

Mixing with Murder

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Chapter One

When I was very small, not more than three years old at a guess, some grown-up figure took me to the children's playground in a nearby park. I wish I knew who it was. Even now, nearly twenty years later, I'd go and find her and give her a piece of my mind. I know it was female, so wasn't my dad, but it wasn't my grandma. It ought to have been my mother because this was before she walked out on us all when I was seven years old. But to my knowledge my mother never took me to the park or anywhere else. In my one clear mental image of her before that time she is sitting in front of the mirror of her dressing table, carefully applying lipstick. She is wearing a dress in shiny green material. She smells nice. I think she is beautiful.

On that day in the park, however, I think I must have been with some older child in whose charge I'd unwisely been put. There were other people around but they were, I suppose, totally occupied with their own small children and unaware of me. My memory serves up a background of

shouts and laughter, dusty trees and trampled green grass with many bare worn patches defiled by dog dirt. Against this urban idea of an open space my temporary guardian hauled me up some steep, slippery metal rungs and we found ourselves at the top of a long slide. Not the little slide for tots but the big slide for older children. It gleamed in the sunshine, polished and silvery, a torture machine of the first order.

Arms wrestled me into a seated position at the top and a voice commanded, 'Go on, down you go.'

I was petrified. I clung to the raised metal edges. I was sure I was so high up I must be near the treetops and the birds but I was too scared to raise my eyes from the ground far, far below. It looked very hard, unwelcoming and unstable at the same time. It lurched about in my vision, rising up and sinking, waltzing from side to side. The rims of the slide didn't look high enough to prevent me toppling out sideways. As well as dizzy I felt horribly, painfully sick. I've disliked heights ever since.

'No!' I screeched.

'Oh, stop making a fuss!' commanded my kindly carer and gave me a hearty shove.

My clinging hands were ripped from their desperate grip. I hurtled down, wind whistling past my ears, at a speed I'd never experienced before. At least, my outer shell did. My inner organs, heart and stomach, seemed to have remained back there at the top. I was powerless to do anything about it. I wasn't old enough to know what death

was but I was sure I was rocketing towards a final end of some sort. I'd never come out of this alive. I'd never go back home and see my family again. It lasted seconds and seemed to take hours. Then I reached the bottom and was caught in someone's arms.

I was lifted from the slide and stood up on my wobbling legs. Belatedly my heart and stomach caught up with me and I was sick, really sick, as only a small child can be.

My carer was furious. 'What did you do that for, Francesca?'

Above my head a battle soon raged. 'Well, I'm not going to clean her up.'

'You've got to. We can't take her home like that.'

The park keeper arrived, stout, angry and red-faced, and joined in, probably furious at the possibility of the park being sued. I howled.

I was taken home, still howling, and there was another argument. The air filled with yelling voices while I stood in the midst of it all, snivelling in my vomit-stained clothes. Then Grandma gathered me up, took me away to be bathed and made everything right again. It would be nice, in the adult world, to have someone there who'd walk in when everything was going wrong and make it come right. Pity it never happens except in detective stories, I suppose, when the detective does the sorting out. My experiences of detection have not been like that at all. There are always loose ends or ends which are tied up in unexpected or not altogether satisfactory fashion. Life takes a hand and plays

odd tricks. I sometimes think the most unwelcome gift a genie could grant anyone would be that of being able to see into the future. Looking back is difficult enough.

My childhood is full of memories like the slide one. I must have had some fun times but they didn't imprint themselves in the same way. It makes me wonder whether some imp of ill fortune has always hopped along behind me, waiting his chance. Perhaps bad memories just squeeze out the good ones, like the evil that lives on after someone's death and the good that's interred with their bones. I know my Shakespeare. I mean to be a proper actor one day. I did most of a drama course in my teens until circumstances forced me to quit. I've only done amateur stuff since. But I'll make it to the real stage one day, you'll see.

In the meantime I take any job offered that's legal and lets me keep my independence. I even do a little confidential work for people. I like to call it that. Calling yourself a private detective is dodgy. Clients expect an office. The tax people expect proper records. Most of the work is stuff I wouldn't want to touch. A friend of mine, Susie Duke, runs a detective agency and I know most of what she does is pretty seedy. I'm unofficial and take the jobs I want to do. Or that had been the idea until that Monday morning in August.

It was holiday time. The tourists had moved into London and those office workers who could, had taken themselves off to foreign sunspots. This year, as it happened, they needn't have bothered. We had a splendid

sun-drenched summer at home. Even in Camden, where I was living, walking along the heat-baked pavements one could imagine oneself in a distant exotic city where life at midday retreated behind shutters and all unnecessary activity was suspended. Along the length of Camden High Street the racks of fantastically hued clothing outside the shops and packed on rails in its crowded markets no longer appeared garish and out of place. They looked quite natural with the sequins sparkling in the sunlight and the bright colours giving the impression parakeets had escaped from nearby Regent's Park zoo and nestled among the coat-hangers. The shopkeepers had dragged wooden chairs into the shade and watched passers-by with lazy indifference. Even the pushers selling marijuana down on the bridge over the canal couldn't be bothered to tout for trade. They leaned against the brickwork watching the sluggish water down below, the occasional slow progress of a pleasure craft, walkers on the towpath and the pale-faced group of youngsters sitting in a circle at the foot of the steps, like so many nomads round a camp fire, to snort coke.

Bonnie, my dog, didn't like the heat at all, so that morning I set out to take her for a walk right after breakfast, before the sun got up. My intention was to take her as far as the newsagent's where my friend Ganesh works for his Uncle Hari and I work on a part-time basis, when needed. There I hoped to cadge a cup of coffee and a look at the tabloids for free before strolling home. Bonnie was happy, pattering along, stopping to sniff occasionally. I felt pretty

happy myself. But I'd only just turned out of the road where I lived when a large sleek car purred to a halt beside me. The driver got out and hailed me across its roof.

'Oi, Fran!'

I'd taken little notice of the car but a greeting like that can't be ignored. This wasn't just someone who knew my name. It was someone who felt free to be familiar. I squinted at him. The sun was shining into my face but I could make out his burly form easily enough. He raised an arm and wiped perspiration from his brow.

'I was on my way to your place,' he said.

'Hello, Harry,' I said unenthusiastically. I made to walk on, even though I knew it was a vain attempt to escape destiny. If Harry was here looking for me it was because his boss, Mickey Allerton, had sent him. The happiness in me evaporated. Here we go again, a voice said in my brain. What is it with you, Francesca Varady? It was as if a booming voice, like the old lottery commercial, informed me *it could be me*. It nearly always was me, not winning lotteries but drawing the short straw. Hey! I said crossly to the invisible imp, just go and play in someone else's backyard for a bit, will you?

'Don't be in a hurry,' Harry was saying in a friendly voice. He was a friendly man for a bouncer. He was a professional, he told me once. He prided himself on that. 'Didn't you hear me? I come looking for you. He wants to see you.'

A kind of discretion prevented him naming his employer

aloud, as if listening ears might be all around and some inkling of Mickey's private business leak out. Mickey Allerton is a very private man. I don't know if much of what he does is illegal. Probably it's mostly legal on the very edge of the meaning of the word. He's the sort of person who doesn't take unnecessary risks. In Mickey's world all the risks are borne by others. This is why a summons from him would make anyone wary. The horrible thought struck me that Allerton himself might be in the car. I stooped and peered inside. It was empty. I probably looked my relief.

'Nah,' said Harry, watching me with amused tolerance. 'He's at the club. Go on, get in.'

I wondered if it was any use pleading a pressing engagement and admitted to myself that it wasn't. I opened the rear door of the car and slid on to the seat. Bonnie hopped in with me, puzzled at this curtailing of our walk but loyally assuming we were going somewhere interesting. She scrambled up beside me and settled down; ears pricked and paws neatly together like a dog who spent her life travelling in fancy motors.

Harry retook his place behind the wheel and slammed the door. He turned to stare at me over the back of the seat. 'Oi,' he said again. 'Don't let that dog get up on the cushions. It's all real leather. She'll scratch it.'

I pushed Bonnie down into the well by my feet and asked boldly, 'What does Mickey want?' I didn't expect to be told but there was no harm in asking.

‘ ‘Ow do I know?’ he returned.

We rolled away from the kerb. I sat studying the back of Harry’s brick-red neck where it bulged uncomfortably over his collar. Pearls of sweat trickled down it. His close-cropped greying dark hair studded the roll of flesh with damp battered bristles. It looked like a past-its-best nailbrush.

I supposed we were heading towards the Silver Circle, one of Mickey’s adult entertainment clubs. He had an office there. I’d originally met Allerton in the course of one of my previous investigations. I’d managed by pure chance to do something which had pleased him but that didn’t mean I was anxious to see him again. He, on the other hand, was apparently keen to see me. I ought to be feeling surprise instead of just dread. The surprise was missing because something had always told me that I would see him again, that it was a question of ‘when’ not ‘if’ Allerton would send for me. Once you’re drawn into the orbit of someone like Mickey, your name goes down in his little book.

But what could he want from me, of all people? I sat bolt upright, not because I was worried about the ‘real leather’ seat but because my stomach muscles were clenched so tightly I couldn’t lean back and relax. I might as well have been an aristocrat on the way to the guillotine, although as a tumbrel the car was comfortable enough. One or two pedestrians looked curiously at us as Harry drove smoothly around one-way systems: big Merc,

chauffeur, me seated rigidly to attention in the back like a royal personage. I resisted the temptation to raise my hand in a listless wave as we glided past.

At my feet Bonnie whined. She had picked up my sense of unease and now didn't like this any more than I did. She pushed her little black nose into my knee and I put down a hand to stroke her head reassuringly. Her ears drooped and her brown eyes were anxious. She's a small animal of terrier type, mostly white with some black patches, curiously placed. If you look at her from one side, she's white with a black patch over her eye and a larger one on her flank. If you look at her from the other side she has no patches at all except a tiny one on her back leg. The result is that, depending on which side you see her from, she is like two different dogs. It's the sort of detail which might usefully confuse a witness if the occasion arose. It hasn't yet. Give it time.

We had reached a narrow street beside the block which housed the club. Harry got out and, ever the gent, came round to the pavement side and opened the rear passenger door for me. I scrambled out, impeded by Bonnie who was so keen to get out of the car she squeezed between my feet and nearly brought me down flat on my face.

'Steady does it,' said Harry, putting out a meaty hand and gripping my shoulder.

We set off towards the corner. I walked in front and Harry followed. That was so I couldn't double back and run away. When Harry wasn't driving Mickey's car he was

guarding the club door. It wasn't like Mickey to leave the entrance unattended and it wasn't today. As Harry and I reached it, another male figure emerged from the gloom within and briefly intercepted us before he saw who was there.

I didn't know the new man but he was of a sort once seen, never forgotten. He was tall with an exaggerated muscular build. I guessed it resulted from excessive weight-training. I can't stand that kind of physique myself. Mostly those guys are all bulging biceps and triceps, with necks the same width as their heads. They have a funny way of standing with their arms hanging by their sides and their feet turned out. This one was blond-haired, thin-lipped and had the round bright blue eyes you see on dolls. As is generally the case with bodybuilders, he clearly thought himself the bee's knees.

'Ello, Ivo,' said Harry and something in his voice suggested to me that he shared my opinion of muscleman. 'Boss there?'

'You are late,' said Ivo. He had a distinct accent I couldn't quite place. 'Mr Allerton is waiting.' He emphasised the last word and accompanied it with a disdainful glance at me.

I met the glance with a steady look. I knew he meant Mr Allerton wasn't to be kept waiting at any time and certainly not by nonentities like me. He didn't like me staring back at him showing neither awe (which he expected) nor admiration (which he'd have preferred). He

blinked and into the china-blue eyes came a very nasty look indeed. Harry gave me a little push in the small of the back. I sensed a message. Harry didn't want me making an enemy of Ivo. He knew Ivo better than I did and the warning push was to be taken seriously.

Bonnie made a decision at this moment. She wasn't going into the club. She trusted my judgement up to a point but that point had been passed. She didn't like the look of the place and that was that. She flattened herself on the pavement and I couldn't drag her forward. It was then Ivo made a mistake.

'Mr Allerton is a busy man,' he said. 'Get rid of that animal.' And he stooped to grab her collar.

The next moment he jumped back, swearing in an unknown language, nursing the bitten fingers of his right hand. The blue eyes blazed with rage.

'Pick her up!' snapped Harry to me. At the same time he moved to place his own considerable bulk between me and the doorman.

I scooped up Bonnie, tucked her under my arm wriggling protestingly, and hurried past Ivo inside. He said something to me in his own language as I entered. I didn't know what it meant exactly but I could guess the general drift.

'It wasn't her fault; he was stupid to do that!' I hissed to Harry.

'Yeah,' said Harry quietly. 'But old Ivo there is a head case. You stay clear of 'im.'

As it was still early, the club wasn't open for business but getting ready for action later. The foyer smelled of cigarettes, alcohol and sweat mixed with that of commercial disinfectant and lavender air freshener wafting from the toilets. It was decorated with large glossy pictures of the entertainment on offer, every kind of female body beautiful available thanks to plastic surgery and bottled hair colour. In stark contrast, an elderly woman pushed a vacuum cleaner back and forth across the carpet. She had a wrinkled darkly tanned skin and in her broad flat expressionless face all hope had long since died. She didn't look up as we passed by her, but worked on bringing a note of mundane reality to that world of lip-gloss and hairspray.

The curtains over the arched entrance to the main part of the club had been looped back. Through them I could see the stage and, standing on it, a black-haired girl in a shocking pink leotard with her hands on her hips. She was glaring down at a small bald man who was yelling up at her.

'Try and make it look sexy, can't you? You look like you're in a perishing aerobics class!'

Before I could hear the girl's reply we'd turned into a side corridor. I lost sight of the stage but I heard a piano strike up, followed by the clumping of feet on the wooden boards and wails of despair from the bald *répétiteur*.

Mickey Allerton was waiting for me in his office at the end of the corridor. He was a well-built, well-groomed

man in his fifties with the softest-looking skin I'd even seen on an adult, male or female, like a baby's. His back was to me and he was watching one of the three CCTV screens behind his desk. It was the one showing the stage on which the girl was dancing. She had energy if not grace.

'She'll have to go,' said Allerton as we came in.

'Fine,' I said in relief, turning back to the door.

I cannoned into Harry who gently but firmly turned me back again to face the desk.

Allerton swivelled in his chair to face me. His eyes were silvery grey, like fish scales. 'Not you,' he said. 'Her.' He jerked a thumb at the screen behind him. 'No talent, that one.' He nodded at a chair. 'Sit down, Fran. Why are you holding that dog?'

'She bit your doorman,' I said. 'Look, I haven't got that kind of talent, either.'

I put Bonnie on the ground but imprisoned her between my legs. I wasn't risking her snapping at Mickey if he came out from behind that desk. She was still in combative mode with the ruff of hair at the scruff of her neck standing up stiffly.

Allerton ignored the information about Bonnie biting the doorman. That was Ivo's lookout. 'Is it likely,' he asked in a weary voice, 'that I had Harry bring you here because I wanted to hire you as an artiste?'

'No,' I admitted. 'I'm on the short side and have the kind of figure my grandma described as 'gamine'. Other people have been less tactful. The girl out there on the

stage might not be 'talented' but at least she looked right.

'Then don't talk stupid. Harry, go and get us some coffee.'

I was sorry to see Harry go. He was Allerton's heavy but I still felt safer with him there.

'Well, Fran,' said Allerton, leaning back in his chair and placing his well-manicured hands palms down on the desktop. He wore a large ring with some kind of gold coin set in it. 'Long time, no see.'

It wasn't that long a time but, as far as I was concerned, it couldn't be long enough. I gave him a sickly smile.

He didn't return it. Allerton didn't waste smiles. But he extended opening courtesies with a vague gesture of his beringed right hand. 'How are things? Got a job?'

'Not at the moment,' I confessed. 'I was working as a waitress but the place was closed down.'

He nodded. 'I heard about that. They were working some kind of wine scam, weren't they?' He tapped his fingers on the desk. 'I'm very careful where I buy wine for my establishments. I've got a reputation.'

Yes, he had. I bet no one would dare to try and sell him plonk bottled up under an expensive label.

'I'm glad you're free at the moment,' he went on. 'I've got a little job for you. You're still in the private detection business, aren't you? Part-time, as I understand.' Now he grinned briefly. 'I heard about the play, too.'

There seemed to be nothing about my recent activities Mickey Allerton didn't know. 'I'm sort of still in the private

investigation business,’ I said. ‘But I haven’t got the facilities to help you, Mr Allerton. I’m on my own.’

‘Facilities?’ He mimicked my voice and looked amused. ‘You don’t half come out with some winners, Fran. I don’t need any facilities, whatever they are. I just need you to do a little job for me.’

‘Susie Duke is still running her detective agency,’ I said desperately. ‘Perhaps she’d be better—’

‘You don’t know what I want, do you? So shut up and listen,’ he invited me. ‘Susie Duke isn’t suitable for this one. You are. Just the ticket, in fact.’

Harry brought in the coffee at that point. Allerton opened a drawer in his desk and took out a small dispenser of sugar substitute tablets. He tapped two into his cup.

‘Got to watch my weight,’ he said. ‘Doctor’s orders.’

‘Give up the sugar altogether,’ I suggested.

He shook his head. ‘I can’t drink coffee without a sweetener. Tea, just possibly. But coffee? No way.’ He contemplated the steam spiralling from his cup.

Harry handed me my cup and retreated to the back of the room. Bonnie, at my feet, had relaxed her guard and settled down. I waited for Mickey to tell me in what way I was just the ticket. He seemed to be taking pleasure in making me wait or perhaps I was just so wound up it seemed as though he was. He picked up a spoon, stirred his coffee, put the spoon gently back in the saucer. At long last he looked up. He opened his mouth. This was it. He

was going to announce some awful shattering news. I held my breath.

‘I tried that Atkins Diet,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes?’ This was hardly what I’d expected and it threw me completely. Probably this was Mickey’s intention. I tried to sound normal but my voice was like something issuing from a computer. ‘How did you get on?’ I croaked tinnily.

He shook his head in sorrow. ‘I like roast potatoes with my Sunday lunch and chips with my steak. I found it difficult to give them up. Besides, my doctor said it wasn’t right for me.’

An Achilles heel! Was Mickey Allerton, whom I’d been inclined to view as omnipotent, in thrall to his medical adviser? I wondered if he might be a hypochondriac. The most unlikely people are. Still, any sign of weakness in him was to be stored up in memory. You never knew, it might be useful one day.

‘It’s not so much a job I’ve got for you,’ he said. ‘It’s more an errand. I want you to take a message to someone for me.’

I didn’t ask him what was wrong with the phone, e-mail or snail mail. But I was reminded of that poor Greek bloke who ran miles with the news of some victory and once he’d delivered it, dropped dead – and he’d brought good news. I had a funny feeling Allerton’s message would bring the recipient bad news. The ancient custom, as I’d heard it, was to kill the bearer of such tidings. Either way, being

a messenger isn't a job with good long-term prospects.

Allerton had resorted to the desk drawer again and now drew out a glossy photograph. He passed it to me across the desk. I took it gingerly.

It was of one of his artistes, a promotional picture like all the others tacked up on a display board in the foyer. This one was a pretty girl of about my age. She wore an outfit which tipped the nod towards the cowgirl style, more rhinestones than it seemed possible to attach to so little material, dinky boots with high heels and completed by a little white Stetson atop her mass of blond curly hair. Her face was plastered with too much make-up, a lot of pearlised mauve eyeshadow and glitter stuff on her eyelashes. She was giving the camera a come-hither look while clinging to an upright pole.

'Lisa Stallard. Dancer,' Mickey passed out his information in laconic, bite-sized snippets. 'Good one.' He leaned back. 'She walked out,' he said.

There was a hint of surprise in his voice. Artistes didn't walk out on him. This was probably a first. He still couldn't quite accept it.

'I want her back. Customers liked her.'

I had every sympathy with the girl who'd walked out of this seedy dump. She had courage. If Mickey wanted her back, I decided, he could go and find her himself. I wasn't going to do it for him.

'Look,' I said. 'If she doesn't want to work here, well, I expect she's got a reason.'

The fish-silver eyes fixed me unpleasantly. Behind me Harry gave a faint warning cough.

‘It could be anything,’ I ploughed on in an effort to retrieve my social gaffe. ‘I mean, a sudden departure doesn’t suggest she didn’t like it here. Perhaps she’s got a family emergency at home.’

Allerton leaned forward slightly. ‘She went without a word. I paid her good money. She’s not gone working for anyone else. I asked around the other clubs. But you’re right about her going home. That’s what she’s probably done. One of the other girls told me.’

He jerked a thumb at the CCTV camera behind him. On it the girl in the pink leotard was sitting on the edge of the stage, drinking a bottle of water.

‘That one,’ said Allerton. ‘The stupid talentless bitch,’ he added ungratefully.

The pink leotard girl was a snitch and the runaway had been foolish to confide in her. If you’re going to do something Mickey Allerton won’t like, at least don’t tell anyone else working for him what you intend.

He could see what I was thinking and shook his head. ‘I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, Fran. I could send Harry here after her. But she’d misunderstand. I don’t want to put the frighteners on her. That’s why I want you to go. I want you to ask her why she left. So that we can sort things out and she can come back. She’s not in any trouble as far as I’m concerned. I’m on the level with this. All I want is for her to come back. I told you, I was paying

her good money, but I'll increase it. You're about her age. You'd know how to talk to her. She knows you don't normally work for me. You don't look frightening.'

'I don't like it!' I burst out. 'It's up to her what she does. It's supposed to be a free country!'

'That girl,' said Allerton, 'could go far. I had plans for her.'

I was afraid of that.

Again, prompted by the misgivings in my expression, he leaned forward. 'No, not those kind of plans! I'm opening a new club on the Costa del Sol. I was intending to send her out there and put her in charge of the acts. Make her a sort of artistic director, if you like. She wouldn't have to get out there on the stage if she didn't want to. Of course, it'd suit me if she did. I told you, she's talented. But really I want her to scout for other girls. Make sure that the club puts on a really classy show. I'm going upmarket. She's the right sort of girl for that, nice spoken, like you. Probably went to a proper school for young ladies, like you.'

I'd never told Mickey about my schooldays but clearly someone had. I ran quickly through a list of my close acquaintances in my head, wondering which one had passed out private information on me. But it could be anyone, really. In the past, when I'd shared squats with people, we'd often sat round of an evening chatting about this and that. Perhaps it hadn't been so hard for Mickey to run a background check on me, after all. In future I'd keep

my mouth shut about my past. Like the runaway pole dancer, I was finding that a little innocent detail could turn out a weapon in the wrong hands.

My dad and my grandma Varady scraped together the money to send me to a private school. I think they were compensating for the fact that my mother had left us. I was a messed-up kid and I messed up being at the school. Eventually I was expelled. When I remember the struggle Dad and Grandma had to keep me there I'm not proud of this. Grandma did home sewing, making wedding dresses and so on. She sat up late into the night at her old treadle machine; her swollen feet pushing the plate monotonously back and forth with a faint squeak at every move, working away for me to have a better future. I think I must have been a particularly odious brat. They loved me and I took their love and tossed it aside like it was nothing. If life has sometimes treated me harshly since then, I look on it as a sort of penance. (That's what comes of being educated at primary school level by nuns.) But one thing I did learn from them, there's right and there's wrong. If you believe that, sooner or later you have to make a stand.

I swallowed. 'Mr Allerton, believe me, I'd like to oblige you. But I honestly don't think I could persuade this girl to come back. Why should she listen to me? Suppose I found her and she refused? What would you say when I got back? You'd blame me.'

Allerton was shaking his head. 'No, no, Fran. You've got it wrong. All I want you to do is go and find Lisa and

explain to her about the job I've got lined up for her in Spain, right? Tell her I'm not angry. I'm disappointed that she didn't confide in me and tell me what was wrong. I really don't know why she took off like that and I'd like to. It's good business to have the staff happy. If she had a problem, we could probably have fixed it. I just want her to come back to London, sit down here and talk it through with me – just like you and me are doing now. Friendly.'

'Do you know where her home is?' I asked, hoping it might be some out-of-the-way place I couldn't possibly be expected to find.

'Sure. Oxford. I've got the address.' His tone was brisk. He thought he'd talked me round.

Not yet, he hadn't. 'I can't just go to Oxford for an unknown length of time,' I said. 'What about my dog?'

Now Allerton smiled. It was a wide slow smile which showed such excellent teeth he must have had them fixed. I was reminded of a shark. I realised too late that I'd handed some sort of advantage to him. I shouldn't have mentioned Bonnie.

'No problem,' he said easily. 'Harry will look after her. Harry's good with dogs, aren't you, Harry?' He looked past me to his sidekick, invisible behind my back.

'Yeah,' said Harry. 'We always have a dog at home.'

'What, a pit bull terrier?' I snapped. My grip on Bonnie tightened and she squeaked protestingly.

'No,' said Harry regretfully. 'My missus don't like them. We got a couple of them hairy little buggers, Yorkies.'

The thought of Harry walking a pair of animated hairbrushes silenced me for a moment. But while I floundered, seeking some argument against Mickey's proposal, Allerton moved on.

'See?' he said smoothly. 'All laid on. Of course, if you're not satisfied that Harry could look after the little tyke, I could ask Ivo. She bit him, you said?' The shark's teeth flashed at me again.

I felt sick. The message was clear. I went to Oxford and carried Allerton's message to Lisa, or Bonnie was handed over to Ivo, the muscular psychopath with the grudge. I didn't like to think what he'd do to her.

'All right,' I said. 'But promise me, Ivo doesn't get near her. Promise! I want your word.'

Allerton's word probably wasn't worth much but I could ask.

'Don't you worry,' he soothed me. 'We understand one another. Now then, here's her address.' He fished a piece of paper from that desk drawer and then a fat envelope. 'And here's some cash for expenses. We'll settle your fee when you get back. I'm a generous man. You'll be all right.'

'And if I don't bring her back with me? How will you know I've even seen her?'

He frowned. 'Get her to give me a call. I'd call her but she'd hang up on me. She's gotta call me.'

I understood his reasoning. Lisa had had the courage to walk out and probably had the courage to put the phone

down at the sound of his voice. Reckless courage. Allerton couldn't afford to let people show him that kind of disrespect. Any sign of weakness in a man in his position gets known. He'd be obliged to do something about it. Just now he seemed anxious to avoid the rough stuff and had called me in. But all that could change. It was up to me.

'No e-mails or text messages! I want to hear her voice. Understood?' The silvery eyes glittered at me.

'I wouldn't try that kind of trick!' I said, irritated.

'No, love, of course you wouldn't. Because I'd find out, wouldn't I? I'll give you my mobile number so she can find me, any time. So can you. Keep me up to date. Give me a progress report. Of course, I'd prefer it if she comes back with you. But I'll settle for a personal call from her.' The fish-silver eyes were cold. 'But you don't get paid any more than is in this envelope.' He tapped it. 'Not unless she gets in contact, right? I pay for results. I don't pay for failure. If you were to persuade her to come back to London with you, well, then you'd be in line for a nice little bonus. Remember that.'

'All I want,' I said, 'is my dog.'

'Better be quick and get it done, then, hadn't you? They pine, dogs, as I've heard. Right, Harry?'

'Yes, boss,' said Harry expressionlessly.

Allerton held out another slip of paper. 'It's all arranged. This is the address of a bed-and-breakfast place where you can stay. The woman who runs it used to work for me. She's expecting you.'

So even when I got to Oxford I wouldn't be out of Mickey's orbit. There would be someone there, checking on me, making sure I was doing what I'd been sent there for.

I've read of people gnashing their teeth in rage and it's what I felt I wanted to do. It wouldn't have helped and I didn't. At least I could prevent Mickey seeing just how upset I was. Not that he didn't know it, but a refusal to let him see it was the only way I had just at that moment of depriving him of complete satisfaction.

Harry moved forward and held out his hand. I bent to stroke Bonnie's head and then I handed the lead to him, meeting his gaze.

'I like dawgs,' he said again. I knew he was trying to reassure me.

'Now scram!' ordered Allerton. 'I'm a busy man.'

Harry escorted me out. Ivo was still in the foyer. He was in deep discussion with the girl who'd been up there on the stage. She wasn't in her leotard now, but skintight pants and sleeveless shell-pink satin top. Pink was obviously her colour.

I write 'discussion' but she was doing the talking, haranguing him in that language I didn't recognise. However, the fluency the two shared suggested the girl and Ivo were compatriots. In a foreign country, that can count for quite a bit. Even if you've nothing else in common, exiles stand together.

When I was young, various elderly Hungarian visitors

would appear at the house and be given coffee and chocolate cake by Grandma. They weren't friends in any deep sense. They were part of the community, the Hungarian Diaspora which had followed the revolution of 1956. They'd known my grandfather, by then deceased. They saw it as a social obligation to call on his widow. I've flunked any opportunity I've ever had to learn another language. At home we spoke English. Occasionally I'd hear Grandma and Dad out in the kitchen exchanging a few words of Hungarian. I suspect now they were discussing something they didn't want me to know about, like where my mother had gone and why. I could have asked either of them to teach me but I never did. At school they tried to teach me French; but all I remember is someone called Pierre going somewhere on his bicycle. I was busy at the back of the room fooling around, as usual.

Under the onslaught of words from the girl Ivo stood looking almost sheepish. Big tough guy that he was, he put me in mind of a small boy caught being naughty. I wondered briefly what was going on.

The girl was aware of my curious stare; she was a sharp one, I reckoned. She turned a look on me which was definitely hostile. I'm used to dealing with unfriendly scowls and returned hers with interest. At this, real anger flashed in her eyes. I had intended to avoid eye contact with Ivo, mindful of Harry's warning. But he gave me a quick sullen glance which made the hair on the nape of my

neck tingle. They both fell silent and unsuccessfully attempted to look uninterested. I knew immediately that the two of them had been talking about me. But what was I to them?

I hadn't time to puzzle it out. Bonnie, by Harry's feet, had recognised Ivo and growled softly. Harry gave a warning tug on her collar.

'You'll manage it all right,' he said to me. It was less an expression of comfort than an instruction. 'Be a doddle,' he added.

The moment of parting had come. I patted Bonnie's warm little body which was quivering with anxiety and walked out of the club, leaving her behind. She didn't understand and yelped protestingly. I turned to call back to her reassuringly and saw her straining at the leash, almost choking in an effort to follow me. Tears of rage and frustration started to my eyes as I hurried round the corner. I've never cried over bad luck. But this filled me with such anger I felt I would burst and the tears popped out propelled by the power of fury. I was angry with Mickey, who'd done this to me. I was angry because of the look in Bonnie's eyes. It wasn't my fault this was happening but she couldn't know that. As far as she was concerned, I'd walked away from her. Bonnie would never have forsaken me but I'd left her, to make things worse in the hands of people I didn't trust not to harm her. If I got her back again, she'd forgive me, but I'd find it less easy to forgive myself. As for Allerton, I'd never, ever forgive him. Not

that my grudge mattered a jot to him. He probably had more serious enemies than me.

I cursed the fact I'd been walking Bonnie when Harry found me. But although that had made things easier for Allerton, it hadn't materially affected the outcome. If I'd been alone, Harry would still have taken me to Mickey's office. While I was there, someone would have gone to my flat (visitors of that kind always know how to let themselves in), collected Bonnie and brought her to the Silver Circle. And now, to get her back, I had to carry out Mickey's wretched errand. I dashed away the tears and scowled murderously at innocent passers-by who naturally assumed I was another case of Care in the Community and gave me a wide berth. I felt physically sick. I felt just as I'd done that day long ago when I'd been forced to the top of the slide and shoved on my way by hands more powerful than mine. I was hurtling down, unable to control events, towards an unknown and unpleasant destination and there was no Grandma Varady any more to make it better.