



CHAPTER 3

Coffee à la Sexton

Whitt awoke to the cries of seagulls and the unfamiliar smell of the sea. The open window had kept his room refreshingly cool. He had no trace of a hangover from his warm beer episode of the night before and, despite the fact that The Harbour Light was no 'five-star hotel', he'd spent a comfortable night. Breakfast was also enjoyable, perhaps because of Sexton's absence. Fried bread with his eggs and bacon was a new experience for him, but he'd enjoyed it. Sarah had done an excellent job with the food but, of course, had failed to lay the table beforehand and had to 'bob-off' to get a knife and fork. There were no napkins either, but, when Whitt asked for one, she blushingly supplied a paper towel. She was refilling his coffee cup when Sexton arrived. The coffee left a lot to be desired, but that was the only low point in his morning – until Sexton's arrival that is.

Whitt felt unaccountably intimidated by this man, despite the fact that, as Sexton's 'programming' voice had instructed, most of the experiences that had unnerved him the previous evening he now attributed to the unfamiliar brew and fatigue. However, the memory of yesterday's déjà vu sensations, combined with the hammering his ego had taken over the last few days, had left him nervous. So, the unlikely pair sat drinking coffee at a window table in the newly carpeted 'Seahorse Lounge'. Whitt appreciated the difference in the atmosphere of this refurbished section of the establishment. The whole area was fresher, brighter, and more comfortably furnished than The Harbour Light lounge. It was no luxury hotel but he felt much more at ease here, and said so.

Sexton smiled. “Well this is a ‘new’ extension to the original inn, Mr. Whitt. This section was added in 1793 and, as you’re aware, they’ve just refurbished it. All there was to the original inn was the building where you spent last night: The Harbour Light Inn. Then, in 1792, a ship named The Seahorse was wrecked in the blind bay just west of our harbour. Most of the salvaged timbers of that vessel were used to build this extension. In fact, when it was finished, the villagers said it was more Seahorse than Harbour Light, and so the inn was renamed. The bowsprit and figurehead still decorate part of the second storey. ‘Waste not, want not’, was almost a religious discipline in those tough times, and an ornament as grand as the figurehead, was too valuable a decoration to discard. The bar room of the old Harbour Light Inn became The Harbour Light Lounge. The original sign was taken from the post in the forecourt, and fastened by the door. It’s still there today, thanks to several layers of shellac. That part of the inn would be more than two hundred years older than this extension. Not ancient by the standards of buildings in this country, but old enough to have an interesting history. Interesting, that is, if you like tales of adventurous sea voyages and smugglers and some of our villagers were no strangers to ‘the Trade’ – as smuggling was commonly known hereabouts. We even have some salvaged furnishings from the old ship.”

Sexton rose from the window seat. “Come, I’d like you to see this old sea chest. It belonged to the captain.” Whitt felt his stomach twist into that same miserable knot that had so unnerved him last night, as the image of an old sea chest formed in his mind. He was afraid that that image might match the antique that Sexton wanted him to see. Hesitantly, he walked to the end of the bar, where Sexton now stood, pointing into a dark corner behind the bar. The skin on Whitt’s arms began to ‘crawl’ and he grew icy cold as he drew closer to Sexton. “Later,” he gasped, “I have to go to the washroom. Too much coffee,” and with a titanic effort, he managed to break eye contact with Sexton and head for the washroom, far too scared to face a possible déjà vu experience. Sexton appeared disappointed, but did manage a resigned smile. Whitt took his time in the washroom, splashing his face with cold water and holding a wet paper towel to the unaccountably stiff muscles on the back of his neck. Once he felt better, he left the building by the side door and walked around to the main entrance. Intent on avoiding another opportunity to view that old sea chest, he called from there for Sexton to join him outside. With a wry smile on his lips, Sexton met him in the forecourt.

A drizzling rain had begun to fall and Whitt commented: "Ah, the notorious English drizzle. Weather like this could really do a number on the wedding. Why don't we take the car? It makes no sense to get wet. It might be raining even heavier when we leave the church." Sexton nodded. "Okay, but I had anticipated you taking longer over breakfast. The vicar will not be expecting us for almost an hour. That will give me the opportunity to give you a quick overview of the village. The orientation centre for our 'park' tour is set in the village's original church. We have high hopes for the success of our tourist park: 'Ryepport Harbour'. Hopefully, it will become the mainstay of our village's economy."

Whitt was nervous of Sexton's motives, but, unable to think of a face-saving excuse, he nodded acceptance. They climbed into the car and proceeded a short distance east, along the broad harbour front, passing workmen working on a row of old cottages. "Most of these cottages are being converted into souvenir shops and cafés," said Sexton. "They are almost finished now. These original homes were small and very primitive.

"This was Ryepport's first church," explained Sexton, as they stopped in front of the largest of the local buildings. He unlocked the old oak door as he said: "Once the new church was built, this building became a community centre. Over the past two hundred years, it has served the village in various capacities. On a couple of occasions it became a morgue for victims of shipwrecks. The dead from the wrecked Seahorse were brought here, for instance." Whitt stepped into the hall, but had only gone a few paces when he was struck by an inexplicable chill. He froze, and shuddered violently.

Sexton paused in his explanations. "Are you okay?" he queried. "That was quite a shudder."

"Yeah. I just felt a sudden chill. Worst I've ever known."

"Really?" Sexton sounded genuinely concerned. "It is a local superstition that only happens when someone walks over your grave." Then he smiled, and immediately resumed his explanations. "Anyway, this hall was more commonly used for Saturday night dances, bingo, and wedding receptions, etcetera. Now it will be a museum, detailing Ryepport's history.

"Now, here is what I really wanted to show you." They were looking down at a table mounted model of the harbour, as if they were viewing it from seaward. Sexton explained: "Ryepport is the only natural harbour for miles along this stretch of coast. It has the added advantage of being close to

what was once a rich fishing ground. It's downside has always been that you can't see the harbour itself from seaward, because the only entrance is through an overlapping gap in the cliff formations. Think of the cliffs on either side of the entrance as gateposts to the harbour. Unfortunately, those 'gateposts' are deceptively similar to the cliff formation next door and they mark the entrance to the harbour's dangerous 'blind-bay' neighbour, 'Sorry Cove'. That similar appearance has been responsible for the loss of several lives, usually during a storm.

He pointed to the model of a square-rigged ship at the edge of the model. "Imagine that you were on this ship, and approaching the harbour." He pressed a button on a control panel, and the ship was illuminated. "As you can see there are three almost identical cliff formations ahead of you. The centre formation and the one on the right, are the 'gatepost' to the safe harbour. If, in limited visibility, you chose the left cliff and the centre one as your gateposts, you would be headed for disaster in the blind bay next door. In a storm the fishing boats might not realise their error until it was too late to make a course correction. I'm speaking of the days of sail of course. Powered vessels and radar have greatly improved the lot of today's fishermen.

So, pick the correct entrance and you would find calm water and a safe harbour. Choose the wrong one and your 'reward' would be almost certain destruction on the rocks of that blind bay called Sorry Cove. That similarity between the two entrances has proven disastrous in the past. Approaching this coast in poor visibility, made it almost impossible to distinguish between the two entrances early enough to correct an errant course. Sexton pressed a button marked HARBOUR on the control panel. A series of small white lights rippled outward from the model ship, through a gap in the cliffs, and then moved through a left-handed dogleg, into the safety of the harbour.

He pointed to the model again. "The entrance to Sorry Cove – that disastrous blind bay to the west – is almost identical. He pressed the button marked: SORRY COVE. This time a series of red lights flashed sequentially into the gap to the left of the true harbour entrance, culminating in a pulsating red glow that illuminated the skeletal wreckage of a ship in the rock-strewn bay. "This is where The Seahorse came to grief," explained Sexton, as he studied Whitt's face. "That bay was christened 'Sorry Cove' because you'd be sorry if you entered it. I'm sure you can appreciate how difficult it would be for a sailing vessel, during a flood tide, or strong

following wind, to change course from close in. No space to manoeuvre. There was one, almost impossible, way to avoid being smashed and pounded on the rocks and that was to squeeze through this narrow gap in the cliff that divides the two entrances. Just here.” Another button, THE CHUTE, illuminated a narrow gap in the centre cliff that connected Sorry Cove to the safe passage. Whitt noticed a rope suspension bridge over that gap; obviously it was intended to provide access to a small building with a huge chimney, on the island cliff-top.

“That gap is known locally as ‘The Chute,’ said Sexton. “Shallow draft boats can navigate that quite safely at high tide. But it’s rarely used. Sorry Cove is like the large open end of a funnel, and The Chute is that funnel’s narrow outlet. The force of water through The Chute during a storm is tremendous. Given a calm sea and high tide, the depth of water in The Chute will safely accommodate a small fishing boat. But finding that opening in the cliff, in poor visibility would be like threading a needle blindfolded – mostly luck. And then, turning your boat into that narrow opening – almost at a right angle – and at precisely the right moment would be something of a miracle. However, one man has managed it – only one – in all the history of the harbour. That man was Tim Ozmund.

To overcome the problem of finding the entrance in poor visibility, the villagers used to light beacons – large wood filled braziers – on top of each of the two cliff-top ‘gateposts’. Steering a centre course between them would keep you in the safe channel. Obviously, the fishermen would prefer to be safe in harbour before dark, but that could be costly if they found fish late in the day and then had to run for home with a small catch. Their greatest danger of course, was during storms because of the reduced manoeuvring options. But those storms would sometimes douse the fires. It was a miserable job to maintain the beacons, and generally left to volunteers. Then the fisherman named Archer, came up with the idea of building stone huts to protect the braziers and their minders from the weather. The seaward wall of the hut would be open, rather like a large fireplace, facing out to sea. This protection made the beacons more reliable by eliminating the risk of doused fires and wet wood.” Another button illuminated braziers on the appropriate cliff tops. “The Western Beacon was a problem, because it needed to be on that cliff that formed the western gatepost and that piece of cliff had been made into a tall island by The Chute. So they built a sturdy bridge over The Chute to provide access. Maintaining those beacons would

be a full-time job. Sufficient dry firewood would have to be cut in a local forest and stored at the beacon huts. It would require two men, full time, plus a horse and cart. The village never had enough money to pay for such a service. Then the innkeeper suggested that Archer – whose arthritis was making him stiffer by the year – and his tubby buddy, Jamie Rookan, should do the job on a full-time basis. Their income would be a small piece of the catch from each boat. It would be a village project to build the huts, and buy a horse and cart.

Those two old boys made quite a job of being ‘Beacon Masters’, as Archer dubbed them, and they certainly made the fisherman’s lives a lot safer.

But finding the harbour entrance was not the end of the problem. The deep part of the channel into the harbour, was relatively narrow, and many a boat has come to grief on submerged rocks just when they thought she was safe. Finding that deep channel in the ‘putter’s shaft’ was the problem. To prompt the boats to turn left at the correct point, and keep them in the deeper channel, the original innkeeper positioned another brazier in front of his inn, on the harbour wall. That’s how the inn got its name of course: ‘The Harbour Light.’ As soon as this light became visible, it was safe for the helmsman to turn left and steer towards the brazier. The water in that channel, and the harbour, was deep enough for even tall ships. It worked very well for about three years, but then, one of the beacon lights failed. It was disastrous and it was that failure that motivated the vicar to design our unique new church. It made navigating the entrance, much safer and proved to be a turning point for the village.

Those were tough times in which to make a living from the sea, but the new church solved two major problems for the village. Today, we are again at a stage where this village is in crisis. And again, it’s the village economy that’s the problem. Fortunately, The Guiding Light Church has come to our aid once again. But you will learn more about that when you see the Church, and take a trip around the harbour. Come, we have time for a brief tour of the village, and then we should be off to the Church. The vicar will be ready for us by the time we get there.”

Ryepport’s community centre – the original church – was in the heart of the village. By contrast, The Guiding Light Church was perched way out on a cliff-top, at the most easterly point of the harbour entrance. It was little more than a quarter-mile walk from the inn, but that route involved climbing ‘Jamie Rookan’s steps.’ If climbing ten feet of steep, irregular, steps

cut into the side of the cliff was unattractive, there was a less arduous route. The long church driveway opened onto the road connecting the village to the main highway: the Coach Road. This almost doubled the distance, but was less strenuous. Whitt and Sexton took the car. That eliminated both the effort and risk.

From a distance, the church appeared to be an unremarkable, basically rectangular building, with an oversized belfry and spire at the seaward end. Whitt parked the car and they walked through a gate in the stone wall surrounding the small church yard. "Where's the unique design that the founding vicar got so much praise for?" Whitt commented. "It's a basic box with a belfry and spire."

"Have patience Sir. There is more to this place than first meets the eye," responded his guide. Closer inspection revealed fine craftsmanship in a building built of rough-cut local stone, but with the corners, doors and windows framed with carved ashlar. The glass in the windows was set in diamond patterned leaded frames, within rectangular, coloured, glass borders. The oversized belfry topped the roof at the seaward end of the building and a generous porch welcomed all-comers from the landward side. However, from Whitt's perspective, the church was basic and unremarkable.

The porch entrance was fitted with a large oak door hung on ornate black iron hinges. Whitt was impressed by the quality of the stonework and the doors. "The craftsmanship seems to be of a quality more befitting a cathedral than a small village church," he remarked. "Very perceptive Sir," said Sexton.

There were two matching doors, one either side of the altar, beyond the choir stalls. The door on the right opened as they approached, and a pleasant-faced young man emerged, greeting them with a smile and extended hand.

"You must be Mr. Whitt," said the vicar. "Welcome to our little village and, more particularly, our church. Sexton told me you would be here this morning. I trust you had a good flight and a pleasant trip down from London. It's not often that we have visitors from overseas. You and your friend have caused some pleasant excitement." Whitt responded with the usual pleasantries and asked the vicar's name. "I'm sorry," he replied. "How rude of me; I'm Reverend James Eggleton. Please, call me Jim. I'm happier without formalities when the occasion allows. Tell me, Mr. Whitt. Have you ever been 'best man' before?"

"No Jim, this is a first time for me," admitted Whitt. "But if we are to be on a first name basis, please call me Earl. But I should confess that I am not



From the author's sketchbook

particularly religious.” At this point Sexton excused himself and, with a wave, disappeared through the door to the left of the altar. “Well Earl,” said the vicar, “we are on fairly level ground. This will be my first time officiating at a marriage ceremony. On the other hand, as you might expect, I am particularly religious. I have practised the ceremony of course, and assisted at many marriages, so I am confident that I will tie the knot securely for your friends. If that knot is to remain secure and the union flourish, as I hope it will, it will require the constant TLC of the married couple. Guarantees on that score, I’m sorry to say, are beyond my capabilities.” Then, suddenly, he appeared embarrassed. “Sorry Earl, I don’t mean to sound negative, but I am very disturbed by the poor survival rate of modern marriages.

If I may change the subject Earl, I am very interested to learn how you took the news that this wedding will now be conducted in costume? The wedding party and many of the guests will be dressed appropriately for the period in which our little church was built, 1793. Personally, I find it quite exciting. That decision was made only a few days ago, so I understand that your friend had not time to advise you. I imagine you were excited when Sexton told you of the change?” Whitt had forgotten Sexton’s references to costume changes last evening, but now that remark fully impacted on him. “Pardon me – costumes? I brought my tux, as Chernak requested. I hope I’ll not be required to dress up. I assumed Sexton’s passing remarks about costume changes referred to the bride’s dress. I’m certainly not aware of any changes required for my clothing.”

“Really? I thought that Sexton intended to brief you on that. Well, it should all be great fun. Your friend, Mr. Chernak, telephoned your tailor in Toronto and got your measurements faxed directly to the costume house where he and his fiancée are being fitted for the wedding. So you can be assured that your costume will be elegant and flattering. You are to be dressed as a ship’s captain I understand. Very glamorous, ‘Hornblower’ style – apparently very dashing. Sword, too I imagine.”

Whitt’s flushed face and tight-lipped expression left Eggleton in no doubt that ‘fun’ would not be his terminology of choice. “Sexton was supposed to clue me in on all this, you say? Well he didn’t. Not that I’m really surprised by that. What does surprise me is that the church would employ someone like him in the first place. All last evening, when he was supposed to be briefing me, he was bending my unwilling ear with tales of reincarnation and voodoo. Quizzing me to see if I knew how my digital watch worked

and all sorts of irrelevant garbage. I couldn't get away from him. Did your people check him out before you hired him?" I can't believe he's religious! In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see "voodoo priest" listed in his resume or find that his education was gathered from comic books, or TV's 'Twilight Zone' possibly during his commitment to the local funny farm."

Eggleton had taken a half step back at the start of Whitt's unexpected outburst, and still looked shaken as Whitt paused for breath. "Actually Earl, I was never involved with Sexton's hiring, although, I must admit that initially, I too considered him an unlikely candidate. I also wanted to see his resume." Whitt interrupted. "Aha! So you agree. The man is weird."

"He's different, maybe, but not weird. Not in a bad sense anyway. He was very well known to the church long before he applied for the sexton's position. Personally, I considered him over-qualified."

Whitt was looking very grim and intense. "And?"

Eggleton began to relax a little, as though realising he was comfortable with his ability to cope with his angry companion. "Sexton, until his retirement, was sole owner of a very successful law firm that specialised in real estate and investment counselling. In fact, his firm manages the resources of this church's 'Guiding Light' account and is responsible for the very fortunate financial position that we find ourselves in today. It is because of his firm's expertise we are able to finance the reorganisation of this village from a struggling fishing economy to a resort attraction. Not a cheap conversion I might add."

Whitt wasn't prepared to give up his attack. "Well I bet that he's been lining his pockets at your expense somewhere along the line. No one gives up a position as a successful investment counsellor to become a sexton of a church in a small fishing village."

"Not true, I can assure you, Earl. Independent auditors, employed by the diocese, verify the accounts annually. And they've always commended his firm for their expertise and ethics."

"Then explain to me why this man would want to become a sexton?"

"Oh! Mr. Whitt!" The vicar's shoulders suddenly slumped, displaying his impatience. "I feel that these questions are beyond the bounds of our relationship at this point. I shouldn't be discussing Sexton's business with you, especially without his knowledge and consent."

“Oh! Suddenly I’m Mr. Whitt. What happened to Earl? Did I touch a nerve?....Reverend Eggleton!”

Eggleton shrugged. “I find your attitude unjustifiably aggressive Mr. Whitt, but I will pass on to you what is a matter of public record concerning Sexton. Sexton – which also happens to be his legal name by the way – is a well-respected lawyer and financial adviser. Aside from his law degree, he also holds degrees in business administration and history. He is also a descendant of the sexton who was incumbent here in 1793, almost from the first day of this church, and is also a foremost authority on the history of this village in particular, and much of the West Coast. It has been his main interest and hobby since learning of his ancestor. I can assure you that his education certainly did not come from comic books or late-night TV and he is a very wealthy man in his own right. When our previous sexton retired a few years ago, Sexton handed the reins of his company to a very accomplished relative, who has worked with him for several years, stating that he wanted to experience the life of a sexton here and devote himself to the betterment of this village. He considered that ambition a form of self actualisation. Incidentally, his ‘sexton’s’ income – at his request – is the same as that of his ancestor of two hundred years ago. As in that case, lodging is provided in an apartment right here in the church as part of his compensation. That much, as I say, is a matter of public record. He does take some time off on occasion to look after some private interests overseas. Apart from that, his time is generously spent on the needs of the village. I should also advise you that he has become a good friend and mentor to me. Now, Mr. Whitt, perhaps it would be more appropriate for me to brief you on the changes concerning the wedding rather than discuss Sexton’s private life.” Whitt looked angry but appeared at a loss to find a suitable rebuttal to the vicar’s rebuke.

Eggleton took the opportunity to change the subject. “I’m really looking forward to the wedding. It will also be good publicity for our new tourism plan and the village will benefit tremendously from that. This happy and colourful event will provide an opportunity to publicise the refurbishing of this church, and the old beacons that guided our boats into the harbour, etcetera. All in preparation for the opening of our holiday theme park. The news media are very excited about the project.” On this note, the two men retired to the vicar’s office for a half hour chat. Whitt declined the proffered cup of tea. Once the briefing was finished, Whitt asked: “Since this is to be a costumed affair, surely there will be a dress rehearsal?”

“Of course, Earl. Sorry, I keep forgetting that you have not been privy to all the planning. We will have to wait for the bride and groom to set the time for that though. Depends on outside factors I’m told. I’m sure that Mr. Chernak will bring you up to date on everything later today though. Okay?” Whitt’s expression was grim, but he nodded agreement.

As the two men were talking, Sexton was sitting alone in his apartment, mumbling to himself, and looking very troubled. Then suddenly, his expression brightened. “Perhaps he will reveal himself if I immerse him in the old village? I could try that...but not here. Not on consecrated ground,” and he slumped into his fireside chair, looking very despondent again. “The vicar’s cottage,” he exclaimed suddenly. “That is outside the consecrated area. I could take the journal and my coffee there. I’m sure the vicar wouldn’t mind.” His expression brightened, and he left his apartment and knocked on the vicar’s door. “Come in,” called the vicar, and Sexton walked in, smiling apologetically, as he said: “Please excuse the interruption gentlemen. Father, as you know, I had intended to make Mr. Whitt some of my special coffee, but my percolator has chosen this very day to quit on me. I wondered Father, if – because of that – we might retire to your cottage instead so I could use your percolator. I also wanted to show Mr. Whitt the founder’s journal, but I could bring that with me, as well as the makings for the coffee.”

“Certainly, Sexton. But I thought you wanted to show Mr. Whitt your ‘digs’, and the special features of this church.”

“That was my intention Father but then it occurred to me that Mr. Chernak hasn’t had the tour either. I thought it would make more sense to show both gents around at the same time. By the way Father, I wondered if I should ask Sarah to serve us lunch at your place. I’m sure she will be happy to oblige. Provided you gentlemen agree, of course, I thought some of her homemade soup and a ploughman’s lunch might be acceptable.”

“That sounds like a good arrangement Sexton. Provided Mr. Whitt is agreeable?” Whitt nodded. “Then let’s retire to the vicarage,” said the smiling vicar. “The tour can wait ‘til Mr. Chernak can join us.” Turning to Whitt, he said: “I found Sexton’s tour most interesting Earl. He is a walking history book when it comes to this village, and a fantastic storyteller. He has the ability to bring a story to life somehow and often entertains the villagers at the inn, with tales of smugglers, and seaborne adventures. I find myself so immersed in his storytelling that I feel I actually experienced

it, rather than merely heard the story.” He smiled, an enthusiastic, boyish, smile. “I just love listening to his tales, and Sexton will answer any questions in a most convincing manner. You would almost swear that you were hearing the story from someone who actually participated in the events.” The vicar’s expression changed for a while, and it appeared to Whitt that he was struggling to refocus a dim memory. Then, with a slight shake of his head, he returned to the conversation. “But I find all aspects of this village, and its history, interesting. Possibly, because I’m a direct descendant of the founder of this church and also distantly related to the bride to be. Actually, there are a number of coincidences surrounding this wedding that are almost... uncanny. If you had a suspicious frame of mind, you might suspect that some unseen hand was craftily choreographing a whole series of events just to help solve the present plight of our village.” His expression grew thoughtful again. “Particularly in view of the financial help that was discovered so unexpectedly, that will now fund the building of our tourist park.” He smiled again, rather sheepishly this time. “But there goes my imagination again. Sexton says I have an overactive imagination. He manages to find logical explanations for all of my puzzles and concerns. You know Earl, I feel as though we are all pieces of some large, jigsaw puzzle, and someone is trying to set the last completing pieces. Of course I would have to be one of the straight bits.” He laughed, seeming a little embarrassed at his feeble joke.

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While the vicar and Whitt were talking, the soon to be Mr. and Mrs. Chernak were finishing a late breakfast in the London Hotel. Despite the fact that they’d had almost ten hours sleep they were exhausted. A week of rushing between Ryeport, and London, plus all the aggravations and long hours spent acting as their own couriers, had taken its toll. They checked out of the hotel and drove their estate van back to the costumers to pick up the last of the altered outfits – an elegant captain’s uniform, loaded with gold braid and complete with a sword. This was for their best man: Earl Whitt. “Are you sure? No...are you absolutely positive, that this uniform will now be a good fit for Mr.Whitt, the man whose measurements were faxed to you from Toronto?” Al Chernak asked the tailor. “Yes!” was the confidant response. Chernak looked hesitant. “Well, would you please be good enough to check it one more time for me before we pack it? Have you got the fax?”

“Mr. Chernak,” responded the irritated tailor. “I’m absolutely certain that the clothes are correctly sized, just as yours were.”

“Sorry,” he said, “but spending five minutes now could save days of grief later.” Half an hour later they were loading the car, including the carefully packed, correctly sized, captain’s uniform, leaving behind them a very annoyed tailor, muttering under his breath.

“Boy! This event is really cutting close to the finish line.” Al said to Heather, as they squeezed the last few items into the car. “Now we face the long drive back to Ryeport. I’m not looking forward to that. Boy if this all comes together as planned, we deserve a medal,” he said. “Wouldn’t it be something if we go through all this, only to break up after a couple of months?” Heather hit him with her purse.

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Sexton re-entered the vicar’s office carrying an insulated carryall. “Gentlemen: I have all the fixing’s for my coffee right here – also some excellent cheese and crackers. Shall we adjourn to the vicarage?” Whitt could hardly remember when he last made a decision for himself, but nodded agreement and the three men walked to the vicarage. They were soon relaxing in the comfort of the vicar’s cosy kitchen. “The coffee smells great,” said Whitt, as Sexton poured. “Oh, I do indeed, make a fine cup of coffee,” responded Sexton with a smile and rubbing his hands together. Then, with a nod and a wink to Whitt, he said: “But I regret that there is no cream or sugar, James.” Eggleton smiled. “That’s no problem, I have cream and sugar.”

“No. I mean no cream or sugar is ALLOWED in my coffee Father! Now don’t look so downcast,” he chided. “Allow me to show you how to really enjoy coffee. If it’s not to your liking ... Well... we’ll review that matter after you’ve tried it. Remember, the old saying? Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it?” He pulled an engraved silver flask from his inside pocket and poured a generous shot of dark brown liquor into each mug. “Pusser’s rum,” he said, with a chuckle. “It’s the genuine stuff. ‘Pusser’ is just the Navy’s corruption of the word purser. The purser was responsible for the ship’s supplies you see, including the rum. This stuff is well matured. You would never believe how well matured – in the cask, of course. I still have enough of this good stuff left to last me out.”

The vicar was looking most uncomfortable. “Come now Father,” chided Sexton, frowning at the vicar as though he was spoiling the party. “There’s

nothing wrong with a cup of good cheer now and then. Your ancestor certainly subscribed to that point of view, as you well know from his journal. Do you really believe that I would lead you astray? Besides, it's ninety percent coffee. All I did was add a touch of Caribbean sunshine." Whitt, and the vicar, each took tentative sips as Sexton raised his mug to the unlikely pair and gave the toast: "Drive the drizzle from our bones," he said, savouring a more confident measure of the seductive brew.

"Well gentlemen, would you not agree that my special coffee drives the drizzle from your bones and warms the cockles of your heart?" He raised his mug and his eyebrows, to Whitt and Eggleton in turn, inviting comment. His companions were quick to agree. Their first tentative sips had validated the promise of the coffee's aroma, so they too raised their mugs to each other and repeated Sexton's toast: "Drive the drizzle from our bones." Without a doubt, it was the best coffee Whitt had ever tasted and he said so. He even asked Sexton for the recipe. "Surely it isn't just coffee and rum. I've had many variations of that before.

"I'm sure, but not this coffee and certainly not this rum. I have a friend in the city who imports coffee. This is his personal blend and the rum is very old. You wouldn't believe how old, but it's so smooth. My supply is almost exhausted, but, as I said before, it should last me out." Sexton smiled as he refilled the mugs. He then added a leather wing chair to complete a group of three seats around the table. "Come Mr. Whitt, you are our guest. Please, take the wing chair. The vicar and I will take the others and tell you something of the history of our church and the village. We even have the first vicar's journals here for reference." He patted two leather-bound volumes that he'd just removed from oilskin wrappings and placed them in front of Eggleton.

"Tomorrow, the weather will be more pleasant, and we shall take you out to sea so that you can experience the harbour the way the fishermen did, so many years ago." Whitt settled into the wing chair, as the vicar and Sexton took their places facing him across the table. Sexton placed the coffee pot between them. "Just a moment," he said, and left his seat to retrieve a small earthenware jug from his carryall, which he placed beside the coffee pot. "Now we are all set. The story of our church really begins with its first vicar, because it was he who conceived the idea of a church with a 'guiding light' and arranged for its construction, long before any lighthouse was ever built along this stretch of coast. That vicar's name was Rodney McDowd. Roddy,

as he preferred to be called, was by nature, a waster and a womaniser. His journals here confess that.” Sexton patted the leather bound, musty smelling journals affectionately. “You see these journals of his were entombed with him. His wife had them wrapped in this same oilskin, sealed in a brass box and placed alongside his coffin, in a special crypt in the lower part of this church – the lamp house – which they had arranged to share with their friend Gerry Mason; the man who built the church. The chamber is quite small, about eight feet square and seven feet high. Entry is by a short door, about five feet six tall and three feet wide and made of solid oak, of course. Roddy’s friend, the mason, who built the church was already entombed there when Roddy died. He had fitted the door with large strap hinges, and secured it with a heavy lock. The vault was not to be opened after Roddy and his wife were entombed there. Well, the sea air took care of that. It rusted the pins in the hinges and the lock mechanism, effectively sealing the crypt shut.

Then, quite recently – shortly after Father Eggleton joined us in fact – the strap hinge at the top of the door rusted right through. One morning I noticed the door leaning outward, away from the top hinge and when I pushed it back into place, the bottom strap broke too. The door fell and the locking bolt slipped from the mortise that was holding it. The tomb was open for the first time in nearly two hundred years. When I reported this to Father Eggleton he asked me to refit the door. But I was so intrigued I couldn’t resist a look inside. When I saw the box beside the vicar’s coffin, it occurred to me that he might have left it as a sort of time capsule. So I took a look. In a sense, that’s just what these journals are – time capsules. His sexton left one too, in an identical brass box and that was sealed in the same way. But that ancestor of mine had decided to become a lawyer and resigned his position as Ryeport’s sexton when he joined the law firm of Blackstock and Associates. That was the same firm that looked after our church’s legal matters. Eventually my ancestor earned his lawyer’s credentials and he bought out Blackstock when he retired. Successive generations of my family have inherited that firm until finally, it passed down to me. My ancestor’s journal had been locked away in the firm’s vault all those years. I was intrigued when I discovered my ancestor’s mysterious box. I opened it and read the journal. That’s how I became so involved in the history of this place.”

The vicar interrupted at this point: “It’s so strange that those hinges chose this particular time to finally rust through. If it had been arranged by some

supernatural force it could have hardly been better timed.” The volume and excitement in his voice faded as he became aware of Sexton’s fixed stare.

“What the vicar is referring to Mr. Whitt is that right now, Ryeport is enduring a hard time financially. Fishing alone can no longer support our village. Our small boats can’t compete with the factory ships that operate today, and to make matters worse, fish stock are dwindling as a consequence of overfishing. But discovering the journal has provided a solution.

Back in the 1790’s, fishing was still a reasonable, though dangerous living. Roddy McDowd saved Ryeport back then by providing safer access to the harbour. Now we have Roddy’s descendant here,” he indicated Eggleton, “to lead us through this new crisis, but in a totally different direction.

Once reliable electricity became available, the authorities installed high powered electric channel markers to guide vessels into our harbour. Then army engineers blasted away any dangerous, submerged rock, as a training exercise and the village didn’t need The Guiding Light anymore. Consequently, it fell into disuse. That Trust Fund – created to provide lamp oil and maintenance, in perpetuity – had grown exponentially. Initially the amount of money was quite small. But the Trust’s real estate holdings made it very rich.

There was also a clause in the trust agreement that allowed encroachment on the capital, ‘to beneficially maintain the community of The Guiding Light Church’. Those last words were our saving grace. ‘*To beneficially maintain the community*’. Use of the money needn’t be restricted to lamp oil and maintenance.

The beneficial executor of that trust is currently, me.” Sexton was enjoying himself telling his story, and the vicar was becoming more and more relaxed with every sip of ‘coffee’. In fact, Whitt thought, Eggleton’s eyelids were looking quite heavy.

Sexton was droning on. “So you see, when we say that you have arrived at a very historical time we were not blowing smoke. For the ‘good and wellbeing of the community’ we have restored The Guiding Light, and arranged for the harbour and the village to be turned into a small theme park: ‘Ryeport Harbour’. The beacon huts that were used before the church was built are already restored. The mirrors and oil lamps of The Guiding Light have all been refurbished. Everything is now as functional as it used to be back in the seventeen nineties.”

Whitt was starting to doze off when he noticed that Sexton was giving him a prolonged stare. He nervously shook his head and apologised. “Sorry, Sexton; the warmth, and the coffee are getting to me. I’ll sit up, and try to master the jet lag.” Sexton, acknowledged with a curt nod, and continued: “In good weather we will be able to take tourists out to sea, feed and entertain them. We’ll bring them back in after dark, using The Guiding Light as a closing highlight of the day.

The costumed wedding of your friend – to a descendant of the founding vicar – with the ceremony performed by another descendant – was a marketing opportunity that will get us off to a great start with free advertising. Media people from all over the country are anxious to cover the event.

Let me top up your coffee gentlemen, and then I think the best way for us to tell the story of our village, and The Guiding Light, is for our vicar to read directly from Roddy McDowd’s journal. Only by understanding that man can you really appreciate this church and the spirit of this village. If it were a movie I doubt it could be more entertaining.” Taking this as his cue, Jim Eggleton stretched, rubbed his weary eyelids, and prepared to read from the journal that Sexton had placed before him.