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UNTIL
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'READS
LIKE
LIGHTNING'
OBSERVER

Until It's Over
by
Nicci French

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Chapter One

I had cycled around London for week after week, month after month, and I knew that one day I would have an accident. The only question was, which kind? One of the other messengers had been heading along Regent Street at speed when a taxi had swung out to make a U-turn without looking. Or, at least, without looking for a bike, because people don't look for bikes. Don had hit the side of the taxi full on and woken up in hospital unable to recall his own name.

There's a pub, the Horse and Jockey, where a whole bunch of us despatch riders meet up on Friday evenings and drink and gossip and share stories and laugh about tumbles. But every few months or so there'd be worse news. The most recent was about the man who was cycling down near the Elephant and Castle. He was alongside a lorry that turned left without indicating and cut the corner. That's when the gap between the lorry and the kerb shrinks from about three feet to about three inches. All you can do is get off the road. But in that case there was an iron railing in the way. The next time I cycled past I saw that people had taped bunches of flowers to it.

When these accidents happen, sometimes it's the cyclist's fault and sometimes it isn't. I've heard stories of bus drivers deliberately ramming bikes. I've seen plenty of cyclists who think that traffic lights don't apply to them. But the person on the bike always comes off second best. Which is why you should wear a helmet and try to stay away from lorries

and always assume that the driver is a blind, stupid psychopath.

Even so, I knew that one day I would have an accident. There were so many different kinds, and I thought the most likely was the one that was hardest to avoid or plan against. So it proved. But I never thought it would take place within thirty yards of my own house. As I turned into Maitland Road, I was about to swing my leg over the cross-bar. I was forty-five seconds from a hot shower and in my mind I was already off the bike and indoors, after six hours in the saddle, when a car door opened into the road in front of me, like the wing of a metal bird, and I hit it.

There was no time for me to respond in any way, to swerve or to shield myself. And yet the events seemed to occur in slow motion. As my bike slammed against the door I was able to see that I was hitting it from the wrong direction: instead of pushing the door shut, I was pushing it further open. I felt it screech and bend but then stop as the momentum transferred itself from the door back to the bike and especially to the most mobile part of the bike, which was me. I remembered that my feet were in the stirrups and if they remained fastened, I would get tangled in the bike and might break both my legs. But then, as if in answer, my feet detached themselves, like two peas popped from a pod, and I flew over the door, leaving my bike behind.

It all happened so quickly that I couldn't protect myself as I fell or avoid any obstacle. At the same time it happened so slowly that I was able to think about it as it was taking place. I had many thoughts, but it wasn't clear whether they were happening one after another or all at the same time. I thought: I'm having an accident. This is what it's like to have an accident. I thought: I'm going to be hurt, probably quite badly. I thought: I'm going to have to make arrangements. It looks

like I won't be at work tomorrow. I'll have to phone Campbell and let him know. Or someone will. And then I thought: How stupid. We're meeting for dinner tonight, one of those rare occasions when we all sit round the table together, and it seems like I won't be there. And I even had time to think: What will I look like, lying flung out on the road?

At which point I hit the ground. I had flipped over like an incompetent acrobat and landed on my back, hard, hitting the wind out of me, so that I made an 'oof' sound. I rolled and felt bits of me bang and scrape along the road surface. When I heard my body hit the Tarmac, there was no pain at first. It was like a bang and a bright flash. But I knew that the pain was on its way and suddenly there it was, at the centre of everything, beating against me in wave after wave, light pulsing in my eyes in reds and purples and bright yellows, each pulse a different sort of hurt. I made an attempt to move. I was in the road. The road was a dangerous place. A lorry might run over me. It didn't matter. I was incapable of movement. All I could do was swear, over and over again: 'Fuck. Shit. Fuck. Shit.'

Gradually the pain started to locate itself. It was like rain that had fallen and was now settling into puddles and rivulets. I felt dizzy but my helmet had saved my head. My upper back was numb where I had landed on it. What really hurt for the moment were lots of other places – my elbows, the side of one knee. One of my hands had been bent back and was throbbing. With the other I touched my thigh and felt sticky wetness and bits of gravel. A tiny part of my brain still had time to think: How stupid. If this had not happened, I would be in the house and everything would be normal. Now I'm here and I'm going to have to deal with it, and if only I didn't.

I lay back and the Tarmac was warm against me and I

could even smell it, oily and sharp. The sun was low and yolky in the fading blue.

A shadow fell across me, a shape blocking the sky. 'Are you all right?' it said.

'No,' I said. 'Fuck.'

'I'm so sorry,' it said. 'I opened the door. I didn't see you. I should have looked. I'm so, so sorry. Are you hurt? Shall I call an ambulance?'

Another wave of pain hit me. 'Leave me alone,' I said.

'I'm so, so sorry.'

I took a deep breath and the pain receded a little and the person came into focus. I saw the vaguely familiar face of a middle-aged woman and I saw her silver car and I saw the open door, which had been bent outwards by the impact. I took another deep breath and made the effort to say something that wasn't just whimpering or swearing. 'You should look.'

'I'm so sorry.'

I was going to tell her again to go away but suddenly felt nauseous and had to devote my energy to stopping myself vomiting in the street. I had to get home. It was only a few yards away. I felt like an animal that needed to crawl into its hole, preferably to die. With a groan, I rolled over and began to push myself up. It hurt terribly but through the fog I noticed that my limbs were functioning. Nothing was obviously shattered; no tendons had been torn.

'Astrid!'

I heard a familiar voice and, indeed, a familiar name. My own. Astrid. That was another good sign. I knew who I was. I looked up and saw a familiar face gazing down at me with concern. Then another swam into focus behind the first: two were staring at me with the same expression.

'What the hell happened?' one said.

Stupidly and inexplicably, I felt embarrassed.

‘Davy,’ I said. ‘Dario. I just came off the bike. It’s nothing. I just –’

‘I opened my door,’ the woman said. ‘She rode into it. It was all my fault. Should I call an ambulance?’

‘How’s my bike?’ I said.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Davy, bending down, his face creased with concern. ‘How are you doing?’

I sat up in the road. I flexed my jaw, felt my teeth with my tongue. I felt my tongue with my teeth.

‘I think I’m all right,’ I said. ‘A bit shaken.’ I stood up, flinched.

‘Astrid?’

‘What about my bike?’

Dario walked round to the other side of the car door and stood the bike up. ‘It’s a bit bent,’ he said. He tried to push it but the front wheel was jammed in the fork.

‘It looks . . .’ I was trying to say that it looked the way I felt but the sentence seemed too hard to construct. Instead I said I wanted to get into the house. The woman asked again about getting an ambulance but I shook my head and groaned because my neck felt sore.

‘I’ll pay for the bike,’ the woman said.

‘Yes, you will.’

‘I live just here. I’ll come and see you. Is there anything else I can do now?’

I tried to say something snappy, like ‘You’ve done enough already,’ but it was too much of an effort and, anyway, she looked upset and bothered and she wasn’t defending herself like some people would have done. I looked round and she was trying to close the offending door. It took two goes to get it shut. Dario picked up my bike and Davy put an arm carefully round me and led me towards our house. Dario nodded at someone.

'Who's that?' I said.

'Nobody,' he said. 'How's your head?'

I rubbed my temple cautiously. 'Feels a bit funny.'

'We were sitting outside on the front step,' said Dario, 'having a smoke and enjoying the evening, weren't we, Davy?'

'Right,' said Davy. 'And there was a crash and there you were.'

'Bloody stupid,' I said.

'Can you make it? It's just a few more yards.'

'It's OK,' I said, though my legs were quaking and the door seemed to be receding rather than getting closer. Davy shouted for Miles, then Dario joined in even more loudly, and the sound echoed round my skull, making me flinch. Davy led me through the gate and Miles appeared from inside at the top of the steps. When he saw the state of me, his expression was almost comic. 'What the hell happened?' he said.

'Car door,' said Davy.

I was quickly surrounded by my housemates. Davy tried to hang the bike on the hooks on the wall in the hallway. Because it was damaged it didn't fit properly. He took it down again and started to fiddle with it, getting oil on the front of his lovely white shirt. 'That's going to need some work,' he said, with relish.

Pippa came down the stairs and said something rude to Davy about how it was me that needed checking, not the bike. She gave me a very light hug, hardly touching me. Mick looked at me impassively over the banisters from the floor above.

'Bring her through,' said Miles. 'Get her downstairs.'

'I'm fine,' I said.

They insisted and I was half helped, half dragged down

the stairs into the large kitchen-dining area where we ate and talked and spent our time when we weren't in our own rooms. I was placed on the sofa near the double doors and Dario, Pippa and Miles sat staring at me, asking over and over how I was feeling. I was clear-headed now. The shock of the accident had settled into simple, ordinary pain. I knew it was going to hurt like hell the next morning but it would be all right. Dario took a cigarette from a pack in his pocket and lit it.

'We should cut her clothes off,' he said. 'The way they do in A and E departments.'

'In your dreams,' I said.

'Do you need to see a doctor?' Miles asked.

'I need a hot bath.'

'About the hot part,' said Dario. 'There might be a problem with that.'

Chapter Two

There's something satisfying about the aftermath of an accident in which you haven't really been hurt. Especially when you look worse than you feel. I felt all right, but there was a lovely bruise flowering on my calf, a raw graze down my thigh, a gash on my hand, and my left cheek had an ugly scrape. My wrist was swollen. I stung and throbbed and ached, but in a masochistically pleasurable way. I kept pressing my cuts to make sure they were still bleeding. After a shallow, tepid bath, I lay on my bed in old jogging pants and a T-shirt, and assorted members of the household strayed in to ask me if I was all right and to hear yet again how it had happened. I began to feel almost proud of myself.

'It was all in slow motion,' I repeated for the fourth time.

Davy and Dario, the two heroic rescuers, were looking down at me. Dario lit another cigarette, except it wasn't a cigarette, and a familiar illegal smell drifted across my room.

'You must have fallen in a really natural way,' said Davy. 'That's why you didn't get seriously injured. It's pretty impressive. It's the way they train paratroopers. But you did it naturally.'

'It wasn't in my control,' I said.

Dario took a huge drag on his spliff. 'Or like a really, really drunk person,' he said. 'When really drunk people fall over, they don't get injured because their body's so relaxed.'

‘Let’s have a look,’ said Mick, sitting on the edge of the bed.

I might have made a caustic remark if someone else had said that, but with Mick you don’t really make caustic remarks. He’s a man of few words. It’s as if it takes a painful effort for him to speak, and when he does the rest of us generally fall silent. I wanted to ask why he was more qualified than anyone else to assess the damage, but I knew he would simply shrug.

‘Does this hurt?’ he asked, as I flinched. ‘Or this?’ He pressed a hand against my ribs, then lifted each leg, one after the other, feeling along my calves over thick daubs of oil that no amount of scrubbing with warm soapy water had removed. ‘Nothing broken,’ he said, which I knew anyway.

Pippa appeared with a small bottle of blue liquid and a handful of cotton wool.

‘Will it sting?’ I asked.

‘Not a bit,’ she said, and applied a liberal dousing of disinfectant to my cheek.

‘Shit!’ I yelled, squirming away from her. ‘Stop at once!’

‘Be brave.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, because,’ she said mysteriously, slapping another sodden wad of cotton wool on to my thigh.

‘Have a drag on this,’ said Dario, offering me his spliff. ‘It’s good for pain and nausea.’

‘I’ll pass,’ I said.

‘Are you all right for the meal?’ said Pippa.

‘I’m starving.’

‘Owen’s bringing it on the way back from his studio.’

He arrived with an Indian takeaway in brown-paper carrier-bags and put them on the table, then looked up and saw

me at the head, in a large chair, propped up with pillows. He frowned. 'You get into a fight?'

'With a car door.'

'Those are some bruises,' he said.

'I know.'

'They'll be worse tomorrow.'

'You should have seen her,' said Davy, sitting beside me. He looked more shocked than I was. 'She flew through the air.'

'Like a human cannonball,' said Dario, taking the chair on the other side.

'Does it hurt?'

'Not so much.'

'Of course it fucking hurts,' said Pippa. 'Look at her.'

'No. Don't look at me. My nose is twice its usual size. How much do we owe for this lot, Owen?'

'Eight quid each.'

There was muttering as people fumbled in pockets and purses, counted out coins and demanded change. Dario pulled a roll of notes out of his pocket, peeled off a twenty and tossed it to Owen. 'Keep the change,' he said. 'I probably owe you anyway.'

'Did you win the lottery?' said Owen, with an expression of distrust.

Dario looked shifty. 'Someone owed me,' he said.

Everyone sat round the kitchen table and eased off the foil lids, pulled tabs on beer cans, passed round chipped plates and an odd assortment of cutlery. Pippa helped herself to Dario's spliff and took a deep drag.

'Are lawyers allowed to do that?' asked Miles.

'Not in the office,' Pippa said, and looked round the group. 'How often does this happen? It's us and just us.'

'Now we are seven,' said Dario, clinking his fork against

his plate for silence, then immediately shovelled an enormous amount of rice into his mouth and chewed for several seconds while we all waited. ‘Like the Seven Dwarfs,’ he said at last.

‘There are certain things we need to discuss,’ said Miles, rather formally. ‘To start with, can I say –’

‘You’re Doc,’ said Dario.

‘What?’

‘If we’re like the Seven Dwarfs –’

‘Which we’re not.’

‘– you’re definitely Doc,’ said Dario.

‘Because I own this house? And who else is going to get the drains fixed and make sure the bills are paid?’

‘The dwarfs represent the parts that make up the psyche,’ said Dario.

‘Is this what I flew into a car door for?’ I said. The beer was making me feel mellow and the pain had receded.

‘You’re Angry,’ said Dario to Mick.

Mick ignored him.

‘Is there an Angry?’ I asked. ‘I don’t remember him.’

‘There’s Grumpy,’ said Davy.

‘Pippa’s Randy, right?’ said Dario, winking across the table at Davy.

This was a reference to the fact that Pippa was not in a proper relationship, but instead had a fair amount of extremely short ones.

‘Oh, boys, boys,’ I said. ‘That’s pathetic.’

‘I think we can agree that Dopey’s taken,’ said Pippa.

‘You can have Sleepy, then,’ said Dario. ‘No one can sleep like you.’

This wasn’t strictly fair. Pippa only sleeps at weekends, when she goes to bed in the small hours and gets up in the afternoon, looking puffy, dazed and replete. During the week

she's a dutiful worker who rises at seven. Dario, on the other hand, sleeps whenever he likes.

'We're running out of the good ones,' said Davy. 'Owen can be Sneazy.'

'Why?'

Davy looked at me. 'Which leaves you and me fighting over Bashful and Happy,' he said. 'And you, Astrid Bell, are not bashful. Unless you want to be Snow White.'

'I want to be the Wicked Queen. There's a real woman.'

'You're spoiling the game,' said Dario. 'You're Happy.'

Happy. And groggy. And relaxed. I sat back in my chair. I looked round the people at the table: a motley collection who were, just at the moment, the closest I had to family. There were only three of us left who had been here from the beginning, or perhaps the real beginning was before that, when we were at university together. Miles had bought the house when he was still a post-graduate student who wanted to change the world, paying a ridiculously small amount for this rambling, run-down place at the rougher end of Hackney. Then, he had had no beard and his hair was long, often tied back in a ponytail. Now he had a closely trimmed dark blond beard and no hair at all. If I ran my hand over his head I could feel all the bumps of his velvety skull. Pippa was the other long-termer. In fact, she and I had met in my first term at university and we'd shared a house in our final year, so by the time we moved in with Miles I already knew her domestic habits well. She was tall and willowy, and had a delicate kind of beauty that could mislead people.

So we were the original trio and we'd survived, even though for a year of that time Miles and I had been sort of a couple and for another six awful months had been sort of not a couple and then definitely not a couple. Now Miles

had a proper new girlfriend, Leah, and that felt good, like a fence between us. ‘Good fences make good neighbours,’ someone had said.

Around us, there had been various others, and the current seven was bound to change sooner or later. Mick was older than the rest of us, and carried his years as if they were a burden that weighed on his broad shoulders. He was stocky and short. He stood with his legs apart as if on the deck of a ship in stormy weather. His eyes were pale blue in a face creased by the sun and wind. He had spent years travelling restlessly round the world. I didn’t know if he’d been searching for something, or even if he had found it. He never talked about it. Now he worked, doing odd jobs, and had drifted to a temporary halt in Maitland Road. When he was at home, he spent much of his time in his small room at the top of the house, though I never knew what he did up there and I’d rarely visited him. None of the doors have locks on them, but some are more firmly closed than others. Sometimes I went downstairs in the middle of the night because I couldn’t sleep, and he was there, sitting quite still at the kitchen table with the steam from a mug of tea curling round his face.

We were never quite sure how Dario had come to be living here. His previous girlfriend (who I suspected was the only real girlfriend he had ever had) had rented a room for a year so he had often stayed over. Then we blinked and she was gone and somehow he was still there, digging himself into the smallest room, which was on the second floor, then gradually colonizing the empty room next door. Although he had no job and couldn’t pay the rent, no one had the heart or the necessary steel to throw him out – perhaps because he didn’t look much like a Dario. He had untidy ginger hair and thick freckles; his teeth were slightly

crooked and when he smiled he seemed like a goofy little boy. In the end, Miles came to an agreement with him: that he should renovate the house, top to bottom, in return for living there. I don't think it was such a good deal for Miles. As far as I could tell, Dario spent most of his time smoking weed, reading astrology columns, watching daytime TV, playing games on other people's computers and doodling on walls with stiff-bristled paintbrushes that he wasn't scrupulous enough about cleaning or replacing.

Davy was the most recent member of the household, being here just a couple of months, along with Owen. He was a carpenter and builder. A real one, not like Dario. Despite the disadvantage of not being Polish, he had plenty of work. Enough of it was outside so that he was lightly tanned. He had light-coloured hair, which fell thickly over his shoulders, and grey eyes. He was good-looking, but he didn't seem to know he was, which I found charming. He had the anxious manner of a new boy in the house, but also a nice smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, and when he arrived I had let myself think, Perhaps? and then decided probably not. Sex in the house felt like a taboo, and my experience with Miles was an awful warning.

And then there was Owen Sullivan, sitting across from me right now. With his pale skin, his straight, shoulder-length dark hair, and his wide-set, almost-black eyes, he had a faintly Oriental air, though as far as I knew all his ancestors had been Welsh. He was a photographer. He hawked his portfolio round magazines and got the occasional commission. But what he really wanted was to do his own stuff. He had once said he hated magazine work. I had giggled and said then it was lucky he got so little of it. He hadn't replied but he had given me such a sharp look that I had realized you couldn't safely tease him where his work was concerned. He

used to watch people as if he was sizing them up for a photograph, checking the light, framing them. I sometimes wondered if he really saw, really listened to what they had to say.

‘Seven ages of man,’ said Dario, dreamily. ‘Seven seas, seven continents . . .’

‘That’s not right.’

‘Listen,’ said Miles. ‘I hate to break into this, but it’s very rare that we’re all together like this. Just the seven of us. Don’t you dare start again, Dario.’

‘You’re right, it *is* rare,’ said Davy. ‘Why don’t we have a group photo to mark it?’

‘We even have an official photographer.’

‘I don’t do snaps,’ said Owen, with finality.

‘Let’s not forget he’s an artist,’ I said sarcastically.

Davy just smiled. ‘I’ll take it,’ he said.

‘My camera’s in the drawer over there,’ said Miles, wearily.

Davy stood up and pulled it open. ‘It’s not here. You must have moved it.’

‘Someone’s nabbed it, more like, and forgotten to put it back.’

‘I’ve got one upstairs,’ said Davy.

‘Let’s just forget it,’ Mick was starting to say, but Davy was out of the room and bounding up the stairs two at a time.

A silence settled over us. Outside, a car horn blared several times and then we heard footsteps running down the road. A door slammed upstairs.

‘Who else thinks this lamb tastes like dogfood?’ said Dario.

‘What does dogfood taste like?’

‘Like this.’

Dogfood or not, there was the sound of chewing and plates being scraped. There was little conversation. Everybody seemed distracted. Then Davy returned, breathless and slightly flushed, but triumphantly brandishing his camera. 'It wasn't where I thought. Now, all squash together. No, you don't have to move, Astrid. Everyone can stand round you. Owen, you're out of the picture like that. I still can't see you.'

'Good.'

'Dario, your face is hidden by Pippa's shoulder. Mick, you look a bit weird with that smile. Scary, actually. OK, ten seconds. Are you ready?'

'What about you?' said Pippa.

'Just wait.'

Davy pressed a button and ran round to join us. His foot hit the table leg so he stumbled and half fell on to the tightly massed, scowling, smiling group as the light flashed. That was how the camera caught us, a blur of flailing arms and legs, and me in the centre, mouth open in surprise in my grazed and swollen face, like the victim of a drunken attack.

'Look at us!' screamed Pippa in delight: she came out the best of us all, of course – dainty and gorgeous in the scrum.

'My eyes are shut,' groaned Dario. 'Why does that always happen?'

'Right,' said Miles, once we'd sat down again. He pushed away his plate of congealing orange curry. 'I want to say something.'

'Yes?'

'This isn't easy, but I'm giving you plenty of warning.'

'It's about the state of the bathroom, I know it.'

'Leah and I have decided to live together.'

Pippa gave a little whoop.

I frowned. 'So why the solemn face?' I asked.

'She's moving in here.'

'We can cope,' said Dario. 'Can she, though? That's the real question.'

'I mean,' said Miles, 'it will be just Leah and me.'

For a moment, nobody spoke: we stared at him while his sentence hung in the air.

'Oh,' said Mick at last.

'Fuck,' said Pippa.

'You're chucking us out?'

'Not like that,' said Miles. 'Not at once.'

'How long?' I asked. My face was starting to throb.

'A few months. Three. That's all right, isn't it? It'll give you time to settle in somewhere else.'

'I was just settling in here,' said Davy, ruefully. 'Oh, well.'

'You couldn't all stay here for ever,' said Miles.

'Why not?' Dario looked stricken. His freckles stood out in blotches.

'Because things change,' said Miles. 'Time passes.'

'Are you all right, Astrid?' Davy asked. 'You've gone a bit pale.'

'I need to go to bed,' I said. 'Or at least lie down for a bit. I feel odd.'

Pippa and Davy levered me to my feet, hands under my elbows, making tutting noises.

'I'm sorry,' said Miles, wretchedly. 'Maybe it was the wrong time.'

'There's never a right time for things like this,' said Pippa. 'Come on, Astrid, come into mine for a while. It's one less flight of stairs to manage. I can rub Deep Heat into you, if you want.'

I shuffled up the stairs, taking them one at a time, and edged my way into Pippa's room, which was thick with the smell of perfume. It was a large room at the front of the house. When we had first moved in, it was the designated sitting room, and didn't seem to have been decorated since the fifties. Pippa had done nothing to change that, just filled the space with the frippery and clutter of her life. The effect was peculiarly jarring. Two walls were a grubby mustardy yellow, and another was covered with flowery wallpaper busy enough to make your head ache and peeling at the joins. The lightbulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling had a brown paper shade, split along one side. A large bay window gave out on to the street, but Pippa kept the shutters half closed so the room was in permanent shadow.

In my woozy state, the mess she had created took on an unsettling, almost hallucinatory aspect. There was a metal bed – a large single, which was particularly inappropriate to her lifestyle – with a lusciously crimson velvet bedspread; a small divan that her grandfather had left her, which was heaped with clothes, both clean and dirty; a chest with every drawer open and underwear and shirts spilling out on to the floor; a wardrobe, similarly open, in which hung her gorgeous dresses, suits, skirts and jackets; a flimsy desk buckling under the weight of papers and files. A full-length gilt mirror was propped against one wall, and at its base were piles of makeup, bottles of body lotion and tubs of face cream, ropes of necklaces, scattered earrings, a couple of belts. Yet out of this room Pippa emerged every morning fresh and immaculate, not a hair out of place, smelling of soap and Chanel No. 5.

I pushed aside a pair of knickers and lowered myself cautiously on to the bed.

'Paracetamol?' She reached under the bed and plucked

out a box of pills. ‘With whisky?’ Like a magician, she produced a bottle from beneath the pile of clothes on the divan and brandished it.

‘Maybe not the whisky tonight.’

‘Go on.’

She shook two white tablets into my hand, then poured a couple of fingers into a tumbler and handed it across. I swallowed the paracetamol and took a sip of whisky to chase them down.

‘Shall I rub your shoulders?’ she asked.

‘I think that might hurt too much.’

‘You’re not making nearly enough fuss.’

‘Strange day,’ I said.

I could hear voices from downstairs, then the unmistakable heavy trudge of Mick making his way to his room.

‘For you, mainly,’ Pippa said. She took the tumbler from me, poured herself a generous slug of whisky and tossed it expertly down her throat. ‘Bastard,’ she added loudly.

‘Miles?’

‘Who else?’

‘I don’t know, Pippa. It had to happen some time.’

‘Bah!’

‘And if he and Leah want to live on their own together . . .?’

‘She’s the one behind it.’

‘You make it sound like a conspiracy.’

‘Of course it’s a conspiracy. So we’re going to have to be the counter-conspiracy.’

She went on talking, saying something about the bump on my head making me too reasonable. But I didn’t really hear the words, or make out their sense. I was feeling crashingly tired. The room swam in and out of focus. I lay back against the pillows and closed my leaden lids. ‘Perhaps I’ll go to sleep here tonight,’ I said thickly.

Pippa grabbed my arm and pulled me into a sitting position. ‘Oh, no, you don’t. Not tonight, darling.’

I went crabwise up the second set of stairs, into my own room, which was white and empty after the garish mess of Pippa’s: just a small double bed, a narrow wardrobe, a chest on whose surface stood all the objects I’d dug from the garden, and a big wooden rocking-chair Dario had picked out of a skip for me and I’d covered with cushions I’d bought at Camden Market. I tugged off my tracksuit trousers, then wriggled under the duvet. But I stung and throbbed, and although I was so tired, it took me a long time to sleep. I heard sounds: the front door opening and closing; voices; someone laughing; water in the tank; footsteps on the stairs; an old house breathing.

Chapter Three

I twisted and turned and slept and fretted and twisted and turned some more, and slept and woke and saw the bright sunlight shining through the curtains and gave up the fight. Besides, my body and my bike both needed checking.

In the shower – hot, this time – I examined myself. I flexed my knees and elbows. They ached but there were no cracking or scraping sounds. I needed to get moving. I also suspected this would be a fine day to be absent from the house.

Meanwhile it was good to be on my own in the kitchen. I made myself coffee and cut a grapefruit into segments. While my porridge was cooking, I went into the garden and looked at my vegetable patch. I'd never grown anything before, except maybe mustard and cress on blotting-paper when I was small, but this year I'd suddenly decided we should grow our own food. I'd gone to a car-boot sale and bought a spade, a trowel and a watering-can so nice and bright, almost new, and cheap they had clearly been stolen from someone who had forgotten to lock their garden shed. What else are car-boot sales for in Hackney? But I'd made good use of the stolen goods, measuring out a long rectangle of overgrown land, and digging it into a well-tilled plot, whose earth was loamy and rich, and studded with old coins and bits of pottery, which I collected and put on the chest in my bedroom. It was surprisingly satisfying. I relished the ache in my back, the blisters on my palms and the dirt under my fingernails. Davy offered to help with the heavy digging

but I wanted it to be all my own work. I'd planted courgettes, broad beans, lettuces, beetroot and rocket – even potatoes in their own raised bed. Everyone else in the house teased me about it, but already sturdy shoots were appearing. Almost every morning and evening, I went to look at them. This morning, I had been thinking that next year I should plant sweetcorn as well, and maybe some butternut squash for soups – until I remembered that next year I wouldn't be here. It was only then I realized that I wouldn't be here this year, either, to harvest the vegetables I had tended so carefully. Miles and Leah would be picking them instead, enjoying the fruits of my labour.

I was on my second mug when Pippa came into the kitchen. She was dressed for the office in a soft grey suit and a white shirt. And she wasn't alone. A man in black trousers, a flowery shirt and leather jacket came in with the familiar mixture of sheepishness and pride you see in men in the morning. She introduced him as Jeff. He sat across the table from me and, asking if it was all right, helped himself to coffee.

I was too dumbfounded to answer. Pippa was amazing. How had she done it? Where had she produced him from? I had left her at whatever time it was last night, sitting in her room. And yet somewhere, somehow, in the middle of the night, she had found this man and smuggled him into her bed.

'Hi, Jeff,' I said, and disintegrated into a sort of stammer. 'How . . . where did you . . . ?'

'We'd arranged to meet for a drink,' said Pippa, cheerfully, 'so I said he might as well come over here. And by then it was so late that, well, you know . . .'

'Not really,' I said. 'Pippa, I wanted to ask you a professional question.'

‘What?’

‘Can Miles actually, legally, throw us out? Aren’t we sitting tenants?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Aren’t you a lawyer?’

‘Are you a lawyer?’ said Jeff.

‘Yes, sweetie,’ said Pippa. ‘Hurry and finish your coffee.’ She glanced back at me. ‘That doesn’t mean I know anything. I’ll look it up or ask someone. But don’t get lawyers involved. That’s the only thing I’ve learned.’

I nodded to Pippa and said goodbye politely to Jeff, suspecting I would never see him again. I rang Campbell at the office, and he said there would be no problem in borrowing a bike for a few days. I’d just have to pick it up from the office in Clerkenwell. Consequently, that morning I must have been the only bike messenger in London who didn’t go to work on a bike. Instead I sat on the tube in tight Lycra shorts and my fluorescent yellow top, with my helmet on my lap. I couldn’t have looked more ludicrous if I’d been dressed in jodhpurs and a scarlet coat.

I hardly ever went into the office. It was really nothing more than a cubby-hole where Campbell and his assistant, Becks, took orders and phoned the riders, but it was amazingly squalid, all cardboard boxes, unwashed coffee cups and unfiled files.

‘Lovers’ tiff?’ said Campbell, as I walked into the office.

‘Car door,’ I said.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’

I was less all right when I saw the bike he was lending me. Campbell saw my dubious expression. ‘It’s served me well, that bike,’ he said.

‘At least it’s not going to get stolen,’ I muttered. ‘So, what’s up first?’

He looked at his clipboard. ‘Fancy Wardour Street to Camden Town?’

‘All I fancy is you, Campbell,’ I said, taking the piece of paper he was holding out. ‘Now that I’ve seen the state of the office, I must remember to come in less often. See you at the pub later, maybe.’

It was a lovely day, the sort that made up for January, when you got wet and numb and it was dark at four o’clock, and August, when you seemed to breathe nothing but heat and car fumes. It was sunny but with a chill, and there wasn’t too much traffic and I felt happy, even if I didn’t know why. I darted across the map of London in straight lines. After Camden Town I went from Charlotte Street to Maida Vale, then from Soho to London Bridge. On the way back I spent too much money on an exotic sandwich at Borough Market. Then it was over the river to Old Street and thence in a long straight line to Notting Hill Gate. Cycling back into town, I stopped in St James’s Park, ate my sandwich and drank a bottle of water. And so back to criss-crossing London, in and out of the photographic labs, advertising companies, editing suites, solicitors’, and offices I had been in and out of for months without knowing, or needing to know, exactly what they did.

Some days it felt like I was dragging heavy weights behind the bike, but not today. The accident had clearly done me no lasting damage. My aching limbs gradually loosened up and by the evening I’d done sixty or seventy miles and I didn’t even feel tired, just a pleasant ache in my calves and thighs. On the way home I stopped off at the Horse and Jockey. The pub was strictly for the cycle messengers. The motorbike messengers were large, bearded and male: they dressed in black leather and met up at the Crown just south of Oxford Street. They congregated on the pavement and

whistled at women walking past and talked about cam shafts, or whatever it was that motorcycles were made of.

We cycle messengers saw each other as a more sensitive breed. We were certainly a bloody sight healthier, those of us who survived. When I cycled up, there was a small cheer from the people who were already there, clutching their bottles of beer. They gathered round to inspect my bruises and grazes and to comment that they were really nothing special. Then we got down to the more serious business. We talked about employment prospects, we gossiped and, above all, we slagged off the clients. We depended on them but that didn't mean we had to respect them. Most of the job was company work, taking envelopes from office to office, but several families had accounts with us and some of them were so rich, or at least so much richer than we were, that they thought nothing of picking up the phone to summon one of us. There was an unofficial competition about the most ludicrous request. I'd once gone on successive days to deliver a forgotten packed lunch from Primrose Hill to a girls' prep school in the West End. One messenger claimed he'd cycled to Notting Hill Gate in the rain to collect an umbrella and deliver it to a woman standing outside Fortnum & Mason. The job also gave us a chance to gawp inside some of these houses. One of the messengers said he was going to start a game: you'd get five points for a private cinema, ten for a fountain, fifty for an indoor swimming-pool.

Just as a messenger called Danny was telling me, quite falsely, about a client who fancied him, I was saved by my phone ringing. It was Davy.

'I'm at the Jockey,' I said. 'Want to meet up?'

The pub was a handy place to rendezvous in the middle of town and Pippa or Davy or Owen would occasionally

join me there and attempt to blend in with the lithe, sun-tanned, lightly clad, generally god-like bodies of us messengers.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m at home. Maybe you should come back.’

‘Is anything wrong?’

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Not really. Nothing to do with us. But dramatic.’

I cycled home slowly, enjoying the amber light and the cooling air against my glowing skin. As I steered into Maitland Road, I was thinking that the one thing I mustn’t do was have another stupid accident in my own road when I almost ran into a police car at the same spot where I had hit the car on the previous day. An area of pavement a few houses down from ours was taped off. Several policemen and -women were bustling around busily. One was standing by the car looking bored.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

‘Move on, please, love,’ he said.

‘It’s just that I live in the street.’

‘It’s all over.’

‘What’s all –?’

‘Just move on.’

I felt reluctant. Something had happened almost exactly where I lived and I wanted to know about it, but the officer stared at me and I couldn’t think of an excuse so I just pushed my bike along the pavement to our house.

Dario was up a ladder in the hallway painting the rose round the light. I leaned Campbell’s bike against the wall. ‘Someone’s going to fall over that,’ he said.

‘It’s just for today,’ I said. ‘What’s going on outside?’

‘There were more police a couple of hours ago,’ he said. ‘There were cars and an ambulance.’

‘What happened?’

‘I don’t really know,’ he said. ‘I haven’t been out. I heard that someone had been robbed.’

‘Murdered,’ said a voice behind me.

I turned round. It was Mick. ‘Murdered?’ I said. ‘No! What happened?’

‘Someone was being robbed in the street and they got killed. They must have tried to resist. Fucking idiot.’

Dario grinned down at me. ‘Yesterday Astrid crashes into a car, today someone gets murdered. This area’s getting dangerous.’

‘Lucky we’re getting evicted then, isn’t it?’ I said, and then I looked up at Dario suspiciously. ‘How long have you been doing the house up?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘Were you in on Miles’s plan?’

‘Me?’ he said. ‘What would I have to gain from that?’

‘I wouldn’t like to think how your twisted mind works,’ I said.

Chapter Four

I had a cool, very quick shower and pulled on loose-fitting clothes over my bruises and grazes, wincing. A light skirt, because outside the May evening was balmy and soft; a shirt that would cover my arms; sandals. I had a date with three old friends in Clerkenwell, and I wasn't going to get on my bike again but travel on the top of the seventy-three bus. Dario came with me, because he, too, was going out. The police were still there. There seemed to be even more of them than before, and now there was also a yellow metal sign on the pavement, just a few metres from the taped-off area, asking anyone who had witnessed anything unusual on the evening of Thursday, 10 May, to contact the police.

'Do you really think someone's been murdered?' I asked Dario.

'Definitely,' he said, with enthusiasm.

'It just says "serious incident". That could mean all sorts of things. Maybe a car crash. Or a mugging.'

'There's an awful lot of police for that,' said Dario.

We were quite used to muggings in Maitland Road, and to yellow signs asking the public for help, which rarely came. Maitland Road backed on to a rough estate. Gangs of youths roamed the street and hung out in the park, bored and belligerent, trousers dropping off their arses and cigarettes dribbling from their lower lips. They broke windows, threw bins across the road, did their drug deals in the bus shelter where we were standing now, had scuffles that could turn

nasty. Where we lived was one of the roads that formed a kind of border between the well-off and the desperately poor.

When Miles, Pippa and I first moved in, many of the houses were crumbling and boarded-up. Gardens were rank with weeds, the only shops were twenty-four-hour news-agents and strange outposts of a previous civilization that sold Crimplene slacks and long johns. The sandpit in the park was full of needles and litter. It was an area that felt abandoned and unloved. Now it was being gentrified. There were still run-down terraced houses and dilapidated squats, but others had been renovated and decorated, inappropriately smart now between their dowdy neighbours. There were Volvos and BMWs as well as beaten-up old Rovers and Fords. Estate-agents' signs peppered the front gardens, builders' vans and skips squatted outside gutted houses. The brutal grey and pink blocks, with names like Morris and Ruskin House, were now grim, stubborn, neglected islands.

The bus came and I climbed up to the top deck to stare out as Hackney ended and I was into more genteel Stoke Newington, then more-genteel-still Islington, where lights glittered in terraced houses and all the expensive restaurants were full. I didn't think about the Maitland Road incident for the rest of the evening. I met my friends and we had a drink, standing outside the pub in the ebbing warmth, then going on for a cheap meal, and back to Saul's house for coffee. Everyone was tired, but because it was Friday night we lolled about, chatting idly, not willing to leave.

It was late by the time I took the night bus home. The air was cool on my skin now. I thought about sleeping late the following morning, then maybe going with Pippa to the flower market and out for lunch. And I thought, too, about

the need to find a new place to live. Three months wasn't long, just until the end of the summer.

Two police cars remained in Maitland Road. Several teenage boys were standing around the first; as I passed, one kicked the front kerbside tyre, trying to be cool. When I grinned at him, he blushed, suddenly appearing much younger than he wanted to.

'Hi,' I shouted, as I pushed open the front door.

Everyone except Dario and Owen was downstairs, sitting round the kitchen table with a couple of empty wine bottles between them. Miles's girlfriend, Leah, was there as well: the cause of our eviction from the house. I would have expected there to be a certain chilliness in the air, but instead I sensed excitement

'You missed all the drama,' said Miles.

'What drama?'

'The police were round here, asking us whether we'd heard anything unusual last night.'

'Really? Did they say what had happened?'

'Mick was right,' said Miles. 'Someone was murdered.'

'In Maitland Road,' added Davy, as if that was good news.

'No!'

'Yeah.'

'God, how awful. Who was it? We don't know them, do we?'

'No,' said Pippa. She sounded almost disappointed.

'Someone called Margaret Farrell, apparently,' said Davy. 'We don't know a Margaret Farrell, do we?'

'I don't, anyway,' I said. 'Did she live near here?'

'That's the thing,' said Pippa. 'She lived just a few houses up. Number fifty-four. She was a neighbour, kind of.'

'Number fifty-four?' I said. I tried to remember which house that was and who lived there.

'The house with the dark green door and the tidy front garden,' said Miles.

'We went out to have a look at it,' added Davy.

'What time was it?' I asked. I couldn't get my head round the fact that while we had been safe and warm inside someone was being killed just a few feet from our front door.

'The police weren't sure about that. They just wanted to ask us if we'd heard anything unusual during the night.'

'Only the usual unusual,' I said. 'Shouts, people running, things being thrown.'

'That's what we said.' Davy tipped the last of the wine into his glass and held it up to the light. 'And we gave everyone's names in the house.'

'What for?'

'Routine,' said Miles, vaguely. 'I said we were all here last night. They just said we should get in touch if we remembered anything that might be helpful.'

'Margaret Farrell,' I pondered. 'Do they know why? Was she robbed – or what happened? Was it in her house?'

'No,' Davy explained. 'Apparently someone found her body where the bins go, outside the basement front. They said the binmen found her.'

'No! Just dumped with all the rubbish? That's horrible.'

'That's what I heard. It's hard to believe, isn't it?'

'But why?'

'I think she was mugged and they killed her by mistake,' said Miles.

'They?'

'It's probably the husband,' said Pippa. 'It always is, you know.'

'Do you even know she has a husband?' I asked.

'We don't really know anything,' said Miles. 'People keep

passing on rumours and suspicions and by now they're flying round the street, getting more and more bizarre. Everyone's talking to each other at last. Ironic, isn't it?'

'Very ironic,' agreed Leah. I started. I'd almost forgotten she was sitting there, composed and elegant, her hands lying placidly on the table.

'Scary,' I said, with a little shiver. 'Right on our doorstep.'

But then the conversation drifted on to other things. Davy was doing his Portuguese homework, I picked up a magazine and started browsing through it. Miles used the remote control to turn on the TV. We watched a programme in which two experts redecorated somebody's flat and made it look much worse than before. Then we watched a cookery programme, which featured ingredients I had never even heard of. We were just starting to watch a film, the sequel to something none of us had seen, when there was a clatter on the stairs. Dario burst into the room. 'Turn the TV on!' he shouted.

Miles looked round. 'It *is* on,' he said.

'Change channel. I was watching upstairs. No, give me the fucking control.'

He changed the channel. A photograph of a woman appeared on the screen, then the picture cut to a local newsreader. I had only seen the face for a second but it was enough. 'It was —' I began.

'Shut up,' said Dario, turning up the volume so that the speaker in the television rattled with the sound.

'... the body of fifty-seven-year-old Margaret Farrell was found yesterday evening,' said the suddenly booming voice. 'Police have begun a murder inquiry ...'

I heard something about appealing for witnesses and house-to-house inquiries, but we were too excited to stay quiet.

‘Margaret Farrell – She’s Peggy!’

‘Peggy!’

‘We saw her last night,’ said Davy, in a voice of awe. ‘Me and Dario and Astrid. We saw her.’

‘What? When?’

‘Peggy! But it was Peggy who knocked me off my bike.’

And so it was that the following morning, instead of having a lie-in, a hot bath, an hour in the garden tending my vegetables and a stroll down to the flower market, Dario, Davy and I found ourselves sitting in the local police station, waiting to be seen by PC Jim Prebble. The horrified euphoria of last night had died away. We were tired, the reception area was drab and depressing; outside it was drizzling. Davy had a stye under his left eye and seemed to be coming down with a cold. But Dario was in the worst state: he had had only a couple of hours’ sleep and we had dragged him out this morning without even a cup of coffee. What’s more, he had a paranoid dread of the police. They made him feel guilty even when he was abiding by every letter of every law. So he sat there, looking like the accused, pasty-faced and fidgeting with anxiety, his eyes glancing rapidly round him.

And when at last we were called in to see PC Prebble, in a small, square room with chairs for only two of us, and the shutters closed, it was an anticlimax. Prebble was a small, stocky man with a bumpy face, like a potato, and a bristle of grey hair. He took our names and address, and heard our account of seeing – and, in my case, being hit by – Margaret Farrell, known to us as Peggy.

‘What time was this?’ he asked, picking up a pencil.

‘About half past seven,’ said Davy. He was standing behind Dario and me.

‘Around seven o’clock,’ said Dario, at the same time.

‘No, it was nearer eight,’ I said. ‘Five to, something like that. I remember because I thought I’d be late for our house meeting, which was supposed to start at eight, so I was very conscious of the time and in a rush. Which was why I hit the car door so hard.’

‘So. At just before eight you saw Mrs Farrell?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you speak to her?’

‘Yes, well, not really. I think I swore a bit.’

‘You did,’ said Davy, behind me. Dario sniggered.

‘And what did she say?’

‘I don’t really remember. Sorry. She kept saying sorry.’

‘She wanted to call an ambulance,’ said Davy.

‘And she offered to pay for the bike,’ added Dario. ‘She won’t do that now. You can ask her husband instead.’

‘Dario!’ I hissed, but Prebble didn’t appear to notice.

‘And that was all?’ he said.

‘Yes. Sorry.’

‘You didn’t see her after that?’

We shook our heads.

‘You didn’t notice what direction she went in?’

‘It’s a bit of a blur,’ I said. ‘I only remember her shoes clearly.’

‘Her shoes?’

‘I remember lying on the ground and seeing them coming towards me. Sensible brown lace-ups. I think I might have been a bit concussed. I remember I had this vague impression there was someone else nearby, beside Dario and Davy.’

‘Nope. It was just us,’ said Dario, firmly.

‘So it was only the two of you?’ asked PC Prebble. ‘Sure?’

‘Yes,’ said Dario.

‘Yes,’ echoed Davy.

‘Right. You two, then, did you see where she went after the accident?’

‘We were helping Astrid into the house,’ said Davy. ‘I didn’t really pay any attention. We wanted to get her inside so she could lie down. She was quite cut up.’

‘Show him your bruises,’ said Dario.

‘No!’

‘But you’re clear it was around eight?’ Prebble seemed puzzled. There was a deep ridge running between his widely spaced eyes and he ran his hand over his bristle. I watched as it flattened, then sprang back into place.

‘Yes.’

‘Hmm,’ he said.

‘We just thought we ought to report it.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s probably not relevant.’

‘No,’ he mused, chewing the end of his pencil and gazing down at the single line of writing. ‘But it’s good of you. You can never tell what will be helpful and what not.’

‘Have you got any idea who might . . . ?’

‘We’re gathering information. Did any of you know Mrs Farrell?’

‘Not really,’ Dario said.

‘I don’t remember even seeing her before,’ said Davy. ‘But, then, I haven’t lived there long.’

‘Ms Bell?’

‘She was just Peggy,’ I said. ‘Part of the street, a bit out of place, maybe, although I think she’d lived there for ages. Much longer than all of us, at any rate.’

‘In what way out of place?’

‘She just looked, well, like someone who should be living

in the suburbs or something,' I said. 'In a neat house surrounded by orderly neighbours. She seemed respectable, as if she belonged to an old England that's disappeared. Certainly from round here anyway. She wore what Miles calls coffee-morning clothes.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning clothes to go to a coffee morning in, casual but smart, you know. I don't think there are many coffee mornings round Maitland Road.'

'So she didn't belong?'

I was beginning to understand what it would feel like, being a witness in a trial. The casual, vaguely gossipy remarks we'd made about poor Peggy were being pinned down, scrutinized and given a weight they simply didn't possess.

'Maybe none of us belongs. People come and go. Everything's changing, shifting, all the time. That's why I like it. It's like a film, not a photograph. You know?'

Prebble chewed his pencil, then carefully picked fragments of wood from the tip of his tongue. 'Hmm,' he said at last. 'So are you aware of her being a victim of racist attacks?'

'No!' I wished I'd stayed silent. 'I'm not really aware of anything.' I turned in desperation to Dario. 'Are you?'

'Why me?' asked Dario, shiftily. 'Why should I know?'

'She was a neighbour,' said Davy, 'but we didn't know her. That's London for you, isn't it? We just happened to see her on the day she died.'

'Was murdered.'

'Yeah. And that's it. We're not much help.'

Prebble didn't look particularly surprised or disappointed. Just tired and a little bored. We trooped out and stood on the pavement in the drizzle.

'Well, we've done our duty, for what it's worth,' said Davy. 'Let's go and have coffee and talk about something else.'