

THE CONNECTION
By Alison Winter

CHAPTER ONE – THE MILLIENNIAL

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Trying to be normal took at least 70% of Molly Stevens' daily energy. Or, since she'd learned about spoon theory, about seven out of a daily allotment of ten spoons. This left her, a confirmed introvert, with a mere three spoons to do everything else, including commuting, any contact with friends or family and then sitting in her basement flat chatting online with her friend Thelma in Norway. But most importantly, updating her secret science blog. She now had over 560 readers, and she didn't want to let anyone down.

Recently, the young reporter had been getting down to her last spoon by the time she got home, but only because she was on an important mission. And the stakes had never been higher now that the main lead in her investigation, Professor Edward Kelley, was dead. He had told her just two weeks ago that he'd always had terrible timing.

Molly knew she was a curious sight on the sleepy street in Cherry Hinton that morning. Her hair was coloured in a wild spectrum of purples immaculately woven into a French crown plait. The rest of her, bar an unnecessarily large lilac leather handbag, was donned in various textures of jet black – elegant but for the clomping knee high boots which were more buckles than leather. She carried off hipster-Goth perfectly, though mostly accidentally, dressed as she was out of respect for the dead. She couldn't do much about the hair at short notice.

A cold, automated voice instructed her to walk another 300 meters just as she reached a fork in the road. She waved her phone around like a Geiger counter and squinted at the screen, bleached out as it was from the bright daylight. The map was completely invisible. She sighed and chanced the left-hand route, frustrated at having to go 'feral' every time her phone let her down.

Today was sort of normal in nature. She was here for work, after all. But work never usually felt this exciting. She was six weeks in to her internship with StopPress International based in Waterloo. She knew it was an incredible opportunity and people seemed to like her, as long as she didn't talk about herself at all.

A piercing dog bark broke her concentration, forcing her to look up from her phone, and she hurriedly passed the overgrown front garden that the small, angry fluff ball was so fiercely guarding. A spacious road lined with redbrick terrace houses curved away from her, identical iron gates, low brick walls, awkwardly placed wheelie bins,

nicely preserved red pillar boxes, a stale silence, and someone with white hair shuffling down the garden path to throw a newspaper in the recycling. The shuffler stopped to wave at his similarly white-haired neighbour, an ancient lady who was standing on her front door step like a sack of bones, just gazing at the world. She waved back as if she'd been waiting all morning to do so.

'Free range retirement home,' mumbled Molly, looking forward to telling Thelma all about it. A couple of the houses were up for sale, and Molly chose not to dwell on why. She read a corny For Sale sign that proudly shouted 'Hidden Valley Housing', and tried not to get angry given there were blatantly no valleys in Cambridge. Maybe that was the hidden part.

The sun went behind the clouds and she glanced back down at her phone, relieved to find she was walking in the same direction as the dot.

She walked past the ancient lady who smiled broadly and waved from her doorstep. 'Morning!' she called cheerfully, before her smile faded into incredulity. No doubt her eyes had finally focused on the true image of Molly.

'Hi,' said Molly kindly, with an awkward wave back, continuing to walk on by and blinking in disbelief at the shattering volume of the television inside. Ensuring she was on the odd side of the street, she found number 29, and rang the doorbell, wondering if the elderly woman inside would be able to hear it. The door swung open. A face full of lines and stories greeted her with a vibrant smile.

Molly started. 'Mrs Cooke?'

The vision replied. 'Yes, darling! Call me Pauline. Come on in, Molly.'

Molly stepped inside the narrow hallway, taking care to wipe her boots on the welcome mat before treading gingerly on the spotless cream carpet. The house hummed with dusty sunlight and the scent of morning coffee. Molly noticed the dozens of photo collages haphazardly lining the walls and tried not to knock into any with her coat or bag. Generations of milestone celebrations, children, holidays and pets grinned out at the world. It felt like home, though given Molly had never lived anywhere like this in her life, she couldn't explain why.

She followed Pauline into a modestly sized sitting room which somehow housed a mahogany piano, two clashing armchairs, a small sofa, a leather pouffe, an antique telephone table which contrasted vehemently with the digital phone atop it, and myriad stacks of papers and old books all over the floor where Pauline had clearly been going through her brother's things.

'It's a fine thing to meet Edward's journalist,' chirped Pauline, indicating an armchair for Molly. 'He talked a lot about you. He was delighted to finally be published. Even just on the internet.'

Molly suppressed the impulse to roll her eyes as she sat down. *Older generation*, she told herself in her best inside voice. *Very nice lady*. She smiled and observed her host.

Pauline sat in what was clearly *her* seat, a red velvety armchair that squigged just the right amount when she sat, and remembered her form welcomingly. Molly knew Pauline's age but considered she might have it wrong – not a grey hair in sight, a healthy, limber figure, and dressed elegantly in fitted black jeans and a silk navy blouse. A chestnut coloured pixie cut accentuated high cheekbones, which could have made her appear haughty if not for her disarmingly warm brown eyes. This was no old lady.

'I'm so sorry for your loss,' blurted Molly, eager not to be distracted by the presence of the woman in front of her. 'Your brother was... a really good man.' She trailed off, disappointed in her lack of eloquence.

Pauline smiled encouragingly. 'Edward was certainly his own man,' she said. 'And a good man.' She looked at Molly with complete calm, though the brown eyes were misty.

A cheerful looking middle-aged woman wielding a tea towel appeared in the doorway. 'Cup of tea?' she asked, sporting a toothy grin.

'Rose, you *angel*,' said Pauline dramatically. 'Yes, please. Molly?'

'Yes please,' answered Molly, unsure if she actually wanted anything.

'Good,' said Rose, disappearing down the hallway. 'I'll break the hobnobs out'.

'You don't have to do that,' said Pauline.

'Happy to!' called Rose from the kitchen.

Pauline looked rather pleased about the biscuits, and Molly wondered just how much of a special occasion warranted hobnobs, and if perhaps they'd been waiting several months to justify such indulgence.

'Rose is my cleaner,' explained Pauline. 'Except she does so much more than that.'

'She's nice,' said Molly, again crestfallen at her limited verbal expression.

'She's a wonderful woman,' said Pauline. Then her face fell. 'Remarkable. Twenty years younger than me. She has breast cancer.'

Molly's breath caught. Pauline's matter of fact delivery made it hard to process.

'Won't live the year out,' continued Pauline. 'Won't stop making me tea.'

Molly swallowed. She looked towards the kitchen but from her chair saw only an empty hallway. She heard the sounds of the kettle, a cupboard closing, and it occurred to her it would one day be silent.

When her mind returned to the room, Pauline was lost in thought, staring out of the window through the elaborately detailed net curtains. Molly followed her eye line, and watched the neighbours opposite peacefully meander up their front garden path with bags of grocery shopping and wordlessly enter their house. Looking back to Pauline, she wasn't sure Pauline had seen anything at all.

A burst of sunshine illuminated the white netting and the room was suddenly full of brilliant light. Pauline blinked back to the present.

'I've lived in this house for 45 years,' she announced. 'I've had two colds. I'm turning 80 this year.'

'What's your secret?' Molly asked rhetorically.

'Raise five children. Survive a husband. Invent a career. Drink gin.'

Molly laughed, caught out by the wit. 'You've done well. Edward always said he was happy not to have his own children because there were yours.'

Pauline glanced away and took a breath as if to respond, but suspended in uncertainty she simply smiled and brushed something away from the arm of her chair. After a pause during which Molly felt the air thicken and gravity start to pull her into the plush carpet, Pauline forced eye contact.

'Edward wasn't built for families. He was built for textbooks. Oh he delighted in the children. But it was always an effort.'

Molly seized her chance. 'Is that why he never married? Just, married to his work, sort of thing?'

A sad smile. Pauline's eyes were telling another story. Molly stared into them. Edward had told her in his last interview that the human eye resembled the event horizon of a black hole, and that the fact you can never travel that far into another's soul was comparable to the limits of space travel. There are always boundaries, he said.

The hairs stood up on the back of Molly's neck. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to probe...'

'Not at all,' said Pauline quickly. She sat up straight and leaned forward with a sympathetic smile. 'Edward had a hard time being accepted. I wish it had been different for him. I think he would have liked this brave new world that's currently unfurling. He was always buying the latest gadgets. Hungry for the future. A man out of his time.'

Quite on cue, an antique mantle clock softly chimed half past the hour. Molly had always found loud clocks rather intrusive, but as she tuned in to each tick, it seemed to have a calming affect. She considered finding an app for her mobile phone that would reproduce this wonderfully retro experience.

Remembering where she was, Molly smiled. 'Yes, I got that impression. Quite out of his time.'

The clock ticked on.

'Now,' Pauline punctuated, declaring that subject closed. 'That box is for you.' She indicated a small, wooden crate that was sitting next to the telephone table.

Molly could see it was almost up to the rim with papers.

'Go on,' encouraged Pauline. 'Take a look.'

Molly got up from her seat, feeling like a child on Christmas day at a stranger's house, unsure of etiquette but thrilled by the enigma of a gift. She knelt down beside the box and flicked through the top few documents.

She recognised Edward's handwriting immediately. She had read everything available on the Professor, a once first rate particle physicist who had later in his career postulated a theory of time which made him a laughing stock at Cambridge and throughout the science world. He was also said to have fallen victim to his faith and his spiritualism, though the only time Edward had ever spoken up on the issue was to distance himself from the Society for Psychical Research who had claimed him as a champion after The Times dubbed him, 'The Ghost Professor'.

'Rose put it together for me,' continued Pauline, standing to observe. 'It's just letters to his close friend, scribbled theories and equations, occasional diary entries – barely mentions anything too personal but you might find something scandalous for that blog of yours, if you're lucky.'

Molly felt herself beam. She knew she'd have a job carrying the crate back to London via a bus, a train and a tube, but it was one of the greatest treasures she'd ever beheld.

Pauline's voice filled the room. 'Rose reads it. She says it's very good.'

The compliment meant more to Molly than she could ever admit, as a serious journalist, and she looked up at Pauline to check for sincerity as her heart pounded.

Pauline was looking at her steadily as she added, 'I don't read things online. I'm afraid I prefer reading with my hands.' She wiggled her fingers like jazz hands and gave an enormous grin that felt like sunshine.

Still stuck for decent words, Molly compensated with the most genuine look she could give. 'Thank you for this. So much.'

Pauline waved her off. 'You're very welcome. I'm sure it will mean more to you than it has ever done to me.' She sat back down just as Rose appeared with a slap-dash tray full of stewing tea in mugs, the milk and sugar, and a heap of hobnobs.

'There you go,' said Rose, plonking the tray down on the pouffe, which clearly doubled as a coffee table in this house. She looked right at Molly. 'Be careful with that,' she warned, nodding towards the crate. 'I'm surprised a box of letters could be so heavy.' She winked and sat gracelessly on the sofa, a little breathless. She and Pauline smiled at each other.

Molly picked herself up from the floor and sat politely to sip tea and chat with the two women, but couldn't help but count down the seconds to taking her new gift away with her. If what Edward had told her was the truth, then among those papers was a lot more than some indiscrete scribbles.