

We slowly opened the front door and peered out into the hallway. The coast was clear.

Norva stepped out to double check. She swung her head dramatically from side to side.

'Come through,' she stage whispered. I pulled on the bag, and immediately pulled a muscle around my ribs. I winced.

'Deal with it,' she said without a single trace of sympathy.

Norva jumped through the doorway to push the bag from the other side. She closed and locked the door behind her. We passed Mrs Kowalski's. We passed Mark's.

We made it to the lift. Floor 22 complete, floor 21 to go.

Norva reached for the call button.

'Don't,' I said quietly. 'It was broken on Friday, remember? We take the stairs.'

'I don't want to, though. Eurgh, do I have to?' she whined. 'It stinks.'

I nodded. 'Move.'

We opened the door to the stairwell and were immediately greeted by the familiar stench of stale pee. After exchanging glances we attempted to carry the body down the staircase.

The bag hit every step on the way down.

It was a strong bag, but it couldn't withstand the constant scraping against the concrete. It began to split; as it did, a rubber gloved 'hand' popped out.

Instant, stinging flashback to Hugo's ringed fingers. I blinked away hot tears.

'Oh my days, Hugo Too, forgive us,' Norva said, noticing the glove. 'It's like you're been murdered all over again.'

It was.

It was disrespectful.

It was also the right thing to do.

Now I knew Norva was correct. Transporting a body any further than this was too risky. Too hard. Too heavy. Whoever did this, did this nearby. And that was terrifying.

As I reached out to push the door to floor 21, it suddenly opened in front of me. Mark stood there chewing, looking up at us. A bottle of Vitonica in his right hand. A burger in his left. I slammed my back against the wall.

Norva was rooted to the spot. She dropped her end of the bag immediately.

40% fear. 60% love struck.

‘Alright?’ Mark muttered, his mouth full.

He nodded, walked past me and began to take the stairs to the floor above.

The door swung shut behind him.

He looked down at the fake body. I stepped in front the bag to somewhat conceal it.

Fail.

‘Wassat?’ he asked, pointing.

Norva was silent.

I coughed.

I clearly had to deal with this. ‘We’re having a tidy up.’

‘Looks like a body in there, HA!’ Mark laughed loudly. I could see his lunch in his mouth. ‘Better stay away from you two!’

‘Y-you don’t have to do that,’ Norva said meekly behind me, suddenly finding her voice.

‘Does it look like a body? Really? I wouldn’t know,’ I asked Mark, faking sweetness, feeling brave. ‘What do you know about dead bodies?’

Mark suddenly stopped laughing. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’ He walked up the stairs.

I shouted after him. ‘How comes you’re on floor 21, Mark? Is the lift broken again?’

I knew it wasn’t.

‘Ah, I don’t, I don’t think so,’ he said. He stumbled over his words. ‘I-I just popped into Serena’s. Went to get a juice. Quicker than going to Better Buy. Also, free from the source.’

He shook the bottle near Norva’s face with a smile and he continued up the stairs, biting his burger as he went.

I pushed the door and walked out on to Third Avenue.

‘A little help, next time?’

‘Don’t crush shame me, OK? When I’m near him, I can’t function. One day you’ll understand.’

‘I highly doubt that,’ I said. ‘Open the chute.’

The entrance to the chute, was black approximately a metre square; the bottom reached my waist, making it around 50 centimetres from the ground.

Norva pulled the handle, and it opened easily.

The smell of death wafted up. I couldn't look down. I bit my lip.

'Right, grab your end, Norva,' I said, readying myself. 'I'll angle the head. Don't, I repeat, DO NOT push or let go. This is just to see if he fits. Then we dismantle him and get...'

'Yeah I know, I know!' Norva broke in, rolling her eyes. 'I know what I'm doing...'

'OH MY DAYS!' A voice – screamed – behind us.

Stunned, I jumped, and let go of the head.

Startled, Norva shrieked, and let go of the legs.

The 'body' slid down the chute. Gone. The bag loudly hit the skip at the other end.

~~To do: Test The Hugo/Chute hypothesis~~

Norva and I stared at each other, turning to the source of the scream. George.

'What in fresh hell are you loons up to now? Why you so jumpy?'

'Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!' Norva shouted, staring at me eyes wide with panic. 'There are gonna be two more murders when this is exposed. Why did you let go? What's wrong with *you*.'

'What's wrong with *me*?' I said. '*You* let go too!' My stomach burned. 'Oh this is bad, this doesn't help Pap in any way.'

'We've got to get Hugo Too back!'

'You don't say,' I said flatly.

'Yo, NSquared!' George shouted, interrupting us. 'Murders? Get who back? You wanna clue me in or nah?'

'You'll know in about five minutes, mate,' Norva sighed. 'It's really bad this time.' She turned to me. 'Extra bad, now.'

Sirens suddenly rang out below.

'Yo, you are lying! Tell me you're lying?'

George's hand flew to his mouth.

'No way...' He stared at Norva, blinking in shock. 'For real?'

I nodded.

'And you were seeing if he could fit in the chute? I mashed up your reconstruction?'

Norva nodded.

'I cannot believe Hugo is dead, man,' George said with a sigh. 'And I'm sorry for freaking you out.' He shook his head at the lift's floor. 'I cannot believe you two are so on it, though. You legit detectives now? What is life?'

'I know,' I said. 'But being right this time is, well, so wrong.'

'I don't feel 'wrong' to be honest,' said Norva. 'I'm in this now and we're way ahead of the cops. We know how they did it; the suspects ... are narrowed down.'

'You got names in the frame?' said George, eyes wide. 'NSquared, you're rapid. Who's made the list?'

'Well,' I said quietly. 'Where were you on Friday night, after the meeting?'

George roared with laughter. 'Come on now, bald one. Look at me. I'm not about that murder life. I was out. I was...'

The lift opened on the ground floor.

A crowd had gathered in the lobby, and it spilled outside and around the refuse area. Residents talked to each other in loud and confused voices.

'Oh no,' I said. 'Our retrieval mission is going to prove impossible.'

Norva's eyes scanned the crowd.

'Wow,' shouted George over the noise. 'This is officially crazy.' He held up the waist of his sagging jeans and jumped up three times. 'Oop - there's my mum, gotta fill her in on the madness.'

George pushed through the crowd. 'I'll catch you up. In a bit!' he shouted back at us.

‘That there was so smooth, Nik. Real slick.’
Norva shook her head at me.

‘What?’ I said loudly. ‘Which bit?’

‘Shussssh! George’s alibi,’ she said in a low voice.

‘What?’ I repeated, quieter this time. ‘We need his alibi so we could rule him out.’

‘Yeah, I know that, Officer Obvious,’ she said. ‘But you can use a bit of flair, a bit of style. Dial back the blunt. Also, we know full well that George ain’t the one. He’s not out here, moving bodies. Like us.’

‘Not funny, but yes, it’s unlikely,’ I agreed. ‘Our – botched – experiment just proved that one adolescent couldn’t handle the weight. But we need to know for sure. Anyway,’ I said. ‘That’s not a priority. Let’s figure out how we’re going to get the body back and potentially spot our suspects.’

‘Yas!’ Norva said. ‘Multitasking! Let’s see if they’re being shady. You know, crims often come back to their scenes. Scope out the vibe, get some thrills.’

‘That’s weird.’

‘People are weird,’ she replied.

Norva pushed through the crowd. People tutted and kissed their teeth as she barged past.

I walked in her wake, offering meek apologies on her behalf, keeping my eye on the refuse area.

Bad news.

A lone, thin Policeman, had begun setting up a perimeter. Blue and white crime-scene tape gently fluttered around it.

‘Iconic,’ Norva whispered.

The policeman looked down at his watch and sighed. He looked back at the growing crowd.

‘How are we going to get around this, Norva?’ I asked. ‘And him?’

‘I’m working it out,’ she replied. Her eyes narrowed and she scanned the area. ‘He’s the only one here – we have time.’

‘You sure?’

‘I mean, no, not at all, but what else can we do right now? Let’s park it here for a moment. This is a hot scoping spot.’

Pap stood next to the Policeman and together they blocked the entrance to the refuse area. Eager residents craned their necks for a gruesome glimpse.

One person was shouting [Barry from Bermuda’s]. Three people were shaking their heads. One person was crying softly. Five people were talking on their phones. Another was trying to take a video.

'Ghouls,' Norva said. 'Now, where are our suspects?'

I scanned the crowd. George had his arm around his mother, Nina. She was crying and jabbing out a message on her phone. He noticed us, shook his head, and threw his hands up at the scene.

Charity Jane approached Pap. She offered a sympathetic smile and squeezed his hand. She stood close to him. Their arms touched.

'Why do you think Jane's up there?' I asked Norva.

'She's 'nice,' remember? Gaga for goodwill. Putting on a front, by standing at the front. Gets her up in everyone's business, 24-7. Plus, she's getting a good old scope of the scene, I bet.'

I reached for my phone and took a photo.

'Oh wow!' whispered Norva, gripping my arm.

'What? What now?' I asked, on high alert.

'Oh god, he's behind us!'

'Who?' I asked.

Norva stood taller and touched her braids.

Stupid questions. It was Mark.

I looked back at him. He surveyed the scene, mouth agape, eyes narrowed.

Norva slipped away from me. She walked in a

circle around him, three times. Stomach in, chest out, hoping he'd notice her.

He didn't.

I watched him, watching the scene. Mark looked genuinely shocked. His eyes darted around the crowd. Searching for someone.

'What's up, Joe? It's Hugo? Whappen? He dead?' someone shouted in my ear behind us, as they pushed to the front. Residents emerged from the Corners, from The Rec, from Better Buy, from Bermuda's.

We stepped forward out of their way. A couple stood next to us were deep in conversation. Low voices. Corner Threes.

'You hear about Joe and Hugo's run in on Friday?'

'Hear about it? I was there, mate. It was wild – Joe went *off!*'

I strained to hear, and nudged Norva. Someone to our left pushed us into the couple. Their voices trailed away as they noticed Norva and me observing them – through narrowed eyes. They shrugged and disappeared into the throng.

Pap's name was circulating as a suspect. Fact. I looked at Norva. She refused to meet my eyes, and instead stared ahead into the crowd.

Her nose wrinkled.

‘What’s that smell?’

Mrs Kowalski ambled past, a platter of pierogis in her hand.

We were in no mood to eat. Others were though. They snatched the food, snacking while the scene unfolded. Mrs K smiled at us and shrugged.

‘Pierogi is the new popcorn, eh girls?’ she said as she moved away.

‘She remains a suspect,’ I said to Norva under my breath. ‘Her behaviour is too odd. How could you be so cheerful at a time like this?’

‘Hmmm,’ Norva nodded. ‘And handing out snacks? It’s like she’s being too obvious, so we won’t suspect her. She’s trying to bluff. Too late, Kowalski, you’re already on the list. We see you.’

I glanced at Pap and Jane. They spoke quietly together. Jane’s eyes were wet. She dabbed at them constantly with the heel of her hand. The policeman stared straight ahead.

A sudden loud sob from behind us made me jump.

‘No!’ The familiar voice screamed. ‘No!’

The crowd parted.

Serena pushed her way to the front. She clawed at the crime scene tape. Ripped it down

and threw it to the ground. Pap lurched forward to grab her. She shrieked loudly, a wounded animal in intense pain.

Serena stared at Pap. He nodded and she burst into tears and collapsed into him. He comforted her, burying her head into his shoulders. He stroked her hair tenderly.

My stomach burned for her and her loss. Tears formed in my eyes.

Charity Jane looked uncomfortable. She looked at Pap and Serena. Sadness tinged with frustration. Jane spotted us and quickly turned away from our gaze, she stepped away and disappeared into the crowd.

'A sharp exit,' murmured Norva. 'Seeing the victim's family was too much, eh. Too real?'

Blue lights flashed across our faces. Additional Police. A single, siren-less car rolled into the Tri. Once it came to a halt, a young Policewoman stepped out, straightening her hat.

Norva squinted and pointed.

'Yes, it's Katie! This is it. Let's move.'

We reached the perimeter at the same time. Pap waved at her, and Katie raised her hand in reply. Serena's face remained buried in Pap's chest.

‘Katie!’ Norva said, stepping in front of her. ‘Katie, we’re so glad you’re here!’

‘Girls! Girls!’ she said, hugging us. ‘Hugo!’ she whispered. ‘I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it. You found him, I heard?’ She shook her head, and squeezed us harder, her eyes welling with tears. ‘I’m so, so sorry.’

‘We’re sorry, too,’ I said. ‘It’s terrible. We’re glad you’re here.’

‘Yeah?’ she laughed bitterly, letting us out her embrace, wiping her eyes. ‘A bit of classified information for you – I’m terrified, honestly. I shouldn’t say that out loud, should I? This is major. So major. I’m so nervous. I think I’ve forgotten most of my training and...’

‘No, you haven’t’ said Norva. ‘You’ve got this. We know you. We’ll help.’

Katie stood up to her full height, which admittedly wasn’t very tall. 5’3”. Same as me. She was suddenly stern. She looked into our eyes.

‘Girls, no. No, no, no. That’s not what I meant at all – it wasn’t an invitation.’ She cursed herself under her breath. ‘You must stay out of this one. This is not a game. I need you out of it. I can do this. I can. I think?’

'Officer Smyth, when you're ready please?' A voice coughed behind us. The thin Policeman.

Katie spun around. 'Yes!' she replied loudly, 'Yes, Officer Burnett.' Quieter now. 'I'm, um, working on community relations,' she said, looking back at us with a weak smile.

'Good for you,' he snapped back, sarcastically. 'I've been the only one at the scene for altogether too long. I need you to take over the cordon and reset the tape. The victim's sister,' he jerked a thumb towards Serena, 'ripped it down.' He sighed. 'I need to set up the Major Investigation Room.'

Officer Burnett thrust a piece of paper into her hand.

'What's this?' Katie asked him.

'What's this!?' He replied incredulously. 'That's the crime scene log, Kathryn. Remember those? From your training?'

The situation was incredibly awkward. Norva raised an eyebrow. Katie was embarrassed. Her cheeks flushed.

'Yes, yes, of course. Yes.' Katie stared intensely at the log. 'OK, so no one's touched the scene yet?' she asked.

'Of course not!' He snapped. 'We have to wait

for a strategy from the Senior Investigating Officer. I just set the cordon.' Officer Burnett looked out across the crowd. 'Speaking of which, where are they? Who's been assigned? Where is everyone else?'

'I don't know,' said Katie without looking up.

The radio attached to Officer Burnett's vest buzzed to life.

'Mike Bravo five, Mike Bravo five, this is Sierra Juliet two-one. Over.'

He grabbed the radio and turned his back to us. Katie leaned towards him, listening in.

'Sierra Juliet two-one, this is Mike Bravo five. Go ahead. Over.'

We strained to hear the message. We could barely understand it, which was obviously the point.

'Mike Bravo, an SIO has been assigned to your incident. Detective Chief Inspector Sharp has an ETA of ten, I repeat, ten minutes. Delay due to a developing Code thirteen in Highbury. Officers across all boroughs are being briefed and diverted to that situation. Over.'

Officer Burnett sucked in a breath through his teeth and shook his head before returning to the call.

'Sierra Juliet two-one. Received. Out.' The radio was silent. He clipped it back into his vest.

'DCI Sharp...' said Katie.

'The one and only,' replied Officer Burnett. 'If she sees the state of this cordon, there's going to be hell to pay. I need your focus on this, Officer Smyth! Now.'

Burnett thrust a roll of blue and white tape into her hand. She quickly walked away, unfurling the tape, the crime scene log tucked under her arm.

He turned to us. 'You two need to move back, and go home.' He shouted over us: 'Everyone, back away; please leave the scene. Please leave the scene...'

The crowd listened and began to disperse. Slowly.

'Take her home? We'll be up to talk with you further shortly,' said Officer Burnett to Pap.

Pap nodded and with his arm around Serena, walked towards the lobby. He looked at us, and mouthed, 'Let's go.'

We nodded, but we weren't going anywhere. Norva reached for her phone and thumbed out a quick message.

'Who are you texting now!' I demanded.

'A decoy,' she laughed.

A decoy?

Ding! Ding!

An instant reply. We stepped away as people streamed past us.

'What's happening North of the river?' Norva wondered. 'Sounds epic. I'm pretty sure 'Code thirteen' is a major incident, and I...'

'Norva, we don't have the capacity to think about that; we have our own major incident here, remember? And by the sound of it, this DCI Sharp person isn't going to be enthused about us rifling through their crime scene. A plan? Now? We've got ten minutes!'

'I know,' said Norva, looking around the scene. 'I'm fully aware. I'm on it. Plus, no one's been in there yet – you heard Katie. We have a little time.'

Officer Burnett strode past, to our left, heading towards the lobby.

'Perfect,' she said, walking over to Katie.

'Katie, the cordon looks great – good job,' said Norva, smiling. She lightly touched the blue tape, and

then stretched it in her hands.

Katie smiled back, 'Thanks, but you need to go now. Really. DCI Sharp is, well, she's no joke, and I need to be ready to brief her.'

'We totally understand, one more thing...'

Norva began, while backing away. Before she finished, loud, booming sirens rang out across The Tri.

George ran towards the cordon with a large speaker in his arms.

'Katie!' he screamed over the 'music'. 'Yas, you're home, Officer Official!' He dropped the speaker by her feet and a confused Katie covered her ears.

'I made this track just for you! Specifically for your comeback.' He grinned wildly. 'Do you love it or nah?'

'George, what the hell are you doing...?' she began to shout, as George quickly drew her into an all consuming bear hug.

He towered over her, pushing her head into his chest, swaying with her from side to side. Katie struggled in his arms.

George looked over at us and nodded, his eyes wild and wide.

Our sign from our decoy.

Norva nodded in return and grabbed my hand. We ran under the cordon and pushed the doors to the refuse area.

Inside, I panted and held my chest. And then my nose.

‘Norva, oh my god...I...’

‘No time, no time,’ said Norva between tight lips. ‘Grab him and tear him apart.’

The music continued loudly outside.

Fortunately, ‘he’ was hanging on the side of the bin, freed from his bag. Together, we pulled him onto the floor. I daren’t look back into the bin. I couldn’t.

Hugo, I’m sorry about this. All of this.

‘Nik! Concentrate, yeah? Just get the stuff out, and scatter it, OK?’

‘OK’

We ripped at the body like feral foxes. The most surreal moment of my life. I was certainly having some kind of out-of-body experience.

‘Why did we use so much tape on you Hugo Too? Why!’ said Norva, snapping me back to reality.

Whatever ‘reality’ was at this point. I wasn’t sure.

‘Here we go!’ she exclaimed as we broke through the tape.

Out came the items.

'Goodbye trophies, goodbye books. Goodbye Pap's new shirt – we hardly knew you,' Norva said, as she garnished the room with our belongings.

She turned to me. 'I think we're done here.'

I nodded.

We stood by the door and Norva pushed it open slightly. We peered through the gap.

The music boomed in front of us. George gesticulated wildly at the speaker, pretending he didn't know how to turn it off. Katie stood in front of him, her hands covering her ears.

'Now!' said Norva. We sprang from the refuse room, and ran to the cordon.

I ducked under the tape, but Norva snatched at it, as she came through. It fluttered to the ground.

She reached for my hand and pulled me towards George and Katie. As I covered my ears, Norva nodded at George, and she crouched in front of the speaker. She prodded a button and the music stopped.

'Thank YOU!' someone shouted from above. It was followed by a smattering of applause.

'What the hell is going on here?' A voice boomed from behind.

'What kind of goddamn cordon is this, Officer Smyth?' DCI Sharp demanded with a low snarl.

Katie froze.

Black cotton trousers, white silk vest, greying afro hair. DCI Sharp reached down, picking up the broken tape on the floor. She threw it at Katie's feet.

'Where's Officer Burnett?' she snapped.

'Setting up the Investigation Room, DCI Sharp,' Katie replied. She glanced at us, a warning to move away with one look. We understood.

Norva, George and I began to slink backwards, away from the wrath. Too late. Spotted. Her eyes fixed on us.

'And who are you? Why the noise?'

‘So, like, see what had happened was...’ began George, pointing towards the speaker.

Katie broke in, ‘DCI Sharp, forgive the distraction, I was developing community relations, and...’

‘*Developing community relations?*’ DCI Sharp said incredulously. ‘By having a rave at a crime scene?’

‘Barely a rave...’ remarked George.

DCI Sharp threw him the iciest of looks. He caught it and immediately fell silent.

‘Pick up your stereo, and go,’ she said quietly.

As George bent over to grab the speaker, DCI Sharp groaned. ‘Oh god, what are *they* doing here already?’

We turned around. As the sun had begun to go down, the journalists turned up. A Cloud News van crawled into the Tri. The crew jumped out with their cameras, their lights and their furry microphones on sticks. They set up camp next to the cordon, looking for the perfect shot. The perfect soundbite.

May Burton, 56. Cloud News reporter – professional story distorter – stepped out of the van, surveying the scene. She spotted DCI Sharp, chuckled to herself and walked over.

‘May,’ DCI Sharp said tersely, staring into her eyes.

'Alice,' the journalist replied, holding her gaze. First name terms. 'We meet again. It's been too long.'

Their reunion was quickly interrupted.

'Do one!' shouted a resident from above. 'You only turn up to share bad news. Making us look bad!' Boos rained down from across the Tri.

Others weren't so negative though. They began queuing to be on camera, to enjoy a fleeting moment of fame. DCI Sharp returned to the scene and May moved towards the camera. Their natural habitats.

Norva and I loitered behind, casual and inconspicuous, naturally – hoping to hear something useful for the files.

As George began to walk away with the speaker, Norva whispered: 'Oh my god, thank you so much!'

'Any time, NSquared, I got you,' he said in a low voice. 'But you owe me big. Huge!'

'Thanks, George!' I said. 'You saved us.'

'You mean I saved us,' said Norva. 'I'm the mastermind.'

'Can you carry on your inane conversation elsewhere?' May Burton snapped at us. 'You're blocking my light!'

We shifted to the left, Norva shooting her dirty looks with each side step.

'Ferals,' May muttered under her breath, smoothed her brown bobbed hair and patted down her skirt suit in preparation for her first interviewee. A make-up artist rushed forward to powder her nose. May tilted her head towards the woman gratefully and then quickly shoved her away. 'Enough!' she growled.

Barry stepped forward. 'Ready for my close-up, May,' he slurred loudly with a laugh.

A wide man holding the microphone, wearing headphones, recoiled and rolled his eyes.

May Burton snapped into TV mode. She pressed her earpiece with her left hand.

'Yes, yes, that's right, Peter,' she replied to the person presumably back in the studio. 'I'm at the scene with Barry West, landlord of the local pub, Bermuda's. So tell us about the victim, Barry? What was he like?' she asked.

'The victim? His name was Hugo, and he was a great guy. Good people! Gin and slim, he drank. Ordered it every time. Twist of lime. Zesty man. Fun! Talked a lot. Arty farty.' Barry waved his hand around. 'Rich. Money money monneeeey. Must be funnnnnny,' he sang into the microphone, laughing.

'This is the hottest of messes,' Norva muttered. May interrupted, attempting to take control of the 'interview'.

'So, Hugo was wealthy, Barry? A wealthy man, living here, on the Tri?' she snorted incredulously.

The wide man holding the microphone shook his head with dismay.

'No offence!' she laughed.

'Fake,' said Norva, under her breath.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Pap walking towards us. He mouthed, 'Let's go.' He jerked his thumb towards the lobby.

'Did Hugo have any enemies here? Anyone who would murder him, Barry?' May asked.

I shook my head at Pap. We're not leaving now. This was just getting interesting.

'Enemies? Nah, no. Not Hugo,' he said.

Barry looked past the camera and noticed Pap. Oh no. My heart met my mouth.

'Oh, wait, except Joe here,' he pointed at Pap.

There it was. We should have left. We should have gone! My stomach flipped. I stared at Norva. She glared at Barry. Her chest rose and fell with anger.

I looked at Pap. His eyes were wide. His hands shook. DCI Sharp was listening, and staring at Pap.

'Come on up, Joe!' Barry said, stepping out of shot, pulling Pap towards him. 'You all heard Joe threatened Hugo on Friday? At the meeting about that statue? Was the talk of Bermuda's. Well, until this.'

May and her team turned towards us. She opened her mouth to speak.

'No comment,' shouted Pap before her words arrived. He pulled us away from the scene and limped angrily to the lobby.

Norva and I followed quickly behind him, exchanging terrified looks. My heart and mind raced. An accusation! On live television. On Cloud News? With the DCI Sharp watching. The very definition of a situation escalating quickly.

Pap repeatedly pressed the call button, looking over his shoulder the entire time.

We rode the lift in shocked silence, not knowing where to look, unable to meet each other's eyes.

Pap put his key in our front door but it swung open without resistance. Strange.

We locked that door. 100%.

Norva looked at me with wide, confused eyes and gripped Pap's arm.

A figure stood silently in the hallway.

'No! NO! We don't want to die!' I screamed.

I ducked down behind Pap.

Norva dug her nails deep into his bicep, shrieking directly into his right ear. Pap shook Norva off him, irritated and in pain.

'Calm down, I know who that is,' he said, exasperatedly holding the side of his face, shaking his arm.

'I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!' the voice said, meekly.

Charity Jane.

Dad slapped at the hallway light switch.

'How the hell did you get in, Jane?' Norva shouted, squinting in the light. She breathed heavily.

'How did you know who that was, in the dark, Pap?' I wondered, out loud.

Jane looked nervous. She tucked her hair behind her ear. Her bottom lip trembled. She stared at Pap. She pointed at the door. 'It was unlocked.'

Lies. It wasn't. No way.

Norva stared at me. She ran her index finger across her neck, pointed at her eyes and then at Jane. Norva was very subtle and discrete.

Jane burst into a flood of tears. 'I'm absolutely terrified, Joe!'

'Yeah, well that makes four of us, Jane,' Norva said.

Pap shook his head, and gingerly touched Jane's shoulder.

'I've brought sandwiches,' she said, brightening up.

'Thank you,' he said with a slightly irritated sigh. He walked Jane through the lounge into the kitchen.

They talked in hushed voices. Norva and I faced each other in the hallway.

'Norva?' I whispered hoarsely. 'Cloud News, Pap, Jane breaking in?'

'Sis, I can't even begin to even with this situation – it's officially wild. We need...'

A knock at the door. We didn't need that.

'Get that will you, one of you?' Pap shouted from behind a cupboard in the kitchen. Glasses clinked in the distance.

I shook my head. No. Not me. Norva stepped up to the door to answer it, looking through the peephole first.

She let out a loud short shriek. My heart raced. She slid slowly down the door, her hand on her mouth.

'Norva?' I said, the dull ache of dread even more acute. 'Who is it?'

She shook her head.

'Tell me!' I demanded.

She shook her head. 'See for yourself!'

I steeled myself, bracing myself for the worst. Cloud News? The police here to arrest Pap? A zombified Hugo? I shook that ridiculous thought away. I stepped over her, and leaned into the peephole.

Mark. Obviously. Her affection was utterly misdirected. Especially now.

'He's a suspect, Norva!' I whispered.

'I'm so confused,' she whimpered.

I shook my head at her, and she stood up. As I opened the door, Norva placed herself in the tight gap between it and the wall.

'Yes?' I asked him.

Mark stood there with his hands in his jeans pockets. 'Hi,' he said. He leaned close to me, peering into my face. I leaned away. 'Like, which one are you again? Neri or Norma?'

I could hear Norva's palpable dejection from behind the door. My sympathies for her were limited. That's what you get for 'loving' fools – and potential murderers. Little to no return on investment.

'Neither.'

'I'm here to see your Dad, innit.'

'Why?'

'I need to talk to him about something, about the madness happening around here.' He leaned on the doorframe.

Interesting.

'Suppose you should come in then,' I said.

Mark smiled brightly and stepped into the hall.

Norva screamed silently as he walked past.

We followed him to the kitchen, where he took a seat at the round table with Pap and Jane. The chair he

dragged squeaked on the lino floor, leaving a raised welt. A little air bubble. Norva stared at it, hypnotised.

Even in the evening, the temperature settled at sweltering.

Jane mopped at her forehead with the bottom of her white t-shirt, while Pap welcomed Mark.

She thought no one was looking. She was wrong.

Mark sat down. All the chairs were taken, so we stood by the sink. I turned the cold tap on and off, running my hands underneath the intermittent stream.

Norva looked at me quizzically and muttered 'weird' under her breath.

It was calming. I needed to be calm. 'O h h , sandwiches!' Mark shouted, leaning over, hastily removing the cling film from the platter and grabbing two fistfuls.

'Help yourself,' I said sarcastically.

Norva shushed me. 'You're so welcome, Mark,' she said with a wide smile.

Another knock. Heart stop.

Pap asked me to get the door by throwing his head in its direction. I dug my nails into my palms during the short trip down the hall.

Through the peephole, I saw Serena, with a basketful of Vitonicas. Finally, something positive.

'Serena,' I began, opening the door. I didn't say more. I didn't have the words.

Her eyes filled with tears and she shrugged. 'I just didn't know where else to go, who to be with. I just met DCI Sharp and I need a moment.'

I welcomed her into the house, and walked her into the kitchen with my hand on her back. Norva gratefully took the basket and stocked the fridge with the juice.

The kitchen was silent. They didn't know what to say, either. Mark hung his head and fixed his gaze on the table. Pap stood up and offered Serena his seat, which she accepted. As she sat, he rubbed her shoulders and offered her a cheddar cheese sandwich on thin white bread. She inspected it, turning it over a few times in her hand. She took the smallest of bites and placed it on the table, wiping her mouth. She smiled, weakly. Jane turned away from her and sighed, irritated.

Another knock. Too many visitors. I was the butler now, so I went to answer it. I peered in the peephole: a duo with food.

Nina Shah. Mrs Kowlaski. Pakoras. Pierogis.

I let them in. Nina mumbled sympathetic words about the situation. She had seen the Cloud

News coverage. Mrs K smiled and walked in. She offered no words. In the kitchen, she threw her food in the centre of the table.

‘Eat!’ she demanded.

Mrs K stared at Mark for an uncomfortably long time. Catching on, he stood up and offered his seat.

The gang was all here. Our suspects drank tall glasses of juice with ice in silence.

Norva leaned against the fridge. ‘So what happened at the meeting on Friday, everyone?’