

Number 4 Grimaldi Square did not look like the sort of house which might surprise. It was just one of the identical terraced properties lining three sides of a Victorian square long past its best. Narrow brick places, often with a small bay window beside a less than stout front door. The only unusual thing about Number 4 on that November afternoon was a police officer who had been pacing outside for at least half an hour. Dressed in immaculate uniform, including a stab vest, there was something about her which suggested she was prepared for anything. She carried a small black duffel bag.

Constable Stevie Baxter did not 'do' late, so it was with some agitation that she continually checked her watch and tapped her mobile to see if perhaps a message was struggling to appear. Finally she reached for the radio on her left shoulder, hesitated and then pressed to connect.

'305 to Control, are you receiving?'

There was a moment's pause before a crackling voice replied, 'Control to 305. Yes, yes, go ahead.'

Stevie bit her lip before continuing.

‘Uh, any message for me?’ she asked. ‘Over.’

‘Negative, 305. Airways clear, please, 305. Out.’

Stevie nodded but took a moment to let go of the radio. She clapped her hands together, uncertain what to do next. She was a handsome woman of thirty. A good height, strong looking with an asymmetric haircut shaved on the left side with a neat parting and then a great flop of hair hanging down over her right eye. Whenever Stevie became anxious she found that thoroughly assessing a situation helped. She always started with an overview and then homed in on detail, so she began by turning her back to Number 4 and planting her feet firmly as she swept her practised eye across the whole square.

It was only a couple of hours or so past lunchtime, yet the sky was surprisingly dark. One of those afternoons when the grey weather oozed damp. A large 1980s tower block several streets away loomed above and stole any sunlight which might have tried to break through. One very elderly woman, bent almost double, was making staggeringly slow progress round the gloomy perimeter with a set of walking poles. Otherwise the place was deserted. Grimaldi Square wasn’t a shortcut to anywhere, so few people chose to put it on their route. Bits of rubbish swept in from the nearby high street and lodged in a couple of scrubby bushes. Once there had been four nice benches in the centre from which to admire the day but all that was left were some upright metal struts cemented to the ground.

Directly across the square on the opposite side, someone was already putting the lights on for evening trade at a very large Victorian pub with the unlikely name of The Price of Onions. Filling an entire side of the square, it looked more like a house where the lord of the manor once held sway. It had a wide and

welcoming double front door with a substantial series of windows on either side. Above, a generous first floor was topped with an attic with three dormer windows. The whole place had clearly once been extremely grand but like everything else in the neighbourhood it was now weary, its heyday long gone.

Stevie checked her watch again and gave a great sigh before shaking herself into action. She turned back to the house. The previous occupants of Number 4 had not been big on fuss. The only attempt at décor consisted of a rusting metal hook for an unrealised hanging basket. As she made her way up the short path Stevie noticed that Number 5 had made more of an effort; artificial turf lay across the small front patch, which was choked with plastic flowers in tubs. The containers varied in shape – some were like ducks; another was a plastic wishing well which stood cheek by jowl with a violently coloured windmill. The effect was somewhere between a garden and a seaside mini golf course.

Stevie was surveying it all when suddenly the front door of Number 5 banged open and a woman appeared. Bad temper had aged her. She appeared to be anywhere between middle age and death. The woman carried the air of the 1950s with her floral apron, a pair of beige slippers for the wider foot and poorly dyed hair; the sort of person you used to see in old ads for the health benefits of suet. She was not in the mood for niceties.

‘Female police?’ was her opening gambit.

‘Uh, yes, but—’

‘Sure you’re not a traffic warden?’ she barked. ‘Look more like a traffic warden. Right, what’s the trouble, officer? I’ve watched you hanging about. Has she popped her clogs? I shouldn’t be surprised.’

As if to complement her mad look, the woman now gave a slight grimace and revealed truly terrible teeth.

‘Sorry, what? Is who dead?’ Stevie managed in the face of these challenging features.

‘Wretched nuisance.’ The woman grimaced again before adding, ‘Mrs Haggerston.’

‘A Mrs Haggerston is dead?’ Stevie was hoping she wasn’t going to have to deal with it.

The woman harrumphed and shook her head. ‘No! *I’m* Mrs Haggerston. Do I look dead? Why they couldn’t send a proper policeman I don’t know,’ continued Mrs Haggerston disapprovingly. ‘Pay my taxes same as anyone. Haggerston.’ She began to spell her name out. ‘H ... A ... G ... Don’t you want to write this down?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Stevie.

The woman harrumphed again. It was a noise she was clearly practised at. ‘All on computers, I suppose. You probably don’t even have a pencil. Let me know!’

And with that she turned back into her house and slammed the door.

Stevie shook her head and in an attempt to get back on track clapped her hands again, as if scaring away demons, then looked through the windows of Number 4. The place was empty. Not a stick of furniture. She nodded. She was surprised to find the door ajar. Why was it not locked? Had someone broken in? There was nothing to steal. Her anxiety levels rose and instinctively she ran through her almost choreographed dance of checking her routine equipment, tapping the radio set on her left shoulder and then swiftly round her body, lightly feeling each piece of her kit.

Work mobile: left pocket of her stab vest, with rubber gloves and pocket notebook. Right pocket: personal mobile, pens, first aid kit. Duty belt from left to right: irritant spray, multitool,

extendable baton, torch, Taser holster, rigid handcuffs. She patted her belt one more time, looked over her shoulder and gently pushed the front door open. It squeaked slightly onto a narrow corridor, off which lay a tiny sitting room. Stevie walked in slowly, conscious of the heavy tread of her boots. She put her head through the entrance to a small dining room with the world's tiniest kitchen extension off the back.

A miniature downstairs loo had been crammed in under the stairs in an old cupboard. The place hadn't been touched for years. Stevie went back into the hall, where she stopped momentarily to pull up a piece of the terrible carpet – swirls of claret with gold, the sort of carpet often found in pubs as it shows neither dirt nor vomit. She tapped the wooden floorboards below with her toe and it echoed through the empty house.

At the end of the hall, stairs rose to the first floor. Stevie began to climb slowly, her footwear continuing to resonate. She looked into the main bedroom; a good size, with two windows looking out over the square where she saw an older man pissing into a dead bush. He glanced up and waved with his free hand. Stevie stepped back into the corridor, where she took a deep breath and noticed a faint smell of lily of the valley. The door to the second bedroom was closed. Stevie hesitated with her hand over the doorknob and was suddenly overcome by the ominous stillness all around her. She flung open the bedroom door to find a very old woman sitting on a small red sofa, staring straight at her. This caused Stevie to do something utterly out of character and unofficer-like: she screamed.

The elderly lady screamed in response and put up her hands, so Stevie screamed again. Once more the woman returned the call then dropped her arms and thrust her wrists under Stevie's

nose. Stevie paused in a slight state of shock. Her own scream was not a sound she had ever made before, and it didn't really suit her. There was a moment's silence.

'Your turn,' said the unexpected woman.

'What?'

'Your turn to scream, I think,' the woman said as if she were giving it quite some thought. 'You screamed first,' she explained, 'then I did, then you again then me, so if we're going for a third time, I think you're next.'

Stevie shook her head. 'I don't want to scream.'

The woman smiled. 'Oh good. It's exhausting.' Once more she put her arms out towards Stevie. 'Right, pop the cuffs on.'

Stevie shook her head before replying, 'No, sorry, I'm not the police ...'

'Bloody good costume,' sniffed the old woman. 'Breaking and entering, is it? Clever. I'd never have thought of doing it in uniform. Shame everything worth nicking's already gone, now you've gone to all that effort.'

'I mean I am police but ...' Stevie took a deep breath before saying, 'OK, can we start again?'

'I doubt it,' replied the old woman. 'The door closed behind you. No handle this side. It's how I got stuck in here. Used to make my husband sleep in here when he'd had a few.'

Stevie and the woman stopped speaking to eye one another. The now silent old lady was fit and even rather elegant in a black blouse and matching trousers, with a small orange silk scarf tied at her neck. Her grey hair was in a neat short cut. She looked nice but Stevie had had a long shift and was not handling things well.

'Are you a ghost?'

The woman chuckled. 'Any day now.'

‘Sorry, sorry, obviously not.’ Stevie tried to slow her breathing and be more reasonable. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I live here,’ came the confident reply.

Stevie decided to be calm. ‘No, that can’t be true. I live here . . . I mean, we *will* be living here.’

‘We?’ enquired the woman.

‘My wife Amber and I.’

‘Amber,’ the woman repeated before adding, ‘That’s a nice name.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Stevie.

‘Good looking?’ asked the woman.

‘Yes.’

The woman nodded. ‘I mean, they say looks aren’t everything, but it doesn’t hurt first thing in the morning. Well done.’

‘Thanks.’

There was another silence before the old lady smoothed her trousers with her hands and enquired, as if they had met at a party, ‘And you live here?’

‘Yes, well that’s the plan,’ replied Stevie, although she sounded uncertain.

The woman reached out for Stevie’s hand as if in sympathy. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said, giving her hand a slight squeeze. ‘Did you live here yesterday?’

Stevie shook the woman off. ‘No . . . no,’ she answered.

The woman smiled as if she had been right all along. ‘Well, it doesn’t sound like much of a permanent arrangement.’

Stevie stood in the middle of the room holding her duffel bag.

‘What’s in the bag?’ asked the woman.

‘Uhm . . . champagne,’ Stevie managed.

The woman gave a slight snort. ‘And they say the police are underpaid.’

‘It’s for Amber.’

The woman nodded. ‘I see. And where is she, then?’

‘Who?’

The woman sighed. ‘Dear god, how do you interrogate anyone if you can’t follow a conversation? Amber! Where is the lovely Amber?’

Stevie’s anxiety rose to the surface in an instant. ‘I don’t know. I keep calling and calling.’

The woman nodded sympathetically. ‘You’re worried.’

‘Yes,’ admitted Stevie.

The woman patted the small sofa beside her. ‘Have a sit down,’ she suggested.

‘What?’

‘I can move up,’ she said, shifting along the sofa to make room.

‘No, I . . .’

‘I would if I were you. I told you: you’ve allowed the door to shut. Follow the clues, Poirot – there’s no handle on the inside.’

Stevie looked behind her at the door and saw it was true. It was closed. There were just screw holes where a handle ought to have been. The woman tapped the small velvety sofa once more, and Stevie found herself sitting down. It was a tiny two-seater and their knees touched.

‘How did you know about the handle on the . . .’ Stevie began.

‘I live here,’ repeated the woman quietly. ‘I’m Dorothy.’ There was a pause which Dorothy allowed before continuing, ‘And you are?’

‘Stevie.’

They made a strangely matching couple, the very old woman and the youngish one. Stevie had dyed her own hair grey last year because Amber thought it was cool. She appeared to be aping Dorothy’s more natural tones.



‘I met the neighbour,’ Stevie said quietly. ‘Are there nothing but old women around here?’

Dorothy laughed. ‘Fucking loads! Place is heaving with women who’ll crumble before you even open the oven at the crem.’

‘Crem?’

‘Crematorium. It’s only round the corner. Very convenient,’ Dorothy added helpfully.

Stevie nodded. ‘I don’t think the estate agent put that on the particulars.’

‘I say, best to desiccate the old birds and sprinkle them on a cake.’

The two captive women fell silent once more. After a few minutes, Stevie sensed a change in her companion and turned to see that, like a child or a kitten, Dorothy, clearly done with conversation, had fallen asleep. Her flat chest rose and fell gently. It was oddly calming. Stevie looked again at the door without a handle and then around the room. There was nothing obvious to use as a lever. All the room contained was the modest sofa and, besides Dorothy, a small wheeled suitcase closed with a padlock. Stevie was patting her pockets to see what she might have in her kit which could help when her phone rang.

‘Fuck! Fuck!’ Stevie scrambled to pull her phone from her pocket, wondering why the hell she was suddenly worried about waking the old woman.

‘It’s Jack!’ chirped a cheerful voice.

Stevie got up from the sofa and moved towards the door, keeping her voice low. ‘I know it’s Jack!’ she whispered. ‘Your name comes up on my phone, you idiot. Jack, I need your help! There’s a woman in my house!’

‘Come now,’ replied Jack, not lowering his exuberant voice in the slightest, ‘that’s no way to refer to Amber.’

‘Yes, but it’s not Amber. An entirely different woman. Someone I don’t know.’

Jack’s delight in any kind of gossip was instantly aroused. ‘Ooh, and where is this mystery woman now?’

Dorothy stirred and Stevie turned away, speaking even more quietly. ‘On the sofa.’

‘I’m sorry, Stevie, can you speak up?’

‘No, she’s asleep.’

Jack was impressed. ‘Blimey, you don’t hang about. One minute you’re buying a house with Amber and the next you’re changing horses on the merry-go-round. Where did you meet this bird? Oh!!!’ Jack took a giant deep breath. ‘Please don’t tell me you want me to give Amber the news. You know I’m not good with drama. She won’t take it well. For reasons I can’t fathom she likes being married to you.’

‘No, I . . . oh Christ. I picked up the keys after work and came to meet her like we arranged but Amber never showed and then the front door was open and when I went in this old woman was in here on a sofa upstairs.’

‘That is unusual,’ agreed Jack.

‘You could say that.’

‘You don’t often get a sofa upstairs.’

‘Jack!’

‘Well, where is Amber?’

‘I don’t know! We’ve been planning this for months. I can’t get hold of her. I’m worried something’s happened.’

‘You could ring the polic— Oh, yeah. I’m at work. I’ll come over,’ he said. ‘What was the number again?’

‘Number 4. You know it’s Number 4. You can see it from the door of the pub.’

‘I’m your friend, not your secretary,’ retorted Jack. ‘You know

how I hate detail. I'll try and find Amber; you get rid of the other woman. Go on!'

'I don't know who to call,' said Stevie rather plaintively.

'I'm like a fairy godmother to you,' Jack sighed. 'Try the estate agent!'

It was actually quite a sensible idea, so Stevie hung up and placed the call.

The estate agent was shutting up shop for the day. Because both Stevie and Amber worked shifts and the agents kept hours often known only to themselves, there had been several days' delay in arranging for the handover of the keys. There was now relief all round – not least at the office, as Number 4 Grimaldi Square had not been an easy sale. The place needed everything doing. The small team of three house sellers were off to the pub to celebrate. Stevie reached the manager just as she was putting her coat on.

'Pixie Lee and Partners!' she said brightly. 'Pixie speaking.'

'Oh hello, Pixie. It's Stevie Baxter.'

As Stevie had seen her only hours earlier, she half thought Pixie might remember but there seemed to be nothing coming back. 'Stevie Baxter? And Amber Delaunay? We bought 4 Grimaldi Square,' Stevie continued.

'How nice,' came the reply. Pixie finished all her sentences on a rising note, as if she were constantly trying to convey optimism in a very uncertain market. 'Very nice!'

'It is, but the thing is – there's an old woman in the house,' Stevie began.

'Oh, yes?' replied Pixie in the professional voice she used whenever she pretended to be interested.

'I mean really old.' Stevie lowered her voice to a whisper as she looked at Dorothy sleeping. 'Like nearly dead old.'

‘Hmm.’ The estate agent put her hand over the phone mouth-piece and Stevie could hear her whisper ‘Gin and tonic!’ to her colleagues. ‘Hmm,’ she said again. ‘Really old?’ she echoed.

‘Yes. Grey hair, black clothes . . .’

‘Oh yes. That’ll be Dorothy Franklin, the vendor. I don’t think you ever met her.’

‘No,’ agreed Stevie.

‘Lovely woman,’ opined Pixie.

‘I’m sure,’ said Stevie, ‘but still here.’

‘Hmm. I’m afraid that if there are any problems with the handover you will have to speak to your solicitor. Thank you for dealing with Pixie Lee and Partners.’

And with that she hung up.

Stevie rang her solicitor.

‘Maisie Pilkington and Associates!’ came the answer. ‘I’m afraid we are now closed for the evening. Please leave a message after the beep.’ Then there was the unmistakable sound of a woman saying the word ‘beep’.

Stevie was not in the mood. ‘Stop it, Maisie. I know you’re still there.’

‘I’m not here. That was the answer machine.’

‘You don’t have an answer machine. You don’t even have any associates. It’s just you in your kitchen.’

Maisie was Stevie’s cousin, otherwise she might have looked elsewhere for legal representation.

Maisie sighed. ‘What do you want, Stevie? I thought you were moving in today.’

Stevie explained and Maisie listened.

‘Hmm,’ she said, as if she worked for Pixie Lee. ‘Right, well, that’s not what’s supposed to happen so we’ll have to see what we can do in the morning.’

Stevie was aghast. 'In the morning? But—'

'Yes, Stevie, it's after hours.'

'It's four o'clock.'

'I've got a date. Actually a *second* date!'

Dorothy gave a slight snore, as if to remind Stevie of the reality of her presence.

'Maisie?' Stevie said into the phone but Maisie, with her high hopes for her evening, was long gone.

Stevie heard someone downstairs.

'Stevie?' called a male voice. She had left the front door open.

It was Jack. She could hear him on the stairs.

'I'm in here!' yelled Stevie, banging on the inside of the door, no longer caring about waking the old woman. Dorothy awoke as the door opened.

'Jack!' Stevie called out. 'Please don't scream because Dorothy's really good at it.'

Jack entered. He was the same age as Stevie. A large, handsome lad whose body entirely filled the doorway. The moment he appeared he screamed. Stevie turned sternly to him, demanding, 'Why are you screaming?'

Jack smiled, saying, 'I wouldn't have if you hadn't mentioned it but once you'd said I couldn't think about anything else.'

Stevie took a deep breath. 'Have you found Amber?'

'No,' he replied, 'but who have you found?' He looked engagingly at the old woman.

'This is Dorothy,' explained Stevie.

'Hello Dorothy, I'm Jack. And what are you doing here?'

'We bought the house from her,' said Stevie.

'From her or with her?'

But Stevie was checking her phone for the hundredth time. 'Where the hell is Amber?'