

THE UNWANTED GUEST



THE ABSURD TALES OF MR GRIFFS

By J & K Joseph

About *The Unwanted Guest*

When Steve Moran, Mr Griffs' troublesome neighbour, throws a lavish party, everyone in the neighbourhood is invited. Everyone, that is, except for Mr Griffs.

Although he has no intention of attending Steve's pretentious party, Mr Griffs' curiosity gets the better of him. After coming to the aid of a party-bound and cake-bearing old lady, Mr Griffs gallantly offers to escort her (and her cake) inside. Within no time at all, Mr Griffs finds himself sipping champagne and sampling Steve's expensive canapés.

All at once, Steve's carefully-laid-out plans unravel and, no matter how much he tries, he just can't keep Mr Griffs away. When all of his friends, and even his wife, begin to flock around his neighbour, Steve is left to wonder – who, in fact, is the unwanted guest?

'I love a cake. And this one's got the perfect amount of cream!' Mr Griffs salivated over the dessert. Although he considered sneaking a piece, he realised that the only way to get a bite would be to infiltrate the party.

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Dedication

For the love of cake



Chapter 1

Taking a seat on his front porch, Mr Griffs stretched out his legs. Though it was early on a Monday morning and the week had just begun, he felt exhausted. As his wife, Mrs Griffs, had recently become addicted to health shakes, she'd been running the blender constantly over the last few days. Pushed to his breaking point by the incessant noise, Mr Griffs had sought refuge on his porch.

'Finally, some peace and quiet. I've had enough of these silly machines,' he said. Even though he was talking to himself, his Northern English accent was heavy.

Shifting in his chair, Mr Griffs reached for his cup of tea. He took a long-drawn-out sip, savouring the moment.

He swallowed another mouthful before exclaiming, 'Ah, it's nice when it's hot.' He set the cup down on the table beside him before relaxing back in his seat.

His lips curved upwards. Completely content, he closed his eyes and basked in the morning sun.

He had just begun to drift off when someone yelled out, 'Put that down!'

Jerked out of his tranquil state, Mr Griffs lurched forward. 'What! Who's there?'

'I told you to put that down!' the voice called again.

Mr Griffs jumped out of his chair and reached out to grip the porch railing. He began to scan his surroundings, looking to see who had disturbed him.

Beyond the shrubs and blooming flowers that enclosed his property, he saw that a fleet of delivery vans were lining up along his street, Pickle Mouse Crescent. He shuddered, watching on as a number of workers darted in and out of his neighbour's property. They were all barking orders at each other.

‘It’s madness!’

Shifting his position to get a better look, he saw that a group of workers were unloading a large crystal chandelier from a truck in Steve and Victoria’s driveway.

Mr Griffs was shocked. ‘Another chandelier? But they’ve already got three! It’s just too much!’

Mr Griffs had barely finished speaking when the voice that had startled him before came again. ‘How many times have I told you? Put that down! That’s not what I ordered.’

Now that Mr Griffs had regained his composure, he had no trouble recognising the voice. Resting his hands on his hips, he muttered, ‘Steve, Steve, Steve, always causing such a commotion.’

Ever since the Morans had moved in next door, Mr Griffs’ life hadn’t been the same.

Although Victoria was extremely friendly, her husband, Steve, always seemed to disturb his routine. Mr Griffs often said that Steve’s presence caused nothing but disaster. Of course, Steve said the same thing about his neighbour.

‘It’s not due till Saturday!’ Steve shouted again. ‘What am I supposed to do with it now?’

Curious as to what his neighbour was up to, Mr Griffs leaned forward. From his elevated position, his view into Steve’s front garden wasn’t obscured by the hedges that separated their properties. Even so, he couldn’t quite see what all the fuss was about and who Steve was telling off.

Wanting a better look, Mr Griffs said, ‘I better go get my binoculars.’ He quickly retrieved them from the house before returning to his spot on his front porch. Normally Mr Griffs reserved the binoculars for bird watching, but today they would be used for something else – Steve spotting.

He adjusted their focus, zooming in on his intrusive neighbour.

As usual, Steve was smartly dressed, though the strain of directing all the workers was showing. His grey tie was loose and his blue business shirt was sweat-stained. Mr Griffs grinned when he saw that Steve's hair, usually slicked back and oily, was standing on end.

But what really grabbed Mr Griffs' attention was the large block of ice that Steve was pointing to. It had already begun to melt in the morning sun.

Mr Griffs' eyebrows furrowed. 'What's he planning on doing with all that ice?'

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Completely oblivious to the state of the block of ice, Steve glared at Tony, the ice-worker in charge. 'I don't have time for this! Who's responsible for this mess up?'

'Unfortunately,' Tony said, 'we've had an issue with our warehouse. It had to be delivered today.'

'But it hasn't even been carved yet,' Steve snapped. 'It's supposed to be in the shape of a flamingo. I didn't order a cube.'

Tony's left eye twitched. 'It's all under control, sir. We brought a special freezer to store it in. The plan is to carve it on-site on the big day,' he explained.

Not at all happy, Steve grunted. 'Well, I hope you're not expecting a tip for the extra work.'

Frustrated, Tony nodded tersely to his co-workers. At his command, they picked up the ice cube and carried it into the house.

'Don't you worry, Mr Moran,' Tony said with a scowl. 'The sculpture will be ready for your party.' Turning around, he followed his team inside.

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Still watching on with his binoculars, Mr Griffs chuckled under his breath. Then, thinking that he had seen everything, he shifted his attention off Steve just in time to see a gold-plated

chaise lounge being unloaded from yet another truck. Unable to hold back his reaction, he cried out, 'WHAT?'

All work on Steve's property ground to a halt. The workers looked around in confusion, not knowing where the scream had come from.

Steve, however, wasn't confused. He turned around and knew exactly where to look; this was not the first time he'd caught his peculiar neighbour ogling at him from his porch. At least this time Mr Griffs had had the decency to wear a shirt.

Feeling the attention on him, Mr Griffs twisted his binoculars, inadvertently meeting Steve's gaze. Hastily, he changed his focus again, pointing his binoculars to the sky.

'Oh, no. I've been caught,' he whispered to himself.

Trying to appear as casual as possible, Mr Griffs slowly lowered the binoculars. He was so intent on making his movements natural and unhurried that he fumbled. His grip on the binoculars loosened and they crashed to the ground.

'Ahh, c'maaan!' Mr Griffs muttered. He bent over and picked them up, only looking at Steve when he had straightened.

Aware that the workers around him were watching the exchange closely, Steve sniggered. Confidently, he mocked his neighbour, 'Bird watching again, Mr Griffs?' Then, derisively, he ran his eyes over his neighbour's attire, paying particular attention to the frayed and shapeless denim top hanging loosely over his hips.

Mr Griffs puffed out his chest and adjusted his baggy pants – even then they hung low on his hips and seemed to swallow his frame. 'Of course. The rare *Grallina cyanoleuca*, known to you laymen as the magpie-lark, is scheduled to make an appearance, it being spring and all. What else would I be looking at, Steve?'

Annoyed that Mr Griffs always came up with a reasonable excuse and that he was showing him up in front of his workers, Steve called out, 'Well I don't see one on my head, do I?'

‘Of course not,’ Mr Griffs replied. ‘How can you see your own head?’

A few of the workers around Steve laughed quietly. More joined in as Mr Griffs continued.

‘Besides, such a noble creature would never stand for such an ill-suited habitat. It’s too greasy up there for them.’

Before he realised what he was doing, Steve reached up to flatten his hair. When this sparked a new bout of laughter, he spun around. Wanting re-assert his authority, Steve barked, ‘I’m not paying you to laugh. Get back to work!’

The laughter died down and, after a moment, the workers did as directed.

His lips curling with satisfaction, Steve marched into his house. He slammed the door behind him.

‘My word,’ Mr Griffs said, ‘how rude. You can’t have a conversation with anybody these days.’

Chapter 2

The next day, Mrs Griffs walked into Cornville's town centre. She was enjoying the fact that her husband had stayed at home and was not around to slow her down. His habit of wandering off and gawking at everything that struck his fancy was something that always exasperated her.

'I have all the time in the world! Where to first?' she asked herself. 'I'll get a fresh vegetable juice and then go to my favourite frozen yoghurt shop. Perhaps I'll even squeeze in a movie if I have time.' Although Mr Griffs was under the impression that she was gathering last-minute supplies for her annual Tupperware Convention, she was in fact treating herself to a day of leisure.

Mrs Griffs was rummaging through her bag, checking her wallet to see if she had enough cash on hand, when she found a few utility bills tucked inside. 'How sneaky! Mr Griffs must have slipped them into my bag before I left. That man!' Her face scrunched up. 'I'll never understand why he insists on us paying through the post office. We might get a seniors discount,' she huffed, 'but it's so inconvenient. Online is the way to go!'

Mrs Griffs snapped her bag shut, not noticing that the bills were now being crushed. While her husband was pedantic about these things, her carefree nature often meant that she was oblivious to details like this.

Spinning on her heels, she headed straight to the Post Office, thinking that it would be better to get the payments out of the way.

Once there, she was delighted to see that all three tellers were available. 'Oh, how lovely. This never happens!'

Mrs Griffs pulled the crumpled bills from her bag and, with a spring in her step, approached the first teller. She gave him one bill, twirled and then handed out the remaining bills to the

other clerks. With a big smile, she said, 'This one's for you, this one's yours and the last one's for you.'

The first clerk, a man with a goatee, protested. 'Ah, excuse me, Ma'am. But one person is enough for the job.'

Mrs Griffs disagreed. 'I don't want anyone to feel left out. There's enough work for everybody!'

He was about to argue back when Jenny, the clerk beside him, interrupted. 'Dan, it's not like there's a line. Customer service is important, so let's just get started.'

As all three clerks got to work, Mrs Griffs eagerly offered her credit card.

'Hold on a moment, please,' Jenny said.

Confused, Mrs Griffs didn't lower her hand.

'Ma'am, I know you want to pay, and we'll get to that shortly, but we're not up to that stage yet,' she said.

Blushing, Mrs Griffs quickly put the card back into her wallet and zipped it shut. 'Well, that's the first time anyone has ever refused to take my credit card,' she joked, hoping to shift the attention off herself.

When the time finally came to hand over her card, Mrs Griffs panicked. She tugged roughly at the zipper, but it was caught. In a fluster, she began apologising to the clerks while pulling at the zipper furiously.

It was at this moment that Victoria Moran, Steve's wife, walked into the Post Office.

'Well hello there, Betty. Fancy meeting you here,' Victoria said. Although their husbands were often at loggerheads, Mrs Griffs and Victoria were good friends. They were often the ones having to settle the disputes between their respective husbands.

Victoria was holding a stack of envelopes and was, as usual, dressed elegantly. She was wearing a white pencil skirt, a blue blouse and heels. Mrs Griffs, on the other hand, was dressed for the gym – she wore brightly coloured leggings, a loose t-shirt, leg warmers and sneakers that had seen better days. Despite their differences in attire, Mrs Griffs wasn't the least bit self-conscious. Her clothes suited her active lifestyle and Victoria, unlike Steve, didn't care about such things.

Completely forgetting that all three clerks were waiting for her credit card, Mrs Griffs reached out to hug Victoria.

In her enthusiasm, she nearly knocked the envelopes from Victoria's hands. 'Oh, I'm so sorry. That's quite a number of letters you have there.'

Cringing, Victoria said, 'It's for our party. Well, Steve's party.'

'What do you mean?' Mrs Griffs asked.

'Well, just between us,' she said in a hushed voice, 'it was meant to be a casual neighbourhood thing. I honestly didn't expect Steve to take it this far. But before I knew it, he'd turned the party into a formal event, hired caterers and spent an outrageous amount of money. You'd think that as a Sales Executive he would be in control of the budget, not to mention the situation.' Victoria shook her head. 'And he's been putting so much pressure on our gardener. I'm worried that Englebern's going to end up leaving us.'

Mrs Griffs gasped. 'Really? I'm so sorry to hear that. I wouldn't have taken Steve to be the flamboyant sort.' In actual fact, Mrs Griffs wasn't that surprised. She'd always known that Steve liked to put on a show and that he thrived on attention.

Victoria lifted up one hand. 'No need to soften the truth, Betty. We both know how Steve can be sometimes. He's not at all like your husband.'

Stunned, she asked, 'What? My husband?'

‘Yeah, Mr Griffs just goes with the flow. He never seems to make a big deal out of small things.’

‘Mr Griffs? *My* Griffs?’

Victoria smiled. ‘He’s a real peach.’

Mrs Griffs didn’t want ruin Victoria’s positive image of her husband – there were only a few people in Cornville who could see beyond Mr Griffs’ quirkiness. With this in mind, she replied, ‘He can be a real hoot sometimes. And a handful.’

‘Ma’am, your credit card please,’ Dan called from behind her.

‘Sure,’ Mrs Griffs said absentmindedly. She unzipped her wallet in one go and, without looking back, gave away her card. After Dan had processed Mrs Griffs’ first bill, he passed the card to the second clerk.

When they were all finished with the card, Jenny tried to get Mrs Griffs’ attention. ‘Excuse me.’

But Mrs Griffs was just too busy chatting to Victoria.

Jenny sighed. Reaching over the counter, she tapped Mrs Griffs on the shoulder.

Cheerfully, Mrs Griffs turned to her. ‘What is it, dear?’

Wordlessly, Jenny handed the card and the receipts to her.

Mrs Griffs thanked the three clerks and then stuffed everything into her bag, once again crushing the bills.

‘Oh, and before I forget,’ Victoria said to Mrs Griffs, ‘I may as well give you your invitation now.’

She flipped through the pile of envelopes and then paused. ‘Hmm, that’s odd. Let me just double check.’ She went through the stack again, going slower this time. ‘You’re not going to believe this, but I can’t seem to find it. I must have left your invitation at home.’

‘Oh, that’s fine,’ Mrs Griffs said. ‘When you find it, why don’t you just drop it off at our place? After all, we do live right next door.’

Victoria nodded in agreement. ‘Of course.’

‘When’s the party, anyway?’

‘It’s this Saturday. Sorry about it being so last minute. I do apologise.’

Mrs Griffs’ face fell. ‘Oh no! I’ve got my annual Tupperware Convention on this week. I’m leaving tomorrow and I’ll only be getting back on Sunday.’

‘I didn’t know that you were interested in Tupperware,’ Victoria remarked.

‘I love it,’ Mrs Griffs said enthusiastically. ‘I have so many at home but I can never seem to match the lids to the bases. So, I always stock up every year.’

Victoria’s mind boggled at the thought of how much Tupperware there was in the Griffs’ household.

‘And Mr Griffs loves Tupperware too,’ Mrs Griffs continued. ‘He always uses them to store his snacks.’

Confused as to why Mrs Griffs was telling her this, Victoria reverted back to the subject at hand. ‘Well, it’s just too bad that you can’t make it. But please tell Mr Griffs to come. I’m sorry about not getting the invites out earlier, but Steve insisted on getting them printed overseas.’

‘Don’t even worry about it,’ Mrs Griffs replied. ‘The party will be good for Mr Griffs. It will keep him from getting too lonely without me. Besides, he loves a good party. He can even bring some of my spiced nuts along with him.’

Glancing at her watch, Mrs Griffs saw that her movie was about to start. ‘I’ve got to go – I’ve got so much to do before I go away.’

They said their goodbyes, and then Mrs Griffs rushed out of the Post Office.

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Even as Mrs Griffs was worrying about her husband being lonely without her, Mr Griffs was having the time of his life.

Sitting in the most comfortable chair in the house, Mr Griffs grinned. 'Ahh. I love Tupperware Conventions. My favourite time of the year. No distractions, no blenders and no noise.' Extremely satisfied, he said, 'I can finally do what I want!'

As he had big plans for the coming days, and as he didn't want to miss out on anything, Mr Griffs decided to write up a list. With a pen poised over a small notepad, he thought for a moment.

'Tomorrow, I'll pop by my favourite cake shop. I hear that they've got a new line of sponges that have the perfect density. I must try them.'

Mr Griffs added this to the top of the list.

Considering that over the next few days his diet would mainly consist of baked goods, Mr Griffs decided that he'd probably need to get a few walks in. He pulled out a map of Cornville from the bag that he always kept within arm's reach of his chair. It generally contained newspapers, tissues and spare rubber bands, all of which Mr Griffs considered to be handy essentials.

Looking at the map of his town, Mr Griffs began to strategically mark out key walking routes. They all had to have good reception for his pocket radio as he never liked to miss *The Garden Report*, his favourite radio program.

After writing out his plan in his notepad, he then thought of what he could do next.

‘Hmm, let’s see. I’ve been meaning to get a new pair of slippers. Mrs Griffs is always taking mine, and my feet have been so cold and dry without them.’ Nodding to himself, Mr Griffs marked it down.

He also scheduled a sleep-in for tomorrow morning. No blender was going to wake him up this time.

‘And let’s not forget about all of my Sudoku puzzles. They’re just piling up at the moment.’

Perusing his list, Mr Griffs cheekily said. ‘Ah yes, that should keep me busy.’

He stood up and began to work out the kinks from his stiff body. Complaining under his breath that he’d been sitting down for too long, he leaned back, placed his arms behind his head and then stretched them out like a pigeon spreading its wings.

Then, with his mouth uncovered, he yawned loudly.

Putting the map away and tucking his list into his breast pocket, he said, ‘Thank you Tupperware Convention. This is going to be a great week.’

Chapter 3

Later that evening, Steve arrived home from work. Having barely walked through the door, he called out, 'Victoria, where are you?'

'I'm in my office,' she replied.

Confused, Steve began to walk towards her. 'You're still working?'

Once there, he saw that she was hunched over her desk typing on her computer. Instead of turning around and greeting him, she continued with her work. 'What do you think I've been doing all day, Steve?' Sarcastically, she said, 'I've only been talking to your suppliers, confirming orders, and mailing out the invitations. Because of *your* party, which I'd like to remind you was supposed to be a small affair, I barely got any of my own work done today.'

Victoria worked as an independent business consultant from home and had an extremely busy schedule. Even knowing this, Steve had assumed that she had enough time to help him with the party. 'I thought that everything was already in order.' He paused, his voice now uncertain. 'It is, isn't it?'

With an exasperated expression, Victoria turned to her naïve husband. 'You think things just happen on their own, don't you, Steve? There's more to organising a party than simply barking out orders.'

'What do you mean, Victoria? Everyone has their jobs, and mine is delegating.'

Abruptly, her patience came to an end. 'This party is out of control! You told me that we were just going to have a few friends over. That it would be a casual gathering. And then all of a sudden, I'm receiving calls from champagne suppliers in France. And a gold-plated chaise lounge, Steve? Have you lost your mind?'

Taken aback by Victoria's reaction, Steve fumbled over his words. 'I . . . I'm sorry. I was just trying . . . you know, to uphold a certain image.' He reached over to comfort her, but she pulled away.

'And what about Mr and Mrs Griffs?' Victoria questioned.

'What about them?'

'I had an extremely embarrassing encounter with Mrs Griffs this morning. I tried to give her their invitation, but I couldn't find it. When I got home, I looked everywhere, thinking that it must have been misplaced.'

'Oh really? That's surprising. I could have sworn that I wrote one up for them.'

Victoria's eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'Steve, did you even bother to organise an invitation for the Griffs?'

'It must have been the printer's fault. Maybe they lost it.' Steve turned away from Victoria, hoping that she would believe his lie. As he didn't want his guests thinking that he was friends with someone as unusual as Mr Griffs, he purposely hadn't included Mr and Mrs Griffs on the guest list.

Preoccupied with the amount of work she still had to do, Victoria took his word for it. 'Fine. I'll just finish up a few more things and then I'll give Mr Griffs a call. He's going to be alone all week as Mrs Griffs is attending a Tupperware Convention. I have to make sure he knows. I'd feel so guilty if Mrs Griffs forgot to tell him and he ended up thinking that he was never invited.'

'No! Don't do that.' Scrambling for an excuse, Steve said, 'He's probably asleep by now. He's an old man, Victoria. You don't want to wake him up.'

Victoria smiled, thinking that Steve was finally being sensible. 'You're right. It's probably a bit too late. I'll just handwrite the invite and place it in his letter box.'

Seeing that she was adamant, Steve put his hands on her shoulders. 'I've caused enough trouble for you today. Why don't you just finish up here and relax. I'll pop over first thing in the morning and invite him in person.'

Victoria sighed with relief. 'That would be wonderful. Thanks, Steve.'

Closing her office door behind him, Steve smirked. Despite what he'd just said, he had no intention of following through. Without Mr Griffs, the party was going to be perfect. He couldn't wait.

Chapter 4

Feeling guilty that Victoria had shouldered the burden of the party, Steve took the next day off work. He spent the morning finalising the numbers for the caterers and organising a seating chart. Steve then spoke to his gardener, Englebern, and demanded he have his property ready before the party.

It was well into the afternoon when Steve finally made his way to *Simple Delights*, Cornville's famous cake shop. A couple of months ago, he had pre-ordered from them a multi-tiered cake with intricate sugar work over the phone. Though he had never been to *Simple Delights* in person, he'd heard rave reviews. He was particularly eager to inspect the cake and to finalise the delivery details.

Strutting into the cake shop, Steve expected to be impressed. However, he was immediately put off by the way a bell chimed upon his arrival. 'How low end,' he scoffed.

Then, turning to the empty counter, Steve frowned. 'Hello? Anyone here?'

When no one answered his call, Steve muttered to himself, 'Pathetic. If I had known how cheap this place looked I never would have ordered the cake from here. I'd like to know who's writing their reviews.'

Steve began knocking aggressively on the counter with his knuckles. 'Service. Service, please!'

Steve was about to yell out again when he heard an all-too-familiar voice from behind him. 'Oh, the cake, the cream, the sponge. So fresh! Perfect, just perfect today.'

Steve stiffened as he heard Mr Griffs smacking his lips in pleasure. He shuddered in revulsion. 'You've got to be kidding me. Griffs, again? Doesn't that guy ever work?'

Just then Maisie, the store's owner and head baker, approached the counter from out back. 'Sorry about the wait. We're a bit understaffed today. How can I help you?'

Hoping that Mr Griffs was too busy to notice his presence, as he didn't want him to find out about the party, Steve lowered his voice. 'I have a custom order that I want to confirm. It's under the name Moran.'

Maisie smiled and asked him, 'Of course. What type of cake was it again?'

Still conscious of his neighbour, Steve covered his mouth and said brokenly, 'Four levels . . . flowers . . . lace sugar work.' He quickly looked over his shoulder and then whispered, 'How's it coming along? Will it be ready for Saturday?'

Taking in her stride the unusual way he was talking, Maisie nodded. 'Oh yes, I remember your cake. We're just adding the final touches. It's nearly finished.'

Steve shushed her. 'Shhhhhh, not so loud.'

Maisie's smile froze.

Seeing that she was taken aback, Steve corrected himself. 'I just don't want the whole bakery to know about the cake. It's for a special occasion, if you know what I mean.'

She politely nodded. 'Okay, Mr Moran. Would you like to see the cake?'

Remembering Mr Griffs' presence in the shop, Steve shook his head. 'No. Let's just talk delivery. I need it at my place on Saturday, no later than 5.00 pm. The earlier the better. And I expect a call when it's on its way.'

'Of course.' Maisie wrote down the details on a delivery form and then asked for his address.

Steve, still trying to be as discreet as possible, leaned in and whispered, '10 Pickle Mouse Crescent, Cornville.'

Maisie wrote down his address and then, to confirm the details, said loudly, 'So that's 10 Pickle Mouse Crescent, and the cake is to be delivered by 5.00 pm this Saturday.'

'What did I tell you? What did I just tell you?' Steve whispered aggressively. 'This is a private party and now Griffs will know. Do you have any idea what you've done?'

Maisie stammered out an apology. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to. I was just trying to confirm the order.'

Still fuming, Steve raised his voice. 'Clearly, the reviews for your little bakery were wrong. I'm unimpressed by your level of professionalism.'

'Steve,' Mr Griffs said from behind him, 'we're trying to eat here. What's this all about?'

Turning around, Steve glared at his meddling neighbour. 'None of your business, Griffs. This doesn't concern you.'

'It's always my business when there's cake involved,' Mr Griffs boldly replied. Taking a few steps forward, he leaned on the display case.

'Well, not this time, Griffs.' Looking at Maisie now, Steve rudely said, 'Just have it ready.'

Maisie hastily agreed.

After glaring at Mr Griffs one more time, Steve marched out of the store and slammed the door behind him.

'Tsk, tsk. Cake is supposed to bring out the best in people,' Mr Griffs said half-jokingly. Then, seeing that Maisie was truly shaken by Steve's behaviour, he softened his tone. 'Don't worry about that man. He's always like that. Miserable.'

'When I opened this shop,' Maisie said in a wobbly voice, 'I knew that there'd be some crazies. But I don't deserve to be treated like that. I was just trying to help.'

Waving his hand, Mr Griffs said, 'He is a bit of a bother. You just have to know how to deal with him. But, don't worry, I still love your cakes.' He smiled. 'After all, I am your chief taste tester.'

Feeling steadier, Maisie laughed. 'Would you like another piece of cake? It's fresh from the oven, and it's on the house.'

Mr Griffs accepted her kind offer. 'You don't have to ask me twice. I never say no to cake.'

Maisie cut Mr Griffs a slice and watched his eyes light up as he tasted her new creation.

‘Mmmm, delicious. You can never have too much nutmeg.’

With his mouth still full, Mr Griffs waved his fork in the air. ‘You know, it wouldn’t be the end of the world if Steve’s cake didn’t make it to the party on time. Or at all.’

‘You know about the party, do you?’ Maisie questioned.

He swallowed and quickly spooned up some more cake. ‘Yeah, the whole neighbourhood does. That man doesn’t do subtle very well.’

Mr Griffs licked his lips. ‘On second thoughts, do you have any cream? There’s a little too much nutmeg.’

Chapter 5

The next day, Mr Griffs returned home from his scheduled walk around Cornville and took out his Sudoku puzzles. Keen to spend the afternoon relaxing, he leaned back in his armchair. 'Perhaps I better start with an easy one. I wonder if I even remember how to do these things; it's been that long.'

He pulled out a fountain pen from his breast pocket, his lips quirking. 'I really should be using a pencil for this, but you've got to live dangerously every now and then.'

Filling in one of the squares, he nodded happily when he saw that the ink ran smoothly. 'Good, good.'

He then got to work, quickly becoming immersed in the puzzle.

When a series of loud knocks sounded from his front door, Mr Griffs jolted. His head swivelled sharply from side to side and his pen slipped on the page, leaving a trail. 'Who? Who's in the house?'

When he realised that the sound had come from his door, Mr Griffs' shocked faced turned sour. As he wasn't expecting anyone, he assumed that a pushy salesperson was outside. 'What do they want now?' he complained.

Looking down at his Sudoku puzzle, Mr Griffs drew back in alarm. 'Ahh no, look what they made me do!' The puzzle was smudged with black ink, and it was barely readable.

His face crinkled and his jaw jutted out. Mr Griffs shuffled to the door, prepared to tell the salesperson off and send them away with a derisive wrist flick and an abrupt 'no'.

He jerked opened the door.

In an instant, his cranky expression disappeared. Seeing that his two favourite neighbours had come to visit him, he grinned brightly. 'Hellooooo.'

Ruby and Lucy Berendorff greeted him in unison. 'Hey, Mr Griffs!'

Ruby, who was ten years old, and her sister, Lucy, who was eight, often visited the Griffs', especially on their way back home from school. Their parents, Mike and Ellen, were happy with this arrangement as they considered Mr and Mrs Griffs to be family.

'Come in, come in. Perfect timing!' he said.

Lucy weaved passed Mr Griffs and ran inside while her older sister stayed behind. 'Hope we're not interrupting you. Mum tried to call this morning, but no one was answering. She said to head here after school anyway and to see if you were home.'

The two of them went to the kitchen and Mr Griffs began pouring nuts into a bowl. Ruby grabbed three sodas from the fridge, and then they moved to join Lucy in the living room. 'I know. I've turned the ringer off. I'll turn it back on later, but you wouldn't believe how many phone calls I've been receiving. Mrs Griffs has given out our phone number to all the telemarketers in the area. With her at the convention this week, I just wanted some quiet time to myself.'

Ruby saw that her sister had placed her school bag on the floor and followed suit. She then moved to join her on the couch.

Lucy, who was about to grab a handful of mixed nuts, paused. 'But what about us?'

Mr Griffs quickly shook his head as he sat down in his armchair. 'No, no. I'm always happy to see the two of you.' He poured their sodas carefully before handing them over.

They all took a sip of their drinks and began munching on the nuts.

Over the rim of her glass, Lucy asked, 'What's a convention? I heard Mum say that Mrs Griffs was at one.'

Mr Griffs shuffled some nuts in his hands before tossing one into his mouth. 'It's a place where they take your credit card and you'd be lucky to get it back again.'

Not really understanding what he meant, Lucy changed the subject. 'Are you going to the party, Mr Griffs? Our parents are.'

Mr Griffs chuckled. 'You mean Steve's party?'

Ruby pulled out the invitation from her bag. She handed the creased card to Mr Griffs, who began reading its contents aloud.

Mr and Mrs Moran cordially invite you to join them for an unforgettable evening. The soirée will commence at 7 pm on Saturday the 19th of August. The attire is formal. Please note, street parking is limited, so we encourage you to plan your trip ahead of time. To RSVP, contact us at the number below.

Having finished reading the invitation, Mr Griffs laughed. 'How pompous of Steve! He just doesn't know when to stop, does he?'

Ruby and Lucy looked at each other in confusion. Then, looking back at him, Ruby asked, 'Didn't you get an invitation, Mr Griffs?'

He shook his head.

Thinking that he was upset, Ruby suggested, 'Perhaps it got lost in the mail? Or maybe Mr Moran forgot to send it to you?'

Lips pursed, Mr Griffs replied, 'Forgot? Steve? I don't think so.'

Lucy couldn't contain a giggle at Mr Griffs' crabby expression.

Hearing her younger sister laugh, Ruby gently elbowed her, nudging her into silence. Neither one of them would ever willingly hurt Mr Griffs.

Chapter 6

‘Grab that shovel. Pick up that pot. Quick, quick. Move, move,’ Steve ordered his gardener, Englebern. He clapped his hands to make him go faster. ‘I need my garden perfect for tomorrow night. My reputation is on the line here.’

It was late on Friday, nearly sundown, and Englebern had been hard at work since dawn. His voice was heavy with exhaustion as he said, ‘I’m only one man, Mr Moran. I can only do so much.’

Steve slapped the back of his right hand into the palm of his left. ‘What do you think I pay you for? Now go clear the marquee, polish the deck and double check if there are any weeds in the garden.’ He then added, ‘And don’t forget to fix the awning out front.’

Beside himself, Englebern paled. ‘I’m a gardener. Not a builder, Steve. I’ve been working all day, doing things that are beyond my paygrade.’ He began to get visibly angry, his hands clenching into fists and his jaw tightening. ‘And not once have you ever thanked me for my work.’

With his hands now on his hips, Steve retorted, ‘What are you looking for? A pat on the back? Now get back to work.’

‘That’s it. I’ve had enough.’ Englebern ripped off his gloves and tossed them at Steve’s feet. ‘First you interrogate me over those strange holes in your garden, then you yell at me for not being able to grow cucumbers in the wrong season, and now this? My work is more than adequate. I quit!’

‘What? You can’t do that to me.’ Seeing that Englebern was serious, Steve softened his tone. ‘I need you, Englebern. The party needs you.’

When Englebern's face remained hard, Steve decided that a bribe was in order. 'What do you want? An invite? Just make sure you tidy yourself up and wear a tux, and it's all yours. We can't have you looking like this at my party.'

Truly disgusted by his snobbery, Engelbern bit out, 'You mean I wasn't getting one in the first place? After all this work? You're joking, right?' Before Steve could reply, he continued. 'You know what, the rumours are true about you. You're an upper-crust muppet. No wonder so many gardeners have quit on you. Well, Mr Moran, I'm the last one you'll ever have.'

Steve scoffed. 'I can hire anyone I want in this town. And don't think I'll be giving you a reference.'

'Reference?' Englebern laughed. 'Oh, I'll be sure to give you one. *The Gardeners Association* have been keeping an eye on you, and one word from me will have you blacklisted. Good luck finding another gardener for your party, let alone ever again.'

Having finally spoken his mind, Englebern gathered up his equipment, hopped into his truck and left.

The reality of what had just happened sunk in. 'Victoria isn't going to be happy about this,' Steve whined. 'How am I going to tell her that I've been blacklisted yet again?'

Chapter 7

Mr Griffs parted the curtains of his living room window. His eyes rounded as he took in everything. It was the night of Steve's party and his street, Pickle Mouse Crescent, was unrecognisable. The narrow street was full of cars and many partygoers were blocking each other as they attempted to park. As more and more drivers began to honk their horns in frustration, Mr Griffs' agitation grew.

'Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous,' he complained. 'You couldn't pay me to go to this party. I mean, the lengths that Steve goes to get people to like him. It never ceases to amaze me.'

Still looking at the mess on his street, Mr Griffs crankily said, 'This must be a violation of Cornville's Parking and Congestion Guidelines. I don't understand why Steve didn't organise parking attendants. When you're planning an event, you've got to do it right!'

He turned away from the window and made his way to another room where he had a better vantage point. 'Who knew that Mr Popular could draw such a crowd? It must be the live band he hired. Some compensation!'

Straining his ears, he struggled to hear the music through all the commotion on the street. 'You'd think that this party was fit for royalty, what with all this highfalutin' mumbo jumbo. Well there's only one king on this street, and it ain't Steve Moran!'

Jerking aside the blinds of another window, Mr Griffs looked directly into Steve's garden and saw that there was a long line forming outside the house.

He chuckled. 'All his guests are going to freeze to death before they even set one foot into the party.'

Suddenly, he heard a screeching sound coming from the street. It was followed by a loud thud.

'What's happening out there?' He returned to the window in his living room and peered outside.

Mr Griffs' thick eyebrows bunched together when he saw that a car had mounted the curb of his driveway. 'That's my property!' he shouted. 'This is getting out of hand! I'm calling the police.'

Before he moved away from the window though, Mr Griffs saw that an old lady was struggling to get out of her lop-sided car.

Mumbling under his breath about Steve's incompetence, he quickly put on his new slippers. 'Now I've got to go and help her. This should be Steve's responsibility, not mine.'

He left his house and made his way to the nature strip. As his slippers muffled his footsteps, Mr Griffs' approach went unnoticed. 'Need some help?' he called out, unintentionally startling the elderly woman.

Now out of her car, she jumped up in shock and nearly dropped the numerous parcels she was carrying.

'Sorry to scare you,' Mr Griffs said. 'Do you need some help? I can move your car off my pavement if you'd like.'

The lady thanked him for his kindness. 'How nice of you, young man. Thank you for coming to my aid. Don't worry about the car though, it's fine where it is. But I must say that you are quite the gentleman,' she praised. 'Please, call me Grace.'

Still thinking about the car that was illegally parked on his property, he introduced himself.

'The name's Griffs. Mr Griffs.'

She smiled at him warmly.

'Did you need some help with your groceries?'

Grace laughed. 'Oh, these aren't groceries. I can never go to a party without bringing something.' Taking up Mr Griffs' offer of help, she handed him a cake box.

Mr Griffs just couldn't resist. Curious as always, he just had to peek inside.

'I love a cake. And this one's got the perfect amount of cream!' Mr Griffs salivated over the dessert. Although he considered sneaking a piece, he realised that the only way to get a bite would be to infiltrate the party.

Together, they made their way to the front of the Morans' property. There, Mr Griffs took in his neighbour's garden. It was brilliantly lit up with lanterns that were hanging down from the surrounding trees. 'What a fire hazard!'

Thinking he was joking, Grace laughed.

Mr Griffs and Grace joined the line that stretched from Steve and Victoria's front door.

'Wow! We're going to be here all night.'

Grace, whose arm was threaded through Mr Griffs', pulled him to the back of the line. 'I'm sure it won't be that long.'

To pass the time, Mr Griffs and Grace began talking to the friendly couple in front of them. Joe and Lisa lived in the neighbouring town of Drewberry and were work colleagues of Steve's.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Lisa cautiously asked Mr Griffs about his casual clothes. 'Didn't you read the invite? The party is formal.'

Mr Griffs, who was wearing a loose jumper, an extremely baggy tracksuit and his new slippers, shrugged. 'Oh, I wasn't invited.'

There was a pause in the conversation before Grace told them about Mr Griffs' gallantry and soon the news spread up the line. As more people turned up for the party, they too found out about Mr Griffs' actions.

At least 20 minutes had passed before Mr Griffs and Grace found themselves at the front of the line. They were greeted by a pimple-faced youth who held up a clipboard. His voice cracked when he asked them, 'Name, please?'

As Grace answered, Mr Griffs tried to peek at the clipboard. As he knew that he wasn't on the guest list, he was looking for a name he could give instead of his.

When the attendant saw that Mr Griffs was eyeing his checklist, he snapped the clipboard against his chest. 'Your name, sir!'

Seeing no other alternative, he introduced himself. 'My name is Mr Griffs and I live next door.'

The young man quickly checked the list and found a paper-clipped note at the top of the page. The note read, *Do not allow this man in!* Next to it was a rather unflattering picture of Mr Griffs. The photograph had obviously been taken from afar and was of poor quality. The inexperienced checklist boy looked up at Mr Griffs before looking back at the picture. 'Sorry, Mr Gryllis, but you're simply not on the list.'

Before Mr Griffs could correct his name, Grace came to his rescue. She sternly said, 'His name is Mr GRIFFS, and he's with me!'

Having heard by now the story of Mr Griffs' kind behaviour, the crowd behind them rallied in support.

On her way to the kitchen to meet Steve, Victoria was passing the front door when she heard the commotion. Poking her head out, she asked, 'What seems to be the problem here, Timmy?'

Relieved that he wouldn't have to face all the disgruntled partygoers by himself, Timmy wiped the sweat off his brow and addressed his employer. 'Oh, Mrs Moran, this man, a Mr Griffin or something, is trying to enter the premises uninvited.'

Victoria immediately told him off. 'Don't be silly, he's our neighbour and good friend. Why I told his wife the other day that Mr Griffs was invited to the party. Steve should have added him to the list.'

Timmy stuttered and tried to get her to look at the note on the clipboard.

‘Wait a minute,’ Mr Griffs said, ‘my wife didn’t mention anything about the party.’

Victoria winced. ‘I’m so sorry about this. She must have forgotten to tell you, what with all the excitement of going to the Tupperware Convention.’ Victoria reached out to touch his arm. ‘Of course you’re invited! You’re always welcome here.’

Mr Griffs thanked her for the invite, calling her Mrs Moran, and she promptly reminded him to call her by her first name. ‘Please, Mr Griffs, there is no need to stand on formalities. As I’ve said before, call me Victoria, or better yet, just call me Vicky.’

Mr Griffs disagreed. ‘No, no. Victoria is fine. After all, you’re named after one of the Queens from my country.’

Victoria laughed. Motioning them inside, she said, ‘Come in, come in.’

Timmy stepped aside to let Mr Griffs and Grace through, calling out, ‘Have a nice time, Mr Gruff.’

Ignoring Timmy’s mistake, Mr Griffs allowed Grace to enter before him. She was just thanking him once again for being so courteous when someone within the formal dining room yelled out, ‘Finally, someone brought real food!’

As most of the guests were not warming to the pretentious canapés that Steve had provided, they were overjoyed.

Mr Griffs jerked his head towards Grace and, grabbing her hand, lifted her arm in triumph to show that she was in fact responsible for the cake.

Grace was momentarily thrown off balance. She had to shuffle her feet and lean on Mr Griffs to steady herself. To the partygoers it seemed as if, yet again, Mr Griffs was coming to the rescue. Although he was known for his absurd behaviour, he was acting pretty normal this evening. Well, to a certain extent. After all, he was wearing house slippers at a formal party.

Victoria, who was supposed to be meeting up with Steve to sort out the issue with the cake, couldn’t help but take a break and enjoy her neighbour’s company.

Mr Griffs and Grace were heartily welcomed and it wasn't long before Mr Griffs became the life of the party. After sharing gardening tips with a fellow horticulture enthusiast, he had an intimate conversation with a group of strangers. He told them wild stories about his youth, much to their amusement.

Leaving them in hysterics, Mr Griffs approached Grace. 'Listen, I really think we should move your car. It's not safe on my curb.'

Grace laughed hysterically. 'You're still on about that, are you?'

'No, no,' Mr Griffs said firmly. Trying to show that he was serious, he continued. 'Just give me your keys and I'll move it for you.'

'You're a funny one.' Grace patted his hand and then walked off into the crowd.

Mr Griffs was not at all happy about the situation. He wanted her car off his property now, even if he had to forcibly remove it. He even considered the possibility of calling a tow truck.

He had decided to give Grace one more chance to move her car when he saw Ruby and Lucy's parents, Mike and Ellen, across the room.

Instead of following Grace as he had planned to do, he changed directions and approached them. He congratulated Mike and Ellen on their wonderful parenting skills. Used to Mr Griffs' quirky compliments, they were flattered.

Everyone at the party was laughing and finally enjoying themselves, and it was all because of the cake-bearing Mr Griffs.

Chapter 8

Even as Victoria was enjoying the company of her guests, Steve was anxiously heading into the kitchen. Having expected his custom-made cake to have arrived hours earlier, he was eager to get an update on whether it had been delivered yet.

Walking into the kitchen, Steve was surprised to see that the caterers were all huddled around the kitchen island. Instead of working, they were whispering to each other frantically.

Not bringing attention to himself, Steve listened in on their conversation.

‘You have to tell him,’ one caterer argued.

Someone else whispered back, ‘I can’t. He scares me.’

The first caterer hoarsely replied, ‘He scares us all.’

‘What’s going on here?’ Steve loudly asked the room at large.

Immediately the kitchen staff jumped back from their huddle. They looked at him anxiously.

When no one answered him, Steve honed in on a man clad in white overalls. He asked, ‘Who are you? Are you the cake man? You should have been here hours ago.’

The man, whose name was Ronald, quickly explained. ‘Unfortunately, Mr Moran, there’s no cake.’

‘What do you mean there’s no cake? There has to be cake! I just finalised it the other day with, what’s her name? Mary? Matilda? Oh, who cares? Where is it?’ Steve’s voice got higher as panic took hold of him.

Everyone in the kitchen stared at the two men, waiting to see what would happen next.

Ronald folded his arms. ‘Hey, I just deliver the cakes. It’s not my fault,’ he blustered.

‘What do you mean it’s not your fault?’ Steve demanded.

‘Your street is completely blocked,’ Ronald said. ‘It was out of control out there! And by the time I found a parking spot the cake had upended.’

‘What?’ Steve shouted. ‘Why didn’t you secure the cake with straps or something, you silly man? I don’t understand. How did it happen? I just don’t understand,’ Steve repeated.

Ronald shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’m not sure. Maybe the straps were loose.’

‘Loose? Well, why didn’t you check them before you set off?’

‘Listen, buddy, I’m not in charge of baking or packaging. I don’t even like cake,’ Ronald said.

‘You know, Mr Moran, you should have organised this better with Maisie at the shop.’

Steve fumed. ‘I did!’ Not wanting to give in, he continued to interrogate Ronald. ‘But surely it was stored in a box?’

‘Maybe it was too big for one?’ Ronald guessed.

‘Ohh, so now you’re a cake expert?’ Steve bit back.

Realising that he wasn’t getting anywhere, Ronald didn’t reply.

‘What am I going to do?’ Steve screeched. ‘Every party needs a cake.’

‘I’ll tell you what, call the shop tomorrow morning and I’m sure they’ll sort you out,’ he unhelpfully suggested.

‘Tomorrow morning? What am I going to tell my guests?’ Steve yelled. ‘I need a cake now!’

Having had enough, Ronald unsympathetically said, ‘Well that’s too bad.’ With that, he left the kitchen.

Turning to his staff, Steve barked, ‘Why are you just standing there? We need some type of dessert.’

One of the wait staff nervously asked, ‘Do you have any recipe books?’

Another shouted, ‘What ingredients do you have? Any flour? Gelatine?’

A third voice enquired, 'What about fruit? Do you have any papaya?'

This was just too much for Steve. 'One at a time! One at a time!' he shouted. Only when there was complete silence did he continue. 'If you don't have any helpful ideas, be quiet.'

One of the caterers, a middle-aged woman, perked up. 'I've got it. We can make fruit salad.'

Unimpressed, Steve bluntly replied, 'Next.'

'How about candied apples?' another caterer suggested.

Again, Steve called out, 'Next.'

In an excited voice, a young male caterer said, 'I know! We can make cookies. You should have all the ingredients.'

'Cookies?' Steve screamed, waving his hands in anger. 'Cookies! This isn't a street fair. What are you thinking?'

Steve took a deep breath before slowly exhaling. He repeated the process until he felt calmer. Only then did he look around the kitchen. Seeing everyone's glum expressions, he said, 'I'm sure you'll come up with something better than cookies. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go and check on the ice-sculpture.'

Before he could leave, however, one of the wait staff nervously stopped him. 'Ahh, about that. The freezer door wasn't shut properly, and unfortunately, the flamingo's head has melted.'

Everyone in the kitchen expected Steve to erupt again. They all braced themselves.

But instead, Steve just smiled. Grinding his teeth in an effort to keep the smile in place, he said, 'Okay. Not a problem. I've got to get back to the party. I trust that you have everything else under control here.'

Steve spun around and left the kitchen. He barely made it through the doorway before he unclenched his jaw and let out an anguished shriek.

Turning towards the hallway mirror, Steve looked at his reflection. Despite all the mishaps, his form-fitting tuxedo was in perfect condition. Still, Steve smoothed the black fabric.

‘You’ve got this,’ he said to himself.

When he had regained his composure, he left the mirror, heading towards the bar that had been set up in the formal dining area. He grabbed a drink and, in one gulp, guzzled it down.

‘You’re the man. You’re in control. Everyone’s here for you. You’re the man, Steve.’

Starting to believe his own words, he turned around and prepared himself to talk to his guests. It was only then that Steve noticed that the room was empty.

Frowning, he searched the nearby rooms. ‘Where is everyone?’

Eventually, he made his way outside to his backyard where the marquee had been erected.

There, Steve saw all of his guests. They were huddled together, and seemed to be listening intently to someone.

Unsure as to what was happening, Steve cautiously approached them. It was then that he heard a voice that made him halt mid-step.

‘Sure, I’ll have a zip.’

Steve watched on as the crowd around Mr Griffs burst into laughter, many thinking that his mispronunciation of the word ‘sip’ was meant as a joke.

In their merriment, the guests parted slightly, giving Steve a clear line of sight. Still frozen on the spot, Steve looked on as his dishevelled-looking neighbour gulped down his finest champagne.

Mr Griffs shook his head and scrunched up his face.

Steve snidely thought that he obviously wasn’t accustomed to high end products.

‘No. No more champagne for me. Do you have any tomato juice?’ Mr Griffs asked a passing waiter.

That was enough to send Steve over the edge. Losing all control, he snapped, 'WHAT!'

Hearing his outburst, all of his guests turned to face him. They all looked at him as though *he* were in fact the unwanted guest.

Wanting to save face in front of his friends, Steve put on a strained smile. Still fuming inside, he said, 'My dear guests, I do hope you're all enjoying yourselves.'

There was a lengthy pause, but eventually some conversation resumed.

As the guests began to disperse, Steve spotted Victoria. Taking her aside, he angrily whispered, 'What is he doing here? I didn't invite him.'

Victoria followed her husband's gaze and saw that his eyes were trained on Mr Griffs.

Mockingly, she said, 'What do you mean, Steve? I thought you went over the other day and invited him?' Her voice became overly sweet. 'Or did you forget?'

Annoyed that all of his efforts to keep Mr Griffs away from his party had failed, Steve didn't answer her. 'I want him gone!'

Not understanding why her husband was behaving in such a rude manner, Victoria shook her head. 'He can't go!' she cried. 'He's the toast of the party. You know, Steve, you can learn a lesson or two from Mr Griffs.'

Realising that he was getting nowhere, Steve turned to Mr Griffs. Unable to contain himself any longer, he exploded. 'Griffs! What are you doing here?'

Once again, all the guests paused and looked at Steve.

Mr Griffs, who had been discussing the migration habits of the magpie-lark with Ellen, excused himself. He hated leaving a conversation unfinished but Steve's antics left him no choice.

Mr Griffs turned to Steve and replied, 'Lovely party, Moran.' Cheekily, he then invited his host to take a load off. 'Have a seat and relax, Steve. Looks like you could use it.'

For Steve, this was just too much. 'Relax! Don't tell me to relax! You're in *my* house, eating *my* food, drinking *my* wine and mingling with *my* guests.'

Mr Griffs held up his plate with one hand and pointed to Grace with the other. 'Well actually, I'm not eating your food. This lovely lady here was kind enough to bring cake.' He shook his head dismissively. 'I've got to tell you, Steve, next time you have a party, you've got to have cake. Give the people what they want.'

Steve's eyes bulged. 'Oh, is that right? Well, I'll tell you what. Take your unwanted cake and leave!'

The onlooking crowd gasped in outrage.

Again, Grace was the first one to come to Mr Griffs' defence. 'Stevey boy, first of all, no one, I said no one, talks about my cake like that! Secondly, how dare you embarrass my friend? His every action tonight has been for our benefit, which is more than I can say about you. And for goodness' sake, next time you have a party organise some parking attendants.'

Mr Griffs nodded, before turning to Grace. 'Speaking of which, have you given any more thought to your car? I really think we should move it.'

Steve was shocked as to how quickly his party had spiralled out of control. Before he could smooth out the tension and rein everyone in, a guest yelled out, 'Let's take the cake and get out of here!'

Mr Griffs beckoned the crowd to follow him. 'I know just the place.'

Steve, motionless once again, watched on as all of his guests left. It wasn't long before the room emptied.

He was cursing Mr Griffs under his breath when a caterer walked towards him carrying a baking tin.

Completely oblivious to the fact that the party was over, she enthusiastically said, 'Brownies! We've made enough for everyone!'

Steve glowered at her. 'I thought we agreed on cookies?'

Chapter 9

Mr Griffs was short on party supplies, but he still managed to rustle up a few bags of chips, an assortment of wafers and even a couple of dips for his guests. Everyone tried and loved Mrs Griffs' spiced nuts and commented about how they were so much nicer than the caviar and plain hors d'oeuvres that Steve had provided. Someone then found Mrs Griffs' secret stash of coconut water. The cartons were quickly opened and passed around. The radio was switched on and Mr Griffs' house was lit up with the sound of folk music and cheery laughter.

Leaving the kitchen, Mr Griffs made his way to the backyard. There, he set up torches to light up the garden and placed plastic chairs under his avocado tree for his guests to sit on.

'Are you expecting a good avocado season, Mr Griffs?' Ronald asked. As the street was still congested, Ronald had been unable to move his delivery van. When he saw that all of the partygoers had left Steve's party, he had gone in search of some help. Instead, he'd been welcomed by Mr Griffs and invited to join the party.

As he grabbed a handful of nuts from a nearby bowl, Mr Griffs smiled. 'I'm hoping to have a bumper season next year. You should come to my avocado party, Ronald. It's an annual event.'

Ronald, who knew nothing about avocados, nodded like he understood what Mr Griffs was saying. 'I'll bring the cake,' he offered.

They both started to laugh.

'Speaking of cake,' Mr Griffs said, 'I'm going to grab another piece of Grace's famous cake.' He smiled at Ronald and then made his way back inside.

'What luck!' he exclaimed. There was only one piece left and he happily helped himself.

'Mmmm, this is some good cake.' He tapped his fork on the plate before going for another

bite. As he did so, he thought about how everything had worked out for him in the end. But still, there was one thing that had been irritating him all night.

Making his way towards Grace, he was just about to ask her again to move her car when the phone rang. He changed direction, grinning happily when he saw that Mike and Ellen were standing next to the phone.

He had a moment of regret that he had turned the ringer back on as he answered the phone. 'Go for Griffs.'

'Is that you, Mr Griffs? I can barely hear you,' Mrs Griffs asked on the other end.

Knowing that his wife would be upset if she found out that he was having a party without her, Mr Griffs quickly moved into action. Waving his hand up and down, he signalled to the people around him to be quiet.

Not everyone, however, got the message. Mike helpfully tried to get the guests to lower their voices, but many were oblivious.

'Well, hello my dear wife,' Mr Griffs pleasantly replied. 'How's the plastic show coming along? Have they taken our credit card yet?'

Ignoring his last question, she said, 'Oh, it's just lovely. I thought I'd call and check up on you.' She paused. 'Is everything okay there? What's that noise in the background?'

Mr Griffs quickly searched for an excuse. 'Fine, everything's fine. I've just got my radio on and, you know, I still haven't had a chance to buy new headphones.'

Listening to his lie, Ellen laughed. But then, realising that she'd been a bit too loud, she clapped her mouth shut.

'Was that laughter I heard?' Mrs Griffs enquired.

'Oh, yes. It was just the radio. Now, I don't want to keep you waiting. Enjoy your last night. See you tomorrow.' Mr Griffs hung up the phone.

Turning to his guests, he yelled out joyously, 'She bought it!'

Everyone cheered.

*

With all the staff and band members gone, Steve looked glumly around his empty house. It seemed like only moments ago that the dining room had been crowded with people engaging in refined conversation and enjoying fine delicacies. Flicking off the overhead light, he plunged the room into darkness.

Walking into his kitchen, Steve lifted up a baking tray and then went to the window. There he stuffed a brownie into his mouth. Pieces of cake crumbled everywhere. 'Hmm, not bad.'

Looking out of the window, Steve allowed the light from Mr Griffs' house to shine onto his face. From this position, he could vaguely see into his neighbour's property. Feeling alone and rejected, Steve continued to observe his former guests. Hearing their laughter and the upbeat music, he thought about what could have been.

Squinting, he tried to make out individual faces until finally he found Victoria. He watched on as she chatted to Grace, tipping her head back and laughing.

Without pausing for breath, Steve devoured another brownie.

Afterwards, he let out a long and drawn-out sigh. He acknowledged that his party had been a flop and, his shoulders slumping, he prepared himself for the unthinkable.

After checking to make sure that there were no traces of chocolate on his face or on his now wrinkled tuxedo, Steve left his house and made his way over to his neighbour's.

As he approached Mr Griffs' front door, Steve saw that Timmy was guarding the entrance with yet another clipboard.

'Care to let me in?'

Without pausing, Timmy asked, 'Name please?'

Chapter 10

The next day, Mr Griffs was finally making some headway into his pile of Sudoku puzzles when he was once again interrupted.

A car horn beeped loudly.

Startled, Mr Griffs cried out, 'C'maaan, again? Can't a person do a puzzle around here?'

Knowing what was to come, Mr Griffs closed his eyes. He savoured his last few seconds of solitude. He lived for these moments of quiet.

The front door suddenly banged open and crashed against the wall. Mrs Griffs enthusiastically greeted her husband as she hurried in, dropping Tupperware containers in a trail to the kitchen.

'How was your weekend?' she asked. Not waiting for a response, she began to reprimand Mr Griffs as she assembled the blender. She had a hankering for one of her health shakes. 'Why didn't you come out and help me? I beeped the horn!' Again, not even allowing him a chance to respond, she continued, 'So, what did you get up to? I completely forgot to tell you but did you end up going to the party?'

She switched on the blender and the noise filled the house.

Mr Griffs opened his eyes and folded his Sudoku puzzle away. Even knowing that she wouldn't be able to hear him over the noise of the blender, he made an effort to keep his voice casual. 'Nothing much. It was fairly quiet on my end.'

The End

The Unwanted Guest is the third story in *The Absurd Tales of Mr Griff's* series. On the next page you will find a sneak peek of the fourth story in the series – *Tea Time*.

For more information, please visit www.mrgriffs.com

About Tea Time

Mr Griffs' world is turned upside down when a new manager takes over his favourite café. When the two butt heads over the price of tea, Mr Griffs leaves under protest and comes up with a plan to create his own line of herbal teas.

Soon his creative enterprise attracts the town's attention, including that of his intrusive neighbour, Steve Moran. Despite Steve's scepticism, Mr Griffs successfully uses unconventional marketing tactics to start a tea revolution – no longer will the citizens of Cornville have to endure bland and over-priced tea. Not when Mr Griffs is around.

As his unique tea blends grow in popularity, the question remains: is Mr Griffs only doing this for revenge, or does he truly want to give tea back to the people?

'Haven't you heard, Steve? I've started my own tea business – Zip Tea.' Seeing Steve's derisive expression, Mr Griffs decided that it was time to stop being polite. 'Come on, Steve, you're in advertising, aren't you?'

Looking down his nose, Steve said, 'I deal with high-end products. Not homemade juices.'

Acknowledgement

The Unwanted Guest has a simple premise – one neighbour has a party and fails to invite the other. For us, it was the perfect opportunity to develop the rivalry between Mr Griffs and Steve Moran. In fact, it is at the very centre of their neighbourhood – everyone gets involved in one way or another.

On that note, we would like to thank all our collaborators who played a part in the finished product – Emily Paget for her editorial assistance, John Martinez for his cover page illustration, Kim Evangelista for her cover page title design and Arthur Dunderdale for the cover page formatting.

Once again, we'd like to thank all of our readers for your support, enthusiasm and encouragement. It is always appreciated. Contact us at hello@mrgriffs.com if you would like to say hello or if you have any questions.

For more on *The Absurd Tales of Mr Griffs*, including backstories and character profiles, please check out www.mrgriffs.com. You can also find us on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

About the Authors

Jonathan and Keren Joseph are a brother and sister team from Sydney, Australia.

Our favourite scene in *The Unwanted Guest* is when Mr Griffs is at Maisie's bakery, *Simple Delights*, and she offers him some cake, fresh out of the oven. His response is almost childlike – he is so excited at the prospect and so eager and honest with his feedback. For us, this is such an endearing moment.

Tell us your favourite scene from *The Unwanted Guest* at hello@mrgriffs.com

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