

SOME KIND
OF
SYNCHRONY

ANN FOWERAKER

Faith Warren, married mother of two, is a secretary in a newspaper office. It wasn't what she'd hoped for, but her dreams of university and becoming an author were lost long ago. Telling stories to entertain her lifelong friend on their journey to work and back is all that is left, until she tells The Story.

The real trouble began with the minor characters, just unfortunate co-incidences, but when do you stop calling them co-incidences and begin to wonder what the hell is going on – and how it can be stopped

To my good friends who have inspired me – you know who you are

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chapter one - Faith

Faith's first true memory was of Di. It was impossible to place a date on it, or even an age, though it felt like being three. Di had appeared one day at the door, a fairy princess, all light and gold, sun dancing on honey-blond hair, dress alight with sparkling jewels. Only Faith remembered this. Remembered the first time she was really aware of Di, though she knew now that they'd known each other almost from birth. No-one else had recalled it for her, no-one else could have conjured up the peculiar feeling that seeing Di that time created in her young mind. Examining it, turning it over gently to feel the sensation again, Faith, in her thirties, could put a name to it, or rather a collection of names, 'love, awe and envy'.

Not much had changed. Faith was waiting five minutes early in the bitter cold for the car to arrive. Punctual by nature anyway, she always made sure she was on time for Di. Eventually the car turned in at the end of the road, radio blasting so loud that it could be heard above the rattle of the engine as it neared, it slowed, breathing heavily into the gutter. Faith ran round to the passenger door, snatched it open and hurried herself inside. The fan blew cool air ferociously in anticipation of the engine warming up, the radio was snapped off. Di flashed a smile, her eyes already seeking the mirror as she indicated and pulled out.

'Thought it wasn't going to start this morning! I nearly had to go back in and get Paul - well pleased he'd have been!'

'How is he?' Faith asked softly, never sure how much to press Di on Paul's drinking. Sometimes Di seemed to pour all her worries out, other times she seemed to resent the fact that Faith even knew about them, as if they might disappear if no one knew.

'Bloody hung-over - though to hear him you'd think he'd gone down with the latest virus doing the rounds - that it has nothing to do with his drinking.'

'Oh.'

'Well, what's Andy up to today then?'

'Well - he should be taking the kids off to school - then, then I think he was talking of seeing your Paul?' wondering if she had got it right.

'As long as they don't end up in the clubhouse!'

Faith was silent. The club membership had been the cause of their most recent row, the bruises blossoming yellow on her upper arm now. Membership that Andy maintained was necessary for contacts and for keeping him sane, and that she'd suggested should be the first thing to go as things became tighter, with her job being the only one to bring money in.

Di swept the car out on to the motorway.

'You all right?'

'What? Oh yeah - sure,' Faith said, remembering the grip of Andy's hand on her arm as he'd insisted that it wouldn't be long before she could quit her 'poxy little job'. 'Did you watch that new thriller series last night?' she said, dragging her mind away from the pain.

'For what it was worth - I mean were you really 'on the edge of your seat'? You could do better than that for suspense - remember that story you did back in the third year?' Di flicked a glance at Faith.

Faith remembered. She always remembered times like that. Times when she gained Di's whole attention, her acclamation and her admiration. Years ago, when they were teenagers, she'd written stories for Di. Tales starring Di and herself in adventures with their favoured pop heroes of the time. Usually fun romantic stuff - but exciting all the same. Then, after Di had turned away from her at a difficult time, she'd written a story edged with fear and darkness, a story that put Di into a position where she was in dire danger - and to her rescue came - Faith. Faith hadn't meant it to be read at all - but soon after their friendship was renewed, somehow she found herself showing it to Di. To her amazement Di loved it - said it was the best, most tingly-scary thing she'd ever read. Told others that Faith was going to be a writer, a really great writer. And, as always, whatever Di thought and said was soon believed by the others in her school clique - Di had that effect on people. Faith had hugged that idea, that image of herself, right to the end of her schooldays.

'I mean - you could do better now - just sitting here - a really scary one,' Di laughed and tossed her head at the thought. 'A real scary one - like set in a deserted manor house - with a murderer escaped from somewhere nearby, come on.....'

'I'm not sure,' Faith hesitated, knowing that the first scary story had been driven by her own demons.

'Come on - I'm depending on you to cheer me up!' Di said, her mouth pulling a frown.

'Oh, okay. Hang on a mo.'

Di gave her an impish smile and a wink.

Faith thought herself into the creepy manor house, thought around the rooms, the air, the sounds and the reasons for them being there.

'Okay - You have won a prize!' the card said, 'all you have to do is attend this free, special, luxurious weekend for two, to receive your prize worth maybe up to ten thousand pounds from our publicity department. No purchase necessary, a complimentary weekend for all our lucky winners -'

'That's just like those time share cons - isn't it?'

'Don't - I'll lose it else.'

'Sorry - go on.'

'For all our lucky winners.' But who to take? Fay had not yet met the man of her dreams, and the thought of wasting the extra holiday was just too much. The answer came to her in a flash - she'd ask her good friend Di. Immediately with this thought she reached out her beautifully manicured hand and picked up the phone. She pressed in the numbers for Di's phone and in moments heard the confident buzz of the ringing tone

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'Bye, Di - see you later,' Faith said as she clambered out of the car.

'Yeah - ready for the next instalment - it really made the journey fly! God that creepy place is getting to me already.' A horn blared behind her. 'Keep your hair on!' she shouted back.

'Okay - see you.' she indicated and lurched back into the stream of traffic.

It was only a short walk from where Di dropped her off to the newspaper office. The streets were littered with the debris of last night's take-aways, huddling in corners where they had been cast or fluttering in the stiff breeze to wrap around hurrying ankles. Head down, avoiding eye contact, avoiding bodies, she hurried along the slippery pavement towards the refuge of the big, glass, office doors. She only lifted her head and smiled as she heard the whisper of the doors at her back.

'Morning!' she greeted the receptionist as she went on past into the lift. A couple of minutes later she arrived at her desk, where her job was to type up *other* people's words. A sudden rush of resentment flowed through her. She could have done so much better. She could at the very least have been writing her own words - hadn't that been her dream?

'Morning!' she smiled to those around her as she hung her coat up and rubbed her hands together to warm them before getting ready to work. She touched a new glossy leaf on one of her plants, feeling the tentative tug of its freshness on her fingertip, felt the dampness of the soil of another, then sat herself at her desk and composed herself to work. The computer screen offered her a blank page and waited patiently humming to itself. She glanced at the pile of papers before her, at the tapes. Supposedly a 'personal secretary' she belonged to two different bosses. Each had their own preferences for how they liked their work presented, and for how they presented their work to her. The gentlemanly Mr Watson liked to dictate, from the sound of the constant roar in the background his dictation was mostly done while he was in the car. He liked to have the most formal style of letter, in the old-fashioned pattern. Ms Robertson however like a short, modern but friendly style, everything blocked to the left of the page and produced hand-written scrawls which Faith had learned to decipher where others had failed.

She slotted in the tape and hooked on the headphones. Faith always did Mr Watson's tapes first as he finished at the office just after lunch time and she needed to get them signed before he left. Today she was glad to begin with the tapes, working from them would allow her mind travel back from the luxurious but sinister country house hotel she had left it in at the end of their journey.

Five completed letters, neatly printed and awaiting only the signature before being sent away, lay to one side of her computer when she heard Mr Watson's unmistakable old-boy tones.

'Well I suppose if you need a secretary then I can give Mrs Warren to you,' he said. At the sound of her name, Faith listened intently, looking towards the gap where the speaker should appear.

'Does she come gift-wrapped?' a voice mocked lightly. Something about the tone irked her, setting her ready to dislike the speaker before she'd even met him.

'Pardon? Um - she's an excellent personal secretary and should be able to accommodate any letters - er whatever - you may require.'

Faith could hear the usually eloquent Mr Watson stumbling in his speech, something had upset him.

Suddenly he appeared, Faith flicked her eyes to the pile of letters she had waiting for him, ready to give him a pen.

'Faith, my dear,' he coughed lightly. He seldom called her Faith, it was more usually Mrs Warren. 'This, er gentleman is Mr Wren,' he sighed. 'The photographer - with us for a while - you understand - he may need a secretary and I have assigned you to him,' he smiled apologetically.

'No wrapping necessary,' Nick Wren murmured apparently to himself, then, smiling and holding out a hand, 'Pleased to meet you - Nick Wren.' His smile brought light and amusement to a handsomely rugged face, but as his eyes seemed to hold hers longer than necessary, her impression of his arrogance was strengthened. Wary of him she touched his

hand as one would a wild animal, and allowed only the briefest smile to turn her lips as she murmured a greeting.

'I won't make much extra work for you - Faith,' this time allowing his smile to reach his eyes, grey-blue eyes that danced with light and mischief. She felt herself stiffen as if challenged. Instinctively she drew herself up, her spine straightening, her eyes narrowing. 'It's quite all right, thank you - Mr Wren,' she said holding formality as a shield, holding tight to her best received pronunciation. He raised one eyebrow slightly, smiled and with a slight nod of the head turned away. The physical impression was swift, the face, the eyes and the dark hair, darker than her own, burnished ebony in the concave, a deep mahogany on the convex, and cut so that it was not until he turned that the length was apparent, caught in a band at the nape of his neck. As they left she felt the blush of annoyance creep up her neck and warm her cheeks - and she'd allowed Mr Watson to escape without signing his letters.

The general murmur of people leaving their desks to head for the staff canteen drew her attention to the time. With a sigh she turned off her screen and tidied the pile of correspondence that she had been working on. Her arms ached slightly, the muscles feeling weary as if too heavy to hold at keyboard height another moment. Lightly she swivelled round and caught Susie's eye, throwing her a friendly smile - they'd go down to lunch together, catch up on the weekend happenings. At the very least Susie would fill her in on her latest love life, distract her for a little while from her own troubles. Faith was always good at listening. Other people's words and ways lodged in her memory, filling her imagination with other lives, other possibilities, but all she heard stayed there, never passed on to other ears, she was not known to gossip.

How can a salad, merely washed raw bits and a slice of cheese or ham, really cost as much as a fully cooked meal? Faith reflected, as she settled yet again for a cheese salad and a virtuous glow, before taking her tray over to the same window seat that they always sat in. Susie arrived, steaming spaghetti bolognese on her tray, and wriggled her way into the stiff padded seat.

Faith watched the steam curl wispily from the mound of mush and felt slightly nauseated. 'Well! Who's the lucky one then? I wouldn't mind working for Nick Wren, even if he's dropped out of the limelight! I'd do his copy work anytime,' Susie said pursing her lips in a mock provocative manner.

'You know him?' Faith began, yet even as she did so she realised that she had heard of 'Nick Wren'. 'Mr Wren' introduced to her in a provincial city newspaper office had meant little - Nick Wren, now she actually thought about the name, rang a bell like a long forgotten brand.

'Don't know him - just of him. He's won awards, and he did a big series on the stars back when I was at school. Plastered my bedroom wall with his shots. Wild man with a camera!' Yes she remembered now, but she'd been too busy with babies back then to take much notice of such trivia. No wonder he appeared arrogant - and she'd gone and reacted like a prissy little madam. The blush began to make its way up her cheeks again.

'Hey - you're not smitten already - are you? Wouldn't chuck him out of my bed though!' Susie grinned observing the change in Faith's colour.

'You wouldn't chuck any of them out!' Faith laughed, glad to find a foil, 'You were going to tell me about the weekend? Did he come over - or what?'

'Oh - and or what. The works, oh dear, you remember I said he'd sent roses. I mean - roses!. Well on Saturday at seven he turns up, 'nother big bunch of roses in his mitt - and all toggged up - like - like he was going to an opera - to sing like! You won't believe it?' Susie, bubbly blonde hair, dark eyes and full of life waited for Faith to fill in the pauses, the gaps in the script that kept the story going.

'Well - where did you go?'

'The bloody opera!' Susie squealed. 'The bloody opera - and I know b-all about opera - don't I? You should have seen me, nodding and smiling, and pretending I knew all the tunes, oh Faith! He is ever so nice - but I don't know.'

'What's wrong - I wouldn't mind being taken to the opera - not quite the worst thing in the world? Not quite anyhow!'

'It's not that - I just don't know if he fancies me? He gives me a kiss - like - ' she kissed the air gently. 'his hands just resting on my shoulders. What'd you think?'

'What do you do?'

Susie shifted a little uneasily in her seat and spun her fork in the seething mass of spaghetti.

'Well - it doesn't seem right to throw myself around him - I just - ' she dropped the fork and put up her hands, as if fending someone off, 'I just rest my hands on his chest and kiss him back - the same.'

'Oh Susie! You do make me laugh - what would I do without you?' Faith beamed.

'Yeah well - it sounds stupid - but when you're there it seems the only way to be - it's like being in one of those old pictures - Fred Astair - Ginger Rogers things.' Susie was laughing too, 'I keep expecting him to burst into song!'

'Or you - "Taking off his top hat, taking off his white tie, taking off his tails!" oh Susie!'

'Oh - shut up!' she smiled amicably.

*

'If you have a moment, Mr Watson?' Faith stood by the office door with the letters in her hand. At least two of them required his personal signature, the others she could have signed on his behalf. Alun Watson's office always appeared crowded, even when he was the only person in it, and reeked of his pipe tobacco. His desk seemed to be squeezed into one side of the room, four filing cabinets stood back to back making an island on the other side and the top of these, and every section of wall space up to the ceiling, was stacked with box files - black-marbled backs all labelled, his personal news collection.

He looked up and removed his glasses, his thin face momentarily rounded by a smile.

'Come in, yes, yes, I'm sorry about that this morning. Quite, quite offhand manner. Thinks he can,' he unscrewed his fountain pen and signed the letters unread. 'There.'

'I - didn't realise who he was when you introduced him this morning, I mean,'

'Well - difficult thing isn't it?'

'I wondered - what he's doing for Central News?'

'Exactly! Nothing, him being here is just some kind of favour for the family - relative or something of Lord Boulder it seems.'

'Ahh.'

'Ahh, exactly - never mind - photographers shouldn't need a secretary at all - don't think he'll bother you too much. Any problems come and see me again.' He settled his glasses back on his face, the interview at an end. Faith smiled and collected up the letters.

Whatever the reasons for Nick Wren being at Central News it was not by popular arrangement with at least one of its senior editors.

Still curious, she next sought out Ms Robertson for her to sign the letters of the day. Though an identical room in essence, the room she next stepped into could have been a world away, not just the other side of the busy newsroom. Heavily scented by Amy Robertson's favourite perfume the room appeared large and airy in comparison, with pale furniture and neat waist-high shelving adorned with a few beautifully elegant houseplants. Amy looked up from under her heavy auburn fringe as Faith tapped on the open door and stepped in. She laid the letters down at the slight smile and nod she was given.

'I understand *he's* landed you with extra work?' Amy said slowly as she ran her eyes down the sheets of printed words.

'Yes, but it shouldn't be too much - a photographer?'

Amy looked up at her again sharply, her eyes fixed on Faith for a moment.

'Not quite any photographer though, eh?'

'No. I know - I don't know what...'

'What he's doing here in this hole in the back of beyond?'

'No ...'

'I do. Not been in the news much lately - buried himself it seems in the deepest countryside,' she sounded disgusted by the idea, 'A waste - playing at the simple life.'

An idea crept into Faith's mind, perhaps Ms Robertson and Nick Wren already knew each other.

'Have you - met Mr Wren before - in newspaper work?'

Amy smiled, the lips formed an almost perfect vee, the cheeks bulged momentarily, her glance was conspiratorial.

'You could say so - we worked closely on a number of celeb projects back in the eighties. Some of his best work.' she let her gaze rest on the desk for a moment. 'I don't suppose he'll be here long - once he gets back into the swing of things - though it's fun to see how upset Alun's got over it.' She knew she could trust Faith with such comments, that Faith understood how things were between the senior editors of the sister papers, Central Daily and Evening Central.

Faith nodded.

'He's gone for today, I suppose. I'd imagine that Alun made sure he didn't stay until I arrived, but I'll catch him later - review old times.' Amy smiled again as she offered the signed letters back to Faith.

Faith shivered. The street lights shone sickly yellow in the thin fog that clouded the tops of the buildings and slid almost down to street level. A stream of silver reflections from the passing cars dazzled as she peered along the road. She hated waiting to be picked up here, so close to the tug of the vehicles as they swept past. She stood with her back to a post box, clinging to its solidity as the other commuters flowed along the greasy pavement. At last, one car flashed its lights and pulled in. Faith climbed in quickly, the car moving away before she had a chance to fix her belt.

'You'll never guess,' Di said, her voice laden with pleasure, her eyes fixed on the road as she drove furiously through the rush hour traffic.

'What?'

'I've got it! Personal secretary to the M.D.! God did I work for it! It's a rise – and it's a cinch of a job,'

'Great - '

'All I've got to do is keep at arm's length from the creep!'

'Oh..'

'Oh, my arse! Faith, sometimes you sound like you come from a different world,' Di said passing her a glance as they took up their station in the lines of motorway traffic.

'Well - that's me.'

'And I love you for it!'

'I've got a new boss too.'

'Really - who's gone?'

'No, an extra. Nick Wren the photographer - have you heard of him?'

'Give me a minute - let me think.' she looked straight ahead at the windscreen, features at rest for a moment, 'Glossy mags stuff - back in, ohh, in the eighties? Film stars – pop stars that sort of thing. Young, well back then, and *very* good looking, almost as famous as those he shot. Am I right?' she flashed a smile at Faith, knowing she was right.

'Your memory! I didn't even twig who he was - not till later.'

'If I recall he had a bit of a reputation - better not let Andy know - he'll be jealous.'

Faith shot Di a sharp glance - but she was only being her usual jokey self.

'He's a bit of an arrogant bastard, if you ask me!' Faith said trying to put herself back in the real world.

'Is that Andy or Nick Wren?'

'Oh, Di!'

'Oh Faith! Hey what about our story then?'

Faith had known that Di would be expecting the next part of the Murder at the Manor story, and she had it ready, but it hadn't inspired her much, galloping to a plausible if dramatic conclusion. The idea was too tired - too well used. However, there was another thriller-style idea building in her mind: an idea that felt as if it were really her own, with no tired ancestry. If she let it develop, if she pushed aside all the mundane things, perhaps she could tell Di that story next. It would be something altogether bigger, a story worth telling.

chapter two – Di

The creep, or ‘The Leech’, as she thought of him, Mr Arnold Lechwood would be getting the best personal secretary he had ever had, Di thought, though a secretary was all he was getting if she could help it. The rise was important, it would mean that they would have enough to pay their mortgage and still be able to eat. If, and this was the big IF, if Paul would lay off the drink. He was costing her more in whisky than in groceries, and it was making her sick. Paul, her Paul. She’d fallen for him the first time they met, tall dark and handsome: everything that she’d been looking for. He was ready to work hard and, more to the point, had the right contacts to make the building boom work for him.

Together they’d made a brilliant team. Her accountancy and office skills turned a one-man-and-his-dog operation into a tidy little building firm. They weren’t into building high-rises or anything grand - just plenty of neat houses for the new first-time buyers, the new to ownership class of people, her class of people - but the punters were never to know that. Though never quite as well spoken as Faith nevertheless she put on a good show, besides, she could get away with things that little Faith couldn’t. Dear Faith, dear little Faith, always such a dark sweet natured girl. Di knew there were times when she had turned against Faith, provoked her, just to find out what would happen, what went on behind those large dark eyes. Yet she could never leave her for long.

And of course where Di and Paul went, Faith and Andy followed. Andy, as Paul’s right-hand man, had fallen as hard as the house prices. The men consoled each other - Di didn’t think that was the best way for her Paul - he needed to be fighting, on his own, getting it all back together. She was holding the world together waiting for him to be ready - her world, all she’d, they’d, worked for. And she wasn’t going to let it go.

‘Paul? Paul?’ The house, cold and feeling damp told her to expect no answer. ‘Damn!’ she’d have sooner found him glued to the television than out, for out usually meant at the club house, putting the drinks on the slate. For the sake of show - for never letting others know how bad things really were, she’d made sure the slate was paid at the end of each month - up until now. Now she was going to have to do some really hard thinking, and some hard talking. It was time. It had to be time.

There was one thing about being brought up where there was little enough to go round - you knew how to make do when the hard times came round again. She sliced a small onion into a glass casserole dish, dabbed some marg on it and set it to soften in the microwave. Quickly, she peeled carrots, potatoes and swede, and chopped them roughly. Stirring a spoonful of flour into the softened onions she made a coarse roux, then blended in a can of tinned tomatoes and added the other chopped veg. She browned the small quantity of diced chicken that she’d bought and added that to the casserole and put it back in the microwave to cook while she went upstairs to shower. When she came down it was all cooked thorough. Some fat dumplings, livened up with a few herbs, and their meal would be complete and there would be enough to go in the freezer for another day too. Not quite what they’d been used to, at the peak of the business they’d eaten out more nights than they’d stayed in. It was as if it was

going to go on forever. She sometimes had the nagging doubts, sometimes she urged Paul to salt away some of the largesse, savings for a rainy day. But the rain was never going to come, he said, and any money that was not ploughed back into the business, buying other plots of land that he 'just happened to know might be released as building land' was theirs to live well on. By selling up everything and taking out a mortgage on the house they'd once owned outright they'd been able to keep the creditors at bay. There was nothing else left: not a single plot of land; not a cement mixer; not a wheelbarrow - just her and Paul and their home on mortgage - and she wasn't going to let that go.

The door banged shut. She heard him hang his coat on the end of the banister, kick off his shoes, wander into the sitting room, then return. The door to the kitchen opened.

'This place is bloody cold.'

'There didn't seem much point in turning on the heating just for a couple of hours - the Calor's on in here, close the door.'

He looked at his hand still holding the door handle, released it and stepping inside he leant against the door until it closed.

'Dinner's ready.'

'What is it?'

'Chicken casserole.'

'Stew again?'

'Don't! It's a meal - it's good food - it's - '

'Don't give me a lecture.'

Di bit her tongue, let her heart beat five times, took a slow breath. 'I've got some good news - ' He sat down at the kitchen bar, looked at her, flicked the long hair back from his forehead in his usual manner. He was still a very handsome man, eyes the colour of dark honey, thick chestnut hair, a good body. Just looking at him made her fall for him all over again, stirred her body from its weariness.

'I've got that promotion I was after.'

His eyes flickered, slid away from hers. 'Good, well done,' the tone all wrong.

Di's heart squeezed, disappointment flooded through her. She got up abruptly, ladled the casserole out into large bowls, almost banged them down before them.

'Well, we've got to eat,' she said. He hung his head slightly, not looking at her anymore. He picked up a fork and poked it about in the mass of vegetables. He ate a piece. Di sat and began to eat her own, the hot lumps searing her throat, tight as it was with anxiety.

He pushed his bowl away - still half full.

'What?'

'Not too hungry.'

'But you must be!'

'Had a bite at the club - ' he ducked his head as if he expected her to throw something.

'At the bloody club - oh Paul - why? It costs the earth for nothing there!'

'We all did - okay? I can't stand there and say - "Oh no, I can't eat with you, I've got to watch the fucking pennies." '

'You didn't have to stay! You didn't have to be there at all - you could - you could have made something up. An appointment. - anything! Anything would be bloody better than hanging around the clubhouse all day. How often did you do that when you were in work? Hardly ever! Just being there singles you out as a loser - they all know! There's no real point in belonging! We never really did belong there!'

'You fucking never belonged there you mean. Never even been in a restaurant that didn't dish up fish and chips before you went with me. You forget. You drag me down to your level every time. It was *my* fucking capital that got my business off the ground and where did I get that from, not from some council house in a poxy little village - from my inheritance - from Grandpa's house that he left *me!*'

'Yes, yes but look - ' she began, but stopped. She had been going to remind him of how things were before she came along - and she knew that would only lead to a deeper more dangerous row. Time to play the peacemaker - he was tired, probably a little worse the wear from drink. 'Look, love, we'll be all right. We'll keep the house, something will turn up - some opportunity to get business back on the road.' she added gently.

'Yeah, yeah. I'm - I don't know why I said that - I'm tired - tired of it all,' sounding too weary to believe her, 'I'm off to bed, okay?'

'Okay,' she said softly. He'd be asleep again when she'd finished clearing up and putting the house to rights. Did she really care? Thank God they'd not had children. What must it be like for Faith? Faith and Andy's saving grace had to be the minuscule mortgage they had on their tiny place, Faith's salary couldn't keep them all otherwise, and Andy was about as useful around the place as Paul even if his whisky consumption was much lower. Would she tell Faith about this latest row? Could she? Would Faith feel Paul's disdain in the telling? After all they'd grown up as next door neighbours, in identical houses in a row of eight. She looked at the washing up, turned and ran a bowl of hot water, she wouldn't use the dishwasher - there was hot water in the tank and the electricity bills were high enough already. She stood watching the bubbles wink and break, not seeing but remembering.

She'd loved to go and play at Faith's house, to escape the torment and row of her three brothers. Faith's mum was so quiet and there was plenty of room. Faith was an only child, there was some reason why they couldn't have any more. Some reason that dropped behind a whisper whenever it was spoken of. A 'woman's problem' of some kind. As she grew into her teens she understood more, but never heard the precise details of the problem, but she did take in the other shadow in Faith's family. They said it was the disappointment - her father had desperately wanted a boy - and had got a girl, and no second chances. He'd fathered a boy elsewhere, and left Faith's mum to go and live with the mother of his son when Faith was just thirteen. Suddenly it was as if Faith's mum had caught the plague. People only talked about her in hushed tones, they avoided her, no one knew what to say. There was a lot of 'who knows what goes on between man and wife' and 'it takes two to break a marriage' and 'poor little Faith' yet they kept their distance in case it was catching. Even Di had abandoned Faith for a time - shunning her as seemed to be expected by her parents and peers. But it didn't last long - none of it. Faith's mother never seemed to get over it - drifting through life, keeping

house, working at the village shop, looking after Faith - though everyone else soon forgot the scandal.

Scandal? An everyday event now - even in the area that they'd grown up in some now didn't bother getting married in the first place. And here, in the leafy new suburbs? Here it was a time when all the other wives, and the recent divorcées, rallied round to keep everything shipshape for the latest casualty, handing out tips on how to get the most, the best deal, from the split. She was right. They didn't belong. And it didn't matter how much Paul talked of 'his inheritance', his home conditions were poorer than hers, a touch of 'fur coat and no knickers' as her mother had put it. His family 'owned' their home, one in a terrace near the centre of town, but owed more than they'd paid off. His mother liked to 'eat out'; Di suspected that she merely couldn't cook. His father worked for the County Council, an official of some pomposity, and made much of his position and his membership of the local Conservative Association. There was something in that. The 'connections' that Paul had come through that clique - those in the know with their fists on the rubber stamp.

The water was almost cold, the dishes looked up at her through the scummy mess that had floated free. Di shook herself and whisked the scourer around, dried the dishes and cleaned the table quickly. 'Hang the ironing' she thought, if she headed off to bed now Paul might still be awake, the thought brought a smile to her lips. Making up after a row was often the best - they both tried a little harder.

Di hummed happily to herself as she made coffee and poured herself a bowl of Special K. No frowning at the skinny woman on the box today. Last night she'd been right to forget the ironing. She'd massaged Paul's ego back into shape, and a little more! The booze had been little enough and taken early enough before so as to shake loose some of his little inhibitions and yet not interfere with performance. He'd even smiled this morning, and suggested she might not want to get up just yet. Sadly she had to - but then, she told him, there was always tonight.

She checked her hair in the mirror, called out that she was leaving and plunged out into a frost-bitten morning. Even the garage door seemed frozen closed. Groaning, it gave and she dived into the gloom, glad to get out of the wind.

'Start, damn you,' she muttered as the engine whined and whined. Suddenly it caught, giving a jolt and shudder as it did so. She pumped her foot a few times on the accelerator, the exhaust fumes billowing off the back wall and coiling round the sides of the car. Slowly she pulled forward, stopped, went back out into the icy wind to close the door, daring the engine to stop.

She rounded the corner. Faith was not in sight. She rubbed harder at the screen to enlarge the clear patch. No Faith? Then again there had to be a wind-chill factor of about minus ten degrees - she wouldn't have hung about herself - though she hadn't expected Faith not to be there. Level with Faith's house she pressed the horn a couple of times, short bursts. She rubbed the side window. The light was on in the front room, showing as a wedge near the top where the curtains were not quite pulled tight. A light appeared in the hall - went out - the front door opening. Faith appeared, bundled up in her old sheepskin coat, a tasselled

triangular scarf wrapped around her neck, across her face. She ran to the car, dragged open the door, slammed it shut, fumbled with her seat belt.

'Okay?'

'Yes - fine - sorry,' Faith's automatic answer came muffled by the scarf as she cupped one hand to her neck. Di paused a moment then put the car into gear and pulled away. Di, catching the movement out of the corner of her eye, noticed Faith turn towards her, as if about to say something. She waited - then Faith's face turned away again.

'Do you ever go to the club nowadays?' Di asked suddenly, as much to start the chatter going as anything.

Faith laughed, it came out hard and cynical. Di looked at her old friend again - this was not usual - Faith had the only laugh she had ever thought of as being musical, a laugh that rose and fell like the sound of wind chimes.

'Scarcely, it's hard to both be out.'

'Ah - I forgot. It's just - well we had this row about the club. Paul keeps running up bills there - it's all I can do to clear them. I'm getting sick of it, and oh God, Faith - he gets so, so defensive when I suggest we drop membership - how do you manage?'

'You don't know? You really don't know? Andy - well he *insists* he stays a member - but I think you'll find most of his drinks go on Paul's tab, I'm sorry, I've tried,' she rubbed her neck again, like a nervous tic.

'What?' Di took her eyes off the road to look at Faith for a moment. 'What - you mean I'm slogging my guts out and waving my arse around The Leech so Andy can drink with Paul? Oh come on!'

'Di. It's not me. Paul - Andy says - Paul feels 'responsible', feels he owes Andy something. I've tried - I have - there's only so much I ...'

'Wait till I see that wretch. Bloody hell - it's bad enough footing his bills, let alone,' her voice trailed off. Both women stared out of the front windscreen, concentrating on the traffic ahead, around them. The silence filled the car like a fog coming down, blinding their thoughts to further conversation. Within the fog a message tapped itself out on Di's subconscious, a worry that nagged at her but would not become clear. She felt it was something to do with Faith, yet even to think of Faith clouded everything again with Andy and Paul and her own anger.

chapter three – Faith

Her neck was stiff this morning; the after effect of a letter from the school.

‘What’s this?’ she’d asked Andy, opening the letter that Jilly had given her just before going to bed.

‘Can’t guess - an envelope?’ he raised a slack-faced smile from his position on the sofa, half dozing, half watching a quiz show.

‘No - it’s a letter from school,’ she scanned the contents, ran her eyes back over the lines again.

‘Oh - Andy!’

‘What?’

‘What? You may well say ‘what’. The children were late to school every day last week! Every day! What the hell are you doing? They’re all ready to go when I leave for work - all ready.’

‘Yeah - well. It doesn’t matter- it’s only primary.’

‘It matters! It gives them a - a bad reputation with the school.’

‘So send them a letter- an excuse.’

‘And what do I say next week then?’

‘Faith, have faith,’ he’d said, standing. ‘Have faith,’ he gave a short laugh at his own joke, resting his hands on her shoulders, looking down on her. A gentle squeeze, reminiscent of their first days. Days when he’d squeeze her shoulders then, slipping his hands under her arms, he’d pick her up, bringing her up to his height to kiss her. But not this time. ‘Faith - don’t fuss! I can’t stand it.’ a little shake, ‘I - can’t stand it.’ a harder shake. She tried to twist from his grip - he held tighter, his breath, rank with drink, came faster, his eyes fixed somewhere just beyond her. She felt sick - her heart thumping, but he kept shaking her like a dog with a rat. It was all she could do to stand, her mind a whirl, a blank of nausea. He stopped, clasped her to his chest, held her head there, his heart thumping in her ear, the sound of his breath rasping through her frame. And then he was sobbing, great gulps, his fingers stroking her hair. She stood, dizzy, scared. Stood still, waiting. Suddenly he dropped his hands and stepped away, turned and walked away, leaving her to sink to the floor.

This morning, for the first time ever she’d wanted to talk to Di. She’d wanted to say - ‘it’s getting too much, I can’t take much more, help me’ - but it was hard, and then Di was not ‘at home’ to anyone else’s troubles, and so she’d kept the words inside. She’d been late because she wanted to make sure Andy was at least awake and prepared to take the children to school, and that had been difficult. She’d stood by the bedroom door daring herself to open it for at least five minutes. And when she did, it was as if he remembered nothing - as if he’d never noticed that he’d slept alone.

‘All right?’ he’d mumbled.

‘Yes,’ she’d stared across at him, his large frame creating a vast mountain range from the duvet, ‘Just - the children are all ready for school, just don’t forget. Bye.’ and she’d turned and fled. In the kitchen she’d spoken to Jilly, quickly, quietly. ‘Don’t make a row, but make sure Daddy knows when it’s half past eight, okay? Okay?’ and she’d hugged and kissed the dark-eyed child, and kissed the blond top of Jon’s head, and run for the door - late.

The silence would not be broken. It was the longest journey into work that Faith had ever endured, and the more she held her head still, the more her neck seemed to ache. The more she tried to find something to say, the more her mind was filled with all those things that it was better not to say at the moment.

'Bye, see you - ' she said, holding the door a moment as she climbed out, but was cut off by the tug of the door in her hand as Di edged the car forward. 'Bye.' she shoved the door hard, making it bang shut, and stepped sharply out of the way of the wheels. For a moment she watched the rear lights weave their way into the pattern of the traffic, wondered how she'd broken the fabric of their friendship yet again, without meaning to. The cold wind that sliced into her ankles brought her round and she turned quickly to head for the office, stepping right into the path of a man.

'Sorry! Sorry!' she said quickly and hurried off. It was dangerous to stop, to say more, to look. A few steps and she felt a hand on her arm. A melt of fear ran through her.

'Mrs Warren? Faith?'

She paused, half turned, dared to look. Nick Wren.

'Are you okay? Sorry I barged into you - I wasn't paying attention,' he said, his voice rich with concern.

She sighed. 'Fine,' her hand touched her neck. 'Fine - I - rushing for work.'

'Come on then - we'll brave it together,' he said, opening his eyes wide a moment, allowing a sparkle of amusement to light them up. Faith found a smile touch her mind, despite herself.

It was as if his body shielded her from the wind, she felt warmer, safer. They walked side by side slower than she usually walked alone. At the door he allowed her to go through first, she turned to him as the doors closed, loosening her scarf from her neck as she did so.

'Thank you.' she smiled.

'Pleasure's all mine,' he said, and turned his hand to indicate the lifts, 'going up?'

She nodded. They stepped over to the lifts together.

'Have you worked here long?'

'Just the last four years - since my youngest started school.'

'Children? What have you got?'

'Just the two, Jilly, she's nine now and Jon - he's nearly eight,'

'Then you must have had them young.'

Faith blushed, annoyed with herself that she'd liked what she'd heard. 'We've been married twelve years!' she said sharply.

He just smiled - a warm, understanding smile; a smile that transformed his face. And the lift stopped, the doors gasped open and let the noise and bustle of the busy room come in.

'Thank you.' Faith said automatically.

'See you later,' he said softly.

Faith found it hard to concentrate on her work. The ache in her neck kept reminding her of Andy, and the memory hurt. What had happened between them? They had always been the odd couple in the foursome, but still a pair. Di and Paul - well matched, tall and beautiful, the

perfect couple - and Andy and Faith. Andy, Paul's best friend from the blood-brother-bonding days of their childhood, had grown to be his right-hand man. Evenings, when they'd all get together and the boys would drink a few over the top and get to reminiscing, their 'do you remember' stories were full of the type of pranks and adventures that only boys seem to delight in, semi-cruel in a childishly savage way, the prototype boys for 'the Lord of the Flies'. And Faith knew just who would be the leader, and who would follow, as they tormented the life out of a victim. There was something frightening about the hidden power of a natural leader, about the charisma that meant that their ideas always sounded exciting, daring and possible. What frightened her most was how much she wanted to be part of it, as if she knew deep within her that if she were not part of it all, then she would be in danger, the danger of becoming the victim.

She'd revelled in their foursome, part of the power-block, part of the beautiful couple. Where Paul and Di were so well matched, and so in love, Andy was scraping the ceiling at six foot three and at least fourteen stone, and there was she, a foot shorter and, in those days, just under eight stone. He always called her 'little' Faith, and for a long time they were just together because Di and Paul were together. He'd put his arm around her shoulder as they all walked together, cuddle her up to him when Di cuddled up to Paul. Kiss her, his hands squeezing and rubbing her breasts too firmly, in the back of the car while Paul and Di said good-night in the front. Somewhere along the line they became a twosome, recognised in their own right. And was it love or relief she felt when he pressed her in to 'letting' him? She knew it would happen. They had Paul's parents' house all to themselves for the weekend, a small party was arranged for the Saturday night, a carefully selected group of Paul's choosing - he had no need to throw wide the doors to cultivate acquaintances - and Faith and Di were to stay the night. Faith hadn't wanted to at first, hadn't wanted to leave her mother all alone, hadn't wanted to lie to her, but Di said she needed Faith. Di called on her friendship - and she stayed the night.

She was terrified. Not so much at the idea of having sex - she knew the facts, and with Di's help was prepared - no, she was irrationally scared that Andy might crush her, stop her breathing with his sheer bulk. Sometimes, when he held her with her face pressed against his chest, she felt as if she would suffocate, it was part of that, she supposed. When it happened, he was remarkably light on her, remarkably careful - as if she might just break if he wasn't. She believed then that he must love her; that she was in love with him. What had happened between them that he no longer treated her with such care?

Once she'd finished the work for Alun Watson she took the sheets over to his cramped office. The door ajar she tapped and stepped in. Alun looked up and removed his glasses, Faith presented him with his letters.

'And there are a number of queries that need you attention, here and here,' she added, her tone confident and crisp, laying down two pieces of incoming mail that she was unable to deal with alone.

'Fine, fine.'

'I have something for you, Faith.'

Faith jumped, she had not noticed Nick lounging against the wall behind her, box file in hand. 'Um - yes. If you could - um.' she swallowed. 'If you bring it across to my desk, I'll do the work as soon as possible.'

'Fine, fine.' he said, his words a mimicry of Alun's.

Faith looked from him to Alun. The thin man forced the cap back on his fountain pen firmly and laid it down slowly.

'Thank you, Mrs Warren,' he said carefully. She collected the papers and left, seconds later the door to the office banged shut, the two men still within.

Faith felt a sudden weight on the back of her swivelchair, causing it to turn slightly under her.

'I'm sorry,' Nick said, close to her ear, then turned and perched on the corner of her desk, looking down at her. 'I'm afraid your Mr Watson's pomposity brings out the worst in me. I hope I didn't embarrass you? Let me make amends - buy you lunch?'

Faith let out an involuntary huff and looked down at her hands poised over the keyboard. Something about his obvious self-assurance made her want to hit him - it was as if he thought he could have whatever he liked just because he was 'someone' once. 'Once' - she grasped the idea and turned her face back to his.

'I always lunch with a *friend*, Mr Wren, thank you.' she said politely, coldly. What she was not prepared for was the look that flitted across his face. She might as well have hit him. It was the look of an often-beaten child, a wincing at pain that is covered swiftly by bravado, in case another beating is given for being afraid. His eyes, usually alight with amusement, became momentarily dull, as if seeing nothing before him. All in a fleeting second - gone so swiftly that by the time the pain had registered and she tried to soften her words he had stood and walked away.

She looked at the words on the screen. They jumbled themselves, making nonsense. She knew she'd hurt him - yet couldn't understand where the power of the weapon came from. Was he just so used to being accepted that he was annoyed by being turned down? And that was as silly as him asking her to lunch in the first place.

'Lunch, Faith?'

Susie stood almost where Nick Wren had been, looking at Faith with concern.

'What? Oh! Yes - I'll just save,' she flicked the cursor to the save icon and blanked the screen. She smiled up at Susie and pushed her chair back. As she stood the ache in her shoulders reasserted itself - she moved them forward and back tentatively.

Susie watched her. 'It's tension. Makes you tighten up all the back and neck muscles,' she said cheerfully as they walked towards the canteen. 'Not that I'd mind that sort of tension,' she smiled quickly at Faith. 'Did I really hear you turn down lunch with that gorgeous hunk of man - to lunch with *me*?'

'Yes - I suppose you did. And I suppose you're right - there is something ..' Faith paused, lost for a moment, standing before the salad selection, seeing only Nick Wren's face. 'Yes,' she said brightly, turning to Susie. 'He is quite attractive - isn't he?'

'Oh yeah – like you've only just noticed!' Susie laughed as they paid up and headed for their table. But what Faith had only just noticed was that she could see his face in her mind; that somehow she'd held it there, and the realisation strangely moved her.

'At last!' Amy Robertson sighed extravagantly when Faith brought her letters in to sign. Faith glanced at her watch. Not late, earlier than usual if anything.

'There's only one letter that I think you need to reply to, I've put that on the top. The others are pretty standard.' she said tentatively.

'Yes, I'm sure.' Amy scanned the letter and put it to one side. She scanned each of her own drafted letters and signed them, not once looking up. 'There, thank you.' she said briskly, leaving them lying on the desktop. Faith began to gather together the letters. 'I've missed Mr Wren again I see - unlike some?'

'Sorry?'

'I wasn't a gossip columnist for nothing, you know. Always have contacts, dear. I understand you arrived together - most friendly.'

Faith blushed. She hated her traitorous face - the way it offered everyone an insight into her feelings of anger or embarrassment.

'And invited to lunch - indeed?'

'And turned down,' Faith said, straightening her shoulders until they hurt. 'Anything else, Ms Robertson?'

'No - but perhaps when you see him again you'll let him know I'll be glad to see him. No - forget that - say I enquired after his health.'

'Health?'

'Yes, dear. That'll be enough,' she said, looking back at the work on her desk, dismissing Faith from her presence.

The whole atmosphere was wrong. How could one man upset the working atmosphere of the place in two days? She returned to her desk with the horribly creepy feeling of others watching her. Everyone knew how fast and maliciously the office gossip could travel. It really didn't take much - and there had been at least one nasty incident when a jealous husband had been the eventual recipient of the tittle-tattle. A rumour with a bedrock of truth as it happened; it split families and ruined chances of promotion where the whole thing might have blown over in a couple of months without the rumour machine. And here she was - a subject - spoken of - so quickly, on so little, with no basis at all. How dangerous, how stupidly, seriously dangerous, it was.