

FADE TO DEAD!

PROLOGUE

The girl was pretty, but way too skinny for his own tastes. Now, him, he preferred them curvy; big tits, big arses, a Jessica Rabbit handful. She was young too, barely legal, just the way the boss liked them. He'd get top whack for this one. He picked his teeth with a broken thumb nail and squinted across from the opposite side of the street. One week he'd been watching her now, huddled in her usual spot on London Bridge, a piece of old cardboard all that stood between her and the freezing pavement. A bitter, sleet-bearing wind blew up along the Thames. Ignored by the commuter herd stampeding home from the city, he saw her shiver and criss-cross her stick-like arms for warmth. Only once did he see someone drop a coin into the plastic beaker beside her, then quicken their step as though ashamed of the charitable impulse. Moments later, a careless foot sent the cup reeling. The solitary coin inside rolled across the pavement, over the edge and into the gurgling drain below. The girl broke then, dropped her head into her hands. Casual, he crossed the street.

Chapter One

DI Jessica Wideacre drew in a deep breath and steadied herself with a mental count from one to five. After sixteen years in the force she'd seen countless bodies, visited countless murder sites, but nothing inured her to the horror when the victim was a child or, as in this case, little more than a child. She hoped it never would.

“Who found her?” Her voice was strong, all signs of emotion professionally reined in.

“A man out walking his dog. Isn't it always?” DS Hennessy, a sickly cast to his ruddy countenance, shrugged himself deeper into his heavy parka and scrunched his face up against the needles of rain slanting in from the east. “Hardy beggars. Nights like this, Bonzo could shit himself inside out, for all I care.”

The sergeant was a corpulent man leading Jessica to suspect poor Bonzo spent more than his fair share of time in a state of great discomfort. She tossed a soggy red curl out of her eye and went to kneel beside the body. Saturated by several days' worth of rain, the grass squelched beneath her, soaking the knees of her trousers. She leaned in for closer examination and cloudy-brown eyes gazed sightlessly back.

Sergeant Hennessy bristled as she reached across to close the young girl's eyelids. Hennessy was do-it-by-the-book old school. She sent him an unapologetic glare. “She's somebody's daughter.” Given recent weather conditions, she doubted much in the way of evidence would have been preserved anyway.

Percussive, the rain continued to lash down, dancing across the small, naked body. The girl's dirty-blonde hair fanned out around her head in an arc, weighted round the edges by carefully placed stones. If her killer turned out to be The Director, then Jessica knew hair extensions would have been added to satisfy some sick urge in the creepy bastard. It was part of his M.O. to give his victims a make-over, before putting a sickening end to their young lives.

“Poor kid.” Her voice was low. “Looks like our man, all right. Far as I can see, she's been strangled, but not before he had his fun with her.” Anger fuelled her impatience. “Where the hell are forensics?”

“A call's gone out to Shackleton. She should be here any minute.” The sergeant jerked his head to where a middle-aged man, a golden Labrador in tow, stood talking to a young WPC. “Want a word with the dog-walker?”

The man looked strained, nervous. Jessica watched him rake his fingers through his thinning hair over and over again, reprising what was probably a childhood ritual of comfort. She rose to her feet and strolled across. He looked as though he might have been crying, though it was difficult to tell with the rain coming down in torrents. She hoped he had. The girl deserved crying over.

He had nothing to add to his story. Millie had run away into a thicket. He'd called and whistled for her but, in the end, he'd had to go looking. His voice cracked. He wished to God he hadn't. "How will I ever sleep again," he asked Jessica piteously. "How will I ever get her face out of my mind? Oh, God! Oh God! Oh God!"

He wouldn't, Jessica thought. The memory would stay with him, would haunt him till the day he died. Her eyes would haunt him. In vain he'd wish he could turn back the clock; that, to paraphrase Hennessy, he'd stayed indoors and left Millie to shit herself inside out. She patted his sleeve, there, there. Small comfort, but all she could offer. For many years, her own dreams had become the meeting place of the dead. You learned to live with it, or not. There were some she knew who had not. Times like now, she envied them. Stop the world, I want to get off.

"You've got his statement?" she asked the WPC, who nodded and patted her notebook. "Good, then take him home. We'll have him in tomorrow to go through it in more detail but, right now . . ." Her voice trailed off.

As the WPC drove away with the shaken man staring wanly from the back seat, Laura Shackleton's 4X4, slewed almost sideways into its place. Jessica jumped backwards as the wheels sputtered up mud. For a woman standing little more than five foot tall and weighing in sopping wet at around eight stone, it was an unlikely vehicle. Jessica smothered a grin, as the door opened and Laura swung out of it, dropping several inches to the ground. Her petite, child-like, stature tended to bring out the protective instinct in big strong men. The urge passed swiftly when they realised that, beneath the Dresden figurine appearance, the forensic pathologist's balls were way bigger than theirs. Jessica and her had history. They'd got off on the wrong foot, but time had forged both tolerance and respect and now they dealt well enough together. Kept it professional. Jessica passed her a set of protective clothing as Laura came straight to the point.

"The Director? Bastard been busy again?" She began to shrug herself into the, paper overalls, rolling up the sleeves several times. Ditto, the legs, which she tucked into Spiderman wellie-boots, probably obtained from the children's department at M & S. She leaned down and pulled a couple of, plastic, shoe-protectors over the bottoms.

"At a guess," Jessica said. "The body bears all the usual hallmarks. Strangled, tortured, left breast hacked off, posed like a silly shampoo advert, but no calling card that I could see. Might be beneath her, though. He always leaves a calling card. Unless, we've got ourselves a copy cat, though I suspect it's too early for that. We've managed to keep most of the sordid details from the press so far."

Laura nodded. Jessica was known to run a water-tight ship. If any of her team was so foolish as to blab to the papers, they'd be out on their ear so fast they'd feel the g-force turning their brains inside out. She snapped on some latex gloves, the smallest size, which still flapped like empty balloons at the end of her fingers. Hennessy and the rest of the team fell back, as she began her tour of inspection, walking round the body in a circle, then squatting down for closer examination. She spoke into a digital voice recorder.

"Body is that of a young female, aged between fifteen and eighteen. Relatively fresh still. Time of death estimated to be not much more than four, five hours tops. Little in the way of lividity. Rigor mortis unapparent. Ligation marks around the neck indicative of strangulation. Obvious signs of torture. Left breast has been inexpertly removed." She indicated the ragged flesh to the onlookers. "At a guess, I'd say a switch back blade or some

such.” She picked up one of the dead girl’s hands, examined it both sides. “Restraint marks round both wrists and ankles. Evidence of bruising to thighs; further examination required to determine if sexual interference took place. Little blood, even allowing for rainfall. Suspect victim killed elsewhere and the body dumped on site.” She clicked off the recorder and jumped nimbly to her feet. “Okay, let’s get her bagged, tagged and back to the morgue. I’ll start work right away.” She grinned impishly, turning a plain face almost pretty. “George Clooney’ll just have to take a rain-check tonight. That’s what happens when you date a career woman.”

Jessica grinned back, but only in a half-hearted fashion. There was little chance of her seeing her own bed any time soon. First step would be to try and identify the dead girl, trawl through the misspers database, see if anyone fitting the victim’s description had been reported missing. Assuming they got a match, her next job would be to land up on some unsuspecting parents’ door, bearing the kind of news no one should ever have to hear. Aside from murdered youngsters, informing the relatives was the one part of her job she truly loathed. As a DI, she could have outsourced it, fobbed it off on someone of a lesser rank. But no rookie deserved to have such a weight thrust upon their shoulders, and the bereaved deserved handling with the sort of care gleaned only from bitter experience.

Jessica took out her mobile phone and voice-called her home number. “Dave,” she said, when her husband picked up. “Look, I know this is a real pain, but I’m going to have to cancel our date-night.” She angled the phone away as her husband erupted in an angry tirade. She didn’t need to look at the team to know that to a man they were all ear-wiggling. “Yes,” she said, when she could finally get a word in edgewise. “I do know you’ve gone to a lot of trouble, but it’s really not my fault. Dave? Dave?” Silence. He’d hung up on her. Stone-faced, Jessica stowed the phone in her pocket. Inside, though, she was raging, but it was a guilt-ridden rage and she wasn’t quite sure where exactly to direct it. At herself for letting him down again? At Dave for laying the guilt-trip on her, when there was genuinely nothing she could do? It wasn’t like she could wave tata to the team. Bye all. I’m off to wine and dine with my husband and, afterwards, bonk like a couple of sex-starved bunnies. Disconsolate, her gaze went to where the young girl’s body, now encased in an ugly grey body bag, was being loaded into the back of a private ambulance. Her real anger, of course, was reserved for The Director. Not only was the bastard hell-bent on murdering random girls, he was hell-bent on murdering her marriage too.

Chapter Two

“There’s nothing random about these victims.”

Jessica suppressed a yawn as, Robert Edwards, the forensic profiler, went into his spiel. His voice was dry as warped timbre. He had a real knack for turning what could have been a fascinating topic into something akin to the shipping forecast. “The killer has a definite type. The girls are all of an age, barely past adolescence, blonde, skinny and, most importantly, available.” In case they were too obtuse to figure it out for themselves, he went over to the whiteboard where pictures of the victims were pinned up in the order in which they were found and tapped each one. “Melanie Potts, sixteen, a runaway from a care home. Jordan Flynn, another runaway, this time from home. Allegations of abuse by her stepfather.” Edwards had a wide mouth. He stretched it into a kind of grimace. “Poor kid. Out of the frying pan . . .” He moved on to the next picture. Tap, went his map-pointer finger. “Tara James. Barely sixteen and already on the game. Track marks on her arms. Started out by smoking weed with her mother when she was only nine, if you can believe it.”

Jessica could well believe it. Some people weren’t fit to have kids. It wasn’t PC to admit it, but sometimes in the dark place of her soul, rarely visited even by herself, she thought there might be a real case for eugenics.

Edwards moved on to the most recent victim, tapped twice beneath her photograph, as if for emphasis. “Kerrie Gray. A different scenario, in so much as Kerrie came from a well-to-do, non-dysfunctional family. Nice house, the kind the Oxo Mum would be happy to live in. Father a well respected GP. One sibling, a brother studying law at Cambridge. They worshipped the ground she walked on.”

“Didn’t they but!” Jessica thought, flinching as she recalled the screams of Kerrie’s mother when she broke the news that their pretty little daughter had the dubious distinction of becoming The Director’s fourth victim. Her father had simply stood there, staring in disbelief, before remembering his manners and inviting Jessica to sit down. “There’s chocolate digestives,” he’d said, clearly in shock, his mind quite unable to process the devastating news. “Coffee, or would you prefer Earl Grey?”

“They didn’t like her boyfriend,” Jessica filled in the team. “Young lad, black, lives in South London. Fill in the gaps.”

“Not good enough for my daughter,” Hennessy huffed.

“Something like that,” Jessica agreed. “They had a massive row. Kerrie emptied her savings account, packed a small bag and took the train from Dorking to London. Who knows what happened then? The five days between her leaving home and her body turning up remain a mystery.”

“Anyone interview the boyfriend?” That was Connors. DS Sarah Connors, so eager for her boss’s job, Jessica swore she could feel the woman’s breath scorching her heels.

“I did.” PC Liversedge, the youngest member of the team volunteered. Mixed race, tall and bendy as a rubber band, he had one of those affable apple-cheeked faces, that made him look ten years younger than his actual age of twenty-eight. “The lad’s got a cast iron alibi. Just got back from holiday, ten days in Majorca, with his girlfriend. His real girlfriend! Kerrie was just an easy source of money. They met at a concert in the O2, some rapper, Pee Jay. Jay Tee?”

“Jay Z,” Connors corrected smartly. “Where have you been living, under a rock?”

Jessica refrained, but only just, from rolling her eyes. At thirty-four, Sarah was a mere two years younger than herself, but tried to kid herself she was down with the kids, cool, hip, or even hip hop.

PC Liversedge kissed his teeth in an exaggerated fashion. “Listen up, Connors. Just cos me daddy Jamaican, don’t mean manz all reggae, rap “n rice and peas.”

Hennessy, the oldest member of the team and self-appointed patriarch fried them with a glare. “So it was the age-old cliché, bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks attraction,” he remarked, when order had been restored. He licked his lips across a Rizzla paper, tapped the ends of a rollie and added it to the line of small white sausages accumulating on his desk. Every first of January Hennessy gave up smoking. The following day, he took it back up again.

“Clichés are called clichés for a reason,” Jessica said. “Still, I’ve got a feeling Nimrod-”, she paused, while everybody snorted out a laugh. “Nimrod Peters isn’t telling us everything. So, I’m popping over to Tooting shortly for a word in his shell-like. She nodded to Liversedge. “Sedgie, you come with me.”

Self-important, the profiler cleared his throat. “The Peters boy is not your killer.”

Jessica’s lips narrowed. He was trying her patience. She lined him up in her cross-hairs, took aim and fired off a verbal volley. “So, who the hell is, then? Name. Number? Rank? “

Edwards grated out a laugh. “If I knew the answer to that, I’d be sunning myself now on a Mediterranean island on the proceeds of my winning Lotto ticket.” He bent her the kind of condescending look that made her want to pulp his face. “Profiling, DI Wideacre, is not an exercise in clairvoyance. I can’t give you any of the aforementioned information. All that I

can tell you, based on the information amassed from similar cases is that, most likely, he's aged somewhere between twenty-five and forty-five. He's educated, well-spoken, white collar job, probably in the media or the arts. He feels under-appreciated, both at work and life in general. He's a narcissist with grandiose ideas; hence his calling-card, The Director. He wants to believe he's the one calling the shots and the ultimate power trip is the power to mete out death. Sexually, he's dysfunctional. As I understand it, no semen was found either inside or anywhere on the victims?"

Jessica nodded. "Nothing we could find, although there was evidence of both internal and external bruising to the genitals in every case."

"Penetration by object or objects of some kind. Further evidence, I would suggest, that our man is unable to perform sexually. He may well be impotent." The profiler took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his large nose. "Perhaps, somewhere in his past, a young lady spurned his advances or laughed at him for his sexual inadequacy, thereby laying down the blueprint for his future killing spree. "

"And the cutting off of the left breast," Connors asked. "Sadism, or symbolic?"

Edwards bent an approving eye in her direction. "A bit of both, probably. It may be significant that it is the left breast i.e. over the heart. Throughout the ages, women's breasts have been lauded for their beauty, sexuality and, of course, nurturing abilities. Our chap might even have had a difficult relationship with his mother."

Fucking Oedipus again! Jessica suppressed a yawn. She'd had a maximum of three hours sleep the night before, plus a massive dose of cold shoulder from David. Her engine was running on empty and her patience, always a limited edition, was fast disappearing. She cut to the chase.

"So, because he didn't get the titty as a baby," she said, "and some girl laughed at his dodgy todger, he's out for revenge?"

Edwards folded his handkerchief neatly and returned it to his pocket. "A somewhat vulgar over-simplification but, in essence, yes."

"And he's aged somewhere between twenty-five and forty-five, works either in the media or the arts and is a narcissist with grandiose ideas." Hennessy enumerated the traits by dint of picking up a rollie for each and separating it from the bunch on his table.

Sarah raised a tweezed eyebrow. "A narcissist with grandiose ideas?" Sounds like every man I've ever known."

Jessica jerked her head at Liversedge. "Sergeant, go out and pick him up. You can take my car." Everybody laughed, except Edwards. She didn't care. Her faith in the breed was, at best, lukewarm. They were just another American import, to be taken with a grain of salt. Lolling back in her chair, she stretched her arms high above her head, then snapped forward again, all business.

"Sedgie. Go get the motor. Hennessy. Connors. Whip out your fine tooth combs and go back over the case notes on all the victims. See if anything jumps out we might have missed. Check again for a common denominator. Tinker. Tailor. Soldier. Spy. Someone with whom all the victims have had contact. She dismissed the profiler with a nod. "Mr Edwards, thank you for your time. You've given us a lot of food for thought." My arse! She thought, as he packed his notes away and headed stiff-backed for the door. He'd given them nothing really, just wild conjecture and generalities. Still, it would keep Inspector Beckwith happy. Detective Chief Inspector Mark Beckwith. Beck-twit! Him and his full-of-herself actress girlfriend, whose first cousin, coincidentally, happened to be none other than Robert Edwards.

She was shrugging on her jacket when, speak of the devil, Beckwith appeared, at the office door. Jessica was dimly aware of Connors flicking her blonde mane and throwing back her shoulders so that her double D breasts strained against her shirt. The DCI had that effect

on women, some anyway. Jessica had once heard him described as the love child of George Clooney and Brad Pitt. True enough, his looks were a cut above the ordinary, but his personality was somewhere down the u-bend. He was bumptious, arrogant and a misogynist and those were his good qualities. He'd tried to shaft her once, scotch her recent promotion to DI. He didn't know she knew and, when the time was right, she had every intention of making him pay for chucking that particular wrinkle her way. Connors was welcome to him! As it happened, Beckwith didn't even glance her colleague's way. He bounded over to Jessica and loomed over her. His glance went to the jacket in her hands."

"I thought Robert Edwards was to address the team this morning."

"He just did," Jessica said coolly. "Although, if you want my opinion, the man is about as much use as a cat flap on a submarine."

"But I specifically told you that I wanted to be in attendance." A pulse, the barometer of the chief's moods, zigzagged in his temple. The more it pulsed, the greater the chance of stormy weather.

"I sent you a memo." The lie tripped easily off Jessica's lips. "Still, like I said, you didn't miss much, just a shit-load of generalisations a nursery kid could have come up with." She feigned embarrassment. "Sorry, I forgot. Robert Edwards is Venise's cousin, isn't he?"

The pulse in his temple registered hurricane. DCI Beckwith raised himself slightly on tip-toes, up, down, up, down, reminding her of the old Dixon of Dock Green stereo-type copper. Ello! Ello! Ello!

"If you're implying, DI Wideacre, that my decision to canvass Mr Edward's expertise was in any way influenced by my personal relationship, I hugely resent the implication. "

Never even crossed my mind." Not altogether successfully, Jessica suppressed a smirk. "And nobody else mentioned it either, or not in my hearing. " The hostility between herself and the chief was palpable.

"Robert Edwards," he almost shouted, "is one of the foremost professionals in his field. Decoding A Killer, his last book, went to No. 1 in the Sunday Times bestseller list. Added to that, he was senior profiler on several high-profile murders, including the infamous Ben Bailey case."

Considering the wrong man had been jailed for that particular murder and the Met had almost gone bankrupt paying out a shed-load of compo, it wasn't, perhaps, the best example to use. The thought seemed to strike the DCI at the same time, for he suddenly looked confused. And angry. Most definitely angry.

Luckily, perhaps for them both, Connors chose exactly that moment to contribute her own pearls of wisdom.

"For what it's worth, sir, I thought Mr Edwards to be quite remarkable." Shameless, she pushed herself slightly back from her desk, crossed one long leg over the other and laser-beamed equal parts sincerity and lust Beckwith's way. "He flagged up a number of interesting pointers." Her hand slid rhythmically up and down her smooth, tanned leg. Jessica cringed for them both, for Sarah for being so obvious, for Beckwith for drooling on cue like one of Pavlov's dogs. She could have kissed Sedgie, when, with perfect timing, he leaned on the car horn outside, providing her with the perfect get-out of a revolting situation clause. She tried not to look too exultant as she headed for the door.

"That's Liversedge with the car. Got an interview over Tooting way. I'll leave you with DS Connors, sir, to fill you in on all the pointers she found so interesting." She tossed the last over her shoulder. How long she wondered, letting the door slam behind her, before he was filling Sarah in all over somebody's desk. Knowing her colleague's track record with the opposite sex, she almost felt sorry for Beckwith's regular squeeze. "NMBP", she told herself, making a "cut" motion at Sedgie, as he rapped out a tune on the horn. "Not my bloody problem!"

Chapter Three

As Shania Lewis struggled back to consciousness the first thing she noticed was the dust motes whirling in the light filtered through the sacking covering the windows. Confused, she thought she must be dreaming. Her bedroom curtains were lipstick pink, her favourite colour. She'd picked them out of the Argos catalogue and customised them with little diamante gemstones from the 99p shop. Her mum said it was a waste of time, the stones would all come off in the wash, but Shania had gone ahead regardless. She'd made a flower design, a wonky daisy. When she put herself into voluntary care, she'd taken them with her, though the cunts wouldn't let her hang them up. The second thing she noticed was that she couldn't move. Something was holding her wrists and ankles; something strong that wouldn't let go; something that bit into her skin and hurt. She noticed the third thing when she tried to open her mouth to scream and found she couldn't. Someone had taped it shut.

“Stick on the blues and twos,” Jessica instructed, when they hit heavy traffic at Clapham North. Like much of South London, the area had gentrified over the last decade or so. Pricey cafes had sprung up, wine bars and designer boutiques that were solely the preserve of the city high-fliers who had flocked to the area because of its proximity to the City. Fifteen minutes to Bank, only. Travel in London didn't get much better than that. The indigenous population of scroungers and smack heads had long been exiled to the country's rundown seaside resorts where housing was a fraction of the cost and where, ultimately, they'd be somebody else's problem. Dole on sea, the papers dubbed it! A jogger bounded past on the pavement, a tall, tanned woman, blonde pony-tail swinging jauntily from side to side, impossibly pert arse.

The PC's lips pursed to a whistle. “Nice,” he said, then lights flashing, siren blaring, began to bully his way through the traffic.

As always, in this neck of the woods, Jessica found herself looking out for the turn-off to Tremadoc Road, where she and David had had their first love nest. It hadn't been up to much, just one bedroom on the third floor of a bog-standard Victorian terraced house. Peeling walls, a windowless galley kitchen and a tiny living room with a 1960s tiled fireplace that belched out smoke on the one occasion they'd tried to use it. The furnishings were eclectic i.e. the product of skips, charity shops and cast offs from friends and family. Since they'd spent most of their time in bed, none of that had mattered a jot. Students, poor as the proverbial church mice, it was only with hindsight that she realised that what they'd had back then was far more valuable than money or status. They'd had paradise! Paradise lost now and, with the way things were shaping up, little chance of regaining it any time soon. If at all.

Following the route of the Northern Line, the car screeched past Clapham Common, Balham and Tooting Bec tube stations. At Tooting Broadway, Liversedge swung a right down Garratt Lane, narrowly avoiding an oncoming ambulance on its way to nearby St. George's Hospital. A little further along the traffic thinned and he killed the siren. Jessica's eyebrows rose as they shot past the four concrete tower blocks of the infamous Thatcher's estate. Ugly in the extreme, they were made even uglier by a wealth of graffiti tags spray-painted by the local gang marking their “ends”. The Tooting Soljas were no competition for Banksy.

Sedgie grinned at her surprise. “Time to put away your preconceived ideas, Guv. Not all scrotes spring from the loins of inner city sink estates.”

“Dante’s seventh circle,” Jessica said, eyeing the concrete monstrosities with distaste as they receded in the rear view mirror. The architects of those places should all have been taken out and shot.”

“Weren’t they seen as the 70s solution to low cost housing?” Liversedge asked, pulling into a tree-lined road on the borders of Earlsfield and Southfield.

“That was the idea,” Jessica said dryly. “Only it didn’t quite work out that way.” She looked around in surprise at the well-kept, Edwardian houses surrounding them on either side. Each had a pretty pocket-handkerchief sized garden in front and several had their own driveway, a definite bonus in traffic-clogged London. “Nimrod lives here?”

Liversedge nodded. “Just opposite. No. 35.” He led the way and, despite the presence of a doorbell, pounded imperiously on the door. Back at the station, they called it the fear-of-God knock, FOG, for short. As they waited for a response, Jessica took in the rest of the house, sparkling clean windows, a hanging basket trailing dark blue and pink Lobelia, two small ornamental Bay trees flanking the door. Her preconceived ideas were tumbling faster than the walls of Jericho.

The PC raised his hand to knock again, just as the front door opened on a gangly, young black man, clad unimaginatively in hoodie, baseball cap, low-slung jeans and Nike 110s. Jessica flashed her ID card.

“Fuckin’ ‘ell, ain’t I the popular one.” Peters stepped back to allow them entry. Under the glower, Jessica could see he was a good-looking lad, though the wispy goatee adorning his chin was something of a lost cause. He turned immediately left into a small living room and threw himself across a chintz covered settee. Insolent, he looked Jessica up and down. “So, what the fuck am I supposed to have done now?”

Jessica kept him waiting as she took in her surroundings. The room was old-lady immaculate, a haven of potpourri and lavender furniture polish. Crochet antimacassars covered the arms of the settee and matching armchairs. A display cabinet showcasing Lladro and Royal Doulton figurines was set against one wall. Above it hung a selection of tasteful botanical prints. Below the period mantelpiece, the brass firedogs were polished to an eye-watering shine. The only jarring note in the room was the open can of Fosters on the coffee table and the rollie burning in a plastic, pub ashtray. Peters picked it up, took a long deliberate puff, and exhaled slowly. His eyes challenged them over the thin ribbon of smoke. “Fuck’s sake, it’s just a bleedin’ fag. Can’t arrest me for that.”

“Kerrie Gray,” Jessica snapped. “Tell me about your relationship with her and, just so you’re clear about it, I don’t do bullshit.”

Peters rolled his eyes. He pointed the rollie at Liversedge. “I already told fuckin’ string-bean here everything I know.” He glared at Jessica. “And there was no relationship, geddit? I didn’t hardly know the stupid bitch.”

“You knew her well enough to take money from her.” Jessica said, itching to knock the smart-ass look off his face. “You a pimp, Peters? That what you do, take money from little girls?”

Peters took one last toke, ground the fag out in the ashtray. “You don’t get it, do you bitch? Girls like her, spoilt little white princesses, sometimes they wanna change.” Lewd, he grabbed his crotch. “Know what I’m mean?” His eyes locked with Jessica’s. “You wanna try it, yourself, Miss up-your-own-hole. No way you’ll ever go back. Just sayin’.”

Jessica stuck her arm out, automatically blocking Liversedge as he took a threatening step forward.

“Oh, I get it, all right. Kerrie was easy meat.”

Peters shrugged. “*She* came on to me.” He made a mouth with his hand. “Flappin’ her beak. Rat tat tat tat! How she could help me make it big as a rapper. How daddy had contacts in the music industry.” He gave a derisory snort. “Blagged on about how she’d actually met

Puff Daddy and P Diddy. Stupid cow didn't even realise they was one and the same." He picked up the can of lager, held it a moment without putting it to his mouth. His eyes gleamed. "She'd squiller, though. More'n I've ever seen, "cept, maybe, in the movies." He upended the Fosters, drained the can of every last drop. "And me, I ain't got shit." He crunched the tin with one hand, tossed it into a wastepaper basket on the floor beside him. He jerked his head round the room. "This yard belong my Aunty. Manz only here on sufferance, so's she can look good in the eyes of the Lord 'n cry 'bout me on Sundays."

"Did you bring Kerrie here?" Stony-faced, Jessica ignored his descent into self-pity. "Is this where you lured her?"

Peters looked shifty, less sure of himself. His hand rose seemingly of its own volition and latched on to a medallion around his neck, an over-sized dollar sign on a golden chain. Gangsta bling.

Jessica honed in on the movement. "Gave you that, did she?" At his almost imperceptible nod, she pressed on. "What else, Peters? What else did she give you?"

He rubbed his fingers and thumb together, nodded towards Liversedge. "I already told him. Squiller."

Jessica squinted her eyes. "How much *squiller*? She used the slang word for money with contempt. "How much exactly did she give you?" Heavy emphasis on "give".

"Enough." Peters' body language had changed during her questioning, segued from cocky to defensive. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Enough to take your girlfriend to Majorca?"

"Yeah. Like, so what? Wasn't like she couldn't afford it."

Jessica's lip curled. "That's hardly the point. No girl gives money to a bloke she fancies so that he can take his bird away on holiday." She leaned across the coffee table getting up close and personal with his goatee. She had the satisfaction of seeing him flinch. "Which leads me to the obvious conclusion, that the money was not given to you, but stolen." She rocked back on her heels. "Her handbag was missing, did you know that? When we found her body, her poor beaten, battered body, there was no sign of her handbag. No purse, no phone, nothing."

"Now, why d'ye think that was?" Liversedge upped the ante. His affable face grew ugly with contempt. "Maybe because you stole it. Did you steal that poor little girl's handbag, Nimmers? Is that how you funded your holiday to Majorca, on the ill-gotten gains from a murdered girl?"

"She was so pretty, wasn't she?" Jessica said, beginning to paint a picture of the innocent Kerrie, a ploy designed to stir his conscience. She was banking on at least a small part of his religious Aunt's influence rubbing off on him. "The apple of her parents' eye, hot-housed all her life. Poor kid, it did her no favours in the end." Her lip curled. "Then again, no one expects their naïve trusting kid to fall prey to scum like you. What a heaven sent opportunity, eh, when this babe-in-arms rolls up looking to you for her first romance." Jessica's hands fisted in rage. Her knuckles bleached beneath the strain. "Heck, she still had her My Little Pony and Bratz doll collections. There was a picture of pretty-boy Harry Styles on her bedroom wall. Her favourite TV programme was Glee. That's how much of a kid she still was. She'd believe anything anyone told her, especially a good-looking boy who knew all the right words." She hit the target. Peters began to squirm. His eyes darted tellingly to the door. He was wishing he was anywhere but here. Setting out to widen the chink in his armour, Jessica began to paint a different picture. "Poor little Kerrie. She wasn't so pretty when we found her, Peters. Not pretty at all. Her face was all bashed in on one side, caved in by a baseball bat or the likes. He'd cut off her left breast too, imagine that." She began to pace around the room. "First, though, he tortured her. "For hours. Days, maybe." She paused before the window, lifted the lace curtain to one side a little, let it drop, returned to stand over

him. "That little girl. That naive little girl who fancied you so much she ran away from the safety of her own home, died an agonising death." She shuddered visibly at the memory, didn't need to act. "Those lovely brown eyes. He'd tried to gouged them out."

Peters cracked then. He held up his hand. "Okay! Okay! Enough! Fuckin shut up and I'll tell you everything."

END SAMPLE