

Want to Know a Secret?

'I love all of Sue Moorcroft's books!'
Katie Fforde

The background is black with several white dandelions and three golden dragonflies with purple accents. There are also several white starburst or sparkles scattered throughout. The dandelions are in various stages of blowing, with some seeds already detached and floating in the air.

Sue Moorcroft
Author of *All That Mullarkey*

Want to Know a Secret?

Sue Moorcroft



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First published 2010 by Choc Lit Limited

www.choclitpublishing.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN-978-1-906931-26-1

Chapter 1

Two towering policemen filled Diane's kitchen, incongruous amongst the splatter and clutter of dinner preparation and her hand sewing litter draping the chair backs. She touched the fabric, as if the blue satin intended for a prom dress would keep her knees from buckling. 'How badly is he hurt?'

The older, taller of the two officers hovered closer. 'Our information is that Mr Jenner's in no immediate danger but has been injured. He was helped at the scene and taken to Peterborough District Hospital.'

Diane imagined the busy A47 on Gareth's route home and an ambulance nosing its way through traffic chaos to their silver Peugeot bent and twisted. And Gareth trapped inside. She swallowed. 'Where? Did it happen, I mean?'

'The helicopter in which Mr Jenner was a passenger unfortunately crashed on take-off from Medes Airfield, this afternoon.'

'*Helicopter?*' Relief whooshed through Diane, slackening the sinews that panic had tightened. For an instant she thought that her head might actually snap backwards like a puppet with a string cut. 'Helicopter? He's as likely to be in a flying saucer.' She laughed, flopping into a kitchen chair and flipping her waist-long plait over her shoulder. As if Gareth would somehow magic himself into one of those clattering monsters when he should be fitting ventilation units to industrial buildings!

The policemen exchanged glances. 'Is your husband here, Mrs Jenner?'

'Well, no he's late – but Gareth works all the hours that God sends, he's probably been held up in the wastes of some industrial estate. One of the last people in the civilised world not to have a mobile phone, is Gareth.'

The older policeman smiled kindly. 'If you're convinced of a mistake, we can radio a colleague at the hospital to double check.' He even shut his notebook, as if that was that.

'I think you'd better. He has a fuzzy old tattoo at the top of his right arm, a capital G. If the man in hospital hasn't got that, it's not Gareth.'

'That ought to settle it.' The older man nodded his young colleague out of the back door to make the necessary call while he chatted easily to Diane about how she liked living in a village way out here, isolated by the splendour of the Fens.

In less than two minutes the young officer returned. 'G-golf, top of right arm,' he reported. 'I'm afraid it sounds like your husband, Mrs Jenner.'

'Oh.' Cold with shock, Diane fumbled her way into a jacket against the June evening and her new burgundy shoes from the hall cupboard. The shoes felt cold and stiff without tights. A sale bargain, they clashed with just about everything, including the turquoise skirt and top she was wearing, but now wasn't the time to be particular. She must see what had happened to Gareth.

She'd never ridden in a police car before. Perched on the back seat feeling sweatily sick, she watched swaying nettles tangle with froths of cow parsley as the car swished up the straight Fen lanes between fields divided into rectangles, brown soil embroidered with green crops. The land was flat for as far as the eye could manage see and deep dykes drained water to the sea that had once made a marsh of the people-

made landscape, but was now miles away. The older constable kept up his amiable conversation. ‘Flat up here, isn’t it? We don’t normally get up so far towards Holbeach and Spalding. Not many windbreaks.’

‘People from outside the area do tend to feel the wind.’ Although she responded automatically, Diane’s mind was churning. What the hell had Gareth been doing in a helicopter?

‘And it was a special dinner you were cooking, was it?’

‘Silver wedding anniversary.’

He glanced back over his shoulder. ‘Never! You don’t look old enough.’

She flushed. ‘I married young.’ Her heart was drumming with apprehension. Gareth might not be a husband sent by angels to make her life heaven on earth but he was her husband. This morning, he’d given her a card, *To My Wife on our Silver Wedding Anniversary*. He’d known that she was cooking a celebration dinner: lamb steaks with herb butter; new potatoes, broccoli and baby carrots from the garden. He’d smiled and dropped a rare kiss on her cheek. ‘I’ll be home on time.’

Instead, he’d been in a helicopter crash. How badly did you have to be hurt for the hospital to send the police to inform the next of kin?

In the thirty minutes of the journey to Peterborough the dread grew that the answer was, ‘Very badly’. The car turned off Thorpe Road and parked between A & E and Outpatients by an ambulance with *East Anglian NHS Trust* on the side in dark green.

‘Here we are, Mrs Jenner.’

Floating through the automatic doors on a cloud of unreality, she found herself the baton passed efficiently from the policemen in the car to a PC Stone, who was exactly what the public expected of a copper – a big, stolid man with buzz-cut hair and a mission to keep her calm. Positively oozing positivity, he must have been top of his police class in reassuring silently freaked women in their best clothes and the wrong shoes. ‘I’m assured that your husband isn’t in any danger, Mrs Jenner. And he’s in good hands. I’ll tell you what I know so far.’ A & E was busy but he found her a blue vinyl chair in the waiting area. Her legs wobbled and she dropped down onto it, wiping a prickle of sweat from her top lip.

He fetched a cup of water and she sipped while he repeated everything the first two policemen had said in his deeply reassuring policeman’s voice and she made herself listen and nod. It was real. It was happening.

Presently, he rose. ‘I have to go back behind the scenes to see what I can find out. Will you be all right here?’

‘Yes. Thanks.’

‘Should I contact someone? You might like to have a relative with you?’

Bryony. But her daughter was far away in Brazil, working in an orphanage full of beautiful, black-eyed waifs who had almost nothing, but considered themselves lucky not to have to scavenge on the street, according to her letters. Bryony would have to be told. But not yet. So far away from home, it would be cruel to frighten her until Diane had concrete information. Bryony’s childhood of illness and narrow squeaks made Diane shield her automatically. Also, Bryony and Gareth’s relationship

had been what Bryony declared ‘shitty’ before she had left, so Diane wanted to know exactly what shape Gareth was in before she prodded that sleeping tiger.

‘The Norths are over there, if you don’t want to wait alone.’ Constable Stone gestured over his shoulder.

Diane didn’t understand what he meant by ‘Norths’, but knew that to wait alone was exactly what she did want. The hospital procedure was familiar from all the times they’d brought Bryony here in the throes of an asthma attack, clutching her inhaler, white-faced, eyes frightened. The staff worked their way down to you and you just had to wait.

‘I can call my brother if I find I need anyone.’ She tried to imagine Freddy abandoning his big, comfortable house in leafy Orton Longueville to sit beside her on these crowded seats. He would in a heartbeat, of course, if she asked him. But it had probably been a long time since he entered an NHS hospital. Much more likely companions were Ivan and Melvyn, who would willingly charge in to keep vigil for their big brother. They’d take over. They’d tell her not to worry, sit either side of her and be grim and demand to see every doctor in the place.

No, she’d wait alone, listening to the vending machine’s satisfied gurgles as a steady procession of people fed its coin slot. A group of teenage lads laughed and swore. Kiddies, pale and whiney, red and sleepy, crying, noisy kids that should’ve been in bed instead of arguing in the children’s playroom, waited while their siblings had their broken limbs and split heads seen to.

‘Diane?’

She jumped. A man loomed over her, his black leather jacket shining dully and his thick dark hair looking freshly cut.

‘Yes?’ she answered, cautiously.

He took the seat the policeman had vacated and smiled. ‘I’m James North, Valerie’s husband.’

Sorting rapidly through her memory, Diane failed to locate a James or a Valerie North.

‘Valerie was in the crash, too,’ he added, as she hesitated. Then, patiently, ‘You know who Valerie is, don’t you? Valerie North?’

She blinked. She hadn’t had time to wonder if there were others in the crash. ‘If you’re her husband, I’ll take a stab that she’s your wife.’ And, realising she’d been unnecessarily curt, ‘Does she work with Gareth?’

His brows went up. ‘Of course not.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know, then.’

His eyes narrowed intently. ‘You don’t know who Valerie is?’ He leaned nearer, as if he could hypnotise her into divulging all she knew. The leather jacket brushed her hand; cool, sinuous.

She resisted the urge to check out its stitching to see if it was as well-made as the rest of him. ‘Should I?’

Frowning, he murmured, almost to himself, ‘I don’t know.’

His grey-eyed scrutiny made her feel like a specimen under his microscope. She put on the crisp voice she used with the bank to cover up a dread of uncovering unpalatable facts – this time that Gareth had been with this man’s spouse. A chill

rippled through her guts. 'You're talking in riddles. How about simply telling me what's going on between my husband and your wife?'

'For God's sake! What could be "going on"?' For an instant something blazed in his eyes and she realised with a little shock that behind his show of patience, James North was smouldering with anger.

Before Diane could bark back that that was exactly what she wanted to know, a pale and untidy young woman rushed up, big-eyed as a fawn. 'Dad – look at *Pops*,' she hissed, a hand fluttering towards an older man who, drained of colour and sunk in a chair, was foraging vaguely in the folds of his jacket.

'Hell,' muttered James. In four strides he was at the older man's side. 'I'll get it, Harold.' His big, deft hand extracted a bottle from the old man's jacket pocket. In seconds a tablet was beneath Harold's tongue and his collar and tie had been loosened. James had even found time to reassure the young woman twitching beside him. 'He'll be fine in a minute, Tamz, when he gets his breath.'

Relief, then uncertainty, flitted across her face. 'I forgot about his medication, didn't I?'

'You did fine, you fetched me, you did the right thing.' James smiled and his daughter smiled tremulously back.

James North turned the beam of his attention back to Diane. 'Could you sit with Harold and Tamzin while I see if I can organise somewhere a bit quieter?'

Not waiting for an answer, he launched a charm offensive at the woman behind reception desk, his low voice warm and his smile persuasive. 'My father-in-law's not well, he has angina -'

Diane dropped into the empty chair beside Harold. 'Any better?'

His large, old man's nose was threaded with red veins, white hair lay neatly to one side and his eyes were kind. Already, the blue tinge was leaving his lips. 'Getting that way.' Hands slack and palms up in his lap, he nevertheless managed a trace of grim humour. 'Shocks can do old codgers in. I shall have to point it out to my children.'

Diane was reminded of her father. Peter Wibberley hadn't possessed much of the friendly dignity in this man but he, too, had spoken 'nicely' and automatically dressed in a jacket, shirt and tie whenever he left the house.

'Pops will be much better soon.' Tamzin's bony hands moved restlessly. 'The pills are well good.'

'Good.' Diane smiled. She'd first taken Tamzin for about sixteen, with her waiflike figure and James North as her sheepdog, but now she saw that Tamzin's eyes were much older. Sadder. Reflecting the world in the grey of her eyes. She spoke like a princess who'd learnt the vernacular from the servants, inserting 'well good' clumsily. She would've been pretty if not such a scarecrow. 'His colour's improving already.'

'Reassuring,' Harold murmured.

Then James was back. 'There's a room we can use. They'll let us through a security door.'

When Harold had gathered his energy, they herded along the corridor, James stationing himself at Harold's elbow as well as resting a hand on the thin shoulders of

his daughter as if to ensure that she didn't get lost. He settled the older man in a room that was cramped but better than the busy, noisy area they'd just left. 'Tamz, will you stay with Pops for a few minutes?' His eyes settled purposefully on Diane. 'We'll organise hot drinks, shall we? We could all do with something.'

Fifteen paces outside the door he took her arm and shunted her firmly to the side of the corridor, letting two wheelchairs whisper past on fat, rubber tyres, stooping to bring his head closer to hers. 'You coping OK?'

Diane breathed in the faint smell of new leather from his jacket. 'Don't worry about me. Although it would be helpful if you'd explain who everybody is and why I'm supposed to know them.' She lifted her brows.

'I was beginning to suspect that you hadn't a clue.' James rubbed his hand over his hair. When he spoke again he had rediscovered the patient tone that Diane was beginning to find seriously annoying. 'It's quite straightforward. Tamzin is my daughter. Valerie, who's had the accident, is my wife; you've got that bit. And Harold is Valerie's father. Of course, Harold is Gareth's father, too, so Valerie is Gareth's half-sister.'

Diane stared. She went cold. She went hot. She felt as if she'd been caught up in some freaky dream but the smell of the hospital and the pinching of her new shoes were quite undreamlike. 'Gareth's father?'

'Yes.'

'And sister.'

He puffed out a sigh. 'Half-sister. Obviously.'

Diane groped for sense and reason. 'But –'

As if to make up for the sigh, James returned to being overly patient. 'I think Gareth's told you about Valerie and me and our three daughters? Natalia, Alice – and Tamzin.' He nodded at the room they'd just left.

'But you can't be talking about Gareth *Jenner*,' she interrupted. 'He hasn't got a father.' She knew this as certainly as she knew where the sun rose – unless someone had been messing with the celestial mechanics. Perhaps that was it! A shift in the universe might explain Gareth's presence in a helicopter and how, when she knew so well that his family consisted only of a mother (deceased) and two brothers living in Peterborough, he'd somehow acquired a father and a sister. She shook her head, trying to clear it.

There had to be an explanation. Her suspicions had hovered earlier around the idea that Gareth was having an affair with this Valerie North but now that seemed comparatively tame.

Was she drunk? Was James drunk? Had somebody slipped him something? His slate grey eyes with their huge black pupils were fixed on hers with unnervingly hypnotic effect. 'Do you think there could have been two Gareth Jenners admitted tonight?'

A corner of James's mouth curled. 'I understand from my brother-in-law, Gareth Jenner, that his wife's called Diane Jenner. And, somehow, I can't see there being two of you, too.'

'No,' she agreed, baffled. Someone *must've* been messing with the celestial mechanics, then. It was the only explanation.

Back in the little room furnished with squashy turquoise chairs, James removed the lid from a polystyrene cup of tea for his father-in-law. 'How are you, now?'

Harold, pale but no longer chalky, grinned, unconvincingly. 'Right as ninepence.'

James touched Diane's arm, the heat of his fingers making her jump. 'The introductions are a bit late but this is Harold Myers, Gareth's father. And my daughter, Tamzin.'

Diane offered her hand and found it enfolded between both of Harold's. In contrast to James's, his fingers were chill and clammy.

'I'm so pleased to meet you – at long last!'

She returned his smile, searching his face for some echo of Gareth to support the preposterous idea that he could, indeed, be Gareth's father. To her, Gareth had always resembled his mother, the same hard mouth and rock-set jaw. But now she could see that Harold was smiling at her with familiar eyes; warmer, on Harold, but exactly the same combination of hazel and green. 'Gareth's father,' she marvelled softly. *But Gareth doesn't have a father. Gareth carries his illegitimacy like a chip on his shoulder as big as a boat.* Growing up in an era when illegitimacy was a positive scandal, he'd suffered for his mother's haphazard fortunes with a defiance matched only by his determination not to blame her.

Harold squeezed Diane's hand. 'Thank God that Gareth isn't in any danger. Broken bones heal. We'll get him and Valerie moved to the new Ackerman Hospital as soon as possible.' He took out a clean handkerchief, ironed neatly into a square, to dab at the corner of his eye.

Ackerman was a private hospital. Gareth didn't have a private hospital income. He barely had a new-pyjamas-for-hospital income. Diane opened her mouth, flicked her gaze around the surrounding faces then closed her mouth without speaking. Tamzin, hair hanging like straw, looked as if she'd already been in bed when news of the accident came. Harold was obviously bone tired, and James had the air that this was just one more day when the cares of the world had descended upon his shoulders. They had enough to worry about without Diane blurting out, 'But we can't afford a private hospital!' No doubt there would come a point when she could explain to the staff, discreetly, why Gareth would remain in the arms of the NHS.

'The helicopter must have come down with a bang,' Harold observed. 'Valerie was always telling me how safe it was. How do you think it could have happened, James?'

James shrugged. 'Mechanical failure? Cross wind? That's the Civil Aviation Authority's province. There will be an enquiry, I expect.' His voice was even but, again, Diane caught the glitter of anger in his eyes.

'Do you really think Mum's going to be all right?' Tamzin sniffed. 'I mean, she's not going to ...?'

James threw an arm around her. 'Tamz, she'll heal. We'll just have to be patient for a few months.'

'What on earth were they doing in a helicopter, anyway?' asked Diane, idly. The police hadn't been able to provide any information beyond the preposterous fact

that Gareth had been the passenger in a two-seater Robinson R22 helicopter that had crashed on take-off at Medes Flying Club. If they drove the country route to visit Gareth's brother, Melvyn, she and Gareth passed the flying club, on the edge of Peterborough, without ever entertaining the notion of turning in under the matt black iron archway, past security. That was for other people, people in a salary bracket that Jenners only dreamed of.

Her enquiry seemed to rouse James's annoyingly patient tone again. 'Valerie got her private pilot's licence for helicopters last year. She often takes Gareth up on his days off.'

'On his *what*?' Diane spluttered her coffee all down her chin.

Silence. Wariness crept into James's dark eyes. 'Is there anyone you want me to phone? To be with you?'

Diane was an old hand at not allowing subject changes as a question-avoidance tactic. Even blessed with what her mother used to term a 'silvery' voice, she wasn't easily talked down. 'What do you mean by "Gareth's days off"?''

James shrugged. 'Since Gareth took semi-retirement, he only works Tuesday to Thursday, right?'

Diane stared. 'Tuesday to Thursday,' she repeated, faintly, wondering how this could be when Gareth's working week apparently also encompassed Monday, Friday and most Saturdays. Even the occasional Sunday. 'So, Gareth's taken semi-retirement, discovered his long-lost family and spends his spare time whizzing around in helicopters?'

A grin flashed across James's face, filling his eyes with suppressed laughter. 'It doesn't normally sound quite so ludicrous – but, yes.'

She refrained from retorting that ludicrous was exactly what it was, because she so desperately needed to understand what the hell was going on. 'And you know who I am, yet you've never met me?'

Smile fading, James acknowledged, 'No. Owing to health issues.'

'Whose?'

'Yours!'

She made her eyes big and puzzled, a trick that could make even the bank manager responsive. 'Oh dear, am I ill? What on earth can be the matter with me?'

James exchanged a look with Harold.

She pounced. 'You don't know!'

'Of course I know! Gareth explained – that you have a nervous complaint, compounded by agoraphobia.'

'Why didn't he bring you to our house to meet me?'

Harold smiled a weary and gently perplexed smile. 'But you don't like meeting new people, Diane, do you?'

Diane studied first Harold's helpful smile, then James's puzzled frown. They meant it. They genuinely believed what they said. Her heart began to beat hard. She fought to keep her voice steady, the voice of a sane, rational person that everyone would believe in. 'Have I behaved tonight like an agoraphobic with a fear of meeting people?'

James watched her. Eventually, he admitted, 'I suppose not.'

Breathlessly, almost as if she didn't know if her input were welcome, Tamzin added, 'We all *wanted* to meet you. We wished we could.'

'Meeting would have made everything clearer,' Diane agreed, before picking up her now cold coffee and withdrawing into meditative silence.

PC Stone left the hospital, having gathered information for his report and satisfied himself that no one was about to die.

The corridors began to quieten.

James tried to relax, but the chair wasn't made to loll in. He felt stiff and bristly. As first Harold and then Tamzin fell silent, he was able to watch Diane Jenner out of the corner of his eye. Her expressions, flitting across her face like a slide show, told him that her thoughts weren't sweet. It had been an education, meeting her. Mindful of everything he'd been told about her precarious health, he'd made a huge effort to cater to her fragility – although the last thing he needed was an extra person to treat like china – and she'd reacted with the kind of outraged disbelief that she might reserve for an amiable drunk with a turd in each hand.

She made him want to laugh. And she made him want to throttle her when she gave him that politely scornful stare and demolished every statement he made.

A reassuring doctor brought news, first that Gareth had gone down to theatre to have pins in his wrist and fingers, a plate in his leg and an external fixation device – whatever that was – screwed into his pelvis, then of Valerie's multiple leg injuries, a similar pelvic device and a collapsed lung. James received the news stoically. 'On the whole, it's slightly better than I expected. Gareth and Valerie have been lucky. Helicopters aren't designed to bounce.'

'Neither Gareth nor Valerie will be on a ward for some time,' the white-coated doctor added. 'You might be better going home for some sleep.'

'I'll stay,' Diane returned, instantly, as if preprogrammed to rebut any idea she didn't originate.

James looked at Harold, who looked as if he could sleep for a year. 'I'll take you home.'

Harold shifted. 'I'm not sure ... Valerie's my daughter. And Gareth, I've only known him a couple of years –'

'A couple of *years*?' murmured Diane. James looked at her sharply. Harold was obviously shattered by the shock of having his child – his children – badly injured and he didn't need Diane interrogating him, not now.

James tried Tamzin. 'And I think you've had enough.'

Tamzin clutched her chair, her pleading eyes melting his heart. 'I want to see Mum when she comes round.'

James patted her arm, avoiding words like, *careful*, *medication* and *rest*. 'I could drop you off at your sister's. Nat won't mind you crashing in her spare bed. She'll fix you up with night things and something to read.'

Shaking her head mutinously, straw hair quivering, Tamzin's voice tightened, a great tear trembled on her lashes. 'I want to see *Mum*.'

James had to relent. 'All right, we'll take Pops home and pick up Mum's stuff.'

He noticed Diane watching them gather their things. 'Rather than staying here alone, you could come with us,' he offered.

'No, thanks,' returned Diane, cordially. 'I'll be OK.'

'Fine.' It might be a struggle to look after his exhausted father-in-law, his waif-like daughter, *and* this agoraphobic nervous wreck half-sister-in-law of his wife's who never left home. But, unaccountably ... here she was out.

Still, she was a woman alone in the middle of the night, far from home, and she'd just sustained a series of bruising shocks ... He sat down again, ready to cajole her into co-operation. 'It might be better if –'

'- you stop knowing what's best for me. Because I'll probably slap you if you use that patiently patronising voice on me again.'

He frowned horribly to disguise the almost overwhelming urge to laugh at her awful politeness. 'I'm not patronising.'

'You bloody well are, you know.' She patted his hand. 'I'm not a child, I'm not an imbecile and, as we now all know, I'm not ill. So I'm the one who makes up my mind. OK?'

Chapter 2

‘Oh-kay,’ he conceded.

Diane watched them leave, the big man and his lame ducks, leaving behind them only silence and space.

She fetched herself another drink and settled down in contemplation of her world gone mad. Two years, Harold said he’d known Gareth. *Two years*. Had Gareth’s behaviour changed in that period, had he been more than usually secretive? Done anything that should have alerted her to the fact that for two days of each week he was not at work, but ...

... where? Almost any other man who was leading a double life would have a mistress tucked away. But Gareth’s secret, it seemed, was a nice family.

She was word perfect on the story of Gareth’s childhood and how Wendy had brought him up any way she could. In the sixties, the benefit system hadn’t been what it was now. Unmarried mothers had found it hard to scrape by and, like many others, Wendy had drifted into a relationship, trading sex and housekeeping for a man to put his roof over her family’s head. Or surviving on jobs that paid peanuts.

So why hadn’t she made Harold cough up for Gareth’s keep?

Diane’s eyes grew gritty as the wee hours stilled the antiseptic corridors. James returned with weary tread, a wraith-like Tamzin drifting beside him, just in time to be allowed in to see Valerie.

And Diane’s vigil was rewarded when she was shown in to see her *poorly, battered, but stable* husband. ‘Just ten minutes tonight, please.’ The nurse consulted Gareth’s chart, pen in hand. ‘He’s just about conscious but we’d like him to rest.’

‘I understand,’ breathed Diane, staring down at the bed

Gareth’s face was grotesquely swollen. Diane had difficulty recognising this purpling balloon-head as her husband. Every feature was puffed, distorted and discoloured beneath his incongruously normal thatch of iron-grey hair. His jaw was swollen shut, there was an enormous egg at the left side of his forehead and that, and the eye socket beneath, were flooded a dark angry red. He looked as if an elephant had pirouetted on his head.

But he was evidently sensible enough to recognise her and, un-Gareth-like, groggily search out her hand with his chilly fingers. His other hand, the right, was encased in plaster and plastic troughs.

The distortion of his features seemed appropriate, somehow, as everything Diane thought she’d known about this elusive, self-contained man had warped, too. He was inclined to guard what was his and she’d always known he wasn’t good at sharing. But finding his natural father two years ago and keeping it a secret ...

She glanced at her reflection in the huge window. Her hair hung long in its neat plait, her clothes were, admittedly, self-made, but then that was her *job*. What was he so ashamed of?

It might’ve relieved her feelings to round on him with ferocious questions but she kept her anger to herself. Habit. Long habit. She never roused Gareth’s temper

unnecessarily. She liked to have her challenge all worked out in her mind before she incurred his house-shaking rage or punishing silence. And she had been punished plenty, in recent years.

‘So,’ she observed. ‘You survived.’

‘Uh.’

She took the grunt for assent. ‘The doctors say you’ll recover.’

‘Uh.’

‘I expect you’re woozy.’

‘Uh.’ He closed his eyes. His breathing deepened.

Sliding her hand from his, she turned to the scarred locker beside the bed and opened the drawer. Beside a handful of change lay his wallet, black and soft with use. She’d bought it several years ago at John Lewis’s one drizzly, dank December morning, £24.99, as a Christmas gift. He’d said one from the market would’ve done just as well, £4.99 or even less, but she’d argued that this would last longer.

She’d never had it in her hands since the day she gave it to him; they respected one another’s private space so far as things like wallets were concerned. Gareth was particular that way. But now, defiantly, she flipped open the snap. Her purse was housing mainly moths and she’d need money to get home.

Cards in the card sleeves, including one Bryony had sent with her contact details in Brazil. Lonely in the note slots, a twenty-pound note and a five.

She fingered the leather thoughtfully. Its substance suggested further paperwork in there somewhere. Her fingertips found the smooth oval tag of the zip to the inner compartment and she ran it gently along the top edge, *ZZZZZZ*.

The inner compartment was full of twenties.

She almost dropped the wallet in shock. Heart picking up, fingers stiff and trembling, she counted. Twenty. *Twenty twenties!* She stared at the lightly mauve notes, unable to remember the last time she’d held twenty twenties. A fortune. She’d almost exhausted the housekeeping for the week and there might be all kinds of incidental expenses for her to meet while Gareth was in hospital. And why should Gareth squirrel away dosh, when things were squeaky tight at home?

Slowly, she slipped out two notes and dropped the wallet back in the drawer.

Twenty twenties. Eighteen twenties, now.

After a moment, she picked up the wallet again and extracted another three twenties. Then five more. That was fair. Halvies.

She jumped to see that Gareth’s eyes had opened. ‘I’ll be back tomorrow.’ Her voice emerged matter-of-factly, as if she were the type of wife who routinely rooted through her husband’s personal possessions.

Gareth said, ‘Uh,’ again, moving his head and then sucking in his breath in pain. She could almost hear the protests he was too ill to make.

She licked her lips. ‘You’d better sleep.’ The unfamiliar substance of two hundred pounds clutched in her hand, she crossed the room slowly, waiting for objections and reprimands to bound after her like maddened cats. But Gareth said nothing. Two hundred pounds. The notes felt soft and thick, coated with the prints of all the fingers they’d passed through, fingers perhaps more used to holding a wedge of

notes than hers were. Two. Hundred. Pounds. She'd never suspected robbing her husband would be so empowering. Fun, in fact.

The door shushed as she opened it and clunked softly closed behind her. She let out her breath.

In the corridor, James was pacing, glancing at his watch. Lines of fatigued grooved his face. 'I thought you must still be here. I waited to run you home.'

She rubbed her temples, her mind still on the blast of Gareth's outrage that had never come. 'But I live way out in the country.' Her eyes went to Tamzin, who was propped against the wall, eyes huge with weariness.

'Purtenon St. Paul. I know it.' He pressed a flat chrome button and the lift doors opened.

She didn't want him to take her home, didn't want to have to be grateful, to satisfy his obviously over-developed protective streak by needing his help. Proudly, she flourished the stack of twenties. 'Don't worry, I just raided Gareth's wallet for taxi fare.'

James stepped back to allow her into the lift, Tamzin drifting in beside her. The doors breezed shut and they stood in the small space for a few silent seconds until the doors opened again in the foyer where a cleaning crew were buffing the floor. Through the main doors, the night they stepped into was cool and fresh. And damn! The taxi rank was empty. Diane tutted. She'd been looking forward to putting some of her ill-gotten gains to frivolous use.

Gareth so disliked frivolity.

She turned back. 'I'll ask at reception for the number of a cab company.'

James groaned, rubbing a square hand over his hair. 'Please, Diane. It's nearly morning and you've had a shock and I can relax if I know you've made it home. Let's not bicker about it. Just get in the fu – in the car.'

Diane glared up at James. His gaze met hers. She hesitated. He looked really tired yet – judging by the obstinate set of his mouth – was apparently unwilling to abandon her, a woman he'd never met until tonight – a fairly awkward and ungrateful woman he'd never met until tonight. She found herself looking at his mouth, as she examined the thought and wondered what she had to prove by refusing his kind offer.

'Give in,' Tamzin advised. 'It's easier in the long run.'

Tamzin didn't like riding in the back of the car but insisting that Diane sit in the front beside her father was the sort of courtesy her parents had drummed into their kids.

The sky was just thinking about turning silver and pearly. She could sit in the middle of the back seat and watch it, occasionally letting her gaze slide over to the still figure of Diane Jenner.

Uncle Gareth's wife! How strange was that? For two years they'd referred to her as 'Mrs Rochester', the unbalanced wife that Uncle Gareth hid away and cared for so heroically.

Diane was well unusual, with a gaze to read your soul and an impressive ability to resist doing anything she didn't wish to do. She certainly wasn't suffering from any nervous, emotional or phobic difficulty so far as Tamzin could see. And Tamzin would know, because of Her Condition.

So, either Diane had made a *mega* recovery ... or Uncle Gareth had been telling porkies.

Mega recoveries were rare. So, Uncle Gareth hadn't wanted them to meet his wife. That was totally pants.

Natalia and Alice would be as mad as hell to have missed this skeleton rattling out of its closet tonight, and their father taking ages to catch on that the facts about Diane Jenner weren't facts at all. But James had asked Tamzin's sisters to stay at home. Valerie wasn't in danger, Nat was working shifts and Ally was in the middle of accountancy exams. Tamzin, as usual, hadn't been given an option; James had just said, 'Come on, Tamz.' Because of Her Condition he wouldn't leave her home alone when anything bad happened – not that she'd wanted to be left at home. She'd wanted to see her mum. And now she had, so broken and bruised. Her dad would be watching her like a hawk for days, if not weeks.

Nat and Ally were lucky; strong and confident and well-adjusted, with healthy lives full of healthy problems like annoying boyfriends, impossible bosses and killer hangovers. She loved Nat and Ally. She wished she *was* Nat or Ally.

Depression was a bastard.

She yawned. She hadn't got up till lunchtime but she longed to retreat to her cool sheets. On bad nights she would only lie and stare at the ceiling, but still she loved the cocoon comfort of her bed. Bed. Her heart lurched to remember Valerie strung up like a fly in a web in that hospital bed. It was so crap that Valerie had been hurt. Really hurt. Tamzin felt a familiar hollowness in her chest. It would be ages before Mum was home. Could Tamzin hack undiluted James for so long? Her father got so stressed about her getting better it made her feel guilty that she couldn't.

Valerie placed less importance than James on things like washing and dressing. Possibly, she didn't always notice whether Tamzin had. That was cool. Less pressure.

Yet, the baby of the family, Tamzin's childhood memories included perching proudly on her mother's lap at parties in her Laura Ashley dresses and white knee socks while Nat and Ally, less malleable and less pretty, careered around with sashes untied and lace ripped. Valerie loved parties, having always been beautiful and vivacious so that men made idiots of themselves over her, which made her dead snappy with Dad, sometimes, because he refused to be made angry by them.

Tamzin had a special connection to her mother – they closed their eyes to each other's problems. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as the car purred through the dawn and wondered how her mother would take to Diane Jenner. Uncle Gareth had been a lovely new audience for Valerie's toys, the big stone house, the Alloy Blue TVR Tuscan 2 Targa, the 4-wheel-drive Lexus, the flying.

But Diane didn't look the type to be easily impressed.

'Where's your place?' James asked Diane, politely.

Diane stirred and stretched in the dark grey light. 'A couple of miles. Drop me by the village green, if you like. I can walk down the lane.'

James glanced across at her. 'At night?'

'It's getting light.'

He made a performance of peering out. There was no colour yet in the fields or hedges and the streetlights were still alight as they neared the village. Tamzin could have told Diane that she was wasting her breath. James wouldn't drop Diane anywhere but safely at her front door. 'Just tell me where to find your house,' he said.

Shrugging, Diane sent him down a main road between brick houses topped with tile, turning left just before a huddle of new properties advertised as 'executive residences'. Nowhere near as big as our house, Tamzin thought. Over a small bridge, they crossed a dyke where the water looked like weak tea without milk in the first of the sun's rays and ran down a lane between a string of redbrick houses with hedges. The flatness of the surrounding fields was typical of the wide expanses of the Fens where most of the scenery was sky and the pylons marched like robots.

The Mercedes rolled along quietly. James glanced at Diane. 'Bit bloody lonely down here. Do you often walk it alone?'

One of Diane's shoulders lifted. 'I have to get from A to B.'

Tamzin couldn't decide whether Diane was hostile or amused at James's concern. Concern was kind of a habit, with him.

They pulled up outside one of the redbrick semi-detached houses and Diane opened the car door. 'Sorry to have put you to so much trouble at the end of a long night.'

Tamzin climbed out, too, intending to move into the front seat. The first streak of pink had appeared overhead and she hunched her shoulders against a chill morning breeze.

'I'll see you in,' said James.

Diane halted, her long plait settling over one shoulder. 'See me in?' She examined the thirty yards between the car and her house. The corners of her mouth twitched. 'Oh. OK. Um, thanks.'

Tamzin grinned as her father, scowling at being humoured so obviously, trailed Diane up the concrete path to what probably used to be a council house. The front garden was long and the shrubs they brushed past were silvery with dew and spider webs. Something squelched under Tamzin's shoe. 'Gross,' she muttered.

Diane led them to a side door that opened into the kitchen. In the light of a bulb shaded by taut white cotton, they all blinked. 'As you can see,' observed Diane, gravely, 'quite safe. It's very good of you to worry, of course.'

'Right.' James turned for the door.

But Tamzin couldn't stop gazing at her surroundings. This kitchen was out of a museum! White Formica worktop, chipped and scarred, white tiles, greying grout, a freestanding electric cooker crouched on quarry tiles, more Formica on the units on the wall. It would have been straight out of the 1970s, except for the fresh pink emulsion with a stencilled grapevine arcing above the washing machine.

Well old! And *tiny* compared to their house, with the gables of six bedrooms studding the red-tiled roof and four cars parked in the garage at the end of the drive.

Her mouth was quicker to react than her sluggish brain. 'Whoa! Does Uncle Gareth live *here*?'

Diane halted, that disconcerting gaze homing in on Tamzin in a way that made Tamzin want to suck the words back out of the air. Seconds passed in silence. Without

removing her gaze, Diane reached down thick, yellow mugs from behind a glass sliding door of a wall cupboard. Her voice had taken on a note of steel. 'I can't let you go without something to keep you awake on the drive home.' She filled the kettle, plugged it in, and scraped out two kitchen chairs. 'Please – sit.'

'We ought to get going.' James turned for the door.

'A cup of tea first,' Diane contradicted firmly. 'And a chat. That would be ... helpful. Please.'

Tamzin watched her father hesitate, pinned by blue eyes. There was something about Diane, something good and valiant. And difficult to resist. Tamzin suspected that if Diane didn't get what she wanted now, she'd lie in wait for them at the hospital. She sighed aloud and dropped into a chair. Slowly, her father joined her, frowning like a goblin.

Diane made tea in a pot, with tea leaves and a strainer.

Then she folded her arms on the kitchen table, pushing aside a bundle of blue fabric, a tattered blue pincushion and a pot of sequins. 'Why are you so astonished that we live in this house, Tamzin?' She glanced around the kitchen. 'It's modest but it's a perfectly respectable house, bought and paid for.'

Picking up the yellow mug, although the tea was hot, Tamzin protested, feebly. 'I'm not astonished.'

Diane's voice softened as she poured her own tea, brewed Guinness-dark. 'Tamzin, I've had a bad day.'

'Tamzin's very tired,' James cut in, in his *in charge* voice.

Diane twinkled at Tamzin. 'Are you too tired to answer, Tamz?'

Tamzin sighed and dropped her gaze to Diane's top. It reminded her of a clear sea on a summer day, the glitter of the sun on embroidered waves suggested by a spangling of golden beads and – now she looked more closely – fleets of tiny silver buckles. Cool.

She ventured. 'I suppose I thought Uncle Gareth would live somewhere different.'

'Different? Bigger, smaller, prettier, uglier, upmarket, downmarket?'

'Upmarket,' Tamzin selected miserably, unwillingly, aware that she was toiling deeper into hideous poo and wishing James had been content to drop Diane at her gate.

'Upmarket.' Diane mused. Her hair caught the light as she nodded. Tamzin fixed her gaze on it. Such a strange colour; properly pale blonde. Moonlight. Star shine. Pearl. Unexpectedly beautiful. 'Why would you expect Gareth to own a house that was "upmarket"?''

James tried again with the authoritative voice. 'This isn't our business.'

'That's a get out.' Diane stretched absently, putting her hands behind her head and making her shoulder bones crack, the fabric of the loose satiny top tightening against her body.

Tamzin was horrified to catch James all too obviously blinking his gaze back up to Diane's face.

Diane dropping her arms. Suddenly.

And James blushing as hot and red as a chilli.

Oh gross! Tamzin felt the sting of mortified tears. Her father had *looked* with that lips-parted expression men reserve for breasts – and let Diane catch him. And they were looking at each other and then not looking, glances flitting around the room like birds with no perches, before their gazes tangled once more.

‘Because of the money,’ Tamzin blurted, to deflect attention from James’s cringeworthy behaviour.

Diane’s gaze flicked back to Tamzin. ‘Money?’

‘Pops gave him money.’ Tamzin’s voice shook.

Diane’s body flexed and quivered as if silently absorbing a blow. Her eyes grew enormous. ‘Gareth would never accept charity. He wouldn’t claim low-income benefit, even, when our daughter was younger.’

Decisively, James jumped to his feet. ‘Then obviously we’re mistaken.’

Diane continued speaking to Tamzin, as if they were old friends, her eyes intent, yet vulnerable. ‘Do you know how much?’

Tamzin hesitated. ‘I don’t know a figure.’

‘Roughly? Please?’

Anxious tears were building and building. And if she cried, Diane would feel sorry for her, might slide her arms around her and stroke her hair. She might like Diane to stroke her hair. But she wouldn’t like Diane to feel sorry for her. She swallowed hard. ‘Quite a bit, I think. Plus the cottage.’

Diane flinched. Dawn was bursting through the kitchen window now, lighting up Diane’s hair pink-apricot. Her skin was soft and clear, the lines fine at the corners of her eyes. Valerie’s grooves were deeper, but then Valerie wasn’t exactly a health freak and the puckers around her lips told of all the cigarettes she’d smoked, no matter how much stuff she had injected. Diane’s face was young but her hands were old; rough and red and work-worn where Valerie’s were soft and manicured -

‘What cottage?’ Diane’s voice was a whisper.

James answered this time, his voice deep and gentle. ‘On the outskirts of Whittlesey.’ He hesitated. ‘Harold’s owned it for years. Apparently he once bought it for Gareth’s mother.’

Diane’s eyes emptied. There was a long silence. Slowly, she touched Tamzin’s hand. ‘Thanks. I won’t keep you if you want to get off to bed now.’ A tear welled and skittered down her cheek. She batted it away with the back of her hand, lurching to her feet and turning blindly.

Tamzin scraped back her chair, seeing a danger with sudden appalling clarity. ‘Careful!’

But James was already there, snatching at Diane before her hand made contact with the chrome kettle. As if it was one shock too many, Diane piped out a sound between a laugh and a sob. And, without either of them seeming to do more than sway, James’s comforting arms were around Diane and Diane’s head was on his shoulder, and James was pushing her plait out of the way so that he could pat her back, murmuring that he was sorry that she’d had so many bolts from the blue and Diane hiccupping that it was hardly his fault.

Tamzin returned slowly to her chair. Her father was well weird, the way he seemed to be able to care for just about everybody in the world.

..... to be continued!