

## Chapter One

IT WAS A PLEASANTLY warm Friday evening in early May as Mark slammed the door to his Bayswater bed-sit, ran down the stairs, flew through the large outer door to his building and hurried off towards the nearest tube station. He was going to dinner with his dearest friend Stella at her comfy flat in Netherhall Gardens, Hampstead, and he was both hungry and impatient to see her again.

As he descended to platform level, his mobile phone lost its signal just moments before a text arrived that would've completely changed his plans that evening, had he received it in time. As a result, his rather staid and predictable life was about to be transformed.

Despite the burgeoning crowds at Baker Street, he crossed quickly from the Circle line to the Jubilee line and jumped smartly onto a train just as the doors were closing. He checked the time and was smiling at his good fortune when the train came to a grinding halt. A jaded monotone voice in the carriage ceiling blamed the delay on signalling problems in the Wembley area. They heard nothing more for nearly an hour.

He was eventually dropped off, flustered and bothered in the rumbling depths of Finchley Road tube station, unbearably late. As he ran up the moving staircase, his mobile picked up a signal and then beeped to let him know a text had arrived. He clicked appropriately, noting the time it had been sent, and read the following: *sorry sweetheart, hughs got BIG problems. must go to him. c u another night. call me. love stella xx.*

'Shit,' he muttered.

He punched Call Sender. The phone rang several times before a flustered female Scottish accent said, 'Halloo?'

'Hi Stella, it's me.'

'Mark!' she cried. 'Sorry about tonight. You got my message?'

‘Yes, just now. I’ve been stuck in a tunnel for ages with no signal and I’ve just arrived at Finchley Road tube station...’

‘Oh, no... I’m so sorry. Wait there, I’ll come down... We can go to the Crown & Thistle for a quick drink.’

Mark looked across the road at the Crown & Thistle. It was a pokey, smoke-filled bar with little to interest him.

‘But, I’ve brought a really nice bottle of wine,’ he said temptingly. *And an empty stomach*, he thought. ‘And I’ve got some really wicked stuff with me.’

‘Oh, Mark. I have to go to Islington tonight,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry, but Hugh’s had some really bad news.’

*That bloody Hugh.*

There was a moment’s pause, then her voice chirruped, ‘Oh, come on up then.’

Mark cut the connection, pocketed his mobile and turned left out of the station. As he searched for a safe place to cross the busy Finchley Road, the excitement that had been mounting all day rapidly cooled. Stella was blowing him out for Hugh, her erstwhile boyfriend.

Although Mark had never met him, he understood from Stella that Hugh was a handsome devil, estranged from his wife and daughter, and that she loved him - at least most of the time. It was a rocky ride though that pitched and yawed like a playground seesaw - one moment they were passionate lovers, the next they were hurling abuse at each other and the next it was all over, as it had been this past week. Then another crisis would unite them - like the one this evening it seemed.

So, no dinner either. His stomach rudely gurgled in protest.

Following a steep climb up from the Finchley Road, he reached the vast flaking dark green door to Stella’s home at last - the once magnificent Netherhall itself. Netherhall was originally a Manor house and had survived intact up until the early sixties when it had been recklessly converted into thirteen bed-sits and flats. Stella was fortunate in renting a cosy one-bedroomed self-contained flat on the second floor with the added luxury of its own intercom system, quite separate from the main doorbell servicing the rest of the house. He pressed the necessary buzzer and heard, ‘Da da dada da,’ as the

## NETHERHALL GARDENS

intercom crackled and hummed, like something Alexander Graham Bell had cobbled together in a moment of madness. Then Stella's metallic-tinted voice boomed, 'Halloo?'

'Big Dick Escorts!' Mark shouted back. There was a loud clunk, then silence and a few moments later Stella appeared as the door flew open and a petite blonde human dynamo slammed into him. Mark hugged her. They smacked lips, noisily.

'I'm sorry... Really sorry,' she whispered into his chest, 'but Hugh's having problems at the moment.'

Mark nodded. Stella led him inside the grand hallway, up the echoing wooden staircase to the second landing and then through a dark recess and finally into her small flat. A Monstera cheese plant, the height and breadth of the living room, was crouched in front of the large open window. It was so enormous that it looked ready to step out of its pot and re-house itself. There were a few books, a couple of magazines, bits of computer and pieces of ancient furniture scattered just about everywhere the eye cared to roam. Mark's eyes finally settled on the few dirty pots and pans in the kitchen sink, just off from the lounge. He gazed hungrily at them for a moment too long.

'Sorry,' she apologised. 'Are you hungry?'

'No,' he lied. 'I had a late lunch.' He smiled and hugged her again. 'It's so good to see you. Come on, let's open this bottle - it's still quite cold.'

They sat together on the sofa overhung by the Triffid (as the plant was affectionately known), feet up and facing each other, wine glasses cupped to bosoms.

'Tell me about Hugh,' Mark suggested. 'What's he been up to now?'

'No, no. It's too horrible.' Stella's face pinched up tightly for a second as if she were sucking a lemon. She took another sip of white wine.

Mark placed his glass onto the nearest flat surface, reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved a Café Crème tin. He opened it and withdrew a pre-rolled joint. 'Perhaps this'll loosen your tongue,' he said and lit up.

Stella rose and found an ashtray beneath an old copy of Vogue.

She snuggled back onto the sofa. 'So, how's *your* love life?' she demanded.

Mark smiled at her through the haze, held a breath and then let out a stream of thick blue-grey smoke. 'I tell you everything I do,' he replied, offering her the joint.

Stella accepted the joint and snuggled further into the cushions, making herself comfortable, before taking a dainty little puff. Then a thought struck her and she struggled to sit up. 'Hey, have you been following the news about this gay serial killer...?'

'He's not a gay serial killer, Stella, he's a killer who happens to like men,' Mark corrected her, sipping his wine.

'There's a difference?' asked Stella, passing the joint and snuggling back down.

Mark took a drag, held it and then spoke through the smoke. 'Of course! He's not someone who hates gay men and wants to kill them. He likes gay men, all men I guess, but he gets his kicks by killing them in an unspeakable manner.'

'Ooh, how horrible!' said Stella. 'So, is he a serial gay killer or a gay serial killer or a serial killer of gays?'

Mark peered at her thoughtfully, though his thoughts were far from clear by now.

'I... Er...'

Stella giggled, then said, 'Well, whatever - just you be careful out there, ok?' There was genuine concern in her voice.

Mark took the offered joint and finished it. As he was stubbing it out, he said, 'I'm not really gay anyway. I haven't even had sex with a man yet. Not properly.'

Stella took a long sceptical look at him. 'Yeah, right!'

'No, I mean it, Stella. Listen, ok, so I've played about a bit with a few guys, but I've never done you know... that! Besides, it's who you love that matters, isn't it?' He peered at her earnestly. 'Isn't it about who you most want to be with? Getting your rocks off is just part of it - a great part admittedly - but I can do that with men or women. And as you know... it's you that I love.'

Stella's eyes softened further then hardened an instant later. 'But, you know I love Hugh,' she said. 'I love you too, of course, but...'

Mark nodded gently. 'I know, I know - it's different!' But he

## NETHERHALL GARDENS

looked hurt all the same. After a while, he said, 'Why don't you tell me about Hugh? What's the problem now?'

Stella looked away, then slowly back at him. 'His daughter gave birth to a dead baby today.'

'Oh, Jesus...'

'By his first wife,' Stella added.

'Eh?'

Stella pushed herself into a more upright position, but still virtually horizontal.

'His daughter - by his first wife.'

'Oh,' said Mark solemnly.

'It was perfectly formed,' continued Stella. 'About 28 weeks or so, I think.'

They were silent for a long time.

Eventually Stella said, 'Hey, got another joint?'

Mark removed one from the Café Crème tin. 'Be very careful,' he warned, brandishing the nicely rolled joint, 'this is extremely good stuff.' He inserted it into the corner of his mouth and torched the end with his Zippo, took a drag and passed the joint to Stella. Back and forth it passed between them and like an ice-cube between mouths of hot lovers the joint seemed to melt. Eventually, it was gone.

'It's gone, Stella,' said Mark, crushing out the remains in the ashtray and finishing his glass of wine.

'So am I,' Stella replied dreamily.

Silence.

Mark closed his eyes and small fireflies danced on a rich black backdrop. Minutes later, he felt Stella rise off the sofa.

'Glass of water, please,' he murmured.

After a while his aching thirst roused him. He opened his eyes and blinked to clear his vision. He peered around him with wide eyes. The door to Stella's flat was wide open. Maybe she was putting the empties in the re-cycling bins.

What empties? They hadn't even finished off one bottle yet!

'Stella?'

Nothing.

'Hello? Stella?'

Still nothing.

He lay on the sofa a few minutes more, keeping a wary eye on the doorway. She must be putting the rubbish out.

Still nothing.

Managing to haul himself into a sitting position and then unsteadily onto his feet, he slowly edged towards the open door and cautiously shuffled into the dark recess, finally peering out into the vacant hallway. There were two more doors on this landing, but they were both closed. The hallway itself was large with functional black and white linoleum laid over wooden floorboards, and totally deserted. The sudden, muffled sound of a door banging downstairs made him jump.

He waited in the open recess for a few moments until he felt too uncomfortable, then he retreated. Closing the front door, but leaving it slightly ajar, he entered Stella's tiny bathroom and swished his mouth out with deliciously cold tap water. He felt almost human again and moved back into the lounge where he crossed over to the sofa and sat down once more beneath the monstrous Triffid.

It was then that he noticed the two roaches in the ashtray and was instantly consumed with paranoia. What if Stella had flipped and was outside, running up and down the Finchley Road, trying to grab the attention of a policeman and have Mark arrested for plying her with drugs? What if she'd gone to put the rubbish out and been stabbed like a human pin-cushion by some drugged-up half-crazed Camden Council rehabilitated knife-wielding maniac who was even now approaching the half-open door to her flat? *This* flat! Or, even worse, what if the gay serial killer, or serial gay killer, or killer of serial gays, or whatever, was in the building and creeping up the stairs to get him, right now...?

The telephone rang sharply and Mark rose in a burst of panic. He shot to the front door and slammed it shut with a resounding bang that seemed to shake the entire building.

The telephone continued to ring ring, ring ring, ring ring. Mark just stared, stared, stared, trying hard to control his dilating pupils. The clamouring thing was small and black and very fuzzy around its edges.

Should he answer it?

No, of course not. This wasn't his flat.

It could be Hugh. What would he say?

## NETHERHALL GARDENS

Hugh would come round there and beat him up or kill him or something even worse...

*No, don't be so silly,* he told himself, *it's only the phone.*

But he wished it would stop.

Ring ring, ring ring, ring ring...

Damn noise! He made a sudden decision and sprang across the room, snatching it from its cradle and holding it at arm's length. He heard a woman's voice sounding like a few million miles away across the void. He cleared his throat and brought the receiver up to his ear. 'H... Hello?' he said.

'Is that Mark?' It was definitely a woman's voice, but not Stella's. The accent was different, more of a drawl.

'Er, er, yes. Who is this, please?' he asked, his voice almost a squeak.

'My name's Laura. I'm a friend of Stella's. I live in the basement flat.'

'Oh. Well, I'm afraid she's not here. I mean, she was a moment ago, but...'

'She's here,' Laura cut in, 'with me. I think you have some explaining to do...'

*Oh my God!* thought Mark. *The police are probably already on their way...* 'Is she alright?' he stammered.

'What do you think? She's as stoned as a parrot, can hardly speak, is covered in blood and she says it's all your fault.'

'What? Oh my God. What blood? I haven't touched her. Please don't call the police...' Bile forced its way up from the very pit of his stomach. He started to shake.

'I suggest you get down here - right now!' Laura replied. There was a click and the line purred loudly in his ear.

Mark replaced the receiver with a bang. He was shaking all over. What in God's name was going on? Blood? What blood? Had she fallen over? Maybe she'd been attacked? He ran for the door.

*Keys!* screamed the solitary sane voice in his head. He raced back into the lounge and finally found a bunch on the small wooden table right next to the phone. He pocketed them and stumbled hurriedly out of the door, slamming it for the second time, and collided with a handsome young man in leather trousers and a green top on the

landing. Mumbling his apologies, he fled down the remaining steps three at a time, yanked open the front door and dashed out into the gathering dusk of a warm May evening.



Pierre Morgan was 24 years old, although he often pretended to be younger or older, depending on the circumstances. He was a *mature* student of French and often pretended to be French, speaking with an exaggerated accent sounding as if he cared a lot about what he said, but not how he said it.

Quite the opposite of what one would expect of a native Frenchman.

Camden College was a brisk twenty minute walk from Netherhall and for the past two semesters he'd spent his weekdays asleep in class and the evenings wide awake, sometimes performing the *Full Monty* and sometimes acting as a male escort. His clients comprised the sex mad, the fanciful, the paralytic and the idle rich. And sometimes all four in one. Although not exclusively heterosexual, Pierre much preferred his clients to be female.

It was early evening and Pierre was looking good. Brushing his short, thick blond hair in the full-length oak-rimmed mirror - the only item of furniture in the room that he actually owned - he surveyed his bronzed, naked torso with a loving eye. He squatted down and performed fifty fast press-ups and then stood panting before the mirror, flexing his hardened biceps.

'Hm, pretty good,' he murmured to his reflection, casting a critical eye down the cleave of his chest. He pulled on a soft green Polo shirt, zipped up his black leather jeans and inserted a well-rolled joint between thick, dark-red lips. He lit the end with a Zippo and inhaled the aromatic smoke, took a couple more hits and left the joint smouldering in the ashtray on the corner of the dresser. Picking up his keys, he headed out of the bed-sit and down a flight of stairs where he was knocked aside by a dashing young man in a mad panic.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'Watch where you're fucking going!'

'Sorry,' the guy mumbled.

Muttering curses, he followed the madman down the stairs at a

## NETHERHALL GARDENS

more leisurely pace and then stepped out into a beautiful spring evening, expectant with the onset of summer.

Pierre carefully closed the huge front door to Netherhall, which the madman had left open, and headed down the steps towards the bustling Finchley Road. He ran across between swift moving traffic and entered the tube station, flashing his pass as he passed through the barrier, and hurried down the moving escalator.

He was late.

He did not like to be late - not for a client.

Experience had taught him that it was generally a bad idea to be late. Clients became very demanding when he was late, as if the wait had somehow put their imaginations into overtime. And overtime rates could be both rewarding and costly at the same time. Laura, his downstairs neighbour and occasional pimp, had informed him earlier that day that a lovely lady with a slight German accent, over here on business with a friend, had specifically requested his services - and it was well-known that Germans respected punctuality. Still, being late could make the evening more interesting. On one occasion, he remembered with a grin, a rich middle-aged widow was kept waiting for almost an hour through no fault of his own. On his approach to her exclusive apartment block somewhere in Hampstead Garden Suburbs, the violent twitch of a net curtain was quickly followed by a monosyllabic command from her private intercom ordering him up to the first floor. She literally ripped his clothes from him, screaming that he was a very, very naughty boy. She calmed down, eventually, after over an hour of tortuous but immensely satisfying sex for both of them. She had tipped him handsomely on that occasion but he had carried the marks for over a week.

And now, with the next southbound train still 9 minutes away, he was going to be late again. As his cock stiffened against his tight black leather jeans, it didn't seem to worry him quite so much.



It was much darker around the side of Netherhall and Mark's haste was frustrated by dense scrub. Almost blinded as a bramble scathed an eyebrow, he emerged with loud curses and the occasional yelp onto

the paved patio area a few metres in front of a dark green door. The door opened and a dumpy silhouetted figure appeared as a bright beam of torchlight sliced through the gloom and riveted him to the spot.

‘Don’t come any closer.’ The heavily loaded accent was straight from CSI New York. ‘I have a gun pointing at your head.’

‘It’s me. Mark. Don’t shoot!’

There was a deep, but relieved sigh. ‘Why didn’t you come down the back stairs like any civilised person?’ the figure demanded, switching the torch off and standing back to let him in. Mark could see no evidence of a gun. ‘I’m Laura, by the way,’ the voice added as he stepped over the threshold into the faintly odorous oblong kitchen with its blackened hob to one side, cupboards, both open and closed on the other and a Yale locked door in the far corner to which Laura was obviously referring. An open archway led through into another room.

‘Very pleased to meet you,’ Mark said, shaking the small chubby hand held out towards him. Through the archway, he could just make out the crumpled figure of Stella, lying face down on a couch. His breath caught in his throat. Her hair, which had been perfectly coiffeured just minutes earlier, was now in ruins. Her black silky top was ripped from the top of her right shoulder to the bottom left in a jagged edged gash. As blood seeped down her left ear, dripping onto a rouged cheek, she moaned incoherently. Mark ran to her.

‘Stella? My God, what’s happened?’

Laura closed the back door and locked it firmly. ‘You’re lucky I didn’t call the cops,’ she said, following him into the lounge. ‘She was in such a state I thought she’d been attacked but then realised she was just pissed or something and it was probably the brambles. Don’t know why she didn’t use the backstairs either.’

Stella moaned, opened her bleary eyes and, lifting her head like a broken rag doll, blurted out, ‘No more dooooope for me. Ever!’

Mark grinned sheepishly and looked up at Laura tending to Stella’s wounds. ‘We’ve had a few joints,’ he explained. ‘We call it *dope*. You probably call it *pot*. I know my American friends do.’

Stella moaned again, more loudly.

Laura straightened up. ‘Mm,’ she said. ‘Got any more of this, er, *dope*?’