

The Handbell Ringers of White Pines Parish

by Korina Moss

Some people say fences make the best neighbors. Mrs. Molly Pringle always thought the best neighbors were dead ones. Thus, when the sturdy 55-year-old widow found a cottage for sale that abutted a nineteenth-century cemetery, she drove the three hundred miles to White Pines, Vermont, to see about purchasing it.

An Episcopal church shared a lawn with the cottage and was its only neighbor, which suited Mrs. Pringle. Father Clinton Burrows, who'd owned the house for the last two decades, assured Mrs. Pringle that the church bells would be the only interruption to the quietude of village life. Mrs. Pringle thought Sunday service bells were acceptable, as she was a churchgoer. She bought the cottage from the reverend and moved in promptly.



So it was with great consternation that a month after moving in, just as the earth was beginning to thaw from the long New England winter, Mrs. Pringle learned of the Handbell Ringers of White Pines Parish. Once a week at precisely ten a.m., a group of twelve congregants gathered on the church's wide front walkway to practice their bell ringing. When Mrs. Pringle, aghast at the piercing din that penetrated her cottage's stone walls, went outside to complain, she was told they'd just come off their two-month break and were preparing for December's holiday performances throughout the Northeast Kingdom, culminating in the regional Christmas Handbell Ringers competition. Had Mrs. Pringle paid more attention to the church than the cemetery behind it, she would've noticed the large handmade sign indicating the fundraising goal for their traveling expenses. Had she listened to the conversations at coffee hour, she would've heard that Fiona Atwell, who was the youngest ringer at thirty-eight and had a penchant for wearing pastels, had recruited two congregants to replace this season's retiring ringers, thus ensuring their fourteen-year streak competing in the regional Christmas competition would not be broken. Since the carols relied on the timing of each bell, even having a single ringer down would've disrupted the group.



Father Burrows' wife of twenty-six years, an exceedingly thin woman with pinched lips and a barely hidden distaste for her husband, disclosed one Sunday after services how thrilled she was to finally be living away from that racket. She sneered at the polished brass handbells displayed with pride in a glass-fronted cabinet in the church's vestibule. Father Burrows' left eye twitched as he tried to shush her—after all, he'd purposely misled Mrs. Pringle about the bells when selling her the cottage. His wife sneered at him too. Mrs. Pringle regretted not heeding her instinct to distrust a man over fifty with hair the color of shoe polish, even if he was a reverend.

Mrs. Pringle felt a certain betrayal that Ina, her 110-pound Newfoundland, loved the ringing and would leap at the door every time she heard the cars pull into the church's lot at 9:55 a.m., as they were all particularly punctual. Mrs. Pringle had to walk Ina up and down the street during the entire bell ringing practice before the dog would settle down, only for her to get excited again when Father Burrows would return to the church alone a mere ten minutes after practice ended. The walk never settled Mrs. Pringle, however. Her irritation at the bell ringers intensified over the summer when her windows were wide open, and by autumn it turned into a severe loathing. The members insisted to Mrs. Pringle they had to mimic the conditions of the outdoor Christmas competition and thus, she would have to bear the ringing.

The closer the holiday season approached, the more frequent the practices. By December, it had become a daily ninety-minute occurrence. Mrs. Pringle continued to hear the clanging in her head long after the brassy peals had dissipated. Any slowing car at any time of day would elicit a torturous Pavlovian response from Mrs. Pringle, tensing her entire body. The clanging resounded even in her dreams. She couldn't take another day of it. Something had to be done.

At church that Sunday, Mrs. Pringle's eyelids did not grow heavy during Father Burrows' sermon, as they usually did. This time, thoughts of how she would execute her plan kept her mind sharp.

The following Wednesday morning at 9:55 a.m., Ina loped to the side door at the first hint of a car's engine slowing at the curb. This time, Mrs. Pringle's muscles did not tense. Her teeth did not clench. In fact, this morning she was humming. She would've been peeved to realize it was one of the Christmas tunes the Handbell Ringers had been practicing.

She wound her knit scarf around her neck, slipped on her boots and her three-quarter length parka, and clipped Ina's leash onto the dog's collar. This time she happily followed Ina outside.

Normally, the handbell ringers would all be in their places in front of the church with Father Burrows standing on the church steps before them, directing, as it was ten a.m. on the dot. They had not started their first song, however. Much to Mrs. Pringle's delight, there was some chaos this morning.



Ignoring the expected confusion, she walked to her detached garage and lifted the door above her head. An excited Ina continued to tug on her leash, forcing Mrs. Pringle to make separate careful trips to the curb with her trash and recycle bins for pick-up later that morning. Navigating the unnecessarily enormous recycle can always annoyed Mrs. Pringle, but not today. Today, she happily rolled it down the driveway, ready for the automated sanitation truck that would arrive shortly. Ina seemed more boisterous than usual, likely because the bell ringing had not yet begun. Mrs. Pringle would have to give Ina extra treats later to soothe her disappointment, as she knew there'd be no bell ringing today.

As Mrs. Pringle began to walk Ina on her usual route past the church, she decided it wasn't enough to merely enjoy the silence. She wanted a front row seat to witness the collective bewilderment the execution of her secret plan had caused. The bell ringers, still abuzz with chatter, left the walkway with brass bells in hand and went inside. Mrs. Pringle and Ina followed up the church steps and through the arched red doors.

Everyone stood in the vestibule, staring accusingly at the single pair of handbells which remained behind the cabinet doors. Mrs. Pringle's lips curled in a smile, but only for an instant. She couldn't show her delight.



“Is something the matter?” she said to the group, making a point to pull up the sleeve of her parka with her gloved hand to note the time on her watch. “It’s 10:09.” Nine glorious minutes without bells.

“Miranda isn’t here,” Shelly volunteered in her squeaky voice. With the hood of her puffy white parka still fastened around her face, she looked submerged in meringue. “We can’t practice without every ringer. Nelson was supposed to pick her up this morning.”

“She lives around the corner, but I drive her here on the coldest mornings,” Nelson said, tucking his wool scarf under his chin to speak. He was just a few years older than Mrs. Pringle with good posture and a protruding stomach where the buttons of his peacoat pulled. “She wasn’t home and didn’t answer her phone. I thought we got our signals crossed and she decided to walk to practice. But I didn’t see her on the roadside and she’s not here.”

“We can’t ring without Miranda. It’ll throw everything off,” Shelly’s husband Gregory reiterated her earlier statement. His bells clanged when he gestured with his arms, causing Mrs. Pringle to wince.

An eager Ina alerted Mrs. Pringle to the arrival of Helen Burrows a few moments before she entered the church. It was impossible to tell her temper, as she wasn’t a smiler even under happy circumstances.

“Helen, what are you doing here?” the reverend asked his wife.

“I contacted her,” Nelson said. “I know she has a key to Miranda’s house.”

“She’s not in the house and she’s not answering my calls. I can’t imagine where she would be. I think she’s gone missing,” Helen Burrows stated.

“Missing?” Mrs. Pringle echoed.

“We should call the police.” Shelly set down her bells and reached in the pocket of her puffy coat for her cell phone.

“Now, now, let’s not be hasty,” Father Burrows said. “It might be nothing. How will it look to have the police here?”

“He’s right,” Fiona, who was dressed as usual in pastel from hat to boots, spoke up. “It could be a simple explanation. Could she have gone away? Maybe on a trip?”

“Don’t be an idiot, Fiona,” Helen Burrows barked. “The regional Christmas competition is the only trip she ever takes. Everyone knows that.”

“She’d never leave the bell ringers so close to our first performance,” Nelson said. “Who saw her last?”

The group tried to ascertain Miranda Titwell’s whereabouts. It appeared yesterday’s practice was the last sighting.

“We returned our bells to the cabinet, I locked the church, and we all left for home,” Father Burrows summed up.

Mrs. Pringle cleared her throat. “Now, that’s not exactly true.”

Father Burrows’ left eye twitched.

She continued, “You returned after practice again like you tend to do. I looked out the window because Ina barked when she heard your car, and I saw you go back into the church.” Mrs. Pringle knew this because it was how she was able to sneak into the church shortly after Father Burrows.

Helen Burrows glared at her husband. Her angry stare slid to Fiona, who always managed to be standing near the reverend. Fiona’s rosy cheeks flushed as if she’d been ringing bells outdoors for hours. She broke eye contact with Mrs. Burrows and looked down at her lavender boots.

Father Burrows stuttered a few mumbled words before finding his voice to explain. “I-I was hoping not to have to say anything, but it looks like I have no choice. I discovered Miranda was stealing the money we were raising for this year’s competition.”

“What?” Astonishment rang through the room.

Father Burrows continued, “As treasurer, she had complete access to the money, of course. I started to become suspicious when our fundraisers were bringing in so much less than usual. She admitted to taking the money and begged me not to turn her in. What was I to do? I told her if she brought the money back in full, I would forgive her and keep it between us. We were supposed to meet in the office yesterday so she could return it—that’s why I came back in secret. But she never showed up. She must’ve decided to take the money and run.”

“I can’t believe Miranda would do that to the Handbell Ringers.” Shelly’s voice cracked trying to hold back her tears.

The *whoop whoop* of a siren sounded.

“I called Sheriff Ogden as soon as I couldn’t find Miranda,” Helen Burrows announced.



Ina pulled on her leash, wanting to investigate the noise. “Down, Ina, down!” Mrs. Pringle scrambled to open the church doors before Ina scratched them trying to claw her way outside.

As soon the doors were opened, the massive dog raced ahead, pulling Mrs. Pringle forward and unbalancing her. The leash slipped through Mrs. Pringle’s hand as Ina barreled down the walkway to Sheriff Ogden, knocking over the church’s recycle bin at the curb, causing it to *thunk* on the ground. Sheriff Ogden readily petted Ina who, on her hind legs, met the sheriff nose to nose.

It wasn’t until Mrs. Pringle made it down the steps and to the end of the walkway and commanded Ina to get down, that anyone noticed what had spilled out of the church’s overturned recycle bin—the dead body of Miranda Titwell.

Sheriff Ogden called for backup and ordered everyone to return inside the church. Father Burrows and Helen Burrows, the ringers, and Mrs. Pringle did as they were instructed. After the other officers arrived, Sheriff Ogden joined the group inside. Father Burrows was forced to recount what he’d disclosed about Miranda’s theft.

Shelly, who’d been standing near the cabinet, regarded Miranda’s bells. “I can’t believe this is all that’s left of her.” This time her tears spilled over. She stuffed her face into Gregory’s lapel.

With one arm around his wife, Gregory reached out the other to open the cabinet.

“Don’t touch it,” Sheriff Ogden ordered as he shuffled everyone into the nave and away from the cabinet. “The bells could be evidence.”

Now it was Mrs. Pringle who felt weepy. She knew her fingerprints would be on those bells.

“Did you kill her?” Helen Burrows demanded to know.

Mrs. Pringle nervously faced Mrs. Burrows, but Helen’s accusing stare was targeted at her husband.

“Helen!” Father Burrows was appalled at the accusation.

“Clint?” Fiona’s voice trembled.

“*Clint?*” Helen Burrows repeated, suddenly enraged. Nobody used Father Burrows’ shortened first name but her and his closest confidantes. “You told me you stopped seeing that cotton candy tramp!” She lunged at her husband, jumping on him like a spider monkey and wildly swinging her fists as they toppled into a pew.

Over Ina’s barking, Father Burrows shouted his confessions as if he were a sinning Catholic. “I stopped! I swear! Fiona meant nothing! I called it off with her months ago!”

Fiona was frozen in place. Shelly helped her back away from the tussle, but not before righting the overturned poinsettia at the foot of the pew.

Sheriff Ogden had a surprisingly difficult time tearing the petite woman off her husband. When he did, she was still spewing accusations.

“Why were you still coming here after practice?” Helen Burrows demanded to know.

He clumsily pulled himself up from the pew and patted his disheveled hair into place. “It was Miranda.”

“You were sleeping with Miranda too?” Fiona cried.

All eyes turned to Fiona, her admission compounding their astonishment.

“No! Miranda was blackmailing me.” He turned his attention back to his wife, his explanation spilling out. “She’d caught me and Fiona months before and she threatened to tell everyone, even after I stopped seeing Fiona. Miranda wanted money, so I started giving her the Christmas competition funds. But when she found out where the money was coming from, she didn’t want it. She wanted *my* money. When I told her I couldn’t do that without you finding out, she said she’d gladly tell everyone about me and Fiona. She threatened me just like you had, Helen.” He turned chillingly calm and took a step toward his wife. “Just like you. So before she

could leave my office, I put my fingers around her neck..." He demonstrated with his hands on an imaginary Miranda. "Until she was finally quiet. I only wish I had done it to you too."

Helen Burrows' face slackened in horror.

Father Burrows sighed, the weight of his secrets now expunged, and extended his arms in front of him in surrender. Sheriff Ogden cuffed his wrists and led him out of the church.

Everyone stood, silent in shock. Gregory put a protective arm around Shelly. Tears streaked Fiona's cheeks and Helen Burrows looked lost. Ina stayed close to Mrs. Pringle, sensing her nerves. The sheriff returned with his deputies and directed them to cordon off the reverend's office. He gently told everyone they could go home.

With lowered heads, they all shuffled out, grasping their bells, not wanting to give them up yet.

"Are we practicing tomorrow?" Shelly asked, her thin voice even squeakier than usual.

Nelson shook his head. "It's over for this season, Shelly."

When church resumed on Christmas Eve with a new reverend, it was decided Miranda's handbells should be displayed in a special place of honor. Shelly took them out of the cabinet and was surprised by their silence—they were missing their clappers. Everyone assumed someone had removed them as a tribute to Miranda. No one ever suspected that at the same time Reverend Burrows was murdering Miranda Titwell in his office, Mrs. Pringle had been in the vestibule unscrewing the bells' clappers—her plan to be free of the incessant ringing for just one day.

Mrs. Pringle never confessed, but her conscience eventually got the better of her. Thus, on the first day of spring the following year, Mrs. Molly Pringle found herself in front of the church steps at 9:55 a.m. as the newest member of the Handbell Ringers of White Pines Parish.

THE END