

# COME TO DUST

A DANNY BIRD MINI



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Fear no more the heat o' the sun,  
Nor the furious winter's rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

— Shakespeare, from *Cymbeline*



## CHAPTER 1



*I* spotted her coming through the pub door. Something – a gust of wind, a pricking of my thumbs – *something* made me look up from the cash I was just dropping into the til, and there she was: The most malevolent ball of teenage fury it's ever been my misfortune to encounter.

The place – the Marquess of Queensbury public house in Southwark, since you ask – was busy for a Saturday. What can I say? There was nothing but football on the telly, the summer heat had given way to a bright, if chillier than expected, autumn and lots of people wanted to be somewhere other than in front of the telly or out on the windswept streets.

Whatever the reason, there were sufficient bodies in the place for her view of me to be impeded, but not enough to give me time to pack a bag and flee the country before she spotted me and set her flying monkeys loose.

So I did what any grown man would do when faced with an angry teenaged girl: I dropped to my knees and cowered behind the bar where the only way she'd see me would be if

she clambered up on the pitted wooden surface and peered over the top of the counter.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ali – my bar manager – demanded, frowning down at me momentarily before glancing up and blanching. The glancing up meant she’d missed my finger to lips plea for her silence, but the look on her face – even from where I was cowering – told me she’d sussed the reason for my unorthodox position.

“What the fuck do you want?” Ali – not known for her many awards as most Genial Hostess of the year – snarled.

“Nice to see you too,” a voice, unconcerned with hostility in the way that only someone who knows that – thanks to their family connections – they’re untouchable, responded. “You done something with your hair? It looks butcher than usual. Where’s Danny?”

“Funny,” Ali responded, her left hand – under the bar – signalling that I should stay put. “What d’you want, Elaine?”

“I told you what I want,” Elaine Falzone – for it was she – answered. “I want Danny. He in?”

“Why d’you want him?”

“What are you? His mum? I want him ‘cos I want him. I need a favour.”

My stomach churned. Elaine Falzone’s grandfather was a man known colloquially to the police, press and anyone who wasn’t within earshot of the great man or his family, as Chopper. This was because of the rumour that he had occasionally, in the past, taken a machete to the extremities of various people who had upset him.

He came across as a charming old duffer, and had been mostly pleasant to me, but his granddaughter, in the style of an apple falling from the boughs of a sociopathic tree in the height of scrumpy season had not yet mellowed her vicious streak with white hair, wrinkles and a dodderly old man act.

Put bluntly, if Elaine wanted a favour from me it would

likely involve either my eternal soul, someone else's eternal soul, the importation and distribution of VX nerve agent, or great risk of life limb or liberty. She was unlikely to want to borrow my Celine Dion CDs.

"A favour?" Ali bridled. "You got the nerve to waltz in here and-"

"Listen," Elaine sighed, "I get it: You don't like me. I don't like you. But do you think I'd be here if I had anywhere else to go? This is important. And you'd be doing me a solid one if we could skip all that outrage and bluster and you could ask him to get out from under the bar and talk to me."

"Under the bar?" Ali reared back as though she'd just heard the most ludicrous insinuation in history, her eyes sweeping left and right – and meeting my terrified glance in passing.

"Jesus." I could almost hear Elaine rolling her eyes. "I saw him when I came in. He's hardly Anne Frank, you know."

There was a scuffling sound and I knew, a millisecond before it happened, what was coming next.

"See," Elaine announced triumphantly as a head – upside down and wearing a broad grin – appeared over the edge of the bar and stared directly at me.

Whatever about Ali, Elaine had recently done something with *her* hair. She'd let her natural curly locks grow out, and attempted to dye it platinum blonde, but had ended up with something beyond auburn but not quite ginger. The resultant halo of curls, especially when suspended upside down on top of her leering mug leant her the air of the bastard offspring of Little Orphan Annie and Chucky the Satanic doll.

I'm ashamed to say a tiny shriek escaped me.

Okay, it was a little more than tiny.

And then I attempted to mask my shameful actions by

scrabbling around under the bar as though I'd been searching for something right at the back of the shelf.

"Here you are, Ali," I said, standing up and handing my bar manager – who by now was shaking her head in embarrassment on my behalf – "here's that slimline tonic you were looking for."

I handed her a bottle of glass cleaner, and styled out the clear disconnect in the way that only someone running on pure terror believes possible.

Ali took the proffered bottle, pursed her lips, shook her head and focussed her eyes over my shoulder. "Are you gonna tell that little tart she's barred, or should I?" She demanded.

Doing what Ali demanded might have been problematic as, whilst I was ostensibly running the place (albeit having outsourced the management to Ali) the real owner of the Marq was one Martin 'Chopper' Falzone; thus, the diminutive fury on the opposite side of the bar was likely, one day, to be my boss.

If I lived that long.

"Important?" I asked, seeing for the first time something like desperation in the girl's eyes.

"Sucker," Ali muttered, and shuffled off to serve a punter.

"Really important," Elaine said, already behind the bar and heading for the kitchen, "and you're the only person I know who might have any idea how to help."



## CHAPTER 2



“*I*’m not sure polenta’s meant to look like this, Danny. What do you think?” Caz – Lady Caroline Genevieve Jane de Montfort, only daughter of the thirteenth Earl of Holloway – was standing over the antique Hob in the kitchen, a wooden spoon in one hand, as a vast pot bubbled on the stove. Noises issuing from it suggested that whatever was within was summoning up the gumption to make a run for it.

I entered the kitchen, Elaine momentarily masked behind me, and Caz turned, her pinnie – possibly older and certainly more stained than the hob – displaying a series of yellow blobs that suggested she’d been fighting with the polenta for some time.

“I mean,” Caz raised a hand as though to gesture at the pot, then, like a panther spotting an American orthodontist with a high-powered rifle in the undergrowth, her eyes squinted, her whole being stiffening.

“Daniel,” she said, her tone changing to one devoid of emotion, her body language becoming still and passive.

“Please step over here. There’s- no, don’t look – but there’s something horrible just by your right shoulder.”

“Fuck you too, your highness,” Elaine snarled, marching past me and throwing herself into a high backed armchair on the opposite side of the room. “You been mixing potions again?” she sneered as Caz, realising how she was dressed, favoured me with a look that said if Elaine didn’t have me strangled with my own shirt sleeves, my best friend just might.

The pinnie was yanked off, dropped on the floor by the cooker and, without even glancing at the interloper, Caz gestured towards the corner. “What the hell is she doing here?” she demanded of me.

“She needs our help.”

“*Our* help?”

“Don’t need her help,” Elaine contradicted me, prolonging the discomfort that was already crackling louder than whatever was in the pot. “I need the brains, not the so-called beauty.”

“Did she just insult me?” Caz snapped.

“Well, strictly,” I said, wondering what the odds of a meteor crashing to earth directly in this kitchen and thus relieving me of this unutterable discomfort were, “she complimented you. ‘Beauty,’ remember?” I smiled nervously.

“So-called,” Elaine clarified, determined that the moment should not be allowed to spiral anywhere but into fisticuffs.

“Did she pull a knife on you?” Caz demanded, and I shook my head in confusion.

“A knife?”

“Well there’s got to be some reason why she’s sitting in your kitchen and not sprawled on the pavement outside,” she said, reminding me how similar – despite a billion cosmetic

differences – she was to the crop-haired bar manager out front.

“She needs help,” I said, realising – even as the words came from my mouth – how lame they sounded.

“She needs locking up,” Caz snapped back, turning her blazing gaze on the source of her ire. “You have a nerve, I’ll give you that.”

“Look,” Elaine waved a hand, “All in the past, water under the bridge, let’s be friends, blah blah blah, right?”

I crossed glances with Caz, and at this stage even I was wondering why I hadn’t simply walked away from Elaine. “Five minutes,” I said, uncertain which of the two I was saying it to.

“Two,” Caz haggled, reaching out a hand to flick off the gas under the pot of polenta.

“What’s this about?” I asked Elaine, and she looked at us both, a gleam of triumph – somewhere under the still-present worry – sparkling faintly.

“Murder,” she said. “Only she didn’t do it.”

## CHAPTER 3



I put the mugs on the table, and threw the espresso grinds into the bin behind me. From her capacious handbag, Caz withdrew a litre bottle of Remy Martin and added sizeable dollops of Cognac to two of the mugs, pulling one to herself, sliding the other to me and deliberately placing the un-spiked one in front of Elaine.

The look of fury that crossed the cherubic face beneath the mop of curls lasted only a second, before she grudgingly lifted the coffee to her lips and sipped it.

“Right,” I said, “you said murder. What’s going on Elaine.”

“My mate Charmaine,” Elaine said, a blush of anger coming to her face. “She’s been nabbed. For murder. The filth are claiming she offed her ex. Only she had nothing to do with it. Nothing,” she finished, her righteous anger almost convincing even me of her friend’s innocence.

Then I realised this was Elaine: If she’d been Facebook Besties with Kim Jong Un it would not have surprised me.

Caz gave me the look – the one that said *ask her the questions you need to ask and get her out of here before my polenta goes stiff.*

“So what’s she actually been accused of?”

“Murder,” Elaine repeated.

“More specifically?” Caz asked, sipping her coffee and immediately topping up the mug with more brandy.

“The five-oh,” Elaine said, trying to sound like she was straight out of Compton, and ending up sounding like she was more straight out of Old Compton Street, “have charged her with running him over. Repeatedly. Til he was dead. Though, from what I’ve heard on the grapevine, pureed would be a better description. Anyways, she didn’t do nothing. She was with me.”

“Well that’s that sorted,” Caz said. “You just pop your maleficent little backside round to the cop shop and let them know you’re her alibi and she should be off the hook in no time at all.” She raised a mug to me as though to celebrate the successful completion of this challenge.

“Not gonna happen, your madge,” Elaine said darkly.

“Is she still here? Are you still here?” Caz put the mug down. “Look, the girl has an alibi. It’s you. Off you pop.”

“I can’t give her an alibi.”

“And this would be because..?” I asked.

“Because I don’t need to,” Elaine turned her baby blues – already filling with liquid in a way that I knew had had lesser – and straighter – men wrapped around her little finger in the past – on me. “Because you’re gonna prove she didn’t do it.”

I shook my head. “Like you said: not gonna happen.”

“Look,” Elaine heaved a sigh, “I give her an alibi, I end up in deep shit myself.”

“And now we get to the point,” Caz said quietly.

“But I’m not gonna get in the shit,” Elaine persisted, “Cos you can prove she didn’t kill the little toerag, and everyone ends up smiling.”

“Except for the poor mug who was pureed,” I pointed out, and even Elaine blushed slightly.

“Yea,” she said, “except for Cathedral.”

“Cathedral?”

“Cathedral Carmichael,” she said. “So called cos of the size of his organ.” Elaine smiled in a way that made me wonder if she had personally fond memories of playing Bach.

“Okay,” I paused, just long enough to push the thought from my mind, “so why don’t we start at the very beginning? That’s a very good-”

“Please,” Caz held a hand up to me, “no ‘Sound of Music’ gags. Not today, please.”

I shrugged. “Who is Charmaine? Who is Cathedral Carmichael? And what the hell is going on?”

She looked at me like I had just asked her to explain water, her gaze only shifting to Caz when it became obvious I wasn’t about to announce I was joking.

After a moment of receiving the same from Caz, Elaine sucked her teeth. “Christ.” She muttered, “Pensioners. Right,” she swigged from the mug, “Cathedral Carmichael and Charmaine Stannard. They’re, like, a proper Insta-couple, innit.”

I assumed that meant they’d met and hit it off at first sight. I was wrong. It turned out it meant that – as a couple – they had a sizeable number of followers on a certain social media site.

“They got, like hundreds of thousands of followers each, and an army of sponsors sniffing round, all for pics of him in clothes and her making crafts an’ shit.

“Then one of their sponsors gives him a pair of matching rose gold aiRPhones.”

“aiRPhones?” I asked, dreading the withering glare I knew was coming my way.

“New mobiles,” Caz murmured. “Ultra high end. Come with a concierge at the push of a button and a waiting list

nine months long. Not ready for residential care just yet,” this last addressed to Elaine, who signalled her appreciation of Caz’s knowledge with a curt nod.

“So anyways, he puts a pic of the phones up on the socials – like you do. And then,” she sighed, her whole body deflating, “then the stupid bastard, while setting up his aiRPhone account, accidentally posted a sextape of the two of them to the internet. They were toast in seconds. Poor Char is still getting hatemail.”

“Okay, but I still don’t understand why that would make her prime suspect for running him over.”

“Well I dunno. Maybe the five-oh reckon that cos it didn’t work the first time she came back for another go.”

“Wait. Stop. Rewind. Didn’t work the first time?”

“She was upset. Cathedral ended up getting off scot free. No hatemail for him, while she lost a makeup deal and got axed as the face of tampons.”

“The face of tampons? I still don’t see why she decided to run him over.”

“Well after all that – makeup, tampons, hate mail, and the fact he’d been diddling some slag on the side – and him getting off scot free, Char an’ me had a few drinks, and, well, one thing lead to another. It wasn’t fair she was losing everything, and he was getting off with a pat on the back like some good old bloke. Misogyny in action, innit.”

“So she – what? – as a pushback against the Patriarchy? – tried to flatten him?”

“With a smart car,” Elaine sniffed. “I told the silly cow it was a stupid thing to do; ‘if you wanna make him suffer,’ I said, ‘Use a fucking Beemer.’ Them smartcars aint got no heft, innit.”

“Sisterhood in action,” I muttered. “So when did this first attempt take place?”

“Couple of weeks ago. It was more a cry of frustration

than an attempt at murder," she clarified, and Caz smiled at her pityingly.

"A *cri de coeur* using a motor vehicle," she reminded her.

"Yeah, well, it wouldn't have been a thing if Cathedral hadn't posted the footage," Elaine griped.

"The footage? He filmed her attempt to run him over."

"Obviously." Elaine, once more, regarded me as though I had asked her to just run past me, one more time, the concept of air. "It aint happening if you aint recording it. Cathedral wore a camera all the time, and he uploaded this footage to the web. He was laughing about it. Even he thought it was a gag."

"I'll bet he wasn't laughing so loudly when someone – what exactly happened to him?" I asked.

"He was on his moped. Went down an alley in Brixton. Got run over. Only the po-po reckon it wasn't a simple hit and run. Whoever hit him over went back and forth a few times to make sure he was a gonner."

"And this someone definitely wasn't Charmaine?"

"Like I say: I know it wasn't."

"Because you and she were together though you can't tell me where, or – in fact – what you were doing?"

She shifted in her seat. "Y'see, the thing is, I could tell you, only then, I'd have to kill you."

She was joking, I thought, though I really didn't want to press the question: If there was one person in my world who might have the contacts and the wherewithal to have someone pop round and do some damage on my person, it was the strawberry blonde sat on the opposite side of the table.

"Okay," I sighed, "So you want me to – what? – find out who *did* kill Cathedral?"

"I knew you were smart." She fluttered her eyelashes, and her cheeks dimpled.



“Okay. When did all this happen?”

“Last night, apparently. They picked up Char this morning and I’ve spent the day down the nick screaming at the fuckers to let her go.”

A picture of Elaine – her little face reddened and screwed up in fury – crossed my mind. I would not have wanted to be on duty today at whichever cop shop was housing her mate, though how they allowed her to berate them for so long was a mystery to me.

Til I realised that they probably knew who she was, and who her grandfather was, and that - as irritating as Elaine might be - she’d be a sight less irritating than a pissed off Chopper Falzone taking your name and badge number.

“Okay,” I sighed, glancing at Caz who almost imperceptibly shook her head.

“Look,” Elaine picked up the movement in the way that a lion approaching prey spots an out-of-place flicker in the veldt, “I know what you think of me. Some of it’s probably bang on. Some of it’s not. Doesn’t matter. Char’s a good girl. I mean genuinely nice. Her family-” she paused, considered her next words for a moment, “well, her family isn’t mine. Or anything like them. So this is me asking you both, yeah? But I’m not asking for me. And you won’t be working for me. This is for Char.”

I waited for the radio in the background to start playing *‘we are the world,’* and when it didn’t, I shrugged, sighed, and gestured at Elaine to disclose more details. “Well, if Charmaine didn’t steamroller Cathedral, who might have?”

Caz sighed, muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “Sucker,” and reached into her bag for the Brandy.

“Well if I knew that I wouldn’t have hot footed it here, would I? Jesus, you seemed brighter last time we met.”

I ignored her jibe. “Elaine, the population of greater

London is nearly nine million people. I have a pub to run. It helps if we can start by excluding as many of that nine million as possible. So: Any ideas where I should begin, or should I just pop outside and start harassing passing punters?"

"Alright, alright. Calm down Inspector Frosty. You could start with his flatmate."

"His flatmate had a motive?"

"What? No," she shook her head in despair, "he's a right fucking ponce, but I don't think he's even got a car. I meant his flatmate lived with him. He might have an idea if Cathedral had any obvious enemies with access to a decent motor."

"And where might we find this flatmate?"

She gave us the address – a mansion block in Earls Court.

"Nice neighbourhood," I muttered, thinking there was clearly money in social media and wondering if it was too late to restart my Myspace page.

## CHAPTER 4



The flat mate's name was Jordan Jones, and he'd apparently been away on a business trip when Cathedral had his fatal interaction with, I found by asking around of certain contacts who knew this sort of thing, a large white vehicle.

The size of the vehicle was a given, they'd said, considering what it did to what was left of Cathedral Carmichael, and the colour was deduced from the paint traces left on the mangled wreckage of the moped the deceased had been riding. And beyond that – whether it was a white van or a 4X4 - was, they said, not possible – at this stage - to say.

We got to the mansion block in Earls Court just as the door opened and a trio of uniforms came out, too busy discussing the day's footie scores to even register us.

Only the last – cute in a gym bunny way, but with way too much wetlook gel in his hair for my taste – thanked us for holding the door open for them. I smiled a 'you're welcome,' and we let ourselves into the block and headed up the stairs to the second floor, passing, en route, a couple of

suits heading down. One of them stopped, turned around and called my name.

“Are you Danny Bird?” He asked, the tone less than welcoming.

I stopped and turned around on the stair I was on. “Depends who’s asking,” I frowned down on him.

“Davis. Detective Inspector Davis,” he said, his cornflower blue eyes boring into mine. “We’ve not met. But I know who you are.”

My reputation, I figured, preceded me.

Or something.

“Where you off to?” He asked, his tone the same flat one I imagine he used on suspects; nothing offered, nothing taken. Just a question.

“Just visiting a mate,” I said, gesturing vaguely upwards.

“Yeah,” the stare bored into me.

He knew exactly where I was going, but also knew there wasn’t much he could – or wanted to – do to stop me.

“Well,” he nodded, breaking the spell, “Have a nice night.” And he turned, followed by his fellow suit and carried on down the stairs.

We continued on up to the second floor, and knocked firmly on the door of 2B.

Almost immediately, it was opened and a young man, looking a little shell shocked, blinked at us.

He was wearing the trousers and unbuttoned waistcoat of a grey flannel three piece suit, a pair of shiny brogues, and a blue button down shirt with a half untied red tie, and he stood blinking at us, his hornrimmed glasses halfway down his nose.

“Oh,” he said, “You’ve just missed them. Your colleagues,” he added when Caz and I stared blankly back at him. “They said you’d be around in a bit. Victim support.”

I glanced at Caz, who raised an eyebrow that seemed to say *run with it*.

So I did.

His name, I'd gathered from Elaine, was Jordan St James. "Chalk and cheese, them two are," she'd said, the look on her face suggesting she found St James to be the chalk end of the equation.

"Can we come in, Mr St James?" I smiled. "We just had a few questions we wanted to run past you."

"Questions?" He frowned. "I thought your colleagues had already done all of them."

"We like to be thorough," Caz said, stepping forward and basically forcing him to retreat and allow us entry to the flat.

"We're sorry for your loss," I said quietly, and he blinked puzzlement for a split second before realising what I was referring to and nodding.

He closed the door and turned to us, the three of us squeezed into the small entry hall, a black leather overnight bag on the floor beside us, the space not feeling large enough for all of us plus the luggage.

"I'm still not sure what happened," he said. "I mean: It doesn't quite make sense. Would you like some tea?" he asked, as though some genetically programmed behavioural trait had been triggered.

Caz gave him the sort of look that a vampire might to anyone offering a nice slice of garlic tarte tatin with a crucifix on the side, and demurred politely.

"Perhaps," I said, "we could sit down," and I gestured towards the door opposite us which, I assumed, lead into a sitting room.

"Well yes, I suppose," St James shrugged, and I was struck momentarily by the thought that if Little Lord Fauntleroy had grown up and become an exhausted wage slave, he might have become Jordan St James. He was polite and proper, but

seemed a little out of time, like someone from the nineteen thirties transplanted to today, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, one shoelace undone, sweat patches visible under his arms.

He had the air of Gatsby the morning after he realised his girlfriend couldn't drive for shit.

His presence in this unmodernised thirties apartment just added to the sense of disconnect I was experiencing.

St James opened the door.

"Holy crap," I gasped.

The place had been turned over.

Atop the long nineteen sixties sideboard to my left, a small selection of liquor bottles was in disarray, some of them standing, two of them lying on their sides, one of them - seemingly empty - was shoved like a drowned chorine neck first into a water-filled ice bucket.

Below the bottles, drawers were half open, their contents either spilling out of them, or piled on the floor beneath them. The sofa - a huge squat monster covered in swirly Pucci fabric - had mounds of clothes and takeaway boxes dumped on it.

The two Club chairs - brown leather and looking like they'd been picked up at a closing-down sale in the House of Commons - were also overflowing with t-shirts and jeans, magazines and books.

The whole room was filled with a huge dusty and frankly hideous orange rug, all swirls and fringe. It was too big for the space, and couldn't be laid entirely flat, as I discovered when I stepped forward, caught my toe on the upturned edge, tripped and ended up sprawled on the low coffee table in the middle of the room, more pizza boxes and t-shirts pressed beneath me and a cloud of dust disturbed from the flat nap of the carpet billowing around my head.

"Sorry about the mess," St James said quietly. "Our

cleaner went back to Hungary. Brexit, I suppose,” he finished vaguely.

“Wait,” I staggered to my feet, “you mean this isn’t the result of a burglary? You actually live like this?”

“Well I don’t, to be honest, but I’ve been a bit busy lately, and Harry – left to his own devices – well,” he tailed off again, shoving the contents of one of the chairs onto the rug, the acid yellow of a discarded t-shirt clashing even more outrageously with the dusty tangerine of the floor covering, and dropped himself into the seat.

“You said you had more questions?”

Caz, as nonchalantly as St James had done, cleared a space on the sofa and sat, indicating with a faint tilt of the head that I should join her. I – fearful of another trip on the migraine-inducing carpet – stepped gingerly across to her and sat.

“How long had you known Cathedral – I mean Mr Carmichael,” I asked, realising as I did so that since our arrival St James had not once used the nickname that Elaine had been using.

“Most of my life. We went to school together,” St James replied.

I was guessing, looking at him and this flat, that ‘school’ had not been a Comp somewhere in Wolverhampton.

“We sort of bonded,” St James smiled. “My parents split up when I was five. My mother,” he swallowed sharply, “well she died shortly thereafter. My father sent me to Saint Florians when I was six, and then spent the rest of his life drowning himself in very expensive single malt.

“So there I was: alone. And it stayed that way for a year til Harry came to the school. Only he was a genuine orphan. Both his parents had died in a car accident. In Val. All he had left was his grandmother. We’ve been friends ever since.”

“And where were you when he was killed?” I asked.

“Me?” His face took on a wariness.

“I think,” Caz said, touching me briefly on the arm as though to suggest I leave the interrogation of posh types to her, “what my friend meant was that you appear to have been away until today.”

I remembered the holdall in the hallway and mentally kicked myself. If he'd been away and had only just returned to discover the police crawling all over his flat, it would explain his general shell-shocked demeanour.

He nodded. “I was valuing a series of Ottoman miniatures; I'm a junior valuer at Bradbury's the auction house. The seller lived in Portsmouth, so I stayed over. I've literally just got back. Look: Is there a reason for the interest in my whereabouts? I mean, am I a suspect or something?”

Caz smiled softly. “It's just routine,” she said, maintaining the suggestion she was police without ever actually saying anything of the sort.

“I thought it was the girlfriend killed him. Didn't your colleagues say they'd arrested her?”

“We like to keep an open mind,” I said. “Someone mentioned he'd been seeing someone on the side. Could whoever that was have had a jealous boyfriend?”

St James considered this, and shook his head. I don't think he was seeing a anyone else. Mind you, he might not have mentioned it to me if he had. He'd been,” he searched for the word, “weird, since his grandmother died.”

“Weird?”

“Harry was a banker. Desk assistant.” St James named a vast international investment bank. “Same as me: up at six a.m. Fourteen hour days. Laying the foundations for a career. Then his grandmother died. It hit him hard, to be honest. It sort of sent him off the rails.”

He glanced around at the carnage in the flat.

“How so?” Caz asked.



“He quit his job. Said life was too short to be stuck doing something he hated day in and day out. Said he’d rather starve. He’d always had a thing for clothes. Fashion. Collecting. Said he was going to see if he could make a business of it: Sort of stylist to people with too much money and not enough time.”

“Stylist?”

“Mmm,” St James used a toe to straighten the corner of the rug, “To be honest, I suspect he figured, once his inheritance came through, he wouldn’t need to actually work for money. He seemed to have expectations. Expectations,” he looked once more around the room, “that didn’t materialise.”

“Expectations?” I was trying – after orphans, boarding school, distant parents and Ottoman miniatures and now ‘expectations’ - to remember at what point I’d strayed into an eighteenth century novel.

“His Grandmother was his only living relative, and he was hers. The old girl was a bit of an idol of his. – she’d travelled the world in her youth, was friends with Stalin.”

“Wait – what? Stalin? *The Stalin*?”

“Well I doubt,” said Caz nodding at Jordan St James, “he means his younger brother Fred. Go ahead, please,” she graced him with the sort of smile that suggested – between them – that she was apologising for my plebeian interruption.

“Yes,” St James clarified, “*The Stalin*. He gave her a house in the Urals. She managed to escape with a few of the furnishings and pictures when he died suddenly, and used the cash she made from selling them to travel the Caucasus. Ended up besties, a couple of decades later, with the Shah of Iran.”

“Okay,” I said, no longer sure if any of this was truth or some posh form of my-nan’s-better-than-your-nan one-upmanship, “When you say friends...” I trailed off.

“He means,” Caz leaned into my ear, “that Grannie was a goer.”

I blushed. Grannie was more than a goer. She was an A-grade goer.

“She was friends with politicians, poets, rented a room to Jimi Hendrix at one point, and generally lived,” St James finished. “She’d always told him that – when she was gone – he’d be taken care of, and I suspect a bit of Harry – beyond idolising the old girl – expected she’d leave him a lot of money.”

“And she didn’t?”

“She left him a few quid. Well, I suppose living large for years runs the funds down. Harry used most of the inheritance to buy clothes. And she left him some furniture,” he nodded at the sideboard, the hideous sofa. “But listen: what’s any of this got to do with his murder?”

“Nothing,” I admitted, though it had been a fun diversion.

“So if he’d quit the job, and there was no bit on the side, then who was texting him?”

“Texting?” St James tilted his head in confusion.

I could hear Elaine’s exact words: *‘He’d been diddling some slag on the side, and Char found out when she spotted some funny texts from her.’*

“Information received,” I said. “Someone’s pretty insistent that he was seeing another woman apart from the girlfriend.”

“But surely that gives the girlfriend an even bigger motive,” St James reasoned, and I couldn’t really argue with his point.

“Unless he’d, in turn, upset this other woman.”

“And she ran him over?” He shook his head. “I don’t think there *was* another woman. He seemed pretty cut up ever since Charmaine and he ended.”

“Well if not the other woman, and if the girlfriend has an alibi,” I prompted, aware that whatever alibi Charmaine had

was one that neither she nor Elaine seemed keen to announce, “then who else could be in the picture?”

St James shook his head in confusion.

“All I can think,” he said at last, is that - if it wasn’t her - it might have been one of the Hunters.”

“Hunters?”

“Hunters.”

I said the word again “Hunters?” And Caz placed a restraining hand on my arm.

“Sweetie, you can say the word all night, it won’t suddenly achieve meaning. I take it we mean Superb Hunters?” She asked St James and I was about to comment that it made little difference to me how amazing he was at hunting shooting or indeed fishing when Caz turned to me and, as though discussing astro physics with a Labrador, introduced me to the concept of the Superb Hunt.

“It’s a fashion brand,” she explained, “named Superb. Mysterious origins. Super cool. Fabulously exclusive. Celebs have been known to sign management deals based on the promise of direct access to the clothes. Though, frankly,” she gestured at the acid yellow t-shirt sitting framed by the orange-with-red-swirls rug beneath, “they make t-shirts, hoodies, jeans. It’s hardly Coco Chanel. But what they have going for them is the marketing, the desire the brand creates, and the super limited levels of stock. Which makes their ‘drops’ legendary, and has spawned the concept of the ‘Superb Hunters.’”

You know how, when people have a stroke, they sometimes come to and can hear words but none of them make sense? Well I’ve never experienced – and hope never to experience that feeling, but I think I came close to it that day.

“Drops?” I said, dreading the answer.

“Okay,” Caz sighed, settled in, turning her body to me like a teacher’s assistant trying to get the class moron to pay

attention to basic maths. “With most fashion brands the clothes are made – sometimes by factories the brand owns, mostly by licensees who make the clothes on behalf of the brand. The brand then handles the marketing and selling of the clothes either into department stores or via their own store network?”

I nodded mutely.

“Good,” Caz nodded back, pleased at the attention her student was giving. “Well Superb disrupted that model. They make the clothes themselves, in super limited numbers, and then they sell them directly to their consumers. But not via their own store network.”

“No?” I asked, imagining that they sold the t-shirts from the back of a van at boot fairs. Turned out: I wasn’t far off the mark.

“Pop-ups,” Caz announced, everything about her manner suggesting that this term came with a flourish; a sort of verbal *ta-da!*

I stared blankly back at her.

Caz rolled her eyes. “They take out a short term lease on a shop or a bar or – in one case, I seem to remember – the gift shop at the Imperial War Museum, put the stock they want to sell into it and then – and here’s the real stroke of genius – give clues to the shop’s whereabouts via their social media streams – Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. You get the picture?”

I got the picture. Sort of. “So are you saying that they have a shop but nobody knows where it is.”

“I think she’s got it,” Caz murmured, looking to Jordan St James for confirmation. “That’s exactly what I’m saying: The people who want to buy the clothes give their details to Superb and then get clues to where the clothes are on sale, thus turning popping out and buying a T-Shirt into an event that gathers pages of coverage, millions of tweets, postings

and comments, and elevates Superb from being, basically, a slightly upmarket Gap to being the lovechild of an Andy Warhol event, and a treasure hunt.”

“And the people who collect these clues and try to get to the pop-up shop and buy the clothes before everyone else gets there are called Superb Hunters?” I essayed.

“By George, she’s got it,” Caz beamed.

“But there’s one thing I don’t get,” I said. “Why, beyond a typical male urge to collect, would so many people be willing to go through all this?”

“For the resale value,” Caz answered. “Look, most of the people who get to the pop-ups and buy whatever overpriced tat is on offer this week have no desire to ever wear it. They will mark it up substantially, shove it up on EBay, and rake in an often very sizeable profit on every single t-shirt.”

“Jesus, Caz,” I sighed, “What’s wrong with just popping to Primark for a hoodie? So – what?” I turned back to St James, “Are you suggesting that someone – one of these Hunters – ran your flatmate over to stop him getting to a shopful of T-Shirts before them?”

St James considered the question silently. “Look,” he finally said, standing, “Harry was really good at this game. He was making a good living reselling the stuff. It’s like he had a sixth sense as to how and where they’d set the shops up, so he was usually a step or two ahead of most other hunters. Almost like he was psychic,” he said, gesturing us to follow him.

“Yeah, well,” I said as we crossed the living room and paused beside two doors, one of which was open, the other firmly closed. “I’m not entirely convinced that his gifts were up there with contacting Houdini or moving houses with your mind. But then, I’m also not sure that it’s the sort of thing that should be getting people murdered.

St James opened the closed door.

"This was Harry's room," he said, crossing to the wardrobe. "Your colleagues saw this, so it'll be on your records anyway."

"Colleagues?" I frowned, before I realised we were – as far as Jordan St James was concerned – what Elaine had referred to as Po-Po.

He flung the wardrobe doors open, and stood pointing into the empty space.

"There," he said, waving his hands like a magician about to produce a dove from thin air.

"Where?" I asked.

A rail. A dozen or so empty hangers. Some dust motes at the bottom of the wardrobe.

"This was Harry's wardrobe," St James said.

A light began to dawn. "And I'm guessing that this – last time you remember – was filled with all of Harry's clothes?"

He nodded. "It used to be wall-to-wall Superb clothing. But now it's been emptied."

"By whom?" Caz asked, running a finger along the hangers and making them jingle like wind chimes.

"I wonder if he was running away," St James mused aloud.

"Running away? Who would he have been running away from?" I turned to him.

"One of them – one of the hunters – turned up here a week or so ago. At least, I think he was one of the hunters. Some Chinese guy, dressed like a fashion shoot gone wrong.

"I didn't see him arrive – I was in my room – but I heard the two of them... well, it wasn't exactly an argument. At first. But the Chinese guy had this wheedling tone like he wanted something that Cathedral wasn't willing to give him, and then their voices started to rise. I came out of my room, and I heard him – the Chinese guy – saying 'Just get me in, mate. That's all I want: a fair slice of the pie,' and Harry said words to the effect that he didn't know what this guy was on

about, at which point the Chinese guy got really upset and said 'You know what I'm on about. Don't make me spell it out for you. I want in. And I want you to get me in.'

"What happened?" I asked.

St James shrugged, "Harry stood his ground; insisted he had no idea what this other guy was on about, and the other guy got more and more angry, til he finally snapped. 'Listen,' he said, 'Do what I want, dude, or you'll be sorry. Nobody says no to me.'"

"What happened then?"

"They saw me. I don't think they realised I was in the flat, so they both looked a bit shocked, and the Chinese guy just sort of ran for it. I heard him still half-pleading, half-threatening Harry even as he was heading out the door, but Harry wasn't having any of it."

"And he definitely said 'You'll be sorry'?" I asked. St James nodded.

"Was there any further contact between the two?" Caz asked, and this time he shook his head.

"Not that I know of. I mean they might have texted or something. The police have Cathedral's phone so I can't check. But the Chinese guy never turned up here again while I was around. I asked Harry what it was all about, but he made out like it was nothing. 'Just a sore loser,' was all he'd say."

St James paused, looked back back into the empty wardrobe. "But I can't help wondering if Harry was more worried than he made out. If, instead of a Superb Hunt that day, he was running for his life."

## CHAPTER 5



Charmaine Stannard was, like Elaine, petite and pretty, but where Elaine had soft blonde curls, her friend had long dark hair, glossy and straight that framed a pale elfin face, a slightly pointy chin softened by the full rosebud lips above, and a pair of round blue eyes – somewhat out of scale compared to the rest of her face, giving a cartoonish air to her, as though someone had assembled the ideal eyes, lips, hair, face, but not really considered that putting all of this perfection together in one place would add up to less than the sum of its parts.

While we'd been not impersonating police officers – but not exactly disabusing Jordan St James of his misunderstanding – Charmaine had been released on bail, and Elaine had brought her straight around to The Marq to talk to us.

The police had interviewed her for several hours that day, and while they'd obviously been trying to gather information from her, Charmaine – who was smarter than they might have assumed – had managed to gather some interesting facts from them.



Like the fact that she'd been arrested thanks to an anonymous telephone tip off to the police.

"They're claiming I did it cos I was still angry at him posting that stupid video," she'd said, her eyes tearing up.

"Well, it was rather an invasion of your privacy," I ventured, and she shrugged as though not entirely agreeing with me.

"I've had a lot of hate mail, but the haters are nothing new. But on the plus side, I've just been asked to talk at a conference about hate porn and what feminism means to today's young women. I'm not sure if it was the video leak or the, y'know," she mimed a blow job, "that got me that gig, but either way, Cathedral did me a favour, really. Plus, the lighting was beautiful. I looked fab in it, so I'm not gonna complain."

"But you did complain," Caz reminded her. "You tried to run him over."

"That was more to do with the slag he was knocking off. I mean, I never said we was exclusive. But it did hurt when I found them texts from that slag he was seeing on the side, while I was getting dropped by my agent."

"Right," I said, "the mysterious other woman."

"Oh she wasn't mysterious. I know exactly who it was: Amanda Hurt."

I repeated the name. "Seriously?" Charmaine looked at me uncomprehendingly. "It's just," I shrugged, "well, it just sounds like a drag queen name. You know," I pressed on to her blank stare, "Amanda Hurt: A man to hurt. It just," I trailed lamely off, "just sounds like a drag queen name."

"Yeah," Charmaine sniffed, a flash of anger in her eyes, "well she dresses like a drag queen. Or a tart. I can't believe," she stopped moving, all the anger and energy seeming to evaporate from her, "that he's gone. Don't get me wrong: He

was a pain in the arse at times, but he was funny and sweet and just a genuinely nice guy. And then this happens.”

She zoned back in to the kitchen at The Marq, smiled sadly at me across the table. “He didn’t deserve this.”

“So what happened when you split with Cathedral?” I asked. “Did he and Miss Hurt become an item?”

“You’re joking, right? She’d ditched his sorry arse long before Cathedral and me ended.” She looked at me expectantly, then at Elaine.

“He does know Mandy Hurt, right?” She asked.

Elaine gave me a look of almost heartbreaking pity, and shook her head. “He’s basically, like, a thousand years old. If they aint in the bible, I don’t think he has a clue who they are.”

Charmaine shook her head in wonder. “Here,” she tapped on her phone, opened a photography based app, and turned the screen to me. “That’s Amanda Hurt. She wears clothes.”

The statement was somewhat misleading. Amanda Hurt, it seemed, was another internet personality, this one known for her extreme fashion and makeup that – a quick flick through her account – suggested she lived in a world where popping down to Tesco dragged up as a sex robot from the year ten thousand, or doing the garden in a bondage corset and ten inch stiletto heels, were perfectly acceptable approaches to life.

“Everyone knows that she and her boyfriend are total whores,” Charmain said in tones so judgemental I expected the phrase ‘only as good as she should be’ to pop forth from her lips at any time. “The two of them sleep around, then the flings end and they get back with each other.”

“Well in her case she has to,” Elaine explained pointing at a picture of the lady in question wearing an A-Line skirt constructed out of what looked like chicken wire, a pair of fluorescent green stilettos – again, at least ten inches high –

and a towering pompadour into which a small cage – featuring what looked like a live canary – was set.

“Perfect for the school run,” Caz noted.

“The stones alone,” Elaine indicated the glittering necklace around Amanda Hurt’s throat and the matching twinkles in her ear lobes, “cost about fifty grand. And that cheap slapper aint got a pot to piss in, nor a window to throw it out of.” I could see that the judgemental style didn’t reside solely with Charmaine.

“So where’s the money come from?” I asked.

“Her boyfriend,” the girls said simultaneously, “Franco,” and Caz, as though rising from slumber, responded, “Please tell me it’s not Franco Farinelli.”

“Perve,” the girls said as one, the absence of a correction confirming Caz’s identification.

“Well,” Caz said to me, “I think that answers the question of Cathedral’s psychic abilities,” and when I looked at her blankly, she explained.

“Franco Farinelli is the man behind Suberb clothing.”

“So, what? You think Amanda was giving him the inside scoop on the pop ups?”

Charmaine frowned. “She kept texting him. And then there was a few nights he told me he was going up to Manchester to a sample sale, only I used ‘find my phone’ on his old phone and he wasn’t in Manchester, he was in bloody Brixton.”

“Brixton?” That was where he’d been killed.

“*She* lives there. With Franco the perve. In some insane loft apartment.” Charmaine jerked her head towards the phone, the photo of Ms Hurt as a post-Apocalyptic Marie Antoinette fading to black.

“Now that,” I said, glancing briefly at Caz, “is very interesting.”

“He wouldn’t let me see the texts, but I saw one from her

that said something about 'Big Boy Games.' At first I thought it was some sort of computer game thing, then when I realised where she lived, and that Cathedral had spent the whole night there, I put two and two together. We had a huge argument about it.

"I called her, told her she was a cheap slapper, and to keep her hands off my man."

"And what did she say to that?"

"She denied it at first, then when I told her who my man was, she laughed, and said that whatever I thought was going on was not what was really going on. Then she said not to worry, that she was ending 'the arrangement.' Are you saying, now, that it was just business?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted, "but I have a hypothesis: while Cathedral's been diddling Amanda Hurt she's been slipping him the details on Superb pop-ups, thus allowing him to profit from buying the most collectable pieces, marking them up and selling them on. Then they split."

"Split? They were never together," Charmaine snapped back, disgust at the suggestion etched on her face. "It was just sex. We – Cathedral and me – we were together. We even had a joint Instafeed."

"The new matching tattoos," Caz murmured, deferring to me. "Your hypothesis, maestro."

I sighed deeply. "I don't really have much more. To be honest, if whatever he had with Amanda ended, then Cathedral lost his access to advance notice. If anything, that would give *him* a reason to lash out in a fury against her. I can't see why she'd lash out against him.

"Well," Caz responded, "I guess there's only one way to check."

## CHAPTER 6



“*I*t’s not exactly Place Vendome,” Caz shivered and shrunk into her coat.

Superb’s website was filled with pictures of young beautiful models – the sort who are so expensive that they look like real people instead of models – sporting and cavorting in their casual wear in places like a litter-strewn back alley in Soho, a palatial-looking stop on the Moscow underground, a Parisian Bistro, a train shed surrounded by construction workers, and a busy Times Square in New York.

Their global headquarters, on the other hand, was located in an industrial estate in Croydon.

The reception area featured more of these ‘real people’ lounging around in this season’s offerings – a black t-shirt with rips and an inspirational quote from Bertrand Russell featured heavily.

The item was priced – according to the Superb website – at two hundred pounds (or, as it was currently out of stock, and the only way to lay hands on it was via resellers on EBay, at four hundred). I doubted many of these real people

pictured in pub car parks or railway sidings would be leaving the shoot and popping straight out for more of the same.

A receptionist – all glistening skin, pearly teeth and absolute disdain – was sitting on the other side of what looked like the monolith from 2001, and ignoring us with every fibre of her being.

Sixties reggae, alternating with 90s trip house, whispered from hidden speakers.

Caz strolled casually up to the slab of black granite, and after a few moments of to-and-fro during which the receptionist (who, it transpired, was called Infamee, and who had gone to school with Caz's friend Spot, and who – furthermore – considered herself 'more of an executive assistant slash corporate welcomer') confided in us that Ms Hunt was in the building, but wasn't seeing anyone today.

"Jodhpurs," Infamee whispered conspiratorially, and I wondered momentarily if we were discussing the clothing or another of their joint school friends. "She wanted them for the Summer 20 collection but they've just had the first batch of samples in and she's not happy. Saggy gussets, apparently. So I've been told to cancel everything and ordered – by him – to keep her away from the gin."

"Oh what a shame," Caz sighed. "I did so want to see her. Well," she waved vaguely towards the door we'd just entered by, "we were passing, and it seemed churlish not to."

The idea that Caz could have been passing anywhere less than thirty miles away from where we were standing did not enter poor Infamee's head. "How is life at the magazine?" The executive assistant slash corporate welcomer asked, seemingly unaware that not only did Caz no longer work at said magazine, but that said magazine, itself, had recently folded, having been sold to an asset stripper based in Monte Carlo, who'd fired all the staff, flogged all the assets and then

folded what was left and dropped it into the trash. Or, as they'd phrased it, "Gone digital only."

"Oh, y'know," Caz murmured noncommittally. "So what's she like?"

"Amanda?" Infamee leant in, as though she was about to say something libellous. We leant in towards her. "Absolutely lovely," she whispered, as though to describe a fashion maven in such terms were the most offensive thing that could be said of her. "Except when she's on the gin; then, she's a right cow."

"I was hoping to do a profile," Caz murmured, keeping her voice as casual and unconcerned as possible.

"Well I could see if I can book you in for some time next month," Infamee answered, "though I'd have to run it past publicity."

Next month, obviously, was not going to work.

Fate, however, smiled on us, for at that moment a tall man, his jet black hair swept back in a widows peak, goatee beard clipped to precise lines, a pair of heavy black rimmed glasses framing a pair of piercing blue eyes, crossed the lobby.

And paused.

"Hello." His face – deeply tanned, in a way that spoke of weekends in Capri rather than mornings on a sunbed – broke into a smile – all sparkling teeth, curious eyes, and crows feet. "It's Caroline, isn't it?"

He was wearing a pair of black jeans so skinny they looked sprayed on, a pair of boots so large that each of them looked like it could house a family, and a black t-shirt with the words "It's Fucking Superb" emblazoned across the chest in red lettering, and a watch that looked like it cost more than my annual earnings the previous year

Caz turned. "Franco," she smiled, and leant in for a triple

air kiss, and once again I was left in awe of my friend's address book. "Darling. You look fabulous."

"As do you," he smiled back, his gaze flicking briefly to me before returning to Caz. "I haven't seen you since that dreadful party at Sophia Sussman-Bogota's. How've you been? And what brings you to this godforsaken place?"

Caz gestured at me. "Franco, this is Danny. He was hoping – that is, we were hoping – to have a brief word with Amanda."

"Amanda?" He frowned, his gaze once again flicking to and away from me. "Not sure today would be a good time."

"What?" Caz tilted her head to one side, "Not even if I said I knew a supplier in China. Wonderful high tensile stretch cotton. Gussets that never sag."

"Gussets?" Franco shot a look at Infamee, who made herself busy with the computer in front of her. He considered Caz's offer.

"Tell you what," he said after a moment, "take a seat, and I'll see what we can do."

And so it was that, a few minutes later, we were ushered into a large bright office, and introduced to a fresh-faced girl with a band of freckles across her nose, her mousy hair pulled back in a pony tail, and – on her left wrist – the mandatory bigger-than-her-head wristwatch. Amanda Hunt wore a pair of New Balance trainers and a powder blue tracksuit and the air of a harrassed genius.

I found it odd to balance this soft young woman with the fashionista persona her social media projected, and when she spoke it was clear she really didn't want to talk to us.

"Franco tells me you may have a supplier that can solve my jodhpur problem," she said and, after Caz had written a name, phone number and contact details on to a page of her notebook, torn it out and handed it across, she thanked her, glanced at the paper, and reached for the phone. "Any-



thing else?" She asked, telegraphing the fact that, the purpose of the meeting now having been achieved, she was keen for us to be on our way and leave her to get on with work.

"Well," I said, jumping in before she could lift the phone and banish us, "we were hoping to discuss Harry Carmichael with you."

She paused.

"Known as Cathedral," Caz added, and from behind us, Franco coughed.

"Cathedral?" Amanda, frowned, and Franco came around the desk to stand beside her, placing his hand on her shoulder. "What about him?" She glanced briefly at Franco, her hand withdrawing from the telephone.

"He's dead," I said.

They exchanged a glance. "Dead?" She repeated.

"How?" Franco asked, his tan fading a little.

I told them, and Franco dropped into a chair, his tan fading further.

"Jesus," he gasped.

"When?" Amanda asked. "Why?"

"Why," I admitted, "is what we are trying to ascertain. But right now, the interesting question might be *where*."

They looked at each other, repeating the word, and so I once again chipped in. "He was murdered down an alleyway in Brixton. You live in Brixton, don't you?"

Amanda Hunt now paled, then the shock was replaced by an angry blush.

"You should probably go now," she said, reaching for the phone.

"Something was going on," I said. "You can throw us out Miss Hunt, but people know that Cathedral was getting tipped off on the locations for the pop-ups. And that he was having an affair with you."

That one made her laugh. “Tipped off? Of course he was getting tipped off. He was an influencer.”

“But then your relationship ended,” I said.

“There was no relationship,” she said flatly.

“Okay,” I tried again, “let’s say it wasn’t a relationship. Let’s just say it was casual. Let’s,” I said as she continued to shake her head, “call it what you did: Big Boy Games.”

She laughed again, this time the laughter skirting around hysteria.

“There was no relationship,” she said when the laughter had ended.

“Not with Mandy,” Franco said, reaching a hand out to cover hers.

And the penny dropped.

“Both of us – Harry and I – had fun,” he shrugged, lifting the hand and inspecting the thumb on his left hand. “It was entirely consensual, and nobody’s business but ours.”

“Which means you didn’t want it becoming anyone’s business but yours,” I said. “And also why – when Charmaine realised that something was going on, *you* agreed,” I said nodding at Amanda, “to take the rap for it.”

She shrugged. “This is the fashion business. People think it’s wall to wall gays, and half the time it is, but bisexuals are a bit rarer.”

“And this is Superb,” Franco added. “We sell to a crowd that relies on a particular image.”

“And that image is that there’s nothing ‘poofy’ about the clothes,” Amanda explained. “Which is why we love tastemakers like Cathedral, Boxers, Forumla One drivers, and all those footballers wearing our creations.”

“Cos there’s nothing ‘poofy’ about boxers, footballers and drivers,” I said dryly.

“Look, like it or not mate,” Franco said, “it’s how things are. I’m not in the business of remaking the world. I make t-

shirts, for Christs sake. So yes, to your question earlier, it was in my best interests – and Harry’s – that our fun remained private.”

“And then it ended,” I said.

Franco finished inspecting the fingernails on his left hand, and switched to those on his right. “These things happen,” he said flatly.

“Only Cathedral didn’t want to lose all the benefits of the relationship,” I said. “It was you, wasn’t it, who’d been giving him his pop-up notifications.”

Franco looked up, made eye contact briefly, and went back to the fingernails. “And if it was?”

“Well,” I shrugged, “If it was, and suddenly you stopped providing those details, Cathedral might have decided that he’d use the one bit of leverage he had over you.”

This time it was Franco who laughed, a loud barking sound that suggested ridicule and outrage more than humour. “You think he was blackmailing me? ‘Tell me about the pop-ups or I’ll tell the world about us?’”

Amanda, hearing the words, shook her head. “I think we’re done here,” she said, her hand reaching for the phone.

“No,” Franco held an immaculately manicured hand out to stop her summoning security.

“Have you seen our product?” He asked me. “They’re t-shirts. We design prints for basic t-shirts. Put logos on jogging bottoms. Cheaply made coats and cotton pants. The markup on them is astronomical.”

“Not news,” I said, wondering where this was going.

“And yet,” he pressed on, “Our customers fork out hundreds of pounds for the stuff. In week six two years ago we had a t-shirt with a print of a peacock on it. It retailed at two hundred and ten quid. And it sold out.”

Proving, I supposed, that there was a dedicated follower of fashion born every minute.

“Next year – in week nine – we’re re-releasing it in a limited ‘homage’ to the original classic.”

Farinelli laughed. Again, the sound was joyless. “‘Homage.’ ‘Classic.’ This time it’s going to be priced at three hundred quid and they will sell immediately. It’s all top secret, but Bloomingdales have already pre-ordered the whole lot. The matching pea-hen sweatshirts are going for five notes and Harvey Nichols are sniffing around them.”

“So it’s a huge money business,” I said, no longer sure what – beyond boasting of his success – Farinelli was trying to communicate to me.

“And one built on sustaining the desirability, the lustre, the collectability of the pieces,” Amanda explained as though I were slightly stupid.

Which I felt.

“And the way we created that desirability, the way we sustain the lustre, is by partnering with certain tastemakers.”

I’d heard this word too often. Like taste could be made. But a light was dawning.

“So you’re saying that the advance notice of the pop-ups wasn’t something that started as a result of Cathedral’s liaison with you?”

Farinelli smiled. “Exactly. And it wasn’t something that ended with the end of our fun. Because for Cathedral, it was a way of sustaining his position as a fashion blogger worth following, and for us it was a way of ensuring that the clothes remained something that were clearly desirable.”

“If Cathedral Carmichael was willing to moped all over London to get his hands on the latest t-shirt, then Fred Bloke from Farnham was far more likely to want to buy the next wave when they hit the stores,” Amanda explained.

“You’re telling me that – post relationship - nothing changed?” I said, feeling somewhat deflated.

“Nothing changed,” Franco confirmed. “The business

relationship with Cathedral was symbiotic: He needed access to the pop-ups to make himself look cool and fashionable, and we needed that cool fashionability – amongst other tastemakers – to keep our product cool and fashionable.”

Caz looked at me. “You look,” she said, “Like someone who’s just discovered that the world is a hotbed of duplicity and deception.”

That, or I was trying to identify the sort of muppets who would fork out three hundred quid for a t-shirt. “So you were still passing on the details of the pop-ups to Cathedral. How did that work?”

“We made it a game,” Franco admitted.

“We had to maintain some semblance of the hunt,” Amanda added, “so we’d send out the same clues that everyone got, but certain approved people-”

“The tastemakers,” I added unnecessarily, just for the effect of feeling the words in my mouth.

Franco nodded. “Certain tastemakers would receive their clues an hour or so earlier than the rest of the mob.”

“They still needed to figure out the clue and get themselves to the shops pronto,” Amanda added, in a tone that suggested she was justifying the uneven playing field.

“But they had an hours head start,” I answered. “On the rest of,” I ladled sarcasm over the phrase, “The mob.”

“It’s just business,” Franco said simply, returning to a detailed examination of his cuticles.

## CHAPTER 7



Back at The Marq, Elaine had turned up with Charmaine, and the two were ensconced at the kitchen table with the twins, a tin of biscuits, mugs of tea and an open laptop.

Charmaine had remembered something: “When he was on a Hunt, Cathedral always had a Go-pro attached to him.”

“A mini High definition camera,” I announced, proud of my knowledge, having helped my brother’s girlfriend research them as a Christmas gift for Dash the year previously.

The gang looked at me as though my outburst had consisted of some Tourettic profanity.

“It was linked,” Charmaine added. “To his website. So he could upload the hunt. It’s also,” she blushed slightly, “how he was able to film me when I lost my temper.”

“You mean,” I corrected her, “when you tried to run him over with a smart car?”

“The thing is, “Elaine butted in, “the five-oh didn’t mention the camera when they hauled Char in.”

“That’s right,” her friend confirmed. “They didn’t show

me any footage. They didn't suggest they had video of me running him over this time. They didn't even seem to know that the footage ought to exist."

"Which they would have done," I acknowledged, "if they'd had the camera. You say it was linked to his website?"

Ray gestured at the laptop. On screen a photo of the rose gold AirPods was quickly replaced by a bland sign in page.

"It's his email address, then CHAR1502. My birthday. All upper case," Charmaine said, a catch in her voice, as Ray tapped at the keyboard, grunted, scrolled through a few files, paused, frowned, asked if we were sure we wanted to watch this now and, once we'd all agreed that now was exactly when we wanted to watch it, clicked on a file, and turned the screen towards us.

We clustered around it intently watching as the screen went black, flickered, and the video began.

It was a dull day when Cathedral Carmichael died, and the light started out dim, then progressed from dim to dark and then to a city lit by sodium bulbs as he traversed the streets. All of this was seen through his chest-level view of the city: Traffic jams, buses, taxis, pedestrians jumping lights as he sped towards the first popup shop in Hammersmith.

The video was silent, the point, I supposed, being to capture visuals that Cathedral could later put to music and post to his website, pulling in more viewers who already knew what a London street sounded like, but who wanted to vicariously live the thrill of being a tastemaker fashion blogger.

I glanced around us. The kitchen at The Marq appeared to have darkened, the six of us leaning in to the screen.

I knew what we were waiting for: Unedited footage of a murder. Perhaps, I thought, we should stop this; simply send the link to the police, and let them do what needed to be done. But it was too late.

On screen, Cathedral had arrived at the first popup store, made his purchases and been handed a white duffle bag with the Superb logo on it, which – I assume, as he was on a moped – he'd slung over his shoulders. The camera showed him exiting the store, climbing back on to his moped and heading to the next store, the streets of London, lit now with an acidic sodium glare, whooshing by.

And then Cathedral turned off the main street, onto a narrower alley.

The room seemed to still, all of us knowing that this was nearly it.

And then the angle shifted, the bright main street swooshing right as Cathedral turned into an alley way and the moped stopped.

Ahead was a brick wall. The view wiggled to left and right, as though Cathedral was looking around.

The light changed suddenly, seeming to become much brighter, and it was only as Cathedral turned, his whole body moving and taking the camera with him that I realised the new light sources were the headlights on a car – something big and – because of the full beam lights – indistinguishable beyond the glare.

Cathedral's hand crossed the frame, as though he were lifting it to shield his eyes against the lights, and a moment passed during which, I assumed, he called out, asking the driver what they thought they were doing.

Then the light seemed to explode as the car shot forward.

There was an incredible impact that caused the camera to, firstly, shift to the ground, then towards the sole street light in the alley, before another flash caused the angle to shift, the perspective to stove to one side, and then the light receded slightly, and briefly, before exploding once again, and I knew that this was the point at which the car had



crushed Cathedral against the wall and, reversing one more time, allowed his body to drop to the ground.

The darkness remained a few moments more, the edges flickering light on and off as – I realised with horror – the car drove back and forth on the body underneath.

Then, after what felt like a lifetime, the orange street light returned, the camera now pointing up at the tile-edged roofs of the buildings on either side of the alley way, and a pair of jeans crossed the field of view before a flash of white, the edge filled with the “S” of the Superb logo filled the screen and vanished.

“They took the clothes,” I said.

Ray tapped on his phone.

Then, as we watched, a hand came back, and a figure – obscured by the nearness to the lense and the lack of light – bent over Cathedral and dragged at his body, shifting the camera as they tugged, until finally the hand reached out and covered the camera, and the transmission ended.

It was only at that point, in the stillness of the room, that I realised that, at the very end, the camera – clipped to the young man’s chest – had been jerking up and down as he struggled to breathe. As he breathed his last.

Dash clicked ‘stop’ on the laptop.

“Fuck,” Elaine said.

“They took the clothes,” Charmaine said. “They killed him for them.”

I couldn’t believe it. “He was killed for a T-Shirt?”

“A coat,” Ray said. “I checked the website – they register what they call ‘Primaries’: People who made it to the site first and got the pick of the gear. And Cathedral was a ‘Primary’ at the popup at a former Co-op undertakers in Hammer-smith. They’ve got him down as nabbing the week twelve Parka.”

“Why is it whenever anyone speaks about this bloody clothes thing I feel like I’ve had a stroke?”

“This Superb lot make a garment for the season – for this Autumn/Winter it’s a Parka, right? Only once you’ve got the Parka there’s no fun in collecting any more,” Ray explained.

“Fun for you; or money for them,” Caz interjected.

“So, to keep things fresh they release a new super-limited edition every three weeks. Week one the basic item in a unique colour; week two maybe different buttons. A new lining, a fur trim, whatever. But it means that, based on the detail you can gauge the uniqueness of a particular piece.”

“Or the gullibility of the wearer,” Caz murmured.

Dash looked at Caz, then at me as though asking me to keep my Aristo under control. He said: “I thought you loved a bit of fashion.”

“Fashion? Sweetie, we’re discussing a Parka. I’ve seen the tat that Superb put out. It’s a waxed canvas piece with a zip front. It’s basically a tent with arms. Plus,” she added, “we’re seriously discussing a coat that resulted in someone being murdered. I’ll give fashion a lot of passes, but not murder.”

“So what happened to the coat?” I mused, as Ray continued to tap away on his phone.

“I think it ended up on EBay,” he said.

## CHAPTER 8



Elaine Falzone was seventeen. Her friend Charmaine was, I reckoned, a year or two older, and Cathedral Carmichael had been maybe a year older than her.

Johnny Yeung was twenty-one.

I knew this because he'd filled his Instagram account with pictures of his Twenty-first birthday party (Theme: Twenty-first century Decadence) which had been hosted (it said on the Instagram posts) on the rooftop of one of London's newest destination Cathedrals, featured a performance by a well known balladeer, a DJ set by someone called Ingvarr Krapp, and an appearance from a minor Kardashian who appeared to have been flown in specially for the purposes of posing with Yeung and a nebuchadnezzar of the champagne brand that had sponsored the festivities.

For my twenty-first, a bunch of us had gone to soho, my best mate had copped off with a bouncer, and I'd ended up being sick in a bin on Regent Street at four in the morning.

Times, clearly, had changed.

Yeung's name had been familiar to Elaine, Charmaine, Ray and Dash.

“He makes out he’s a normal guy who somehow manages to live this fabulous life,” Elaine, unable to keep a trace of bitterness out of her voice, had explained, “but everyone knows his parents are mega rich.”

“So not an average Joe at all?” I asked, wondering if everyone in this mess was going to turn out to be doing life as performance art.

“His dad’s some bigwig in China. Which is a Communist country,” Ray explained, in case – I suppose – I was unfamiliar with the history of the People’s Republic of China. “So having a shitload of money is sort of frowned on,” he added in his most earnest tones.

Yeung junior – that scion of Communist royalty – wasn’t living in a commune in Stoke Newington. Having arrived as a student majoring in Political Science and Political Economy, he’d moved in to an apartment block on Park Lane where the most recent flat had sold for somewhere in the region of two and a half million. Sterling. Mummy and daddy Yeung had clearly been watching their pennies for a while.

There was more likelihood of a supermodel ordering the risotto and the roast potatoes than there was of us slipping into Yeung’s student digs: a buzzer on the door got us no further than a reception – all polished marble and deep carpets – which seemed to be the personal fiefdom of a Gorilla in a suit.

The presence of a gold name badge did nothing to dispel the sense that he was more repellent than receptionist, as did the knuckles on his hands – bruised and red from where he’d clearly dealt with a recent unwanted visitor.

“Which apartment did you want?” he fixed us with a look of unfiltered mistrust.

“Yeung,” I said, smiling. “Johnny Yeung.”

“And the apartment number?” He asked, making absolutely zero attempt to return the friendly smile I offered.

“Oh, we don’t know the flat number,” I smiled back, and his eyes seemed to change from slate grey to black.

“No number,” he said simply, “no admittance.”

I opened my mouth, prepared to debate the ruling, and a glance from King Kong silenced me. From behind me, I heard the sound of a camera shutter clicking, and turned as Caz lowered her phone and began tapping the screen.

“What you doing?” The Gorilla in Gucci snarled.

“Well if the mountain can’t get to Mohammed,” Caz smiled back at him and continued to tap, “let’s see if Mohammed can come to the mountain.”

“I thought you said you wanted Johnny Yeung,” the bruiser snarled, his mind clearly reeling at the introduction of this mysterious Mr Mohammed.

“Seriously, Caz,” I whispered, “what are you doing?”

She smiled, and nodded at the phone, where she’d opened the Instagram app. The picture she’d just snapped – the back of my head with the snarling face of the bouncer – filled the screen.

“I’m sending it to Johnny Yeung via his Instagram account,” she explained. “He seems to live on it these days. ‘Dear @Yeung\_Hung\_London,’” Caz recited as she typed, “Lord, subtlety is clearly not his metier, is it? Where was I? Oh yes, @Yeung\_Hung\_London, we’re in reception and would like to talk to you about the murder of Cathedral Carmichael’ – why do you think every man in this mess seems obsessed with their willies? Anyways, ‘Especially as you seem to have ended up with the clothes he bought the day he died. Feel free to pop down any time, but be warned we’ll be heading off to the police in half an hour.’ There,” she scanned the text once more, hit send, and slipped the phone back in her pocket.

“Shall we take a seat?”

We'd barely parked our behinds when the phone behind reception rang and Guy the Gorilla picked it up, muttered something into the receiver, glared at us in a way that suggested he was considering the cost benefit ration in tearing us limb from limb against having to steam clean the Persian rugs, and, a moment later, he dropped the receiver.

“I dunno what you did,” he snarled across at us, “but he wants you upstairs. Fifth floor. And if there's even a whiff of something wrong I'll be up. You don't want that happening.”

I strained for something witty to reply with, and was saved from the ignominy of failure by the lift doors opening and Caz suggesting we get in and up to the fifth before he changed his mind.

The doors opened on a bland carpeted lobby, and almost before we were out of the lift, the apartment door opposite us swung open and a tall angry Johnny Yeung stood glaring at us.

“I don't know who the hell you are,” he snarled, “or what you think you're doing, but you have exactly five minutes to spill it and get the hell out of my flat before I call security.”

He turned and stalked off down a long entry hallway that opened up into a vast living room.

The space was furnished like an antiques showroom as styled by Pierre et Giles. In the corner, a life-sized Terracotta warrior stood, his head surmounted by a beehive of tiny fairy lights, which trailed around his neck and off down his left arm to the floor.

Three vast sofas – each seemingly bigger than my bedroom – formed a U-Shape, in the middle of which squatted a huge coffee table that looked like it had once upon a time doubled up as a marital bed, and on the floor in front of the balcony window was a humongous vase in Ming style.

On top of the coffee table a three wick candle the size of

my head blazed brightly. I guessed that that was the source of the room's smell, a mixture of smoke, cardamom, vinegar and mulch. It smelled like someone had been burning cowshit in a Tandoor oven. I gagged.

"What's that smell?" I choked.

"It's Vulgar & Inappropriate," Yeung snapped, his look suggesting I should be impressed.

I returned a look that said 'no comment,' and tried not to breathe through my nose.

"They make candles," Caz muttered, whilst smiling beatifically at him. "It's fabulous. Limited?"

"Obviously. They sent it." he sniggered, "Scent; sent. Get it?"

We got it.

Neither of us collapsed in paroxysms of hilarity.

He huffed. "Anyways, it's called 'History,' and it's fabulous. So: What the hell is all this about? And why are you posting shit about murders on my feed? That crap's bad for business, you know?"

I walked over to the vase. What had at first appeared to be traditional motifs resolved themselves, under inspection, to digitised screenshots from porn movies. Sometimes, I realised, what seemed like art, what appeared redolent with history, was junk.

"Well," I said, "Since you mentioned History: What were you doing two nights ago?"

"What? You mean when Cathedral was offed?"

"Offed?" Outside, London rumbled. In here we were in an episode of Law & Order. Perfumed by Jo Malone in her Mumbai Horseshit phase.

"Killed. Murdered. Forcibly retired from life." He sighed theatrically, dropped into one of the sofas, the sudden movement wafting more History towards me. I was already getting a headache.

“So?” I pressed. “Where were you?”

He shrugged. “Around. Why?”

“Because you sold a week twelve Parka on EBay yesterday,” I answered.

“For an awful lot of money,” Caz, who was now roaming around the room inspecting the artwork on the walls chipped in. “And my friend here would very much like to know how the coat came into your possession.”

“I bought it.”

“Not the week twelve, you didn’t,” Caz – still intently inspecting the pictures on the walls – replied. “Y’see, Johnny, Superb are so keen on ensuring that they can track provenance of their pieces that they record – and publicly list – all Primary purchasers.

“The week twelve parka went on sale on Friday. Was completely unavailable anywhere before then, and all the primaries are listed on the Superb website.”

“And yours,” I said, dropping onto the sofa next to him, “isn’t one of those names.”

“He’s right,” Caz turned her gaze on Yeung, who squirmed in his seat. “Oh I know: I hate it when he’s right, too. But he is. Y’see, Johnny, the internet never lies.”

“I used another name,” he said, running long slim fingers through his hair and staring into the middle distance as though he, now, were debating the cost benefit impact of having the Besuited Bruiser downstairs pop up and dismember us in his flat.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “We checked.”

We hadn’t; there hadn’t been time to locate contact and verify every purchaser on the list. But I was hoping Johnny wouldn’t call my bluff on this one.

And he didn’t. “I used a proxy.”

“Johnny,” Caz tapped a fingernail against the glass of one



of the framed artworks on the wall, and Yeung blanched noticeably.

“Okay,” he threw his hands up. “I didn’t know it was his stuff.”

I waited.

He ran his hands through his hair again, a nervous tick that was already noticeable.

Caz tapped the glass on the artwork again. “Do your parents know you’ve been selling off their art collection?”

He made a noise, somewhere between a cough a gasp and a shriek.

“The hell you on about?”

She tapped the glass again. “Basquiat. A limited run. Number fourteen of thirty. Except, Johnny, I happen to know that Bonham’s sold number fourteen in this collection in May. For something like three hundred thousand. Your allowance wasn’t enough?”

“You’re deluded,” he shot to his feet, and glared furiously at her.

“It’s a decent copy,” Caz nodded. “Good enough to fool them if the old Yeungs ask you to walk them around the collection on Skype – I’m guessing they don’t actually get in to London that often.”

Johnny slumped. “What do you want?” He asked, the belligerence evaporated from his voice.

“The source of the coat,” I said, patting the sofa.

He dropped back down on to it.

“It was couriered in, along with some other stuff, some time late Friday night. I was out. The security guy had them behind the desk when I got in.”

“So you opened them, checked out the contents, Ebayed them and went to bed?”

“Look, I like the Superb hunts. I love the exposure their

clothes generate every time I include them on the blog or my social media, and I *really* love the cash that some people will pay for whatever I bring back from them. But the stuff isn't really my thing, you know?" I noticed, for the first time, that young Mr L was dressed head to toe preppy: soft leather boat shoes, a pair of chinos, a button-down shirt and a look of old old money.

"And you didn't think to wonder where the clothes had come from?"

"I figured it was either straight from Superb – some sort of thank you for featuring them on social media so much – or from Cathedral, to say sorry. That was before I heard he was dead, obviously."

"Sorry for refusing to let you in on his little Superb scam?" I prompted, figuring Yeung had to be the Hunter who had demanded an 'in,' and become belligerent when Cathedral had rebuffed his approaches.

"I knew Harry was up to something," Yeung said, leaning back in the sofa and staring at the ceiling. "He was getting to the popups way too quickly."

"So you paid him a visit," I prompted.

"You were seen," Caz murmured.

"The flat mate," Yeung smiled, his lips curving softly. "Rookie error. Should have checked the place was empty."

"So where were you the day he died?"

"Oh," he sat up. The soft smile – part knowing, part uncaring – still in place. "It's like that, is it?"

"You think it could be any other way?"

He shrugged. "I suppose it has to be the way it is. That day?" He stared into the middle distance as though trying to recall what he'd been filling his time with.

I knew this much, from what I'd seen of Johnny Leung: he hadn't been at lectures.

"I was hunting," he said, at length. "Obviously."

"Did you see Cathedral?"

He shook his head. "I must have been given different clues. Mine sent me, first, to a butchers in Shepherds Bush. I got a week twelve boiler suit. Chinchilla trim. And a pair of the week nine crocs. The second clue sent me to Hammer-smith, but all I got there was a Maggie Thatcher sweatshirt and a pair of Richard Wagner Rhinestone jeans."

"Maggie Thatcher sweatshirt?"

"Irony," his smile vanished momentarily. "Whatever: when Cathedral Carmichael was being introduced to the front end of whatever killed him, I was stuck in traffic en route from Shepherds Bush to Hammersmith."

I sat up straighter. "Why were you going from Shepherds Bush to Hammersmith?"

He leant forward, wafted at the candle so that the vile stink wafted up his nostrils and looked at me like I was deranged. "Because that's where the week twelve popup shops were. What's your point?"

"My point," I said, my pulse quickening, "is: Why was Harry Carmichael in Brixton?"

Caz plopped down into the sofa opposite me. The room, somehow, seemed to get a little dimmer, the city outside a little stiller.

"Brixton?" Ho shook his head. "He couldn't have been in Brixton. There were no Superb shops in Brixton. Why would he have been there?"

I glanced around the room, the smell of bullshit and honey filling my nostrils, at the terracotta warrior sparkling like some dragged up ornament, the ming vase that wasn't a ming vase, and I suddenly knew why.

"Because someone sent him there," I said.

## CHAPTER 9



Franco and Amanda were the first to arrive, with Johnny Leung turning up five minutes later. He parked his white Bugatti on the street and stood frowning up at the building, checking the phone in his hand, before shrugging, walking up to the front door and pressing the bell for entry.

The door was barely closed when a small white Smartcar pulled up to the kerb, parked on a clearly visible set of double yellows, and Disgorged Elaine and Charmaine, who also crossed to the door and, having pressed the button and announced themselves, were admitted to the apartment block, Ray and Dash arriving on foot just as the door began to swing closed.

I glanced at Caz. "Ready?" She asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I said, and we stepped out of our watching space in the doorway opposite and made our way across to the apartment block.

"It's us," I said when Jordan James's voice came out of the intercom.

"Okay," he said, sounding something less than pleased,

and there was a loud buzzing followed by a click. The door swung open.

From the lobby, we could hear the buzz of chatter, Johnny Leung's voice raised above the others asking what the hell was going on, the low rumble of Franco Farinelli responding and Jordan's tone – vexed, but trying to remain polite – saying that he was sure everything would be sorted soon.

We climbed the stairs to the first floor, and the door swung open at my touch.

“Wow,” I said, staring around the place, “You’ve tidied.”

The room was pristine, all the piles of clothes and magazines gone, the coffee table devoid of empty pizza boxes. Even the trip-hazard rug was no longer in situ.

“I’m still not sure why you need to do this,” Jordan whispered.

“Well I like a grand finale. I mean: Who doesn’t like a grand finale, right?”

He frowned, clearly less enamoured of theatricality than I was. “I mean,” he said, the smile tight, worry in his eyes as he glanced at the people hanging around his living room, “is it even legal.”

The buzzer sounded again.

“It is now,” I smiled back at him. “That’ll be the law. Would you mind?” But even as I spoke, Caz had pressed the button on the intercom and opened the door to D.I. Davis and a couple of uniforms.

A moment later they were in the flat.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.” I stepped into the living room, the cops following me and Caz trailing behind with Jordan. “I thought it would be nice to come back here, where Harry was happy with his Play Station. Oh-” I had gestured at the space where the PS4 had once been.

It was gone.

"I've boxed it up," Jordan said. "It's in his bedroom."

"Of course," I said, "You need to reclaim the space."

"Before the body's even cold," Elaine said flatly, looking around her with an expression that suggested all this tidiness offended her.

"So what's this all about?" Franco, lounging cross-legged in a big overstuffed armchair, asked as Amanda Hurt perched on the arm of the sofa next to him, Charmaine and Elaine having nabbed the sofa proper, the latter with her feet propped up on the coffee table. Johnny Ho was slumped in the matching armchair to Franco's fiddling with his phone.

"Only we need to be going soon," Amanda clarified, "Franco's flying off to L.A. tomorrow morning and he needs his sleep before long haul."

"I thought you'd like to know who killed Cathedral Carmichael," I said, and the room stilled.

"Killed him? It was a road accident, surely." Franco uncrossed his legs and sat forward in the chair.

Behind me, Ray had been fiddling with various cables and the TV, connecting them to his laptop. I turned to check on him, and he made eye contact, nodded and stepped back.

"The police received this footage a little earlier today." I nodded at Ray and he pressed play, the giant TV screen flickering then filling with the footage from Cathedral's own chestcam.

The room swiftly fell silent as people realised what they were looking at.

Johnny Leung glanced up from his phone, frowned, glanced back to the phone and then, as the footage inexorably unfolded, slid the mobile into his trouser pocket.

At the first moment of impact, Franco let out a strangled cry, and Charmaine, even though she'd seen – perhaps because she'd seen – the footage before, closed her eyes.

Amanda stared at the TV, her face unreadable.

Jordan had moved further into the room and perched on the other end of the sofa. His eyes didn't leave the screen.

Johnny Leung giggled as though he were watching a particularly audacious move in a video game, then – seeming to realise for the first time that this was reality – had the good grace to blush and lean forward in this chair, his full attention fixed on the unfolding crime.

None of those watching looked away until the screen went dark.

“Shit,” Leung whispered, reaching once again for his phone and then seemingly deciding that whipping it out and Tweeting what he'd just seen was probably not the point of the exercise. “Wait: That bag of clothes that crossed the camera: That was the one that I ended up being with, right?”

I nodded. “We think so.”

“Shit,” he said again, before the implications sank a little further in. “Wait a minute: You know I had nothing to do with that, right?” He gestured at the screen. “I mean that's, that's just messed up. Messed up,” he repeated for emphasis.

“And yet the clothes were taken,” I said, “And you had had a fight with Cathedral the week before.”

“He was getting to the stores too early,” Johnny responded sulkily.

I glanced at Amanda and Franco, the latter of whom had tears in his eyes as Leung continued: “I was convinced he had an ‘in.’ Someone was feeding him advance notice of where the pop-ups were going to be.”

“And did he have an ‘in’?” I asked.

Johnny shook his head. “He claimed not, but I wasn't having it. Even on the day when he died he made it to the Hammersmith store too early. Everyone else was in Shepherds Bush. He definitely had someone feeding him locations.”

“You threatened him,” I said flatly. “Said he'd be sorry.”

He sighed. "I was angry. But no matter what I did, I couldn't get the truth out of him. But wait," he seemed to come to the surface, "If you're suggesting I had anything to do with his death..."

I shook my head, "I know you're in the clear. Not long after Cathedral was being murdered, you were registered on the Superb system buying clothes at the popup shop in Hammersmith. Having driven there from Shepherds Bush. No way you'd have made it from Shepherd's Bush to Hammersmith via Brixton and been at the second shop on time on a Friday in rush hour traffic. And that's the first interesting point. Why was Cathedral in Brixton? He'd been shopping in Hammersmith. The next shop was in Shepherds Bush. That's West.

"So why did he drive his moped South East and end up in Brixton?"

I glanced around the room. Charmaine and Elaine were looking at each other in puzzlement.

"That doesn't make any sense," Charmaine said. "Unless there was another shop nobody knew about in Brixton?"

"There wasn't," Franco said darkly. "The shops for week twelve were all in West London. Week fifteen will be all North London. We haven't done South London since week six."

"There's something else," I said, gesturing towards Cathedral's room. "The wardrobes in Cathedral's room are empty."

Elaine shifted uncomfortably; I knew now that I was definitely on the right road.

"Almost as though Cathedral had emptied his cupboards and was about to leave town."

Charmaine was now holding Elaine's hand as though the two of them were about to make a run for it.

"Or," I added, "as if someone – while Cathedral was out –



let themselves into his flat and stole all his clothes. Someone, maybe, who wanted to punish him.”

“Okay!” Elaine threw her hands in the air. “We did it.”

Charmaine scowled darkly at her, then she too deflated. “We only wanted to give him a shock.”

“We filled the car,” Elaine admitted, “and took all his stuff around to mine.”

“It felt like he loved those clothes more than he loved me,” Charmaine said, blinking tears out of her eyes. “And I wanted him to get a shock.”

“And Lo, it came to pass,” I muttered, “that the mystery of Charmaine’s alibi was solved.”

“So,” Davis said from his corner of the room, “your alibi is that you couldn’t have committed the murder because, at that time, you were committing burglary?”

“I’m really sorry,” Charmaine – her eyes downcast, her lower lip trembling - looked suddenly much younger than she was. “I’m so so *so* sorry.”

“So if it wasn’t these two,” Davis gestured at Elaine and Charmaine, nothing about his demeanour suggesting he was forgetting the crime committed, rather that he was focussing on the bigger charge “who was it? Who murdered Mr Carmichael?”

I considered the question. “Why do people commit murder? Surely, it’s usually for one of a few reasons. I mean, I’m not an expert or anything, but I’ve watched enough *Murder she wrote* to make a fair guess: Self-defence – the dead person was an immediate threat to the killer. Doesn’t make sense in this case. Someone lured Cathedral to that alley. The video you’ve seen shows he was followed into the dead end and attacked before he had a chance to do or say anything threatening.

“So what next? Jealousy? Is it possible that the partner of someone Cathedral was having a relationship with became

worried that the relationship was becoming too intense? Did they decide that Cathedral was becoming more than casual?" I glanced at Amanda Hurt and Franco Farinelli.

"Or was it someone who was angry that he'd ended a relationship with him? A crime of passion, as they say?" Both Charmaine – who, truth be told, had been the one to end the relationship – and Franco shifted uncomfortably.

"Or Envy? Someone who was used to getting their way all the time, and suddenly was being shut out of a channel into Superb merchandise that Cathedral had access to?" I glanced at Yeung, who did the fingers-through-his-hair thing again.

"Or was the motive greed? Well," I shrugged. "Let's put the motive to one side for a moment. Let's consider how this murder was committed. Someone lured Cathedral to that alleyway, got him to ride to the end of the alley, and then – when he was well out of sight of the street – ran him over. Repeatedly.

"So how did they lure him there? How did he end up going from Hammersmith to Brixton instead of Shepherds Bush? Or put differently: where should he have been going from and to?"

Franco shifted again, glanced at Amanda. "The clues we sent out were for Shepherds Bush first. That's where we sent everyone first." Johnny Leung nodded.

"And yet Cathedral was sent a text message that sent him to Hammersmith first."

"Impossible," Amanda said. "We separated them so we'd have maximum attendance at the first shop."

I glanced at DI Davis. "Did you bring it?" He lifted a clear plastic evidence bag. In it was Cathedral's phone, the rose gold shining softly in the room's light.

"The police have checked his phone," I said, "and you're right: It definitely shows the order of clues as Shepherds Bush then Hammersmith.

“But something happened on that video,” I nodded towards the now dark screen “After Cathedral is on the ground – as he’s dying – the killer moves around. His body – or, at least, the body cam view – shifts a bit. Almost as though the killer is shifting his body around. Maybe searching for something.”

“Maybe he wasn’t going to a shop,” Jordan offered. “I mean, if he got the messages before everyone else, maybe he decided to do the Hammersmith shop first then was going somewhere else in Brixton unconnected with the Superb Hunt.”

“Who said he got the messages first?” I asked.

Jordan St James froze. I knew that look.

He’d made a mistake. And he knew I knew.

“He did,” he said, gesturing at Leung. “When he came?”

Johnny Leung leaned forward in his seat. “I knew he had an in, but I didn’t know he was getting the actual messages first.” He looked angrily at Franco and Amanda, as though they had personally betrayed him. Each of them – secure, I supposed, in their new deal with Bloomingdales – spared him a glance that said, frankly *Welcome to the real world baby*, before returning their attention to me and Jordan.

I shook my head. “I think I know who told you that Cathedral was getting the messages first,” I said, and Jordan – like a drowning man looking for a lifeboat – turned his eyes to me. “It was Cathedral, wasn’t it?”

He didn’t answer, so I pressed on, “And in doing so, I think he sealed his fate. You see, you needed him dead, and you couldn’t risk killing him here. You’d have been a prime suspect.”

Jordan laughed, shaking his head. “Why on earth would I have wanted to kill Harry? He was my oldest school friend.”

“Who had no money.”

“So? So I leant him a few quid from time to time? Why

would that mean I'd want to kill him? And how did I kill him? I don't own a moped, let alone a car. And besides, I wasn't even in London that night; I was with a client in Portsmouth."

"Your phone," I turned to Charmaine, who looked at me in puzzlement, as though I'd suddenly jumped a few pages ahead in the script for no reason.

"I noticed recently that your phone is a plain black one. What happened to the matching rose gold one that Cathedral got for you?"

"I never got it," she answered. "Obviously. He was setting his one up when he leaked that sodding video. D'you think I wanted a reminder of that on me at all times after? I handed him the box back, still sealed."

"So where is it?" I looked around the flat, finally falling back to Jordan, who looked back at me with a combination of puzzlement, fear and something else.

He knew.

"The police didn't find a rose gold mobile phone – unopened or not – in the flat. I didn't see one. Jordan?"

He shrugged. "Maybe he sold it. You said yourself he was short of money."

I let it drop. "You mentioned that, at one stage, he'd had expectations. His grandmother."

"She died and left him a few quid," Jordan said flatly.

"And some furniture. Where is it, Jordan?"

He waved his hand around at the hideous sideboard, the huge sofas and the coffee table. "It's there. It's all there. What the hell is this about?" He looked at Davis, "And if you have an accusation to make, can you make it and get the hell out of my flat?"

"The rug," I said eventually, and he stopped squawking.

"The rug?" He asked. "I – it was too big for the room. It was dusty. I got rid of it."

“What? Even though it was worth something in the region of four million pounds?”

A collective gasp went around the room.

“Addaboy,” Caz – always a fan of the theatrical moment – murmured.

“It’s worth what?” Charmaine asked, her eyes huge.

“Cathedral’s grannie lived a life,” I said. “Friends with Stalin; mistress of The Shah. Not sure which one, but my guess is that it was the Iranian who gave her the Silk Isfahan rug. The antique silk Isfahan rug – they were mostly woven in the 1600s. I suspect she knew it was valuable. I doubt she had it rolled out in her living room. They were hand woven from virgin silk, dyed with vegetable dyes, woven through with gold thread and decorated with Koranic verses.

“And one of them sold last year at Bradbury’s auction house for four point four million pounds. And you work at Bradbury’s. And you specialise in Ottoman miniatures with, I think we’ll find, a secondary knowledge in all things Ottoman and Persian.”

He shook his head. “I had no idea,” he insisted.

I let that, too, go.

For now.

“I imagine it was something of a shock to you when your penniless mate, who still managed, somehow, to live a dream life – fashion, sex, cash in the good times, while you had to get up every morning and drag yourself to Bradbury’s, ended up unrolling his dear old grannie’s bequest to him. And you saw what she’d left him.”

“It’s in a skip a few blocks away,” he deadpanned. “Or was last time I saw it.”

I smiled. “I doubt that. Now, where were we?”

“Carpet,” Caz prompted. “Glamour versus daily grind.”

“What could you do?” I asked Jordan. “If it was a miniature, you could have swiped it and let him believe it had

been lost. But it was too obvious. Perhaps you tried to persuade him it was too big for the room. Maybe not. Either way, it was Cathedral's inheritance, and he didn't want to be parted from it. And it was sitting there: Four. Million. Quid. And the only way you could lay hands on it was if Cathedral was no more. Then the fates smiled on you. You had to go to Portsmouth on business. You knew he was on a Superb Hunt that day – I can't believe you and he didn't discuss your lives. You were the best of friends after all. If he died while you were away, then you'd be alibied.

“Even better: If he died far away from this flat, people would never assume that anyone or anything in it had anything to do with his death. And Bradbury's didn't expect you to take a Friday rush hour train to Portsmouth; they leant you a car. We've checked,” I nodded at Davis, who nodded – grimly – back.

“So you have a car and he's out on the road on his little moped. But you can hardly follow him wherever and ram him on the public highway then deny you had anything to do with his death. But you know that he gets the texts telling him where the shops are going to be. And he goes there. No matter how odd the location seems. Without question. Without fear. Without hesitation.”

St James had slumped against the wall. His face was waxy, his eyes blazing darkly. The effect was of a figure as lifeless as the Terracotta warrior in Johnny Leung's flat, the 'antique' that wasn't an antique which had triggered my realisation that it might be possible to have an antique that nobody realised was an antique.

“You switched the phones: Set the spare one up so that it looked identical to his, except it wasn't his, and it wasn't his number. And then you held on to his. You got the messages about the shops. You fed him the first one, just to test it

worked. Only you accidentally sent him the second shop first.

“Didn’t matter; he went. He shopped. And then you told him to go to an alley in Brixton. To go right to the end. And to wait. You knew you’d be driving from the West End to Portsmouth, and that you’d go through Brixton to get on to the A3. All you needed to do was make a small detour, turn into the alleyway. Nobody about. Run him over. Take his bag of swag and use it later to frame Johnny Leung, then switch the phones back so that there’d be nothing to explain why Cathedral Carmichael ended up dying alone and afraid, gasping for his life, up an alley way he had no need to be up.”

Somewhere in the middle of Jordan St James, a light went out. “He said he’d never be parted from it.”

He was referring to the carpet, I knew. St James stared into a middle distance. I was no longer sure if he was seeing the room and the people – regarding him with various degrees of horror – or if he was seeing the wet, stinking alley way that his oldest school friend Harry died in.

“We used to dream of what we’d be like when we grew up,” he said at length. His grandmother was our idol. She lived, you know?”

He lifted his head, stared around the room, seeing everyone.

“We were going to live. We weren’t going to be stuck doing jobs like everyone else. But that didn’t happen. Cathedral ended up in an office. I ended up spending my days sucking up to old colonels and to the dessicated wives of long dead diplomats selling off their souvenirs. At least those old bitches had had lives. I was wasting away.

“And then Harry’s grandmother died, and he quit his job.”

He looked around again, a mixture of awe and outrage on his face. “He quit his job. He quit routine. He walked away from it all and became this,” he struggled for the word, “this

*thing*. This walking, talking free thing. Free. He was free, and I was stuck with the responsibility of making a fucking living so we could pay the rent on this place.

“Then they read his grandmother’s will, and I’ll admit I had a moment of – what’s the word? – Schadenfreude? His face. He thought he was about to get millions, and there was a few quid in cash and some old furniture. And I thought, well, he’ll have to come back down to earth now.”

He looked at the ceiling. “Yeah, he’ll have to come back down to earth now. Come back to the shit I have to deal with. Except he’d tasted freedom, and he’d realised he was making money without doing the nine to five, and he didn’t want to go back to it, and I think I hated him even more then.”

“And then the inheritance arrived,” I prompted.

The room had become entirely silent.

Jordan St James nodded. “I knew, almost before it was unrolled, what it was. And I knew that it was my chance. I could escape. I could be free.”

“And all it was going to take,” I said, “was murder.”

“It’s in a garage in Acton,” he said, and I knew he meant the carpet. “I had to get an Uber to take it there, and it really shouldn’t be there much longer or it will be damaged. It’s pure silk, you see. Woven by hand on looms made of sycamore wood, by weavers who were born and raised to weave, as their fathers were before them and their sons after them.

“It’s probably the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And it could have worked, only Harry was too caught up in t-shirts and sweatpants to even see how much beauty he was walking on.”



## CHAPTER 10



They arrested him. Franco and Amanda went off to sleep and he was limousined to his flight to wherever he was going to. Johnny Leung went into the night already preparing a blog post about what a bizarre scene he'd just witnessed (with Davis warning him to do nothing to risk the trial that was bound to follow) and Caz, who appeared to have become quite friendly with the blue-eyed DI Davis, went home to freshen up before meeting him for a quick drink he'd arranged with her once he'd processed the ghost of Jordan St James.

I ended up on the pavement outside with Charmaine and Elaine.

Elaine chuckled, the sort of noise I reckon one of those American kids-who-kill makes when they realise they've successfully used dad's semi-automatic to sort out their inheritance tax issues without getting anyones brains on the latest TV Guide. "If we get them clothes back in there tonight, Char, they'll have trouble making a burglary charge stick."

Charmaine looked at her like someone waking from a deep sleep.

“Can we do it in the morning?”

Elaine shrugged. “So long as it’s first thing. Cheers, Danny. I knew you’d figure it out,” she gifted me with a smile that seemed devoid of any guile or sarcasm.

“I’ll be honest,” I said, “I sort of wish I hadn’t.”

“He killed Cathedral,” Charmaine said, breathing in the night air and staring down the road where the flashing blue lights were still faintly visible, “but I sort of know what you mean. So what happens now?” she asked, and – though I knew she was referring to the trial and so on, I couldn’t help thinking she was being more general, and – watching the two young women – little more, really, than girls – shivering in short skirts, thin but fashionable jackets and unfeasibly high heels, I wasn’t entirely sure how to answer her.

So we waited til their taxi arrived, and then I walked to the tube and went home.