



KATE ATKINSON

Author of *When Will There Be Good News?*

Started Early,
Took My Dog

About the Book

A day like any other for security chief Tracy Waterhouse, until she makes a shocking impulse purchase. That one moment of madness is all it takes for Tracy's humdrum world to be turned upside down, the tedium of everyday life replaced by fear and danger at every turn.

Witnesses to Tracy's outrageous exchange in the Merrion Centre in Leeds are Tilly, an elderly actress teetering on the brink of her own disaster, and Jackson Brodie who has returned to his home county in search of someone else's roots. All three characters learn that the past is never history and that no good deed goes unpunished.

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STARTED EARLY, TOOK MY DOG

Kate Atkinson

For my father

All mistakes are mine, some deliberate. I have not necessarily kept to the truth.

My thanks are due to:

Russell Equi, as usual; Malcolm Graham, Detective Chief Superintendent, Lothian and Borders Police; Malcolm R. Dickson, former Assistant Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland; David Mattock and Maureen Lenehan, for revisiting Leeds and the seventies with me.

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Traditional

‘I was just cleaning up the place a bit.’

Peter Sutcliffe

Treasure

1975: 9 April

LEEDS: 'MOTORWAY CITY of the Seventies'. A proud slogan. No irony intended. Gaslight still flickering on some streets. Life in a northern town.

The Bay City Rollers at number one. IRA bombs all over the country. Margaret Thatcher is the new leader of the Conservative Party. At the beginning of the month, in Albuquerque, Bill Gates founds what will become Microsoft. At the end of the month Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese army. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* is still on television, John Poulson is still in jail. *Bye Bye Baby, Baby Goodbye*. In the middle of it all, Tracy Waterhouse was only concerned with the hole in one of the toes of her tights. It was growing bigger with every step she took. They were new on this morning as well.

They had been told that it was on the fifteenth floor of the flats in Lovell Park and - of course - the lifts were broken. The two PCs huffed and puffed their way up the stairs. By the time they neared the top they were resting at every turn of the stair. WPC Tracy Waterhouse, a big, graceless girl only just off probation, and PC Ken Arkwright, a stout white Yorkshireman with a heart of lard. Climbing Everest.

They would both see the beginning of the Ripper's killing spree but Arkwright would be retired long before the end of it. Donald Neilson, the Black Panther from Bradford, hadn't been captured yet and Harold Shipman had probably already started killing patients unlucky enough to be under his care in Pontefract General Infirmary. West Yorkshire in 1975, awash with serial killers.

Tracy Waterhouse was still wet behind the ears, although she wouldn't admit to it. Ken Arkwright had seen

more than most but remained avuncular and sanguine, a good copper for a green girl to be beneath the wing of. There were bad apples in the barrel – the dark cloud of David Oluwale's death still cast a long shadow on police in the West Riding, but Arkwright wasn't under it. He could be violent when necessary, sometimes when not, but he didn't discriminate on the grounds of colour when it came to reward and punishment. And women were often *slappers* and *scrubbers* but he'd helped out a few street girls with fags and cash, and he loved his wife and daughters.

Despite pleas from her teachers to stay on and 'make something of herself', Tracy had left school at fifteen to do a shorthand and typing course and went straight into Montague Burton's offices as a junior, eager to get on with her adult life. 'You're a bright girl,' the man in personnel said, offering her a cigarette. 'You could go far. You never know, PA to the MD one day.' She didn't know what 'MD' meant. Wasn't too sure about 'PA' either. The man's eyes were all over her.

Sixteen, never been kissed by a boy, never drunk wine, not even Blue Nun. Never eaten an avocado or seen an aubergine, never been on an aeroplane. It was different in those days.

She bought a tweed maxi coat from Etam and a new umbrella. Ready for anything. Or as ready as she would ever be. Two years later she was in the police. Nothing could have prepared her for that. *Bye Bye, Baby*.

Tracy was worried that she might never leave home. She spent her nights in front of the television with her mother while her father drank – modestly – in the local Conservative club. Together, Tracy and her mother, Dorothy, watched *The Dick Emery Show* or *Steptoe and Son* or Mike Yarwood doing an impression of Steptoe and his son. Or Edward Heath, his shoulders heaving up and down. Must have been a sad day for Mike Yarwood when Margaret Thatcher took over the leadership. Sad day for

everyone. Tracy had never understood the attraction of impressionists.

Her stomach rumbled like a train. She'd been on the cottage cheese and grapefruit diet for a week. Wondered if you could starve to death while you were still overweight.

'Jesus H. Christ,' Arkwright gasped, bending over and resting his hands on his knees when they finally achieved the fifteenth floor. 'I used to be a rugby wing forward, believe it or not.'

'Ay, well, you're just an old, fat bloke now,' Tracy said. 'What number?'

'Twenty-five. It's at the end.'

A neighbour had phoned in anonymously about a bad smell ('a right stink') coming from the flat.

'Dead rats, probably,' Arkwright said. 'Or a cat. Remember those two dogs in that house in Chapeltown? Oh no, before your time, lass.'

'I heard about it. Bloke went off and left them without any food. They ate each other in the end.'

'They didn't eat each other,' Arkwright said. '*One* of them ate the other one.'

'You're a bloody pedant, Arkwright.'

'A what? Cheeky so-and-so. Ey up, here we go. Fuck a duck, Trace, you can smell it from here.'

Tracy Waterhouse pressed her thumb on the doorbell and kept it there. Glanced down at her ugly police-issue regulation black lace-ups and wiggled her toes inside her ugly police-issue regulation black tights. Her big toe had gone right through the hole in the tights now and a ladder was climbing up towards one of her big footballer's knees. 'It'll be some old bloke who's been lying here for weeks,' she said. 'I bloody hate them.'

'I hate train jumpers.'

'Dead kiddies.'

'Yeah. They're the worst,' Arkwright agreed. Dead children were trumps, every time.

Tracy took her thumb off the doorbell and tried turning the door handle. Locked. 'Ah, Jesus, Arkwright, it's humming in there. Something that's not about to get up and walk away, that's for sure.'

Arkwright banged on the door and shouted, 'Hello, it's the police here, is anyone in there? Shit, Tracy, can you hear that?'

'Flies?'

Ken Arkwright bent down and looked through the letterbox. 'Oh, Christ—' He recoiled from the letterbox so quickly that Tracy's first thought was that someone had squirted something into his eyes. It had happened to a sergeant a few weeks ago, a nutter with a Squeezy washing-up bottle full of bleach. It had put everyone off looking through letterboxes. Arkwright, however, immediately squatted down and pushed open the letterbox again and started talking soothingly, the way you would to a nervy dog. 'It's OK, it's OK, everything's OK now. Is Mummy there? Or your daddy? We're going to help you. It's OK.' He stood and got ready to shoulder the door. Pawed the ground, blew air out of his mouth and said to Tracy, 'Prepare yourself, lass, it's not going to be pretty.'



Six months ago

The suburban outskirts of Munich on a cold afternoon. Large, lazy flakes of snow fluttering down like white confetti, falling on the bonnet of their anonymous-looking German-made car.

'Nice house,' Steve said. He was a cocky little sod who talked too much. It was doubtful that Steve was his real name. 'Big house,' he added.

'Yeah, nice big house,' he agreed, more to shut Steve up than anything else. Nice and big and surrounded, unfortunately, by other nice big houses, on the kind of

street that had vigilant neighbours and burglar alarms dotted like bright carbuncles on the walls. A couple of the very nicest, biggest houses had security gates and cameras attached to their walls.

The first time you recce, the second time you pay attention to detail, the third time you do the job. This was the third time. 'Bit Germanic for my liking, of course,' Steve said, as if the entire portfolio of European real estate was at his disposal.

'Maybe that's something to do with the fact that we're in Germany,' he said.

Steve said, 'I've got nothing against the Germans. Had a couple in the Deuxième. Good lads. Good beer,' he added after several seconds' contemplation. 'Good sausages too.'

Steve said he'd been in the Paras, came out and found he couldn't handle civilian life, joined the French Foreign Legion. *You think you're hard and then you find out what hard really means.*

Right. How many times had he heard that? He'd met a few guys from the legion in his time - ex-military guys escaping the flatline of civilian life, deserters from divorces and paternity suits, fugitives from boredom. All of them were running from something, none of them quite the outlaws they imagined themselves to be. Certainly not Steve. This was the first time they'd done a job together. The guy was a bit of a gung-ho wanker but he was OK, he paid attention. He didn't smoke in the car, he didn't want to listen to crap radio stations.

Some of these places reminded him of gingerbread houses, right down to the icing-sugar snow that rimmed their roofs and gutters. He had seen a gingerbread house for sale in the Christkindl market where they had spent the previous evening, strolling around the Marienplatz, drinking *Glühwein* out of Christmas mugs, for all the world like regular tourists. They'd had to pay a deposit on the mugs and on that basis he had taken his back to the Platzl,

where they were staying. A present for his daughter Marlee when he got home, even though she would probably turn her nose up at it, or, worse, thank him indifferently and never look at it again.

‘Did you do that job in Dubai?’ Steve asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘I heard everything went tits up?’

‘Yeah.’

A car rounded the corner and they both instinctively checked their watches. It glided past. Wrong car. ‘It’s not them,’ Steve said, unnecessarily.

On the plus side, they had a long driveway that curved away from the gate so that you couldn’t see the house from the road. And the driveway was bordered by a lot of bushes. No security lights, no motion-sensor lights. Darkness was the friend of covert ops. Not today, they were doing this in daylight. Neither broad nor bright, the fag end of the afternoon. The dimming of the day.

Another car came round the corner, the right one this time. ‘Here comes the kid,’ Steve said softly. She was five years old, straight black hair, big brown eyes. She had no idea what was about to happen to her. *The Paki kid*, Steve called her.

‘Egyptian. Half,’ he corrected Steve. ‘She’s called Jennifer.’

‘I’m not racist.’

But.

The snow was still fluttering down, sticking to the windscreen for a second before melting. He had a sudden, unexpected memory of his sister coming into the house, laughing and shaking blossom off her clothes, out of her hair. He thought of the town they were brought up in as a place devoid of trees and yet here she was in his memory like a bride, a shower of petals like pink thumbprints on the dark veil of her hair.

The car pulled into the driveway and disappeared from view. He turned to look at Steve. 'Ready?'

'Lock and load,' Steve said, starting the engine.

'Remember, don't hurt the nanny.'

'Unless I have to.'



Wednesday

'Watch out, the dragon's about.'

'Where?'

'There. Just passing Greggs.' Grant pointed at Tracy Waterhouse's image on one of the monitors. The air in the security control room was always stale. Outside, it was beautiful May weather but in here the atmosphere was like that of a submarine that had been under too long. They were coming up to lunchtime, the busiest time of the day for shoplifters. The police were in and out all day, every day. A pair of them out there now, all tooled up, bulky waist-belts, knife-proof vests, short-sleeved shirts, 'escorting' a woman out of Peacocks, her bags stuffed with clothes she hadn't paid for. Leslie got sleepy from peering at the monitors. Sometimes she turned a blind eye. Not everyone was, strictly speaking, a criminal. 'What a week,' Grant said, making a gurning face. 'School half-term and a bank holiday. We'll be going over the top. It'll be carnage.'

Grant was chewing Nicorette as if his life depended on it. He had a stain of something on his tie. Leslie considered telling him about the stain. Decided not to. It looked like blood but it seemed more likely that it was ketchup. He had such bad acne that he looked radioactive. Leslie was pretty and petite and had a degree in chemical engineering from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and working in security in the Merrion Centre in Leeds was a short, not entirely unpleasurable dogleg in her life's journey. She was on what her family called her 'World Tour'. She'd done

Athens, Rome, Florence, Nice, Paris. Not quite the world. She'd stopped off in Leeds to visit relatives, decided to stay for the summer after she hooked up with a philosophy post-grad called Dominic who worked in a bar. She had met his parents, been to their house for a meal. Dominic's mother heated up an individual 'Vegetarian Lasagne' from Sainsbury's for her while the rest of them ate chicken. His mother was defensive, worried that Leslie would carry her son off to a faraway continent and all her grandchildren would have accents and be vegetarians. Leslie wanted to reassure her, say, It's only a holiday romance, but that probably wouldn't go down well either.

'Leslie with an "ie",' she had to tell everyone in England because they spelt it with a 'y'. 'Really?' Dominic's mother said, as if Leslie was herself a spelling mistake. Leslie tried to imagine taking Dominic home to her own family, introducing him to her parents, how unimpressed they'd be. She missed home, the Mason and Risch piano in the corner, her brother, Lloyd, her old golden retriever, Holly, and her cat, Mitten. Not necessarily in that order. Her family took a cottage on Lake Huron in the summer. She couldn't even begin to explain this other life to Grant. Not that she would want to. Grant stared at her all the time when he thought she wasn't looking. He was desperate to have sex with her. It was kind of funny really. She would rather stick knives in her eyes.

'She's passing Workout World,' Grant said.

'Tracy's OK,' Leslie said.

'She's a Nazi.'

'No she's not.' Leslie had her eye on a group of hoodies lurching past Rayners' Opticians. One of them was wearing some kind of Halloween fright mask. He leered at an old woman who flinched at the sight of him. 'We always prosecute,' Leslie murmured, as if it was a private joke.

'Ey up,' Grant said. 'Tracy's going into Thornton's. Must need her daily rations topping up.'

Leslie liked Tracy, you knew where you were with her. No bullshit.

‘She’s a right fat pig,’ Grant said.

‘She’s not fat, just big.’

‘Yeah, that’s what they all say.’

Leslie was small and delicate. A cracking bird if ever there was one, in Grant’s opinion. Special. Not like some of the slags you got round here. ‘Sure you don’t want to go for a drink after work?’ he asked, ever hopeful. ‘Cocktail bar in town. Sophisticated place for a sophisticated laydee.’

‘Ey up,’ Leslie said. ‘There’s some dodgy kids going into City Cyber.’



Tracy Waterhouse came out of Thornton’s, stuffing her forage into the big, ugly shoulder bag that she wore strapped, like a bandolier, across her substantial chest. Viennese truffles, her midweek treat. Pathetic really. Other people went to the cinema on an evening, to restaurants, pubs and clubs, visited friends, had sex, but Tracy was looking forward to curling up on her sofa with *Britain’s Got Talent* and a bag of Thornton’s Viennese truffles. And a chicken bhuna that she was going to pick up on the way home and wash down with one or two cans of Beck’s. Or three or four, even though it was a Wednesday. A school night. More than forty years since Tracy left school. When had she last eaten a meal with someone in a restaurant? That bloke from the dating agency, a couple of years ago, in Dino’s in Bishopsgate? She could remember what she’d eaten – garlic bread, spaghetti and meatballs, followed by a crème caramel – yet she couldn’t recall the bloke’s name. ‘You’re a big girl,’ he said when she met him for a drink beforehand in Whitelock’s.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Want to make something of it?’ Downhill from there on really.

She ducked into Superdrug to pick up some Advil for the Beck's headache she would wake up with tomorrow. The girl behind the till didn't even look at her. Service with a scowl. Very easy to steal from Superdrug, lots of handy little things to slip into a bag or a pocket – lipsticks, toothpaste, shampoo, Tampax – you could hardly blame people for thieving, it was as if you were inviting them. Tracy glanced around at the security cameras. She knew there was a blind spot right on Nailcare. You could have taken everything you needed for a year's worth of manicures and no one would be any the wiser. She placed a protective hand on her bag. It contained two envelopes stuffed with twenties – five thousand pounds in all – that she'd just removed from her account at the Yorkshire Bank. She would like to see someone trying to snatch it from her – she was looking forward to beating them to a pulp with her bare hands. No point in having weight, Tracy reasoned, if you weren't prepared to throw it around.

The money was a payment for Janek, the workman who was extending the kitchen in the terraced house in Headingley that she'd bought with the proceeds of the sale of her parents' bungalow in Bramley. It was such a relief that they were finally dead, dying within a few weeks of each other, minds and bodies long past their sell-by date. They had both reached ninety and Tracy had begun to think that they were trying to outlive her. They had always been competitive people.

Janek started at eight in the morning, finished at six, worked on a Saturday – Polish, what else. It was embarrassing how much Tracy was attracted to Janek, despite the fact that he was twenty years younger and at least three inches shorter than she was. He was so careful and had such good manners. Every morning Tracy left out tea and coffee for him and a plate of biscuits wrapped in cling-film. When she returned home the biscuits were all eaten. It made her feel wanted. She was starting a week's

holiday on Friday and Janek promised everything would be finished by the time she returned. Tracy didn't want it to be finished, well, she did, she was sick to death of it, but she didn't want *him* to be finished.

She wondered if he would stay on if she asked him to do her bathroom. He was champing at the bit to go home. All the Poles were going back now. They didn't want to stay in a bankrupt country. Before the Berlin Wall came down you felt sorry for them, now you envied them.

When Tracy was on the force her fellow officers – male and female – all assumed she was a dyke. She was over fifty now and way back when she had joined the West Yorkshire Police as a raw cadet you had to be one of the boys to get along. Unfortunately, once you'd established yourself as a hard-nosed bitch it was difficult to admit to the soft and fluffy woman you were hiding inside. And why would you want to admit to that anyway?

Tracy had retired with a shell so thick that there was hardly any room left inside. Vice, sexual offences, human trafficking – the underbelly of Drugs and Major Crime – she'd seen it all and more. Witnessing the worst of human behaviour was a pretty good way of killing off anything soft and fluffy.

She'd been around so long that she had been a humble foot soldier when Peter Sutcliffe was still patrolling the streets of West Yorkshire. She remembered the fear, she'd been afraid herself. That was in the days before computers, when the sheer weight of paperwork was enough to swamp the investigation. 'There were days before computers?' one of her younger, cheekier colleagues said. 'Wow, Jurassic.'

He was right, she was from another era. She should have gone sooner, only hanging on because she couldn't think how to fill the long empty days of retirement. Sleep, eat, protect, repeat, that was the life she knew. Everyone was fixated on the thirty years, get out, get another job,

enjoy the pension. Anyone who stayed on longer was seen as a fool.

Tracy would have preferred to have dropped in harness but she knew it was time to go. She had been a detective superintendent, now she was a 'police pensioner'. Sounded Dickensian, as if she should be sitting in the corner of a workhouse, wrapped in a dirty shawl. She'd thought about volunteering with one of those organizations that helped mop up after disasters and wars. After all, it was something she felt she'd been doing all her life, but in the end she took the job in the Merrion Centre.

At her farewell piss-up they had given her a laptop and two hundred quid's worth of spa vouchers for the Waterfall Spa on Brewery Wharf. She was pleasantly surprised, even flattered, that they imagined she was the kind of woman who would use a spa. She already had a laptop and she knew the one they gave her was one of those that Carphone Warehouse gave away for free, but it was the thought that counted.

When she took the job as head of security in the Merrion Centre Tracy thought 'fresh start' and made some changes, not just moving house but getting her moustache waxed, growing her hair into a softer style, shopping for blouses with bows and pearl buttons and shoes with kitten heels to wear with the ubiquitous black suit. It didn't work, of course. She could tell that, spa vouchers or no spa vouchers, people still thought she was a butch old battleaxe.

Tracy liked getting up close and personal with the punters. She strolled past Morrisons, the gap where Woolworths used to be, Poundstretcher - the retail preferences of the lumpenproletariat. Was there anyone in the entire soulless place who was happy? Leslie perhaps, although she kept her cards close to her chest. Like Janek, she had a life

somewhere else. Tracy imagined Canada was a good place to live. Or Poland. Perhaps she should emigrate.

It was warm today. Tracy hoped the weather would last for her holiday. A week in a National Trust cottage, lovely setting. She was a member. That was what happened when you grew older and had nothing fulfilling in your life – you joined the National Trust or English Heritage and spent your weekends meandering around gardens and houses that didn't belong to you or gazing in boredom at ruins, trying to reconstruct them in your mind – long-gone monks cooking, pissing, praying inside walls of cold stone. And you spent your holidays on your own, of course. She'd joined a 'singles social club' a couple of years ago. Middle-aged, middle-class people who didn't have any friends. Rambling, art classes, museum visits, all very sedate. She joined thinking it might be nice to go on holiday with other people but it hadn't worked out. Spent all her time trying to get away from them.

The world was going to hell in a handcart. The Watch Hospital, Costa Coffee, Wilkinson's Hardware, Walmsley's, Herbert Brown's ('Lend and Spend' a fancy rhyme for a pawnbroker, eternal friend of the underclass). All human life was here. Britain – shoplifting capital of Europe, over two billion quid lost every year to 'retail shrinkage', a ridiculous term for what was, after all, straightforward thieving. And double that figure if you added the amount of stuff that the staff nicked. Unbelievable.

Think how many starving kids you could feed and educate with all that missing money. But then it wasn't money, was it, not real money. There was no such thing as real money any more, it was just an act of the collective imagination. Now if we all just clap our hands and believe . . . Of course, the five thousand pounds in her bag wasn't going to benefit the Inland Revenue either but modest tax evasion was a citizen's right, not a crime. There was crime and then there was crime. Tracy had seen a lot of the other

sort, all the p's - paedophilia, prostitution, pornography. Trafficking. Buying and selling, that's all people did. You could buy women, you could buy kids, you could buy anything. Western civilization had had a good run but now it had pretty much shopped itself out of existence. All cultures had a built-in obsolescence, didn't they? Nothing was for ever. Except diamonds maybe, if the song was right. And cockroaches probably. Tracy had never owned a diamond, probably never would. Her mother's engagement ring had been sapphires, never off her finger, put on by Tracy's father when he proposed, taken off by the undertaker before he put her in her coffin. Tracy had it valued - two thousand quid, not as much as she'd hoped for. Tracy had tried to squeeze it on to her little finger but it didn't fit. It was somewhere at the back of a drawer now. She bought a doughnut in Ainsleys, put it in her bag for later.

She clocked a woman coming out of Rayners' who had a familiar look about her. Resembled that madam who used to run a brothel out of a house in Cookridge. Tracy had raided it when she was still in uniform, long before she was exposed to the full horrors of Vice. All home comforts, the madam offered her 'gentlemen' a glass of sherry, little dishes of nuts, before they went upstairs and committed degrading acts behind the lace curtains. She had a dungeon in what used to be her coal cellar. Made Tracy feel squeamish, the stuff that was down there. The girls were indifferent, nothing could surprise them. Still, they were better off in that house, behind the lace curtains, than they would have been on the streets. Used to be poverty that drove women on the game, now it was drugs. These days there was hardly a girl on the streets who wasn't an addict. Shopmobility, Claire's Accessories. In Greggs she bought a sausage roll for her lunch.

The madam was dead a long time ago, had a stroke at the City Varieties when they were filming *The Good Old*

Days. All dressed in her Edwardian finery and dead in her seat. No one noticed until the end. Tracy had wondered if they'd caught it on camera. They wouldn't have shown a corpse on TV in those days, these days they probably would.

No, not the ghost of the dead madam, it was that actress from *Collier*. That was why the face looked familiar. The one who played Vince Collier's mother. Tracy didn't like *Collier*, it was a load of crap. She preferred *Law and Order: SVU*. The actress who resembled the Cookridge madam looked older than she did on screen. Her make-up was a mess, as if she'd put it on without a mirror. It gave her a slightly unhinged air. The woman was obviously wearing a wig. Perhaps she had cancer. Tracy's mother, Dorothy Waterhouse, died of cancer. You get to over ninety and you'd think you would die of old age. They talked about treating it with chemo and Tracy had objected to wasting resources on someone so old. She had wondered if she could sneak a DNR bracelet on to her mother's wrist without anyone noticing but then her mother had surprised them all by actually dying. Tracy had waited so long for that moment that it felt like an anticlimax.

Dorothy Waterhouse used to boast that Tracy's father had never seen her without make-up, Tracy didn't know why as she gave the impression of never having liked him. She put a lot of effort into being Dorothy Waterhouse. Tracy instructed the undertaker to leave her mother *au naturel*.

'Not even a bit of lippie?' he said.

Electricity everywhere. All the bright shiny surfaces. Long time since everything was made from wood and lit by firelight and stars. Tracy caught sight of herself in the plate glass of Ryman's, saw the wild-eyed look of a woman falling over the edge. Someone who had started out the day carefully put together and was slowly unravelling during

the course of it. Her skirt was creased over her hips, her highlights looked brassy and her bulging beer belly stuck out in a mockery of pregnancy. Survival of the fattest.

Tracy felt defeated. She glanced down and picked some lint off her jacket. Things could only get worse. Photo Me, Priceless, Sheila's Sandwiches. She could hear a child crying somewhere - part of the soundtrack of shopping malls the world over. It was a sound that was still capable of piercing the shell like a red-hot needle. A group of listless teenage hoodies were hanging around the entrance to City Cyber, jostling and shoving each other in a way that passed for wit amongst them. One of them was wearing a Halloween fright mask, a plastic skull where his face should be. It unnerved her for a moment.

Tracy might have followed the youths into the shop but the screaming child was moving closer, distracting her. She could hear the child but she couldn't see it. Its distress was startling. It was doing her head in.

Regrets, she had a few. Quite a lot actually. Wished she'd found someone who appreciated her, wished she'd had kids and learned how to dress better. Wished she'd stayed on at school, maybe gone on and done a degree. Medicine, geography, art history. It was the usual stuff. Really she was just like everyone else, she wanted to love someone. Even better if they loved you in return. She was considering getting a cat. She didn't really like cats though. That might be a bit of a problem. Quite liked dogs - sensible, clever dogs, not stupid little lapdogs that fitted in a handbag. A good big German shepherd perhaps, woman's best friend. No burglar alarm could better it.

Oh yeah - Kelly Cross. Kelly Cross was the reason for the screaming child. No surprise there. Kelly Cross. Prostitute, druggie, thief, all-round pikey. A scrag-end of a woman. Tracy knew her. Everyone knew her. Kelly had several kids, most of them in care and they were the lucky ones, which was saying something. She was storming along

the main drag of the Merriion Centre, a woman possessed, anger coming off her like knives. It was surprising how much power she radiated, given how small and thin she was. She was wearing a sleeveless vest that revealed some tasteful trailer-trash bruises and a set of prison tats. On her forearm, a crudely drawn heart with an arrow through it and the initials 'K' and 'S'. Tracy wondered who the unlucky 'S' was. She was talking on her phone, mouthing off to someone. She had almost certainly nicked something. The chances of that woman walking out of a shop with a valid till receipt were almost zero.

She was pulling the kid by the hand, wrenching her along because there was no way that the child could keep up with Kelly's furious pace. Imagine, you've not long learned to walk and now you're expected to run like an adult. Occasionally, Kelly jerked her off the ground so that for a second the kid seemed to fly. Screaming. Non-stop. Red-hot needle through the shell. Through the eardrum. Into the brain.

Kelly Cross parted the throng of shoppers like an unholy Moses striding through the Red Sea. Many of the onlookers were clearly horrified but no one had the nerve to tackle a berserker like Kelly. You couldn't blame them.

Kelly stopped so suddenly that the kid kept running forward as if she was on elastic. Kelly thumped her hard on the backside, sending her into the air as if she was on a swing and then, without a word, she set off running again. Tracy heard a surprisingly loud middle-class voice, a woman's, say, 'Someone should do something.'

Too late. Kelly had already stomped her way past Morrisons and out on to Woodhouse Lane. Tracy followed her, cantering to keep up, her lungs ready to collapse by the time she caught her at a bus stop. Jesus, when did she get so unfit? About twenty years ago probably. She should haul her old Rosemary Conley tapes out of the boxes in the spare room.

‘Kelly,’ she wheezed.

Kelly spun round, snarling, ‘What the fuck do you want?’ A faint glimmer of recognition on her venomous face as she glared at Tracy. Tracy could see the wheels ticking round until they came up with ‘copper’. It made Kelly even more enraged, if that was possible.

She looked worse close up – flat hair, grey corpse-skin, bloodshot vampire eyes and a junkie edginess to her that made Tracy want to step back but she held her ground. The kid, tear-stained and mucky, had stopped crying and was staring slack-mouthed at Tracy. Made her seem gormless but Tracy guessed adenoidal. Her appearance wasn’t helped by the green caterpillar of snot crawling out of her nose. Three years old? Four? Tracy wasn’t sure how you told the age of a kid. Maybe it was from their teeth, like horses. They were small. Some were bigger than others. That was about as far as she was willing to go in the guessing stakes.

The kid was dressed in various shades of pink, with the addition of a little pink rucksack stuck on her back like a barnacle, so that the general impression was of a misshapen marshmallow. Someone – surely not Kelly – had attempted to plait the kid’s stringy hair. The pink and the plaits signalled her gender, something not immediately obvious from her podgy, androgynous features.

She was a small lumpy kind of kid but there was a spark of something in her eyes. Life perhaps. Cracked but not broken. Yet. What chance did this kid have with Kelly as her mother? Realistically? Kelly was still holding the kid’s hand, not so much holding it as gripping it in a vice as if the kid was about to fly up into the air.

A bus was approaching, indicating, slowing down.

Something gave inside Tracy. A small floodgate letting out a race of despair and frustration as she contemplated the blank but already soiled canvas of the kid’s future. Tracy didn’t know how it happened. One moment she was

standing at a bus stop on Woodhouse Lane, contemplating the human wreckage that was Kelly Cross, the next she was saying to her, 'How much?'

'How much what?'

'How much for the kid?' Tracy said, delving into her handbag and unearthing one of the envelopes that contained Janek's money. She opened it and showed it to Kelly. 'There's three thousand here. You can have it all in exchange for the kid.' She kept the second envelope with the remaining two thousand out of sight in case she needed to up the ante. She didn't need to, however, as Kelly suddenly meerkatted to attention. Her brain seemed to disassociate for a second, her eyes flicking rapidly from side to side, and then, with unexpected speed, her hand shot out and she grabbed the envelope. In the same second she dropped the kid's hand. Then she laughed with genuine glee as the bus drew to a halt behind her. 'Ta very much,' she said as she jumped aboard.

While Kelly stood on the platform fumbling for change, Tracy raised her voice and said, 'What's her name? What's your daughter's name, Kelly?' Kelly pulled her ticket out of the machine and said, 'Courtney.'

'Courtney?' Typical chav name - Chantelle, Shannon, Tiffany. Courtney.

Kelly turned round, ticket clutched in her hand. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Courtney.' Then she gave her a puzzled look, as if Tracy was a Polo short of a packet. Started to say something, 'But she's not—' but the bus doors closed on her words. The bus drove off. Tracy stared after it. Gormless, not adenoidal. She registered a sudden spike of anxiety. She had just bought a kid. She didn't move until a small, warm, sticky hand found its way into hers.

'Where did Tracy go?' Grant asked, scanning the bank of monitors. 'She just disappeared.'

Leslie shrugged. 'I don't know. Keep an eye on that drunk outside Boots, will you?'



'Someone should do something.' Tilly was surprised to find herself speaking out loud. And so loud too. Resolutely middle-class. *Resonate!* She could hear her old voice coach at drama college exclaiming, *Resonate! Your chest is a bell, Matilda!* Franny Anderson. *Miss Anderson*, you would never call her anything more familiar. Spine like a ramrod, spoke Morningside English. Tilly still did the voice exercises Miss Anderson had taught them – *ar-aw-oo-ar-ay-ee-ar* – every morning, first thing, before she even had a cup of tea. The flat she lived in, in Fulham, had walls like paper, the neighbours must think she was mad. Over half a century since Tilly was a drama student. Everyone thought life began in the sixties but London in the fifties had been thrilling for a naïve eighteen-year-old girl from Hull, straight out of grammar school. Eighteen then was younger than it was now.

Tilly had shared a little place in Soho with Phoebe March, *Dame* Phoebe now of course – hell to pay if you forget the title. She'd been Helena to Phoebe's Hermia at Stratford, oh God, decades ago now. Started off on an equal footing, you see, and now Phoebe was forever playing English queens and wearing frocks and tiaras. She had Oscars (supporting) and Baftas coming out of her ears, while Tilly was stuffed into a pinafore apron and slippers pretending to be Vince Collier's mother. Hey-ho.

Not really an equal footing. Tilly's father had owned a wet fish shop in the Land of Green Ginger – a street more romantic in name than in reality – whilst Phoebe, although she *called* herself a 'northern girl', was really from the landowning classes – house designed by John Carr of York near Malton – and she was the niece of a cousin of the old

king, huge house on Eaton Square that she could repair to if things got tricky in Soho. The stories Tilly could tell about Phoebe – *Dame Phoebe* – would make your hair curl.

Miss Anderson would be long dead now, of course. She wasn't the kind to rot messily in the grave either. Tilly imagined she would have become a parched mummy, eyeless and shrivelled, and as weightless as dead bracken. But still with perfect diction.

Tilly knew her outrage was impotent, she wasn't going to be the one to tackle the fearsome tattooed woman. Too old, too fat, too slow. Too frightened. But someone should, someone braver. A *man*. Men weren't what they used to be. If they ever had been. Agitated, she glanced around the shopping centre. Dear God, this was an awful place. She would never have come back but she had to pick up her new specs from Rayners'. She wouldn't have come here at all but a production assistant, nice girl, Padma – Indian, all the nice girls were Asian now – had made the appointment for her. *There you go, Miss Squires, anything else I can do to help?* What a sweetheart. Tilly had sat on her old specs. Easy thing to do. Blind as a bat without them. Difficult driving the old jalopy when you couldn't see a thing.

And after all this time buried in the country she had fancied being in a city. But perhaps not this one. Guildford or Henley perhaps, somewhere civilized.

They had her holed up in the middle of nowhere for the duration of her filming. Guest appearance on *Collier*, twelve-month contract, her character killed off at the end of it, not that she knew that when she took it on. *Oh, darling, you must*, all her theatre friends said. *It'll be amusing – and think of the money!* You bet she was thinking of the money! She was more or less living hand-to-mouth these days. Nothing in the theatre for three years now. Scripts were tricky, the old memory not what it was. She had awful trouble learning her lines. Never used to have a problem, started off in rep when she was eighteen.

The ingénue. (Rote learning at school, of course, out of fashion now.) Different play every week, knew all her lines and everyone else's as well. She had once, long ago, just to prove she could, learned the whole of *The Three Sisters* by heart, and she was only playing Natasha!

'Senile old bat,' she heard someone say yesterday. It was true everything was dimming. *The lights are going out all over Europe. Suffer the little children.* Should she find a policeman? Or phone 999? It seemed an awfully dramatic thing to do.

The last thing she'd done for the telly was a *Casualty* where she'd played an old dear who had manned an ack-ack gun in the war and who'd died of hypothermia in a high-rise flat, which led to a lot of hand-wringing from the characters (*How can this happen in this day and age? This woman defended her country in the war.* Et cetera). Of course she wasn't really old enough to play the role. She was still a child during the war, could only remember certain awful things about it, Mother harrying her into the shelter in the middle of the night, the smell of damp earth inside. Hull took a terrible beating.

Flat-footed Father was given a desk job in the Army Catering Corps. Not much fish to sell during the war anyway, trawlers requisitioned by the navy. The ones that kept on fishing were blown out of the water, fishermen's bodies coiling down into the cold, icy depths. *Those are pearls that were his eyes.* She had played Miranda at school. *Have you thought about the stage, Matilda?* Her headmistress didn't think she was much good for anything else. *Not exactly academically inclined, are you, Matilda?*

Tilly wished she had been old enough to fight in the war, to be a bold girl on an ack-ack gun.

The producers of *Collier* had seduced her in the Club at the Ivy over a cocktail called the Twinkle, rather disturbing nomenclature for Tilly as that was the name her prudish