

## Chapter 1: May

May was sure the girl on her doorstep was a whore. There was something in her manner, something all too familiar. A defiant desperation.

The girl shook May's hand daintily and introduced herself as 'Laima'. She sounded foreign, Eastern European perhaps, but not Russian. Softer. Her nails were long, red and false, the cuticle of her left thumb bloody and bitten as if she gnawed that in lieu of access to her nails. She was certainly attractive enough for the part: pretty, slim, blonde, fair skin and pale blue eyes. *Good cheekbones*, thought May, *like me*.

Cheekbones will always last you, unlike tits, face and hair. May looked at herself through Laima's eyes: a skinny old crone, shrivelled skin and bone, grey scalp shining through scraps of white hair. A mangy alley cat. May wondered why the girl had answered her advertisement for a lodger. You'd have to be desperate to even consider living in an out of the way place like Upper Bleating.

Upper Bleating, no more than twenty miles away from Brighton, but a world away from that sexy city of dirty weekends. An obscure, demure, unknown little town tucked into the green folds of the rolling South Downs. Most people drove by without a second look- why would they linger? Unlike Wilmington, these chalk hills contained no mysteriously carved 'Long Man'. There was no castle or ancient ruins and, compared to Alfriston's impressive 'Cathedral of the Downs', the

town's church was damply insignificant. The fifteen thousand residents were not especially friendly; they kept themselves to themselves, hidden inside the plague of net-curtained bungalows that encircled the original village like a pox. In short, Upper Bleating was not the sort of place where anything remarkable should happen, but here, on May's doorstep, was a whore.

It was on the tip of May's tongue to tell the girl that the room had already been taken. But then she thought of the other applicants: the dull accountant, the chatterbox civil servant, the two junkies, the stinker, the gay man who'd seemed perfect until he revealed that he had two small children. All of them unbearable lodgers, but May had to choose someone soon. Without a lodger, her daughter would gang up with social services and force her into some piss-reeking old folks' home. May, who had once held the balls of a maharaja in her jewelled hands and whipped welts into the soft buttocks of a high court judge, would be reduced to watching *Countdown* with all the other old bags. It was not to be borne, so she invited the whore in for tea.

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May was not always eighty-seven. This is obvious, but people do tend to forget that fact. They think she was born like this, a sexless, frail bit of a thing, best ignored. They see her tottering along down the High Street, clinging to her shopper, tits at her knees, and they think, *Old lady. Old old lady.* Some of the younger ones even say it, 'Here, look at that old bag, she must be like... a thousand years old...'

When May hears this she thinks, *wankers*. May's not deaf you know, a bit blind now I grant you, but her hearing's as good as ever it was. More's the pity. When May and Lou were sent here in 1940 the town was almost rural, bird song and distant tractors was all you could hear from the high street. Boring, but better than the Blitz. May still has nightmares about those air-raid sirens, even now.

*Upper Bleating*, what a laugh the girls had over that name. The place didn't know what hit it when the two Fanshaw girls arrived, filthy faces and even filthier mouths. Their hosts, Mr and Mrs Parker, were certainly disappointed when they met their allocated evacuees. They'd been hoping for a strong, useful boy to help out in their butcher's shop while their own lad was away, sailing the treacherous seas, but they got two weedy girls who didn't have half the stuff they were supposed to. May remembers her Ma's face, fists clenched as the WVS women read out the Evacuee Requirements List: pyjamas, warm coats, slippers, towels, flannels, combs, handkerchiefs, toothbrushes.... No idea some people. Poor Ma.

Upper Bleating was another planet. May was barely ten and little Lou not even seven. Never been out of London, never even seen a cow before, let alone been chased by one. Still they learned quick- you must never run from a cow; always face her down. Show her you mean business. Good advice for life that.

Not many cows left now- at least, not the four legged kind. In the seventies they built a big estate on the Lewis's old farm and it seems to spread a little further out every year. Now the song of the high street is pneumatic drills, car alarms and mobile

phones. May likes to grumble about everyone being permanently glued to their phone when they obviously have nothing worth saying.

Truth is, May would've loved one of those phones when she was younger. When her friends were still alive and she had someone interesting to call. They're all dead now, every one of them. Or lost, which comes to the same thing in the end. *Only the dull live long*. A mobile phone would've been so useful for work too; would've saved her all kinds of bother.

They play pop music and *infomercials* in the chemist now. It's infuriating. The racket chases away any thought of what she went in there for. Sometimes she gets the urge to go up to the counter and, instead of the liniment or support bandage she's actually after, ask those sarcastic teenage assistants for a gross of johnnies and an economy-sized tub of lube. That'd wipe the patronising smiles off their spotty young faces. As they gibbered at her, synapses fusing in horror, she'd tell them airily that she had her own porn channel on the Internet. Offer to give them the details and show them a video. She'd say it was called Granny Porn, Vintage Oral or Wrinkle Wank... The thought of this cheers May up until she thinks of Clive. Clive would've loved the Internet, born before his time that one. May imagines the harm he could have done; he was bad enough on the streets of Soho.

Clive. If the old days taught May anything it's this: for every perversion there is a pervert out there. You've just got to find him, preferably before he finds you.