

ONE

A Shop on the Nore Road

Widow McKinley's Curiosity Shop had been closed since Bugger's funeral. The black iron grill stayed locked to the shabby window frames and the plastic blinds, for years yellowed and cracked by the sun, now collected the dust of an airless room. Even the most curious of passers-by could not see inside. The shop was so run down that other traders wanted Maggie McKinley to sell the place so that something could be done with it. But the city folk who shopped on the Nore Road – at the greengrocers and butchers, at the haberdashery and the wet florist – didn't think that the little black and white shop was a blemish on the thoroughfare. Not a pimple, not even a prick. McKinley's had been there in the thirties; maybe the place was shut now, but it would come alive again. That was the way of things.

The old lady lived upstairs, in the front bedroom that overlooked the busy road and, although Timberdick said that she ventured out twice a week, no-one had seen her in the streets since May. Every day, she sat in her cluttered room and played Ted's old 78's. She liked to listen to the dance songs that he had sung to her before the war. She looked at the tradesmen in the street below and remembered how Ted had re-assured her about the changing times. "Never mind what the wireless says." He had a delicate, squeaky voice that fooled many people. "Things will stay the same for us. You look out of the window, Maggs, and count all the things that don't change. They talk of making tele coloured. What difference is that going to make to you and me? Take Telstar, it's three years old and we've nothing to do with it, have we? So don't worry." Here, he would clear his nostrils before going on. "I've heard our Timberdick tell you that reps in fast

cars do her well. Well, they're just commercial travellers, Maggs – just commercial travellers and they were the same before the war.”

Ted had been right. Across the street, the poulterer still hung up his fowls before eight every morning and his younger brother, three doors up, still laid wet fish in the open and decorated them with shells and sprigs. Gilbert Brotherton, who always wore brown overalls, brought a van load of second-hand furniture to his corner emporium two or three times a week, just as he had done for sixteen years. “Another house cleared,” Maggie McKinley muttered. “Another soul dead. But you'll not get my booty, Brown Gilbert. I'll make sure I'm sorted before I go.”

It hadn't rained for weeks and it should have done if things were fair because poor Ted, the poor bugger, was a man who should be remembered in sad weather. But he had died at the beginning of the summer and there had hardly been a wet afternoon to match Maggie's mood since. She wanted to watch in the rain when the florist came out to her awning to usher the shelterers away and Barbara Bellamy stood at the window of her haberdashery as if she were mesmerised by water running down the glass panes. Malcolm the barber was always busy in the wet, Maggie noticed.

She had known the shopkeepers for years but rarely spoke to them now. The errand boys cycled past the Curiosity Shop without a glance. And the papergirl had nothing to deliver; Maggie had cancelled all that nonsense. The postman no longer brought letters to the front door. He walked down the covered footpath, minding the dog dirt and stubs of old vegetables (McKinley's was next to a greengrocer) and he poked any letters through the gap beneath the back door. Each time, he broke away a little more of the rotting wood but what else could he do? Mrs McKinley had no letterbox. When Timbers arrived, after hours, she would sometimes find a package wedged behind the chicken mesh that protected the little window beside the door. This was the window to the empty larder. When the back rooms were open for business, Timbers placed a dish of stewed prunes and a bicycle lamp on the cold marble slab. Then she would switch on the lamp and wait with the girls in the kitchen.

A dowdy policewoman stood quietly on the opposite pavement. She had been close to the little road junction for more than an hour,

occasionally stepping fifty yards in one direction or another but always keeping the Curiosity Shop in sight. She should not have been there at all because a W.P.C. was not allowed to patrol on her own. But Miss Redinutt was a girl for breaking the rules. She knew that something was going on in there and she wanted to join in but, like a child in a new neighbourhood, she wasn't brave enough to cross the road and ask. If anyone had questioned her, afterwards, she would have been able to account for all the comings and goings. Not that there was much to tell.

The night had an uneasy feel, although the women could not put it into words for a long time. Did a girl shudder as she imagined the devil's hand on her shoulder? Did unnatural shadows fall from the grey clouds above? No, their nerves were not as tangible as those fancies. The haberdasher said, with hindsight, that the night had a waiting emptiness. Nothing was there when there should have been something. Weeks later, when people were dead and locked up and the detectives had moved on, the policewoman recalled her unease. She said, the Gods had gone to bed and left the back door open.

By a quarter to eleven the pavements had emptied and only an occasional car drove along the road. There was nothing but shops on the Nore Road and when the shops closed, people dried up like plants that come out only to be nourished. The evening was so quiet that, a hundred yards from McKinley's, a man could cross the road without looking.

TWO

The Walking Stick Man

The Walking Stick Man comes quietly but with the stage presence of a classical actor and no less confident of his place in the world. He is a large man, smartly dressed in new shoes, a creaseless raincoat and a felt hat that is deliberately two sizes too large. And in his left hand he carries a black lacquered cane with a silver handle. The handle is the shape of a naked woman bending over, so that the knuckle is her proffered bottom. As the gentleman walks, he strokes her intimacy with the pad of his thumb. It is a quiet eroticism, easily missed by an unschooled eye, but to others it serves to warn. The Walking Stick Man cannot breathe without an audience, he likes to think, so every stance, every fidget and quirk, is set to amuse and please. Like all practised performers, he knows the value of pause and silence. He knows not to compete with distractions so, when a noisy car goes past, he turns to look in a shop window. But for all his tricks of the trade, something says that this man has never been an actor. Perhaps he can exaggerate his own character but never assume another. Or does something messy in his past mean that no company would include his talents? So, where do his dramatic whims take him? He is too large to be a ventriloquist. He has neither the agility of a juggler nor the wholesomeness of a serious singer. No. He is just an enthusiast – a collector of theatrical goods, a lover of objets d’art, a raconteur without a real audience and no honest memories to his name. This man – the Walking Stick Man – is a fraud.

Widow McKinley watches from her first floor window but hardly notices him. She will tell the police that she was looking across the rooftops for the ghost of her husband. She had asked Timberdick to

leave his supper in the coalhouse, so sure was she that he would come to her that night. Barbara Bellamy has moved her sewing machine closer to the window for light and she sees the gentleman. Days later, she will say that he looked like a man with nothing to do. He was window shopping, she will tell the W.P.C., but he was looking in every window, not just the ones that interested him. Perhaps he was away from home and wanted to kill some time before going back to his Bed and Breakfast. "Large. That's how I'd describe him. Tall and broad and weighty."

Should she say that there was something else about him? Something that made him apart from the rest of us. Something more than aloofness and eccentricity. Something that made her wonder what thoughts were in his head. But, 'he spent a couple of minutes at the electrical shop,' is all she will say. He was certainly interested in hi-fi. Then he looked at the grapefruit and bananas and when she looked again, he was gone.

Timberdick and Shannelle were cold in the kitchen. They had already drunk more coffee than they could stomach and the electric convector at their feet couldn't work for three minutes without overheating. Sitting each side of a light Formica-topped table, they had been playing 'scissors cut paper' because Shannelle said it would keep their hands warm. But Timbers had stopped the game when they made too much noise.

"Have you seen your Gordon?" Timberdick asked.

"He makes sure I do." The younger girl fidgeted with her new hairstyle. "He pretends to spy on me but he always makes it too obvious. He's thrown me out, Timbers, but he won't let me go."

Timbers offered a little bit of wisdom. "Shannie, we're never free of them. Men always come back to hurt you. They think they have a claim on us. Especially the bodily bits. We're like a farmer's field, Shannelle. Men come and have their picnics on us, leave their litter behind and, when they hand over a little money, they think they're taking out a mortgage. That's how they see it – and I guess they must be right because that's how it lives. Gordon's gone from your life, but he'll have left snares and traps to catch you out on dark nights. His name will be there – in years and years – like a threat or a price tag, or an unpaid bill in the post."

But Shannelle wouldn't have it. "I'd go back tomorrow, if he'd have me," she said.

Two years ago, Shannelle had shared Timbers' flat and some of their best mornings had started with them waking, one before the other, with daylight shining through the skylight above Shannelle's bed. Timbers looked older now – probably five years older – and Shannelle had changed. She had turned her hair mousy for 1965 and wore it short. The fringe wasn't really a fringe at all; it didn't lie on her forehead but came down the sides of her face like ill-fitting lobster claws. It made her look like Stevie Marriot in a pop group, she said. Timbers thought that it showed off her spots.

Shannelle conceded, "No-one else likes Gordon, I know that. You think he's creepy and he tells lies. I know that too."

"He talks in whispers, Shan, and he wears carpet slippers that his mother bought him."

"That's not true," Shannelle chuckled.

"Well, they look like his mother bought them. Shan, you don't know what he was like when he first came here, years ago. I'd put my arse up for sale and I'd see him, standing on the other side of the road, drawing me. Or I'd be drinking in the Hoboken and he'd be there again, across the room, working with his pencils and pad."

"A lot of men do that."

"But not like Gordon Freya," Timbers insisted. "He never asked."

"They never do. Not the real ones."

"Real ones?"

"Real artists," said Shannelle. "They never ask. It's the same with photographers on the street."

Timbers realised that her friend was relaying the explanations offered by her man. She wondered how many times they had argued about his voyeurism. She said, "But your Gordon made our skin crawl. All the girls said it. It was like he was trying to hurt you. Drawing was his way of taking you. Having you, without asking."

"Well, I've lost him now." Shannelle twisted a lock of hair around her finger as she reflected, "When he asked me to move in with him, it was the first time I had lived in a real house that didn't share any

walls and had a garden. I didn't know if I loved him or not, but I knew that he was good for me and that felt enough. Really, it did. I cooked his tea and did his clothes like he wanted them. And I'd even spoken about having a baby."

Without meaning to, Timbers put a hand to her belly. Babies were something that she didn't talk about. She was thirty-five – too old, she thought – but, just recently, she had started wondering. Starting regretting, perhaps.

"Well, I've lost him now," Shannelle repeated. "He won't take me back. He always said he wouldn't if I started working again." She sighed, "How long are we staying?"

"We've not bloody started yet." Timbers got to her feet and ran the hot water so that the Ascot on the wall fired-up. She held her fingers in front of the inspection hole – the bare flames thawing her out.

Earlier in the evening, she had found an old fashioned dress, tossed in the corner of the junk shop. Now, she came back to the table, held the patterned cotton in front of her and tried to imagine how it could be worn to niggle at a man's senses.

"You know what Layna says?" Shannelle teased.

Timbers said she didn't.

"She said you look like a penguin on wheels." Shannelle giggled with all the naughty spite of a schoolgirl who has just told on her best friend.

Timbers smiled at the joke. She had cycled to the shop, her sticklike legs working ten to the dozen, and her cheap fur coat billowing like a pair of wings. So, yes, a penguin on wheels – she could see that.

The third girl clattered into the room. "Where's the bread knife?" she demanded urgently. Layna Martins was naked. Timbers had known her for four years but still gawped whenever she came near without her clothes. Her parsley patch was so glossy and had such growth – it was luxuriant. Everything about her looked so healthy. Her muscles were taut so that her limbs looked hard and fit. The moistness of her skin, the clearness in the whites of her eyes and the way her mouth always looked clean. And her breasts stood majestic,

like no others. Timbers had tried to get her own to do the same in the mirror but Layna's out did them. Layna looked hand reared. "The heater's stopped working up there," she said. "And the knife's the only thing that'll fix it."

"You've left him alone?" Timbers complained. Time and again, she had told the girls off for leaving a man out of sight in the bedrooms.

"He's all tied up. He can't pinch anything. We're in the loft."

Shannelle grumbled. "No wonder the house is frigging freezing, you've got the loft hatch open."

"Bloody cold," Layna repeated.

Cold? But you are down here without your clothes. Timbers smiled at the contradiction. The vivacious minx knew that she was showing off. She had trotted downstairs to fix the heater but couldn't resist the opportunity to remind her classmates that she was the sexiest of them all.

"Don't worry about him. You'll not hear a squeak." She crinkled her nose. "He's a willy-white." 'Willy-white' was Layna's cruel corruption of lily-white. Taking something from lily-livered and Wee Willy Winkie, she meant that she was entertaining a weak cry-baby of a punter. The whiteness was especially barbed. Layna Martins was a good-looking brown girl. Her body was so shiny that it took on all the temptations of gold. "I dressed him in his stockings and corset and then, he says, he wants to be bound to the rafters in the roof-space. He wants the splinters to prick his bum, he says. Timbers, don't worry. He can't move, and a blindfold's over his eyes and ears."

Someone unseen tried the back door and the girls stopped talking. The caller tried again, then rapped on the woodwork.

The girls didn't move until Timbers decided. She threw the old fashioned dress at Layna and said, "Cover yourself up." Then she stepped into the little pantry and, with her funny face peering over the dish of stewed prunes, she looked through mesh that covered the little window. "We've not seen him before," she said. "Smartly dressed. Biggish." When she turned around, she saw Layna trying to stretch the dress across her chest and push it down over her hips. It would never be big enough and it went wrongly with the rich texture of her skin – but it stopped her being naked in front of the man at first sight.

Timbers collected the back door key from its hook. “You both ready?”

Shannelle said she felt all right. She sat on the edge of the table and started to cough. She always did and Timbers gave her a few moments to settle.

Timbers opened the door, keeping herself to one side, and the stranger walked into the scullery with a flourish.

“What crinkum-crankum goes on here!” he declared with thespian relish. He lifted his walking stick high in the air and Timbers’ curious attention was drawn to the handle. The way that he twirled it made it difficult for her to identify the mascot straightaway. “I spy! I spy a dish of stewed prunes in the window. Ah, a woman who understands her calling. A stew-house! Let all men know they are safe in here.”

For all the electricity that was going on, the girls kept quiet. Young Shannelle, with one cheek still perched on the table’s edge, didn’t know what to make of this larger than life gentleman. She knew he would be her turn because Layna already had a bloke and Timbers never went upstairs. So, Shannelle was the most available. She feared that, if luck were against her, she would be corralled with an unpredictable, hairy old stallion. God knows what he’d want to do with her. ‘We can always say no,’ she reminded herself. How many times had Timbers reassured her girls? It wasn’t true; every working girl had known times when they had no say, and one look at Timbers’ face told Shannelle that she would be allowed no choice if this impresario figure took a fancy to her. Shannelle shifted uncomfortably. She watched his thumb and fingernail play in the rude knuckle of the walking stick handle and she bit her lip. And, as she looked, the man said with a deliberation that made it fateful, “I come in search of Shannelle.”

The girl’s heart pounded.

Timbers said promptly, “Shannelle doesn’t work any more. She’s set up home outside the city.”

“Ah, yes. She is Gordon Freya’s woman. Don’t you know that’s why I want her?”

Shannelle’s mouth went dry. This man wanted her only because she was Gordon Freya’s woman. She was in his head, not because she

looked nice or would make him feel good but because humiliating her would be like violating Gordon, like soiling his bedclothes. And this horrid man would have to make sure that Gordon got to hear of their encounter. No good would come of it.

He said, “My theatrical digs tell me that there’s one here who knows her.” Calling his lodgings ‘theatrical digs’ went with his fancied persona. If challenged, he would say that he meant his rooms were fancy and dramatic, not that actors frequented them. But the Walking Stick Man was never called to account for his words. He was so practised at building an image on a froth of half-truths that the weakness of it all didn’t bother him. “One —” And he raised the stick in the air. “One — Timberdick.”

Layna felt edgy. The gentleman had thrown her off the stage. Just two minutes ago, she had been flouncing around without her clothes, knowing that she had the best-shaped breasts, the tightest rump and perfectly muscled thighs. Now she felt like a rag doll. Her head was full of dark clouds that made her want to shrink within herself. The man was bad – a badness that brought perspiration to her palms and made her soles itch and her stomach feel empty. She sensed evil. There was wickedness in the room that her mother would have seen in pictures but Layna could only feel.

“Come now,” he said, and Timbers watched his thumb working on the silver girl’s bottom. “Why can’t I see what’s on offer? A parade of pretty maids, all three in a row.”

Still, Timberdick said no. “We don’t do chorus lines.” And if we did, there would only be two.

Then he seemed to lose his presence as the lids closed over his eyes for a few seconds and he inhaled deeply through his nose. The comedy and the theatricals had gone. Mention of Shannelle’s man had provided a glimpse of the visitor’s dangerousness. He was a bad ‘un on the prowl and Shannelle – and, yes, now even Layna – kept their faces down. They didn’t want to invite his attention for fear that he might capture their souls just by looking in their eyes. He knew things. And so much in their lives could be dangerous to know.

Only Timbers looked him in the face. She was no more comfortable than the others but she took the blame for letting the Walking Stick Man into the house. She wanted to shoo him away.

Like a mother hen. “There’s nothing for you here,” she told him. The notion of Timbers as a mother hen was emphasised by the look on her face. She had bead-like eyes – pellets that stuck out from their sockets – and a crooked beak of a nose. She had no chin to speak of and, in the past year, she had developed a habit of tucking her bottom lip behind her two front teeth and ticking hesitantly. Like a chicken pecking at seed.

The man sat in Shannelle’s chair and, as the girl was leaning against the table, she was almost touching his shoulder. “I have no intention of being dismissed. I came, honestly, to your stew-house. And that is all that I want. If I have suggested anything more sinister, then it is my performance that is wrong, nothing in my heart. What about this Little Nell?” He lifted the walking stick as if he meant to tap Shannelle’s shoulders, but kept it short. “Is this who you are? Little Nell from The Curiosity Shop? Is this what really became of you? Never mind what old Mr Dickens told us. Nell is working in a stew-house, don’t you know?”

Shannelle wanted to hate him. Oh, she hated him a little bit already but she was determined to hate him much more. Shannelle was the first to see through his acting. At first, he had wanted her because she was another man’s woman. Now, he wanted her to play the role of a poor Victorian wretch. A hairy stallion? No, she decided, he wouldn’t have the staying power of a stallion. He was flippant with his women. First this fancy, then another. He was just a Walking Stick Man. A promenader. She could feel the sweat fizzing on the tips of the pimples on her cheeks and everything that was wrong with her face turned red; that’s how much she wanted to hate him. Yes, she’d take him upstairs and, almost careless of what he might do to her, she promised herself that she would humiliate him; she would be the better satisfied.

“Now then, my Little Nell.” He nudged the end of the stick beneath her bottom and Shannelle wanted to turn and slap him. “You will tell me, won’t you? Is your mother here, the one they call Timberdick?”

Shannelle did not answer him. She said to the others, “I’ll take him upstairs.”

Timbers, puzzled by the girl’s change of attitude, studied

Shannelle's face before assenting. 'Who is this man?' she wanted to ask. 'Have you met him before? What's the history, Shannelle?' But Timbers gave up when she saw the girl's determination. Shannelle had something in mind. "Go on, pet," Timbers said quietly. "But no more than twenty minutes."

"Quite," said the man, with that smugness of a mature schoolmaster who has, at last, managed to introduce his class of dunces to the sunlight of knowledge. All along, he had known that he was going to get his own way. His thumb and forefinger were excited on the silver knuckle and the buzz transmitted down the walking stick so that it couldn't help but tap with glee on the scullery floor. Layna looked at the cane and saw an instrument of untold wickedness. She tried to catch Timbers' eye. She knew that Timbers was in love with her deep brown eyes and if Layna had been able to catch her attention, she would have been able to warn her. But it was all too late. The man and little Shannelle – she had always been the fat little piggy, too smelly, too farty and too hairy everywhere – they had agreed a match and the Walking Stick Man was shoving her up the staircase. It smacked of indecency – the man's eagerness and the inescapable picture of Shannelle as a sacrifice.

When they had gone, Timbers began to tidy the kitchen. She put the chair straight and filled the sink with soapy water. But Layna couldn't settle to a chair or the table, neither could she lean against the sink for more than a second or two. "I can't help it. It's so strong," she said.

"Oh God, it's not old gran'mamma's witchcraft again?"

"I can feel it," Layna insisted. She was tugging and snatching at the ill-fitting dress. "It's a wickedness that you've ushered into the house."

"Nonsense, I've done nothing of the sort."

"Lord above, Timbers, you almost curtsied when the Walking Stick Man came in. Like you were paying homage to the devil-man. You've drawn him in, don't you know that? All this leaving food out for Bugger McKinley's ghost and making a hocus-potion of stewed prunes and putting it in the window. The spirits are bound to notice these things, Timbers."

Timbers said that perhaps this visitor wouldn't be bad to

Shannelle after all. Yes, at first, Timbers had been thrilled by his sudden appearance at the stew-house door. Here was one of the old school. She told Layna about the Scotsman – big and powerful but gentle like this man – who had read the Bible aloud as she washed herself in front of him. “He called on me every month for three years and he never touched me. He never swore. He never grumbled.” Perhaps the Walking Stick Man would be like him. She laughed, “Or the bank manager in his waistcoat, socks and shoes and nothing else?” He had been the one who told her to place a dish of stewed prunes in the window.

The telephone began to ring in the front of the shop. As Timbers stepped from one room to the other, Widow McKinley began to knock irritably on her bedroom floor. Timbers shook her head.

“I’ll check my man in the roof,” Layna said.

“All right!” Timbers shouted into the phone as the banging continued. Then she heard Layna running up the staircase.

“What?” she said. The man had urgent things to say to her. “Wait!”

Mrs McKinley was shouting now as well as thumping. Then Shannelle screamed.

Timbers cupped a hand over her free ear. She needed to take in the message.

Both girls reached the bottom of the stairs together.

“Wait!” Timbers shouted. “Hold on.”

“He’s dead,” Layna cried. She had the knife in one hand and blood was everywhere. “The Walking Stick Man is dead!”

* * *

The body straddled the bedroom threshold – his legs in the room, his head and torso in the passage. The side of his neck had been torn open – by a spike rather than a knife, Timbers thought – and blood had shot up the walls. His mouth was horribly open, as if the man’s soul had been ripped from his body in one painful vomit. The hole in the neck was deep and open; the bloody membrane hung loose against the skin. It was like the crinkly plastic that butchers use to wrap giblets in.

“He pushed past me at the top of the stairs. He said he wanted to choose which room. He opened the door and just fell back on me.” The words spilled out of Shannelle’s mouth while her fingers gripped her jaw – as if some demon was speaking inside her and she wanted to shut him up. “Someone must have been in there. Waiting for him.”

The women were standing in a queue in the narrow passage. Shannelle, then Timberdick, and Layna at the back. By accident, the smallest was at the front so each could see the body. Layna kept saying the blood was everywhere.

“Did you see anyone?”

Shannelle put her fingers in her mouth and shook her head.

“Layna had the knife,” Timbers said, trying to get the sequence clear in her head.

“I dropped it when we saw him,” Layna explained. “That’s why it’s covered in blood. God, Timbers, it’s everywhere. How are we going to hide this?”

They weren’t going to, Timbers had decided. She said, “Go through his pockets, Laynie. He’ll have a door key. Nothing else, I should think.”

“You can’t ask me to do that!” the girl shrieked.

Shannelle stood still, open mouthed at Timbers’ suggestion. “Layna will get covered in blood, Timbs.”

“Look –” None of the women could take their eyes off the hole in the man’s neck. “Look, none of us did this. Someone was waiting for him in the room. That’s what happened. So, we’re going to explain that to the police.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I know what I’m doing. Too many people know we’re here, and what we’re up to. If we try to cover this up, we’ll be found out. We didn’t kill him. The police can question us, and then they’ll know that we didn’t do it. But, I want to keep one step ahead – so I need the key to his lodgings.”

“I don’t care!” Layna insisted. “Even if the police find out I was here, I’ve friends who’ll hide me.”

“Layna, you don’t need to hide. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

The widow started banging again. “You come here! You talk to me! I’m not coming out!” She sounded mad.

Shannelle said, "You do it, Timbs. You search his pockets."

"I'll get bloody and the police will know that I've tampered with the body."

Shannelle muttered, "Stop saying it," with her hand at her mouth. "Stop saying 'body'." Before Timbers could help, Shannelle's stomach came to her mouth; she turned away and she was sick. "I need to go downstairs."

"Love, sit on the top step," suggested Layna. But Shannelle was at the front of the queue and couldn't easily reach the staircase.

"Layna," persisted Timbers. "You're the only one who's got a reason to have blood on her hands. Please, go through his pockets."

"Don't be a cow, Timbs. Can't you see Shannelle's ill."

"We've got to do this," Timberdick insisted. "If we don't find out who killed this bugger, people will think we did. Do you think we'd work again? Do you think that the fresh faced, pimpled arsed, scaredy cat youngsters will dare to be alone with us. Of course not, they'll worry about their wives and mums and stay at home."

Some might, Shannelle thought. The weirdies would love the thrill of it. But Shannelle was in no state to speak up.

"And we'll be on the street corners again, hitching our skirts against brick walls for any Jack who gets out of his car and counts to a hundred. Do you think I'm going back to that?"

"Mrs McKinley won't let us work here anymore," Shannelle argued as she got to her feet. She was holding her sleeve away from her arm because of the sick on it. "No matter what. The police'll stop us, any case."

"So we've got to help ourselves. It starts with the key, Laynie."

With an impatient sigh, tall shapely Layna, still dressed in the ill-fitting frock, pushed her way to the front and closed her eyes tight as she stepped over the dead body. Her shoulders were already shaking when she knelt down; she was trying to keep her sobbing inside.

"Go gently now," said Timbers when the girl was in position. "One pocket at a time. Slowly, to make sure."

Layna got her courage together, then bent her head back, keeping her eyes shut. She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth so that her sobs came out as grunts through her nose. "Everywhere," she was trying to say. "Blood's everywhere." But the noise made no

sense. Then she made a high-pitched whinny before pushing her fingers inside the dead man's trousers.

"Good girl," Timbers said softly. "Check to the bottom of each pocket."

Layna was crying. The big teardrops of a strong girl. The salt got into her mouth and when she wiped the tears away, she smudged dirty make-up along her jaw. "Timbers, why did you let him into the house? He's wicked." She pleaded, "Don't make me mess with a body that's evil."

"I've got to have that key. Go in with your fingernails pointing, yeah? You won't feel anything then."

"Stop being a bitch!" Shannelle pushed her face in Timbers' way. For a moment it seemed that the women would fight.

"It's here!" Layna exhaled and produced the Yale key from the first pocket.

"Right. Give it to me. And no-one mentions this. No-one says that we've got the key."