

Chapter 1: May

Burglars! Hiding behind the bedroom door, poker in hand, May listened and narrowed her eyes. Good sense suggested that she should keep quiet and leave these louts- two at a guess by the voices- to poke around. From the sound of it they'd moved from the hallway and were now rummaging in the lounge, opening drawers, scraping chairs on the parquet. Mrs Boscombe would have something to say about that. May closed her eyes for a moment, imagining what they were doing down there, what they were taking. They were welcome to help themselves to any of David's old tat- the paintings, the heavy silver, the fiddly ceramics- but they weren't having it away with her jewellery. Oh no. She tightened her grip on the poker.

Stupid, really, to care- she never wore any of it. Not now. No sentimental value either- it was all from David. Clive took the previous collection. Now that was a glory box, every diamond brooch and gold bracelet a testimony to a hard night's graft. David's gifts were more predictable, but no less valuable: the three carat engagement ring, platinum wedding band, diamond pendant for Emma's birth, bracelet for Adam's, eternity ring for their tenth anniversary, brooches and bangles for various birthdays. Each piece gratefully received and carefully hidden away. Twice shy.

The sound of feet on the stairs opened her eyes. She catapulted back into the present with a pounding lurch of her heart. Mouth dry, she swallowed and took a deep breath. When the bedroom door swung open she stepped forward with a banshee scream of rage.

Later, tightly bound by starched sheets in the narrow hospital bed, a drip itching her arm, it was clear that the burglars would never have found the jewellery box in its hiding place under the floorboards. But still. You had to draw the line somewhere. She didn't like strange men in her bedroom. Not any more. At least she'd got the first one a cracking blow to the shins. Tall and skinny he dropped like a stone, but the second one was stronger and smarter. He dodged the poker and pushed her hard. She lost her balance, slipped and fell. She knew it was going to be a bad fall; you get a sense for these things as you get older. As the louts, children really, ran from the room

swearing, she heard her hip crack against the corner of the fireplace. It sounded like an old branch falling from an oak tree.

The pain was almost sensual, wave upon wave of burning fire. Without that she could've happily faded away into the eternal night, but she was still clinging onto life when Mrs Boscombe found her two days later. May heard her grumbling about the mess downstairs before she started bouncing the Hoover up the stairs, but her mouth was so dry she couldn't even call out. She listened to the vacuuming of the spare rooms and the hall before the Boudiccan chariot of dust was driven into the bedroom. May'd never been so glad to see those chunky veined legs. Mrs Boscombe was efficient as ever: checked May's pulse, placed a pillow under her head, and administered sips of tepid water while they waited for the ambulance. May was grateful, but the woman's goodbye kiss overstepped the mark- they weren't even on first name terms.

Emma was there like a shot. She took time off work, came down from London and installed herself into her old bedroom, visiting the hospital twice a day. May knew her game. All those whispered conversations with the nurses and the doctors. After a week Emma proclaimed her considered opinion. She came into the room like a C.E.O. followed by one of the bossiest nurses, a doctor who looked barely old enough to shave and a fat, messy woman who had *social-worker* written all over her. They stood around the bed, observing, as Emma sat her expensively upholstered buttocks down onto the cheap visitor's chair. It squeaked in alarm, voicing May's own opinion. Emma cleared her throat and began.

'So, Mum, I've been consulting with Nurse Barry, Doctor Yeo and Miss Percival-' May glanced across the room to see all three nodding at their names like performing dogs. She glared at them but not one would catch her eye. Emma ploughed on, '- and we all think that you're getting a little too old to be living on your own. Yes? It's time, past time that you went somewhere where you could be looked after properly. I've got some nice brochures for you-' she plonked a huge pile of glossy pamphlets onto May's quilt-covered knees. The old woman twitched and watched them slither onto the floor, but Emma picked them up again with a motherly tut and stacked them neatly on the bedside table, 'Rattling around in that big house all by yourself, it's asking for trouble at your age, isn't it?'

May gave the others a pained, innocent look. A look that expressed not only her infinity capability, but also the serpent-pain of bearing a greedy, thankless child. Her voice was soft, with just the right amount of fear.

‘Of course darling, I shall consider all my options most carefully. I’ve told you before that you will get the house very soon, so please don’t rush me into something that might not be best for me. I know you want to sell the house, but I do try to give you as much money as I can...’

May was careful not to look directly at her daughter, in case the furious look on that round, pouchy face made her laugh. Emma never asked for money. Even when she was a student in London, struggling to pay the rent, she’d managed to get by without asking for help. Her banker father had always admired this trait, but May thought her a stubborn fool. Noting the ugly red blotchiness blooming on Emma’s neck, May bit her lip to restrain her smile. *So transparent, so like David.* Pointedly ignoring all the women in the room, May turned to speak to the male doctor, careful to emphasise the cut-glass vowels she owed to Clive.

‘I wonder, Doctor Yeo, if I might have a *private* word?’

Storytelling is a skill you never lose. May easily convinced Doctor Yeo that Emma was so deeply in debt, *a gambling habit you know, terribly sad*, that she was one step away from euthanising her mother. Emma was forbidden to visit again. After a week’s sulk she wrote May a tight little note stating that all she ever tried to do was to love her and “form some kind of a normal mother-daughter bond”. *Fat chance*, thought May, and tore the note into strips.

It was a victory, but a minor one. Emma’s meddling had ignited the blazing juggernaut of bureaucracy. Once May was released from hospital Miss Percival visited each day, insisting that a care home was the best way forward in May’s ‘individually-tailored care-plan’. May glowered at the insistent chins and hid her clenched fists in her cardigan pockets as the woman threatened all manner of assessments, regulations, tests.

It was an inescapable litany of misery until the fifth visit, when Miss Percival inadvertently offered a tiny spark of hope. She’d brought a vast stack of forms and was reiterating the terms of May’s care-plan when May heard something that made

her sit up. She asked Miss Percival to repeat her last point. Miss Percival reached for the clipboard.

‘Do we need to test your hearing dear? I’ll have to make a note of that. So, as I said, as you are living alone we must assess whether or not you are able to cope-’

‘But what if I wasn’t living alone?’

‘Well, if you could prove you no longer lived alone, obviously that would affect the outcome of the assessment, but that’s beside the point, isn’t it dear? There is no one living with you. Your daughter is back in London I believe?’

May nodded. The pen scribbled.

‘And your son lives in Australia?’ May nodded again, the pen danced over the clipboard. ‘Well then.’ Miss Percival stood up, smoothing the dusky pink velour of her trousers. ‘I think that’s all I need to know for now.’

She scribbled a final comment on the clipboard, frowned and bustled off. May relaxed back onto the sofa and smiled. Forget family- all she had to do was get a lodger. After a while the authorities would forget all about her, just as they had when she was a child. The ‘individually-tailored-care-plan’ could get stuffed, but it would be nice to have someone around to notice if she collapsed in a heap or fell down the stairs. So long as that person wasn’t Emma. She turned over one of Miss Percival’s forms and used it to compose an advertisement. It didn’t take long. She made tea, read it aloud and reached for the phone.

TO LET:

Bright dble room in

lge house. V.reasonable

rate for right person.

Smelly/tedious/talkative

types need NOT apply.

The girl at the Upper Bleating Advertiser laughed, but when Miss Percival visited the next day she quibbled at both the concept and the wording. May stood firm: she did not want residential care. She wanted a lodger and that lodger had to be bearable. Miss Percival sniffed and made several firm notes on the clipboard.

An accountant called Brian was the first to call. It was impossible to discern hygiene over the phone, but he was clearly both talkative and tedious. May told him the room was taken and hung up. Next was Janet, an ex-civil servant, recently arrived from London, retired and widowed. With evil subterfuge she sounded quite reasonable on the phone, so May suggested they meet that morning. May made coffee and Janet was on time. A good start. She smelled acceptable too, if rather floral, but after five minutes May was convinced Janet had talked her husband into an early grave. It was half an hour before she managed to get a word in edgeways. She told Janet she wasn't suitable and asked her to leave. This was not well received. It is not easy for an eighty-seven year old to forcibly eject someone from her parlour, even one armed with a walking stick, but May was determined. Rude words were utilised. In reply Janet said May was *a vicious, mean old cow* and slammed the front door so hard the glass rattled. The whole thing was exhausting, but on the plus side it was unlikely Janet would ever speak to her again.

A week passed without any more replies and, like the Grim Reaper, Miss Percival arrived armed with a Clipboard and Suggestions. May made tea and listened stoically as Meals on Wheels, Pensioner Pilates and daily visits to a community centre that featured Granny Bingo were highly recommended and reinforced with leaflets. The woman crunched her way noisily through seven Hobnobs before announcing that unless May found someone soon, she would reinstate her recommendation for Residential Care. She placed a glossy brochure on the table: *Apple Tree Lodge, a Place to Rest*. It gleamed malevolently and May rubbed her neck, remembering the itchy string of the evacuee name tag. Just like those posh WVS busybodies, Miss Percival talked a big game: the advantages of communal life, nursing staff on call, regulated meals. *The girls will be safe in the country Mrs Fanshaw! Fresh air, plenty of food. Don't be selfish now dear. You know we're right.*

No, thought May, *not again*. As soon as Miss Percival's wide behind had made its way up the stairs to visit what she'd coyly referred to as *the little girls' room*, May picked up the phone. Three minutes later she'd successfully placed an advertisement in the Sussex-wide *Argus* newspaper. She kept the message simple this time: *Large bright room to let in Upper Bleating, reasonable rates*. That should cast the net a little wider.

Reinforcing May's belief that society would prefer it if she was swept away into a tidy little corner, Miss Percival was not at all happy when she came back downstairs and found out what May had done. Her chins wobbled in agitation as she spoke.

'But Mrs Davenport, is that *wise*? It's not like advertising in our Upper Bleating Advertiser you know. You can get the Argus all over, even in Brighton! You'll get all sorts answering if you start advertising down in *Brighton!*'

She left, huffing and puffing in agitation, but her warning had quite the opposite effect to the one she'd intended. May was thrilled by the prospect of *all sorts*- anything rather than more boring Brians and chatty Janets. But, she thought wryly, even they would be better than spending the rest of her days playing bingo at *Apple Tree Lodge*. The very idea of it made her want to scream. Whatever *all sorts* the Argus advert brought to her door, this time she would be less picky. She *would* find someone. She had no choice.

The advertisement was published in the morning edition. By lunchtime May had received three phone calls and every one of the voices sounded interesting. Her spirits rose. Surely this time she would find someone bearable? Despite the unpleasantness with Janet, May wanted to interview each applicant in person, but when she mentioned this to Miss Percival she insisted May conduct her interviews somewhere public, like a café in town.

'You absolutely cannot invite strangers into your home, Mrs Davenport, think of the danger!'

Danger for whom? thought May, and smiled, remembering Janet's face after she'd told her she was *less appealing than a tuppenny whore*.

May chose a small café on the high street, close to the Rotary Bus's drop-off point. The first applicant was early, and she stood out in the morning mumble of tea and scones like a piranha in a village pond. May had nothing against gay women of any denomination, far from it- she often hoped Emma might turn out to be a lesbian as she needed *something* of interest about her- but Melita's combat trousers and aggressively short hair suggested she was of the militant variety. May was well aware that she wasn't even remotely correct, politically or otherwise. She let Melita down politely, but the news was clearly received with more relief than disappointment.

Later, when Melita had climbed back onto her impressive motorbike and roared off back to Kemptown, May reflected that an eighty-seven year old with a filthy vocabulary and dubious social skills might not be a keenly sought after housemate for interesting younger people. It was a worry.

The next interviewees came half an hour later, by which time May had argued twice with the waitress and spilt tea on her skirt. They were a couple, mid-twenties. May thought they might be students, they seemed quite self-sufficient and jolly, but a few minutes conversation and the girl's child-like fascination with the sugar dispenser told May that they were junkies of some kind. She thought it was probably heroin, but she was not *au fait* with all the latest chemicals. May had lived with several junkies over the years and while it was sometimes amusing, more often than not it was tedious. Plus, she really was very fond of her jewellery collection. The young couple were politely refused. They took it well, she thought, or perhaps had no real idea of what was going on. Either way they wafted out without any fuss leaving May to consider the fact that there was only one applicant left to see. She looked at her handwritten list, *Marcus Wright*, it said, *sounds queenie*. May ordered more tea and waited, folding and refolding her paper napkin.

Marcus was indeed a gay man and May liked him immediately. Something in the way he laughed reminded her of Eric. Darling Eric, what a glorious human being he'd been, always knew just what to say when you were down. Hard worker too, none of the girls could touch him for earning potential. If this Marcus was anything like Eric they'd get along famously. She ordered more tea and splashed out on some scones.

It went well. Marcus was charming, funny and radiated a pleasingly fresh lemon scent. He was gentlemanly about the scones too, offering her the lion's share of the jam. She was all set to say *yes* when he dropped the bombshell- he had children. There was always something. He and his ex-partner had adopted and now they were separated the two boys stayed with Marcus every other weekend. He switched on his phone and showed May a picture. *Don't they always*, she thought. He launched into detail.

'This little monkey is Randall- doesn't he look adorable with that hammer?' May nodded, crumbling her scone into tiny fragments. Marcus leaned in closer,

swiping through an endless stream of photographs. ‘Here’s Octavius, riding next door’s Labrador. They’ve moved now. And here we all are at the petting zoo! Wait, I’ve got the cutest video of Randall chasing chickens-’ May gripped her teacup thinking, *Randall and Octavius? Vandal and Snivelus more like*. She forced a warm smile.

‘They look delightful Marcus! But I do have a few more people I’ve promised to see. Could I let you know tomorrow?’

He nodded, clearly a little disappointed. She, knowing full well there was no one else left to see, went home with a stomach full of tea and knots.

May slept badly that night. She dreamt of a hellish, echoing Bingo hall, full of elderly women chewing cuds of biscuit, fat pens grasped in clawed hands. On the stage, next to a vast box of flying ping-pong balls stood Miss Percival, reaching sausage fingers into the melee. Every ball she extracted was announced as- ‘Number eight-eight! Two fat ladies!’- but the old women moored in excitement each time, scribbling frantically on their cards.

She woke the next morning in a cold sweat. She had to find a lodger, now, so did it really matter who it was? *Old bag like me, I should be grateful I’ve had any applicants at all*. She stared miserably at the ceiling thinking, *who in their right mind would want to live with me?* Perhaps chatty Janet had been right, she was just a *vicious, mean old cow*. How had it come to this? May punched her pillow into submission, turned on the light and made up her mind. She would accept the lovely Marcus and learn to tolerate the fortnightly invasion of his two brats. It would be fine. *Fine*. She was reaching for the phone, ready to dial his number and tell him the room was his, when it rang. Having checked the caller display ID to make sure it wasn’t Emma, she answered.

It was a young woman. Her voice was foreign- Russian? It was hard to tell- she spoke so faintly and nervously as she asked *permission to see accommodations*. Something in her tone made May cautious, so she asked the caller where she was currently living and why she wanted to move. ‘Bright-on’ the girl said, exotically, explaining that this was also where she worked, but rents were very high and she wanted something cheaper. Made sense, thought May, Brighton was ridiculously expensive these days, but she wondered if the girl realised quite how far Upper

Bleating was. When May replied she found herself speaking gently, clearly and kindly, as you would to a lost child.

‘You do know where I am, don’t you love? I hope you’ve got a car. It’s no picnic getting to Brighton from Upper Bleating. No trains and not many busses come around any more. Taxis would be expensive- we’re at least an hour’s drive from Brighton-’

The girl butted in.

‘Is ok, I have... friend with car. He say he pick us, me up for work. I can see room please?’

It sounded fishy. The tone of desperation- *friend, us, me, Brighton-* and that accent. May opened her mouth to say, no, she didn’t think it would be suitable, but instead the words, ‘Of course love, come by this teatime, around three!’ fell out.

May didn’t even suggest the café this time, just gave the girl her home address and said she’d see her later. When she hung up the silence was deafening. What the hell had she done? She heard a voice, laughing. Clive. *Well my dear,* he said, *getting back in the game then are we?* May shook her head free of him, dressed, opened the window in the guest room to freshen it and headed into town to get some cake for her visitor.

The small supermarket was busy, noisy and very bright. May found she was quite unable to decide what kind of cake would be suitable. She didn’t eat much cake these days. Before she’d retired she’d lived on fruit cake made with plenty of nuts and brandy, but who knew where you could find something like that now. Plus the girl had sounded foreign, did she even eat cake? In the end May settled for a variety pack of fancy biscuits. Everyone liked biscuits. She bought a big box just in case. And did one serve coffee, tea or wine in the afternoon? Champagne perhaps? It had been so long. May closed her eyes for a moment, remembering soft bubbles on her lip, the chink of crystal. *Why not?* She placed a bottle of Bollinger next to the variety pack of biscuits in her basket and headed for the check-out.

By half past two May was beside herself with impatience. The table was dressed with a clean linen cloth, she’d spread out a selection of biscuits on one of David’s fancy Spode plates, dusted off two Waterford flutes and set the champagne in a bucket full of ice. When the doorbell rang, a little before three, she leapt to her feet

in a way more suggestive of a cat than an arthritic octogenarian. She took a deep breath before opening the door, readying herself for disappointment, but as soon as she saw her visitor she relaxed.

Oh yes, she thought, oh yes.