

### Extract from Smoke Trail

Of all her mother's rejects, this shawl was the one Cora would keep, and she stroked it against her face. Its scent reached her, faint but distinct; it was not a woman's fragrance of make-up and perfume, nor was it the baby smell of soaped skin and newly laundered wool. It was lightly astringent; it reminded her of swealed stubble, of singeing.

Smoke.

And, beyond the glass of her window, it swirled towards her, bobbed, leaped in elegant spirals round a figure that frisked upon crackling hay. He wafted and winnowed it, gathered it into blazing sconces, blew on its guttering tapers and kindled them again into a whirligig of sparks. The flames curled into the vents of his jacket, wove through its seams; its cloth was stitched by their winking threads. While through it his body gleamed, gilded. Incandescent but unharmed.

'Could the man in the barn have been *you*?' she asked the draught lifting the curtains. 'You putting out the fire? From what he said, Dan would be about three at the time, so I would be born. Were you on your way to attend my christening, to see your daughter, to admire her in this beautiful shawl? It isn't impossible. The man never showed his face to Mr. Foley and Mr. Downes. They couldn't even make a guess who he might be. So it could have been you. You, coming back. But you changed your mind.'

The draught had gone; the curtains were still. Out of reach in the night the figure lost substance, grew transparent, and its brilliance vanished in the smoke's dying wisps.

### Author's comments

Many adopted people set out to find their blood parents and this story began because I know someone who did. But I decided that Cora's position should be rather different, complicated by her loyalty to her mother and grandmother whom she loves. I also decided very early to set the story on a moor that was once given over to lead mining, a deserted place crossed by gullies and shallow streams, darned with the grills of drainage tunnels. You could hide on that moor for weeks and not be seen. I often walk there.

As I thought about Cora and what might happen, I was fascinated by two memories. One was something I had seen years before when on holiday: a burnt out car which, though only a few yards from dozens of picnickers, was hidden from view. There was something eerie and rather frightening about it. The other memory was of watching a friend stitch the fleece of a dead lamb over a new born lamb whose

mother had rejected it. This was done to encourage the ewe who had lost a lamb to take the abandoned one. Soon the car became of central importance and the fleece was to play a significant but more delicate part.

So I had Cora, the setting and two unusual memories. Gradually as I wrote, all these came together and grew into **Smoke Trail**.

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