

**NOTHING
EVER
HAPPENS
HERE**

ANN FOWERAKER

To my husband who has supported my writing

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CHAPTER ONE

He heard their feet first. Their heavy-booted feet, scuffing and ringing on the pavement. It was only as they neared, and he could make out the murmured chant, that he knew they were after him.

He knew it wouldn't be a good idea to turn round and face them, they'd love that. They'd love it too if he tried to run away. His bag, stuffed full, was already pulling at his muscles and bruising his shins as he slightly increased his speed.

'Smart Alec. Smart Alec. Smart - ' the chant became more rhythmic, louder, as they moved in for the kill.

Two Asian women rounded the corner ahead of him. He breathed lighter, they weren't quite stupid enough to do him in front of witnesses. The pair walked with eyes cast down, with only a furtive glance to the future, they did not look at him, or those behind him. They walked close together their peacock saris bright in the sunshine, exotic against the grey of the wall, the grey of the pavement.

‘All right mate?’ a breezy voice edged with razor blades blasted in his ear as an avuncular arm slapped across his shoulder.

‘Yeah, all right Smart?’ hissed another voice from the other side, and he could still hear the sound of boots behind him.

He could sense them grinning at the Asian women as they passed, a great joke between friends.

‘Weren’t nice of you was it?’

‘Grassing – that’s a – punishable crime – innit?’

Alex kept on walking, steadily, as if alone, not answering, praying for someone else to appear in the street. How could anywhere be so empty in London?

‘Oi! I asked you a question, Smart,’ Skells said digging his elbow sharply into Alex’s side. Alex turned, his eyes bright with anger, and it all went out of control.

*

‘Bye, Miss,’ the cheeky face of Kylie Burns smiled at Jo. Kylie, eleven going on twenty-one, was leaving her primary school for the last time. A little madam and too knowing for her age she had none the less done well in the lessons that Jo Smart, deputy head of Sir John Liddle Primary, took with the top juniors.

‘Bye Kylie, I’m going to miss you.’

‘Miss Smart?’

‘Yes?’ Jo looked interested, wondering what important thing Kylie wanted to ask to her.

‘Who’s that in your photo?’

‘Who?’ began Jo, then realised Kylie was pointing at the small frame that she kept on the bookshelf behind her. It had been one of very few ‘new-baby’ gifts and was just the right size to take the standard school photo. In it, each year, she put a new one of her son. Sixteen now, he looked older than his age and remarkably like his father had when Jo had first met him, dark and sultry. She’d met Alessandros at school, in her first teaching post, both new probationary teachers they’d been thrown together, and that’s how they’d stayed. He had an English mother and a Greek father, the combination had gifted him the looks of a Greek god, beautiful, dark and strong to her blonde and fine, intelligent yet wildly impulsive – she’d fallen in love almost at once.

‘Oh, that’s my son,’ Jo smiled, ‘he’s sixteen.’

‘I didn’t know you had any children miss, he don’t look like you.’

‘No. Not a bit. He looks just like his father though,’ she said softly. Just like his father in looks and intelligence, but she’d never describe Alex as impulsive, but then perhaps that was her input.

‘Okay. Bye then miss,’ Kylie said, spinning on her heel and heading for the door.

‘Bye, and you work hard, you’ve got the brains to do well if you work hard.’

Kylie pulled a funny face, shrugged and vanished from sight.

*

Like some ghastly vicious ballet, the gang worked as a remarkably co-ordinated unit. Raikes stuck out his leg and one of the others shoved Alex from behind and, as he fell, Skells snatched at his bag, twisting Alex’s body so that it crashed undefended to the coarse concrete. Even as he landed they were reaching for him.

‘Oh dear, the poor boy’s fallen over,’ Raikes snide voice sang out, ‘Help ‘im up,’ he added as he scanned the still deserted street. They frog-marched Alex a metre or two up a back lane and dragged him into a yard behind a take-away, where the rank smell of oil and rotting waste from the row of bins permeated the air and the ground was slippery with decaying debris.

Barden and Skells linked their arms in Alex’s and twisted him round to face Raikes. Raikes stood squarely in the gap in the wall, legs astride, fists clenched and with a mockery of a smile on his face. Suddenly Alex knew exactly what was going

to happen. It was just like a scene from a hundred old films – the henchmen hold the victim while the boss thumps hell out of him. Almost as the thought came into his head Raikes strode forward, and Alex instinctively tried to curl up, to protect himself from the fist that hurtled towards his stomach. It hurt, God it hurt, but they were pulling at him to force him upright again, and the fist thumped again. Raikes' face was glowing, his eyes glittering with power. And again. Alex's stomach muscles, strong for a boy of his age, screamed with the tension that he was holding them in, and the pain flared across his body.

Another scene from the old films flashed across Alex's brain. It was worth a try, he thought, as Raikes' disgustingly delighted face came into close-up with the next thrust. Judging his moment, Alex threw his weight back on to his captors, and kicked out his leg, straight at Raikes' crotch. He had time to see Raikes' eyes turn black with uncomprehending pain before Barden and Skells toppled back into a heap, dragging Alex with them.

Was it worth it?

'Get the bastard!' Raikes screamed, doubled up in the doorway.

And Alex disappeared under a rain of fists and boots allowed their fun at last. He took a blow on

his cheek, another in his stomach; he curled tighter wrapping his arms around his head, and forced himself into the corner, to protect his back, to make a smaller target. Everywhere hurt, everywhere was battered. By the time Raikes had recovered, and had them all stand round to deliver the coup-de-grace, Alex was unconscious.

*

Detective Sergeant Kelvin March perched on the corner of the desk as his Detective Inspector, Rick Whittington, carefully emptied drawer after drawer.

‘I can’t believe you’re really doing this? You’ll be buried there – who ever made good down in the sticks?’ he said as he watched Rick select some things to go into a box, some in an office tray and dump the rest in the bin. ‘And don’t tell me promotion’s not everything – it was you who used to push so. Go for it, eh? You, damned near dragged me up to D.S.’

‘You deserved it,’ Rick spoke quietly, his voice, almost always soft, had its own subtle nuances, some as hard as granite, some as silky as the finest sand. Kelvin had heard them all, knew how Rick could inspire confidence with one, and fear with another, yet seldom had he heard that voice raised in anything but song.

‘That’s not the bloody point, the point is you could go far. Star rated you are. The Met’s the place to stay, you know that, you’ll make bloody top brass.’

Rick shoved the last empty drawer back in place. He looked at his old friend. Somehow they’d managed to travel the same way since leaving police college and joining the Metropolitan Police. True, Rick had made it one step higher in the time, but there was no resentment, and they knew each other well. Leaving Kelvin was about the only thing that Rick regretted as he’d put in for a transfer. He just couldn’t stand another year in London. He knew he certainly couldn’t stand another New Year’s Eve.

‘I’ve told you why. It’s no use staying – nothing’ll ever come right if I do.’

Kelvin looked contrite. ‘I know,’ he sighed, ‘but you could have said like, earlier – eh?’

‘Never knew when it’d come off.’

‘I’d have understood.’

‘Look, I’ll meet you for a pint later, seven at the ‘Dog’ ?’ he said using the nickname for the local pub

Kelvin raised a smile, ‘Yeah. See you later,’ he said and pushed himself off from the desk and with a glance at his watch left the D.I.’s office.

*

Mr. Ahren opened the back door to let some air through the stuffy back store and into the kitchen. As soon as the smell that came from the overheated yard reached him he wasn't sure it was such a good idea. He was just about to step back inside, thinking stale air better than smelly, when he noticed a book lying in the yard, its pages flapping lazily in the light breeze. He stepped out of the door, eyes on the book as if it might suddenly flap its wings and take off. He was just stooping to pick it up when he heard a sound. He froze, the sound, a small groan, was coming from behind him, barely discernible from the background hum of traffic but different enough to be noticed. With a prickle of fear tightening his spine he looked round.

The corner beyond the bins was a confusion of fluttering paper and a knot of clothing that emitted, as he stood transfixed, another moan and shifted to reveal a face.

'Oh, My God!' gasped Mr. Ahren, stumbling forward towards the boy.

The boy's face and the sleeve and front of the white shirt were bright with blood. File paper had been tipped out all over him, sticking to his frame, the wall, the ground. Broken empty files rested at crazy angles where they'd landed, pencils, split

and bright, lay like broken firewood, and a gutted bag hung from a bin.

As Mr. Ahren stepped forward the sweet, acrid smell of urine enveloped him and he noticed the pages of writing were smeary. He crouched down. 'Are you all right? I'll phone for an ambulance.' The boys eyelids opened and closed twice as if it was all he could manage. Mr. Ahren stood quickly, making his head swim. He looked at the boy for a second and decided he'd better phone first and make him comfortable afterwards.

*

Jo pulled another pile of forms towards her and yawned. It was the last day of term before the Summer holiday, just one more day for administration then the bliss of no school work for at least five weeks and, towards the end, a fortnight in Greece. It might be the last holiday that Alex took with her, or the second to last, whichever, it wouldn't be long before holidays would mean going off somewhere with his friends, not with his mum. She'd decided to leave visiting Greece until he was older, for a time when he might appreciate it more, she'd told herself, for a time when she could really explain things. She yawned again, the heat of the summer making the room as dry as chalk dust, the air heavy. She

wondered if Alex would remember to pick up some salad stuff to go with their evening meal, he usually did, he was a good boy.

The phone rang, she finished filling in the line while it rang twice more.

‘Deputy Head’s office,’ she said as she scanned the next line to be completed.

‘Jo? Sally. I’ve got a call for you – it’s the police.’

Sally’s voice sounded unusually tight. Clicks sounded on the line and a new voice began.

‘Mrs. Josephine Smart?’

This wasn’t right. Usually if the police wanted to impart or gain information about a pupil they referred to her as the deputy-head. That it might be a personal problem concentrated her mind.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m D.S. March, Mrs. Smart, you have a son, Alexander?’

‘Yes, yes. What’s happened?’

‘I’m at St Stephens’ Casualty.’

‘Casualty?’

Sally appeared at the door, her round face set in a frown.

‘I’m sorry to inform you that your son has been assaulted – he’s expected to be okay though,’ D.S. March added quickly.

‘I’ll be there – now!’

‘Give you a lift?’ Sally offered, knowing that Jo never drove to work.

‘Oh God, Sally – he’s been – assaulted.’ The term sounded vicious and perverted.

Jo grabbed up her bag and together they ran from the room, skittering down the echoing stone steps and out in to the glare of the asphalted playground.

The drive was interminable, Jo trying to hurry the rush-hour traffic forward with willpower. She hadn’t even stopped to ask when or where it had happened. Could she have prevented it if she’d gone straight home after school instead of staying on to fill in forms? What had happened? Why were all the traffic lights red?

Sally swung her Metro round to the Hospital entrance and paused, where bright painted notices screamed NO WAITING, just long enough for Jo to leap from the car. Running, Jo headed for the large ‘Casualty’ sign and burst into the waiting room at a trot. Inside everyone was still. Sitting waiting, standing at the desk, waiting, or moving slowly and carefully around. The coolness of the room after the heat of the street immediately calmed her. Yet to wait while the receptionist filled in a form for the person in front of her was agony

‘You’ve got my son. Alex – Alexander Smart?’

The receptionist looked down at her screen and up, past her, and gave a small nod, before returning her gaze to Jo.

‘Yes, Mrs. Smart. This officer would like a word.’

‘When can I see him?’

‘Now,’ said a stout, smartly-dressed man at her elbow. ‘D.S. March. We spoke on the phone?’

‘Yes – what happened? When?’ all the questions she had failed to ask, poured out.

‘It appears he was set on by a gang – he’s not said much yet. The doctor says he’s taken quite a beating, it’s mostly superficial, but it was a nasty attack – one we’ll need to investigate. Go in and see him now, I’d like a word after.’ Kelvin tried to sound gentle, he could see the pain in Jo’s large grey eyes. He’d been taken aback by her appearance. He’d seen the dark-haired son and he knew that the mother was a deputy head at an large primary school, so he had expected someone different, someone a bit more domineering, not this young blonde bit that stood before him.

A nurse let Jo into the cubicle where Alex lay. He looked small as she entered the room, her little boy. She caught her breath as she came close. Half of his face was shiny, white and red, swollen. One eye almost closed with the swelling, the kiss of butterfly plasters on his cheekbone.

‘Mum,’ he mumbled as his eyes filled with tears, and she was by his side. Tears were trickling down her face while anger filled her.

‘Oh Alex. Who did it? Oh.’

‘Raikes’ lot.’

‘Are you – anything broken?’

Alex raised half of his mouth towards a smile, the other half stiff with swelling.

‘They say not – mum?’

‘Yes?’

‘The police want to talk to me – don’t they?’

Jo nodded.

‘Won’t do any good. Their word ‘gainst mine. No one saw. Besides.’

‘Besides?’

‘Ohh,’ why couldn’t she see, it hurt enough to talk as it was, ‘they’ll still be about, won’t they?’

‘Not if they get done for – for assault – whatever. They’d be away.’

Alex shook his head a fraction, the pain whirling with the motion, ‘Doubt it – nothing much happened to Jenkins last year, and he beat up a teacher.’

Jo nodded. He was right. That little brute had received a reprimand and little more, the teaching union press it had made it sound like the courts had declared an ‘open season’ on teachers.

‘But you’ll listen to him, the policeman?’

Alex nodded a fraction, it hurt. It all hurt, and he could still smell the stink from the yard on himself, despite having been cleaned-up by the nursing staff.

‘Mum?’

‘Yes, darling,’ she said, her throat tight as she touched his coal-black curls gently, where they lay matted on his forehead.

‘When can I come home?’

*

‘Sorry I’m late!’ Kelvin said as he landed heavily on the old plush seating of the ‘Dog’, ‘Had a GBH on a young lad to see to.’

‘What’ll you have? Lager?’

‘God! Yeah – that’ll be fine.’

He watched Rick standing at the bar. Somehow he already seemed more relaxed. He was dressed casually, jeans and Tee shirt, but it was more than that, his long, lean frame looked less angular, more at ease than it had seemed for ages. Rick’s Mediterranean good looks were holding out well too, scarcely a grey hair in sight, Kelvin thought, considering his own spreading waist and the grey that seemed to have multiplied in his hair since his fortieth birthday last year.

‘When you off then?’ Kelvin asked as Rick returned with his drink.

‘Report on Monday. I’ll pack up tomorrow and leave on Friday. It’ll give me the weekend to get settled in, some digs sorted out.’

‘Digs?’

‘I intend to buy something down there eventually – plenty of small places around Plymouth.’

‘Right – I’ll come for m’ hols then shall I? Book me in last week in August.’

Rick grinned. ‘I’m only going to miss one thing about London – and that’s you!’

‘Don’t be daft – you’ll be back, won’t you? You’ll never stand the boredom down there. Mrs. Minnie’s cat going missing, great blag at the sweetie shop?’

‘Huh – if only! No, I won’t be back,’ he shook his head slightly. ‘You could always transfer too!’

‘What would my missus say? Dragged away from her beloved shop!’

‘She might say thank you!’

‘No way – she couldn’t live away from it now – it’s in her blood.’

‘They do have shops down there – she could open a branch of ‘Tats’ in Plymouth.’

Kelvin seemed to consider this for a moment. ‘Nah – Josie says you can only make money out of being exclusive in the capital.’

All ‘Tats’ hats were exclusive. Catching on to the new concerns about sun-induced skin cancer

she'd developed a stunning range of hats for all sunny occasions, each hand finished by herself. That each hat was unique and each carried her own designer label meant that they had become one of *the* fashion accessories of the last couple of summers. Sheer time had kept her business small but exclusive, now it was paying off as her prices became exclusive to match. Their house always smelled of raffia and straw and in every room were sheaves of colour, piles of glistening fruits, bundles of plasticized wire and hats – hundreds of hats, in all stages of creation. They filled the house like the children they did not have.

'Holidays then.'

'Rick? I hope it works mate – but I don't know, seems like – ' Kelvin tried to find the words to express his feeling that Rick was trying to hide from the facts.

'Like I'm running away?'

Kelvin nodded, shamefaced.

'More like running home. It's just, down there I have other memories, things to fill up the spaces. Here? Here nearly every other street reminds me of them.' Rick felt his throat tighten against his will, and swallowed to release it.

He should have put in for a transfer long ago, he'd not felt settled for the past year and a half. New Year's Eve had confirmed his feelings. The first

anniversary of their death – his loss; wife and child together, gone in an instant. His request for transfer landed on the Chief Super’s desk as soon as he was back on duty but it had taken six months to work through. He’d kept it quiet, not even telling Kelvin, knowing that every discussion of the transfer would bring him back to his reasons for leaving, and that would bring back the pain and the futile anger. It was better this way, one session of justification and it would all be over.

*

‘You ought to take him away from here.’ Sally said quietly over the cup of coffee she’d just put down on the desk.

Jo looked up startled. She’d been miles away. It was her very last day in school, supposedly a whole day of administration. In reality she was just ‘being there’ in between visiting Alex in the hospital. They had decided to keep him in for a day’s observation, though they’d assured her that he was very lucky to have nothing more than some cracked ribs and severe lesions.

‘I was just thinking of that, sort of. We’re off to Greece at the end of the summer, but that’s too late, I need to get him away now, really.’

‘Any ideas?’

Jo shrugged and gave a rueful smile. 'Greece will just about clear me out for this year – and that's going cheap, a non-resort place I know. I don't know where we could go, it's pricey this time of year.'

'Relatives?'

Jo shook her head. Relatives might as well be non-existent, a long story she kept to herself.

'Hmm..' Sally mused, 'There's – it's only an idea mind – my sister, down in Looe? She might know somewhere – not too expensive, might be a bit rough and ready though.'

'Looe?'

'In Cornwall, fishing village – on the south coast. Don't you know it?'

'No, I've been to Devon, but that's it.'

'Oh, you'd like it. I wish John could find work down there. It's where I come from, well St. Austell really. But Sylvie lives in Looe. Shall I give her a ring?'

'Okay. Thanks Sally,' the idea of an immediate break growing on her. 'Only if she happens to know of somewhere really cheap, we don't need anything fancy – just peace and quiet.'

Sally smiled, thinking of the unusual holiday place on the cliffs, and trotted off back to her own office to put through a call that wasn't strictly school business.

*

‘Smug bastards.’ Kelvin muttered to himself. He’d just finished interviewing the last of the gang named by Alex Smart. It hadn’t surprised him that they all swore to being elsewhere, nor that some of them were the alibis for the others, but they’d obviously worked on a few of their ‘friends’ too, just to make sure that their story stood up. What irritated him most was their cockiness, the way they almost swung on their chairs, lounging back and sneering. Trash, rubbish he’d be sweeping in time and time again, and a nice lad like that Alex gets the shitty end of the stick. ‘Good record,’ his school had said, ‘expected to get top grades on all ten of the GCSE’s he’d taken – had even been in until the end of term helping out in the science and technology departments.’ As for the others he asked about; the school just seemed glad to be rid of them.

It was strange to walk over to Rick’s office and see a different face. The new D.I. seemed a pleasant enough bloke, but the reputation that had preceded him was that of a paper shuffler, unlike Rick, who’d rather have been out following up leads than sitting behind a desk.

‘Not much joy on this one, sir, as it stands,’ Kelvin March said as he offered his report to D.I. Williams.

‘No?’ Williams replied, raising his eyebrows. ‘Why’s that?’ he added, not making any attempt to take the sheaf of papers.

Kelvin stood up straight and withdrew the file, glancing at it then tucking it under his arm.

‘The gang who beat Alexander Smart up were his contemporaries, from the same school. They’ve got themselves pretty well covered and there’s no concrete evidence and no witnesses to actually link them to the assault – on the surface. If forensic were let loose on their clothes, boots, whatever, it’s my guess they’d find evidence.’

‘Forensic? What were the injuries?’

‘Minor – but,’

‘Minor. I’m sure we have more serious detective work to spend money on than sorting out teenage fights. File it.’

‘But if – ’

‘File it.’

‘Sir.’

Kelvin stood for a moment looking down on the balding spot on the top of D.I. Williams’ head, and congratulated himself on not going bald, even if he was going grey!

*

‘Do I really have to?’ Alex asked the nurse who had brought a wheelchair to his bedside.

‘Yes, we have to take you down to the car in the wheelchair. It’s policy.’

It seemed ridiculous. Getting dressed caused much more pain than walking, it was moving his arms that hurt the most not his legs. His mum had gone back down to move the car to a collection space, he picked up the sports bag with his pyjamas in and sat in the wheelchair. He felt such a fraud as a grey-haired old porter arrived and began to push the chair out of the ward and down the corridor. It was only as they came out into the light that he suddenly felt nervous. A feeling of being exposed, of being suddenly visible to unfriendly eyes, ran through him. He shuddered despite the heat of the day.

He climbed into the car, wincing as he did so, and pulled the seat belt across. Jo, noticing his pain, took the end from him and slotted it into the catch. He sat with the belt held slightly away from his chest to ease the pressure. They waved goodbye to the porter and were off.

‘Okay?’ Jo asked as she pulled out onto the main road.

‘Yeah,’ he said softly, feeling nervous about everybody they passed.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you. You know we’re going to Greece at the end of the summer? Well, at the beginning we’re off to Cornwall! In just under week!’

He didn’t say anything, his throat seemed to have a lump in it.

‘Alex?’

He drew in a loud breath.

‘Alex?’ she said, stealing a quick look at him. His dark eyes were full, shining with un-shed tears.

‘Oh, great. I mean – I really mean it. I didn’t want to be around here – for a bit.’

‘Oh Alex. It’s a friend of Sally’s sister – down near Looe in Cornwall. She says it’s a bit primitive – but I’m sure it’ll be okay. It should be really quiet – Sally says nothing ever happens down there.’

‘Good.’ Alex’s voice sounded small and tight. It hurt Jo just to hear him.

They turned off the main Fulham road and were on home territory, turn right just past the church and then it was just straight down the street. Parking, as usual, was difficult, but Jo found a space almost opposite their door. She leapt out of the car to go ahead and open the door calling for Alex to take his time, to be careful.

The sun had been shining on the front of the house all afternoon and the light bounced off her

brilliant-blue front door. It had been the finishing touch, after years of re-decorating she had at last finished with the bright flourish of a beautifully glossed door. She sniffed. The heat of the sun usually rekindled the scent of new paint, but as she lifted the key to the lock she registered a quite different smell. She glanced round at the steps and pavement, and tipped up each foot in turn to check that she hadn't stepped in something unpleasant, something she certainly wouldn't want to walk onto the recently laid carpet. All clean. She smiled back at Alex, as he clambered out of the car, pushed the key in the lock, turned it and opened the blue door.

Then it hit her.

CHAPTER TWO

The first time she saw that small terraced house Jo knew it was right for her. It was tucked in behind the Fulham road where the roar of Chelsea's victory could be heard from the Stamford Bridge ground. Almost on a junction with the incongruously named, Farm Lane it had one eye-relieving view across the railway track to the patch of green offered by the Cemetery.

What a gamble! Four years ago, as the housing market had taken a steep nose-dive and bottomed out at prices that seemed derisory to the purchasers of only a couple of years before, Jo had bought. It had been a terrifying experience, but one that she was glad she had taken. Prices had steadied since then and, here and there, even begun to tentatively rise again.

Number 38, or 'Homeleigh' as some previous owner had dubbed it, was anything but, when she first viewed it. It was a sad house, dark and musty, trapped in time. The new owners, inheritors, were desperate to sell before a 'poll tax' was levied on it. The old gentleman had scarcely changed a thing since his wife had died thirty years before, she was told, and she could readily believe it, but

the house itself was sound. With a little downward negotiation, a horrifying mortgage and all of her savings, she bought 'Homeleigh' determined to make it live up to its name and Jo was nothing if not determined. It was the last piece of proof that she needed: successful teacher with a top job; handsome intelligent child; home owner. That would show them, everyone of her family who had turned their backs and stuck up their noses, who had told her she was stupid and worse and who hadn't wanted to acknowledge her baby.

With very little left over after paying the mortgage, Jo had worked on the house herself. Alex had helped as much as he could, and in the last two years he'd really made a difference to how quickly they'd finished. Started with a general clean; scrubbing all the paint-work, tearing up layers of crisp linoleum, washing down the walls, until the house smelled fresh, then, month by month as there was enough money for each job, they began to repaint. Jo had decided against wallpaper as it seemed so expensive and, after having read some books and bought a basic kit, she decided to paint the walls and stencil designs on to them for decorative effect. It had the extra

benefit of costing nothing to spend three weeks painstakingly removing the wall-paper and not too much to roller all over with a 'white-with-a-hint-of-colour' emulsion. Each room she finished with a stencilled border in one colour to enhance the colour hinted at in the base paint and a new, but usually cheap, carpet.

She'd started in their bedrooms, to get practise before moving on to more public rooms, and she'd needed it, even now she winced at the heavy stencilling that was hr first effort in Alex's room. After that she'd moved down to the kitchen, no longer able to stand the cracked and crazed surfaces of the yellow and black melamine-faced worktops and doors. It had been the slowest room to come right, and the most expensive, but she was so proud of her efforts. The kitchen now had a country look about it that would belong in a house just off 'Farm Lane'. She'd retained the cupboards, as they were sound in themselves, but had stripped off the doors and worktops. She'd bought a length of new 'marble' faced work top ready cut to fit and some cheap solid pine doors to fasten to the fronts, with the aid of Alex's technology teacher. All at once, the room looked both more wholesome and more homely. With more advice, an adventurous bit of tiling and more paint and

stencil it had only taken the introduction of a few plants to make the kitchen one of her favourite rooms.

The tiling she undertook in the bathroom had been limited but effective, in a bold, deep red and black it made so much difference to the plain white suite which, as it was still good, she kept. In the past year she'd finished off the dining-room and sitting room. Each was now a pleasant, light room in soft shades and with simple furnishings. The hall she had left until last. Feeling quite accomplished in the art of stencilling she designed and created something special. Her whole hall was an experience in light and shade. She'd taken her ideas from the water-side, from the light cast by sunshine on ripples and dappled shade through fresh green leaves. Everyone who'd visited her since she'd finished had been amazed, had suggested she could do interior design as a side-line, had laughed with her, knowing how little time she had left in a day as it was. Since she'd completed the hall, opening her front door was an experience she always enjoyed; refreshing and pleasing.

She turned the key and pushed open the door. The stench hit her. A stench that she'd merely

suspected as being somewhere outside surged out from her hall assailing her senses as a physical force. She staggered back, gagging, her eyes trying not to register the desecration, her hand waving Alex back behind her.

‘What is it?’ Alex began, before the stink of faeces reached him. He stepped back as if someone had hit him, found hot tears rushing into his eyes and an intense anger lodged somewhere in his chest.

‘Go back – Alex – in the car,’ Jo snapped, stepping backwards as if she couldn’t bear to take her eyes from the open front door. In her mind the dull brown smears were crawling out and streaking everything, muddying the brilliant blue of the door as it stood in the shadow. She shuddered. They stood at the car and stared at their home.

She put her hand to her mouth and tried to breathe. The air seemed full of the foul smell even here on the other side of the road.

‘I – I must phone,’ she muttered. ‘Stay there *please* Alex.’ She didn’t want him to see any more than he had already. She steeled herself and having taken a breath, as if about to dive under water, strode across the road and straight up to the door.

The peace of the hall was destroyed by streaks and circles covering the walls, drawn in excrement. The telephone was on the kitchen

wall, she hurried forward towards it. She came to a halt at the door of her favourite room with tears running down her face, and even so she tried not to breathe too hard, tried to block out the smell. The scene was bizarre: a mountain in the middle of the kitchen floor. Everything, almost everything that belonged in all the cupboards, had been hauled out and smashed on the floor, heaped up in a sticky, crunching, powdery heap. Moving carefully, trying not to slip, feeling the crunch of cereals beneath her feet but not permitting herself to stop, she reached for the phone. It was slippery as she picked it up and she almost vomited as she realised that even the hand-set had been smeared with shit. She wiped it with a kitchen towel and scrubbed at her hand for a moment before punching the number for the police. 'At least it still works' she thought as she heard a distant ringing tone and tried to work out what she was going to say.

Replacing the hand-set she turned to go back outside to wait. Alex stood in the doorway, his face a shadow against the back-light from the open door.

'Alex - I said not to ...'

'It's me.'

'What?'

‘See what it says? Grass!’

Jo stepped back into the hall and looked up at the wall where Alex was pointing. The streaks and circles at that point resolved themselves into the word. She allowed her eyes to move round the hall, stepping back to see other smeared words, foul four-lettered obscenities.

Just as the stench had overcome her senses so that its strength seemed diminished in her mind, now she found herself becoming detached from the personal effect of the attack. She found herself wondering whether they’d gone round collecting dog-mess or had ‘manufactured’ it themselves. She wondered if they’d come prepared with rubber gloves to protect themselves or had merely scooped it up in wadges of paper, and she wondered about the handprint on the wall halfway up the stairs.

‘They didn’t break-in,’ Alex said as they stood outside in the sunshine, their backs to the door.

‘They must have got in somewhere. I don’t know. I haven’t, couldn’t go round everywhere.’

‘Won’t be a break-in – they had a key.’

‘Alex?’

‘Bloody Raikes ...’ Alex voice broke as tears coursed down his face and he tried to hide them from his mother.

‘You don’t know Alex – it could just be a coincidence.’

But he was shaking his head. He knew they’d gutted his bag and remembered seeing the baseboard, where he kept his key hidden, tipped out amongst the other debris. It had seemed a safe hiding place, buried under all his files and stuff, and had been until then. Now it made him feel responsible.

‘Is there someone you could go to, Mrs. Smart?’ The young constable asked kindly, looking definitely a little green after his first sortie into the house.

Jo thought for a moment. He was right of course, though she’d not thought past calling the police, they could not stay there tonight – and there were so many other things to consider: Alex; cleaning the place up; insurance; getting away, getting away.

‘I’ll ring – ’ she began, then the thought of actually speaking into the shit-smearred phone again made her feel sick. She looked round, tears forming in

her eyes, wondering where she could phone from. She caught sight of a neighbour standing at her door, arms folded, leaning against the doorjamb, watching the police activity. Jo had no idea who she was, she knew only one of her neighbours, the rest seemed to be either out most of the time or securely locked indoors, there wasn't a great community in this street, undeterred Jo headed for the woman. As soon as the woman became aware that Jo was coming towards her she straightened up and stepped back into the shadow. Her hand was on the door, ready to close it, as Jo reached it, instinctively putting out a foot to keep the door open.

'May I? I live just over there, Jo Smart – may I use your phone? Please?'

'What's going on?' the woman asked, thin and pale with eyes too large for her face, like a creature that lives in caves.

'We've been broken into by – vandals. I just need to phone someone urgently – my phone's – out of order.'

The woman's face wrinkled a little. Jo wondered if the stench clung to her, hung about her like a cloud.

'It's there,' she said pointing at a phone fixed to the wall near the stairs, and stepped back to allow

Jo to reach it. She moved no further as if barring the way to the other rooms of the house, almost as if Jo carried the danger with her.

‘Thanks, I won’t be a minute – thanks,’ Jo said steadying herself against the wall as she pressed in Sally’s home number.

*

He’d been living in an empty house for almost a week. As soon as he knew that the transfer was through, Rick Whittington had packed up his home and sent it into storage down in Plymouth, to wait for him. A fortnight ago he’d used the couple of days he had off to take a drive down and look around some of the estate agents, to collect sheaves of details on ‘desirable’ properties, to check some of these out and to get the flavour of some of the areas. It had been years since he’d been to Plymouth and he’d never really known it well, so it had been a useful exercise. His last few belongings were crammed into his trusty Carlton estate, luckily it always held more than he thought it could.

Rick looked round the empty rooms, one by one. Stripped bare, they seemed impersonal, yet they still echoed with memories of the eleven years they’d had together there. Elise sitting in the

living room sewing new curtains, bright curtains that changed the rooms where they were hung. Louise running to meet him at the door and tripping over one of her own toys, knocking out a tooth. Bathing Louise on the evenings when he was home early enough, too few, when they'd splash water all over the place and both be in trouble with Elise. Eating late with Elise, dinners fragrant with herbs or sizzling with spices, or early, en-famille, joyously and easily. The bedroom. He closed the door. It hurt too much to even think now. He closed the front door of their police apartment and walked away.

As the miles rolled by under his wheels he began to feel better, as if layers were being left behind, strewn on the hard shoulder. A fresh start. Though they would always be there, always be part of him, he could try to begin again and wipe the bitter taste from his mouth that arrived every time he came home, every time he 'saw' them in a familiar place and every time he had to pass the junction where Kensington High becomes Hammersmith Road. He allowed the miles to unwind the years, to take him back to the time when he had first seen Elise. He'd had enough girlfriends in his time, but none had proved to be

stronger in their attraction than his work and none had been able to share him with it. For Elise he thought he might have given it up completely, had she not been quite happy to be the wife of an irregular time-keeper.

He'd seen her as soon as he arrived at the club. He could hardly miss her, standing as she was in the centre of the small stage. She had a fine willowy figure with high carved cheekbones that accentuated her dark eyes under her glossy black hair. Her voice had seemed to belong to someone else, someone a lot bigger and stronger, as she galloped with the horsemen in the folk ballad that she was completing. All at once, under the spell of the song, she was transformed as her voice fell to that of the lady-love that the knight sought, calling to him from beyond the grave. 'Alas! My Lord, where I am gone, you may not follow. Alas! My Lord, where I am gone, for me you must not come.'

The applause had been effusive, and Rick joined in, as on unaccustomed impulse, he pushed his way to the front and round to the side of the stage to congratulate her on her voice as she stepped down. She'd smiled up at him, her dark eyes shining, and asked him to join her party.

Captivated, he'd followed her to a group of young people sitting against the wall. Everyone had shuffled about a bit to squeeze in Elise and her new friend. Introductions were made, a quick round of first names or nick-names, and they settled back to listen to the next singer to take to the stage. Whether Rick's ears had become deafened by love already or whether the next singer was truly dull he was never to discover as the general decision was taken to move on. Politely they'd waited until the dirge was complete before standing en-masse and leaving the folk club.

Rick had found himself walking through the cool evening air beside a woman who made him feel lit up. She told him that she worked as a translator, working on texts, often on deadly boring technical texts like those for instruction leaflets. He'd laughed and pointed out that she must be the one responsible for many an abandoned self-assembly kit. She'd laughed and told him he must be responsible for all the burgled apartments in London! It was the beginning of a year-long courtship, as they worked all round the fact that they had both fallen for each other in an instant on that first evening because they just couldn't believe it. They created a beautiful duet, a pair of

complementary voices and eventually they married, Rick was twenty eight and Elise two years younger. Louise arrived after a year and they settled in their new Police apartment as a family. Now they were gone, so suddenly, gone. 'Alas My lord where I have gone you may not follow. Alas my Lord where I have gone, for me you must not come.'

It had been New Year's Eve, but the New Year was still a few hours off. Louise had been invited to a party in Kensington, her first teenage party. He was on duty late that day so Louise had given him a fashion show the evening before. It made him smile as she paraded her fineries. Except for the ugly heavy boot-like shoes, the black and white dress could have been something one of his girlfriends would have worn back in the late sixties. Louise had suddenly grown, the prototype of the young woman she would be in a few years. The puppy-fat had left her cheeks giving naturally fashionable high cheekbones, just like her mother, and even taking the prejudice of a father, she was all set to be a stunner.

The party finished at nine, a sensible and respectable time for an eleven year-olds' disco-party. He wasn't due off duty until ten that evening so Elise had gone to collect Louise. They

were on their way home when it happened. Head-on smash. Two survivors. The back-seat passengers of the Lotus. Not the right ones. The police were on the scene in an instant. They would be, they'd been chasing the stolen Lotus for the last mile or two.

The police had called in the numbers of the car. One was registered in his name, and his name was recognised. They radioed him on his way home. They told him to pull over a moment, and checked that he was ready before asking him if his wife and daughter had been out in the car that evening.

With a lump settling in his throat he'd answered them, knowing that this was just a pre-amble, a check, before his world broke apart and because he knew, he sounded in control when they said there'd been an accident, a fatal accident at the junction of Kensington High and Hammersmith Road, and that all the casualties had been taken straight to hospital. The heavy pause told him that the next words to be spoken would be the death sentence. The driver and passenger in the white Metro were not among the survivors. He signed off in a voice that belonged to someone else, then screamed and shouted until his throat felt raw with the harshness, then the tears came instead. He felt trapped in a vacuum, in a bubble

of time, he'd sat there for half the night screaming, but barely ten minutes had passed since he'd pulled over. Through misted eyes he pulled back into the traffic, and headed back through the dark of the last hours of the Old Year towards the hospital.

He really should have put in for a transfer straight after the funeral; instead, he'd struggled to pull his life back together. The effort had been too much; so often pieces would fly away just as he'd almost got them tied down, too many memories crowded in on his quiet moments. This New Year's Eve had been the breaking point, full circle back to the realisation that he had to start again, somewhere where the memories could be brought under control, somewhere where he could concentrate on his work – it was all he had left. Plymouth forty-six miles the sign said – nearly there.

*

‘What did I say? Henry's not the only one, I have my contacts too,’ Detective Constable Fuller expanded, gangster-like in stance, dress and looks. ‘We'll do you want to know about the Lord Mayor of London – or don't you?’

‘Okay – give,’ sighed D.C. Lewis. She was curious, they were all curious about the new D.I. they were getting from London. After all, they all had to work with him and it made a big difference to their lives if they could get on with the man. Fuller’s manner irritated her, but she had come to accept it as an intrinsic part of his personality and like it or not, when pushed he was a good man to work with. All they’d been told was a name. Richard John Whittington. In an instant Fuller had picked on the name, Dick Whittington – Lord Mayor of London, and had run with it to find out what he could.

‘Our Dick is a good-apple. No sideways demotion job at least. Mind you it makes you wonder whether he’s been sent or has jumped – doesn’t it?’

‘That all?’

Fuller shrugged. ‘I could have got tied in with a pal – he didn’t seem too forthcoming – leaving for personal reasons, his wife and kid were in a car smash last year, that’s it, except to say he was – quote – ‘one of the best’.’

‘Poor guy.’ Glenda mused as she glanced out of the window, past the burned-out church, out to sea. ‘Why Plymouth – did they say?’

‘Nah. No doubt we’ll find out soon enough once he’s here,’ James remarked acidly.

Glenda turned and glanced at him sharply, it wasn’t a tone she was used to from James.

*

Jo put the phone down and put her hands flat to her face, hiding every feature. She sighed deeply and slid the palms down until she could just see over her fingers.

‘Problems?’ Sally asked, her face furrowed by worry was curiously creased in a manner it wasn’t designed for.

‘You bet,’ Jo said, removing her hands from her face and interlocking her fingers in case they tried to escape. ‘It seems that I will probably not be covered by my household insurance because there was no forced entry. They make it sound as if I had left the doors wide open or something!’ She heard her voice rise with the indignation that she felt and breathed deeply to bring it back under control.

‘But you told them, about Alex – the attack. What did they say?’

‘They said that I should have notified them and had all the locks changed – under the insurance! They say they would have paid for that.’

'But you had so much to worry about.'

'Doesn't cut any ice with them. Besides I didn't even know the key was missing – don't think Alex even realised until after we went home and saw that- that – I will never, ever, understand it! You know at college we used to do child psychology – and how the baby goes through all these little stages -anal obsessive, that was one – just about describes this bunch. Sorry Sally – I'm talking ugly.' I haven't said that for years, she thought, thinking about Greece must have brought it back.

"Don't talk ugly – ugly is as ugly says." Alessandros had said that day when she bitched about her parent's attitudes, comparing them to the open-arms welcome she'd just received from his family.

'No – it's okay. What are you going to do?'

'Get some cleaners in – I don't really want to – it's not like me – but I couldn't look at it again. It's sort of scarring. I'm rather hoping that when I see it again I'll be able to pretend it was just a dream – correction – nightmare!' Jo laughed, feeling the tension slightly ebb away. 'I'm just so grateful to you for putting us up like this.'

'Nonsense, it's a pleasure. And while you ring round some cleaners I'll go and put the kettle on.' Sally beamed, her face regaining its usual shape and optimism.

‘That’s Greece gone!’ Jo said as she heard Sally come back into the room. ‘With the new locks and a bill from one of that lot we’ll only be able to do Cornwall if that! Perhaps I ought to just knuckle to and do it myself.’

It wasn’t Sally.

‘No mum! You mustn’t do that – that’ll really please them. Forget Greece...’

‘Alex! – I thought you were Sally – I didn’t mean. It’s not as if they’d be there, watching.’

‘So.’

‘Don’t say ‘so’ like that!’ Jo snapped, then instantly relented and added softly, ‘I know what you mean – it’s okay – I couldn’t face it anyway. Anywhere else – perhaps I could do a swap – I’ll clean up someone else’s mess and they can do mine,’ her voice tapered off as she noticed how tired Alex looked. ‘We’ll get away, just the minute the house is clean enough to lock up and leave, we’re off. Okay?’

Alex smiled – it was enough.

*

‘Mum?’

‘Yes?’

The traffic moved slowly, fumes belched from the cold exhausts all round them, insinuating their stifling odour into the fully closed-up car. Jo looked sharply and briefly at Alex.

‘Nothing,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘It’s silly but I’m really nervous about going back home,’ Jo said softly, feeling she understood Alex’s wary look.

‘Mm,’ he acknowledged.

‘Be okay though – ‘all clean and fresh’ they said, with an emphasis on the fresh!’ Jo grinned ruefully. ‘Better damn well be – at that price! Oh I must be mad – I could have –’

‘No!’ Alex shook his head violently. ‘No – I can’t forgive myself as it is – not that.’

‘Oh Alex – I’ve told you – it’s not your fault that there are such disgusting creatures in the world.’

‘Just mine for knowing them.’

‘But you don’t. Forced acquaintances.’

‘Yeah, but if I’d just kept quiet ...’

‘No Alex – you were right about that. It’s important that you – that people stand up for what is right – or else – else – we might as well give up and go back to the jungle right now.’

They pulled up in the nearest space to their home they could find. Jo switched the ignition off and they sat as each waited for the other to move first.

Jo sighed. Alex moved and opened his door. With a quick grin at him, Jo did the same.

The sun beamed down the street and shone its sideways glance on the bright blue door.

Jo sniffed – she consciously tried not to – but as the gleaming new key reached the shiny circle of the new lock – she sniffed.

There was a smell. A smell usually described as being the essence of the pine forest – pungent and acidly green. It increased in strength as she opened the door, her eyes unwillingly seeing the brown smears her memory painted, before she could wipe it clean with reality.

She sighed, Alex was at her elbow and she turned and looked up at him. It was, as they had said, clean and fresh, but she felt it would never be quite the same. They moved through to the kitchen and found a similar transformation. Jo flicked open a cupboard. Empty. As was every one in the kitchen, not a plate, not a cup, not a can of beans remained.

‘Well we better get packed and on the road before we fancy a cup of tea,’ she said with more light-heartedness than she felt and led the way briskly up the stairs to drag the suitcases down from the tops of the wardrobes. She was thankful that the handprint halfway up the stairs had not been a

way marker of their trail of desecration, but apparently a full stop. Why, she could never be sure, but she had been convinced that they would have trashed Alex's room, yet it remained, as did all the other upstairs rooms, untouched. Had they been disturbed? Was it not Raikes and Co but someone else who had the key and address? Impossible to say now, but she was thankful as she laid clothes from the wardrobe and chest of drawers into her case.

Alex finished before her, came in and watched as she packed a few more pieces, squeezing them into a sports bag.

'Finished already?'

He nodded.

'Nearly done – take the key – put yours in the car – I'll just be a minute.'

Alex left and Jo quickly checked all round the house, paid a last visit to the loo, and locked up her bright blue door. As she turned she felt a deep sense of relief and strode towards the car with a feeling of optimism.

*

'Where exactly are we staying?' Alex asked as if he had just woken up. They had been travelling

for three hours, listening to the radio, playing the odd cassette, but not talking much.

‘At Sally’s sisters – just for,’ Jo reached forward and pressed the off button on the radio. ‘Just for the three days until this chalet place is empty.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘The chalet?’

‘Sally’s sister’s.’

‘Oh, in Looe itself. Um, West Looe – next to a pub – I’ve got the instructions in the back, we’ll look at them when we stop for some lunch. Soon!’ she smiled, knowing that he was probably feeling ravenous by now. She felt, rather than saw him nod his approval of the idea of lunch. ‘Ah! Services five miles – Plymouth sixty-eight,’ Alex read out with a certain degree of satisfaction, ‘nearly there.’

CHAPTER THREE

It was his eyes that really attracted her, green and sparkling, like sunlight on the sea. They'd arrived in Looe mid-afternoon, glad to reach the small town after the winding country roads, greeted by the sight of gulls wheeling, and houses perched up the hillside, beaming down on the harbour. Following the instructions they'd crossed the bridge and swept up to West Looe and round to the point where the sight of the Smugglers Inn told them they'd arrived. They stretched their limbs as they climbed out of the car and headed for the door of the house. Before they reached it the door was suddenly thrown open and Sylvia Gold beamed a welcoming smile at them.

Jo was momentarily taken back, and at the same time glad that she wouldn't have to ask if this woman was Sally's sister. Sally of the ample figure, round face and mousey-blond hair had a sister who looked nothing like her – except for the smile. Sylvia was slim, to the point of thinness, and her hair was a dry ginger.

‘Come in- come in,’ she said, ‘and this must be Alex,’ she paused a second to take in his still bruised face. ‘Poor love.’

Alex cringed inside ‘love!’ – and he’d hoped he could forget last week – that there’d be no one round to remind him – did everyone know?

Sylvia moved quickly, bird-like, so different to the gliding movements twhich Sally engaged, that Jo could not help wondering at the amazing combination of genes that could make two so different sisters.

‘It’s really good of you,’ Jo began as they were sat in the soft floral lounge suite, cup of tea in hand.

‘No! Not at all, Sally explained everything. You couldn’t stay *there* a moment longer. I don’t know how Sal sticks it myself – but there it is. Still, after all you’ve been through it was the least we could do.’

‘Sally said you’d only got the one spare room, I’m happy to..’ Jo started to explain how she wanted Alex to have the room with the bed that wouldn’t aggravate his cracked rib and bruised body, and that she’d make do.

‘It’s all fixed – can’t have guests on a put-you-up. Tamsin’ll move out for the couple of nights. No!’ she added quickly, noting Jo’s immediate start of a

refusal, 'It'll do her no harm.' Sylvia finished thinking of her sulky fifteen year old daughter. It had been the usual toss of the head and the pouting lip when she'd been asked to vacate her room. She was up there now, ostensibly clearing it up a bit for a guest.

Tamsin had been sitting on her bed reading an old Cosmo magazine that Michelle had lent her when they'd arrived. She was playing a game of brinkmanship – wondering whether her Mum would come up and give the room a quick tidy if she didn't bother – or whether she'd blow her top first. She heard a car draw up and glanced out. Not that she really expected it to be the visitors, not so early, all the way down from London. But it was.

She watched the small blonde woman climb out, stretch her back then dive back in for something – then she saw him. Even at twenty metres she knew she was in love. If that was the visitor then he could have her room anytime. By the time they'd reached the door and she heard her mother's voice, her face was pressed against the cold window in an effort to get a better look at him. Her face flushed with a deep heat as she glanced round the untidy room. She set to tidying

it a furiously, aiming to clear weeks of mess in ten minutes.

She could barely think where to store all her clutter for trying to remember what her mother had said about the visitors. Friends of Aunt Sally's – from London. HE was from London! That was glamorous enough without being tall, dark and handsome with it. She wondered how old he was – he looked about eighteen. What else had Mum said while she wasn't listening? She swept her make-up and hairbrush off the dressing-table and into an old wash-kit bag. She dumped an armful of clothes in the bottom of her wardrobe, and old trainers and magazines on top. The major clutter removed she glanced round the walls. It was awful! Absolutely kitsch, from the roundel picture of kittens her mum had hung on the wall when she was small, through the fading posters of 'Take That' to her latest 'Guns 'n' Roses', that she was suddenly sure must be 'old-hat' by now. She peeled the yellowing tape holding up the 'Take That' poster as carefully as she could, trying not to pull paint off the wall as she did so. That was why they'd stayed up so long – Dad had gone bananas when she'd left great holes in the paint before, now 'the kittens' and the 'Guns 'n' Roses' were covering them so couldn't take them down! A last

glance at her tape deck revealed too much – she grabbed some of the sick-making juvenile stuff and tossed it on top of the pile in the wardrobe.

‘Blow!’ a red-faced Tamsin said to the mirror as she realised her favourite black Tee-shirt was in the pile she’d deposited in the wardrobe. She dragged it out, hearing a clatter of cassettes rattle down the back of the wardrobe. She tugged it on and checked her profile, pulled a face and reached for her brush, recovering it from the wash-kit she brushed her long hair. She bent over forwards and let it fall around her head, brushed it vigorously, then, in one arching movement, swung her hair high back over her head to fall cascading over her shoulders and down her back. Long heavy auburn waves that shone as she gave them a final surface brush set off the few pretty freckles on her pale skin. She couldn’t wait any longer – she daredn’t, she didn’t know whether at any moment her Mum might bring them up and really didn’t want to be in her room when he saw it, she needed to create a good impression first.

The chatter sounded light and easy as she crept down the stairs. She waited a moment at the bottom before turning into the living-room. Her heart was thumping. She swallowed and made

sure her face felt cool. She was dying to see him close-up.

It was true – she tried not to stare – her eyes had not deceived her – he was really gorgeous a drop-dead looker. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees – eyes on his coffee cup, but she could see most of his face without him noticing. Wow.

‘Ah, Tamsin.’

She jumped. Sylvia had suddenly noticed her daughter standing quietly just inside the door. Tamsin, to her horror, felt a warmth spreading up her neck as they all turned to look at her. She’d meant to give a bright beaming smile – people had said she had a lovely smile – but it came as a tight lipped grimace. She knew it, saw the slight narrowing of her mother’s displeased eyes, and heaved a sigh. It was so stupid, she felt on the brink of crying now.

‘Tamsin – this is your Aunt Sally’s friend, Mrs. Smart and her son, Alex.’

Tamsin nodded and squeezed out ‘Hello,’ aiming it at Jo rather than Alex.

‘I was just telling them that this is the place to be for peace and quiet – as you keep telling me,’ she smiled an encouragement at Tamsin to finish the line.

Tamsin looked blank.

'In common with most of the youngsters down here, Tamsin's always saying,' Sylvia put on a voice, ' "there's nothing to do, it's boring, nothing ever happens here".'

How could she! Tamsin felt the blush hit her cheeks. 'So?' she said, vehemently.

Jo laughed. The universal teenage 'so'!

'Suits me,' Alex said so softly that Tamsin only just heard him. She glanced at him, thinking he was making fun of her too, and met his deep brown eyes, and knew he wasn't.

*

Rick knew his way around in Devonport and finding the Mount Wise area was easy. Which of the roads lined by long yellow-striped blocks of flats was Cloncy Street he wasn't sure and slowed a little to read the barely-legible defaced signs.

'Next one, sir,' D.C. Lewis said suddenly. This was her first time out with the new D.I. and she'd surprised herself by checking her appearance before they left the station. He flashed a grin of thanks and turned slowly into the street. The flats crowded in on both sides, each identical in paint scheme, each as depressing as the other. They pulled into the side between a battered Ford Capri and a chassis up on blocks. The smell of the area

should have been of salt and sea, considering the Hamoaze was less than five-hundred yards away, yet the air hung heavily with the rancid scent of decay as if it were trapped between the blocks of flats.

The police constable on the balcony walkway indicated the flat they had come to view. He straightened fractionally as he watched them approach. The flats seemed deserted, no curious faces at windows, no one lounging in the doorways.

‘Quiet isn’t it?’

‘Keeping out of the way,’ Glenda shrugged.

‘Bedroom at the back, sir,’ the constable said as he opened the door for them to go in, ‘Dead, I’d say.’

The hall was narrow, claustrophobic, it felt as if it brushed both of his shoulders as he walked down the middle. The carpet was a greasy red, the walls beige marked with scuffs at various levels, he expected the bedroom decor to be much the same. The door was, had been, a cheap flat hardboard faced door in pale pink. It hung loosely from one hinge, a number of gaping dark holes had been smashed through its smooth facade.

He stopped a moment to sense the air. Stale tobacco, sweet wine and the iron-filing smell of blood. Then he stepped inside; into a different

world. The room was lit by a single window hung with flounced lace curtains, framed by heavy burgundy velvet drapes. The bed, centre stage, was a delicate four-poster turned in a deep rich mahogany, draped with brilliant white broderie anglaise . The coverlet had once been of the same pure-white ornamental material. The dark stain that streaked across and over the side of the bed appeared like a crevasse in a snowy plain. Stepping carefully, Rick moved around the bed to the end of the bloody trail and the body slumped on the floor. A mass of dark hair surrounded a delicately shaped face, pale and slack in death. A young woman, fully dressed in fashionable clothes, drenched in darkening blood. He heard the wail of the ambulance siren as he confirmed for himself the police constable's immediate diagnosis of death.

Pulling on a pair of gloves he quickly turned on the light, a miniature chandelier, and together they began to search the room. All was immaculate, tidy, clean. Not a thing out of place. The doctor arrived and was almost dismissive of the murder. 'Straight stabbing, single blow, long – um – ' He tipped the woman's body forward a little, supporting it so that it didn't fall. 'very long

weapon. I'll be able to tell more later. Professional job, or very lucky.'

Rick thought 'lucky' a strange term, but acknowledged the instant diagnosis. It was important not to ruffle the feathers of the doctor too much, it could make all the difference between a quick start and a delay.

Forensics came and took photos, fingerprints and fibres, the medics came and took the body, Rick and Glenda concentrated on the other rooms.

'It's weird,' Glenda said as they returned to the hall after checking the sitting-room. 'That room's been ransacked - just about anything that comes apart, has been taken apart, yeah? Yet the bedroom was untouched. And the furnishings! They must've cost a packet - look past the wreckage and here's some poky flat that's been done up like a place in the Ideal Home magazine.'

Rick nodded his agreement. 'Okay, kitchen and bathroom left, your choice,' Rick smiled. Glenda pulled a face, wrinkling her diminutive nose. 'Kitchen - get it over with.' It would take ages if the kitchen had been ransacked in the same way.

The find came in the bathroom, the once immaculate bathroom. It was fluke that they found it at all. The medicine cabinet, the only container in the room, had been tipped out.

Lotions and pills filled the hand-basin, empty bottles littered the floor, and as in the other rooms, there seemed nothing left to search, someone had been doing their job for them.

The bathroom had been done out in style, if a little over the top, like the bedroom. More Viennese-draped lace curtains, blue and white tiles, a mock marble-topped washstand in dark wood with a handbasin sunk into it and a Victorian style cast iron bath with an old-fashioned shower head, like a huge wateringcan rose, hanging over it.

'I can't understand this – you just don't change the bathroom suite in a council flat – there's probably rules about it,' Glenda said wearily as she stood in the doorway.

'It's certainly different – and with the hall left just about as grotty as you can get,' Rick said, idly turning on the shower tap, curious as to the effectiveness of such a large shower-head. Nothing, no water, not even a dribble. He tried the bath taps below, they worked fine, gurgling and spluttering water forcefully. He looked again at the shower-head. It appeared to screw on, no other fixings, he gave it a gentle twist and it moved easily. As he turned it a little more he felt a

tingle run round his frame. How many parts of a plumbing system move so easily?

‘Glenda?’

‘Sir?’ she stepped over beside him.

He turned the shower head, once, twice, three times. It came loose and was heavy in his hand. He lifted it down, a globe filled with a plastic bag stuffed with white.

*

Sylvia was burbling on about some of the places to see, some to avoid. Tamsin scarcely heard until her own name was mentioned again.

‘What?’

‘Pardon! – I said you were working for your Uncle over at Millendreath this summer.’

‘Yes,’ her voice sounded unenthusiastic – when only the day before she’d been delighted and more – triumphant – when she told Michelle that she had a holiday job. Jobs of any type were hard to come by – especially for someone not yet sixteen. Now she thought her time might be better spent showing Jo and Alex, or rather Alex and Jo, around Cornwall. ‘Only a bit – though – part-time,’ she smiled at Alex for the first time.

Alex caught her smile, and returned a shy one of his own.

The waves were almost lost in the dimness and the thin mist that was creeping round the bay as the last rays of the sun lost their strength. Sylvia, her husband Tom, Jo, Alex and Tamsin sat in the warmth of the evening outside The Smugglers and sipped their drinks. Alex and Tamsin leant back against the wall of the pub, cokes in their hands, listening to the adults' conversation, but not taking part and not daring to chat to each other.

'I've a confession,' Jo smiled, shaking her head. 'I would never have picked you out as being Sally's sister – put you in a crowd and I'd never have guessed.'

Sylvia laughed, 'I s'pose Sally never said. No, it's a bit of a joke in the family. There's three of us, right, Sally's the blonde, I'm the red-head and Richard's dark – real Spanish-Cornish. We always says that the milkman kept changing,' she laughed quickly, 'before anyone else suggests it!'

'And your parents' colouring? Stop me if I'm being nosy.'

'Nosy nothing. No, Mum was blonde as a girl – real blonde, not like Sally's. And Dad was dark like Richard – they say it can throw up these mixes.'

'Mmm,' Jo nodded, 'All sorts of permutations – fascinating isn't it?'

‘What’s fascinating round here then – apart from you?’ a rich warm voice cut in.

‘Evening Rod,’ Tom said with a small salute of his beer glass.

Rod pulled up a chair and joined them amid smiles of welcome. ‘Well then – aren’t you going to introduce me?’ He smiled across at Jo, she found herself smiling back at a ruggedly handsome face, sun-tanned and framed by chestnut brown wavy hair.

‘Jo, this rogue is a friend of ours, Rod,’ obliged Tom.

‘Hello, Jo,’ Rod said and held out his hand to her. ‘Here on holiday are you?’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ Jo said as she took the proffered hand and shook it, a hand that was warm, dry, hard and extremely masculine.

‘Here to escape London!’ Sylvia said with feeling, ‘You’ve no idea what she’s gone through in the last couple of weeks.’

‘Really?’ Rod turned his eyes on Jo once more. They sparkled as they caught the light from the pub window. They sparkled green like the sun on the sea, and Jo felt herself begin to float. ‘Tell me about it,’ he invited.