

ONE

Glasgow. Rosanna Nixon

The flat in Kingsborough Gardens, empty, seemed twice the size it had before. It had always been far too big for one – big enough, her mum and dad had often hinted hopefully, to ‘Get married into, hen...’ Rosanna sighed. Fat chance of that now, then. She was nearly twenty nine. She’d had two love affairs, a paltry two, and both had ended in failure. She sighed again. Her failure, she supposed. She wasn’t cut out for standing by her man.

She’d been in the flat for a long time, though, and had been committed to that, undoubtedly. It was in Hyndland, gratifyingly posh for her parents, who had raised her in Milngavie. It had a small private garden – no drunks, no druggies, no shagging on the hallowed grass – and a residents’ committee who watched over it with eagle eyes. You were allowed to use it on a Sunday, they weren’t Wee Free for goodness’ sake, but they’d always viewed Rosanna with a certain suspicion. A lone young woman, a journalist to boot. And one who had been seen to have night visitors. Night visitors of a certain sex.

Not many, though, and for the last month or two, no one at all. In fact, her movements had been something of a mystery for a good long while since she’d been rumoured to have shifted her working operation down to London. Where she had a man, an older man, who had only turned

up once or twice in Hyndland and had been, quite frankly... disappointing.

Standing in the barren, abandoned room, Rosanna felt a wave of misery sweep over her. Misery and fear, in almost equal measure. The polished wooden floor was bleak with dust and scraps, the piles of no-longer wanted books in untidy, accusatory heaps. There was only her mattress now, and that would go tomorrow, or be abandoned to the dump. The new tenants did not care, they said. They did not even care if she left it in a mess. Just so that she went, and they could crank their own lives up, in the space so long her own.

I've got nowhere to go, she thought, pathetically. Not even Andrew's grotty hole in Stoke Newington any more. If I turned up there looking for a bed, he wouldn't want me in it, or even worse, he would. He'd want me in it, and I'd want to be in it, and the whole business would start up again. But I can't stand it. I can't stand the mess, the strain, and anyway it's all wrong. Andrew always said so, and Andrew was always right. He said so to cut the nose off his own face, but it was my decision in the end. I loved him but I had to go.

For a moment, Rosanna thought she might cry, and then she made a raucous, scratching noise deep in her throat.

You bloody dare, you dweeb, she said, you bloody dare! You cry for no man, least of all that scruffy lunatic. He'll be off with some other now, he'll have forgotten you exist. The noise became a hoarse bark of a laugh.

'He'll be down the pub,' she said, aloud. 'He'll be down the Princess Louise swilling pints.'

That brought her up, though. If he was in the Princess Louise he'd be swilling unhappily, because Peter Jackson was long gone, dead and buried, and Peter was his man for that pub, they'd met there almost every day. Andrew had

said he'd never go again till he found out who had killed him. Aye, she thought. Aye, right.

Then her phone rang, and Rosanna dragged it gladly from her pocket. It hadn't rung in ages, although it should have done. And it was the voice she wanted to hear, as well. The lifeline to a new career. The lead-in to some top class interviews, some in-depth heavy stuff. This one, she hoped, the Sunday Times.

Outside Basingstoke. Joseph Benson

Like all his business calls, Joe took this one on his mobile. He was sitting in his car in the sunshine, but he was going nowhere. He trusted nobody, and he trusted mobiles even less. But he always took elaborate precautions not to be tracked down, and he was confident he was one jump ahead. Ahead of anyone, ahead of any game.

'If I've got a motto,' he would tell his soldiers, '—and I ain't, mark you. But if I had, that would be it. No names no packdrill, see? Don't trust no one, not even your own mother. Good general, me. I'll see you right.'

Soldiers, that's what top men called their skivvies. They were his soldiers, he was their general. He had two soldiers now, Mac, and Baggie the new boy. He was a very likely lad, the new boy, a bloody lovely find. Between them they could do some lovely business. They'd be quids in.

The man on the mobile had a posh voice, and it was all Joe could do to keep his own from changing. That was natural he knew, but he still hated it. He was as good as anyone, when push came to shove. Rich bastards were not

superior, they were just *superior*. It was politeness, maybe. He'd heard this voice before.

He didn't know him, he didn't have a name, but the man knew him – or of him – and he'd chosen him on what he'd heard. Joe was the best, he actually told him that. A man he could rely on all the way.

And it was a lovely job. Top dollar. A hundred thousand in it, minimum, to divvy up whichever way he fancied, it was down to him.

'Mr Benson,' the voice had said, 'I leave the details up to you. I want the best, I want no part in it, I want no come-back. That is why I came to you.'

No names no packdrill, see. The word is getting round.

This call, in the sunshine, was a final rundown. The targets would be in the house, alone, in three days time, five at the most. Just the old man and his decrepit wife, and their decrepit liver-in. No dogs, no neighbours, no nosy bastards dropping by.

'And you know the place,' the posh voice said. 'You're familiar with the lie of the land. You know exactly how to get there, down all those little lanes and bye-ways. I need that, Mr Benson. That is most important.'

You bet your life it is, thought Joe. Down where the Bonus Boys live, even the lady in the satnav would have a heart attack to find it. If you didn't know it like your hand, you could be in there for ever, you might never see the light of day again.

'I know,' he said. He almost said 'sir', he almost bit his tongue off to stop it coming out. He tried a bit of daring, to show he was the boss.

'Better than you do, I bet,' he said. 'How well do you know it, then? Are you a...are you a Bonus Boy?'

The man laughed loudly.

'Ah you hate them too, do you?' he said. 'I wouldn't live there for ten million. Twenty! They're scum. Tax dodg-

ing, fat cat scum. You stick it to them, Mr Benson. You give them what they deserve. Ha! A Bonus Boy! I should damn well think so!’

That was enough for Joe Benson. This man hated them as well. This man was on his side, his and all the poor, downtrodden bastards. Jesus, he was going to do a job all right.

He pushed out his own laugh, although he knew the line was dead.

‘I’ll be on a fucking bonus, mate!’ he said. ‘This job’ll be a fucking masterpiece!’

Bosham Creek. Thea Hayter

Thea Hayter made the phone call from her car as well, not many miles from where Joe Benson had made his. She was watching the waters of Chichester harbour racing downwards on the ebb, and smelling with relish as the mud uncovered. Across the water she could see The Anchor Bleu, which her father Peter Foxton thought was a typical West Sussex name. Peter was a Hampshire man, from just down the road in Havant, and had been brought up on the derogatory song about their neighbour county.

She had first heard it as a small child, six or seven, maybe younger, and the words had then been ‘You can tell them all that they know flip all, in Sussex by the sea.’ Despite her mother’s disapproval, she’d only been twelve or so when the real words had emerged, and she relished them now as keenly as she snuffed the glittering, weed-strewn mud. She didn’t register that the ringing tone had stopped.

‘You can tell them all that they know fu— Oh, I’m very sorry! I—’

But the laughter that came down the phone was delighted, and it instantly made up Thea’s mind. It was the journalist, the Scots girl that she’d spoken to, who’d been trying for an interview for days. Suddenly, it gelled. She’d heard the words, the embarrassed cut-off, and she had laughed. That was good enough for Thea. A human being.

‘Oh,’ Rosanna Nixon was saying. She was flustered, trying to row back. ‘Look, is it a bad time? I mean...’

Now it was Thea’s turn to laugh. She hated interviews, even special colour-supply type interviews, and most of all she didn’t like pushy journalists with their standard Ox-bridge accents. This accent was Scottish. This accent Thea Hayter was sure that she could live with.

‘But I called *you*,’ she said, ‘I was just singing a family song. I am from Sussex, so I wasn’t even being racist. And the answer’s yes.’

There was a puzzled silence.

‘Is that Thea Hayter? It’s Rosanna here, Rosanna Nixon. Of—’

‘Yes, of the Sunday Times. You want to know if I’ll let you do that interview, and the answer’s yes. I’m down in Sussex for the next few days, at Mum and Dad’s. A celebration at the weekend. Surprise. Is there any chance that you can do it here?’

Rosanna’s heart was swooping. This was the big one, Thea Hayter was tomorrow’s world today. The gig was in the bag, and if the Sunday Times wouldn’t take it, a dozen glossy style mags would. They might even pay better, she’d have to check.

‘Yes, I’m sure I can! Oh, that’s marvellous. But I don’t work for the Sunday Times exclusively. They’ll be my first pitch, but does it matter if it’s someone else? They’ll be big, don’t worry. It’ll be excellent publicity.’

‘Well, I’ve never been a fan of Murdoch,’ Thea said, ‘so I couldn’t give a toss, quite frankly. Where are you based? Where can we meet to talk?’

‘I’m based in Scotland. Glas—’

‘Hence the accent. But isn’t that—’

‘No, don’t get me wrong, I’m based in Glasgow, in that that’s where I come from, but I’ve just sold my flat. Today. I’m moving out. I’ve got a job with the Tribune group. Covering a huge swathe of the south. I’ll be working out of Southampton, mainly. I’m moving to Millbrook. Renting a bungalow.’

‘Brilliant. How well do you know the area? We’re in the wild and woolly hinterland, the coastline to the east of Portsmouth, past Langstone Harbour, the Chichester badlands. We’re Bonus Boys, in the local parlance. Offshore hedgefunders. Millionaires’ Row with trees and cow dung.’

Her laugh was infectious. Rosanna felt light-headed. This woman could lift her spirits, and she’d damn near forgotten what that felt like.

‘That’s marvellous,’ she said again. ‘Oh sorry, that’s so trite. I mean...I mean, what’s a Bonus Boy when he’s at home?’

‘He’s not at home, and that’s the point. All these houses around me now, the outskirts of Chidham, Bosham, Thorney...they’re all owned by bankers and they’re wonderful. Wonderful, marvellous – and empty. They buy them with their enormous bonuses, move in with their trophy wives and anorexic daughters, drink cocktails with the other Bonus Boys until they’re putrid with boredom and adultery, then leave them to the elements. Well, the security firms and occasional police patrols. The place is littered with them. It sickens me. If I was five years younger I’d start a squatters’ party. Cut the children’s heads off and stick them up on sharpened poles.’

Rosanna, not unnaturally, was at a loss for words.

‘Call yourself a journalist?’ Thea gave a boom of laughter. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here? If it’s so bloody horrible?’

‘Well,’ said Rosanna. Her nickname was the Mouse. News editors in the past had often expressed similar doubts about her dedication.

But Thea was laughing easily. Her voice was warm and friendly.

‘Don’t mind me,’ she said. ‘I get frustrated sometimes, and I don’t live here at all. My Mum and Dad, the Foxtons, do, and my Auntie Eva. By local standards they’re old money, landed gentry, and the fact that their new neighbours don’t actually do much neighbouring suits them down to the ground. They’re old. They’re not completely fit. They sort of cruise around and wait for me to give them grandkids.’

Rosanna, in the flat in Glasgow, felt disconnected from reality in a funny kind of way. She did not know this woman. She was hoping to turn her into a feature, and some cash. She was being treated like an old friend, one of the girls, someone to go and have a cocktail with.

Cocktail. Maybe not. The Mouse was not too well up on what the moneyed classes drank. But this one sounded like a lot of fun. Perhaps she’d get to find out pretty soon.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Grandkids. And is it going to happen?’

Thea’s phone began to bleep. Low battery.

‘I’ve got to go,’ she said. She gave a sudden chuckle, weird and unexpected. ‘I can’t tell you *all* my secrets, can I? We’ve never even met!’

‘Oh, please,’ Rosanna said. ‘Can I ring you later, maybe? Are you near a landline? I won’t give anybody else the number, trust me.’

Thea laughed again.

‘No I’m not, unfortunately. I’m on the sea shore. I tell you what, where are you now? In Scotland? When are you

down here? Why don't we meet for a preliminary chat? Tomorrow? Is that too early?'

The phone was bleeping harder. The battery was knackered, Thea should have replaced it weeks ago.

'I can do Wednesday,' said the Mouse. 'Is that all right? I...oh, she's gone. Oh shit.'

Both women, four hundred miles apart, felt strangely bereft. Thea chucked the phone through the car window on to the seat.

'I'll ring you back,' she told the gleaming mudflats. 'Don't worry, Rosanna Nixon. I'm going to ring you back. Oh crap, I should've got another battery. Buggeration.'

TWO

Stoke Newington. Andrew, Rosanna

Forbes's house looked just the same. The street was cluttered, dirty, crowded out with cars and tired mothers. She studied the cars quite carefully as she stood at the top of the steps outside his door. No battered Porsche, down on one flat tyre. No crap old Lada, either, with or without its cargoload of scum. Scum, she thought, and smiled. Government scum, secret service men, upholders of the country's peace.

How cynical you made me, Andrew. How cynical in such a ridiculously short time.

She banged the door again, and rang the bell, and banged and banged some more. It was early afternoon. He would probably be asleep. Rotting in his pit, she thought, bitterly. Then had a vision of his tired, tousled head peeping out from underneath the duvet.

Christ, that hurt. That tired, tousled head, that beer and whisky hangover. Oh fuck, she thought. I miss you, Andrew. I fucking love you, you nasty, dirty, useless bastard.

She tore herself away, turned on her heel, forced herself towards the pavement again. She was going. She'd been mad. She could find out all she needed from other people. She'd been lying to herself.

And there he was, inevitably. A hundred metres down the road, shirt open, no tie round his neck. From the general direction of the Princess Louise? Yes, he'd probably forgotten all about his pledge. Why not?

It was too late to get away now, because Andrew Forbes had seen her. Eyes like a shithouse rat, in the parlance of his trade. His face was pale, and he did not smile. But he put his hand into his trouser pocket and produced a bunch of keys, and waved them.

'Miss Mouse,' he said. 'To what do I owe the honour? I rather hoped you couldn't keep away.'

'Don't think I'm going to sleep with you, you bastard,' she said. 'I'm not. In fact I'm going. It was a mistake. Another mistake. How do you make me do it, you—'

'Twat?' said Andrew Forbes, although that would not have been her word. 'Christ, Rosanna, I'm not finishing your lines for you as well. You've been scrimping on rehearsals. If you want to make an exit, get it right.'

As he walked past her he tried to peck her on the cheek, and Rosanna, hopelessly, resisted.

'I'll come in for a cup of tea,' she said. 'Nothing more.'

'I hope you've brought your Marigolds. You don't want a dirty cup, do you?'

'Mug,' she said. She gave a rather bitter little laugh, but she was beaten and she knew it. 'Why not just call me a mug as well, and done with it? Why change the habits of a lifetime?'

Andrew opened the door and the old familiar smell assailed her nostrils. A tired London smell. Bachelor pad without a woman's touch.

No one was changing the habits of a lifetime.

Eastleigh. Joe Benson, Mac

‘Because I said, that’s why,’ said Joe. ‘If you don’t like it, Mac, you can go and fuck yourself. Kiss your arse to this job, you kiss your arse to thirty grand. Forty maybe, maybe more. The choice is yours, okay?’

Mac Skirton was hung over. Mac was always hung over, unless he was already drunk, he only had two settings, really. He was five foot four, as tough as arseholes, stronger than an ox, and he only lived for drink.

‘I just don’t see it, that’s what I don’t see,’ he said. ‘Why a new man? Why a driver, I’m the driver, I always have been. And if we’re talking thirty grand, it’d be sixty if I wasn’t splitting, wouldn’t it? Where did you bloody find him, anyway?’

‘Where I found him you don’t need to know. For Christ’s sake, Mackie, you should be over the fucking moon. You like a drink, don’t you? Well this guy don’t. He likes to drive. That’s where he gets his kicks. He don’t even like screwing big fat women.’

Psychology that, Joe thought, comfortably. Apart from drink there was nothing in the world for Mac except fat girls. The very mention of it would bring out a smile on him.

In fact it did. Mac finished off his pint, and wiped his mouth, and stuck his empty glass out for more.

‘You’re a twat,’ he said. ‘I can do the driving. If I’m losing thirty grand I want another pint. Anyway, that’s another thing. The job’s only just near Chichester. What’s all this bollocks about going all round Birmingham? Is this your new man’s crap idea? Does he like being drove that much?’

Benson did not answer. He went to the bar and got a supplementary pint for Mac. It had not been the new man’s idea, it had been his. In fact, the new man had been inclined

to argue. Joe's first opportunity to show who was the boss. He smiled as he thought about how hard he'd cracked him down.

Mackie's was a pint of Stella. Wife beater as he called it, happily. As Joe slid it across he returned to the job in hand.

'This bollocks, as you call it, is what'll make this job work, and don't you forget it when it happens, mate,' he said. 'We're only half an hour away from Chichester out here, and I'm known there, I used to work there, din't I? And on the motorways they got ANPR. Automatic Number Plate Recognition. You ever heard of that?'

Skirton did not bother to reply. He made a movement with his right hand, a 'wanker' movement. Benson was always full of theories, and this one was that if they went a long way to the target, passed some ANPR cameras, then returned on roads that didn't have them, no one could ever place them near the site. He'd heard it before, and quite honestly could not be arsed to argue. Benson was a big-head, maybe, something of a twat. But he got the jobs and thought them through and always divvied up the takings. Good enough for Mac.

'Rich bastards' house,' he said. 'They'll have CCTV up every bleeding tree. So they'll have the numbers anyway, won't they?'

This made Joe Benson laugh. This is where insider knowledge played its part. Homework.

'I've told you that a million fucking times,' he said. 'They're rich bastards and they're in a different world, they're lunatics. Life's too short to bother, innit? Anyway, they've got a good alarm system. Muppets.'

He was tempted to egg the pudding. To claim he'd disabled all the cameras, cut the alarm feeds, that sort of stuff. But he hadn't. Given the bit of basic knowledge that he had, the Foxtons were already sitting ducks.

Mac, in any case, had finished the supplementary pint. It can't have even touched the sides. He belched, and held his glass out, made a joke.

'Life's too short,' he said. 'Well, that's a dream we can make come true for 'em, can't we? Mine's a pint, by the way. Chop chop.'

Stoke Newington

Over breakfast, Andrew and the Mouse discussed the future. He did not claim, nor did she openly acknowledge, that he had got the Tribune job for her, but it made both of them feel easier. The break-up had hit them hard, and neither of them had been sure how much they could salvage from the wreckage.

He was in black denims at the kitchen table, with his belly out of his open shirt. Rosanna, although her big old dressing gown still lived on his bedroom door, had fully dressed before she had emerged. He had offered her the sofa for the night, she had accepted it. Neither of them had even hinted that maybe they should experiment in non-sexual sharing. They weren't born yesterday.

'So what's the plan, then? Why have you joined me in the House of Forbes? I'm sure you didn't do it just to rub my nose in it.'

She laughed. She had come downstairs long before Andrew and she had cleaned up the kitchen, done the washing up. Just like old times. There were clean mugs to drink out of, clean plates for the toast. No bread though. No butter either, nor any jam or marmalade. She'd drawn the line at going to the shops.

‘Good job we’re both instant coffee men,’ Andrew had said. ‘You’re looking smart enough to drink Earl Grey. I haven’t got any, naturally, but I’m flattered.’

‘Don’t be, it’s not for you. I’ve got to see a woman to set up a big interview. She’s multo posh, and multo powerful. If you taught me anything, it was not to dress like you. You’d shame a Gorbals scavvie.’

‘Interview? What, for Charlie Winters? I thought he was setting you off on news again. Shoo in.’

‘No, not for the Tribune. I’m meeting him tomorrow. This is freelance, as allowed for in my contract. Main reason that I took the job.’

They both smiled. Main reason she’d taken the job was because Andrew had pulled some strings for her. Jobs in journalism that paid more than peanuts were like hen’s teeth these days. The good times no longer rolled. Boom Britain was a memory away. Boom Britain was a basket case.

‘Good work,’ he said. He drank some instant coffee. No milk. He hadn’t got that far in domesticity. The milk she’d found in the fridge had been solid in the bottle. A white and yellow brick. ‘Who is it? Who’s it for?’

‘Woman called Thea Hayter. She’s—’

‘Rich bitch and all round genius. Yeah, I know.’

‘Well she might be rich, but she doesn’t sound much like a bitch,’ said Rosanna. She shook her head in disapproval at his attitude. ‘Godsake, Andrew!’

‘Godsake yourself.’ He laughed. His face crinkled, and Rosanna felt it in her stomach. Their eyes met. They both felt it. It was painful, this.

‘Okay, so it’s going in the Sunday Times, I hope. Someone might even offer more. It’s not her fault if she’s brilliant.’

‘Helps that her old dad made a pile, though. Best schools, best travel ops, best everything. If I’d had Thea’s chances I could probably carry off a suit.’

‘But she had that hidden extra. Talent. Let’s you out I’m afraid, old lad.’

They were still smiling. The break-up had been mutual, with all the hidden horror that conveys. And they were still smiling.

‘Mobile phone app design, computer programmes, then bloody knitting, wasn’t it? The poor man’s Kaffe Fassett. If that’s how you pronounce her name.’

‘His name. Kaffe Fassett. Bloke.’

‘Well. Three fields of human understanding you can count me out of. She’s a rich bitch, whichever way you look at it. And the best of luck to her. She lives down on the coast, though. Long way to go just for a prelim. Are you driving it?’

How did he know about Thea Hayter, Rosanna wondered. Or where she lived. But at least he’d got that wrong.

‘She lives in Highgate with her husband, actually. Not far from you. Does that make you a rich bastard, then?’

‘A Scottish thing, is it? If you think this street and Highgate have got anything in common, you need some lessons in geography. I thought she still lived in Sussex. Old Man Foxton and his brood. Fatcats’ Riviera.’

‘The Bonus Boys,’ said Rosanna.

His expression was blank.

‘Ha! So you don’t everything, do you?’ she crowed. ‘That’s what they call them. They pick up their city bonuses, buy these enormous houses, and go mad with boredom looking at the mud. Back to London and the bright lights.’

‘Where there’s more to go to bed with than the odd good-looking sheep. The Bonus Boys. I like it. Pity you’re not going down there, though. You’d’ve enjoyed it.’

Rosanna laughed again. She had not expected to be laughing quite so much.

‘This conversation’s going round and round in circles. I *am* going down there. This afternoon. Train and taxi. Thea’s

down there for a few days with the family for some sort of surprise beano, and she's agreed to let me pop in to map things out. Charlie is tomorrow, like I said.'

'All right, then. So what about an afternoon with me? You don't want to mess about with trains, it's a jungle down there for a city girl. I'll drive you. Show you the sights. An afternoon in Christie Country. Put roses in your cheeks.'

'Andrew, what are you on about? Christie Country? What the hell is that?'

'It'd be the perfect setting for old Agatha to let Miss Marple loose in. Not Poirot, they don't like foreigners down there. Creeks, backwaters, trees, fields, isolated houses, half the population gaga with old age, the other half just Sussex natives. It's like Midsomer Murders without the crime.'

'You're the gaga one. I've rarely met anyone as sane as Thea Hayter sounds. And if I do go with you, you don't get to see her, right?'

He covered his face with his hands in mock despair.

'My reputation as a seducer of young women has gone before me, has it?'

She shook her head.

'Purely professional reasons,' she said. 'I wouldn't trust you near a lucrative interviewee for a thousand dollars. And anyway, a little bird tells me she's already pregnant, hence the celebration, maybe. So she's not your type at all.'

She stopped, and shook her head.

'No, that's baloney that bit, that's just a stupid guess, forget I said it. But if you're serious, okay. I'd love a country drive. Excellent.'

'I hope you've got a car, then. I haven't.'

She almost spat. He was grinning from ear to ear.

'You're in the money now, girl. You're a reporter again. I'm surprised at you.'

'I'll hire one,' she said. 'But I do think you're a bastard, Andrew. You haven't changed a bit.'

‘I have,’ he said. ‘My life’s not so cluttered now. I’ve got rid of lots of pretty, useless things. Not you, Miss Mouse, I meant the Porsche, actually. You may have noticed it wasn’t outside in the gutter. I use the cash to hire, these days. Safer that way, in my line of business.’

‘Are they still after you? Christ, Andrew, I wish you’d give it up.’ She clocked his face. ‘Or keep a lower profile, anyway.’

He grunted.

‘De Sallis hasn’t given up Stateside, either. But I hire wheels when I need them, and I walk a lot, as well. Hadn’t you noticed my newly slimline figure?’

‘I’m going out to get some milk and eggs,’ said Rosanna. ‘Why don’t you have a bath and shave and change your clothes? You’re not meeting Ms Hayter, but I might still be seen with you somewhere. I’ve got a reputation to build up again, remember?’

She stood up. Forbes did not reply.

‘I won’t be very long, though. How long will it take us to get there? And don’t forget to hire a car. A proper one.’

‘Yes, Miss Nixon. No, Miss Nixon. Three bags full, Miss Nixon.’

She turned to go.

‘*Ms* Nixon, you unstructured chauvinist,’ she said. ‘And just don’t you forget it.’

Eastleigh. Joe Benson, Karen

After his session at the Farrars Arms, Joe Benson went home and beat up Karen at their home in Kiting Lane. It started as sex, but she had come in straight from work, and

she was tired and resistant. He called her an idle twat who didn't understand his 'manly urges,' and when she laughed at these ridiculous words, which she thought meant he was joking, he smacked her in the mouth.

Karen screamed, but not too loudly, because the walls in her semi were pretty thin, and fell over on the bed. She had gone upstairs to change out of her office clothes, and Joe had followed her, which was where the trouble had started. She had removed her jumper, and he'd grabbed a breast and tried to stick his tongue right in her mouth. When she'd pulled away her bra had torn right off, and Joe had got a monster hard on.

'You'd've thought by now she would've had more sense,' he told Mac Skirton later. 'Fucking hell, I was only after me rights, and she's got a lovely pair of tits, you must admit.'

Too small, thought Mac in all probability, but he said nothing. Even small-breasted women could be tasty in some circumstances, and Karen had a lovely smile. Not that she smiled at him much. She thought he was an evil little toad.

It wasn't much, as beatings went, and Joe was quite aggrieved at the stupid way she went on and on. She was bleeding from a torn lip, fair enough, but he hadn't blacked her eye or anything. He ripped her skirt up, tore her pants to one side, and had to practically break his dick in half to free it from his jeans it was so near to going off. Before he'd hardly got it in he was pumping, and he smacked her face a time or two to stop her wailing like a stupid kid who'd lost her dolly.

Afterwards she would not shut up. She was crying as if she'd ruptured a lung or something, short, heaving, grunty sobs that he'd have actually found funny if they hadn't been so loud. He smacked her, hard, to shut the row up, then held a pillow on her face and pointed out in no uncertain terms the neighbours might be home.

‘You’ve got your reputation to think of, ain’t you?’ he said. ‘Miss Goody Two Shoes. So shut up your fucking, whining *gob!*’

It occurred to him he ought to stop before he lost his temper. If that happened, he might accidentally kill her.

So he went out for another drink. Mac was still up for it, despite he’d left the Farrars nearly on his hands and knees, so by the time Joe got back home he was completely legless.

Karen wasn’t there, nor was her little blue Fiesta. Back at her bloody mum’s again, he guessed.

The sulky little twat.