*Not everyone is happy at Christmas time*

A story for the turn of the year

by Veronica Heley

Two days after Christmas. Sally was taking down the mistletoe in the hall when the doorbell rang. She opened the door and someone – a girl? – fell into the hall, screaming, ‘She pushed me!’

‘So I did!’ Sally’s friend Dora stood on the doorstep, arms akimbo.

Sally said, ‘Dora? Is that Sue, your grand-daughter?’

‘She pushed me! You saw her!’ The girl scrambled to her feet shaking back her hair. Dora seized the girl by one arm and swung her through the hall and onto a chair in the

sitting room. ‘Sit down and shut up!’ She turned to Sally. ‘If I hadn’t got her out of the flat, Leo would have murdered her! I know it’s a lot to ask but could you put her up for a couple of nights till the holidays are over?’

Dora was the competent sort who ran voluntary groups, while Sally liked peace and quiet and gardening. But their husbands had known one another for so many years that Dora and Sally had also become good friends.

Now Sally became concerned for her friend’s health. Dora’s colour was high, and she was breathing hard.

As for the girl, Sally saw that Sue’s T-shirt and jeans were stained and her hair was all over the place. She looked, and smelled, none too clean. Her dishevelled appearance made a shocking contrast to the brightly lit Christmas tree which still stood in the corner of the sitting room.

The girl pushed herself to her feet. ‘I need to go to the toilet. Don’t bother to show me where. I’ll find it.’ She set off for the hall and went up the stairs.

Dora collapsed into a chair. ‘She’s been a nightmare over Christmas. My son and daughter in law have tried so hard, but they’ve given up on her. If only she were more like her sister! She won’t listen to anything we say. She’ll have to go into care. But the council office is closed till New Year and the emergency services are snowed under.’

Sally said, ‘I thought your grandchildren were doing alright. They were in the Youth Group at church, weren’t they? And, hasn’t one gone off to university?’

‘Yes, that one’s doing well. Sue’s the youngest. She’s been staying out all night drinking and knocking herself out with drugs. She’s been truanting from school and what she’s been up to with the boys we daren’t think because a packet of contraceptives fell out of her pocket this morning with my son’s credit cards that he’d been missing and had to report stolen. Can you believe? Sue had taken them.

‘That was the last straw for our son. He took her smartphone off her and she said if he didn’t give it back she’d leave for good, and he said “Where would you go, then?” and she said she had friends who would look after her and we’re afraid that could lead to homelessness and prostitution, so he said she’d have to go into care and everything’s closed at the Council, so he dumped her on us, even though we haven’t a spare bedroom in the flat. I said she could sleep on our couch. The little madam asked to go to the toilet and then Leo heard a noise and she’d gone into his desk and taken the Christmas church collection which he was going to bank tomorrow when the banks open again and he blew his top. I was at my wits’ end. Then I thought maybe you and Bruce could look after her for a few days till the Council can find a place to put her, although that’s far from ideal and it breaks my heart to see her so unhappy. Oh, Sally, where did we go wrong?’

Sally was at a loss, too. What did she know about looking after such a disturbed child? Perhaps Bruce would have an idea? But he was out seeing an old friend today and wouldn’t be back till evening.

There was a sharp cry and something fell with a bump upstairs. Dora started to her feet. ‘That girl! You don’t keep money upstairs, do you?’

The two women went up to find Sue coming out of the master bedroom, stuffing something into the pocket of her jeans.

Dora said, ‘What have you done, you wicked girl?’ She pulled Sue’s hand out of her pocket and a pair of earrings fell onto the floor, flashing diamonds.

Sue flicked her hair back out of her eyes. ‘So what! You’re not going to call the cops on your granddaughter, are you? Not you! And now, I’m going to the toilet.’ She whisked herself into the bathroom, closed the door and shot the bolt.

Dora dissolved into tears. ‘She used to be such a sweet child, even if she does lack her sister’s brains. How could this happen?’

Sally didn’t know what to say. Her instinct was to be a peacemaker, but what peace could she offer either of these troubled souls? She put her arm round Dora. ‘I’m sure Bruce won’t mind her staying here for a while. Now you must look after yourself and Leo, who must be worried about her, too. Why don’t you go home and tell him we’ll take care of the girl for a bit?’

Dora left. Sally picked her jewellery box up off the floor, put her earrings away and made up the spare room bed, pondering how to deal with an angry teenager.

Eventually Sue unbolted the bathroom door and come out onto the landing. She seemed ready for a fight. ‘Well, called the cops yet?’

Sally saw that the girl looked flushed and yes, that she was shivering. Sally felt the girl’s forehead, and checked her pulse. ‘When did you last eat? Or sleep?’

‘What’s it to you? Not last night, that’s for sure. So what? Give me the earrings and I’ll get out of your hair.’

‘How much money do you need? You may not be able to sell the earrings easily, but I’ve got some cash downstairs that I can give you, and I can get some more. Would fifty do?’

Sue wrenched her wrist away. ‘You’re a joke, you know that? As if you’d give me money, just like that!’

Sally said, ‘Well, I would. Look, I can see you’re not feeling well. Have you been in contact with someone who’s got flu? Suppose you have a nice hot bath and pop yourself into bed. I’ll bring you up some aspirin and a lemon drink, and we’ll talk about how much money you need when you feel better.’

‘Oh, ha, ha! My father says you’ve more money than sense. If you’ve money to burn, why not give me a hundred or two now?’

Sally guided the girl into the spare bedroom. ‘Because I haven’t that much in the house and I think you’re going down with something nasty. Do you fancy a sandwich? Is your throat raw?’

‘So what! Like you care!’

‘I care,’ said Sally and meant it. She said, ‘We younger sisters have to stick together, don’t we? Yes, when I was growing up I got compared to my older sister, too. She’s clever, writes books. I’ve no special talents. It used to make me spit, but I wouldn’t change places with her now for anything. It takes all sorts, doesn’t it?’

The girl didn’t reply, but allowed herself to be undressed and went to have a bath.

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Bruce came home in the early evening to find Sally in the sitting room, taking some of the decorations off the tree. He kissed her and said, ‘What’s up? I’ve had Leo on the phone, saying that Dora was threatening to dump their juvenile delinquent on us.’

‘She’s upstairs, in bed. Very angry, very distressed, and running a slight temperature. She had a hot bath and washed her hair. I gave her a sandwich, tea and some aspirin to begin with and she dozed on and off. She had soup and some more aspirins a while ago and I think she’ll sleep now till morning.’

Bruce folded her arms and leaned against the table. ‘You think we can deal with her, when her parents and grandparents couldn’t? I hear she’s tried to steal from them, and been up to all sorts, truanting from school, smoking weed, going with boys.’

‘Mm. I think she was rebelling because she was always getting compared to her more academic elder sister. I’ve got all her clothes in the wash and cleaned her trainers.’

‘You think clean clothes will make her feel better?’

Sally shrugged. ‘I saw that she was tired and dirty and running a fever. That was something I could put right. She said she needed some cash. I said I’d give her some.’

‘Drug addicts will take and take and come back for more. They have no sense of right or wrong.’

‘There aren’t any tracks on her arms or legs. She’s not self-harmed. She hasn’t asked for cigarettes and she didn’t have any with her. Yes, I know there are other drugs she might be taking, and I know it’s unlikely I’d be able to help an addict. I know her parents and grandparents have failed to help her, but I prayed about it and it came to me that *you* are better with people than they are.’

Bruce opened his mouth to object, and closed it again. Sally had acted from the heart and who was he to say she was wrong? But what did he know about young girls? Would he be able to save her? With God’s grace, perhaps.

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The girl slept through till late the following morning when she put on her now clean clothes, and came downstairs to find the Christmas decorations had been piled on trays on the table, though the lights were still shining on the tree.

‘Where’s Sally?’

Bruce looked up from reading the newspaper. ‘Gone to buy some new boxes for the Christmas tree decorations, and to get you some cash. Want some breakfast?’

‘I don’t eat breakfast. When will she be back? The sooner I get some money, the sooner I’m out of here.’

‘How much do you need?’

The girl flicked her hair back. ‘How about five hundred for starters?’

Bruce shook his head. ‘I said, “How much do you need?” Not “How much do you want?” If you have a debt to pay—’

‘What’s it to you? Give me what I want, or I’ll change my mind about taking your wife’s earrings. How about that?’

Bruce returned to his newspaper. ‘If your need is greater than hers, I suppose I can buy her some more. There’s some coffee in the kitchen. Want some?’

The girl said, loudly, ‘You won’t give me the money? I’m off, then.’

Bruce didn’t respond.

Sue went to the front door, opened it, hesitated, and then went to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of coffee and grab a croissant from a packet which had been left for her on the table. She returned to the sitting room. ‘Why don’t you point out that taking your wife’s earrings would be theft, and I’m an ungrateful bitch who doesn’t deserve all the nice things my parents shower on me? Aren’t you going to weep and wail that I’ve taken a wrong turn in life but that all I need to do is turn over a new leaf and everything will be hunky-dorey?’

‘We all make mistakes. It’s how we deal with the consequences that make a difference to what we become.’

She stared at him. ‘You’re an odd one. Granny says you’re “Holier than thou.” You could never understand someone like me.’

Bruce winced. ‘I’ve made mistakes. I’ve done some stupid things. Some of them I managed to put right, and some I couldn’t. I regret those to this day.’

The girl sipped her coffee, started to speak, frowned, and slumped into a chair. ‘I’m not a child. I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to *befriend* me, make me “bare my soul” to you like the mentors at school! What a laugh!’

Bruce said, ‘Will the money put it right? Sally says that like her, you’ve always been in the shadow of your older sister. She’s made her own place in the world. Perhaps you haven’t found yours yet?’

‘She’s got a nerve!’

‘Mm. She’s incredible, isn’t she? She’s a much better person than I am. She saw that you were in need and she did something about it.’

‘The others didn’t. My family, school.’ Tears starred her eyes.

‘Do you want to wait and tell Sally about it when she gets back, or would you like to tell me now?’ Another silence. ‘Would a change of schools help? Am I to understand that you owe someone a lot of money?’

‘You know what? You’re a bloody idiot, that’s what you are.’

‘Sticks and stones will break my bones. Hard words never will. Did they throw sticks and stones at you, or only words?’

‘I . . . I did something stupid. Really, really stupid. It wasn’t my idea, either. Yes, I went along with it. A whole lot of us. I mean, he was so rude, banning us from his shop, and we thought we’d get back at him, show him what he was up against. We went in, five or us though there’s this sign barring more than two at a time. It was planned that two of us were to distract him and the others to take . . . just to show him his stupid rules were . . . Anyway, he locked the door on us, and it was frightening, a bit. He said he’d call the cops and the others gave in and said they’d pay for what they’d taken but I was . . . I don’t know why I didn’t, but I wanted to brazen it out, not to turn chicken, and I said I wasn’t part of it, not at all. He didn’t believe me, of course, but he let us go.’

Bruce said, ‘I get it. The other girls turned on you, and you didn’t know how to put it right. So you acted like you didn’t care, and that took you into a different set, who despised school rules and pretended they didn’t care about anything. Then . . . drugs?’

‘A couple of times. They offered, I took. Not worth it. But now they say I owe them and I haven’t got enough. Fifty quid.’

‘Fifty quid is a snip if you’ve learned that drugs aren’t for you.’

‘If you have it, yes. Not if you haven’t. Dad cut off my allowance when I started getting bad reports at school, and the price goes up every week.’

‘Sally will give you the fifty to get them off your back, and she won’t want repaying. What about the boy?’

She reddened. ‘Twice. Not nice. He was rough, and stank of alcohol. I told him I didn’t want to do it again, but he had a photo . . . Changing schools isn’t going to help. I mean, he lives down the street.’ She flounced back in her chair, shook her hair back and then kicked out at the Christmas tree nearby. ‘I hate Christmas!’

The lights on the tree went out. Suddenly the room seemed very dark. Rain spat at the window.

The girl cried out. ‘What did I do?’

Bruce levered himself up from his chair. ‘There’s a loose connection. It’s time we had a new set.’ He fiddled with the bulbs, and the lights came on again. ‘There you are.’

The girl had her fingers in her mouth. ‘It was like God cursing me for saying that I hated Christmas!’

‘You know that God doesn’t see things that way. He sent his only son down to earth to show how much He loves us.’

The girl was bitter. ‘Even when we do bad things? Are you trying to say that he loves me in spite of everything I’ve done?’

‘What do you think?’ Bruce went out to the kitchen to get himself another cup of coffee. When he returned, he found the girl curled up in a corner of the settee, looking at the lit-up tree.

Bruce drank his coffee and put his cup down. ‘Now, what’s your plan of action?’

The girl bent her head till her hair covered her face. ‘You’re going to say that on a scale of one to ten, my “mistakes” are nothing much.’

‘I wouldn’t say that. They’ve spread a considerable amount of misery around.’

‘You think I should go to the girls, and the shop-keeper, and confess. That won’t stop the girls slagging me off on the internet. They’ll scream with laughter, and do it all the more. You can say that “Sticks and stones won’t break my bones” but they’ll have a good go at it. Changing schools might help but the word would soon get out.’

‘Being brave enough to confess will also get out. People admire courage.’

She pulled a face. ‘Paying off the boy who sold me the drugs. Yes, I’ll do that if Sally will give me the money, and I won’t try it again. The boy who snogged me . . . ugh! How could I have been so stupid? But what about the photo he took of me? He threatened to put it on the net if I didn’t go with him whenever he wanted.’

‘I think that’s an offence in law.’

She sighed. ‘Once the damage is done, once the photo is out there . . . Well, I’ll just have to live with it, won’t I?’

There was a long silence. The unstable connection on the Christmas tree lights fizzed and the lights went out again.

Bruce got up, switched the lights off at the mains, and started to take the defective string off the tree. After a while, the girl got up and helped him.

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For the next three days Sue stayed with Sally and Bruce. Sally gave Sue the fifty pounds she needed and bought her a mobile phone so that the girl could make peace with her family and make arrangements to visit her old friends and say she was sorry. Sue also paid off her debt for the drugs and told the boy she’d been seeing that if he put her picture on the internet, she’d have his guts for garters.

Finally she moved back home.

On New Year’s Day she took Sally a pot plant by way of a thank you, only to find the house filled with spring bulbs, some of which were already in flower and scenting the air. Awkwardly, Sue thanked Sally. ‘If it hadn’t been for you . . .’

‘Your family do love you, you know.’

‘They don’t see me as clearly as you do. They keep saying I should forget about what I’ve done and turn over a new leaf, as if I were Aladdin in the pantomime, rubbing a lamp to get a new life. It’s not that easy, is it?’

‘No. but I think you’ve got it in you to win through.’

Sue hunched her shoulders and withdrew her hands into her long sleeved sweater. ‘I’ve tried to make them understand that I’ll never be like my sister. I’m me, with a different take on life. I’m beginning to think I might train for a job helping other people when I grow up.’

‘You’d be really good at that.’

‘Dad says he’ll repay you the money you gave me, but I told him you didn’t want it. That’s right, is it? It was you offering me that money which set me thinking.’

‘It’s the season for gifts, isn’t it?’

‘Some gifts don’t cost anything but money. You took me in and looked after me. That cost more than money.’

Sally smiled. ‘And now we can say to one another, “Have a happy New Year.”’

Veronica Heley’s latest book FALSE ACCOUNT is published at the end of the year.