

ALAN JONES

BLOQ



Bloq

Alan Jones

Free sample edition

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Remembering Nancy Stephen

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PROLOGUE

As a funeral, it was nothing much. Only four people were present; one of them was dead and none of the others gave a fuck. And there were one or two omissions from the service. Flowers. Music. Mourners. A priest. And, oh – a coffin.

The body was badly wrapped in a polythene sheet, the kind used as a damp-proof membrane by builders, laid under concrete floors. From the size of the feet sticking out one end and the sad straggle of matted blonde hair at the other, you would probably have guessed it was a young woman.

“Grab fucking end each, dickheads.” Built like a tank and with a shaved skull, his words, in heavily accented and broken English, carried a low but effective menace that made his two companions, of lesser bulk but almost as intimidating, jump to comply.

The hole was no more than a foot deep, but it had been scraped out of the only level piece of ground in the immediate vicinity. All around the solitary flat patch, mountains of rubble, of various grades, crowded the small burial party and hid them from the houses to the north and west, and from the river to the south. A sludge barge sounded its horn as it made its way slowly downriver.

“Hurry it up, for fuck’s sake. We’ve not got lot time; it will be soon dark.”

Neither of the two subordinates, both born-and-bred Fulham hard men, would have dared to mock the Albanian’s diction.

“Don’t you think we should tie the ends up?” the taller of the two reluctant gravediggers asked, struggling to grip the polythene, slippery and damp in the drizzle of the grey evening.

“No, put fucking thing in fucking hole and get the fuck out of here, before get seen by some cunt.”

Grunting and stumbling, they managed to get the plastic-wrapped corpse into the shallow depression, but the feet wouldn’t quite fit, protruding above the level of the surrounding packed earth.

“You couple useless lazy cunts.” He picked up the spade and made as if he was going to take a swing at his two assistants, who cowered from his advance. Instead, he used the spade to loosen a little of the gravelly soil around the feet in an attempt to lower them, but the ground had been heavily compacted by the lorries and heavy plant that had run over it for years and it was hard going. He began to appreciate why his two companions had dug the minimum depth they could get away with and he regretted not having used a small excavator, even though it would have been difficult to get it into this corner of the yard.

His efforts had allowed the legs to sink further into the hole, but he could see that the toes were still going to protrude when it was filled in. He lifted the spade above his head and swung it hard down on to the corpse’s left ankle, shattering it with a sickening thud. A piece of flesh flew off and hit him on the side of the face and he irritably wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and spat a mouthful of saliva on to the ground, in case any of it had gone in his mouth.

He swung the spade again, at the other ankle; this time it took a couple of blows before it was severed enough to allow the foot to lie flat and to the side like the first one.

He stuck the spade into the ground a couple of times to clean it then threw it towards his helpers, who had to move sharply to avoid it.

“Always end up do it fucking self,” he swore at them. “Fill fucker in and get fuck out this shithole.”

He watched as the pair filled the hole, one shovelling and the other using the sides of his feet to level off the thin layer of soil on top of the body. Finally, they stamped around on the surface to compact it down, kicking some of the looser stuff on top to hide the footmarks.

“That looks OK, boss, doesn’t it?”

“No thanks to you two phidi, but is going OK. It not matter anyway after tomorrow; no cunt will find,” he replied. It felt good to curse in his native tongue, even if his audience didn’t get it.

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The wires grumbled as the grab line bucket lifted a tonne and a half of material from the pit where it had been tipped by the last of a steady line of trucks that had filed into the yard since first light. The crane operator swung the massive boom around and released its load on top of the nearest pile, causing a minor avalanche down the back of the mound. A rivulet of rubble trickled down on to the unmarked grave below and each subsequent release of the bucket caused the small space to shrink, until it had disappeared entirely. By lunchtime there was no sign that there had ever been a flat bit of ground there at all and when the edge of the mound reached the perimeter, the shallow grave that had been hastily excavated was buried under seven feet of rubble and dust.

CHAPTER 1 BILL

Bill Ingram tried to ring his daughter's mobile just before he left the house at six o'clock, to see if her train was running on time, but her voicemail message told him that her number was unavailable. *She must be in a tunnel, or something*, he thought. He headed for the station, always a stickler for leaving himself plenty time to spare for everything he did, especially when meeting Carol. Everything was ready, so there was no point hanging around at home.

She'd sent him a text around the beginning of December informing him that she'd be travelling up from London on Christmas Eve, and giving him the time her train was due in.

He parked in the multi-storey in Mitchell Street and strolled the short distance to Central Station. It had a real Christmas buzz about it, with families being reunited, last-minute shoppers laden with bags rushing for trains, and revellers heading home after boozy office Christmas parties. Even the obligatory policemen looked quite cheery; as if they expected the seasonal goodwill to moderate the drunken carnage they'd normally have to deal with on a Friday night.

He was nearly half an hour early and on checking the arrivals board he saw that Carol's train was due in ten minutes late, so he decided to nip into Costa Coffee to treat himself to a latte and a muffin. He watched the flow of passengers to and from the trains as he waited for the late arrival of the 14.23 from Euston.

He was back at the arrivals board five minutes before the train glided in, marvelling, as he always did, at the effortless elegance of such a mechanical leviathan coming to rest so gracefully.

He scanned the platform as all the doors simultaneously opened, spilling their human cargo; a river of faces flooded towards him.

At first he watched only with interest, observing the usual rich tapestry of humankind, knowing that he wouldn't miss her, or she him, but as the mass of people dwindled, a prickling anxiety crept up on him, and when the last few stragglers walked down the platform without her appearing, he turned around to see if she'd somehow passed him by.

As the concourse emptied of its recent influx, the number of passengers milling around thinned out to a few solitary souls. If she'd been there, he would have spotted her within seconds. He checked both exits and hurried back to the platform.

He tried her mobile again but she didn't answer. He realised that he had her landline number on his mobile and he stood in the centre of the almost deserted station and tried it. Her voice answered but it had the hollow echo that identified it as the recording on her answering machine. He waited until the long tone had sounded and left a message telling her to contact him as soon as she got in.

He asked one of the Network Rail employees, standing talking to the train's driver, if he could check the train to see if his daughter had fallen asleep on it. He felt stupid even asking, but when the man told him to go ahead, he hurried up the platform, peering through each window as he did for any sign of her.

The guard had just stepped down from the rear of the train when Bill reached the last carriage, and he asked him if he'd lost something.

"My daughter," said Bill, "she was supposed to be on this train. I wondered if she'd fallen asleep."

The guard looked at him sceptically.

"There's definitely no one remaining, sir. I've just walked the length of the train, clearing up litter and checking for stuff folk have left. I think I would have noticed a girl."

"Yes, sorry. I just thought ..."

The guard wasn't unsympathetic. "She could have caught a later train, sir. There's another two due in from London tonight."

"She would have phoned me to let me know, she's very good that way."

"These phones aren't always all they're cracked up to be. Maybe her battery's gone."

"I suppose that's possible. Listen, thanks, I'll just wait for the next one. Do you know when it's due in?"

"One gets in at 21.38, the other at 23.54." He looked at Bill again and felt sorry for him. He had a couple of daughters himself and he knew what it was like to worry about them. "Come with me. I'll ask my manager if you can sit in our office until then."

He guided Bill to a doorway at the side of the concourse and climbed the stairs inside, motioning for Bill to follow. After talking briefly to a smartly dressed older woman, he directed Bill to sit in one of the chairs in what looked like a staffroom, with a low table in the centre and a hot beverage vending machine in the corner.

The woman, who introduced herself as Sheila but whose badge told him she was *Mrs S. Crainey, Operations Manager, Virgin Trains*, looked after him once the guard had signed off and headed homewards with a last "good luck" aimed at Bill on his way out.

She fetched them both a cup of tea and sat down opposite him.

"How old is your daughter, Bill?"

"She's twenty-five." Bill thought it must have sounded premature to be so worried about an adult who had effectively missed a train.

"What does she do for a living?"

"She's a trainee journalist with *The Times*. She has a degree in journalism." Bill couldn't keep the pride out of his voice.

"That's fantastic. One of my boys wanted to be a sports writer, but he didn't get the grades. Kids, eh."

Bill wasn't really in the mood for polite conversation, but it wasn't in his nature to be impolite. "What does he do now?"

“He works in a bank. It’s a good job, but it’s not what he wanted. The money’s good, though.”

“Carol was always good at school and through university. She finished as one of the top students in her year. That’s why she got a job at *The Times*.”

“You and your wife must be very proud of her. Do you have any other children?”

Bill’s face clouded over. “My wife died earlier this year. We had no children other than Carol. It’s been a bad year for us.”

The rail manageress apologised. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise.”

“No, you weren’t to know. It’s probably why I’m so worried about Carol.”

He looked at the woman sitting across from him. Concern was written all over her face, but he could see that she didn’t know what to say. “She died of breast cancer in August,” Bill said, to spare the woman from any awkwardness. “She was diagnosed in April and, despite treatment, she didn’t even get a small respite from it. They did a mastectomy and gave her chemotherapy, but it was too far gone. I think she hid it for a while. Maybe if she’d gone to the doctor earlier ...” His voice tailed off.

“That’s awful. It’s a horrible thing, cancer. It must have been hard on your daughter, too.”

“It hit Carol hard, but she was great. She came up from London every weekend from when her mother told her about the cancer, taking her to clinics, visiting her in hospital during her treatment and in the hospice towards the end.”

“She sounds like a marvellous daughter. She must be a comfort to you.”

“She is. She stayed with me for a week after the funeral, sorting all Alison’s things out and helping me with the paperwork, and all the formalities that come with a death.”

Sheila Crainey could see that Bill was happy to talk, and she was a good listener. It was part of her role to deal patiently with her customers’ problems and although it wouldn’t have appeared in her job description, she considered it her duty to do what she could to look after Bill’s wellbeing.

There may have been a degree of him off-loading some of his cares on to a stranger because Bill, who normally kept himself to himself, felt comfortable talking to the friendly and sympathetic woman who had time to spare for him.

After descending to the platform with Bill to meet the next train, still with no sign of Carol, she sent him back upstairs while she sorted out a few minor issues resulting from the latest arrival, then followed him back up to sit with him until the last train arrived.

Bill told her how he’d made a special effort with the Christmas tree because he knew that was what his wife, Alison, would have wanted, but he’d booked a nice local restaurant for Christmas dinner, figuring that the two of them sitting at the family table without Alison might be a little too morbid.

Sensing that Bill had unburdened himself enough, she told him a little about her own family, and it seemed to help the time pass for Bill, listening to the stories of the exploits of her three

boys. He even managed an odd smile, reflecting that they'd had a much easier time bringing up Carol than Mrs Crainey had dragging up her tribe.

When it was time to meet the last train, she went down to the platform with him again and waited until it had emptied. Her heart went out to him when it became obvious that his daughter hadn't been on it. Her shift finished, she reluctantly advised him to go home and try to contact Carol again in the morning.

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He looked around and spotted the two policemen he'd noticed earlier, encouraging a young woman, somewhat inebriated, to make her way out of the exit and catch a cab home.

He hesitated and, after the drunken girl clacked noisily and unsteadily down the slope towards the taxi rank in her three inch heels, he approached the two officers.

"Excuse me, I wonder if you could help me."

They both looked very young. He spoke to the one who looked the marginally older of the two. "My daughter was supposed to be on a train from London tonight and she hasn't appeared. She's not answering her mobile or the phone in her flat."

"What age is your daughter, sir?"

"She's twenty-five. Why?"

"Well, sir, if she was under sixteen, we would be a little more concerned and the procedure we'd follow would be totally different."

"Oh, I suppose that's fair enough; if she was a child I could understand that it would be more critical, but should I report her missing? I'm very worried about her."

"What's your name, sir?"

"Bill Ingram."

"Well, Bill, we don't normally take a formal report of a missing person until they've been gone for twenty-four hours, but that depends on circumstances. If there could be a reasonable explanation why the person hasn't turned up, we generally allow that amount of time and most people do get in touch by then. If I were you, I would go home and wait for her to contact you."

Bill was disappointed that they couldn't help, but could see that they had a point. He was too polite and reserved to insist but he knew, deep down, that there was something far wrong. She would never have left him like this, not knowing where she was or what had happened to her.

He took one last look round then made for his car. Fumbling in his pocket, he couldn't find his car park ticket; his mind was in turmoil and he could feel the panic taking over. He retraced his footsteps in case he'd dropped the ticket in the station, but he couldn't see it, and anyway, a man in an electric sweeping buggy with a yellow flashing light and a loud beeper had already cleaned half of the concourse. Fortunately the policemen had gone, or they might have thought he was losing the plot.

He returned to the car park and read that he'd have to pay for the full twenty-four hours if he couldn't find his ticket; in the light of Carol not showing up it shouldn't have mattered, but it did. He emptied all his pockets, standing under the harsh blue-white light of the car park entrance.

He found the ticket in between the folded sheets of paper he kept in his jacket pocket to write lists of his daily tasks on. Without them, he would be lost. It wasn't an age thing; he'd always done it and he kept separate pages for home, work and shopping.

Driving out of the multi-storey, he took the wrong one-way street and had to circle around to get back on to the road home. In his mind all sorts of scenarios kept popping up, some perfectly reasonable, where at any minute the phone would ring and she would be all apologetic and full of explanations; others dark imaginings, where she'd been in an accident, a victim of a terrorist bombing, or was lying ill in her flat, unable to get to the phone. The darker ones repeatedly came to mind, ousting the less frightening possibilities.

There was no message on his answering machine when he got home, and only one missed call. He recognised the number as that of his cousin, Robert, and made a mental note to phone him in the morning.

He sat at the dining room table, looking at his phone, willing it to ring, for about fifteen minutes then, wondering if anything big had happened in London which she might have got caught up in, he switched on his laptop and waited for the icon that told him the Internet was connected to appear.

He liked the BBC news site and it was one of his bookmarks, so it loaded quickly. It was what they called a slow news day. The top story was the big freeze and the second was the level of consumer spending in the run up to Christmas, followed by an item about a New York man who'd been released from prison despite shooting dead one of a mob who'd attacked his home.

He couldn't see any London stories that could have impacted on Carol's travel plans, and if the ice and snow had been the problem, the trains wouldn't have been running so well and on time.

He looked up his usual rail information website to find out what he already suspected – there were no trains running on Christmas Day, almost everywhere, so even if she wanted to come up, she wouldn't be able to. It also stifled the germ of an idea that had crept into his mind – that he should jump on the next train and head down to London to see what had happened to her – and as that option was taken away from him, he steeled himself for what he knew he had to do. The thought of a three hundred and fifty mile overnight drive in darkness through ice and snow made him feel sick. He wondered if an ill-conceived rush down the M6 was the worst thing he could do for her, but he knew if he didn't, the night would be even longer.

And if he left now, he would be easily there first thing in the morning, even with a couple of stops for coffee or a short sleep.

Once he had made the decision, Bill moved quickly and efficiently. He packed a change of clothing, a sleeping bag and the basic toiletries, along with a flask of hot soup, a couple of slices of hastily buttered bread, and a second flask, filled with strong black coffee.

He was always extremely thorough in everything he did; he'd filled the car up with fuel that afternoon in preparation for the festive period and he always carried a spare container of

diesel in the boot, but anyway, he was pretty sure that there would be a service station open somewhere on the motorway should he get low on fuel. There was no reason to hurry, so he could travel at a steady sixty and one tankful might just take him all the way.

Passing through the front door with his bags and provisions, he took a last look at the telephone, willing it to ring. Seeing the answering machine, he realised that he should leave a message for Carol on it, in case she phoned the house. Alison had purchased the thing before she had a mobile phone, when she'd been the chairperson for two local charities and had become exasperated at missing calls. It was old, but it still worked. Bill found it useful for screening out calls he didn't want to answer and now he was glad he'd hung on to it. After depositing his luggage in the car, he returned to the house and changed the outgoing message, taking a few attempts before he got it right: "It's Bill here. If it's Carol calling, leave a message saying where you are and how I can contact you. If it's anyone else, please phone my mobile if it's important."

He didn't leave his cell phone number; anyone who he wanted to contact him would have it already. He picked up the little card that was under the machine showing him how to connect to it remotely and, seeing the old spiral-bound notepad that functioned as a family address book, he pocketed it as well.

Finally, he switched off the Christmas tree lights that he'd left on to make the place festive for Carol and double locked the front door. Sitting in the car, putting on his seatbelt, he suddenly realised that he hadn't left a light on. *Shit.*

Even in his haste to get going, he wasn't the sort of person who could just ignore it. Alison and he always left a light on when they were going to be out in the hours of darkness, with a plug-in timer to convince potential burglars that the house remained inhabited.

He went back in and switched it on, checking the time on the little mechanical wheel, then locked up again. Reversing out of the drive, he felt slightly more comfortable seeing the glow of the light behind the curtains of the living room. He steered the car out of the quiet suburban cul-de-sac, heading for the motorway and his long trip south.

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During the first part of his journey Bill constantly ran over in his mind how he was going to tackle his search for Carol. He drove for about an hour then stopped, not because he needed coffee or felt compelled to empty his bladder – although both were welcome – but to make notes of his thoughts and plans so that he wouldn't forget any of it.

As he drove across the border into England, he thought back to happier times, trying to dispel the dark cloud of fear that had enveloped him.

He had a happy childhood, with parents who cared deeply for him but didn't stifle him, and his teenage years were fun-filled and, in a gentle way, adventurous. Four years followed at university, where he learned how to be an engineer, experimented with drink and girls, and watched from the sidelines as some of his friends dabbled in the softer end of the drug scene.

He met and married the love of his life in his gap year, while working his way around Europe, and secured a good job with one of Scotland's largest engineering groups just in time for the couple to move into their first house in a secluded but dull suburb of Glasgow a few weeks before Alison gave birth to their daughter, Carol, seven months after the nuptials. They

managed to obtain a mortgage, helped by a loan from Bill's parents and the money Bill had somehow managed, even as a student, to save.

As Bill climbed steadily up the management tree in the company and moved home a couple of times to reflect his growing income and aspirations, Carol glided smoothly through her childhood, youth and further education, culminating in her gaining a degree in business journalism from Stirling University.

Her parents were disappointed when she moved to London, but realised that it was the best chance for her to further her career. They still saw her regularly; she came home to see her friends and family every two months or so and they would spend a weekend with her in London in between these visits. Her job as a junior reporter with the business section of *The Times* was just the opportunity she'd headed south for. The nearer Bill got to London, the harder it became to keep the anxiety from overpowering his memories.

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Three short breaks and seven hours later, Bill found a parking space vacated by an early morning worker in Leybourne Street, fifty yards along from Carol's flat in Camden Town. He was cursing himself for forgetting, in his panic and worry, to lift the spare set of flat keys that lived in one of the kitchen drawers at home.

It wasn't a major disaster. He knew that Mrs Hamble, the neighbour in the flat below Carol's, had a spare set. He and Alison met her often on their visits down to London; she was a pleasant older lady who was very good to Carol, as their daughter was to her. But although the worry was eating into his bones, he still couldn't bring himself to ring her doorbell at six o'clock on Christmas morning, so he sat there for a while, putting the scribbled notes he'd made into some semblance of order, refining a plan in his mind for the day ahead. He could see that the curtains in Carol's flat were closed, but there was no answer when he'd rung her doorbell. He hadn't expected anything different; he'd rang both her house phone and her mobile every time he'd stopped during his journey and again when he'd first arrived. He could faintly hear the phone ringing from the direction of the flat and wondered why it didn't wake up Mrs Hamble below.

He sat in the car, turning over and over in his mind that, if he looked back, he should have known that something hadn't been right. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed that his previously charmed and untroubled life had started to fall apart on the 13th of January, 2010, the day of his forty-seventh birthday.

The first indication that Bill's almost utopic existence had been nearing its end was when, for the first time ever, Carol missed his birthday. A few friends and relations were coming round that Wednesday evening and Bill was supposed to pick his daughter up from Glasgow's Central Station late the previous night, but he received a phone call in mid-afternoon saying that something had come up in London that she couldn't get out of and, although she felt really bad at missing his birthday, she wasn't able to make it up for the few days with them that she'd intended.

Bill and Alison were disappointed, but not upset, and thought nothing of it. They supposed that it might have been something to do with work or with one of her friends – she was the type of girl who would go out of her way if someone needed help or support. *Besides, she was home at Christmas for a few days.*

She managed to come up the weekend following Bill's birthday, but didn't elaborate on her reasons for postponing her visit and her parents weren't the kind to pry. Despite Carol being their only child, they hadn't smothered her. Bill liked to think they'd given her the same space and freedom that his own parents had given him but, over the next six months, the period between her trips up north stretched a little. On a couple of occasions, when they'd suggested an extra visit down to see her, she'd had other things on that would have made it silly for them to make the journey.

That all changed with Alison's breast cancer diagnosis in mid-April. She'd noticed a small lump a few days before Bill's birthday, but a natural reticence to tell him or see the doctor about it, and the familiar slow progress through the grind of the National Health Service's diagnostic machine meant that it was exactly five months after Bill's birthday that she was admitted to hospital for a breast removal.

During Alison's illness, Carol wasn't her usual self, but Bill knew the effect his wife's slow and inevitable deterioration was having on him, and he could only assume that Carol felt the same; struggling to cope with the knowledge that each time she visited, more flesh had melted from her mum's shrinking frame and her eyes disappeared a little further into her head, leaving her more skeletal with each passing week.

Bill's father had died a few years before and his mother was in a home, with advanced dementia, so at Alison's funeral, he and Carol felt very much alone, despite the presence of a number of friends and acquaintances, and Alison's parents, who lived in Aberdeen. Carol's maternal grandparents had never been a big part of their lives; Bill had always thought that they'd never forgiven him for their only daughter's unplanned early pregnancy and short engagement.

Bill knew that Carol had waited until she was quite sure he was coping before heading back down south. She phoned him twice a week and travelled the West Coast Main Line to and from Glasgow on a fortnightly basis until late October, when the phone calls suddenly became less frequent and there was only one trip to Glasgow in the two months leading up to Christmas. During her visit Bill noticed that Carol was a bit pale and subdued, but didn't say anything. He'd thought to himself that she would eventually speak to him if something was bothering her. And anyway, she'd told him she had plans to come home for Christmas. She didn't know, but he'd booked them a week in the Lanzarote sunshine over the New Year. He felt that they both deserved a break after the horrendous year it had been for them.

But she hadn't turned up.

By eight o'clock, his nerves were frayed and his patience had given out. He rang the old lady's doorbell, despite having vowed not to do so until he saw signs that she was up.

Nothing happened for a while, so he rang it again. This time, after a few minutes, he heard sounds from behind the door and eventually the letter box popped open.

"Who is it?" said a slightly croaky voice, as a pair of tired looking eyes peered at him through the slit in the door.

"Mrs Hamble, it's Mr Ingram, Carol's father. I was hoping you still had the spare keys for her flat."

"Wait a minute." There was a pause, then a rattle of chains and the sound of two locks being undone. Finally, the door swung open. The old lady had on a rather elegant purple dressing

gown and green slippers. Her silver hair was unbrushed and loose, in contrast to the usual tight bun he was used to seeing; he apologised for waking her up so rudely.

“Don’t fret about it. I normally get up between eight and nine. I probably wouldn’t have heard the door if I hadn’t already been awake.” She motioned for him to come in. “Now, what’s up with Carol?”

She fumbled for the keys as Bill explained what had happened and told her about his worries. She gave him the keys and gamely followed him upstairs to Carol’s flat, one of two at that level.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside, his heart thumping in his chest, dreading the worst. He quickly checked the living room and kitchen, subconsciously leaving her bedroom until last, but despite his uneasiness as to what he might find, when he pushed open the door he saw her bed was empty and unslept in. He stood for a few seconds, gasping with relief that she wasn’t lying in bed, severely ill or worse. Those few seconds of respite died as the full impact of her absence hit home.

“She probably stayed the night with friends, Mr Ingram. I’m sure she’ll be back.”

“She would never have done that without phoning; even if her mobile was broken, she would have found a phone somewhere. No, something’s far wrong. I’m going to contact the police.”

He wanted her to leave, needing to be on his own to gather his thoughts, irritated by her platitudes, but knowing that she meant well.

“Mrs Hamble, thanks for your help. I’ll hang on to these keys, if that’s all right.” He paused, willing her to go, but she stood resolutely, as if her being there was a comfort to him. Bill tried again. “I’m going to go to the nearest police station. Do you know where it is?”

“There’s one in Kentish Town. It’s not far from here, but it may not be open today. You’ll probably have to go to one of the larger ones, or just phone them. Would you like me to stay here until you get back, in case she phones, or comes home?”

He bit back his exasperation, not wanting to offend her, even in his worried state. “No, Mrs Hamble, that won’t be necessary. You go down and get some breakfast. I need to do a few things, then go and report Carol as missing.” He took her arm and guided her gently towards the door. He watched her as she carefully went down the stairs, looking back at him with concern a couple of times.

He closed the door and sat on the edge of Carol’s bed for a minute. He then got up and started to look round the flat, searching for any clues to her whereabouts.

Carol had always been an organised and tidy person, and at first glance the flat seemed to look the way it should do, but on closer inspection there was something not quite right. A fine layer of dust covered every surface, and when he checked the fridge, he found no foodstuffs that he would have described as perishable, like milk, eggs or butter; there was only some cheese in a sealed packet which, although it looked all right, was long past its sell-by date. It was almost as if she hadn’t lived in the flat for a while. When he checked the bin, it was half-full of empty spirit bottles, mainly vodka, which he found strange as there were no signs that any sort of party had taken place.

Looking out the window, he realised he hadn't displayed Carol's resident's permit in his car. He picked it out of the drawer in the chest in the hall, where she kept it handy for their visits. She'd sold her car nearly a year before – an Oyster card was much cheaper and she found it just as easy to get about on public transport – but the permit had a couple of weeks still to run.

He retrieved his bags from the car, placed the permit on the dashboard and returned to the flat. He noticed that the light on the answering machine was blinking and pressed the play button anxiously, hoping it was Carol, but disappointment flooded over him when he recognised his own voice on the message he'd left the night before.

Despite his anxiety, when Bill sat down on the chair his eyelids started to droop. He didn't fight it and before long he drifted off to an uneasy sleep, exhausted after his overnight journey.

CHAPTER 2 CAROL

7th November 2009

“Where are we going tonight, then?” Carol held the phone to her ear with her shoulder, wrapping the last remaining length of hair around the hot curling tongs, checking out the result in the mirror opposite the bed as she did so. *Hmmm, not bad.* She laughed to herself.

“Alice says she’s found a fucking awesome club over the river in Walworth. Bloq, she said it was called. She was there last week with girls she knew from school; said there were a few celebs in but it’s not right up itself and the drink’s not extortionate.” Heather was always up for trying somewhere new and liked to drag Carol along with her.

“What celebs were in? Not that I give a toss, anyway.”

“You know him in Skins; the one that plays Cook?”

“Yes. Is he as wild in real life as he is on the telly?”

“Alice didn’t say, but she also mentioned a couple of tennis players, the girl from one of the morning shows who was on Strictly and, inevitably I suppose, some football players and their WAGs. But not Thierry Henry, unfortunately.”

“He lives in Spain now. I saw it in a magazine.”

“OK, smart arse. But he is gorgeous. Anyway, are you coming?”

“I don’t know. It sounds a bit upmarket for me. I’m not sure I want to make an arse of myself staring at second rate glitterati who are probably completely up their own arses, pardon my French.”

“Oh, shut up. Don’t be a tight Scottish mare. You always whine when we talk about going somewhere different then you end up having a ball.”

“Yes, I know, but we’ll probably go there, spend all our wages on one night and have nothing left until payday.”

Heather laughed. “It won’t be that bad. I, for one, intend to find some rich, good-looking bugger to buy me drinks all evening, so that won’t be a problem.”

“You’d settle for not-so-good-looking if he had enough money.”

“Carol Ingram, you *are* a bitch. But you could be right. It’s not all about looks; it’s what’s inside that counts.”

“Aye, inside their wallet, more like.”

“Right, that’s it. I’ve booked a Taxi for nine thirty. If you’re lucky, I’ll pick you up on the way. Not that you deserve it.”

Carol grinned for a while after she’d put the phone down and carried on with her make-up. She’d been lucky falling in with Heather, who she worked with, and Alice, Heather’s crazy

friend from school. She'd fitted in so well with them and their wider social circle, making the transition from Scotland to London much easier than she'd expected.

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"That's the guy who owns this place." Alice nodded towards the bar. Although the music was loud, they could make each other out without shouting too loudly.

"Which one?" Carol could see several men at the bar, all striking poses and mostly, as far as she was concerned, failing to pull them off.

"The one with the goatee. Aleksander, he's called. Spelled with a 'K', so defo foreign. Quite tasty, if you like that sort of thing."

Carol grimaced. "He's not my type. Too full of himself and I hate beards."

"Mostly, I agree, but some men suit them. What about Hugh Jackman, Ben Affleck and, of course, Sean Connery?"

It was Heather's turn to pull a face. "For fuck's sake, he's old enough to be your grandfather. That's disgusting."

Carol disagreed with her. "To be fair, I don't think that would put me off. I'm with Alice on that one. And the others are pretty hot, too, but on normal guys, gross."

Carol looked around. "Anyway, how do you know there's a 'K' in his name? And where are all those footballers and soap stars you promised?"

"I didn't say they were in every night, did I?" Alice shrugged. "And his name's on the licensee notice above the front door," she said smugly, just as the waitress appeared.

They ordered drinks – Carol, a white wine spritzer; the other two, long vodkas. Alice and Heather rummaged about in their bags and each handed Carol a couple of twenties. She groaned.

"Why is it always me who has the kitty? Can someone else not take it for a change?"

"You're the sensible one!" they chorused, laughing at her.

She grinned, not really minding. They were great friends to have, even if they did sometimes take the piss.

They'd chosen a table just off to the side of the dance floor and were still waiting for their drinks when Carol saw, out of the corner of her eye, the bearded man they'd been discussing walking towards their table. She nudged her friends to warn them.

"Ladies, ladies, welcome. I'm sure I'm not seeing you in before."

"We've never been in before," Heather replied, indicating Carol and herself, "but Alice was here last month." She was inwardly cursing herself for sounding so lame.

"We're always delighted when beautiful girls like you come visit our little club." He smiled and all three of them melted a little.

Impeccably dressed in a suit that said “money” but achieved a casual look at the same time, his voice had more than a hint of an Eastern European accent and he exuded a natural charm, despite his blatant smoothness. Undoubtedly, he was a good looking bastard; about six foot tall, with a slim physique that still managed to suggest an underlying hardness and a tinge of danger, but his eyes smiled when the rest of his face did and disarmed any feelings of threat or malice. “Has no one sorted for you drinks, yet?”

“The waitress is just coming with them; she took the order a few minutes ago.”

“We can’t have three lovely ladies sitting not with drinks.” He casually nodded at a woman in a sharp tailored suit who was passing the table. “Anna, could you organise bottle of Prosecco for this table? One of good ones.”

The woman, without smiling, nodded and turned towards the bar. She spoke to one of the barmen, waited while he placed a bottle and four glasses on the tray, then brought it over to the table. Still without a word, she placed the bottle next to her boss and dished out the glasses to the girls, giving him the last one. “Do you want me to open it?” she asked, her Geordie accent evident but not too strong.

He shook his head. “That’s everything. You go now.”

As she walked away, he turned to the girls. “My new manageress. She’s bit abrupt sometime, but runs place like clockwork when busy and doesn’t take shit from punters when get crazy. I have many staff to look sexy and be friendly with guests, so don’t mind her showing some serious shit.” It sounded as if he was making excuses for her and Carol wondered if she was more than just his manageress.

Not that she would have asked him, but he precluded any questions by popping the cork and filling their glasses from what Carol could see was an expensive bottle of fizz. The glasses were frosted around the top, which made her lips tingle when she took a sip. She was no wine buff, but she guessed that it was the best of stuff and hoped that it wasn’t extortionate, as she half expected that they might end up paying for it.

That worry was immediately dispelled.

“My compliments, ladies. Here’s good health and enjoyment at club.”

They clinked glasses and chatted comfortably with him, asking about the club, and his background.

“Sorry about English. I learn quick, but sometimes not good. I came here from Albania about ten years ago and got work as barman in West End.” Carol got the impression that he dropped the odd word and retained a slight accent for effect; there was no doubt that it fitted in with his appearance. His story was genuinely interesting and he told it casually and with humour, in a self-deprecating manner.

“After about five years, I was manager of club and getting good money, but I didn’t spend much. Soon I bought small bar in not good area and got lucky, as students were just starting to rent flats close by. They liked tunes I play and cheap drink. Soon, I bought next-door shop and converted whole place to small club. It still does well and I have my little brother over to run it for me. It makes good money, but when I saw this building, I thought, Aleksander, this would make great club for rich people to come. Then I give to my brother other club.”

He smiled, the girls hanging onto every word.

“So this wasn’t always a club?” Heather asked, leaning over towards him.

“No, it was sort of warehouse, with small shop area at front. May have been small clothing factory long time ago, but used just as store for many years. Was good building. Just shell to work with. I borrowed lots of money from bank. Put in best of stuff. Now great club and expensive people come. Sound system cost hundred K alone,” he told them, proudly.

“Why is it called Bloq?” Alice asked, curious.

He smiled. “When I come here first, I hear ‘Eastern Bloq’ this and ‘Eastern Bloq’ that. I ask what is this Eastern Bloq and they said it means all countries behind Iron Curtain, so I ask what this Iron Curtain and they say former communist states before wall come down. I tell them not all countries same, but they think we all USSR. When I buy club I think of name and make joke. I say will call it Eastern Bloq, but some friends say too long, so I decide Bloq. English people say should have letter ‘c’ but in Albania we have word *blloqe* nearly same, with letter ‘q’.”

They all laughed; it was a good name and it was even better when you heard the story behind it.

He recharged their glasses and his. “You should come often. Good place for young beautiful ladies. Meet nice people.” He gestured around the room with his hand, as if to say *take your pick*.

“Are you single?” Alice asked, laughing.

“I have no time for ladies. Need to make money, pay bank.” It could have been dismissive but he broke out that smile as he said it and they all knew that he didn’t go short of female company.

“Do you ever go back home?” Carol asked, surprising herself and the others.

“This home now. But I visit my parents once this year for week. Anna and boys look after club very good. I meet all relatives; they see I do good. But would never move back. Well, maybe when very wrinkled old man, to sit in sun with other old men, drink raki and talk about old days.” He laughed again. “I must go now. You’re not only guests in club tonight,” he scolded them, grinning. “Enjoy bottle on house. Your other drinks will come when this finished.”

“Thanks,” they all chorused.

“My pleasure, call me Aleksander. I see you around.” He held up his glass. “Gëzuar,” he said, as he toasted them. “In Albania, means ‘cheers’.”

He got up and walked away, speaking to a person here and there, the odd hand on a shoulder, laughing and joking all the while.

“Wow!” said Alice. “Dangerous. But I’d do him.”

“Alice, do you need to be quite so subtle? But I know what you mean. There’s something *very* attractive about him.” Carol smiled as she said it. They all felt his presence, even after he’d left.

“I wouldn’t say no, if he asked, either,” Heather said, “but we’ve no chance. Even if we did, he’d chew us up and spit us out when he’d finished,” she added, rather more sharply than she’d intended.

“You’re probably right. I’m sure he has his pick and I’d bet he doesn’t stay with the same girl for too long,” Carol observed.

“But what a night! It might just be worth it.” Alice looked over as he mingled with a mixed group of very well-dressed, obviously moneyed, clubbers. “Look at the buns on him!”

“Alice, you always have to bring the conversation down to base level.”

“Only saying what you’re both thinking. He did show an interest, though. Which one of us do you think he’d go for? I think it’s me. You two are too prudish. Especially if he’s just after a shag.”

“Alice!” the other two said simultaneously, but they all laughed and finished off the remainder of the bottle.

“Let’s go and look round this place. We’ll get our drinks later.”

They made their way towards the main entrance; there were a couple of openings off to each side and a spiral stairway that led to a mezzanine level. They chose to go up the stairs and stood on the wide curved balcony that overlooked the dance floor, close to where they’d been sitting talking to Aleksander. More tables and seating occupied the upper floor, and Carol noticed that at this level it was mostly arranged in small booths suitable for two or four people. They scanned the dance floor below, noticing for the first time that there were a couple of semi-famous faces in, surrounded by hangers-on, fawning over their every word. They had a bit of fun identifying the more obscure of these celebrities until one of the waiters arrived with their drinks order. The waiter wouldn’t take any money from them and when they looked down, Aleksander gave them a wave; they self-consciously returned it, mouthing thanks for sending up the drinks.

Carol was reluctant to sit her drink on the wide balustrade at the edge of the balcony until Alice pointed out the discreet but substantial net designed to catch any glasses, or possibly even bodies, that might fall towards the dance floor below. They sat in one of the booths adjacent to the edge and people-watched for a while.

“I told you I wouldn’t have to buy a drink all night. I think he’s definitely got the hots for one of us and I can’t see it being either of you two.”

“Shut up, Heather; it would be me if it was anyone,” said Alice. “I think he must have noticed me the last time and decided to make a move. I don’t know if I fancy him much, though. I think I’d rather have one of those guys down there,” she said, pointing to a much younger group standing together at the end of the bar.

Carol laughed, accustomed to her two friends winding each other up. “I bet he buys drinks for any new girls coming here for the first time, to encourage them to come back. Everybody knows that it’s the women who pull in the male clientele to nightclubs, so they’ll do anything to get us to be regulars.”

“You’ve always got to be fucking sensible, haven’t you? Can you not let us have a fantasy for a moment or two, before you give us a reality check?” Alice groaned, but she was smiling at Carol as she said it.

When they’d finished their drinks, they returned to the lower floor and continued to look around the club. The door to the right of the entrance vestibule was marked *Private – VIP lounge only*, so they tried the door leading off to the left. It led into a wide but short corridor, with an identical door at the other end and they could feel the thud of a bass beat through the floor as they approached it. Seeing the shimmer and flashes of intensely coloured lights through the small round window in the upper half of the heavy door, they opened it and a wall of sound hit them, making them gasp with its intensity. A DJ stood on a platform in the centre, high above the dense crowd bouncing on the dance floor, the spectacular light show illuminating the dancers’ faces eerily.

Heather leaned in towards her friends. “This is more like it. Let’s have a fucking dance.” Hardly making her out, Carol and Alice caught the gist of her words and they launched themselves into the melee, instantly part of the writhing mass of dancers responding to the DJ’s manic performance. One track blended in with another and they must have been dancing for nearly an hour until, exhausted, they stumbled back through the double doors for a break. The music back in the main part of the club felt noticeably quieter now, after the crushing noise they’d just left.

“I can’t believe how busy it is in there, and how loud. You can’t hear it out here at all!” Carol exclaimed.

“I’m guessing he paid as much for soundproofing as he did for his speakers,” Alice said, “and the lighting was pretty awesome, too. How does a guy who comes over here with nothing get successful quickly enough to be able to afford to spend that sort of money on a club?”

“If you’ve got the balls and the brains, and you’re willing to take a few risks and flirt with the edges of the law, it’s surprising how quickly you can make it big.” Heather regularly interviewed young entrepreneurs for the paper. “It doesn’t do any harm to be charming and have the gift of the gab, either,” she added, “and your man here seems to have these qualities in spades, so it’s not surprising.”

“Or he may be the front for an Albanian cartel,” joked Alice. “Those two bouncers at the door looked pretty thuggish and creepy.”

Heather laughed. “Bouncers always look like that, that’s why they employ them. But they prefer to be called doormen or security operatives nowadays.”

After another couple of drinks and another spell in the “loud room”, they were ready to call it a night. As they reclaimed their coats, Aleksander suddenly appeared at their side, from nowhere.

“Ladies, you are leaving so soon? Did you not enjoy my club?”

Heather and Alice tried to deny any form of dissatisfaction with their evening at the same time, drowning each other out. As they looked at each other in annoyance, Carol took the chance to tell him that they’d had a great night, but they were exhausted. “We’ll definitely be back, though, and we’ll tell everyone we know about it.”

“Thank you, thank you. You are very charming ladies.”

Again, the smile banished any arrogance from his face.

“Now let me get taxi for you. It’s not good to wander round this place at night looking for cab. Some bad people out there.” He motioned to the doorman, who spoke into a microphone attached to his earpiece, waving them over when he’d finished.

Aleksander surprised them all by kissing each of them on both cheeks before wishing them a good night and leaving them to be guided out by the doorman who, up close, seemed every bit as brutal as they’d remembered him, and with a much more marked Eastern European accent than his boss.

The doormen must have had direct contact with the drivers because there was a taxi sitting with its door open, ready for them, when they went outside. As it drove away, they could see what Aleksander meant about the area not being the best for a late night stroll.

“That’s how he’s got a club that size at his age. He was prepared to buy a property in a less fashionable part of town, probably at a fraction of the cost of a similar building somewhere classier,” Heather said, as the cab sped northwards past the Elephant and Castle.

“He’s been quite clever, as most people come by cab or car, so it’s not necessarily an issue and anyway, I hear from those in the know that this area could be the place to be in five years’ time.”

Alice was quite often right with her predictions, but Carol was more intrigued by the man than by his money.

“There is something about him, though. A bit full of himself, but he just about gets away with it, somehow. And I think he’s definitely got one of you two in his sights!”

Her friends laughed, but Carol could see that they’d come to the same conclusion and that neither would put up a fight if he made a move on them. As they crossed the Waterloo Bridge and the cab sped them back home to the north side of the river, a return to the club the following week was discussed with a feigned indifference.

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Carol, surprising herself, felt a thrill of anticipation when her friends suggested returning to the club the following Saturday night. Neither Alice nor Heather would admit it, but both were intrigued by its charming and attractive owner. Although she would never have acknowledged it to the others, Carol was just as curious, if a little nervous at the thought of meeting him again, but she sensed that it wouldn’t be a good thing if one of her friends did get involved with him.

It all added an extra edge to their night when they met up for a few drinks at their usual wine bar. When it was late enough to ensure that they wouldn’t be arriving unfashionably early at an almost empty venue, they joined the scrum of revellers trying to hail a cab to take them over the river again. As usual it took Heather’s aggressive competitiveness before they got one, which dropped them off as close to Bloq as the driver could get. Threading their way through the carnage of cars parked in every available square foot on both sides of the street, they made it to the door just before the queue was beginning to form.

It was a disappointment to all three when they got in to the club and there was no sign of Aleksander. When they asked Anna, the manageress, she told them, almost rudely, that he’d

been away on business all day, but that he hoped to be back at some point in the evening. Carol wondered again if the woman was in a relationship with her boss, or wanted to be, because for a moment, her facial expression seemed designed to warn the three friends to stay away from Aleksander. If it was true, Alice and Heather hadn't noticed it.

They were soon joined by a few of the journalists who worked with Heather and Carol. Even Steve Evans, a seasoned columnist just escaping from his second failed marriage and a veteran of London nightlife, was impressed by the new club the girls had found.

It was almost the end of the night when Alice noticed Aleksander appear behind the bar. He might have been there a while; the staff were barely coping with the "last drinks rush" and their boss had stepped in to help until the drinkers waiting to be served thinned out to less than one deep. Small groups of clubbers were beginning to leave and Aleksander left the bar and spoke to some of those on their way out before approaching Carol and her friends.

Steve and the others were even more impressed when Aleksander quietly told them to wait until the majority had left and then to join him and a few friends for a private drink or two.

They waited until the exodus had dwindled to the last few stragglers and made their way to the entrance of the VIP room. One of the doormen had stationed himself outside, but he just nodded to Carol and her friends as they went through.

The room was much smaller than she'd expected; almost like an oversized living room, with a small bar at one end. There were perhaps thirty people present, relaxing in the opulent clusters of couches surrounding a small dance floor. The lighting was subtle and the music was quieter, with a smooth jazzy feel to it. Aleksander himself was dishing out the drinks and a couple of waitresses were carrying plates of nibbles for the guests.

Carol sat with her back to the dance floor, alongside Jenny, another of the interns, and Steve. Heather and Alice sat facing them, beside Dawn and Petra, a couple of young office trainees from the paper who were giggling excitedly, wondering aloud if it would be OK to talk to the three young West Ham players they'd recognised sitting at the next couch along.

Aleksander sauntered over and Heather introduced everyone while he took their drinks order. Most of them accepted the offer of a glass of fizz, but Steve ordered a whiskey sour in an attempt to impress the group. The nightclub owner returned to the bar to pour their drinks and a waitress brought them over. Aleksander, briefly talking to the young footballers on the way, followed her and sat beside them.

"This is really great of you to do this," Alice said, her words echoed by a few appreciative murmurs from the others.

"Not at all." Aleksander turned to Steve, Jenny and the two girls, who were still trying to catch the eye of the footballers. "My three beautiful friends here are regulars; they bring me much new customers." He didn't seem embarrassed by this exaggeration and Heather, Alice and Carol basked a little in their colleagues' gratitude for being included in their privileged status, however unearned it was.

He definitely has designs on Alice or Heather. Carol didn't mind if it was the case; it was working to everyone's benefit. Steve was taking the chance to grill Aleksander about his rise from bar worker to club owner for a possible feature, and Carol and Heather cursed themselves for not thinking of it. The two girls from the office had plucked up the courage to

talk to the three West Ham players, who weren't quite senior enough to be completely arrogant and seemed quite taken by Heather and Carol's young colleagues.

Carol didn't pay much attention to what was going on. Being completely honest, she was beginning to feel tired and was quite happy to make her drink last until the others were ready to go home, when she noticed Steve, Heather and Alice talking quietly with Aleksander. The next thing she knew, her two friends and Steve were each doing a line of coke on the table. It wasn't the first time she'd seen coke being snorted and she'd often shared a spliff with Heather and Alice, but she did feel a little uneasy at the sight of the three of them openly doing a line in front of her.

Aleksander leaned over. "You not want some?" he asked.

"No thanks," she replied, "I've never done it." She blushed at how naïve she sounded, but he didn't seem bothered.

"Fair enough. But let me know if change your mind. Is good if only use now and then. You try it before dance. Or make love. Best ever." He laughed, but she noticed that he hadn't taken any.

"Do you ever ..."

"Yes, but not often and not when work."

Steve and Jenny had been talking together for a while before getting up for a dance, and the two trainees had moved along to sit next to the football players. It was the first time during the evening that Aleksander had the three friends together, alone.

"There's private party here next Thursday. Somebody slight bit famous. Do you want come to it?"

Alice and Heather looked at each other briefly and nodded. "Yes, we'd love to. Are you up for it, Carol?"

Carol wasn't sure. "I hate going out when I'm working the next day. I think I'll give it a miss, this time."

Alice was shocked. "You are joking, aren't you? You've got to come. How often will you get invited to something like this?" She turned to Aleksander. "Who is it?"

"Ach, that's secret. Girlfriend throw surprise party. Not know enough people to fill up club, ask me make look busy."

"Just come and don't drink too much. Or take the Friday off," Heather said to Carol. "When was the last time you had a day off work?"

Aleksander was, as always, diplomatic. "Let Carol make her own mind. You let me know by end of evening and I add you to list. It start sooner than normal night so you go home early if want to work next day. Work important. I now go work, too, keep other guests happy." He smiled at them and worked his way round to the bar, checking that everyone in the room had drinks.

Both her friends turned to Carol after he'd left.

“Come on, you can’t miss something like this,” said Heather.

“Don’t be a dork. You’d hate it if we came back and told you all about us mixing with the celebs and you’d missed it,” Alice added.

“I don’t think it will be A-list, from what Aleksander said, but I’ll come anyway, even if it’s just to watch you two make asses of yourselves fawning over people who’ve been on TV for two minutes.” She laughed.

Alice and Heather were delighted. “Right, that’s settled. Let’s have fucking dance, as Aleksander would say.”

Heather and Carol giggled at Alice’s impression of the club’s owner, just as Steve and Jenny came back. They left them sitting together and had a couple of dances on the now busy compact dance floor. When they returned to their seats, the two other girls had disappeared with the football players and there was no sign of Jenny or Steve.

“Well, bugger me, so much for a night out with friends!” complained Heather. They laughed and agreed to call it a night. Aleksander saw them heading for the door and showed them out, once again making sure that his doorman had called a cab for them.

“Must go. Need to chase others now, too, or no sleep. You want come Thursday?”

He seemed pleased when they said that they were up for it and he left them waiting for the cab, which took no more than a few minutes.

“Hasn’t he made a move on one of you yet?” Carol joked on the way back to her flat, where they were all staying.

“He’s been the perfect gentleman to me. It’s very disappointing.” Alice did look a bit deflated.

“It’s the same with me. Perhaps he needs to get me on my own,” Heather said.

“You’re bound to get a chance next Thursday. Maybe we should put bets on it.” Carol found this hilarious, but the other two didn’t join in with her mirth.

CHAPTER 3 LONDON

Bill awoke with a start. A little drool of saliva had trickled from the corner of his mouth onto his jumper and he quickly wiped it with a hanky, embarrassed despite there being nobody else present. For a brief second he wondered where he was, but that thought was brutally forced from his mind by the crushing recollection of why he'd woken up, cramped, in a chair in Carol's flat.

After checking the flat again for any clues as to Carol's disappearance and finding nothing of significance, he quickly left for the police station. He'd fortunately left his *A to Z* in the glove compartment the last time he'd been down to the flat, which now seemed to him like an age ago, and Kentish Town police station was relatively easy to find anyway.

Unable to find a space, he took the risk of double parking. A notice on the front door told him that due to critical staff shortages, there was no one manning the front desk until the 26th and that any enquiries should be directed to the neighbouring police station at West Hampstead or to Metropolitan Police Headquarters. He didn't fancy the trip over to Victoria and, irrationally, he thought the police might think his problem was too trivial for him to report it in the familiar and imposing Scotland Yard building that he'd seen so often on the news, when major crimes from the capital were being reported on the BBC.

Again the *A to Z* proved useful and he found West Hampstead police station with less trouble than he'd expected. If it hadn't been for his situation, he might even have enjoyed the reduced numbers of nose to tail buses, irritable taxi drivers and reckless cyclists that made it easier to travel across the city than through London's normally gridlocked streets. This time, he was lucky to find a parking space and he used his mobile to pay for the ticket.

Nervously, he stood in the crowded waiting room while a constant stream of people was dealt with by two bored looking officers standing behind a long counter. Bill looked around and saw the usual ethnic mix that always fascinated him when he was in London and, although his home city of Glasgow was fast becoming as multicultural as the capital, the sheer number of communities and cultures in London put it in a different league. Bill didn't feel particularly uncomfortable, even when his attempts to pass the time of day were rewarded with sullen silence, but he was pleased when it was his turn to approach the desk. He waited patiently for the officer behind the counter to lift his head from the sheet of paper he was reading.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Bill stumbled over his explanation of Carol's non-appearance, perturbed slightly by the lack of notes being taken, but he hesitated to comment on it so as not to antagonise the man. Eventually, when the officer had heard enough to realise that Bill's story was going to have to be recorded, he reluctantly, it seemed to Bill, selected a form from the rack behind him and asked Bill to repeat the information that he'd already given.

"We'll officially record your daughter as a missing person, which will mean that her name will be circulated around all the police stations in London and she'll be placed on the missing persons list in the nationwide database. In the meantime it would be better if you made your way home and we'll contact you when we hear something."

“I’m going to stay at her flat until I hear from her. I’ll call back round tomorrow, if you don’t mind.” Even when he was annoyed, Bill couldn’t help but be polite, although as a result of the policeman’s seeming indifference, there was an edge to his voice.

“It would be better not to, sir. It gets pretty busy in here and we wouldn’t want you wasting your own time or ours, would we?”

“I’ll phone, then, if that’s not going to put you out.”

The officer looked at him as if trying to make up his mind if Bill’s voice held a hint of sarcasm, but he let it slide. “That would be better, although you’d be best served by waiting till we call you, Mr Ingram.”

Bill left, unconvinced of the prospect of the police exerting much energy in the hunt for Carol, and returned to the flat more dispirited than before.

Mrs Hamble, in her kindness, had made him some lunch, and as he ate the bowl of soup and sandwich at her kitchen table, with little enthusiasm, he updated her on the disappointing response of the police.

“Not to worry, Mr Ingram. I’m sure they’ll get moving on it once they’re fully staffed tomorrow. You should go and get some rest, after driving all night like that.”

He thanked her for the food and, agreeing that a sleep would be helpful, he made his escape.

More to keep himself occupied than anything else, he retrieved his laptop from his bag and cursed under his breath as he realised that, in his haste to leave home, he hadn’t packed the chargers for either the computer or his phone.

He fired it up anyway and, knowing that it was fully charged, he thought he’d go on to the Internet to find somewhere he could buy replacements.

It took him ten minutes to find the small card with Carol’s Wi-Fi settings that allowed him to connect and a further five minutes to guess what her password was, but when he did, he quickly found two or three retail outlets nearby that might have chargers, if they were open. The most likely one was a Maplin store in Parkway, a few streets away. He walked, rather than taking his car, to clear his head and stretch his legs.

None of the shops in the row were open but he could see that, according to the notice stuck to the glass door, the Maplin store would re-open at 10 a.m. on Boxing Day for the start of the “New Year Sale”. On returning to the flat, he restarted the laptop and retrieved the phone number and address for Carol’s work, then found the contact number for Heather, one of her friends, in the family address book. Carol had given the girl’s number to Bill when she’d first moved down.

Carol’s office line re-directed him to an answering service informing him that her section of the paper was closed until the 27th. He rang Carol’s friend next, but there was no answer.

When his phone rang a few minutes later, he jumped and grabbed it excitedly, knowing it would be Carol, but an unfamiliar woman’s voice asked him if he’d called her number, and what did he want.

It took Bill a second to realise that this was Carol’s friend calling back and he quickly apologised for phoning her.

“I’m sorry to bother you on Christmas Day, but I’m very worried about Carol. She didn’t turn up in Glasgow for the holidays and I can’t get in touch with her.”

There was a pause and, when the caller spoke, it seemed to Bill that she sounded a little wary.

“I haven’t seen Carol or spoken to her for months, Mr Ingram.”

“I thought you worked together.”

“We did, but Carol hasn’t worked at the paper for ...” she paused again, “... oh, it must be at least two months now.”

Bill felt a tightening of his chest and he struggled to breathe as he tried to come to terms with what he was hearing. “That can’t be true. She never said anything. I don’t understand.”

“Mr Ingram, I’m sorry you didn’t know. She lost her job. I thought she would have told you. I can ask around, if you like, to see if anyone’s heard from her.”

Before Bill could answer, he was cut off and he looked at his screen in dismay as the low battery message fizzled away with the last of the phone’s power.

He quickly dialled Carol’s friend back from the landline in the flat and explained that the call had dropped because his phone battery had died.

“I didn’t realise you were down here, Mr Ingram,” said Heather, recognising the number as Carol’s. “I thought you were still at home. I think I should maybe come round to the flat and see you. There are a few things I think you need to know, but I’d rather not talk about it over the phone.”

“Can you come round now? I’m really sick with worry and any information you can give me would be a great help.”

“I’m on my way. It’ll take me about ten or fifteen minutes.”

While he waited, Bill, unable to sit and do nothing constructive, scribbled a brief summary of their conversation in his notebook and jotted down a few questions raised in his mind by what Heather had said. He went back downstairs and knocked on Mrs Hamble’s door.

“Would you like a cup of tea, Mr Ingram?” she said, when she answered.

“No thanks; I’m waiting for one of Carol’s friends to come round. She’ll be here shortly. I just had a couple of questions to ask you, if that’s OK?”

“Of course. Anything I can do to help.”

“Have you noticed anything different about Carol in the last month or so? Was she about more often, especially during the day?”

Mrs Hamble thought for a moment. “No. Definitely not. If anything, I would say she’s not been at the flat as much, of late. I just thought she was staying with friends. You know what young ones are like nowadays.”

“Did she ever bring her friends here?”

“Not recently, come to think about it, but a couple of nice girls stayed over with her a while back, once or twice. They were never any trouble, noisy or the like.”

“Did you ever see her with a boyfriend?”

“No, I can’t say I did. She was dropped off a few times in a car, but it could have been a private hire, for all I know. I never saw who the driver was.”

“Did you notice anything else, Mrs Hamble?”

“I’m not sure, because I saw less of her and when she was here, she always seemed to be in a hurry.”

At that moment a taxi stopped outside and a young woman, who Bill assumed was Heather, stepped out and walked towards the house. He turned to the old lady.

“Thanks very much, Mrs Hamble, I appreciate your help. I’ll let you know when I hear something.”

Mrs Hamble peered around Bill to see the newcomer. “Hello, my dear,” she said and, in a whispered aside to Bill, she told him that this was one of the girls who had stayed over with Carol a couple of times.

“Hi, Mrs Hamble; we met before. I stayed a couple of nights with Carol.” Heather turned to Bill. “You must be Carol’s dad. I’m Heather.” She held out her hand and Bill shook it, surprised.

“We should go upstairs,” he said, letting her pass and following on behind her, much to Mrs Hamble’s disappointment.

As soon as she entered the flat, Heather turned to Bill, her face now pale and tense. “I should have contacted you earlier. I’m sorry.”

Bill could see that she was fighting back tears and he reached out to touch her shoulder in support.

“Don’t be down on yourself. It’s always easy to know what to do in hindsight. Just tell me everything you know. Why did Carol leave her job? She loved it.”

“She did, and she was really good at it; she would have gone far if she’d kept at it, but she lost interest and in the end she was asked to leave.”

“You mean sacked?”

“In effect, yes, although not officially. I think they had liked her so much when she first arrived, they didn’t want to make it impossible for her to get back into work again if she sorted herself out.”

“What do you mean, *sorted* herself out?”

Heather started to cry and Bill handed her a paper hanky from the box on the table. “Take your time.”

Between sobs, Heather managed to speak. “We think she has a drug problem ...” She paused. “And there’s this guy she’s seeing ...”

Bill was stunned. "What type of drugs?" he asked, sharper than he intended.

"Well, the last time we were together she did quite a bit of coke, but I'm worried that she was into other stuff as well."

"And you saw her taking this coke? That's cocaine?"

"Yes. I mean we all smoked the odd spliff now and then and we'd tried a line of coke once or twice, but Carol seemed to be getting more and more into it. I suppose that went with the club scene she was getting involved with."

Heather's eyes were rimmed with red and the little eye make-up she had on had started to dissolve and run down her cheeks in dark streaks. Bill gave her time to blow her nose on the hanky he had given her and wipe her eyes with another from the box. When she'd composed herself, he spoke again.

"And this man she's involved with. Who is he?"

Heather looked at Bill, a knot of guilt making it impossible for her to look him in the eye.

"It's because of us that she met him ..." She crumbled into deep sobs and Bill awkwardly put his arm around her, not saying a word. Part of him was angry, but he couldn't blame this young woman for not intervening. After all, he and Alison had noticed changes in Carol's behaviour since she moved down to London, but had said nothing

"What's this man's name?"

Heather managed to blurt it out, before breaking down again.

"His name is Aleksander Gjebrea. He owns Bloq, a nightclub Alice and I took her to. Carol said she could handle it, that she wouldn't let him hurt her."

"Tell me everything you know."

CHAPTER 4 EASTERN BLOQ

“We’re on the list.” Heather stared at the doorman. It wasn’t the one who’d got taxis for them the last time.

“Just checking, miss. I’ve been told be extra careful tonight. Please bear with me.”

Heather was fuming, but other than have a strop and say something to Aleksander later, there was nothing she could do without appearing petulant.

Finally they were allowed in, but for the first time, they’d felt as if they weren’t quite welcome.

Once they were inside, the atmosphere changed completely. They bumped into Aleksander almost immediately and he escorted them through and sat them down at a table near to the bar but just off to the side, an ideal position from which to observe the birthday boy and his followers.

He apologised for having to leave them, but he explained that it could be a big night for him; attracting the type of people who would spend a large amount of cash on a regular basis was critical to his success. He promised that he would join them again when he could and they set about having a bloody good evening. They played a childish spot-the-celeb drinking game at which, for some reason, Carol and Heather seemed to excel, while poor Alice took a hit nearly every time. Carol called a halt to the game when she thought Alice was getting a little too loud and bought her a non-alcoholic cocktail to nurse for a while.

Anna, the manageress, noticed her buying it and gave Carol a nod; it had saved her the awkward job of asking Alice to tone it down a little. She spoke to Carol while she stood at the bar waiting for the other two drinks to be poured.

“I wouldn’t get too close to Aleksander, if I were you.” Carol was taken aback by Anna’s warning. “He’s out of your league and you’ll only get burnt.”

“I’m sorry, but why would you say that?” spluttered Carol, annoyed. “Are you and he together?”

“God, no. I’m just saying for your own good.”

“In that case, if either of my friends did want to go out with Aleksander, I can’t see why it should have anything to do with you.” She said this in a low voice, although she was pretty sure no one else at the bar could hear what they were saying. The music was loud enough to make it necessary to lean close to be heard.

“It’s not them he’s interested in. Do what you want, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Carol’s drinks arrived and, as she paid, she could see that the conversation was over. *Cheeky bitch*. But part of her brain was still trying to digest Anna’s parting comment. *Is there any truth in what she said? There are no signs that he is interested in me.*

Back with her friends, Carol sat thinking while Alice sipped her drink, unaware of its non-intoxicating contents. Carol told Heather what Anna had said, omitting the bit about Aleksander's interest in Carol herself.

"Jealous cow," Heather blurted out. "Still, I suppose it means he's interested. I should really take advantage of Alice being pissed, shouldn't I?" She laughed. Carol thought she was only half-kidding, but that it might be interesting to see what happened if Heather did try something on with Aleksander.

The next time he came over, she noticed that he made a point of sitting next to her, opposite her two friends, *but that was just where the spare seat was*. When he spoke, it was to all three of them and although he seemed to turn to Carol when he could, she wondered if she might be reading too much into it.

"So are you and Anna together?"

Carol was shocked when Heather blurted out what they were all thinking.

Aleksander laughed, not in the slightest put out by Heather's directness. "No, she bit of cold fish. Maybe she lesbian." He said this with a wide grin, disarming any offence they might have taken. "Don't have time and not my type. I like women with fuller figure. But she bloody good worker."

Had it been anyone else, they might have bridled at his comments, but all three silently assessed themselves and hoped they matched up to his benchmark.

As the party drew to a close, Aleksander left them to complete his host duties with the footballer and his fiancée, whose party it had been, but before he left, he gave the three of them a handful of Bloq's business cards.

"I'd most appreciate if you hand out these for me; give to people you think would like club."

Handing Carol her small bundle, he winked and smiled at her.

Later, in the cab, Carol idly looked at the card on top of the little pile she held in her hand and was surprised to see a phone number written on it, with "call me" scrawled below it. She hurriedly slipped the cards into her handbag, her pulse racing; a few scenarios ran through her head, but she couldn't see past the most obvious one. It *was* her that he was interested in and she wondered just what the hell she should do about it.

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Aleksander usually picked her up from the flat. She still hadn't told the other two that she was seeing him. She'd waited three days after the private party to phone him, but he'd insisted on taking her out that night, and the following night, to what she considered obscenely expensive restaurants. On both occasions he had picked her up and dropped her back at the end of the road on her insistence, to save him driving up the narrow street with cars half parked on both pavements.

He never forced the pace, letting her be the one to decide to kiss him on the first night and encouraging his hands to wander a little the following evening. She knew it was only a matter of time before she was going to cave in and sleep with him, because she didn't care about the sense of danger that seemed to surround him or her suspicion that he would eventually move on and leave her an emotional mess.

She told Heather the next day that Aleksander had contacted her (true in the strict sense of the word, in her mind) and that they had been out on a *date* and were now seeing each other. Heather, after a few seconds of shock and a burst of jealousy that she immediately felt guilty about, laughed at her and Alice's presumption that it had been one of them that he'd been interested in. When she phoned Alice later that night to tell her Carol's news, she detected a similar note of envy in her friend's voice, but she couldn't blame her, because her own initial reaction had been the same.

But Heather also had a genuine concern for Carol, knowing that she was the most naïve of the three. Alice especially would have treated any involvement with Aleksander as a short-term affair to be enjoyed and discarded, and not cried over when it came to an end too soon.

A desire to give Carol and Aleksander their own space, and a horrible feeling that she would find it difficult to watch them together, led Heather to turn down Carol's invitation to go with her to Bloq that weekend, but she and Alice did cave in and go the following Saturday, and it hadn't been as bad as she'd feared it would be. Carol and Aleksander hadn't been overly demonstrative about their relationship and he had the good grace to appear embarrassed by the possibility that he had led the other two on in any way.

Despite this, and knowing that she'd become very close to Carol, Heather couldn't stop the unwelcome stab of envy when she realised that the woman she now considered to be her best friend was sleeping with a man who she'd half hoped to sleep with herself. It was hard to explain that for both her and Alice, rejection would have been easier to accept if, of the three of them, it hadn't been Carol who had been chosen by Aleksander.

That Carol and Aleksander had become intimate was obvious, despite the pair's attempts to hide it. And it had happened very quickly. On the third occasion he'd picked her up, it was with an invitation to have dinner at his home. She hadn't wavered for a second when he had suggested it and had coolly purchased some condoms on the way to work, knowing that he would probably be prepared anyway, but enjoying the decadent feeling that she was deliberately and unashamedly giving herself to him with undisguised pleasure.

His house had blown her away. It was brand new development in a very fashionable part of Islington. Even the address had a ring of class to it: *Mulberry Mews*. White, with lots of glass and cubes of wood, it was tall and thin; a modern town house, with a large deck overlooking a patch of sunken designer garden at the back. Everything about it spoke money to her, and plenty of it, but it was done with exquisite taste.

He cooked, as well. After showing her around, sweetly avoiding the bedrooms, they ate in the dining area adjoining the kitchen, looking out into the tastefully lit and exquisitely planted garden. If she hadn't seen him prepare the food herself, she might have been suspicious that he'd bought in a takeaway from one of the city's expensive restaurants and reheated it. She knew, just by looking at the bottle, that the wine they shared was probably of good vintage, and expensive.

Although wine might have lowered any inhibitions she had, it wasn't necessary, as she'd already long since decided that she would be staying overnight with him.

They both spoke of their backgrounds (his was much more interesting, she thought) and he made her laugh, and sometimes nearly cry, with stories of his first few years in London as an exile from his home in Albania, which he still loved with a fervour that she couldn't quite

summon up for her childhood home in a comfortable, if somewhat boring, suburb of Glasgow.

Even his choice of music, from a hidden sound system casually turned on from his iPhone as they made their way up the stairs to one of the large modern L-shaped couches on the ground floor, was perfect. She wasn't a particular fan of classical music, but whatever the piece was that he'd chosen, it filled the whole house with a rich and seductive sound.

They had thrown themselves at each other almost immediately with a ferocity that was, to Carol, exhilarating and slightly frightening at the same time. Remarkably, another swipe of his iPhone made the glazing become opaque and they had sex for the first time on his very expensive antelope skin couch, neither of them willing to break off to make the journey upstairs to his bedroom.

Unsurprisingly, he was a great lover, but she'd known that would be the case. He oozed an animal arrogance that was only tempered by a sense of humour and occasional self-deprecation that saved him from being insufferable. And despite the fierceness of that first encounter, there were moments of tenderness and consideration that hinted at a caring nature beneath the hard and somewhat menacing shell.

He'd removed her clothes quicker than she'd thought possible, discarding his own, with her help, at the same time. After that, other than kissing her hard enough to almost hurt, there hadn't been much foreplay, but he'd stimulated her enough while fully clothed, hardly even touching her, to ensure that she came just before him. Even putting the condom on had been seamless; the packet appeared in his hand from nowhere and the contents were expertly applied with practiced ease, barely interrupting their progress.

Later, lying in his bed on the top floor, with floor to ceiling views at both ends of the master bedroom, he'd made love to her again, slowly and with a practiced expertise that hinted at a breadth of experience that could only have come from him having had a long line of women sharing his bed, probably from an early age. Fleeting, it worried her a little that she was just another sexual conquest in a life otherwise devoted to the advancement of Aleksander Gjbrea's business career, but the physical sensations he was triggering within her soon banished any concerns she had. And although she didn't see herself as a great or experienced lover, she sensed that just responding to him, without inhibition, was enough for him.

Afterwards, they showered in the large en suite wet room, which they entered through an effortlessly pivoting door in its glass wall. There seemed to be no privacy; the whole room could be seen from the bed and she wasn't sure a toilet visit would be an entirely comfortable experience until he waved his hand in front of a faintly glowing glass tile inset into the slate wall, and the clear wall, like the windows downstairs, became instantly frosted. Another gesture by him and the lights came on and were dimmed and brightened by yet another motion of his hand. She presumed that holding your nose in front of the sensor would probably turn the fan on and pulling an imaginary chain while sitting on the toilet would cause it to flush. He laughed when she said so and showed her how the toilet automatically flushed when you stood up after using it and told her that the air in the toilet was constantly sucked out by strong remote fans, whenever a person was sensed within the room.

"The whole place ducted with air condition. Everything automatic or remote control."

"What if you don't have your iPhone?" she joked.

"Always backup method to control everything, no worries."

As he gently washed her she half-considered how much all this luxury had set him back, but any thoughts of a financial nature were soon dispelled by his hands, slippery with shower gel, gently washing her breasts and following the stream of bubbles down her belly and between her legs. She wondered if there was a little nook where he kept a supply of condoms close to the shower, but she soon realised that his intentions, on this occasion, were for her pleasure only.

He dropped her off at work the next morning, after a surprisingly light and healthy breakfast. She'd heard him rise about six and had followed him downstairs shortly afterwards, clad only in a skimpy bathrobe that had been left for her on the chair at her side of the bed.

She'd descended two floors without finding him, but she could hear sounds of exertion from the basement below and realised that he had a gym down there, which he obviously used on a daily basis.

Not really a shock. She remembered the firmness and strength of his body from the night before and knew that he took keeping himself in shape very seriously. She returned to the penthouse bedroom and, looking into the large mirror hung on the opposite wall to the bed, she let her robe slip to the floor and tried to look at herself as critically and dispassionately as she could. *Perhaps slightly rounded in places, but not bad. Nothing a little working out wouldn't sort.*

He must have showered in the basement; when he returned, he smelled fresh and his hair was still damp. He had a towel wrapped around his waist, which he casually discarded, getting back into bed with her.

This time, he surprised her by being content to lie with his arm around her, answering her questions about the house. He'd lived in it only one year; he'd bought it off plan so as to have it done to his individual specifications and, no, he wasn't going to tell her how much he paid for it; not yet, at least.

At the office, she'd tried to appear as normal as possible, especially around Heather, not wanting to give any impression of smugness or self-satisfaction, but when Heather asked if she'd had a good time, she'd hinted just a little at how good it had been.

If Heather was jealous at all she hid it well, but Carol didn't give her any reason to think that she was gloating and she knew that they were still going to be friends.

On her own, she couldn't stop thinking about him and she had to firmly tell herself not to build up any expectations about their relationship. He seemed to her like a man who loved female company but was basically a loner, and she felt if she could always retain that thought, she would minimise the hurt she knew she would feel when it all came to an end. More than anything, she wanted to come out of it with her dignity intact and her heart as unscathed as possible.

Over the next few weeks, she stayed over at his place five or six nights, but never on the weekends. This suited them both. He needed to be at the club on the two busiest nights and she still had a social life with her friends.

She went home to see her parents for Christmas, even though she expected to be back up in Glasgow for her dad's birthday. When Aleksander told her that he was closing the club and having a private party for his friends and favoured customers to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Bloq's grand opening, she was delighted, especially as she would be the one at

Aleksander's side all evening. He told her that she could invite a few friends and work colleagues, and she wouldn't have been human if she didn't enjoy her position as hostess. The fact that it was midweek didn't spoil it. She knew he was too much of a businessman to close the club to paying guests on one of his busier nights.

It came as a blow when she realised that her dad's party was on the same night. Despite never having missed one of his birthdays, she felt awful phoning him the day before to say she wouldn't be able to make it, made worse by keeping the reason from him.

Heather and Alice still made a weekly visit to Bloq with her, so they were delighted to get an invite to Bloq's fifth anniversary celebration. It was a hell of a night. Aleksander and Carol always kept any public show of affection to a minimum, which made it easy for her two friends to accept the fact that they'd been turned over by an outsider in their pursuit of Aleksander, especially one who'd made no effort in the contest.

Sometimes, curiosity got the better of them and Carol responded to their questioning by giving them vague details about their intimacy, but chapter and verse on their non-bedroom activity and his amazing lifestyle.

She made it clear to them that she knew where it was going.

"I'm not stupid; I realise that he's not the kind for long-term relationships. I'm just going to treat it like you two would: a bit of fun and a chance to live life in the fast lane for a while."

"I just hope you can do that. We'd hate to see you get hurt." Heather's voice held genuine concern and Carol touched her arm to reassure her that she could manage her own expectations.

"Think of it as a holiday romance," advised Alice. "Not that I'm saying it will only last for a fortnight," she hurriedly added, "but keep in mind that there's an end point."

"It's always possible that I'll be the one who he'll want to settle down with." Carol bridled, not enjoying her friend's dismissal of the possibility, despite her own conviction that they were right.

"Here we go," quipped Alice, "she's planning the wedding already."

Carol laughed. "No, you're right. I was only saying ... I can handle it, I won't let him hurt me."

End of chapter 4.

Thank you for reading the first four chapters of Bloq. If you enjoyed it, you can purchase the book at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/B01CLH5AUE?>

If Bloq is to your taste, you also might be interested in my first two books, *The Cabinetmaker* and *Blue Devil*.

The Cabinetmaker wasn't originally written as a crime novel. It is more of a story of the relationship between the two main characters, a Glasgow cabinetmaker whose son is brutally murdered, and a young detective on his first murder inquiry. When the case goes wrong, and the culprits walk free, the two men become lifelong friends, bonded together by a desire to see justice done, a love of playing amateur football and the detective's introduction to an enduring passion for fine furniture by his friend. It averages over 4 out of 5 stars on its ratings on Amazon, and has been very well reviewed by book bloggers since its publication in 2013. You can read four free chapters at www.thecabinetmaker.info where there is extra content including an online audio slang dictionary and an interactive location map.

Blue Devil is an out-and-out crime story with an unusual pair of investigators. A series of tortured corpses of young alcoholics and drug addicts are turning up and only Eddie Henderson seems to know why. When he tries to tell the police, his information is ridiculed and he's told to stop wasting their time. One officer, junior detective Catherine Douglas, believes him, and together they set out to discover why the dregs of Glasgow's underbelly are being found, dead and mutilated. It is seriously dark and gritty, with a fair smattering of violence, strong language and Glasgow slang - it's not for the faint hearted! It also averages over 4 out of 5 stars on its ratings on Amazon, and has been even better reviewed by book bloggers since its publication in 2014. Again, you can read four free chapters at www.bluewicked.co.uk where there is another audio slang dictionary.