

COVER-UP

Something about that morning held onto every detail. Janet's eyes followed shadows on the wall, even the smallest movement of air fluttering a curtain distracted her from the one purpose . . . the documents spread on the kitchen table. A breeze rattled new-leafed branches against the window; another job to be done. The letter drew her back. She imagined Sandra writing it.

'The tax man will take our fortune.'

Morning surrounded her. It was as if she was swimming in thick water. Making sense of all the practicalities had to be the priority; bills and regularities snapped at her attention and the possibility of nosy parkers. Sandra had been the organiser while Janet, although capable, had sat back and allowed herself to be looked after as if she'd been the weaker of the two. In this modern day no one bothered neighbours for cups of sugar or gardening tools. She and Sandra had *good-morninged* people but kept to themselves . . . apart from those dying off. Most of the folk on the estate now were new – well, newer than them. Nobody would take much notice of what she did, and their house was on the edge, cornered off, overlooked only by trees.

When the birds' screeching and singing outside reached fever pitch, Janet had thrown back her covers and headed for the bathroom to pee. It had been a one-pee night – that's a lot of sleep. The kitchen was empty, cold, so she was first up. She'd never remember what made her go out into the back garden; it wasn't part of her morning ritual. Out she went as if to welcome the day, check the weather and what had sprouted since last she'd took any notice. She walked towards the great square hole Sandra had a man dig: foundation for a fancy new shed. It drew her to peer down. Sandra lay in a deeper hole inside it, loose dirt piled up on both sides. There was a ladder standing in the hole, the little ladder they used for trimming hedges. The whole scene was tidy, not a shovelful of dirt out of place.

'What the fu . . .' She gaped. 'Sandra. Get bloody out of there.'

They hadn't shocked each other with mad impulses for years. The ground was soft but damp with spring well-intentioned.

'You'll freeze to death lying there – have you been there half the night?'

Sandra didn't move. A piece of paper flapped, was trapped under her belt. Belt? Sandra didn't wear belts. Janet climbed down the ladder. The hole wasn't deep, and the other hole hadn't been there before; she must've dug it. Why the hell would she do that?

'What's going on?' Janet leaned down and shouted, 'Sandra!'

No answer, no twitch of movement. Her shaking hand helped her kneel then stretched out to touch her friend's face. Cold and white. She hadn't noticed the white before.

'How can you be dead, like this?'

Janet's insides fell, until she was almost pushing something out of her. The word *Prolapse* hung on the air – she didn't quite know what it meant but thought it was the womb falling out. No pain,

just this heaviness holding her down. She lifted her head and stared all around the garden. Nothing out of order. The lawn was cleaner than the living room rug.

‘What did you do?’

She snatched the sheet of folded paper and scrambled out of the hole, smelling of subway tunnels, knees and hands smeared with black dirt. The kitchen was warmer than being outside, but the tiles felt hard, more brittle than normal. She threw the paper on the table and stared at it, her back to the sink in case she heaved. But she didn’t, she reached for the kettle and while it started up, she gawped at the makings – tea, coffee, hot chocolate. The whisky lived in the top cupboard. In a rush she pulled the little stepladder out to reach the bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label.

There was a list in her head. She knew that as long as there was a list then everything would be done, eventually. Top of the list was pour a drink and read that bloody letter. The kettle clicked off. Janet sat down and poured her drink and drank a big mouthful, letting the liquor sit in her mouth for a minute before swallowing. Oh, there was the normal opening with *sorry* and apologies and *Dear Janets* but it went into the Twilight Zone after that.

‘Money’s the main problem here,’ Sandra said. ‘I’ve tried to work it so I could move or switch accounts to you, but the bloody tax man would still have us by the tits. So, the best thing or rather the only thing to do is – we switch. You become me. We look alike to most people in this area cause they only know us in passing and neither of us shop here. And by the way it also crossed my mind (too late) that we could get married and we’d be spouses. That might’ve been fun. We’d have made a mental couple . . . sorry I missed the chance. The reasons for all this are in other letters but you’ve probably guessed by now. Anyway, what I’ve got in mind is that you leave me where you found me. When I had this hole dug the guy thought I had another guy coming to pour the concrete and set up the foundation for the new shed – don’t worry, all the specifications are done and correct so there shouldn’t be a problem.

‘Obviously I couldn’t bury myself but have made it as easy as possible for you; you should thank me for not making you drag me downstairs to dig a hole from scratch. I don’t think it’s actually very illegal to bury a body. Anyway, just cover me up and pat the earth down hard, hard as you can, then read the instructions for making the concrete. I think you fill it to a certain level then wait for it to dry completely before adding the next layer – we don’t want there to be a problem with the shed and me dug up, do we? So, when it’s all dry call the shed guy to set it on the new base – make sure you get the bloody concrete level.

‘Think of the secret me down here while you’re musing art and crafts up there in your wee studio, but you must promise to laugh at the new adventure. You haven’t done anything to be guilty about so quit that. We’re just living (and dying) on our own hard-earned money. So be impulsive – re-invent us and go somewhere. Rent the place out maybe but come back to me. I did this for you, dear, mostly to jog you, make you see that time is a bastard so you may as well throw caution to the wind for your last years.’

‘She’s off her frigging trolley.’

Now Janet was looking at her own bank accounts, and the hugeness of Sandra's. 'No bloody wonder she didn't want to let the tax man have a share.' The house had been in Sandra's family forever; there was no mortgage on it and after all these years it was worth a goodly pile.

Her mind kept slipping to the idea of parading the world as two different women – they'd had completely opposite taste in clothes, so that would be a riot. A laugh escaped, but tears choked it out of her.

In another letter Sandra had gone on about how easy it would be for Janet to really become Sandra. Neither of them had been to a doctor since the eighties, or thereabouts, had preferred to heal themselves and use natural methods – so nobody had their blood-type on file.

'Clever bitch.'

She found letters and notes all over the house, sticky coloured pieces in the pantry, freezer and bathroom cabinet. It took her an hour before she could go back out there, attempt to bury her sister-in-life. Sandra's voice pulled her shoulders back, made her pick up the spade but she threw it down again; she couldn't toss dirt onto that face. What the hell was she doing thinking she could get away with all this anyway? But who's going to know? Sometimes invisibility's a godsend.

It took a journey back into the house, upstairs to rummage in drawers for something beautiful. They used to fight over a particular silk shawl with fringes. She also grabbed a sensible tartan wrap to tuck the whole body in tight. It would be a long, long night for both of them.