

Paw Patrol

The November morning was dark, wet and windy but not particularly cold. It had been raining hard for four days and the streets were glistening with a slick of surface water glinting in the swaying streetlights. The gutters were running full, the gratings blocked with leaves the council claimed they were no longer funded to clear.

A few minutes after seven o'clock, Lyndia Marshall parked her veteran Volvo estate on the wide pavement triangle created years earlier when the council re-aligned the junction at her patrol point. Her car was fraught with problems both electrical and mechanical. Tommy, her tame mechanic had warned her it was not worth trying to get it through another MOT. This test was due in January but she had no idea where the money would come from. Perhaps she should take Cilla's advice and buy a lottery ticket.

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Thinking about Cilla, (named after Cilla Black) always made Lyndia feel anxious. Like Lyndia, Cilla had also been married twice and she too had reverted to her maiden name, both insisting on being addressed as "Ms" on official forms. *Is this my fault?* Lyndia asked herself yet again. Over these last years, Lyndia had lost contact completely with her previous husbands but she knew Cilla was still in regular Facebook contact with her first husband, now divorced from his second wife. *At least Cilla had avoided children*, she thought. Poor Cilla, she had cried her heart out when her father left and moved to London with his boyfriend. Still, Bert had left her the two-bed terraced house and had agreed to support Cilla through university, until she dropped out when she got married to Ken. Six months earlier Cilla had moved to Falkirk to be near Ken and was working in *Tesco Extra* as a night-time shelf-stacker. Cilla had always been good with computers and was making a good income as an online blogger, specialising in cute videos and voiceovers of her Siamese and Burmese cats, which she also bred for sale.

Lyndia Marshall was in her twenty-third year as a lollipop lady. She was running late because roadworks at a burst watermain had forced her to detour in a slow conga. She was not on official duty until eight o'clock but worried she might have missed Teddy, a miniature poodle, one of her regulars. Officially, he was due at seven-thirty but was often dropped off early by his owner Dan Curtis, known to everyone as Slow Dan Curtis, who some wag had said, had never in his life exceeded twenty-miles an hour. Dan hated to be late for his part-time job and might arrive as early as quarter to seven if he was on the morning shift at *Femme Fatale*, the exclusive ladies' only gym near the SECC, an enterprise owned by his step-daughter, Melissa Mountebank, real name Mary Watson.

As Lyndia arrived, she noticed that the traffic at her mini-roundabout was much heavier than usual, as commuters used their SAT-NAVs to suss out ways of skipping past the roadworks. This was an added worry. The sightlines at her crossing were always made difficult by the usual gaggle of builder's vans stopping for breakfast rolls, coffees and

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snacks. On rainy days like this, the cars of older people like Dan collecting newspapers always added to the chaos as they jostled for a parking place or bumped up on the pavement over the double yellow lines.

Taking time to get it right, Lyndia parked out of sight in the gap beside Abdul's high-sided, long-wheel base Transit van. The Turkish man Abdul Murktah had owned *Callums* for the last eight years buying out Donnie Thomson and his wife Mary when Donnie had retired after years of suffering from a bad back.

On weekdays Abdul and his small team of youngsters did a brisk trade in morning papers, hot breakfast rolls, hot and cold drinks, snacks, cigarettes and Lottery and scratch cards, serving builders and council workmen from six o'clock onwards and the occasional secondary pupil buying rolls, pot noodles or instant porridge made by adding hot water.

After nine o'clock, the demand slowed but surged again from noon, when the local secondary schoolkids descended like locusts, milling around chatting and eating oven chips plastered with red or brown sauce.

From the start of her long stint at this junction, Lyndia had been friends with the various owners of the corner shop where she kept her lollipop. This thriving convenience store was a goldmine, she reckoned, wondering if Abdul would sell up and retire to the north of Cyprus where Anita's family now lived. From around late October to early March, Abdul was often left to fend for himself, when Anisa refused to help in the shop, claiming arthritis in her hands brought on by damp Scottish weather, jetting off to Cyprus for three or four months leaving Abdul to fend for himself.

When Abdul took over, Lyndia had continued her previous informal arrangement when Abdul took over, stacking shelves and helping older customers find what they needed, listening to their oft repeated moans and groans, acting as their agony aunt, always trying to end on a cheery note. Having lived as a singleton for over thirty years, she enjoyed the company of the busy shop and her status in the local community where she was known as "Lyndia Lollipop" or "Auntie Lindy". When the council cut the lunchtime patrol, she had continued as before in her previous routine, now unpaid, standing at the door, still wearing her high viz clothing, acting as a door marshal, controlling the numbers of youngsters entering to a maximum of six at any time, exchanging banter and ignoring the sotto voce ribald remarks.

Her Volvo, which she called *The Tardis*, was essential to her *Paw Patrol* hobby business as a dog-sitter, an increasingly important cash income stream since her hours had been reduced, first from twenty-two to seventeen then to twelve when they cut the lunchtime patrol. On a busy day she might have up to five day boarders in various sizes plus Basil,

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her most recent foster dog, a reformed Coker-Corgi cross and Trudy, her eighteen-year old pack leader matriarch, a small, ginger, collie-spaniel with added Heinz.

At the time Lyndia had 'inherited' Basil, he had been attending an expensive 'dog therapy clinic' with a charlatan called the *Giffnock Dog Whisperer*. On her website, this woman claimed she had psychic powers and could see into the mind of a problem dog and discern which of her fake potions would effect a cure. Lyndia realised at once Basil was neurotic, nervy because he needed company. She had only had him in her weekday doggy creche for a few weeks when his owner had died of a heart attack while on a business trip. Lyndia had volunteered to take him on when the owner's estranged wife had revealed her intention to have the dog put down. Once Basil had been neutered, he settled to become a placid and lovable dog, a calming influence in her ever-changing daily pack and a potential successor to Trudy, when her time came.

Levering her small, chubby frame out into the downpour, Lyndia Lollipop was already dressed in her luminous yellow waterproofs. Under these she wore only three-quarter length slacks, a yellow tee-shirt and a blue cotton jacket. This lightweight attire was worn summer and winter, her way of combating her chronic hyperthermia, a condition she had suffered since menopause, self-medicating with homeopathic concoctions, some home-made and others from a Chinese Traditional Medicine shop in Glasgow. She avoided doctors, dentists and hospitals, people she referred to as "quacks". As a result, she was no longer on a GP register. Blessed with good teeth which she brushed five times a day with home-made toothpaste, she had not needed to visit a dentist for over sixty years, a fact she proudly advised to anyone who complained of toothache.

Wearing her oversized waterproofs made her look slightly comic. They comprised a wide-brimmed sou'wester to protect her hearing aids, a traditional behind-the-ear type made in Switzerland and bought online through *Amazon*; a baggy with ankle-length coat and waterproof over trousers. Her wrist and ankle cuffs were secured with bright orange Velcro ties which sparkled in a continuous chase of tiny, randomly flashing LEDs. In a few weeks, during the run-up to Christmas, she would add another string of LEDs around the brim of her hat. Because of her bunions, she wore open-toed sandals year-round, regardless of weather conditions, an oddity which most people missed. What everyone remembered about Lyndia was her cheery smile and happy chatty nature, playing the role as *Callums* informal front of house greeter.

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With her seventy-fifth birthday looming on Christmas Eve, Lyndia was sure she was a target for redundancy. Shanta McCrory, her aggressive supervisor from the new fancy council offices in Kirkintilloch had called Lyndia's mobile several times over the last few months, asking questions about her health, probing intrusively, advising Lyndia that if she

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intended to continue beyond her birthday she must provide certificates from an ophthalmologist and an audiologist to confirm her sight and hearing were of a good enough standard for her role as a lollipop lady. When challenged, Shanta had said these certificates were necessary for insurance purposes, but Lyndia knew better. Shanta, determine to trim her departmental budget, had 'done a number' on Alfie, Lyndia's previous patrol partner who had been eased out on his seventy-fifth birthday after a spell of sick leave following a big operation on his leg, his deafness listed as a contributory factor in his dismissal letter. Lyndia's hearing was poor; this, she believed, was related to her chronic asthma caused by traffic fumes. However, she claimed her long sight was excellent and boasted she could read and recognise numberplates at up a hundred yards, well above the Highway Code distance of sixty-seven yards or five car lengths. However, the thought of being subjected to close examinations by strangers was unpleasant: *That's something that just not going to happen!* she had told her audience as she exchanged gossip at the shop.

On one social media council forum, Cilla had picked up the rumour that Shanta McCrory was a high-flyer, ambitious to climb the bureaucratic greasy pole and become a local authority chief executive. In another impromptu phone conversation, Shanta had wandered on, Lyndia struggling to follow her mangled vowels and half-posh voice, explaining the council's view was that parents should take responsibility for seeing their children safely to school, adding that, in her personal view, school crossings were unaffordable, a thing of the past: *Aye, it is an anachrunisum which simply hustae go!* Reflecting on this later, Lyndia wondered if her boss had been drinking on duty.

Everyone agreed with Lyndia that her busy junction needed two lollipop persons. Hearing her grumbles, some of the parents had mounted a campaign on Facebook to try to force the council into sending her a replacement. Lyndia was not hopeful. Shanta had been furious at this campaign, accusing her of stirring up resentment, hinting this was 'against the terms of her employment'. Lyndia had decided in her mind that Shanta was 'out to get her' and wished she would get a promotion to another council area.

Although Lyndia's patrol duties were intended to safeguard primary-age children, some of the younger secondary pupils in the area still waited for her help to cross. Only when they were much older with their heads down, tapping on their phones or when walking with a group of friends did they ignore their Auntie Lindy. When alone, many of these older kids stopped to chat briefly, sharing their successes, triumphs and worries, seeking reassurance. As might be expected, she knew all their names, always happy to help where she could, acting as a sort of extra granny.

Not all the children who used her patrol were heading to local schools. From seven-thirty onwards she helped a steady trickle of older primary and early secondary children to

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cross as they headed for the main bus route and train station to get to their private schools.

One of her most recent 'nieces' was twelve-year-old Lilah, a tall, slim pretty girl who attended a fee-paying school on the south side of Glasgow. This meant she was often one of the first children to visit *Callums* for a travel snack and a can of juice on her way to the station to catch the first of two trains to take her to the school. Over the previous weeks, in her role as Auntie Lindy, she had learned Lilah was from Newton Mearns where she had lived with her mother and her long-term boyfriend, Malcolm. As the weeks unfolded, Lilah revealed Malcolm's wife had refused to give him a divorce. Recently, her mother had found a new boyfriend and Malcolm had moved out back to his wife and had put the Newton Mearns house up for sale as he had paid the deposit and all the mortgage payments.

Lyndia had also learned Lilah's mum had dumped her daughter with her grandmother and moved in with her new boyfriend, who had a small one-bed flat in Dennyloanhead.

On the back of this revelation, Lilah had added,

"Mum said it's a sort of honeymoon and if it works out, she'll get Denzi to move to a proper house and we can get together again. Mum's struggling because of my school fees. She said she is working on Granny Slater to pay them. I told Granny I don't like my school because they are all stuck-up and won't speak to me, because I'm not posh enough. I hate it there; I just hate it. Granny says Malcolm should pay but he says I'm not his daughter, that my father was one of Mum's other boyfriends, maybe even her second husband, Ewan. Ewan must be rich, I think, 'cos he always sends me nice presents at Christmas and on my birthday. But that's supposed to be a big secret, so don't tell Granny please."

Lyndia was familiar with this sort of naive openness from the children who shared their worries with her. She had also learned that Lilah liked living with her Granny, glad to escape the constant rowing she had endured in Newton Mearns. Lyndia had asked the other customers who lived in Agnes Slater's street to learn the widow had recently moved into a larger modernised bungalow, downsizing from a monster West End property after her husband's death. There was a huge Mercedes four-wheel drive in her double garage and a soft-top sports car. Money, it seemed, was not in short supply.

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As Lyndia made her way from the Volvo to *Callums*, she spotted Lilah running towards her on the other side of the street. Despite the driving rain, the child was in her dressing gown and fluffy slippers, not her fancy uniform and trench coat. She was struggling with a huge umbrella grasping it with both hands.

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From that point, for Lyndia, everything happened in slo-mo.

When Lilah spotted Lyndia, the girl raised a hand to wave. Behind Lilah, racing downhill at high speed was the blurred image of a large car or van, its headlights on full, overtaking Dan Curtis's slow moving pale blue Mini.

A gust of wind tugged Lilah's umbrella free and it hurled off helter-skelter into the path of the speeding car.

The girl was about to step off the pavement in pursuit.

Lyndia's heart leapt into her throat. '**No, Lilah, don't.** . . .'

The huge vehicle swerved, skidded out of control, mounted the pavement and smashed into Abdul's van with an ear-splitting boom, its momentum causing the Transit to topple over, coming to rest, crushed against the Volvo.

A group of workmen from Callums raced past Lyndia and ran to help the driver. Abdul came to the door, his shop phone in his hand, and shouted at the top of his voice, telling everyone he was speaking to the 999 people.

Lilah tugged at Lyndia's sleeve.

'Auntie Lindy, can you come please, Granny Slater is a funny colour. She can't speak properly. I think she might have had another stroke but she says not to call an ambulance because my Mum is coming to help her.'

'OK, Lilah, let me get Basil and Trudy from The Tardis and we'll go to your Granny's house.'

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Several weeks later:

Lyndia and Lilah were watching 'Strictly' on catch-up when Ewan and Henri called on Skype to Lilah's new iPhone.

'*Bonne soirée, chers dames*, how are things working out? How's *ma mère*?'

'Hi, Dad, so you made it home to Guernsey safe and sound?'

'Yes, honey. There was the usual fog over the channel delay but then it cleared and **Voila!** here we are, back at *The Haven* and getting ready for Christmas. We're fully booked, all fifty-three rooms taken and two hundred and forty covers for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. Poor Henri, he'll be frazzled in the kitchen but never mind, sweetie, we can have a good long break after the New Year crowd go home and we'll come up to see you then and have our own special *après Yuletide* meal at *Beaumartin* with Ricky And Andrew.'

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'*Oui, oui*,' said Henri, '*c'est notre meilleure année* since we bought *The Haven* five years ago.'

'Ewan,' said Lyndia, 'would you like Lilah to check if your Mum is awake. She's not speaking clearly yet, but she is very much brighter. Gemma, the district nurse, says her stats are good and she should be off the oxygen mask in a few days. We had her sitting up in bed this afternoon while Lilah was serenading her to a re-run of old *Top of the Pop* clips on *YouTube*., didn't we Lilah?'

Yeah, Dad, and we were singing Christmas songs, from Alexa. Did you know Lyndia is a brilliant singer, she knows all the words.'

'I'm not as good as you, Lilah, you're Scotland's Kylie Minogue!'

'Yeah, sure Lyndia,' said Ewan, 'why not? At least while she's still masked up, she won't be able to start in on me as usual.'

'Right, Dad, here we go. And thanks again for my new iPhone. It's fabulous, truly fabulous.'

Lilah disappeared taking Ewan and Henri on *Skype* to her Granny Slater's bedroom with Basil padding along as her escort. Trudy lifted her head, sighed, rolled over onto her back, folded her legs onto her tummy and slipped back into the land of nod.

Thankful for a rest from Lilah and her constant chatter, Lyndia stretched her legs out on the pouffe, tipped the chair into recline mode, closed her eyes and re-ran what had happened since the morning of the accident.

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The pick-up which had careered out of control and slammed into Abdul's Transit was being driven by Shanta McCrory. She was not wearing a seat belt and the pick-up airbags were not functioning. Later investigation revealed they had not been replaced after a previous shunt involving the pick-up's owner, Jimmy Bradford, an unemployed building labourer from Bonnybridge, the next village to Dennyloanhead.

Lyndia and Lilah had missed this drama. As soon as they reached Granny Slater's bungalow, Lyndia had called an ambulance and Agnes Slater had been rushed to hospital where she had been treated for a second minor stroke. The ambulance team had assumed Auntie Lindy was a real auntie and had advised her that she and her niece should not follow to the hospital, telling her to make urgent contact with her next-of-kin, as a precaution.

With Lilah's help, Lyndia had found Agnes's telephone and address book and called her son Ewan in Guernsey to give him the bad news. He promised to fly up "*tuit suite*" but explained the island was currently shrouded in mist and getting a flight to the mainland

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would prove difficult. In those early hours of the trauma, Lyndia was completely focussed on comforting the girl and re-assuring her. This meant she did not check her *WhatsApps* and Facebook messages until later, when the girl was tucked up in bed, fast asleep.

Only then did she learn the gruesome details of Shanta's death which she decided to keep secret from Lilah until the Ewan arrived. Next morning, while Lilah was showering and dressing after breakfast, Lyndia called Ewan a second time to find he was in a taxi, heading towards them from Edinburgh Airport, the quickest flight he could get on. This gave her the chance to tell him the news of his former wife, Shanta.

When Ewan eventually arrived the next day, Lyndia slipped away and left the pair to catch up and share their news, With Basil and Trudy, Lyndia headed for *Callums* to assess the damage to her car in the daylight, not all that hopeful The Tardis would be safe to drive. Abdul told her it had been towed away to the police compound along with his Transit and the Ford Ranger pickup. He had overheard the *SOCO* team saying they knew the pickup from a previous bust and wanted to test all three vehicles for traces of drugs.

Weeks later, long after the cremation, she would discover on social media that Shanta McCrory was high on cocaine at the time of the crash.

It transpired the pick-up was not insured to allow Shanta to drive and its third-party insurance was invalid because it had not been MOT's for several years. Road fund tax was also overdue. Jimmy Bradford's wife took to social media to defend her man, claiming the vehicle had been stolen from his compound weeks earlier but he had not got around to reporting it because he had been inundated by roofing work caused by the spell of bad weather. She was adamant neither she or her man knew anything about Shanta McCrory or her boyfriend.

The wrangle with Lyndia's insurers was continuing. Unasked, Abdul had publicised her predicament on *Callums' Facebook* page, linking it to a *Just Giving* account. These donations eventually reached £3,450, a sum which Tommy her mechanic said should get her a reasonable older Volvo estate as a replacement. She was holding off meanwhile to keep pressure on her insurer, sure they would pay up a compensation amount soon, hoping for a 'functional vehicle' pay-out of around £2,500 rather than 'scrap value only' compensation of around £300.

At the insistence of his solicitor, Lilah and Ewan had DNA tests taken to prove he was her father. This allowed him to successfully apply for guardianship of his daughter. As the days rolled on, Lyndia was only slightly surprised by Lilah's refusal to be drawn further about her mother's tragic death. Perhaps the girl's grieving would come later, Lyndia thought, when the novelty of having a reconnected with her lost father began to lose its shine.

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Ewan, who had power of attorney for his mother's affairs, arranged for Lyndia to drive the Mercedes and to use it for her *Paw Patrol* day-care dog creche business. With Lilah asleep in bed, Ewan and Lyndia had come to an informal agreement. During the uncertain period ahead, Lyndia would live at the bungalow and care for Lilah and his mother, in return for a weekly amount to be paid directly to her bank account. His cousin Kiera Matheson, the Slater family's lawyer also provided a notarised certificate of temporary guardianship for Ms Lyndia Marshall to enable her to act *in loco parentis* for Lilah Slater Napier until his mother recovered, allowing Ewan to return to Guernsey.

This arrangement was discussed with Lilah who was happy to agree provided she would be allowed to attend the local council school. As the days rolled on, Lyndia was worried by Lilah's reluctance to talk about the loss of her mother. Perhaps the grieving would come later, she thought, when the novelty of having 'found' her father began to lose its shine.

Standing on *Paw Patrol* with Lyndia on the run up to the Christmas holidays, Lilah had struck up a friendship with the Armstrong twins, Milly and Molly, tiny doll-like girls who lived nearby and who were her same age, normal teenagers. Like Lilah, these girls spent hours on *Facebook* and *WhatsApp*, playing 'Just Dance' and 'Animal Crossing' on their *X-Boxes*.

Encouraged by Lyndia, the three girls had become members of *Kool Katz for Kids*, a fully approved and regulated site run by Ms Cilla Marshall, (a new site which complement to *Kute Katz and Kittenz*). On this new site, designed for early teenagers, applicants must first be registered by their 'responsible adult'. As members, kids were enabled to swop and share make-up tips and compile virtual try-ons of new clothes they could design to suit their whims, providing click-links to help them find stores selling safe cosmetics and similar clothes for the their Christmas lists.

The cremation service for Shanta McCrory was a small affair, 'hosted' by Ewan. There was a marked absence of former work colleagues and no friends from *Femme Fatale* nor her Pilates and Zumba classes.

For the wake, Ewan and Henri hired a fifty-person function room at the Central Hotel in Glasgow where Henri had once been Head Chef. This event was gate-crashed by an over-dressed, mixed group from Dennyloanhead supporting Denzi, a man in his mid-thirties, dressed in a black shiny suit, black shirt and sporting a tie in Rangers' tartan. At Ewan's request, the hotel called the police who came mob-handed and arrested them on suspicion of possessing and dealing hard-core drugs.

Using social media, Lyndia and Cilla followed up on Denzel Wallace and were not surprised to learn he had twice been in Barlinnie for dealing drugs, Claiming to be reformed, he

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promoted himself as a 'mover and shaker' with investments in many local businesses. Other anonymous postings suggested he was the king spider at the centre of a web of pushers supplying drugs to high class gyms, hairdressers, spas and sun tanning outlets.

Malcolm Napier did not attend nor make contact with Lilah but he sent a cheque 'to help with school expenses' in the amount of £1,000, made out to Lilah McCrory Napier.

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From the master bedroom at the end of the corridor, Lyndia could hear Lilah singing at the top of her voice, belting out 'Merry Christmas Everybody' to Slade on Alexa with Basil howling along. Rising with a sigh, she closed the door and returned to the white leather recliner and tipped it back, reaching for her Kindle and Samsung Galaxy. Trudy rolled over, heaved herself to her feet and waddled across from her bed to lick Lyndia's hand.

'Well, Trudy Marshall, who would have thought things could work out as well as they have. Shall we *Facetime* Cilla, and bring her up to speed? See if the new litter has arrived? Find out how things stand with her romances? Find out if Ken's broken her heart again this week? Or if Colin, God of Tesco's night-shift has made a move yet?'