

## COW KILLER

That sodding dog. It had barked since they pulled up, before they even squeezed the van doors closed. It barked as they climbed the stairs, as they cat-crept along the landing, as they inched towards the door. How did it know?

They line up either side. Sweat trickles down under her helmet into her eye. The door is plywood, painted Babybel red, recently kicked-in and patched. Web-cracked wired glass supplies illumination. The knocker is in the shape of a fish and is deadened with blu-tack. She confirms the top screw hasn't fallen out of the number nine to turn it into a number six. She's not that stupid. At her feet stands an empty milk bottle. Christ, who has a milkman these days.

The barks frantic now, deep-chested, a metallic note to them, like an anvil struck with a toffee hammer. It'll have tortilla-chip ears, be brick jawed, hip high and hackled, have fur the colour of its own turds, the mandatory studded collar. Named Titan or Bullet or Bastard. What was the name of the hellhound? The Old Man had it on album cover. Anybody got a sausage to shove through the letter box? Along the landing a woman comes out in a pink dressing gown and pink foam rollers and no teeth. She waves her back inside, and the woman gives her the finger.

She's not going in first. Sod that. Lead from the front, my arse. Her goggles are steaming up. Ray looks at her. He'll have an eyebrow raised. She nods, the dog silent now, all twitching nostrils and cocked head, taut and teeth ready. Ray nudges Craig. Craig swings the Persuader.

The gondola swing, illegal now, Tony clubbed, lying still, her on the return journey. He never saw it coming.

Cerberus. Thank Christ for that.

[Break]

‘Jesus Christ. That fucking dog.’ Randall leans up on one elbow, makes a fist and rubs crud out of his eye. ‘Shut the fuck up!’ You get an attack dog and it barks at next door’s cockatiel, bluebottles head-butting the window, the fridge clicking on.

Teresa bursts in. ‘Get your hand off your cock and shut that bloody dog up. I’ve been on nights. I’m not putting up with that again all day.’ She turns, ‘It terrifies the bloody life out of me.’

‘Rocco! Rocco! Come get your chew. Come on, boy. Where’s your chew. Werzzit.’ Rocco ignores him, *Yak Snacks* low on the snackometer with human flesh pending.

Randall rolls off the mattress and pulls on yesterday’s boxers, ‘Rocco?’ Randall squints round the bedroom door. Were it not for an ear twitch Rocco could be stuffed. Randall sees the shadows, hears the crackle of a radio. Randall says, ‘Oh Fuck.’

He grabs the plastic bag from under the mattress and reaches the bathroom just as the door comes in. The bathroom door is locked, his mum in there after the night shift. He thumps on it. ‘Ma, let me in. It’s the police!’

‘What? I’m in mid-shit. I can’t shove it back in.’

The sound of repaired plywood splintering. ‘Police!’

Randall kicks open the bathroom door, Christ what a stink, Teresa rising, pulling her pants up, staring him out. Her eyes fall onto the bag. ‘You stupid ... I’ll see to you later.’ She storms into the hall. ‘I’ll hold them. You get shot.’

Randall looks into the bowl. He turns away and wretches and pulls the handle. A reflex. He presses the back of his hand to his forehead, ‘You idiot.’ The stuff swirls around and tumbles and folds and remains. Fucking council. Water dribbles back into the cistern. Grandad could fill it quicker. ‘Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Think.’

Crush it and rinse it down the sink. Take too long. Out the window and claim it Joey's next door. *He* wouldn't believe it. He hops from foot to foot, like when he was a kid and Dad was due home. From the hall, bumps and thuds and swearing as Teresa grapples with the first one. 'Don't you dare touch my boy.'

The back door crashes in. It clubs him. Mules. They do it all the time. That's how they get it through security. I mean, how bad could it be?

[break]

*A poacher's moon, the colour of a new penny, silhouettes the church spire. Bet you don't get poachers around here anymore. Who the hell knows how to gut a pheasant. The day's heat rises from the road, a mist from the river.*

*She'll be here. Waiting.*

*She hears the footsteps and looks up. She's chewing, always chewing. I don't care.*

*There you are, Gorgeous. No, stay, please. You know I'm always gentle. Come closer. Shush. There's no need to make a noise. She huffs and approaches.*

*I've got something special for you tonight, girl. Yes, that's better. Don't be shy. You have such beautiful eyes. Look at you, all ready for your big day. I do love your new coat.*

*She nods. She feels the hand caress her neck and stroke her forehead, tug an ear. She trembles.*

*Hold still. Look what I've got for you.*

*She feels the cold hard ring pressed to her forehead, but she feels no fear.*

[break]

'Shut the door.'

She shuts the door. The door is glass. The walls are glass. They all pretend they are not watching, apart from Ray, who mugs a grin and gives her a sarcastic thumbs up. He makes her wait, tapping out an urgent memo. Che cazzo sei. He moves the cursor across the screen to click save and doesn't look up. 'Let's hear it.'

'Bad intel.'

'Bad Intel.'

'Bad intel. Misinformation. Duff Gen. False news. Call it what you like, Guv. We thought it was kosher.' Kosher? For Christ's sake.

'Kosher? Who the hell do you think you are, Sergeant, Jack Regan?'

'Who?' She searches her brain. The brain returns a red leather jacket and fawn flares and dolly birds. 'No Guv.'

'Guv ... Guv ...' He picks up a pencil and twiddles it. On the desk is a pencil sharpener with a cranked handle. There's a joke. Something about a cat's arse. 'No, Sergeant. I think not. After today's fiasco, it will be Sir. Understood?'

'Yes sir.' His fat fingers snap the pencil. Jesus, is that the best you can do, Pete. Come on. Let's have it.

'Let me lay it out for you, Sergeant.' His voice rises. Could be an octave, but she knows bugger-all about music, except how to dance to it, maybe. 'I'm down two officers, one with a dislocated shoulder, one with a crushed testicle. Craig put his back out with the Persuader. He's not MOE trained. Did you know that?' Might have. MOE? Why not BR, battering ram? She felt the back

of her head and bald spot where Teresa had grabbed that badly stowed lock of hair. Christ that hurt. Ray had picked it up and said, This looks like yours.

'I've already got two off with Covid and one off with monkey pox. I've got a respected midwife, a pillar of the community, threatening to sue for police brutality. I've got a family pet with a broken collar bone, assaulted with the Persuader. They say they might have to put it down.'

Yes. She hadn't seen that coming. A corgi-Rottweiler cross? It had corgi legs anyway. She pictured them doing it, and smiled. Dogs have collar bones.

He shrieked now. 'Wipe that fucking smirk of your face, Sergeant. I'll bust you down so fast to constable you won't know what's hit you.' Bust? Jesus. No you won't, Pete. I wiped the snot off your face when we found that girl.

'To cap it all, the absolute fucking red cherry on the cake,' icing, isn't it? 'We have a minor in hospital with a perforated rectum. He might never shit normally again. He might have to wear a bag. He'd only bought the stuff to try. It's his first offence, for Christ's sake.' Yep, looked like he'd rammed it up with the loofah. Randall. Nice one, Teresa. 'And all you can say, sergeant, is "Bad intel."' "

'That's how it was, sir. Our source is usually reliable. What can I say. Shit happens.' At least we filled in the Risk Assessment.

'Unfortunately for young Randall, henceforth a little too often.' Not bad Pete. Not bad, for you.

Pete, the purple in his face subsiding, gets up and walks to the window. He clasps his hands behind his back and rocks on his toes and heels like he's seen somebody do on the telly and stares out. He overbalances and has to put a foot out. He has taken to fastening his belt around his middle, a decision that divides his belly into two bulges. How could she. What was she thinking. The Old Man had it right. Under the belly and let it hang over and be done with it. She closes her eyes to change the view. No need to stop at the supermarket

on the way home. Luca said he'd get something in. How lucky was she. Petrol though. She needs petrol.

'What am I going to do with you, Becs?' She opens her eyes. He has adjusted his eyebrows to form a shallow wigwam. He is squeezing the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. The beset but patient gaffer now, surrounded by imbeciles. 'What am I going to do with you.' On the repetition he hits the am. Release the hounds? Show her the shark tank? 'You are a good officer, but you need to get your shit together.' Another he's got off the telly. It's all shit these days, isn't it. 'I know things have been rough at home ...'

'Don't. Don't you dare bring that into it, Pete. I'm as professional as ever I was.'

'You telling me you haven't let things slide? Because I see different.' He turns and jabs a forefinger. 'You need to know Becs. I'm under pressure, from on high.' Heat from above? 'They've never liked your attitude. Now they say, not me you understand, they say you are becoming an embarrassment. They want you out, back in uniform. Could be they want you out altogether.'

She dropped her head and stifled a laugh. Pay-back. You're off the case, officer. Take a vacation. Go fishing.

'But I've fought for you Becs. I really have. After all, I owe you one.'

Not half you do.

*[Break]*

First it was the Railway Caf, greasy spoons de rigueur. Then it was Sam's Diner. Now it's the Rendezvous and does paninis. Saveloy and chips and mushy peas would go down nice. You can still get salt, but no vinegar or mushy peas, so it'd have to be a Bratwurst and fries. Anyway the peas would come in a little pot and be the temperature of a pyroclastic flow.

'I still can't believe that dog,' said Ray.

'I was expecting it to rip my throat out.'

'It'd need a stepladder and a bung up.'

'Yeah, but he'd got Teresa. You don't need an attack dog when you've got a Teresa.'

'She's some unit.'

'You can't say that, Ray. Didn't you do the course? That's fat-shaming.'

'Bet the junior exec at McDonald's got a massive bonus for that one.'

A waitress came over and said to Monet's lilies, 'Would you guys like drinks?' and they ordered.

Ray sipped his espresso, what he called an expresso. He said, 'Anyway, she's mainly muscle.'

She broke the heart of her cappuccino. 'Who is?'

'Teresa. She used to throw the javelin for the county.'

That explains the carnage. Lucky she didn't have one handy. She'd have kebabbed them for sure. 'Must have had a hell of a grunt on her.' In her final term at school she'd done the discus and modelled her orgasmic grunt-shriek on Sharipova's forehead.

Ray licked the end of his finger and picked up sugar crystals. 'Okay, let's hear it.'

'Second time today.'

'What is?'

'Second time I've heard that today. You're not going to put that finger in your mouth are you?'

She told him. She'd run out of chances. They couldn't afford another incident. She needed time away. Somewhere 'less challenging.' It would do her good. Who knows, one day she might come back. 'They're sending me into the sticks. Place called Rushton Blackshaw.'

'Sounds like a dodgy estate agents. That's up on the moors isn't it?'

'Good as. And yours truly born on Bentilee, the former title holder as the biggest council estate in Europe. I grew up to the sound of boy racers, twocs and domestics. I can't stand it too quiet. You end up thinking.'

'It's not right Becs. You don't deserve it. I told you should have dropped that council investigation. What was his name?'

'Pender. Pender the bender they called him. Not me. And now he's on the Police Committee.' How ironic. Or is it sod's law.

'You've got no say?'

'Oh yeah. There's always a choice. I could go back in uniform, back to constable. Pete says they've got a flasher who needs catching.'

'And you told where to shove it.'

'I told him you don't call them flashers anymore, Pete. They're sex offenders intimidating women who have a right to walk about a public park without being confronted by some perverts purple prod.'

'No need to be so PC yet.'



'Nice one, Ray'

The meals arrived and an 'Enjoy guys,' Ray's the vegan burger.

Thanks, she will. She chewed on bratwurst and waved her fork at the burger, 'So how's that going, Ray?'

'I won't lie to you, Becs. It's hard. I'd swing for a bacon sarnie. I've thought about taking up smoking again just to get my mind off the cravings. But we got to do it Becs, to save the planet. They say we are going to crack 40 degrees this month. I've got kids.'

'Tomas Shafernacker?'

'No, Carol Kirkwood.'

'Ah, Carol. I like Stav Danaos, me. He always sounds on the verge of a fluff but always pulls it back.'

'Whatever happened to Michael Fish?'

'Dead?' She called out to the waitress, 'Duck, a glass of house red here. You Ray?'

The wine arrived. 'Everything alright for you guys?'

They never did that before, did they, back when it was the Station Caf, come over five minutes in and ask you that, poor sods, because that's what they do in America. Oh, thank God you asked me. I wasn't going to mention the jobbie. It's banger and chips for Christ's sake.

'So what will you do?' said Ray, 'Not going to move house, are you?'

‘Commute. Takes forty-five, fifty minutes. It takes me half an hour to get into town what with all the traffic. Should be a nice run out.’

‘And what kind of jobs are you expecting out there?’

‘Don’t know. Dog fouling. Leylandii disputes. Riots at the tearooms. Pete says they’ve got a problem but won’t say what. “Suit you down to a T,” he said, tosser.’

‘Going by the telly these places are hotbeds of intrigue and murder. One a week at Midsummer. Oxford, that’s like South-Central L.A.’

‘That’s because they’ve got nowt better to do.’

Lewis Beatty slouched in jangling his bollocks, a trio of thuglets in tow wearing similar slack trackies with plenty of room for bollock jangling, gangsta caps oriented to regulation skew. Lewis’s hat read ‘Mets’ and depicted a baseball heading towards the stars. He’d been working out and appeared unable to straighten his arms. Who was that bloke? Mason. That’s it. Mason. She’d gone out with Mason. He did weights but only his top half, and refused to wear shorts even on the hottest days. They never did it. Ooh no. The first time she saw she him naked she burst out laughing at the chicken legs propping up the beefy slabs. He put his trousers back on and stormed off in a huff.

A queue had formed for the takeaways and Lewis strode to the front of it, hitching up his left hip like he’d survived a drive-by. A middle-aged couple hrrumphed and Lewis looked up from his phone and stared them down. ‘You don’t mind do you. We’re alright guys. These fucking biddies don’t mind. Shouldn’t you be at home watching fucking Countdown or somink?’

She and Ray exchanged exasperated glances. She said, ‘Let’s wait and see. It’d be nice to eat my dinner in peace.’

But there always has to be one. This one, well she'd peg him an Administrative Assistant. His neck sprouted from the middle of his shirt collar like a stick of celery and featured an Adam's apple to put Renaldo's to shame. With luck he'd have a telephone box nearby to change in. 'Hey! Hey you! You get to the back of the queue like everybody else. Leave those folks alone.' His fellow queuers grumbled support. He even got an, 'Ay, yer buggers.'

Lewis cracked his fingers and sloped over. He ought to be wearing a built-up shoe and claiming disability. The Adam's apple jerked up and down. His fellow queuers inspected the floor and thumbed their phones. Lewis grabbed his tie and pulled his face in close, so close their eyeballs about touched. He drew back and pulled out his chewing gum and stuck it on the end of his nose.

'How do you like that then. I just stuck my gobby chewing gum on the end of your fucking nose.' He flicked his tie up into his face. 'What you going to do about it?' Now the Adam's apple travelled the length of the neck. A fairground strength tester. Ding. He shoved the tie knot tight against his throat to thwart the return journey.

'I thought so. You fuck-king pussy.'

Lewis gobbled in his face.

Aw, now Lewis. Porca puttana. Why did you have to go and do that.

She spits out the Bratwurst and the chair spins away as she rushes forward. She slams a shoulder in. He spirals and falls and sprawls onto his belly. He presses himself up, snarling fuck and bitch and cow. Knee on his back, she twists his arm around and up, like they taught her all those years ago at college. You have to go to uni now and learn about Duty of Care. She gives it a final tweak. Lewis shrieks, 'Time out! Time out! For fuck's sake.' The thuglets back off, already with their phones out filming. 'Sick. Lou getting pasted by an old cow.'

‘Lewis Beatty. I am arresting you for assault, for pushing your way to the front of a queue, and for general rude behaviour toward humanity. You don’t have to say anything, you little shit.’ Blah-blah-blah. He knows it by heart anyway. ‘Ray, in my jacket pocket you’ll find some cable ties.’

‘Sergeant Copeland. Is it you? Yeay. How brilliant is that. I hear your old man went off with your best friend. Your stinking minge dried up, did it Sarge?’

She takes a tie and gives it back. ‘Stick it through the hole and get it started will you Ray. You can see I’ve only got one hand.’ Jesus. How long’s he been a copper. Lewis, feigning submission, bucks. Yee-haw. She crashes into Ray’s legs. Ray falls back into a table. Lewis on his feet now, sneering, cracking his finger joints. Mam said you’d get arthritis if you did that.

Time slows down like in the movies. Her vision tunnels. Everybody has shut up. A rolling noise, wood on wood, rolling rolling rolling, and something solid bumps into her hand. She stands. Lewis really can’t straighten his arms. God, she’s going to miss this. She feints and drives the giant pepper grinder into his kneecap.

## CHAPT

Something was wrong with the Peugeot. When she took her hands off the steering wheel it drifted to the left. Well, don't take your hands off the steering wheel then, you daft cow.

Probably the tracking.

The lone oak loomed. Look out for the big tree, you can't miss it, she always instructs delivery drivers and distant relatives. It wasn't that big, although big for around here, and the middle of it was missing. Yoof were loitering under it, sheltering from the sun and poking devices. She hoped creepy crawlies were falling on their heads.

She swung onto the pink-bricked, grey-roofed, plastic-windowed, double-garaged development, once a potbank employing hundreds, including Mam for a bit. Then it got demolished and designated a 'brown site.' They'd knocked down all the bottle kilns and then decided to rebuild one in the middle of the estate, God knows why. Heritage. When did they stop putting chimneys on houses? Why had they left the oak? She pulled onto the drive. Next-door Gary was turbo-mowing his lawn. Please, not now.

She opened the car door, the mower sounding like a B52 powering down. 'Becky, how goes it? Still keeping us all safe?'

'Sorry Gary. Desperate for the lav.' She gestured to the hereabouts of her fanny. Why?

'No worries. Catch you later, love.'

The front door closed and she leaned against it and fought the urge to collapse in a heap. The B52 started up again but couldn't drown out Adele.

'Luca! For God's sake turn it down.' She took the broom she keeps by the door and banged on the ceiling and ignored the litter of mail.

She collapsed onto the sofa instead. Her legs fly into the air and Luca comes down two at a time. Thud-Thud-Thud. She sees her and Andrea helping him down, one big chuckling stride at a time. Down-a-big-un. Down-a-big-un. See how clever you are. Che bravo sei.

He bursts in, and she sees his dad and her heart breaks afresh. 'Mum! Mum! I've got some great news. Christ, how did you get that bruise?'

'Friendly fire,' Ray's knee, 'I'll tell you later and you can tell me your news. Meantime, make us a cup of tea will you love, I'm spitting feathers. And how many times have I got to tell you not to say Christ in the house.'

'What are you angry about? I've made spagbol.'

Tears well up, and not at the prospect of Luca's spaghetti bolognese. 'I'm not angry. Hurry up with that cup of tea, love. I'm thirsty. Spitting feathers, think about it. You been outside today?'

The tea arrives with a bag of peas wrapped in a tea towel. 'Here. You don't want to lose your gorgeousness.' And he's not trying to get round her. What did she do to deserve this. She dreads the day it will end. Drugs. Some girl up the duff. Stabbed. God no.

While she holds the peas to her face and nurses the tea, Luca sits at her feet on the pouffe, his knees knocking together. She tells him about Lewis Beatty, like it was nothing, the noise the pepper grinder made when it cracked his kneecap, that she'd had a row with the boss, leaving out the details. Luca is all ears, but the knees still knock.

'Okay, let's hear your good news. It'd better be you've had an offer from Manchester or Brum.' He bites his lip. The knees will soon be pulp. What is he nervous about.

He opens his mouth to speak, but drops his shoulder and sends her the wrong way. He leaps up and says, 'I tell you what, let's eat first. You must be famished what with all the excitement. I'll put the kettle on for the spaghetti.' Procrastination is best left till tomorrow. This is going to be a belter.

They eat and he tells her he's had an offer from both, and he fancies Manchester. Is Manchester still Madchester? She had no idea. Shaun Ryder was on *I'm a Celeb* yonks ago, so unlikely. Her eighteenth, with Sarah and Sal in Sal's Mini to the Hacienda. She got ecstasied-up and danced for four hours non-stop and went home with an Eccles plasterer. No mobiles back then and she had to get the train home. He gave her a business card. No job too small. Happy days.

Luca makes vague remarks about modules and halls of residence and Brian Cox. This isn't it. She mops up the sauce with yesterday's baguette. Luca doesn't finish his. She says, 'What is it, love?'

'Why don't you have a comfy chair mum and put your feet up. You've had a grueller.' The comfy chair. Like she says, Please take a seat, to the mum of a DOA. He's got a girl pregnant. He's stole a car and killed a granny. He's decided he wants to be a lawyer.

She eschews the comfy chair and plonks her elbows on the table. 'Spill it, lad.'

His chest expands as he sucks in a deep breath. 'Mum, I know you'll understand.' Another deep breath. 'I've been denying it for a long time.' Okay, so he's gay. Not what she dreamt of, but no big deal. He slaps his palms on the table. 'But I've decided to self-identify as female.'

First, she wants to laugh, not at Luca, but at herself. Oh God. Her life is turning into a cheap thriller. What next? My mum is really my older sister. Ray is on the take. Pete's a paedo. But she hadn't seen this one coming. She realises her mouth has fell open and is in no hurry to close. What had she missed? Has he been trying on her clothes? Are trans people even transvestites? She really must keep up.

She tries to keep her voice level. 'Well, I hope you've thought it through. Have you discussed it with anyone?'

'Yeah. I've been through it with the counsellor at college — Lisa, she's great,' I bet she is, 'and a couple of my mates are doing it, and there's loads of transgender girls.' He puts his hand on hers and squeezes it. 'Mum, you've always known I'm not a typical male.' Have I? 'I've always had a feminine side.' Er, isn't that stereotyping women? God, it's a minefield. She'd never considered herself exactly feminine. Mam smacked her if she found out she'd been playing football. Tony called her Mickey Thomas but still wouldn't let her play with him and his mates, although he let her go in goals if they were desperate.

Luca was still talking. 'I'm not competitive and I don't like fighting and endless knob jokes and comparing all the girls I've ... had sex with.' She'd give him that. Yes, men are pretty horrible. Well, say around sixty percent of them. Like women. You just haven't met enough. And don't knock the knob joke.

Another cup of tea, that's what she'd be offering the DOA mum now. It was a right old the bombshell and her head was still singing. While he made it she arranged her thoughts.

He came back. Her opener was, 'So. You want to change your gender — sorry I don't know the right words — because you want to express your gentler more sensitive side? But women aren't all like that. Christ, I should know.'

'You are not as tough as you make out, mum. All I know is, I can't bear the thought of living my life as a man. I'm just not like them.'

Gentle vegan Ray, his doe eyes when he brought the kids in at Christmas. His skinny arms. His empathy. Christ. How had he made it that far in the force? 'Do you fancy boys?'

'God no. Awful hairy smelly things.'



She took him in. Those curls —he could be a Greek God. She saw his dad's hawk nose and heavy beard, shaved twice daily. He'd commandeered the bathroom cabinet with all his balms and emollients and she'd had to buy another. And she hadn't seen it coming.

'Mum, I know you've had a hard day. We can talk again when you've had time for it to sink in.' They hugged. Was that her Veet she smelled?

'Luca, I love you more than anything in this world. All I want is for you to be happy.' She ought to get a little gong and keep it handy, strike it whenever she unleashed another cliché. Maybe a pair of those tiny Buddhists cymbals. Ting. But every word was true.

[break]

'I'm off round Jen's,' he said.

Before he left he deposited the mail in her lap, 'to save your legs.' She regarded it. She considered procrastination. One of her greatest talents was procrastination. Come on girl. Treat it like a pile of Chinese menus and Londis special offers. That way it won't be there. She sifted through, hoping not to find it, knowing one day she would. Please, not today, and found a brown envelope with a window. Brown Envelopes with windows should always elicit, Uh-oh, but this was like a Persuader in the stomach.

Poste Italiane. The stamps were printed 'Dante Alighieri' over an indecipherable abstract image.

She stood and walked over to the patio doors, slapping the envelope to her thigh as if it was on fire. What a shitty garden. She really must plant something. That clematis looks like it's on its last legs. It'll die anyway soon if the hosepipe ban comes in. Next-door not-Gary had dragged the telly out and were watching Emmerdale. She left the envelope smouldering on the worktop and took a shower. She watched Corrie. She poked at the leftover spagbol.

She finished off yesterday's Rioja. Leave it till morning, after her run when she'd have a clear head. Yeah.

She tore it open.

It was watermarked and in legalese but her Italian was still good enough. Nothing more than what he'd said he'd do. Andrea always did what he said he'd do. The legal machinery was grinding into motion. He was claiming custody of Jess. Figlio di puttana.

He was desperate. Soon she'd be seventeen and out of legal range, and Italian jurisprudence moves as quickly as a traction engine going up Mow Cop. Surely he'd got no chance, as long as she kept her shit together. God, she hated Americans, all their good and bad shit and assholes.

But the letter was only an extra nail in a coffin already screwed down, lowered on ropes, dirt shovelled on top, the vicar saying dust to dust and a JCB standing by to complete the job. How could he? She'd been prepared to let Luca go on holiday there. Risk the temptations of Bologna and its student scene, Andrea's swanky leather and glass office and his giant black Audi. But now he can shove that up his perfect culo. She'd fight it, think up some temptations of her own, something a bit better than a wet week's camping in Devon. He'd be starting Uni, hopefully, and Andrea couldn't interrupt that. Anyhow, how do the transgenders go down in Italy? Wasn't Italy where machismo was invented? Or was that Spain.

She opened another Rioja and went to bed and put the World Service on. Now, Morgan Freeman reading the shipping news, on a loop. Rockhall, Malin, Hebrides, Bailey. Good, occasionally moderate later. They've missed a trick there. Low: losing its identity.

[break]

At least they'd got a new front door out of it. White uPVC, a brass knocker held in the teeth of a lion. No square of wired glass to tempt the air-rifle

brigade. A little fake-leaded oblong instead. The milk bottle was still there, a confused spider inside.

She pressed the doorbell and waited. Thank God she was in the shade. She tried the knocker, Black Rod demanding to be let in. Rowff, rowff. Rrrrowff. The door opened and Teresa filled the frame like a Jollees bouncer and she was expecting entry wearing Primark jeans. Teresa laser-scanned her from eyebrow to ankle and her mouth opened and growled, 'Yes?' and roared, 'Quiet Rocco!'

Rocco looked out from behind her legs. He had a shaved shoulder and a lampshade on his head. Despite his handicap he seemed unfazed, grinning such you'd think he'd worked out how to dip his bollocks in beef dripping. Teresa yelled, 'Rocco! Go find your chew.'

'Mrs Clarke?' An upward jerk of the head and jut of the chin communicated, Yeah, what do you want? You could have struck a match on her face.

'Mrs Clarke, I'm sorry to disturb you. My name is Rebecca, Rebecca Copeland, I'm a detective sergeant with the police.' What other kind of detective sergeant would she be. She held out her ID.

Teresa ignored it. She cocked a hip and gripped her elbows to give her bra a breather. 'What?' spat out, 'This better be good.'

Conflict Resolution led by retired Inspector Slack elbowed into her mind. She relaxed her stance and spread her palms and raised her eyebrows and smiled. It made about as much difference as offering a Chucky a handmade card and a box of fruit jellies. 'Mrs Clarke, Teresa. Do you mind if I call you Teresa?' Not a flicker. 'Mrs Clarke, I'm here to apologize.'

Barely perceptibly, perhaps only detectable by the most finely calibrated seismographic instruments, the taut face relaxed. 'It should never have happened. We got it badly wrong. Listen, I'm sorry.'

‘Jesus Christ. The police, apologizing. Hang on, duck.’ Teresa turned her head, ‘Randall, go out and buy a lottery ticket will you love. I’ve got the police here and they are apologizing.’ She stepped over the threshold and said, ‘Have you any idea what you’ve put us through?’ The voice was flat and hard. You could have sharpened a diamond on it.

She let her rant. It ended with, ‘Bloody insurance companies. You pay them all that money.’ Teresa paused and frowned and cocked the opposite hip and looked at the sky. ‘Oh, I get it. This to get out of the claim. You think you can come here and say you’re sorry and it makes it all right. Well let me tell you, you lot are not getting off the hook over this. I’m going to—’

Time to spread the hands and interrupt. ‘Mrs Clarke. Please. I’m here entirely on a personal basis. They don’t even know I’m here. This won’t affect any claim you wish to make against the force.’

Teresa’s mouth remained open. Her shoulders and bosom slumped. She said, ‘Well ... Well alright then.’

‘I won’t keep you any longer, Mrs Clarke. Here’s my number if you need to call me. I wish you and Randall all the best.’

Randall. Nice one. As the door closed she tipped the spider out of the milk bottle.

[*break*]

Teresa closed the door behind her and fanned herself with the gas bill. ‘Better keep your eyes peeled for flying pigs today, Randall my boy.’ Randall appeared by the bedroom door in a pair of outsize paddi-pants. He held up his phone. ‘I got nearly all of it.’

[*break*]

*No copper moon tonight. No blooming blackthorn hedge. No sweet scent of Linden. Distant, over by the fox covert, a fox shrieks. Well good for you. Distant, over by the Fox and Hounds, humans shriek.*

*The blotting mist. But they are there, waiting. Come to me. I only want what is best for you. No, don't run away. Don't make this difficult. You will make me hurt you. I don't want to hurt you. I want to save you.*

[break]

At the *Wheatsheaf* Ray said, 'We had Senga Beatty in yesterday.'

'Don't tell me, shouting the odds because I'd beat up her little brother.'

'That, and we arrested her for suspected ABH on Uncle Nev's business rival. Said you're the one needs locking up, not her.'

'And what are the chances of that?'

'What, you?'

'No her. Margie and the whole clan turn up did they? Said she was on the settee with them watching Corrie? And the business rival, he'll press charges, will he.'

Ray shook his head, but not in denial. 'You need to watch out for that one, Becs.'

'Senga? Pah, I can handle Senga,' she lied.

Ray asked if she wanted a leaving do.

'You joking? Oily Pete wishing me good luck and wanting a hug. Steve and Amanda and Mo all 'poor you – you don't deserve it,' when they'll be after my a job quicker than —. Jesus, I can't think of anything. Anyhow, it's not fair to

put them through the trauma of thinking up something to write on a leaving card.'

'Oh you'll get one of them anyway.' Ray squeezed her arm. 'Go on. They're not all bad. Matt and Tanya will be there, and me.'

'I'll think it over, and watch it. I'll have you for inappropriate touching.'

'You're not my type.'

'Oh really?'

'I'd say I prefer blondes, but you know I am married to Nina. Anyhow, you'd be,' Ray trying to rescue it, 'Too intense. No that's not it.' He glanced around. Two children were playing on a giant green snake. One fell off and started bawling. 'Wild. That's it. There's something wild, atavistic about you Becs.'

'What? Remember I didn't go to uni.'

'You know what it means. I can imagine you squatting naked on your haunches, disembowelling the cat what's just shat on your lawn.'

'Jesus Ray. Where the hell did that come from?' Where indeed. 'You can only get away with it because I won't be about to take the piss anymore.'

Christ, but Ray was sharp. How had he got the naked part? She'd seen the forecast and raised the fence between her and Gary with a bamboo screen, and now she let the sun range over her. Gary would need to set a step ladder up in his bedroom and a mirror if he wanted to see. She wouldn't put it past him, any man. Let him. Sometimes she scraped the lounge aside and lay on the Cotswold slabs and let the heat soak into her breasts and belly and thighs, watched the red spider mites jaggling about. Ronnie at school had drawn tiny mazes in red biro. They didn't like to cross the fresh ink. Maybe they got their feet stuck. Maybe they didn't like to leave tiny red footsteps. Any that made it out, Ronnie granted their lives.

It began in Italy. Goosebumping about in the altogether doesn't go down well on the Bentilee Estate. She'd lie spread-eagled on the red Tuscan brick, a pillow under her head, her body sucking in the heat, Andrea, mortified. 'I vicini!'

'Che me ne frega.'

Not so weird. Enid Blyton, she liked parading about in the nuddy. Enid played tennis in the nuddy. Draw the line at that. Mixed doubles. All those breasts and bollocks and willies flying about. It'd play havoc with your toss. You might get a nipple caught in the strings. And where would you keep the spare ball? She'd got a hundred of these.

She decided against torturing Ray further and put her half down on the table, stirred her finger through a beer puddle and dragged out a balloon shape and gave it horns. He had turned to the safer ground of Force restructuring and rationalisation: sackings. The words washed over her. The Wheatsheaf wasn't a bad place on a warm evening, if you steered clear of the undesirables.

Her mind flooded with ochres and impossible blues: The Piazza del Popolo. The day's heat radiating out of the buildings. Her and Andrea getting tipsy on Oviato and orange juice and saying too much. His hand grazing the back of her hand. Sly sod. The rise and fall of conversation and the tink of glasses and the hiss of espresso machine, children playing. You don't expect it to all kick off there. Unless it's the brass band.

'Look at us,' said Becs interrupting him, 'we're like Lewis and whasisname after cracking a big case. Sending some toff professor down.'

'Hathaway.'

'That's it, Hathaway. Toff's name. He's a toff isn't he, in real life.'

'Wouldn't know. Don't care. Listen. When's your first day at Blackmoor Ramshaw or whatever it's called.'

'The fifteenth.'

'Jesus. No time off then?'

'What's the point. Spare time lets you think.'

'Do they do boxercise at Blackram Bumrush.'

'Good point, Ray.' It was a good point. 'They're probably still doing the Jane Fonda Workout up there. Feel the burn. The Green Giant, whatever she was called.' She must hunt out the leg-warmers.

'Becs, I'm off the week before, so —'

'I know. Forget the leaving do, Ray. I'd need a sick bag. Clean break is best.' She drained her glass and got up to leave.

'You'll be back Becs.'

She smiled at him, considering a peck on the cheek. Ray. 'Quicker than Bo-Jo thinks up an excuse. How's that?'

'Six out of ten, Becs. Stay in touch from Shawshank Redemption.'

'Yeah,' suddenly awkward. 'Right then.'

He watched her go. You never asked me why they called me Ray.

[*break*]

Later, Luca staying over at Jens' she went back to the Wheatsheaf, let herself get pulled and driven to a Travelodge by a hairy-backed premature-ejaculating



performance tyre salesman. 'They'll knock half a second off your nought-to-sixty.' He had no discernible waist and his lips worked away at her body like a housefly mopping up syrup. His moobs wobbled as he came and he apologised and said you were great and fell asleep, snoring on the exhalation, the condom still dangling from his shrivelled dick. She shifted and shut out the print of fuzzy balloons on a lavender sky and kindled an orgasm, conjured a picture of Andrea kneeling between her thighs, that delicious hooked cock, and bit on her fist to stifle the roar.

At 1am he farted again and she ordered a taxi. In the carpark she got bored of waiting and let down a tyre on his beamer.

## CHAPT

She knew things were heading south when she'd put Anusol on her toothbrush. At least she got a minty-fresh arsehole out of it. Then the usual stuff, Fairy Liquid in the washing machine. Optrex as Otex. Cups of tea with dead bluebottle croutons. Then she'd left the oven on.

Only a few pines at *The Pines* remained, the rest chopped down for fear of interfering with the sewers, piling needles onto Qashqais and Dusters, detaching branches and crushing biddies. The inmates gazed out as she locked the car and studied her as she marched across the gravel. One waved, and she waved back. Don't let me get like that. I'll top myself first — is what they'd all said. She walked through the gritstone porch into a concrete vestibule.

'Hi Rebecca. You okay? Haven't seen you for a while.'

'Fine thanks, Dot.' The cow. Hope your rubber gloves give you finger fungus.

'Ellen's in the usual place. Amy will bring you a cup of tea.' You had to hand it to her though. The place didn't smell at all of urine, not at all of sprouts, and only faintly of faeces.

The door was ajar. She said, 'Alright, mam?' and squeezed her shoulders and kissed her whiskery cheek. Physical contact. That was new, thanks to *The Pines*. Growing up, physical contact had been as frequent as salads. Hugs, they made you soft. Jesus, the state of that chip-pan.

Ellen, Nell, Mam, wheezed in a deep breath and hauled her head to verticality and said, 'Hello duck. You were only here yesterday.'

She dragged over a chair and gave her the once-over. Amy had combed the cirrus hair over the pink scalp and put her in a clean cardy. But the face was hollower, the collar-bone knobbier, the eyes glassier and the bottom lip

wetter. Yep, on the downward slide. Won't be long now. Surprising she's out of bed.

The door banged open and Amy rattled in with the tea. Her face lit up like she'd discovered Maxine Peake or somebody in the room. 'Hello Becs. How are you today?' Dear Amy, body fashioned by Maccy Ds and Papa Js, the swishy thighs. Enid Blyton would call her a brick, if it wasn't for the hair, shaved at the sides and long on top, and the nose ring, and then she'd turn her into a baddie. The first time she'd held Amy's hand and said, 'Thank you. Thank you so much. I don't know how you do it,' then left under the tea mug a card depicting a kitten stuck in a hyacinth vase, a twenty inside. The card, that was patronising. Now it was just the twenty. Neither party said anything.

'How's she doing Amy?'

Ellen wasn't doing well. Barely touched her food now. Couldn't get up. Chest getting worse. All the pottery dust, and fags.

'The doctor came the other day.' Amy lowered her voice. 'It's not my place to say this, but he doesn't think it will be long now. I'm so sorry Becs.'

'No sorrys Amy. She's eighty-four. I can't say she's had a great life, but better than some.' Thirty years sticking handles on teacups at Coulson's, till it all went to China, lol. Then Woolworths. Two live children, two stillborn. The Old Man. She was an accident. How could she not be – forty-five years between them. Drink half a bottle of gin and jump up and down, did you? That would explain a lot.

'I'll leave you two together.' Please don't.

'How are you mam?' On the telly Michael Portillo's man-diddies were locomoting across the screen as he ran for a train. She reached for the remote and put the snooker on. Mam liked the snooker. Couldn't stick Michael Portillo. So she must be far gone. Ronnie O'Sullivan had just made a 135 break and was looking wry about it.

Man told her how she was. 'They're rotten to me here. Rotten, always pinching and poking me. I ask for sugar in my tea and they deliberately don't put it in. I mean, why would you do that?'

'Yes, Mam.' She took a sip of mam's tea. Syrup. 'How are you in yourself, Mam?'

She limbered up with a couple of wheezes. 'I can't grumble. Besides being in here. I want to go home. Why won't you let me go home?'

'Because you keep falling over, mam.' Because you nearly blew the street to bloody smithereens, you daft old bat.

'Have you seen our Tony?'

'I keep telling you, Mam. Tony's gone now.'

'Oh yes.' Her head slumped.

Might as well do what she came to do. Kick a ball against a wall. Hit it wi' y' 'ed till it bost.

'Mam. Andrea wants custody of Jess. He can afford the lawyers to get it done. I should never have let her go there on holiday. A whole summer. What was I thinking.'

'Jess. Has she started school yet? Bit too mouthy for my liking. You need a firmer hand.' Like you did with me.

'She's sixteen now, mam.' Going on twenty-one.

What was she thinking. His flat, floor to ceiling windows overlooking the historic quarter, his casa di campagna and its sodding heart-shaped swimming pool amongst the sodding olive groves. A university town. More hot Gianni's

that you can shake a stick at. Why would she come back to this shithole. What was she thinking.

‘Spare the rod - spoil the child. That’s what I always say.’

What lies, and truths, had he been telling Jess. Why all this legal mumbo jumbo. She’d never said Jess couldn’t visit. What was he up to?

The phone calls had been daily. Then weekly. Then monthly. I still love you Mum. It’s just so great here. Why don’t you come out? Maybe you can patch things up with Dad.

‘How’s Andrea? Oh, I do love Andrea. Gorgeous. If I was 20 years younger you’d have to watch out.’ Maybe that’s where I get it from. There had been rumours. ‘Why doesn’t he come visit.’

‘We’re divorced now, Mam. He’s in Italy. I told you’

Patch things up? With Amanda there. Fat frumpy Amanda, the cow. How did that happen? You know how, girl. Well she’s not that fat, actually. And love makes you do mad things. Bet she’d make her welcome. All happy families mwaw-mwaws as she poured the Vernaccia and doled out antipasti. We’ve put you in the guest room. I never meant it to happen, Becs. You know how it is. Andrea still adores you. You know that. Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare say his name, you cow.

‘I don’t know what to do. I can’t fight him —I can’t afford it.’

Do you know how much I’m paying towards this? The council home for the elderly with the permanent smell of boiling brassicas and the crusty bibs and plastic house plants, yes, I know they do their best, well she just couldn’t do it to her. Even her. Why can’t you just die.

‘But I’m terrified of losing her.’

'Eh? Is that Jimmy White? His hair has grown back.'

'It's a wig, mam.' She's better off there. She's not going to get bladdered every Friday and Saturday night and piss in the street, get shagged up against a skip. Does she have my madness?

'You should bring your uncle Geoff with you. What a card he is. Makes me laugh fit to die.' Laugh you into bed did he. 'That thing he always does. Flings his trilby into your grandad's pigeon loft and says, "The hat's among the pigeons now. I say, The hat's among the pigeons now." Oh it does tickle me.' Yeah, ruddy hilarious. 'He used to love to come upstairs and tuck you in.'

Didn't he just.

She still can't swear if it was real or a nightmare. The thud-thud up the stairs. The creaking last step. The gasp as he hauled himself onto the landing. A pause to get his breath back. Then the raised sheets, the stink of Old Spice, Bay Rum and fags. Scratch of whiskers. Busy, busy fingers. How would that tickle you, Mam. She'd find him now and ask him. But it is thirty years since his heart exploded, in a Datsun with a prozzy down by Westport Lake.

'Your tache is showing. You want to see to that.'

She stood and looked in the mirror. Your eyes aren't that bad then, you old bat. She ought to buy shares in Veet.

'Why don't you visit more often? I do love you Becs. You know that, don't you.' Oh yeah. Another *Pines* innovation. Where were you when I was ten and Barry Wardle got me on the playground floor and pulled my knickers down.

'I might not have always showed it, but like my dad said, sometimes you got to be cruel to be kind. You can't mollycoddle them.' The head slumped and the voice cracked. 'You turned out alright. You've got nowt to complain about, you miserable cow. If it wasn't for you I'd still have Tony. He'd look after me.'

Not like you.' She sobbed and felt for a tissue. Becs pulled one out of the box and handed it to her. 'They're rotten to me here, Becs. Rotten.'

She bumped into Amy on the way out. 'I hope you don't believe everything she says about us, Becs.'

What is it stupid Yanks say? Right back at you, lady.

[break]

Into the valley of the Trent. You wouldn't even know it was there. The slag heaps, they'd long since been rounded off and grassed and called a Park. Potbanks were now Enterprise Parks. The long terraces, where for decades women in floral tabards and knotted headscarfs had polished the step and leaned gossiping watching the children play, were now pink-bricked semis with no chimneys. You could still glance down a side street and see a car-choked relic, tarted up with uPVC and concrete roof tiles, all that aggro over parking.

She merged the Peugeot into the glacier traffic. Though these days glaciers go like the clappers don't they. Into first, clutch in, should I put it in neutral. Get an automatic, you soft cow. Cars should be designed with armchairs and tellies and broadband. Toilets. Or you could get your bits plugged in like astronauts. Christ, she was going to be late. First day anall. When did cars get so big? Is it so fat people can get in? When she was a little kid before Tony happened the Old Man resurrected an Austin 1100. They'd bost out laughing at it now, the four of them crammed in. They'd said on the course you can't call them fat anymore. Her school chums, they should have done that course and saved her a whole shitload, as Pete would say, of prepubescent mockery.

Pink semis crowded onto tiny plots like tics in a dogs ear. Giant sheds promised discount sportswear, diy goods and home bargains, their little brothers, discount tyres and a free tracking check, plastic windows and express extrusions. Workout zone: *get the body you always dreamed of*, next to Mobility Superstore: *live the life you deserve*. Tight Lines Angling next to Pram City. The Wood Floor Store, nice alliteration (was it alliteration?) promised

they wouldn't be beaten on price, as did Bye-Byes Beds. Should there be 'e's? Born to Store, they were the cheapest in town or they'd repay the difference. When did that become a thing? Why don't they give it to charity? Triple A Skips, who seemed not to have clocked the alphabetical advantage, offered an alternative. A fragment of terrace, front doors opening over unpolished steps into the snarl, a clump of ex-council semis. The old chapel, graffitied and wired-up windows, 'Zumba Here.' God, when did it all get so ugly. She flashed a van in and the man behind banged the heel of his hand on the side of his head and mouthed the words, What the fuck.

Through the Old Lime Pits traffic lights, make sure you get in before the lights change but whatever you do don't block the yellow box or you'll have to turn the radio up to eleven to drown out the abuse, then, ahhh, relax, the crystal dream labs: Audi, BMW, Lexus. You can have me. Just work hard enough. Soon she might even make it to fourth. A prime piece of council, baby Bentilee, iron railings and stone lions and Sportifs supplying gentrification. More pink and greys, a surviving bottle kiln jammed in. That's your heritage is that. The sign to the crem where they burnt the Old Man. The canal bridge.

Over the Trent and Mersey, and that thing Uncle Geoff did with his face, glum look, pass his hand over, happy look. Glum-grin. Glum-grin. What a card.

Green fields. She's never seen anything greener. Tooty-Frooty green. Wasn't it something they put on the grass now? The countryside: she didn't get it. It was just things eating and shagging each other. They'd eat and shag you if they could. Probably shag you first, but you wouldn't put anything past nature. Where do you think they got *Alien* from? David Attenborough the other night showed a fish that lived up a bigger fish's arse. It'd go for a swim about, eat something, shag something, and then return home and do a U-turn inside the rectum so its head was sticking out. Or did it reverse in? Beep-beep-beep. She couldn't remember.

Cows now, black and white cows. If they were lying down it meant it was going to rain. Some were lying down; some were standing up. The old Coulson



factory, luxury flat development now, still scaffolded, bankrupt. Bradderly council estate opposite had supplied Coulson's workers.

Mam brought her here to visit auntie Madge. You could hear the roar of and clatter of the factory as you stepped off the bus, taste the dust. Auntie Madge all pop and choc ices, the tea poured and the ginger nuts snapped and solemnity pressing in as they grumbled about their downstairs bits, the visits soon to end. They sent her out to play with Skipper. Skipper, who generally sniffed her for treats then slumped down and licked his bollocks, the only thing left to do inspect Uncle Steve's Dahlias and watch the bees and wonder why Skipper kept a lipstick between his legs.

The land rumbled up, limbering up for the peaks. Big trees and big houses. Residences. The old grammar school. A Vicarage. The old post office, all millstone grit. Millstone grit and oxbow lakes and grumlins. That's all she got from geography. Or was it drumlins.

The Peak. She didn't get that either. Peaks should be pointed. This was bumpy ground a bit higher and turned inside out. They brought her up here, and Tony, him dribbling away and slapping his good hand at the windows, on Sunday jaunts in the smoky Granada, if the old man had got it going. He liked a big car, did the Old Man. He said a man should have a big car. He never got over the shame of the 1100.

Once there they didn't know what do to. Mam spread a blanket and they'd eat ham and pickle-cabbage sandwiches and Battenburg, tinned peaches entombed in jelly and slavered with evap milk, a stone's throw from the main road because of Tony's kiddie wheelchair. They'd stare aghast at hikers. The Old Man, a countryman in another life, sized up pheasants and cupped his hands and peered over humped-back bridges at fish he said were trout. Andrea said she was dark waters. Mam fancied picking bilberries but was never sure if it was the season and what they looked like, and anyway bilberries meant walking up that hill. Afternoon and they'd be in a beer garden, burger and chipping it, mayo in sachets she had to ask the Old Man to open, Tony staring up at the sky, mam mopping his chin. The Old Man would

drink his three pints. Best be careful. The Filth might be about. They'd smoke a series of fags down to filters and start bickering, a full-blown you-fucking-bitch/bastard barney on the road home. The long silence, and she'd wind the window down to let the smoke out and let the wind whip her hair and get scolded for it and stare at floppy iridescent birds Ronnie at school told her were pee-wits.

The traffic thinned out. Past the old POW camp, the inmates now chickens, and the long pull up Whitestone hill, brooding gritstone on the left, sheepy moorland on the right, no crawler lane for the lorries. Mam was born on Moorland Road, at the foot of Sneyd Tip. The Old Man told them they should look out for wallabies escaped from the Lord's estate and gone native. The Old Man told them there was a rock shaped like a man's head, a hole for the eye, and when you went past it winked at you, some rock behind blanking out the sky. Look out for the Winking Man! It's around here somewhere. Here it is! No. Coming up now. No. This one! There! That was it. You missed it, you dozy buggers.

The hill topped out and moor swallowed the crags. Maybe it's the next bunch of rocks.

She switched the aircon off. Hail rattled on the windscreen. Hail? You never mentioned that, Carol. It lasted half a minute and, somewhere up there, glad she'd plumped for a skirt, she pulled over and squatted down behind a rock, the wind blowing the pee up into her face, a sheep watching. At her feet the crag had been hacked away, the stone flattened and a circle chiselled out and a hole for the axle begun, or was it where they put the corn. But he never got round to finishing it. Maybe the miller went bust. Beyond, awaiting the hail, a hill in the form of a breaking wave.

Down the winding hill in blinding sun. A sign instructed and consoled, Lorries: Engage Low Gear. Now! Escape Lane Ahead. Past the 30s semis and the iron railings of the milk factory, every sixth one a spear. Traffic May Be Queueing. It was. A new brown sign said, Ruston Blackshaw Ancient Market Town Dating

back to the Domesday. Shouldn't there be a 'book' on the end of that? To the left, a cracked white sign: Tidy Towns Winner 2002.

Oh God.

[break]

'In tyoo hundred yards turn left. Turn left. Turn left. Turn Left!' I can't turn left you stupid cow. 'You have arrived at your destination. You have arrived at your destination.' Erm no, Janet. She peered about. No I bloody haven't, Jan love. A parp from behind. There'd be far less road rage if cars made the sound of the old-fashioned hooter with the rubber bulb on the end. She turned into a car park, Council Employees Only, slipped into the last place and put the Doctor on Call on the dash. Janet. Nah. Think of another.

It was market day. The market comprised half a dozen stalls, anoraks, hi-vis workwear and discount toiletries big in Rushton Blackshaw. She stopped at the only fruit and veg stall and bought tyoo bananas and a punnet of Spanish strawberries and asked the sad man where the police station was.

'You're not far, love. They keep it hidden. That's how they like it.' As he gave her change he said, 'It'll be shut today though.'

'Thanks. Nice banana.' The strawberries tasted of water. The first time Mam gave her strawberries she asked why they didn't taste real like red Opal Fruits.

She dodged a mobility scooter blaring out Meatloaf and looked up at the station. Victorian. Had to be, going by the gables and steep roofs and curly barge boards. The sign looked millennial and read, Open Mon-Fri 2pm-5pm, except Weds and Sat 10am-1pm. Ookay. In case of emergency ring 999.

The carpark was round the back, reached by an alley, two police cars and two civvys therein, keepers of a secret entrance unknown to Janet. The back door was secured by keycode and card scanner. Faaantastic. She placed her City

Central card on the scanner. There was a red light and a green light. Neither lit up. Card Not Recognized would have smashed the budget.

She banged on the door. She looked up at the security camera and waved, held up her card. She banged on the door. The lock clicked and a chain-limited door opened a couple of inches. For God's sake. Her granny had been less cautious on Bentilee.

Half a face appeared and a whole word came out of it, 'Yes?'

'I believe you are expecting me? Sergeant Copeland?' The upturned inflections overdone.

'Ah yes. Sergeant Copeland. We had about given you up.' The chain jangled and the door swung open.

He'd probably peaked around the time of the New Romantics, but if he had gone for the full Phil Oakey, it had declined to a comb-over. A fuzz of earhair to thwart the ingress of flies, dewlaps and a paunch like an overfilled hot-water bottle completed the picture. Three stripes. Seen it all. Fetched them one about the earhole and they were all the better for it. Sticking it out till retirement. Ting. Ting. Ting. One of the ears had been tuned to the upward inflection, 'By the way, it might be the way with you city types, but you'll find that sarcasm doesn't go down too well here, Sergeant. Punctuality, however, does.'

Oh God. Oh-God-Oh-God-Oh-GOD.

[*break*]

He took her through a maze of magnolia-painted passages and gestured into magnolia-painted rooms. Cobwebs festooned cornices moulded as foliage and flowers now so overpainted only an impression remained. He showed her the main office, three desks crammed in, the kitchen, 'Tea and coffee and sugar's in there, milk's in the fridge. There's a kitty. You can opt out if you've got

weird tastes.’ He gave her a look like he suspected she had. Lockers. Mostly empty. ‘Take whichever. We’ve lost all the keys.’ Cells down the stairs. ‘They usually take them straight to the city.’ Front desk, Janice’s domain. The toilet, ‘Two shorts and a long does it, so Janice tells me.’ The snooker room, the full-sized table hemmed in by filing cabinets, the balls in the pockets and sawn-off cues laid out. ‘Nobody knows how to take it to bits.’

In the office, both sipping tea, he mellowed. ‘I realise I haven’t introduced myself. How remiss of me. Brian Jeffries, Bri if you like, guardian of this bastion of law and order. The others are out on jobs. Becs isn’t it? Like it. Good telly cop’s name.’ He mulled it over. ‘Becs. You should get a quirky car.’

Maybe she ought to spell it with an x: Bex. Dig the Piaggio out of the garage. What was that telly-cop producer with the made-up Italian name. Nick Maserati. Something just as click-bait. Jeb somebody? Only Ray told her it wasn’t made up. He was a lad from Wednesbury. Who’d have thought it. Not her.

Brian placed two digestives together and dunked. His eyes slid down and she wished she’d put on a baggier top, but the eyes were en route to a wasp. So not that old school then. Maybe the heart of gold will turn up soon. Brian said ‘Go on, you bugger,’ to the wasp and, ‘He must be quite an albatross about your neck,’ to her.

‘Who?’

‘Inspector Green.’

‘Go on.’

‘Pete ... Peter Green ... Albatross ... Fleetwood Mac? Fried his brain with LSD?’ The digestives slumped and fell onto his shirt. ‘Bugger. Sandra will kill me.’

‘Oh yeah. Nice one.’ Been saving that one up all morning, have you.

'Has he filled you in?'

'Who?' How did you know?

'Pete. Apropos your presence here.' Apropos?

The phone rang. Brian stared at it a moment and picked it up. 'What, again? I'll get somebody onto it. I don't know. You know we're short.' He looked at her and rolled his eyes. 'Tell them somebody'll be there by the end of the day. Well they'll just have to lump it won't they.' He waited till the dial tone and put the receiver on the desk. 'Kids riding motorbikes around the park. Where were we?'

'Why I'm here. No he didn't. In fact I'd say he was downright coy about it.'

'Ahh, he wanted it to be a surprise. Good old Pete. I could fill you in, but I'll let DC Cowan do it when he gets back. He's investigating a spate of burglaries on the Meadows.'

'You investigate burglaries?' Jesus.

'Oh, you wouldn't believe it. It's crack dens and drive-by shootings all over the shop, but we try to fit them in. We're a bit old fashioned like that. Anyway, this perv is a perv.' Knicker-draw wanker.

She drained her tea. She said, 'Hot desks?'

Bri said, 'Especially this weather.' He fanned himself with a pamphlet titled, Dealing With Change. He said, 'They're shutting us down soon.' His bottom lip flopped down and he looked away. She thought he was going to cry.

She pointed to two motionless desk fans. 'Don't they work?'

'One does. Go and have a fiddle.'

She fiddled and asked if there was anything she could do while she waited for DC Cowan. The fan whirred into life.

‘Janice is here at two. Have a natter with her, love. She’s nice is Janet. Salt of the earth. She’ll give you all the gossip.’

The first ‘love.’ You get three of those, Bri. ‘No, I mean work.’

‘Go and sort those budding Fogartys out if you like.’ He was back dabbing at the digestives, ‘But then you’d need a uniform, wouldn’t you. They’re hardly likely to take any notice of a lass in a skirt.’

Two.

‘There’s fisticuffs over a caravan blocking a neighbour’s light on the Greenhill Estate. You could go and have a word, if it’s not beneath you.’ He chuckled. ‘Tell you what. Let’s get the file. I’ll steal Angus’s thunder.’

She thought he’d lead her to a computer, give her the login, lean over too close and show her the filepath. He went out and came back with a maroon folder Mam could have sold him in Woolworths. ‘Ah, I saw your face. Don’t you worry, love. We’re not Luddites. It’s all on digital.’

‘Bri, let’s knock the loves and lasses on the head, eh?’

‘Oh yeah.’ He held up jazz hands. ‘Bang to rights. Old habits and that. I’m old school, me.’ He put the file gently on the table, like it might go off, and patted it. ‘I’ll leave you to it then,’ he said, and smirked.

A thin file. It held crisp white printed papers, shoved in and forgotten. She spread them out and two minutes later she was tamping them back together like Fiona Bruce after a bulletin. She replaced them in the file, and hurled it across the room. She took out her phone. ‘Inspector Green please.’ I wish he’d fry his sodding brain on LSD. ‘Becs Copeland.’ Asphyxiate, that trouser belt around his neck while having a wank. That’s how old rockers die isn’t it.

You're trying to finish me, and we know why. 'Is he. Is this Liz? Come on Liz, we both know he's not in a meeting. Put him on, love.'

Choke on his on vomit.



## CHAPT

Janice rang in sick. Brian asked her if she fancied a spell on the desk dishing out crime numbers and faking sympathy. Bad time for a joke. He said, 'You've got a face like a snake with lumbago,' and nodded down at the folder. 'It's a bugger in't it. You might make something of it, then you can move on to pastures new, no pun intended. DC Cowan will be here soon.' He went to sellotape 'Crime Desk Closed Due to Staff Shortages' on the door.

A uniform came in puffing out her cheeks. Brian and her exchanged whispers and glances and she came over and introduced herself. She was called Tasmin not Tamsin and had lager-coloured hair and pronounced work as 'wehk' and turn as 'tehn.'

The toilet did indeed need two shorts and a long. Thanks Bri, she'd have been there all day. Back into the office a man in a royal blue suit was sitting on Tasmin's desk. No, lolling is better, one leg crossed over the other, that leg jerking up and down as if playing keepy-uppy. And no, not a man, a stretched-out, scrubbed and polished gelled millennial. Tasmin went 'Ha-ha!' and punched his arm. He went 'Yeah, er-herr, too right,' and twiddled something on her lapel. She clocked Becs and ahemed.

He unfolded and sprang up, checked his phone, and opened a lipless mouth like a stab in a side of bacon.

She said, 'DC Cowan, I assume.'

'Guilty as charged. Angus Cowan at your disposal.' God, he's going to salute.

She took him in in one glance. A slab of brassy hair Enid might call a 'shock,' if it wasn't slicked back. Straight up and down. Put him through Grandma Platt's mangle and he'd still come out wet. Trousers tapering down to black clown-tempting shoes so highly polished you could semaphore SOS or look up women's skirts. No good in a ruck. Maybe he's got killer karate moves, knows

Mr Spock pressure points. What's the diminutive? An? Ang? Gus, that'd be it.

'Stop showing off to Tasmin constable and let's get this briefing over with.'  
She thought he'd wilt, at least a bit. He didn't. Instead, where the lips should be the barest smile curled.

'Of course, Sergeant Copeland.' He drained Tasmin's tea. She assumed the wink. 'Best if I show you the lay of the land, ma'am. If — that's ok with you. We can talk while I drive.'

[*break*]

It was a two-year old Focus in maroon. Great. Angus blinked up and said, 'We're lucky sergeant. Look at the weather.' He gestured at the sky with both arms like a ringmaster at an elephant.

She opened the door and heat slammed out. Angus was winding down his window. 'Sod that, Constable. I should get that air-con on sharpish.'

'Oh, there's no air-con ma'am. This is a pool car.'

They waited at the lights, the fans on number four blowing dust and pollen and diesel particulates into her eyes, her hair already stuck to her forehead. She pulled the baggy top away from her sodden armpits and rapidly soddening belly. Angus looked like he was sitting in a fridge. A black Beamer pulled alongside, hip-hop thudding out. Angus nodded along, nodded to where he thought the driver might be behind the tinted windows. Cool beats man.

Angus glanced over. 'Don't worry Ma'am. We'll be out on the open road soon and the wind will be whistling through. That'll cool you down.'

She said, 'Your folks Scottish then?'

'How do you mean, ma'am?'

'The Angus.'

'God no. They just liked the ring of it. Sounds stolid and resilient, I suppose. Like I won't be crapped on. The Ang I suppose. Like I might get angry. Rrrrrr.'  
Yeah, I get it. 'Maybe they believed in nominative determinism. I should ask them.'

'What do you like to be called?

'How do you mean, ma'am.'

'Angus? Gus?'

'Why — Angus of course, ma'am.'

'I'm not an officer, so you and drop the ma'am. Sergeant is fine. I might let you have Sarge later. I've already got you pegged as a cocky sod. Try and prove me wrong.'

'Nothing wrong with self-belief, sergeant.' He smiled an I've-got-you-sussed, smile.

He accelerated away from the lights, trying to keep up with the Beamer. 'I'm afraid there won't be time for that Sergeant.'

'Time for what?'

'To prove myself to you. As my putative cousins might say, at the end of this week I'm offski.'

The Beamer lights became dots. 'Should we pull him over, Sergeant?'

'What, you're leaving?'

‘God yes. Secondment over. I’ve got a career to nurture. Can’t waste my time on the rustics in this shithole. You think they can afford two CID here?’ He shook his head in pity. ‘Don’t worry, you’ll get the full SP.’

They left the town behind, topped and surpassed a low hill dotted with sheep, the grass already the colour of Angus’s hair, and entered a broad valley of big green fields and black and white cows. Some fields were brown. She wondered why.

Cloying stink filled the car and her nose and throat. She gagged. ‘Jesus, what’s that stink?’

‘That, Sergeant, is the odour of the substance you pour onto your cornflakes of a morning, or at least the main by-product of it.’ He’d got one hand on the steering wheel, or rather a finger and thumb pinching the bottom. He waved the other at the scenery. ‘What you have before you sergeant is the finest dairy pasture in the kingdom. Something about all the rain they get and the sheltering hills. Where you get cows, you get shit.’

‘It surely doesn’t stink like this all the time.’

‘Ebbs and flows. I rent a house in yonder village, and there’s generally an underlying refrain, but this is shit-spreading season. It happens three times a year, and if you complain they call you a pussy and enquire as to why you moved into the countryside in the first place. You get used to it, but there’s no point planning al fresco dining.’ He pointed nearside. ‘Quod erat demonstrandum, Sergeant.’

Beyond the hedge a tractor pulled a huge doughnut-wheeled tanker. Brown liquid sprayed out in twin arcs. ‘I should wind your window up sergeant. You don’t want to be breathing in all those micro droplets.’

‘Why do they spray it up into the air if they want it on the ground?’

‘Search me, sergeant. The finer points of yeomanry are beyond my ken.’

The façade was crumbling. The 'a's were softening. Rustic had been rostic. Year: yahr. It had never been by-gum and flippin-eck, but he'd even dropped in a few ees and ays. Now, yonder, for God's sake, and QED. The rented house in a country village. He was Home Counties, and money.

'A bit young to be a DC aren't you Angus?'

'No point having a Commander dad in the Met and a First in politics and economics from Bath, and spending ten years as a Plod, Sergeant. It'd be a shameful waste.' Barth.

The stink eased, less syrupy but sharper, more of an Uncle-Geoff-arse tang. Uncle Geoff, a non-believer in underpants and a heathen to diligent arse-wiping. She'd lain down once, only once, for a snooze on the settee where he'd been sitting, and put her head there.

Angus said, 'I ought to give you a primer, Sergeant. You don't want to sound like an ignoramus when you start talking to the yokels.'

'Go on.'

'This is agri-dairy as I understand it anyhow. The cows spend five months a year inside. Winter. Some farms are even moving to a non-grazing system where the cows never go out. Three times a year they cut the grass, twice if it's a bad summer, and wrap it up in black plastic balls. You'll see them piled up round about, like giant rabbit droppings. They feed it to the cows in winter. Silage it's called. If you drop silage into the conversation they'll think you know what you are talking about. After they cut the grass they shit on the cropped fields, but, don't ever call it shit. They won't like that. They call it slurry.' Like you'd get in a cone with a flake. A McSlurry. 'And all this green grass you see around you isn't what God planted. It's some engineered super fuck-off high-yield stuff, with the added benefit of giving the cows constant quivering squits. That way the shit is easier to store and pump around. A cow produces fifteen gallons of shit and piss a day, Sergeant.' He glanced at her to check she was

listening. She was. 'Fifteen gallons. That's more than this petrol tank holds. The Carrwood Estate, where we are heading, has a thousand cows and is planning more. Work it out. You ask me, the dairy industry is mostly what to do with all the shit.'

'Thank you, Angus.'

'That's the gen. Don't quote me on the finer details. Farmer Giles, he'll say he has to do it to compete. In China there's a mega dairy of 100,000 cows. Robots do the milking. Economies of scale and all that. They are mad for milk over there. Anyway, you'll be relieved to know we are approaching the crime scene, sergeant. Well, scenes.'

She struggled to get her mind off R2-D2 milking a cow. How do they find the teats? Teats. That doesn't sound right. Give a whole new meaning to a nipple-cripple. Angus pulled over by a barred gate. A straw-chewing slack-hatted rustic should have been leaning on it. Yonder, were cows. Some were standing, others were lying down. All mouths were rotating. As they got out they all looked.

Not going in there are we. She'd had a bad experience on a family fun day, strayed to pick buttercups to do the butter test, and got trapped in the angle of a hedge by a herd of bullocks. The farmer bounced over in a Land Rover and told her how stupid she was. 'What's wrong with you, you pillock? They won't hurt you.' He said next time he'd call the police and she'd be had up for trespassing.

Angus climbed onto the gate. 'Don't worry sergeant, they won't come near. There's string up. Cows are terrified of string, and to be honest I don't like them anymore than you.' Heat shimmer levitated the cows.

She climbed onto the third bar and swung a leg over, caught Angus risking a furtive glance for knicker crotch, and jumped down. 'Okay, what am I looking at.'

He nodded at the gate. 'Nicely done, sergeant. See that flattened grass there and the dark stain? That was the first one.'

'Weapon?'

'Captive bolt gun. Then knife to the throat. It had spent an afternoon in makeup and having the shit wiped off its arse in readiness for media stardom. Golden Meadows Butter. They'd got Xander Armstrong lined up for the voiceover. "Put a little sunshine on your toast." Pure class. You can't teach it.'

'Remind me. Captive bolt gun?'

'Does what it says on the tin, sergeant. Used in abattoirs. You don't want bullets ricocheting about a confined space, all that concrete and steelwork. Somebody might get hurt.'

'So, it is somebody comfortable with livestock, somebody who can get close.' About time she showed some intelligence.

'Points that way.'

'Theories?'

'Nutter. That'd be number one. Maybe a rival. Rival with a grudge. Rival nutter with a grudge.'

'Animal rights activists? Environmental extremists?'

He looked at her as if she were a simpleton. 'Hardly. Why? It'd be bad PR, and I can't imagine the tree huggers having the balls to go around exsanguinating barnyard animals.' He nodded back to the car. 'Shall we proceed, Sergeant?'

Through a village, church bells, a spire, lychgates and weathervanes, chimneys, a thatched pub with a view over a duckpond devoid of plastic beakers, a straw

owl on the gable, and on out into more green fields and stink. She said, 'Why are we doing this Angus? We've got bigger fish to fry.'

'Oh, you can't say that Sergeant. Here's another good word to drop in. Do you know how much an out-of-the-box plug-in-ready, ahem, heifer is worth?'

Christ knows. Why should she? She looked over at the cows. Not much meat on them. Five-hundred?

He gave up waiting. 'Fifteen-hundred to two-grand. Carrwood is down a fifteen head already. As our dear benighted cousins across the pond say, you do the math. Besides, Sir Norman shoots and plays golf with the Chief Constable.' Sir Norman. Ah yes.

It could have been the same field, but it was fresher, and bloodier. 'Half a dozen here. He must have approached downwind, so they wouldn't scent the blood. Bovines aren't the brightest and if they see a sister go down they don't think, Jesus, some bastard is massacring us. Maybe they even come and investigate. Something went wrong with the last two though. They ran. He shot them in the haunch with a shotgun and then stuck the knife in.'

'Anybody report the shots?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'This is the countryside, Sergeant.'

'He?'

'Forgive the shorthand, sergeant. I wasn't meaning to be gender determinative.'

From a copse came the brraow-brraow of a chain saw.

Angus followed her gaze. 'Oh, they hate trees. They stop the grass growing.'

'Forensics? Stuff like boot prints?'



Angus threw his head back and laughed, his body the shape of a lower-case r. 'Oh that's a good one Sergeant. It really is. SOCO? Get the blue and white tape up and the screens round. Oh please. What else? Get a dozen bobbies to go round all the farms. "Sorry to bother you sir. Do you mind if I take a look at your wellies?"'

'Moderate your tone, Constable.'

He shook his head and looked at the grass and smiled. Pitiful. Truly pitiful. 'My sincere apologies for my tone. You don't know, do you, Sergeant.' He rubbed back of his neck and looked at her. 'Why should you know?' He sighed. Are you sitting comfortably. 'You must understand, Sergeant. No resources are being diverted to this investigation. Zip, zero, nada. You'll have to investigate and get results, oh yeah, send a weekly report to Sir Norm so he doesn't go pestering the CC and bugger up his swing. But you can't send a piece of Barbour off the lab to get it analysed. They'll piss themselves. Christ, with respect Sergeant, you must have dropped a massive bollock to be saddled with this. Why do you think I am getting out?'

'Er, because daddy is a Commander at the Met?'

He held his hands up. 'Ouch. Touché, Sergeant. Touché.'

Her skirt rode up as she got back into the car. His eyes fell and lingered. He said, 'I could show you the other one, but it's pretty much the same. It's all in the file.'

'Suggestions on how to proceed?'

'If I were you, first thing I'd do is go and pay Sir Norm a courtesy call. Never a bad idea to toady-up to the local gentry. They like that, and you might get more joy than I did. All he wanted to do was rant.' Must be your winning personality.

They drove through another big slice of stink. The tyres made a shlick noise like the tearing off of a mile-long wax strip. 'Hear that? Shit. You give up washing the car around here. There's a milking unit just back there.' He stepped on the brakes. 'Shit. I thought we'd beat them to it.'

Cows, walking towards them. No, sauntering, trudging towards them. A team of arthritic pallbearers would outpace them. In ski boots. Lots of cows. They stopped to look over garden walls, chew on the verge, inspect a crisp packet, mount each other. Angus said, 'Big lezzers, cows.' They didn't stop to defecate.

'Will they damage the car?'

'Nah. Might knock the wing mirror.' He pulled it in.

'Do they always look like this?'

'Meaning?'

Can't he see? The coathanger hips, xylophone ribs, pickle-jar knees, the strings of spit, an over-inflated spacehopper jammed between their shitty crooked legs. 'They can barely walk.'

'A cow, Sergeant, needs only to do four things. Give birth. Eat grass. Make milk. Walk very slowly to the milker twice a day. We don't have wolves or bears anymore. It doesn't need gambol or butt heads or win the 3.15 at Doncaster. It doesn't even need to fuck. Farmer Giles does that with a big blunt syringe. Bull spunk is big bucks.'

They kept coming. He wound his window up. One stopped and peered in and dribbled spit down the glass.

'You know, latest scientific research says that cows are remarkably intelligent. Don't believe it myself. They taste nice though.'

They kept coming.

‘You’ll have to allow for this. I have to time it right to leave the house every morning. I can easy be twenty minutes late.’

‘Can’t we nose through?’

He tutted. ‘Get a stern telling off from Farmer Giles if you do that. Can’t risk damaging a two-grand beast.’

Too close, a tail lifted and shit splattered out over the wing. A headlight was hosed in piss.

‘You know, on balance I think the piss smells worse than the shit. Doesn’t linger as long though.’

They kept coming.

At the tail end, a boy, maybe fourteen, waved a stick, ‘Goo-wan,’ like Mrs Doyle, only in shitty blue overalls and shitty wellies. Angus raised his forefinger. The boy raised his stick. Angus said, ‘Unusual that. They can’t get their kids to go into it anymore.’

At the station Angus motioned towards the car. ‘Look at that. They’ll expect me to jetwash that. They don’t tell you that at detective school.’

He chewed his bottom lip and looked at her. He said. ‘Well Sergeant, I hope our little jaunt has been instructive.’

‘Instructive if not enjoyable, constable.’ She held out her hand. ‘I wish you well in your new posting Angus.’

He returned to the lip chewing. He turned his head a little, but continued to look at her. She knew that look. The handshake was long over, but he was holding on.

He said, 'You know what, sod it. Carpe Diem, Angus.' He took a deep breath. 'How would you like to come back to mine. My girlfriend's away and I've always had a thing for the older woman, and that hair, Jesus. I've got a bottle of bubbly. We could drink it in the Jacuzzi, light a few candles, see what happens. Ships in the night and all that.'

May God bless and preserve the public school system. She pictured his mantis limbs clambering over her, and burst out laughing.

The laugh was as much use as an ant shouting 'stop' a train. 'Don't forget, Becs,' he spat her name out. 'I'll be your boss one day. Could be a good career move.'

Jacuzzis. Isn't the water supposed to be one-percent poo, five-percent pubes and ten-percent dangleberries.

'Angus, you had me at Jacuzzi. How could I resist.' She grabbed his tie, led him over to the wall where the camera couldn't see, even if it was working. She pulled his face into hers, reached down and grabbed for the bollock region, bingo, and squeezed. Angus yelped.

'You odious little shit. I've a mind to twist them off and leave them on the snooker table. Fuck you, you stick insect? Don't make me laugh.' She held a finger up. 'Wait, you already did.' She remembered Louis Beatty and pushed the knot up against his throat and wrenched the tie off to the side. She reached up and tousled his greased hair so it stood up. 'That's the only stiffy you are getting out of me.' Not bad. Give it an eight. She patted his behind. 'Now run along Tiger and get mummy to rub them better. I've got grown-up stuff to do.'