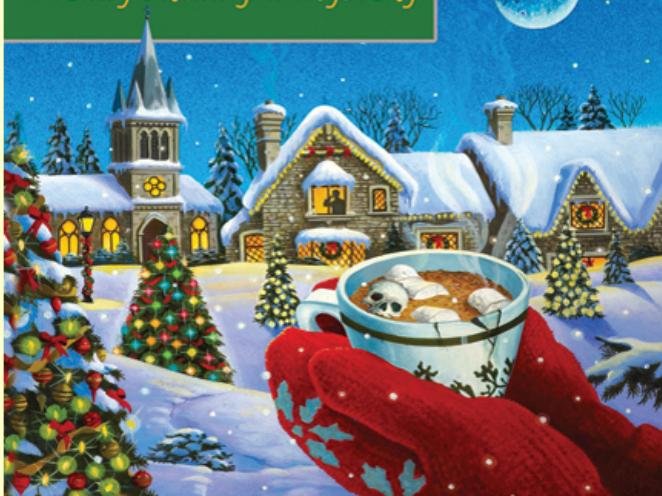


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A Killer's
Christmas
in Wales

A PENNY BRANNIGAN MYSTERY



ELIZABETH J. DUNCAN

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One

On a dark gloomy morning in early November, Penny Branigan placed her spoon in her empty cereal bowl, finished her cup of coffee, looked up from the newspaper spread out on the table before her and, taking off her reading glasses, gazed about the small kitchen with both pleasure and anxiety. Work on the charming period cottage that was now her home was almost finished, and while she was pleased with the results, the spa was turning out to be a different story.

Not for the first time, she wondered what she had let herself in for. Just a few short months ago her life had been relatively uncomplicated and uneventful. She'd owned a small manicure shop in a picturesque North Wales market town where people went quietly about their business, she belonged to an artists sketching group, and she enjoyed rambling about the beautiful countryside painting watercolours and selling them in local galleries. She

was reasonably content with the way her life was turning out and the universe had been unfolding as it should.

But recently, following the death of retired schoolteacher Emma Teasdale, Penny had inherited a cozy cottage that was now undergoing a complete makeover while she and her friend and business partner, Victoria Hopkirk, were converting a derelict stone building beside the River Conwy into an up-market spa. And bearing silent witness to the enduring accuracy of Murphy's Law, that if something can go wrong it will, the spa renovations had gone wildly wrong when workmen discovered skeletal remains in the ductwork. Remains both human and animal that so far, despite the best forensic efforts of the North Wales Police Service, remained unidentified, although it had been determined that the bones were those of a female with an estimated age of twenty-five to forty and that the animal skeleton was that of a cat.

There had been the kinds of setbacks and complications that come with any major building project and some, like human remains in the ductwork, that no one could have anticipated. But beyond the inconvenience of the decades-old bones, their discovery raised troubling questions that had awakened her in the middle of the night more than once.

Who had this woman been in life? What had she looked like? How had she died? What had gone so terribly, tragically wrong that someone, for some reason, had removed grille work, stuffed the remains of a woman and a cat bundled in a tatty old duvet into the ductwork, and replaced the grille, leaving the remains to decompose in their dark, secret place for decades?

While the police had been dusting off old missing persons records and reviewing computer databases, Penny had gone through back issues of the local newspaper to see if she could

turn up anything. She scanned microfiche copies going back years, searching for a story of a local woman gone missing. Although she had found nothing, she knew that the answer was out there somewhere. It always is. Someone knows, she thought. Someone always knows. The police had told her that the DNA results were expected soon and she hoped that encoded within them would be the information to reveal the identity of this poor woman. If not, she wondered if the police would go to the trouble and expense of having a forensic sculptor create a facial reconstruction based on the woman's skull to attempt to reveal what she might have looked like at the time of her death.

Enough of this, she told herself firmly, bringing her thoughts back to the morning about to unfold. Victoria will be wondering where I've got to. Best get on. She pushed her chair back, gathered up the newspaper for the recycling, and set her cup and bowl in the sink. As she opened the back door to get a sense of the weather, as she did every morning, a draught of damp, frosty air rushed past her. Her eyes swept over the walled garden, taking in the pile of brittle, withered leaves that had been blown into the corners, and then turned upward, toward a sky the colour of a bruised plum. It'll be tipping down rain, and a cold rain at that, before the morning's over, she thought. Swirls of mist wreathed the trees and shrouded the ancient hills that overlooked the town, cloaking them in mysterious foreboding. She closed and locked the door and, crossing her arms over her chest, headed upstairs in search of a warm sweater to wear under her raincoat. She'd need both.

A trim, smart-looking woman in her early fifties, Penny had arrived in the town of Llanelen many years earlier as a recent university arts graduate looking for a place to stay for a night or two. Days turned into weeks and still she stayed, reluctant to leave but not knowing quite what was binding her to the town.

Temporary accommodation became permanent as she began to acquire the necessary things of daily living, small and few at first, then larger and more of them, those items that add comfort, familiarity, and civility to one's life, like books and art supplies and clothes for a new season. And one day, she realized that while she had been making friends, starting and growing her manicure business, drawing and painting, twenty years had slipped away. She rarely thought of her native Canada and the few family members she had left behind. Her life was here now.

As she was looping a scarf around her neck, her mobile rang. She checked the number, then smiled.

“Hello, you.”

Detective Chief Inspector Gareth Davies of the North Wales Police. Another recent addition to her life and, without question, the most welcome complication of all.

She listened for a moment.

“So there’s no match. That’s disappointing.” The DNA results were in on the skeletal remains found in the spa ductwork, he’d told her, but unfortunately they did not match anything on file.

“We have to find out who she was and how she came to be there,” Penny told him. “You will keep looking, won’t you?”

Davies reassured her, and after they said their goodbyes, Penny hung up and looked at her watch.

There’s so much still to be done, she told herself as she opened the front door, reaching in her pocket for her gloves. And what with Christmas still to sort out and the spa to get up and running, there’s no time to dwell on anything else, even an unidentified body.

And today, being Thursday, she’d have to make sure everything in the shop was ready for her most demanding client.

She checked to make sure she had her house key, pulled the door behind her, and set off for her salon.

Two

Celyn Lloyd picked her way slowly down the path that led from her bright red front door to the street, lifting her feet up and placing them down carefully with each cautious step. Although the cold rain of the past two days had eased into a light, misty drizzle, the overnight temperature had dropped below freezing and yesterday's shallow puddles had become today's invisible patches of smooth, slippery black ice. Like most people her age, she was desperately afraid of falling. One moment you're perched atop a kitchen chair reaching for a can of peaches and the next minute you're laid out on the linoleum with a broken hip. She'd mourned the loss of several dear friends over the past few years and for one or two of them, a nasty fall had meant the beginning of the end. Just yesterday she'd sadly crossed two names off her Christmas card list. No, in this weather, she was taking no chances.

Still, she was glad to be able to get out to the shops after a day or two of being cooped up indoors. She paused for a moment to glance up at the pale, watery sun that hung low in the mid-afternoon sky and then, just as she was about to take her next step, she heard her front door opening behind her. She turned around.

“Don’t forget to pick up one or two navel oranges,” Florence Semble called out to her. “I need the zest for that new shortbread recipe I want to try.” Florence had recently moved in with Mrs. Lloyd as something of a cross between a companion and a lodger and had happily taken on the responsibility for cooking their meals. Mrs. Lloyd considered the fact that Florence loved baking a delicious bonus.

Mrs. Lloyd raised a gloved hand to acknowledge she had heard and then, reaching the safety of the stone wall that separated her house on Rosemary Lane from the street, she clung to the wall to steady herself while she unlatched the wrought-iron gate. Stepping onto the pavement, she closed the gate carefully behind her, and after hearing the satisfying click of the latch settling into place, she turned toward the High Street and set off eagerly, not knowing she was headed for a date with destiny.

An active, robust woman in her mid-sixties, Mrs. Lloyd favoured the old-fashioned look of a crisp white blouse paired with a pleated skirt, and on chilly days like this one, a buttoned-up cardigan underneath her winter coat. Now retired from her life’s work as postmistress of the North Wales town of Llanelen, Mrs. Lloyd liked to think she took good care of herself mentally and physically: her permed grey hair was washed and set every Monday at 9 A.M. and she treated herself to a weekly manicure at the Happy Hands manicure salon every Thursday afternoon so her hands would look their best on her bridge night. Today was that day.

She soon arrived at the salon and, pushing open the door, stepped gratefully into its warmth.

“Hello, Eirlys,” she called out as the young manicurist working at the treatment table looked up and gave her a warm smile. “Hard at it, I see. Makes me wonder how Penny got along without you.” Penny emerged from the small preparation room, wiping her hands on a fluffy white towel, and smiled at her customer. “Hello, Mrs. Lloyd. On time as always.”

Mrs. Lloyd took off her coat and draped it on the coatrack. “So glad you took my advice, Penny, and took Eirlys on as a junior staff person.”

Eirlys smiled to herself and exchanged a quick glance with Penny. She doubted very much her recent employment had anything to do with a suggestion or recommendation from Mrs. Lloyd. It probably had to do with the fact that her employers, Penny and Victoria, were about to open a new spa, and while their attention was focused on the new venture, they needed to entrust their existing business to someone pleasant and reliable.

But Eirlys, and Penny, too, for that matter, like most of the Llanelen townsfolk, wouldn’t dream of contradicting Mrs. Lloyd.

“If you’d like to have a seat, Mrs. Lloyd, Eirlys will be with you in about ten minutes.” Eirlys glanced at the hands of the client she was working on and then at Penny. “Actually, better make it fifteen. We don’t want to rush Mrs. Owen, do we?”

Mrs. Lloyd sighed, then reached for her coat.

“No, of course we don’t. I am a little early, and as I’ve a few errands to run, I think I’ll just nip out to the shops.”

“Well, mind how you go, Mrs. Lloyd,” said Penny. “It’s slippery out there.”

“I am well aware of that, thank you, Penny, having just walked over from Rosemary Lane.” Mrs. Lloyd gathered up her

handbag and hooked it over her arm. “I’ll be back in about ten minutes.” She glanced at Eirlys, who gave Mrs. Lloyd a brief smile and then returned to the task of applying the first coat of varnish to her client’s nails. Little wisps of black hair escaped from behind her ears as she bent forward in concentration. Penny closed the door behind Mrs. Lloyd and returned to the preparation room.

Mrs. Lloyd walked down Station Road and then ventured onto the rough, uneven cobbles of the town square. Although the weather forecasters were predicting the coldest, snowiest winter in Britain in more than twenty years, she, like most townsfolk, was not well prepared. In her mind, practical, rubber-soled galoshes folks used to wear belonged in the past; like everyone else she had gotten through the recent mild winters in ordinary walking shoes.

After paying for a few groceries, she emerged from the small supermarket, toting her shopping in the reusable carrier bag from a major department store chain she had brought with her. Having lived through the days when British housewives carried all their shopping home in string bags, she was delighted to see the end of the era of disposable plastic bags and the return to sensible shopping bags.

As she shifted her handbag higher up on her arm, her foot caught on a shard of ice that had formed between the cobbles and went out from under her. She instinctively dropped the shopping bag and stretched out her arm to try to balance herself. As her other arm came up as a counterbalance, she felt a strong pair of hands under it, steadyng her. A moment later, her centre of gravity restored, she felt in control again and looked to see who had come to her rescue.

A handsome man whom she judged to be in his late fifties smiled at her, his hand still resting lightly under her forearm.

“Steady on, my dear,” he said. “Are you all right now?”

Mrs. Lloyd nodded and clutched at her collar with her other hand.

“I don’t know what happened; I think I must have slipped,” she said. “It all happened so fast, but I think I would have gone right down if you hadn’t been there. Thank you.”

His eyes crinkled at her.

“Not at all. I’m so glad I was here to help.”

He looked at her carrier bag lying on the cobbles, its contents spilling out. Two oranges had managed to escape and roll a little distance away.

“If you’re okay to stand there for a minute, I’ll get your bag,” he said, releasing her arm. Mrs. Lloyd stood motionless as he bent over and picked up the bag, then scooped the wayward oranges into it.

“There we go,” he said. “No harm done, I hope?”

“No, I’m just fine, thank you,” she said, gesturing vaguely at her shopping bag. “I must go or I’ll be late for my appointment.”

“Perhaps you would allow me to escort you.” The man smiled, offering her his arm.

“Oh, really, that won’t be necessary,” Mrs. Lloyd protested. “I’m just going a little way up Station Road to the manicure salon. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s no trouble. Let’s get you there safely,” he replied and, tucking her arm in his, led her the few metres across the square and then along Station Road to the door of the salon. Just as they arrived, Eirlys opened the door.

“Oh, Mrs. Lloyd there you are,” she said. “We were beginning to wonder.”

“Well, you had nothing to worry about,” Mrs. Lloyd replied. “Penny was right, it is a bit slippery out and I very nearly took a

tumble. But this gentleman has very kindly seen to me and I'm perfectly all right." She smiled at her companion as she took her shopping bag from him. "Well, thank you again," she said as she handed the bag to Eirlys and started to enter the salon.

"Good-bye," he said, with a broad smile that revealed well-cared for teeth. "I do hope we'll meet again. Mrs. Lloyd, is it? Harry Saunders. It's been a pleasure." He offered his hand, which she shook. She stood in the doorway of the shop and watched as he turned away and strode off confidently.

Mrs. Lloyd gave a wistful sigh and a few minutes later, after Eirlys had shaped her nails, was dipping her fingers into a bowl of lavender-fragranced soaking solution.

"You know, Eirlys," she said happily, "you always get the temperature of my soaking solution just right. With Penny, it's so hot she must think my fingers are made of asbestos."

"Hmm," murmured Eirlys. "I'm glad it's okay for you." She glanced at the shelf of bright nail varnishes. "Have a little soak and while you're doing that, I'll just fetch two or three bottles for you to choose from."

She walked over to the selection of nail polishes, and after a few moments pulled one, then two more. She returned to the treatment table and set them down. Mrs. Lloyd looked from one to the other, and then nodded at the one in the middle.

"That one looks nice; I'll have it. Turn it over and let me see what it's called."

She squinted at the label and then smiled.



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