

Safer Than Houses

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Bang, bang, bang. Worse than the sound of a gun.

It was, as Jane Austen described, a good address, had been once, and perhaps, unfortunately, might well be so again. Tucked away in Bloomsbury, that area of art, literature, science and Bohemian respectability, lit with verdant green squares, Bedford, Russell, Georgian houses sitting around like grand old ladies knitting, feet firmly planted on the ground. There, there were tall, wide doors, reached by steps, flanked by curved iron railings, places of visible reception rooms, drawing rooms and significant chandeliers, panelled and painted walls, old societies, and learned activities within. A place of contrasts. Into the squares, like a spider's web, led the smaller streets of terraced houses, places of less certain fortunes. In Jane Austen's times, the second-grade families and hangers-on might have lived here, without benefit of a carriage, on the outer skirts of the West End, enduring a comparative lack of riches, and in later times, downright poverty in a dozen different manifestations. Now he lived in

a half of a house, or more aptly, the greater fraction of a long skinny building, with himself in as uncertain a condition as the street. And he lived with a heavy-footed monster.

Dump, dump, dump. Crash.

He looked up at the ceiling. The plasterwork was old and uneven. It had always been like that, but never before had that thundering footfall, more hoofs than feet, dislodged a flake of plaster to fall on his upturned face like a flake of dry snow. *Gerrummph, gerrummph, gerrummph*, the sound of footsteps, grinding above his head, undeterred, undrowned by the sound of Handel on his CD player, the very notes preaching harmony and sounding like a nonsense. Pictures on the walls, old, wood panelling, lovingly restored, the whole edifice crooked and wonky and sturdy, despite the creaks, the makings of a fire in the grate, which he could not light, because she complained and banged and said it seeped smoke into her room. The pocked mirror above the redundant fireplace reflected a face he no longer recognised as his own, shiny with tears.

He could go down to the lower-ground floor, to the elegant kitchen with the old fire range and food and warmth, but the sound of the television would still penetrate, and the stain on the ceiling would remind him of the Devil. Three times her bathroom had flooded, though the merciful eccentricity of the plumbing had diverted the water not into this floor, but down into the haven of his kitchen, where the ceiling sagged, brown and stained, and he had brushed out the water into the dark garden in his vigorous way. He was not old, yet; he felt he had aged a hundred years.

The footsteps resumed; the TV boomed. His head felt fit to burst, unable to take in any other, internal sound. He unhooked his coat, opened his own door and tiptoed out into

the passage he shared with her, towards the front door they also shared. He would go out for a walk; there was nothing else to do. He had once been described as the perfect guest, and he was not old, yet.

Outside on the steps, he closed the door quietly behind himself, of habit. He was a quiet man who also liked to talk; she knew that. The satanic creature owned the top half of this house; he owned the rest. They were supposed to live like neighbours, in peace, security, and civility, and she was intent on reducing it to rubble and his soul with it.

The cold turned his breath into vapour. He could hear the distant traffic in the square, humming and rumbling, imagined buses depositing people at the dozen hotels that stretched along what everyone knew as Hotel Row on the far side, saw taxis and cars taking the world out and back on a Saturday night. Another life was audibly out of reach and he wished the traffic would detour down here instead of devouring itself up there. He craved noise outside; silence within. He took hold of the cold iron railing, which he loved at least as much as he loved all inanimate things, and began to descend the mere three steps to the pavement. Encountered a wet polythene bag on the second step, and fell. She must have left it there.

Buckled, more than fell. Twisted over on his foot, heard a distinct sound, like a *twang*, steadied himself, gripped the railing, and sat, slowly. He did not need to examine it to know something was broken; only bones made such a sound. Metatarsal, probably. He sat for a while. You bloody fool.

Then he fumbled for his mobile phone, beginning to shiver. Shock. Needed to get back in, tested the weight, tried to get up, not good. Bones were bones. Fingers cold, breath steaming his glasses, eyes inside specs not doing good.

Nine . . . nine . . . nine . . . *I am not that old, but I am very thin these days.* He sat where he was on the cold step, waiting for the ambulance. In an area of hospitals, they were never far away. He remembered how the Devil had said that the existence of hospitals in this part of the world had come up as a local health hazard on the survey of her flat. All that medical waste and all those chemicals, spouting into the air. Traffic'll kill you first, he said, remembering it, waiting for the ambulance, which took a time, all the same.

They were kind, but busy. He was not young, but not old enough for special consideration. Busy night, things not what they were, gov. Can we just leave it, and you go to Accident and Emergency in the morning?

The door behind him opened as they prised off his shoe.

The woman stood, in all her splendour, capable and dependable, with her iron hair held back.

He needs strong tea and sugar, they said. And that foot strapped up. Pointless taking him to Accident and Emergency at this time of a Saturday night. Big queue.

I'm his neighbour, she said brightly. I'll look after him.

He thought he shouted, No, no, no, but no sound emerged.

They took him back up the three steps, following her directions, into the hallway. Yes, she was saying, kindly. I know what to do, we don't need to trouble you. The foot needs ice and elevation, crêpe bandage, treatment tomorrow. I'm a nurse, you know.

They left him on the chair in his own hallway. The soul of geniality, she showed them to the front door, and while she did so, Henry hobbled the necessary steps to the open door of his flat, got inside, and slammed it shut behind him. Leant against it, double locked it, listened at the keyhole. There

was a pause before he heard the front door bang closed, and after a moment, her voice, horribly close, the feel of her breath though the keyhole.

I'll look after you, she said. And laughed. Then he heard her heavy, slow footsteps going back upstairs.

Without the coat, he might have shaken himself to pieces. Why the hell had he not screamed at them to say, take me away? Because shouting and screaming were unnatural for a quiet man who could scarcely murmur protest at the best of times, although he loved to talk. And he could not afford to go and leave her here. She would flood his house, kill his cat, claim his territory and leave him homeless. Instead he was a prisoner.

Shock gave way to pain and weariness. He sat huddled in his coat, until he managed to bump his way downstairs into the kitchen, travelling on his bottom, looking for the old crêpe bandage which lived in a drawer and the frozen peas in the freezer. He was highly practical and knew what to do. After some fumbling around, he sat with the rogue foot propped on a chair, feeling it throb. The cat watched, unhelpfully. He lit a cigarette and watched it glow, wondered if it was true that everyone was capable of murder, laughed, as if he had been tickled. Then wept.

He had always been the perfect guest, even in his own rooms. A bachelor, an effete man who loved women and was timid of them at the same time.

What kept him going now was the vision of a woman, coming indoors and hugging him. He would be like the princess who slept for a hundred years, only he was a prince. It was the princess who would come along and break the spell of this passive horror, by hugging him awake. She would lead him away to a place of safety. He dreamt of being kissed

awake, and then hidden away. She would bring back his nerve, and dispel the spell.

On the other side of the city, near, but far, a robust old lady held an unpleasant one-page letter up to the light of her ancient standard lamp, the better to read it from the comfort of her armchair. The urge to tear the paper into small pieces was certainly strong, but on mature reflection she decided it could all wait until the morning, since emergencies were always the inventions of men.

CHAPTER ONE

Dear Helen of Troy, Lady of the Lake, slayer of a thousand suitors' hearts, oh lovely jubbly jellybean babyface . . .

She tucked the card back in the envelope. It was a talisman to brighten the day, even a day like this that was part of a succession of days that began dark, paled into grey and then became dark again. Days when she wanted to remain under the blankets, imagining the sound of the sea and the deliciousness of sleep. Never going out. Sarah Fortune shook her head and kissed the paper. Thank you, she said, silently: thank you for reminding me of jellybeans, and how to be cheerful for Dulcie.

She sipped her tea. The Fountain restaurant at Fortnum and Mason on a Monday was the perfect venue for watching Dulcie Mathewson proceed over the floor towards her with a certain regal clumsiness. Dulcie's handbag rivalled any held by a duchess; it was a sharp-edged block of leather which doubled as a weapon, and when she sat, it required a seat all

of its own. It looked as if it should contain something live, like a chihuahua, or a cat.

'You look wonderful,' Dulcie said, seating herself heavily and pushing back her delicate chair into the one behind at the next table, without apology. 'Wonderful, as usual. I do love that colour on you,' nodding deference to a rust-coloured scarf of silk petals. 'But you do look a little *peaky*, now I come to observe. Is that Earl Grey? Give me China tea. I suppose it's too early for gin.'

Sarah regarded her fondly. It was difficult to resist hugging Dulcie, but Dulcie did not always like it, not in public.

'How are you, Dulcie?'

'Blooming, as you can see. Never better. Or as good as I damn well can be without Ernest. Can't believe it's nearly two years since that ghastly funeral. Now it's one damned committee after another. Not enough time for shopping. By the time I've finished with the arts committee, the legal charities wotsit and the hospital trust, thank God I've no time for grandchildren either. Little bastards.'

She laughed, refreshingly loud and long. The adjacent group began to leave, perhaps exactly as they intended, although Sarah was not sure. She never knew if the ripples created by Dulcie were a natural result of her presence, or contrived. There was nothing Dulcie did without a purpose, although not necessarily one fully defined in advance. She had a way of clearing space.

'That's what you get from once being a magistrate,' she boomed, reaching into the handbag, which did, indeed, occupy its own seat like a lady-in-waiting. 'Everyone's looking for a bloody chairman or treasurer, and I'm in. Chief Nit. It's also what comes from being a lawyer's widow.'

A status Sarah Fortune also enjoyed, although differently.

The family at the next table were halfway across the room, fanning out as they fled. Dulcie poured and drank the tea, laced with sugar. The bulk of her was both soft and solid, and Sarah was ridiculously pleased to see her. Her sheer presence was a reassuring blessing. She might always want something done, and that made no difference.

'That's better,' Dulcie Mathewson said, spreading herself. 'How sweet of them to go.'

'So give me the good news first,' Sarah said.

'Right. Ernest's stocks and shares have held up well, all things considering. Poor darling, he'd have turned in his grave if he knew about current politics, or the way the firm went, which was only the way it was going before he had that last heart attack. Nothing to do with the bacon sandwiches you used to buy him, dear. Kept him sane.'

Dulcie took off her glasses and rubbed them with her napkin, thoroughly. Sarah thought briefly of her office on the top floor of Ernest Mathewson's legal firm, where, for a decade, she had once been the ever-junior lawyer who would never make partnership, all complicated by the additional, self-created, unofficial responsibility of *looking after Ernest*. And thus she had met and collaborated with Mrs Dulcie Mathewson, wife of the bemused senior partner, Ernest himself. She had also known their son, Malcolm. There was always a pang of nostalgia, rather than regret, when Sarah thought of Malcolm, and she often wondered if that was because the loving, followed by the leaving of him, had lost her the opportunity of having Dulcie for a mother-in-law. It seemed a lifetime ago, instead of a mere six years. With the uncanny ability, honed over long acquaintance, to read her thoughts, Dulcie beamed at her.

'No need to ask after him every time, you know. I'm far

better off with you as a lifelong friend, and so are you. Malcolm's inherited some of his father's pomposity, now he's a father himself, and you'd have hated one another by now, as well you knew. Such a sweet little wife he has, as I told you. Can't talk to her. This ghastly subservience. Your own career, my dear, has been so much more *innovative*. Do let me know when you need more clients. All those committees; I meet suitable candidates all the time.'

'Fancy you criticising deference in a wife,' Sarah said. 'You used to treat Ernest like Lord and Master.'

'We all have to *pretend*, you of all people know that. It's the art of maintaining control.'

'Fools are more hard to conquer than persuade,' Sarah quoted.

'Oh Lord,' Dulcie said, tipping the teacup over her nose. 'If you take men for fools, you're really in trouble. I think I need a new hat.'

'You don't need a hat. No one *needs* a hat.'

'You never know. I anticipate at least three funerals and one Buckingham Palace garden party this year. That kind of thing; you might like to come to the latter. Anyway, need and want is the same thing.'

She leant forward over a comfortably spread waist, practically resting her large bosom on the table. 'You do realise, Sarah, that after two years of the widowhood business, spending money's still a marvellous novelty. It's taken up until now to sort everything out. Ernest always had me scrimping and economising and now I've got oodles. Never felt secure before. I'd rather he was alive, of course, but the only compensation for death is the opportunity to behave quite differently. He gave me the freedom, the dear man.'

'I suppose my benefactor gave that to me,' Sarah said,

adjusting her scarf, sensing Dulcie's desire to move on to the next thing. 'I still can't get over him leaving me a *flat*. A bunch of flowers, maybe. Not a whole apartment.' The scarf was an impossible confection of silk leaves in rust and black, appliquéd to thinner silk, looking like a rag from a distance, on closer view a work of art lying nonchalantly on her collar bone. Dulcie's handbag seemed to leap back into her lap, unbidden.

'Well, you did look after him, dear, and you did deserve it. Ernest had some very nice clients as well as some nasty ones,' Dulcie added, not wishing to dwell on it. 'Such a good old judge he was, to give you security. Unheated garrets and mortgages really aren't any good to the creative soul, are they? And isn't it wonderful to be left something in a will? Preferably a lot. I shan't mind dying when the time comes, if my death invests someone else with choices. At least dear Ernest had the sense to tie some of it up, so I can't spend it all.'

'You could do up the house,' Sarah suggested. 'Modernise a bit?'

Ernest would have vetoed that. Nothing was ever renewed in Dulcie's house after she got her way the first time on account of being a bride. He hated that kind of change, and so did she.

'Can't be arsed,' Dulcie said. 'I'd rather have a dog than an electrician. Let's get frivolous.'

They moved, adroitly, to the ladies' fashion floor, where Dulcie assumed rather more delicate movements in the vicinity of clothes, tucking the handbag inside her coat to avoid it swinging from her shoulder and knocking things over. She had a horror of being required to pay for something she had merely damaged. They admired the hats without enthusiasm, since none had the extravagance to fire Dulcie's

imagination, and besides, she had changed her mind about what she wanted. That was the whole point about shopping. A new coat would be better, dear, but the coats on display in late February were fitter for spring than for the raw, damp weather outside.

'Why is it always impossible to buy something to wear *now*?' Dulcie complained. 'Who the hell wants a cotton coat *now*? At least charity shops don't make you think of summer when it never happens. Wait a minute, look at this. That would look lovely on you.'

She paused by a charcoal-grey coat, long length, fitted, flaring below the knee, high-necked, soft light wool which swung like silk as Dulcie attempted to lift it from the hanger. A tired assistant loomed at her elbow as she began to tug at the wire cable that anchored it to the rail through the sleeve, and if madam would wait, she would unlock it.

'Oh, very funny. They lock up bloody coats now. Put chains on them as if they were delinquents. What do they think they're going to do? Escape?'

'We were looking for a coat for you,' Sarah said, shaking her head.

'We were just *looking* for the hell of it, Sarah. Do as you're told.'

Sarah shrugged into the coat. It was panelled into seamless seams, so that, left undone, with hands in the pockets, it slouched like an arm-in-arm friend, and swung lazily. With a dozen buttons in the same fabric fastened up the front, it neatened itself into formality, looking almost judicial, the elegant lawyer's coat, commanding respect, slightly severe if only it were not so soft. Unaccountably, Dulcie's eyes filled with tears.

'Turn round,' she said, fishing in her pocket for a capa-

cious handkerchief and blowing her nose. Sarah turned, a brief pirouette on high-heeled boots which she wore like slippers, to run down any road. Sarah, always ready for flight. Dulcie loved her so much it hurt. She knew it was returned in equal measure, not that either of them was likely to say so.

'Ernest always loved to see you in charcoal grey,' she said, in between blowing her nose. The assistant retreated and left them alone. 'He said it suited you best. Better than black. He'd phone me to tell me what you were wearing each morning, and then you'd phone me to tell me what state he was in during the afternoon, so I'd know.'

Both of them mourning him. 'He did love clothes, didn't he?' Sarah said. 'And he was right. Grey suits me better now. Soft dark grey. The new black.' She began to take off the coat. Even in the warm room, it felt chilly to be without it.

'I wish you were my daughter,' Dulcie burst out. 'And I'm also bloody glad you aren't. You'd scare me to death with worry, to say nothing of envy. I really wish I had your career. What are you doing, taking that sodding coat off? It belongs to you. This coat does not wish to remain imprisoned on a rail,' Dulcie said. 'It would be cruel to it.'

'It's lovely . . .' Sarah said, slowly.

'Too severe? Too warm? Too classic? Not the right label? Not right for your image? Grey, rather than black? Doesn't fit right? What's wrong with it?'

'It's . . .'

'Too dark, too impractical? Prefer it in red? You're mad. *What's wrong with it?*'

Dulcie was roaring. The assistant stayed away.

'It's too expensive,' Sarah said. '*Way* too expensive. That's the only objection. Yup, I have my glittering career, but that's

not exactly cash rich at the moment. Maybe I'm getting too old, but—'

'Too *old*? Are you barking mad or what? You've only just started. You've been working at a discount again, haven't you? And anyway, *I'm* buying the coat.'

'I can't let you do that,' Sarah said, evenly.

'Bollocks. Ernest paid you peanuts all those years ago. He exploited you. He put you in danger with Charles Tysall, *twice*.'

'He never meant harm to anyone, and he gave me a client base, and I owe you both, rather than the other way round . . .'

'Got bugger all to do with *owing*,' Dulcie bellowed. 'And I'm nearly thirty years older, and much, much bigger than you, so **WHY CAN'T YOU JUST TAKE SOMETHING?**'

She tore the coat out of Sarah's arms and strode to a till. Sarah followed, protesting, overruled by that resonant, magisterial voice. 'Are you saying my money's not good enough? Call a doctor to this woman. She needs treatment. I'm trying to buy her a coat she wants, and she won't let me. What kind of daughter is that?'

The coat was wrapped in swathes of tissue and an unnecessarily solid, huge bag, as if to give it space to breathe. Mrs Dulcie Mathewson's card was presented and accepted and no one referred to the price. Hurrying to leave, as if they had stolen the thing, they collided with each other in the door; Dulcie stopped and beamed.

'I've been longing to do that for years,' she said. 'And now, let's have a drink.'

It was dark outside; February dark, head-in-oven time of year, Dulcie said. The windy rain gussied spitefully on the

corner as they turned left and left again. 'Should have bought a sensible hat,' Dulcie grumbled, patting her abundant grey-rinse curls which shone blue in the streetlight. It was the sort of musty dark which seemed endless, in which Sarah felt she needed to move from one sanctuary to another. They moved on an automatic route, both knowing where they were going, without discussion. Dulcie wondered if she was the only person in the world who worried about Sarah Fortune. The soft lights of the Lamb public house beckoned through the nasty drizzle, the figured windows half obscured by the window boxes full of straggling winter greenery which had given up the fight to survive. Inside, at the far end of the L-shaped bar, there were a couple of regulars to whom the same applied. Two men nursing pints looked as if lunch was a distant memory, tea a complete irrelevance, and life might begin again when the crowd came in after working hours. Not long to wait. Dulcie sighed with pleasure. Both of them felt more at home. Dulcie tipped her head at the fat man slouched at the nearest end of the bar, and looked Sarah straight in the eye.

'I'd rather die a virgin,' she whispered.

It was the sort of unreconstructed pub which ignored its rich environs of retail therapy, as well as the pressure to serve food, and instead went along with catering for those in urgent need of strong drink, served without flourish or style, consumed in a dark corner. The bar was solid mahogany, embellished with ornate shelving above, and the fat barman with a seen-it-all expression leant through the gap and then turned his back, avoiding eye contact. The prevailing smell was old beer, tinged with the sweetness of spirit, cigarettes and cleaning fluid. You could cut it with a knife.

'Two large gins, please.'

Sarah elbowed Dulcie aside in order to pay, and Dulcie allowed it. They retreated to the high stools flanking the window ledge and looked out at the rain, Dulcie, at least, feeling an enormous sense of achievement. Sarah raised her glass.

'Thank you,' she said, 'for my ridiculously expensive, gorgeous coat. I shall wear it with pride and joy, to celebrate my fortieth birthday.'

'Time to be ambitious. At least you've grown up enough to accept a gift graciously.'

'Oh come on, Dulcie, I do that all the time.'

'But not usually from a woman. You prefer to earn it, I suppose.'

'Of course.'

Dulcie leant forward and sipped her gin. Mother's ruin. The first sip of a gin in a pub like this was absolute nectar. The stuff was never the same at home, even if the mixture was stronger, which all went to show that the alcohol content had little to do with the pleasure.

'Sarah, dear, do you remember Henry Brett? Friend of Ernest's. That shy man. The expert in something useful. Used to come to dinner with us. He always looked in need of a feed.'

'Henry Brett? I remember the name, but I don't think I ever knew him. I know, wasn't he the one Ernest got in to advise on the firm's art collections after I left?'

Dulcie nodded. The art collection had been a bad idea. Ernest had used a lot of experts on that and in various insurance cases, never thought they were worth the money, and always evaded paying them.

'Ernest used to get me to feed him in lieu of payment. He was the sort of academic type who could never send a

bill, that man. Lives alone with a cat. Ernest cheated him. A bit.'

'And?'

Dulcie stroked the condensation on the outside of the glass, lovingly.

'He wrote to me so sweetly after Ernest died. I tried to keep in touch after that. Like I did with several people Ernest owed money to. I liked Henry. He was the perfect guest. He used to bring flowers already arranged in water, so that you didn't have to put down what you were doing. Can you imagine? But now when I phone, he doesn't reply. He's either in trouble or maybe he's ill or something and is too proud to say. It would be like him.'

Sarah sighed. Dear Dulcie, the networker.

'What could I do for him?'

'Oh, just knock on his door and find out if he's all right,' Dulcie said airily. 'He doesn't live far from you.' She slipped a card with an address into the bag with the coat. Always trying to fix her up. Then she banged down the gin glass on the smeared surface of the window ledge. Outside, the rain stuttered to a halt. She turned her eyes on Sarah. Dulcie's eyes were pale blue and shrewd.

'You would tell me if there was anything wrong with you, wouldn't you?'

They could lie to one another with fluent ease.

'I'm a very lucky woman,' Sarah said. 'And there is absolutely nothing wrong.' She hesitated. 'You know I'd do anything for you, don't you?'

Dulcie kissed her, gruffly.

'If I didn't think you'd kill for me, I'd never have bought you a coat.'

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