



The Secret Notebook

by Sue Hitchcock

Clearing her parents' house had been arduous, but Jane was down to the last odds and ends in the oak cupboard, which had never seemed to have a purpose, other than to accumulate the unwanted rubbish. The top shelf was dedicated to the crockery, which was neither needed nor loved – a clumsy mug with the slogan, “I love Mum”. The bottom shelf was filled with shoeboxes containing the Christmas decorations they hadn't bothered to put up for several years. There were defunct cables for abandoned radios and computers and a tin of seed packets, all past their “sow by” dates.

The most interesting box contained postcards, saved from their life together, all of fifty years, so Jane sat in a comfy chair with her coffee to browse through them. Tucked in the back was a notebook, only postcard sized and rather worn. Jane felt some excitement, as it might contain more clues to her mother's mind than the appointment diaries she had found under the jumpers.

But it was a puzzle. Page after page was filled with numbers, not tidily lined up, just scrawled across the page. Mother had worked for British Telecom, so maybe they were phone numbers. Each number consisted of three digits followed by a dot – a decimal point? – and then more numbers. In the past telephone numbers consisted of three digits signifying the exchange and after it four or five more. Some of these had only one digit and several had twelve digits after the dot.

Jane flicked on and found something written, “Tinling – ring Bib” What on earth did it mean? Who was Bib?

Her father, now in a care home had no idea. “It’s not to do with telephones. I had a friend, Bob, but not Bib.”

Jane put the notebook in her bag and forgot about it. She needed to arrange for a bookseller from Lewes to inspect the huge book collection to see if anything was collectable. When the day came for the visit, she stood by quietly, not to interrupt his concentration. Strangely he rejected lots of the older books, which she had thought might be valuable.

“They’re old library copies, with library stamps all over the place, look!”

The page he showed her had a series of numbers, one of which looked familiar. It was just like those in the notebook. She pulled it out of her bag and showed the expert.

“Oh, yes – they’re Dewey numbers. That’s how you used to find things when Google didn’t exist.”

“Dewey?”

“He invented a system for arranging the subjects of books, not novels of course, but anything non-fiction.”

Jane showed him the page about “Tinling”

Looking at the numbers with it, he laughed. “It was classified as “sport”, but he designed tennis clothes, so the other number is “fashion”.

Of course, her mother had worked in a library just before she retired.