I'll read them out."

*Half a bag of Almond flour,
Three bars of dark chocolate
Two packets of candied fruits
A tub of goat's cheese
Twelve leaves of gelatine
A few handfuls of hazelnuts
A tin of preserved Maraschino cherries*

The shaking of most heads around the table confirmed that any concoction made from the missing ingredients would challenge anybody's baking skills or taste for that matter.

Myvvi concluded, "There are for sure, other ingredients you could add to these to make some kind of cake or pudding, but it certainly isn't one I've come across in twenty years of meeting the appetites of those who have just said goodbye to their loved ones."

She sat down. Penny said. "Not to worry girl, when you've heard what Maria has to say it might shed some light on your findings."

She went on. "Maria and me went down to the Lion Hotel where I persuaded Rip Davies, to let me in to the main function room so that I could check the light exposure ready for taking photographs at the forthcoming evening function. My main task was to keep him busy while Maria wandered out into the kitchen to have a word with Barry the kitchen boy. Maria can tell you herself."

"I found Barry scrubbing out the leftover pots from a Town Council dinner. He had a lovely smile on him as soon as I wished him a good evening in Italian. Straight away, I realised that he wasn't fully a countryman of mine." She paused.

You've got to hand it to the girl, she's learned a lot about presenting a report complete with compelling silences, in the short time she's been a member.

Maria explained. "His accent is Sicilian, which although the island is a part of Italy, they consider themselves to have their own identity. I asked him how he came to be known as Barry, not an Italian name. He said that his name was really Giovanni and that he had moved from Sicily when he was twenty years old, to Barry Island in South Wales. His English has never been very good, so when asked what his name was when he first arrived in Pembroke, he thought they had enquired as to his previous home. He'd been known as Barry Highland from that day on. He added that he had left Sicily because he didn't want to go into the family's business. He had moved abroad to get away from causing his parents any further disgrace. I asked him how he came to be a pot washer in Pembroke. He went quiet and then said he had been a pastry chef for most of his time in Barry, but when he was bumped into by a twice-removed cousin who used to live near him in Palermo, he decided to move on. He said it was only in the last few years that he had thought he could face a family

reunion. There's not a big demand for intricate pastry work in Pembroke but he likes the place and the people, and that's how he ended up in the back of the kitchen at the Lion Hotel." All were listening intently. Maria's natural Italian accent folded into the Pembrokeshire dialect she had picked up and made her a more than sound story teller.

Joan the Tip was practically out of her chair. "I have to say Maria, that was a thorough report on Barry's history, but were you able to make any progress on the missing ingredients?"

Penny chipped in. "Come on now Joan, it's the girl's first report, there's more than a bit to come!"

"Sorry for that!" Joan sat back in her seat. "This is developing into a family feud, almost a Mills and Boon's classic."

Maria carried on; she knew when to step up the pace. "As Barry was putting the clean pots and pans away, I noticed nine medium sized decorative cake tins stacked up at the back of a top shelf. He had said to me that his baking days were over. I asked him what they were for. He sat down and put his head in his hands before openly confessing that he had been making cakes during the night and storing them away. He had been over to Haverfordwest to buy some ingredients from the shops to avoid attracting attention. The special items he had indeed taken from the larder, paid for mind you, mistakenly thinking it would end there. I knew that Penny would keep Rip the night porter occupied as long as I needed, so I made Barry a cup of coffee, sat him down and listened to the whole thing." Maria then looked nervous. "I'd like to end my report there."

There was an uproar, phrases including "Talk about leading us on?" and "Now, that's half a report if I've ever heard one!" came thick and fast. Bessie stepped in. "Ladies, I am sure that Maria is going to tell us why her report has ended where it has."

Maria coughed. "Barry told me everything on the strict understanding that I could tell no one until after the golden wedding celebration. Not even Penny here." She put her hand on Penny's shoulder. The photographer's assistant looked as mystified as the rest of them. Maria concluded, "An oath to secrecy is absolute to a Sicilian; I intend to keep my promise to Barry. What I can say is he agreed for me to write down in English what he plans to do and that he will share it with Cerys the Cook. As Penny is an approved guest

at the function so to speak, I would ask her to let Myvvi and me in the side door on the night so that we can then report back fully to everyone here.” She sat down.

Bessie the Law opened the St Michael’s church hall door a full half hour before the meeting was due to start. Her anticipation was well-founded in that all but one of the members of the Station Road Sewing Circle were in attendance with twenty-nine minutes in hand. Florrie the Fire was often late since she had taken it upon herself to ensure that the fire crews had returned safely from a day-time call-out. Penny was smiling. “Ladies, the three of us appreciate that you’ve had to wait quite a while to hear this full report with nothing held back on the mystery of the missing ingredients.” Ten ladies sat back, the promise to deliver the entire works as far as they were concerned had just been made.

Penny set the scene. “When I had finished the group photographs and everyone had moved into the function room, I nipped down to the side door and let Myvvi and Maria in. They went up to a small balcony and were able to see all nine circular tables and their occupants. I went back down to take some table photos when I realised that in the centre of each table was a decorative tin much like the ones Maria told us about.” She turned to Myvvi “Could you bring us up to speed on where Cerys fits into all this?”

“Well now, I met Cerys in Hall’s the Bakers the afternoon before the event. She was collecting a special order for twelve dozen Brioche buns which had been requested in advance by the guests attending the celebration. Apparently, she told me, Sicilians are partial to a Brioche bun for their breakfast. I asked her how the rest of her preparations were going. She said the meal which was all prepared, had turned out to be more of a banquet, but the highlight of the evening which will stop everyone in their tracks, she wasn’t allowed to say much about. She reminded me that the women of Pembroke know how to keep a secret and how to pass it on without betraying anyone’s trust. She then told me what was going on without telling me because she was sworn to secrecy!” By now Mrs Preece from Orange Gardens, who was holding up the bread queue waving a

cottage crusty which she said had gone stale after only five days was just getting into her stride. Mr Hall, a patient man, was explaining that he had sold it to her cheap because it had been already stiffening up.”

Myvvi paused for no good reason. “Now where was I? Oh yes, the business at the front of the queue suited me down to the ground. Cerys was telling me that a member of staff was planning a surprise for a certain couple celebrating at the Lion Hotel. He had been working in secret but was well behind where he needed to be. He came to her and told her everything including his unauthorised use of her ingredients, but being the woman she was, she gave him a free run of the kitchen. She even did all the baking for him while he concentrated on the sculpting and finishing.”

Joan the Tip led the chorus of small sighs, as the mystery seemed to be moving towards a happy ending.

Penny cut in. “Thank you for that Myvvi, I should have said that the entire proceedings in the function room were conducted in Sicilian. The master of ceremonies was a lovely boy, smart he was, from the Gower. Thankfully Maria, who had spent a few summers on Sicily as a child, understood enough of the goings on to be able to as you might say, put the final pieces together in this Mediterranean jigsaw.

Maria stood up, flipped through her notes and finally revealed all. “The whole evening ran like clockwork. They had finished and applauded the meal; the speeches and toasts were duly delivered. Cerys then came in pushing a large trolley carrying a roughly triangular outline in blue icing. She was wearing her full chef’s outfit so that everyone present would know they were in for a treat. She handed a note to the master of ceremonies, who then requested each table in turn to open the cake tins and take out the contents. All consisted of irregularly shaped cassata cakes, beautifully decorated with candied fruit.”

Everyone looked suitably impressed with her detailed report. She took a deep breath and continued. “The Master of Ceremonies gestured towards the trolley and in turn, one person from each table duly walked over to the trolley and placed the individual cakes within an outline. As each cake carrier returned to their table, a great deal of pointing and excited discussion broke out. As the outline was filled by each table’s contribution, the discussions changed to satisfied nods

conveying that the guests had discerned what was going on. As requested by the Master of Ceremonies, the last beautifully adorned cake was carried by the celebratory couple, who had no trouble fitting their piece into the now completed map of Sicily. I could see below our viewing point that their piece had been decorated with the word Palermo. The room erupted into applause. The tables shouted out the name of the region they had contributed and I couldn't hear what the husband said to Cerys, except that it was in English by now. She shook her head and signalled that she would be back in a moment. In no time at all, she appeared almost dragging Barry the Kitchen boy into the room. He was wearing one of her chef's coats; about four sizes too big for him it was, but he looked tidy. 'The room fell into silence. No one was sure what was going on.' Maria paused to increase the already unbearable tension.

"As Barry walked towards them, the husband cried out 'Giovanni!' to which Barry, or should I say, Giovanni ran towards him crying 'Umberto.' They hugged for a long time. The wife was introduced to Giovanni and she hugged him. The whole place had by now become nothing short of an ecstatic uproar. I was so taken with it all I didn't see too much more because of the tears in my eyes. Myvvi said we'd better leave before I fell over the balcony and joined in the celebrations. I'll hand you back over to Penny who was summoned to take photos of everyone in turn posing with Giovanni; it seemed every other guest knew him or had heard of him."

Maria sat down to a stunned Station Road Sewing Circle. The murmured conversations began and ran on for a bit - who would have believed that a few missing cake ingredients would lead to all that happy upheaval.

Penny waited until all theories had been voiced and eyes were now set upon her. "You will know that I am a bit of a night owl. I had no trouble staying there until the end, into the early hours. The guests had all retired and promised to renew the celebrations at breakfast. Giovanni seemed happy enough with the mountain of washing-up in front of him. His English is better than he had led us to believe, all part of keeping to himself. Umberto it turned out, is his brother. Giovanni had run away to Wales because he desperately wanted to be a pastry chef and not an ice-cream maker. His brother had brought the family business to Wales some years later. A trend set by many

businesses from Italy and Sicily.

Joan the Tip was loving it all. “So, this broken family was put back together in Pembroke!”

Penny nodded. “When Giovanni had realised that his brother was coming to Pembroke, he decided to give him the best golden wedding present he could – namely the best of his baking and his own return to the fold.”

Beryl the Will liked to tie up the legal side of things – her husband being a solicitor and all. “Is he going to be a partner in their ice-cream empire then?”

Penny smiled. “You’d think so, but Barry, as he still wants to be known, has decided to stay in Pembroke. He says his new roots are here, but now that he knows his brother is also living in Wales, he can keep in touch.” She sat down.

Bessie brought things to a close. “Well now, that’s a happy outcome, assisted by our Sewing Circle. In secret of course. It’s a pity that Florrie hasn’t made it to the last two meetings, but I would ask anyone who sees her to pass on the good news.” The suggestion received the customary nods of all present.

Glenys the Coal announced. “I thought all this celebration business was going to end with a smile, so I’ve brought some home-made crempogs – genuine Welsh pancakes that is, along with salted butter from Pembroke Dock market, strawberry jam from Maggie’s shop, and clotted cream supplied by our milkman - Maria’s husband.” The refreshments, nothing less than the best, were then well enjoyed.

Florrie was both conspicuous and convenient by her absence from the next meeting. Several members of the Sewing Circle were practically queueing up to deliver the details of their near-encounters with the increasingly mysterious fire station clerk.

Megan the Signals was up first. She set the mood of the meeting in St Michael’s church hall with her report of a brief sighting. “I was visiting friends in Pembroke Dock and I happened to be passing the fire station. I caught a glimpse of her red mop of hair and so popped in and called up the stairs to the office. Imagine my surprise when the Fire-station Chief leaned over and said. “Florrie is clearing the

backlog on her records, due to her recent absences. No time for a friendly chat I'm afraid." Megan was clearly annoyed. "Well now, it's something being sent on your way, when we've been friends ever since I moved to Pembroke from Templeton. I am not having that!"

Maria couldn't hold back. "Barry the kitchen porter at the Lion Hotel had asked me to buy some chocolates from Jones the Sweetshop. They were to be a thank you present for Cerys, for all the help she'd given with his celebration cakes. I took the chocolates into Barry at the hotel going in the back entrance; he didn't want me to spoil Cerys's surprise. As I came in to the kitchen, I saw Florrie leaving in a bit of a hurry. I asked Barry if she was doing some fire checks or the like. He coloured up and said I should never ask a Sicilian to break a secret, all I can say is she has heard of my cake decorating skills and had been making enquiries."

Beryl the Will put her hand up. "There's something going on with that girl if I'm not mistaken. I was browsing for some nice table decorations in the florists. The Mayor and Mayoress are coming over to tea on Friday you see – when she came in and ordered an out of season flower arrangement. Florrie that is - not the Mayoress. When she was leaving and saw me, she cut me dead. Pretending to remove a stray petal from her sleeve she was. When I took my selection to the girl at the counter, I asked her how much notice she needed for special orders. She said it was normally a week but two weeks if it had to be made into a wreath or a bouquet."

Following several sharp intakes, the rumour machine started to rumble into action. Bessie the Law was quick to separate the Florrie facts from fiction. "I've had a brief note from Florrie pushed through my door. She won't be attending our meetings for the next four weeks. It seems to me that the girl has a lot on her plate and she wants to keep it to herself. She's even skipping work according to Megan. Unless there's anything firm that anyone can report, I suggest that we wait for her to share it all with us in her own time." Bessie could be short with them sometimes if she had to.

Tea was sipped in near silence and Carol from Chapel's mustard-infused Welsh cakes were consumed without comment, hesitation or complaint.

The good thing about being given advice is that you can listen to it carefully and then decide it was more important to take no notice. Such an instance brought three of Florrie's good friends, all members of the Sewing Circle, to Brown's café on the Tuesday afternoon. No-one was really in the mood for a generous slice of cake with their tea, but Beryl managed to get a Bakewell tart down her.

Megan went straight in. "I don't like meeting like this, behind people's backs and all. We are however, her closest friends in the Sewing circle. From what we know so far, Florrie doesn't want to speak to any of us. There's a possibility of a Sicilian-decorated cake and she's ordering a posh wreath or bouquet. Most likely, it's a bouquet - as far as I know all her family are alive and kicking. Bearing in mind the number of times that Florrie has told us about her ideal wedding day, we don't need to have gone to Pembroke Dock Grammar School to work out what is going on. We just don't know the why of it." She lowered her voice. "Without saying it out loud, we all know she has for a long time now, given her devoted feelings to the Fire-station Chief, a confirmed bachelor. All she can think of is walking down the aisle on the arm of her heart's desire, resplendent in his Fireman's uniform. She must have found a way to unlock his heart so to speak. Why she wants to keep her special day under wraps leaves me cold."

Beryl pushed the tart crumbs into the middle of her plate. "Seems to me that we'll have to be a bit secretive too. Florrie and her husband to be, are at work together at the Fire Station during the day. We won't learn much down there; we know how protective he is because he gave you your marching orders." She looked at Megan for confirmation but she didn't say a word.

Megan's face was etched in horror. Her gaze was unwaveringly fixed on a couple sat in the corner, well away from the café entrance. She shook her head and spoke to the others quietly. "I have only just recognised him out of uniform. Don't look now, but it's Florrie's intended sat with a woman. He's having a tall iced coffee and she's making short work of a Banana Split."

Maria commented. "Well at least he's taking Florrie out for a treat even if they are keeping quiet about the wedding."

"That's it you see!" Megan's whisper was harsh now. "Florrie is

proud of her bright ginger mop. The lady over there is a blonde and I can tell you now, she wasn't born with that strawberry caramel streak in her hair."

As instructed, they then took turns to subtly turn and take in the unidentified woman. Megan who hadn't taken her eyes off this mystery in the making gasped. "I can't believe what I'm seeing. He's now holding the woman's hand! Poor Florrie, he's doing the dirty on her even before he's walked her down the aisle."

All pretence of a covert observation had left the table.

Megan continued her running commentary of the events unfolding in the corner of Brown's café. "He's just paid the bill and they are about to leave. Talk about brazen with it! She's put her arm in his and they've both gone out the door as if there was nothing to make of it."

Beryl grasped the nettle in front of the three of them. "Maria and me will follow them at a distance and see if he's taking her back to his house over on the Green Estate. If they split up, we'll follow them to see if we can make sense of why the Fire Chief is having what seems to be a final fling before he settles down with our Florrie. We'll meet back here this afternoon at three."

Mr Brown was delighted; he had been taking a bit of a chance with a new teacake supplier from Monkton. The young man in question had just opened a small bakery in Long Mains and had persuaded the owner of Pembroke's prominent café to take the first tray on approval. Mr Brown had confirmed that the deal would be based on a 'Stale or Return' basis. The wry statement had sailed straight over the head of the grateful baker. The immediate order from the three ladies coming through the door for 'Anything you can spread cobs of butter on and ladle jam on to, if you please, along with three large cups of tea.' More urgent than curt it was, the request meant that his great tea-cake gamble was about to pay off.

Keeping to the Sewing Circle code of politeness, which meant waiting until everyone had at least had one bite and a sip, Beryl was eager to share her news. "I followed the woman when they split up at the Lion Hotel and she went inside. He gave her a peck on the cheek

before he headed off to the Green Estate. There's no two ways about it, he was giving her all the affection that decency would permit while they were both stood in plain view in the Main Street. I waited a while and then went into the Lion hotel to have a word with Roslyn in reception. After finding out how her family was getting on after the loss of her grandfather, she confirmed that he had indeed been found living with an old shipmate in Newport Pems. Apparently, he said that they still had a few lanterns to swing and that he would be home on the next southerly breeze.

Megan, once again took the lead on this mystery and coughed, indicating that Beryl should get on with it!

Beryl smiled briefly. "It was then confirmed that the guest who had just gone up to her room was indeed from up the line. Her accent which Roslyn had placed as a cross between a Swansea lilt and a Cardiff broadside, was confirmed with the entry in the hotel register. The woman was from Bridgend." Beryl paused, there was more to come. "I managed to look at the register, her surname is Maddocks!"

Maria nearly choked. "That's the Fire Chief's last name!"

Megan's face was grim. "He is married already! He's not only taking Florrie up the garden path, but he's leaving her up there. He's a bigamist."

Maria had sipped her tea. "It gets worse! I followed him over to the Green Estate. Instead of turning right to his home, he went straight over to Florrie's house in Green Meadow Avenue."

Megan was fuming. "The neck of the man!"

Maria continued. "Not content with all his goings on, he knocked the door as large as life. I know she was there because she let him in, then scanned up and down the street as if to check no one saw him arrive. Everywhere we look, we are seeing more secrets."

Megan was starting to look distraught. "How can one man bring so much trouble to such a lovely girl? We'll have to tell her what's going on. Right now, she will be the only one eating the wedding cake that she's ordered from Barry the Sicilian."

Beryl was thinking about Florrie's likely response. "If she gets a whiff of what we've been up to, our detective antics that is, she'll end up sending us to Coventry or further up the Midlands for sure."

Megan concurred. "Not to mention Bessie's face when she finds out we've defied her request to let things go. I just know that we are

on to something, but we need more proof that the Fire Chief needs a good dowsing before he goes up the aisle. Come to think of it, it's only our opinion that all of this is tied up with Florrie's wedding. Let's meet up again before the next Sewing Circle meeting and meanwhile we'll pull out all the stops to collect any scraps of information. I for one am hoping somehow that our fears are not warranted."

Maria was trying to be practical. "We can't keep meeting here in Brown's café; we have to show that we are still going about our everyday business. I suggest we plan to meet up in a few days at my cottage down in Kingsbridge for an afternoon cup of tea. That certainly won't alert any suspicions. If, as we are all hoping that there is nothing more to be made of this, then we can be happy in knowing we have been looking out for our good friend Florrie."

The best of plans will have a contingency built in and so it was after several notes had been popped into each other's letterboxes the following morning. The three friends were sat down in Maria's front parlour at the first available tea-time. It would be true to say that Beryl and Megan were looking forward to the latest concoction from Maria's native Italy. Brindisa Tarta de Santiago, an almond cake had been promised. However, it was the urgency of their get-together that enabled the skipping through the usual politeness of sipping tea and nibbling at cake before news was exchanged.

Megan couldn't wait. "I was in the Post Office getting the new release of Coronation stamps for my husband and casually asking Marion behind the counter if she had seen much of Florrie lately. I said that we were missing her at our sewing circle and hoped that she was well. Now that's how desperate I was getting because everyone in Pembroke knows that Marion has very little news in her. They say it's to do with the Official Secrets Act being drilled into her when she did her post office training before the war. Apparently, she has to think twice before she will tell anyone what the time is."

Beryl and Maria picked at their cake. Megan responded. "There was no one queueing behind me when Marion whispered 'Don't you go worrying yourself about Florrie. As I was locking up last night, I saw her and a friend coming out of Tracey's the Jewellers looking at

what seemed to be men's cufflinks in a presentation box. They had big smiles on their faces.' Well, I was hanging on her every word. Then Marion said she was fed up with getting the same shampoo and set each month and she is thinking about having the same colour as Florrie's friend - strawberry blonde!"

Maria gasped, cake crumbs flying everywhere. "It's a 'Menage a Trois!'" Fortunately, French hadn't been a school option taken up by the other two ladies and the impact of the statement fell flat. Maria thought it best to move things on. "I haven't got much to report except that Florrie has doubled her milk order, according to Antonio my husband. He said to me as he was doing his milk-round books last night, that she must have seriously raised her intake of tea or is receiving a constant stream of visitors."

Megan grumbled. "It certainly isn't anyone from our Sewing Circle!"

Beryl had finished her cake, quite happy to wait her turn. She cleared the last of the sweet almond taste from her throat. "You know when you're chatting on the bus, you never say what it is you're actually talking about? Prying ears and all that. I had a conversation with my husband this morning at breakfast, which followed the same pattern."

Maria and Megan waited; both knew it was best to hear the bones of it all before filling in any of the gaps.

Beryl went on slowly. "He asked me if we'd received our invitation. I didn't want to let on that I had no idea what he was talking about. I replied that it's probably still in the post. He said it's going to be a modest affair then. I answered that sometimes big is not best. Then he confirmed to me that a little look at his work notes and diary before he left for the town hall would be most useful. After he got up to get his jacket, I looked. I just couldn't believe my eyes but there it was in black and white." Beryl paused; she had completed setting out the dots so to speak.

Megan nodded she had already joined them up.

Maria was none the wiser.

Beryl delivered the last link in her emerging chain. "His last meeting the previous day had been up in Pembroke registry office to clear up some details on a man from Manorbier who had left a water-damaged will in longhand writing. It seems that one of the sons had

already turned up in the middle of the night with a removal van to take away, in his opinion, his just legacy. My husband and the rest of the family turned up the following day having to sit on the floor in an empty house. It was the first time he had ever been in the middle of a family row before the will had actually been read.”

Megan didn’t seem to mind Beryl’s inclusion of a family feud in her journey to the centre of the truth. She was smiling for the first time in all of this bother. Maria’s brow was still furrowed.

Beryl explained. “It was the registry office that did it for me. They deal with births, marriages and deaths you see. Well now, you don’t get invited to a funeral, or a baby being delivered for that matter. Our suspicions are well founded.

Megan had stopped smiling. “So it’s true, her best friends are going to be the last to know.”

Maria’s light had come on. “Not to mention the rest of the Sewing Circle. Isn’t it about time we owned up to them and faced the song?”

Megan corrected her. “I think you mean ‘music’ but you are so right. The sooner we deliver all of this back to the ladies, the sooner we can put right the many apparent wrongs.”

Bessie the Law had taken the news of the exploits of the breakaway three without a flicker. All she said was. “Doesn’t surprise me in the least. I knew it wouldn’t be long before some of you would attempt to get the truth of it all out into the open. Let’s share what you’ve told me with the rest of the Sewing Circle and leave it there.”

Beryl wasted no time in taking the remaining members on an eye popping, edge of their seats, rollercoaster of revelations. No twists or turns in their investigations were left unspoken. As expected, the resultant mood was nothing short of sombre. They all knew that there was very little they could do to save their friend from heartbreak and misery. Beryl sighed. “We’ll just have to find a way to tell her gently what her intended is really like!”

Bessie chided her. “I know it goes against the grain of all that this Sewing Circle stands for. We have never stood back and watched a wrongdoing take place before our very eyes. Florrie’s wishes are clear. She wouldn’t have gone to all this secrecy if it wasn’t important.”

Megan wasn't having it. "We are running out of time; the girl is about to make the worst decision of her life. If it means I have to break our code of conduct and leave the Sewing Circle, I'll stand outside the Registry Office on her wedding day with a large placard saying, 'One man – one wife!'"

Her sacrificial offer went no further. The door of the church hall crashed open. In walked Florrie without a care in her voice. "Now then Megan, you won't need to do any such thing. I had planned to tell you all what's going on a week before my wedding. Now that the arrangements are all in place, and it's too late for any of you to persuade me I'm making a mistake, I'm happy to share it all with you. After all, you are my best friends!"

Joan the Tip muttered loud enough for all to hear. "Can't think how you treat your enemies then."

Florrie's smile grew. "You're right girl. I felt so bad about it, so I've decided to come clean earlier than planned. I've brought along the other two people who have been heavily involved in these secret goings on." She went to the door. "Charlie and Margot, come in please!" A nervous Fire Chief and a confident strawberry blonde entered. "Charlie here has been giving me all the time I need to prepare for the wedding. He has even agreed to give me away. My Dad has been in and out of hospital lately and has said he's not up to it. Margot here, Charlie's sister-in-law, owns a Wedding shop in Bridgend and she has been helping me to arrange the dress, flowers, cake and reception, not to mention the dozens of other things that'll have to go right for my special day."

Megan had to ask the obvious on behalf of all sat down. "I have to say there's another small item to be arranged. If Charlie is giving you away, who on earth is the lucky man?"

Florrie was beaming. "You may remember him from when he lived as a boy in Gwyther Street. His family moved to Portsmouth for his father's work in the naval dockyard. Jeffery, my intended, moved back here two months ago to join the fire brigade in the docks at Milford. He came over on a course to our fire station and we fell for each other over a glass of my home-made lemonade. He's very shy; that's why he hasn't come here today. No doubt you all might be wondering how Charlie fits into all this?"

Many around the tables shook their heads as if it was no business

of theirs. Everyone knew the opposite to be true.

Florrie looked a bit relieved as she delivered the last piece in her marital mystery. “Without causing too many blushes, I have to say that my Fire Chief here is fourteen years older than me. When I told him about Jeffery and how we couldn’t wait to get married, he said that over the year’s he had thought of me as the niece he’d never had, Margot having presented him with three nephews only. I replied that I too must have loved him like he was my uncle. I hope that clears up any loose ends for you.”

Charlie was looking even more uncomfortable in this all-woman domain.

Florrie continued. “When Charlie said that his sister would be more than happy to help me out, I couldn’t say no. Unfortunately, she has to go back to Bridgend tonight and needs to catch the last train out of Pembroke.” She touched Charlie’s arm. “Could you kindly escort Margot to the station at the top of the road?” Charlie looked relieved and gently tugged his sister towards the door.

Florrie waited then announced. “Now girls, we still have a few more strands to tie up.” She pulled a stack of envelopes from her handbag. She walked around the table handing them out. “These are your formal invitations to my wedding on the last Friday of this month at the Registry office. Please don’t open them yet. There are indeed three invitations which are slightly different.”

She paused to look in turn at the three exposed investigators. “Beryl, when I was with the clerk at the registry office yesterday tidying up the music for my entrance, you know I’ve always been keen on *No Other Love* by Perry Como. The clerk told me that your husband’s eyes nearly popped out when he saw my entry in the registry office book. You were bound to get something out of him even if he did not know it.” Beryl shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Florrie went on. “Maria, I did not see you come into the Lion Hotel kitchen as I was leaving after ordering my Wedding cake. However, I heard Barry say something to you in Italian. Not many people in Pembroke speak that particular lingo. I was sure it was you.”

She continued. “Finally, Megan, my closest friend amongst you all! There was no way that you would sit on your hands and wait until I was ready to tell you exactly what was going on. When Charlie noticed you staring at his sister-in-law in Brown’s café, he was worried

sick that you would jump to conclusions and either accost him in public or at least tell me what you thought was going on.”

Megan shook her head as if in denial. She then smiled. “There I was thinking that the three of us had it all worked out. I should have known that you being a member of this Sewing Circle, you’d be doing your own detective work. I’m so relieved that this has all now been put to bed so to speak.”

Florrie retorted. “Not quite. Your three invitations are indeed for my wedding, but in addition, you are invited over to my home for the final fitting of your Matrons of Honour dresses. Margot took your sizes from me and I know between us they will fit a treat.”

Bessie rounded it all up. “It’s plain to see that between you, the four of you have solved any remaining mysteries attached to Florrie’s forthcoming wedding.” She announced to all present. “I think a celebration ahead of the happy day is in order. Florrie, would you kindly collect from the entrance hall a large biscuit tin holding one of my Coffee, Walnut and Rum cakes. The rush for the kitchen to put the kettle on was nothing short of a stampede.