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Dark Corners

Written by Ruth Rendell

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AN INTERVIEW WITH
RUTH RENDELL

‘But why the fascination with psychopaths? . . .

“Well,” Rendell says in her precise voice, “I do empathise with people who are driven by dreadful impulses. I think to be driven to want to kill must be such a terrible burden. I try, and I think I succeed, in making my readers feel pity for my psychopaths, because *I* do.”

Sunday Telegraph magazine, 10 April 2005

CHAPTER ONE

For many years Wilfred Martin collected samples of alternative medicines, homeopathic remedies and herbal pills. Most of them he never used, never even tried because he was afraid of them, but he kept the lot in a cupboard in a bathroom in his house in Falcon Mews, Maida Vale, and when he died they went, along with the house and its contents, to his son Carl.

Carl's mother recommended throwing it all out. It was junk, harmless at best, possibly dangerous, all those bottles and jars and sachets just taking up room. But Carl didn't throw it out because he couldn't be bothered. He had other things to do. If he had known how it, or one particular item among all the rest, would change his life, transform it, ruin it, he would have emptied the lot into a plastic bag, carried the bag down the road and dumped it in the big rubbish bin.

Carl had taken over the former family home in Falcon Mews at the beginning of the year, his mother

having moved to Camden when his parents divorced. For a while he thought no more about the contents of his bathroom cupboard. He was occupied with his girlfriend Nicola, his novel *Death's Door*, which had just been published, and with letting the top floor of his house. He had no need of those two rooms plus kitchen and bathroom, and great need of the rent. Excited though he was about the publication of his first book, he was not so naïve at twenty-three as to suppose he could live by writing alone. Rents in central London had reached a peak, and Falcon Mews, a crescent looping out of Sutherland Avenue to Castellain Road in Maida Vale, was highly desirable and much sought-after. So he placed an advertisement in the *Paddington Express* offering accommodation, and next morning twenty prospective tenants presented themselves on his doorstep. Why he chose the first applicant, Dermot McKinnon, he never knew. Perhaps it was because he didn't want to interview dozens of people. It was a decision he was bitterly to regret.

But not at the beginning. The only drawback Dermot seemed to have was his appearance – his uneven yellow teeth, for instance, his extreme thinness and round shoulders. But you don't decide against a tenant because his looks are unprepossessing, Carl told himself, and no doubt the man could pay the rent. Dermot had a job at the Sutherland Pet Clinic in the next street and produced a reference from the chief veterinarian there. Carl asked him to pay each month's rent at the end of the previous month, and perhaps the first mistake he made was to

request that it be paid not by transfer into his bank account, but in notes or a cheque in an envelope left at Carl's door. Carl realised that these days this was unusual, but he wanted to see the rent come in, take it in his hand. Dermot put up no objection.

Carl had already begun work on a second novel, having been encouraged by his agent Susanna Griggs to get on with it. He didn't expect an advance payment until he had finished it and Susanna and his editor had read and accepted it. There was no payment promised on paperback publication of *Death's Door*, as no one expected it to go into paperback. Still, what with being both a published author with good prospects and a landlord receiving rent, Carl felt rich.

Dermot had to enter Carl's house by the front door and go up two flights of stairs to get to his flat, but he made no noise and, as he put it, kept himself to himself. Carl had already noticed his tenant was a master of the cliché. And for a while everything seemed fine, the rent paid promptly in twenty-pound notes in an envelope on the last day of the month.

All the houses in Falcon Mews were rather small, all different in shape and colour, and all joined together in long rows facing each other. The road surface was cobbled except for where the two ends of the mews met Sutherland Avenue and where the residents could park their cars. The house Carl had inherited was painted ochre, with white window frames and white window boxes. It had a small, very overgrown back garden with a wooden shack at the end full of broken tools and a defunct lawnmower.

As for the alternative medicine, Carl took a couple of doses of something called benzoic acid when he had a cold. It claimed to suppress phlegm and coughs, but it had no effect. Apart from that, he had never looked inside the cupboard where all the bottles and jars lived.

Dermot McKinnon set off for the Sutherland Pet Clinic at twenty to nine each morning, returning to his flat at five thirty. On Sundays he went to church. If Dermot hadn't told him, Carl would never have guessed that he was a church-goer, attending one of the several churches in the neighbourhood, St Saviour's in Warwick Avenue, for instance, or St Mary's, Paddington Green.

They encountered each other in the mews on a Sunday morning and Dermot said, 'Just off to morning service.'
'Really?'

'I'm a regular attender,' said Dermot, adding, 'The better the day, the better the deed.'

Carl was on his way to have a coffee with his friend Stacey Warren. They had met at school, then gone to university together, where Carl had read philosophy and Stacey had taken a drama course. It was while she was still at university that her parents had been killed in a car crash and Stacey inherited quite a lot of money, enough to buy herself a flat in Primrose Hill. Stacey wanted to act, and because of her beautiful face and slender figure was given a significant part in a TV sitcom called *Station Road*. Her face became known to the public overnight, while her slenderness was lost in a few months.

'I've put on a stone,' she said to Carl across the table in their local Café Rouge. 'What am I going to do?' Other customers were giving her not very surreptitious glances. 'They all know who I am. They're all thinking I'm getting fat. What's going to happen to me?'

Carl, who was very thin, had no idea how much he weighed and didn't care. 'You'll have to go on a diet, I suppose.'

'David and I have split up. I'm finding that very hard to take. Have I got to starve myself too?'

'I don't know anything about diets, Stacey. You don't need to starve, do you?'

'I'd rather take one of those magic diet pills that get advertised online. D'you know anything about them?'

'Why would I?' said Carl. 'Not my kind of thing.'

The waitress brought the two chocolate brownies and the slice of carrot cake Stacey had ordered. Carl said nothing.

'I didn't have any breakfast,' she said.

Carl just nodded.

On his way home, still thinking about Stacey and her problem, he passed the bookshop kept by his friend Will Finsford. It was the one remaining privately run bookshop for miles around, and Will had confided that he lay awake at night worrying about having to close, especially as the organic shop down the road had not only gone out of business but had had the bailiffs in.

Carl saw him rearranging the display of best-sellers in the window and went in.

'D'you have any books on losing weight, Will?'

Will looked him up and down. 'You already look like you're wasting away.'

'Not for me. For a girl I know.'

'Not the beautiful Nicola, I hope?' said Will.

'No, for someone else. A friend who's got fat. That's a word I'm not supposed to say, isn't it?'

'You're safe with me. Have a look along the shelves, health section.'

Carl found nothing he thought would be suitable. 'Come over one evening, why don't you?' he said. 'Bring Corinne. The beautiful Nicola would love to see you. We'll ring you.'

Will said he would and went back to his window arrangement.

Walking home, Carl realised it wasn't really a book he wanted. Stacey had mentioned pills. He wondered if there were any slimming medications among his father's stash of pills and potions, as he had come to think of them. Wilfred Martin had always been thin so was unlikely to have used that sort of thing, but some drugs claimed to serve a double purpose, improving the skin, for instance, or curing indigestion.

Carl thought of his father, a rather taciturn, quirky man. He was sorry Wilfred was gone, but they had never had much in common. He regretted that his father had not lived to see *Death's Door* published. But he had left Carl the house, with its income potential. Had that been his way of offering his blessing on his son's chosen career? Carl hoped so.

The house was silent when he got in, but it usually

was whether Dermot was at home or not. He was a good tenant. Carl went upstairs and saw that the bathroom door was open. Dermot had his own bathroom in his flat on the top floor, so had no reason to use this one. Probably he'd forgotten to close the door himself, Carl thought, as he went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Wilfred's pills and potions were in a cupboard divided into five sections on the left-hand side of the washbasin. Only the topmost section was for Carl's current use; he didn't need much space, as his toothbrush and toothpaste and roll-on deodorant were on the shelf above the basin. Surveying the collection of bottles and phials and jars and packages, tubes and cans and blister packs, he asked himself why he had kept all this stuff. Surely not for its sentimental value. He had loved his father, but he had never felt like that about him. On the contrary, he regarded the pills and potions as mostly quack remedies, rubbish really, and quite useless. A lot of the products, he saw, taking small jars out at random, claimed to treat heart problems and safeguard against heart failure, yet his father had had two heart attacks and died after the second one.

No, there was nothing here that would encourage weight loss, Carl told himself. Best throw it all out, make a clean sweep. But what was that in a large plastic zip-up bag in the second section from the top? Yellow capsules, a great many of them, labelled DNP. *The foolproof way to avoid weight gain!* promised the label. Behind the bag of capsules was a box full of sachets also containing DNP but in powder-to-liquid form.

Taking the plastic bag out, he noted that, further down, the label advised using with care, and not to exceed the stated dose, etc. etc. The usual small print. But even paracetamol containers said that. He left the bag of capsules where it was and went downstairs to look up DNP on the computer. But before he got there, the front doorbell rang and he remembered that Nicola – beautiful, clever, sweet Nicola – was coming to spend the rest of the day and the night with him. He went to let her in, telling himself he must give her a key. He wanted her as a more permanent part of his life. With Nicola, his new novel and a reliable tenant, life was good.

For the time being, he forgot all about the slimming pills.

CHAPTER TWO

At first, being a landlord seemed trouble-free. Dermot paid his rent on the appointed day with the minimum of fuss. That is, he did for the first two months. The thirty-first of March was a Monday, and at 8.30 Carl was, as usual, eating his breakfast when he heard Dermot's footsteps on the stairs. Generally they would be followed by a tap at the door, but this time they were not. The front door closed, and Carl, getting up to look out of the window, saw Dermot walking down the mews towards Sutherland Avenue. Maybe the rent would come later today, he thought.

Carl seldom saw a newspaper except for selected bits online, but he bought a couple of papers on 1 April to see if he could spot the jokes. The best one he had ever heard of – it was published before he was born – was the story that the arms of the Venus de Milo had been found washed up on some Mediterranean beach. Still, today's made him laugh, and by the time he got to his mother's flat, he had forgotten all about the missing rent. It was her birthday as well as April Fool's Day, and Carl

was invited to a celebration lunch along with a cousin and two close friends. His mother asked him if she should have invited his girlfriend, and he said Nicola would still be at work in the Department of Health in Whitehall. It was a lovely sunny day and he walked halfway home before getting on the 46 bus.

But there was still the matter of the late rent. There was no sign of an envelope from Dermot. Carl woke up very early the next morning worrying. He disliked the idea of confronting Dermot; he found he had broken into a sweat just thinking about it. He was drinking a mug of very strong coffee when he heard Dermot's footsteps. If the front door opened, he told himself, he would make himself go out and ask for the money. Instead, Dermot tapped on the kitchen door and handed over an envelope. Smiling and showing his horrible yellowish teeth he said, 'Did you think I was playing an April Fool's joke?'

'What? No, no, of course not.'

'Just a mistake,' said Dermot. 'He who makes no mistakes makes nothing. See you later.'

Carl felt great relief, but just to make sure, he counted the notes. And there it was, as it should be: twelve hundred pounds. Not nearly enough, his mother had said, considering today's prices, but it seemed a lot to Carl.

He filled a bowl with muesli because he was suddenly hungry, but the milk had gone sour so he had to throw the contents of the bowl away. Apart from the milk, though, things were going well and it was a good time to get back to work on his new novel, a more

serious venture than his first. Carl looked at the notes he had made about Highgate Cemetery, the research he was doing for his first four chapters. Perhaps he should have made another visit to the cemetery yesterday, but he thought he had enough material to write his first chapter. The only interruption was a phone call from Stacey. It surprised him the way friends unloaded their trivial (it seemed to him) concerns.

'I'm so sorry, Carl.' She seemed to think the simple apology was enough to permit a long misery moan about her weight.

'I'm working, Stacey,' he said.

'Oh, writing, you mean?'

He sighed. People always said that, as if writing were quick and easy. Should he mention the DNP? No, it wouldn't shut her up. On the contrary, it would fetch her round here, and as much as he liked her, he needed to work. Instead he listened, making sympathetic noises, until he told the white lie those who work from home sometimes have to employ.

'Got to go, Stacey. There's someone at the door.'

He still couldn't write. It was absurd and something to feel a little ashamed of, suddenly to be happy, to be carefree, because he'd received a packet with twelve hundred pounds in it. Money that was rightly his, that was owed to him. Now he came to think of it, the rent money was his sole secure income. He couldn't count on more book money for a long time. The rent brought him relief and happiness.

He definitely wouldn't be able to write today. The sun

was shining and he would go out, walk up to the big green space that was Paddington Recreation Ground, lie on the grass in the sun and look up through the branches at the blue sky.

CHAPTER THREE

It wasn't April Fool's Day or even May Day but 2 May when the next rent payment arrived.

Carl wasn't as nervous as he had been the previous month. Nicola had spent the night with him, but he had said nothing to her about the rent being late in April. After all, it had come and all had been well. She had gone to work on 2 May before Dermot left the house, so she wasn't there to see Carl listening for his tenant's footfalls on the stair or to see his surprise when the front door closed without Dermot's tap on the kitchen door. Perhaps the rent would come later in the day, and this was in fact what happened.

They encountered each other in the hallway, Carl leaving the house to do some food shopping and Dermot coming in at five thirty from the pet clinic.

'I've got something for you,' said Dermot, handing over an envelope.

Carl thought it strange that Dermot should have carried that envelope containing twelve hundred pounds about with him all day, but still, it wasn't important: he had

got his money. He wouldn't have to break into his very meagre and dwindling savings in order to go on a week's holiday with Nicola. They would only be going to Cornwall, not abroad anywhere, but he was looking forward to their stay in Fowey.

Stacey had phoned again in some despair before they left, but on his mobile this time. He told her he was going away but that she must come over to see him when he got back. They'd go out to eat and he would see what he could do to help with her weight problem. Why had he said that? It must have been the DNP that had come into his mind. He dismissed it. He couldn't help anyone lose weight.

He and Nicola went to Fowey with the couple who had introduced them, and who were still special friends partly for that reason. They had a good time, and by the time they got back to Paddington station, Carl had asked Nicola to come to Falcon Mews. 'I mean to live with me,' he said. 'Permanently.' He felt good about Nicola. They cared about the same things – books, music, the outdoors. She loved that he was a writer. He loved her.

'I'll have to go back to my flat and tell my flatmates, but then I will. I want to. I'd been going to ask you, but . . . well, I must be sort of old-fashioned. I thought it wouldn't be right for me to ask and not you. Me being a woman, I mean.'

She moved in three days later.

*

The day before Nicola moved in, Stacey came round. She and Carl planned to go out to eat at a nearby restaurant. Before that, Stacey used his bathroom to renew her make-up. Perhaps because of her acting and her modelling, she made up very heavily, especially around her eyes.

After a few minutes, Carl went upstairs to fetch himself an antihistamine pill for his hay fever. He left the bathroom door ajar. Stacey followed him in. She was one of those people who, when someone told her of a mild illness or problem, always claimed to suffer from the same complaint. 'Funny you should say that, because I've got hay fever too.' He opened the cabinet and found the antihistamines on the top shelf. Stacey was standing behind him, telling him about her symptoms and peering over his shoulder.

'Where did all this stuff come from?' she asked. 'Do you use it?'

'It was my dad's. I sort of inherited it – you know, when I got the house and the furniture and everything.'

He reached into the cabinet and brought out the package with the yellow capsules. 'This is supposed to make you lose weight. I expect he got it online.'

'Did your dad use it?'

'He can't have. He was so thin he was practically a skeleton.'

She took the package from his hand and looked at it. 'DNP,' she said. 'Dinitrophenol. One hundred capsules.' Then she read the instructions and looked at the price marked on the package. One hundred pounds.

Carl took the bag from her and replaced it on the shelf, but not at the back.

‘I could order some online,’ she said. ‘But – well, you’ve already got these. Would you sell me fifty?’

Sell them? He knew he should just give them to her, but the hotel he and Nicola had stayed in in Fowey had been pricey, the restaurants they had visited in various other Cornish resorts as expensive as London – the kind they never went to in London – and the holiday, though the costs had been shared with Nicola, far more expensive than he had expected. Fifty pounds for these pills wasn’t all that much, but it would be a help. And Stacey could afford it; well, she certainly could if she lost that weight and kept her sitcom job.

‘OK,’ he said, as he counted fifty out into a tooth mug and handed her the packet with the fifty remaining in it.

He went downstairs, realising as he did so that Dermot was closing the front door on his way out. Could he have heard his conversation with Stacey as he came down the stairs? Perhaps. But what did it matter if he had?

By now Stacey had finished her make-up and joined him. They were going up the road to Raoul’s in Clifton Road. Outside on the pavement she handed over the fifty pounds.

He forgot about the transaction, not least because Nicola had moved in and he wondered why they had waited so long; it had been two years since Jonathan

had first introduced them. But his novel wasn't going well and he had reached a stage in which he struggled to produce two or three paragraphs a day. Nicola asked about it, and he always said everything was fine. He had no idea why this writer's block had arisen.

May was a fine warm month in London, and because staring at his computer was useless and unprofitable, Carl had taken to going out in the late morning while Nicola was at work and picking up a copy of the *Evening Standard*. He chose the *Standard* rather than any other daily paper because it was free.

He stared at today's front page. There, in full colour, was a three-column photograph of Stacey. She looked beautiful, not smiling, but in a soulful pose, her long, thick blonde hair draped about her shoulders in a theatrical head shot. Described as twenty-four years old, with her face familiar from her starring role in *Station Road*, she had been found dead in her Primrose Hill flat by a friend who had a key. Police said foul play was not suspected.

It couldn't be – but it must be. Carl broke into a sweat. The phone was ringing as he let himself into the house. It was his mother, Una.

'Oh darling, have you seen the news about poor Stacey?'

'It's in the *Standard*.'

'She was so lovely before she put on all that weight. There was a time when I thought you might marry her.'

His mother belonged to a generation where women always thought in terms of marriage. Useless to tell her, though he often had, that even girls seldom thought

about marriage any more. The subject only came up when they became pregnant, and often not even then.

‘Well, I can’t marry her now, can I? She’s dead.’

‘Oh *darling*.’

‘We were friends,’ he said. ‘That’s all.’

His mother’s words hardly penetrated as he thought about Stacey. He couldn’t believe she was dead. She had eaten for comfort, he supposed. Her addiction to food had been the opposite of anorexia. When there was food around, especially butter and cheese and ham and fruit cake and anything in a rich sauce, she would declare that she mustn’t touch the stuff, she shouldn’t dream of touching it, but she couldn’t resist. And as he watched her grow larger, visibly it seemed, increasing each time he saw her, he stopped seeing her, only going over to her flat in Pinetree Court, Primrose Hill, when she begged him not to desert her, please, please to come. And then it seemed to him that she stuffed down food in front of him to annoy. Of course, that couldn’t have been her motive, but it seemed like it, especially when mayonnaise dribbled down her chin, fragments of carrot cake or macaroons stuck all over a close-fitting angora sweater, and her once beautiful breasts were transformed into vast mounds of sticky cake crumbs.

They had never been lovers but they had been best friends. Now she was gone.

‘A man and a woman can’t be friends,’ said his mother. ‘I wonder if that’s what was wrong, that she ate for comfort.’

'You mean if I'd married her she'd have stopped eating?'
'Don't be silly, Carl.'

He imagined himself married to Stacey and walking along Sutherland Avenue beside her, an increasingly ridiculous sight. He was very thin, which had nothing to do with what he ate or didn't eat and everything to do with his thin mother and thin father.

He sat down in front of the computer and touched the tiny switch with its blue light. The screen showed him its usual picture, a green hill and a purple mountain behind it. Dermot had once come in just after he had switched it on and started singing some hymn about a green hill far away without a city wall. Now every time Carl saw the screen he thought about that stupid hymn and sometimes even began humming it. He had meant to move the mouse on to *Sacred Spirits.doc* and try to get back into his novel, but instead he went to the internet, telling himself he had never checked on those yellow capsules he had sold Stacey. The little arrow hovered over Google. He typed in the letters DNP, but went no further. He was afraid.

Shutting his eyes – he didn't want to know, not yet, maybe never – he shifted the cursor to exit.

CHAPTER FOUR

Four days before Carl read the story of Stacey's death, Lizzie Milsom entered Stacey's flat. It was very imprudent to leave the keys to one's home outside the property, and quite difficult to do so when the property was a flat. Still, it was something Stacey Warren did and a good many of her friends knew about it.

There were four flats in Pinetree Court, all with different-coloured front doors. The door to the ground-floor flat was blue, while those to the first- and second-floor flats were yellow and green respectively. A staircase went down to the basement flat, where Stacey had told Lizzie the front door was red. Stacey lived on the first floor; she secreted her two keys on a single ring inside the cupboard underneath the flight of steps that led up to the front door. The cupboard, which had no lock, held the four tenants' waste bins, and there was a loose brick in the floor. Beneath the loose brick, in the hollow space, were Stacey's spare keys.

Because Stacey had told her she would be out that

morning, Lizzie Milsom lifted up the loose brick and helped herself to the keys. She then went into the entrance hall, and went up the stairs to the first floor. Once outside Stacey's flat, she stood still and listened. Silence. All the occupants would be out at work. What she intended to do was find some small object of no great value, an item such as a piece of pottery or a paperweight or a ballpoint pen – the kind of thing a friend might give you for a Christmas present – and take it away with her, having first substituted another valueless object in its place. The latter she had brought with her: a black and white plastic napkin ring. Doing this – and she often did it – gave her a sense of power. People thought their lives were private and safe, but they were not.

She inserted the key in Stacey's yellow front door and let herself in.

Lizzie wasn't beautiful, but she was the kind of girl people called attractive without specifying who they were attractive to. She had lovely blonde hair, thick and long, large innocent brown eyes and pretty hands with nails she kept nice with different-coloured varnish that was never allowed to chip. Her figure was good. She would have liked to dress well but couldn't afford it.

She and Stacey had known each other for years. Their parents' homes had been so near each other that they had walked together to their Brondesbury school, which was just down the road. This wasn't the first time Lizzie had been in Stacey's flat, but it was the first illicit visit. She searched through the living areas, looking for some

trinket or useless article, and after a while decided on a small diary, unused and three years out of date but with Stacey's name printed inside the front cover. The napkin ring was substituted and the diary went into Lizzie's bag.

The rooms in Stacey's flat were large. That is, the living room was large and Lizzie assumed the bedroom was too. She devoted half an hour or so to exploring and searching through cupboards and drawers. She had no intention of taking anything else, and what she had taken she would bring back. But she was more inquisitive than most people, and once in a place that wasn't hers was consumed with curiosity. She was also a consummate liar. In the unlikely event of someone entering the place she was exploring, she was always ready with the excuse – she called it a reason – that the owner had asked her to check that she or he had turned off the gas or not left the iron on.

She passed an interesting twenty minutes investigating Stacey's desk drawers, where she found a wad of twenty-pound notes, a bunch of leaflets advertising weight-loss remedies, an unpaid electricity bill and an envelope containing photographs of a naked Stacey taken in the days before she got fat. Lizzie told herself she wasn't a thief and helped herself to only two twenty-pound notes while anyone without principles would have taken the lot. She proceeded to the kitchen, found a half-full bottle of Campari in the fridge, which was otherwise empty of food and drink, and took a swig from it. It made her choke and she wondered what it could have been diluted with. Stacey had a lovely big bathroom, large enough to

accommodate an elliptical cross-trainer and a rowing machine. 'She doesn't get much use out of them,' said Lizzie aloud.

She nearly gave the bedroom a miss. She wasn't interested in sorting through Stacey's underwear or trying out her moisturiser. But the Campari had gone to her head and she thought a lie-down might be a good idea. She opened the bedroom door and stopped short. Stacey, in a lacy nightdress and velvet dressing gown, lay on her back on the floor beside her emperor-size bed. A small plastic packet, empty of whatever it had contained, was beside her, and a glass of what was possibly water. Pale yellow capsules were scattered across the pale yellow carpet.

Lizzie knew Stacey was dead, though she couldn't have said how she knew. She didn't scream. Privately she believed that women who screamed when they saw or found a dead body only did it for effect. They could easily have controlled themselves. She made no noise at all.

She knelt down on the floor and felt for Stacey's pulse. But she didn't need that; she only needed the coldness of the skin on her face and the icy dampness of her hands to know that Stacey had been there for a long time, probably since the evening before. She also knew that she had to call the police, or maybe an ambulance, and that now Stacey was dead she really needed no explanation for being in the flat. It would only be a tiny bit awkward. She tapped out 999 on her mobile, and the speed with which it was answered amazed her.

‘Police,’ she said when presented with options. ‘I’ve just found my best friend dead.’

Stacey wasn’t her best friend, but a small lie was necessary. She would have felt cheated if she had told anything in the region of the truth. Saying she had come into the flat with her own set of keys, keys that Stacey had given her, was only a way of supporting the best-friend statement. She mustn’t overdo it.

The operator asked her if she would stay in the flat until the police arrived, and she said of course. She sat down, because in spite of her bravado, she felt quite shocked and afraid that she might fall if she stayed standing up. While she waited for the policeman and perhaps others to come, she replaced the diary in the living room and took back her napkin ring. Best do that – suppose they found her DNA on it?

Alone with her thoughts and feeling stronger, Lizzie sat in an armchair in the living room and wondered what would happen to the flat. It had been Stacey’s own, free of mortgage, bought with an inheritance from her parents. Stacey had been proud of her financial independence, certain she could carry on with her acting, with big parts in TV serials, once she had lost weight. Her parents had died in a car crash on the M25 when Stacey was at university. She had been staying with her aunt Yvonne Weatherspoon and her aunt’s children when the accident happened, and remained with them throughout her time at university. Lizzie wondered if she should phone Yvonne to tell her about Stacey’s death, but thought better (or worse) of it. Let the police do that. She didn’t have her

number, and although she knew Stacey's aunt slightly, she had never got on with her.

In contrast to Stacey, Lizzie lived in a rented bedsit in Iverson Road, Kilburn. The rent was very high for what it was and the place was small, damp and in dire need of redecoration. She thought about it while she sat in Stacey's flat, and thought too how little she wanted to return to it. Her job as a teaching assistant at a private school paid very badly, although it had its advantages. To be able to walk to work was one of them, and a free lunch was another. She wasn't supposed to have a free lunch, or indeed any lunch at school at all, but there was no one to notice her eating from one or more of the many untouched plates she removed from the children's cafeteria. She also ate an evening meal at her parents' once a week, not because she wanted to, but bearing in mind – never for a moment forgetting – that her father paid half her rent. Well, her father *and* her mother, her mother told her she should say, though Lizzie couldn't see why, as her mother didn't work, or wasn't, as she preferred to put it, a wage-earner. A breadwinner, said her father, who had been, until he retired, quite well-off.

Lizzie was thinking rather wistfully of the shepherd's pie and queen of puddings her mother would serve up tonight, when the doorbell rang.

The police had arrived.