**58**Don’t Look Now   
Sam raised her eyebrows. “Don’t look now,” she said. “Not yet.”  
Disregarding her, Will began to twist around on his bar stool, only stopping when he felt a punch on his arm. “Ow! What the h-?”   
“I told you not to,” interrupted Sam. “It’s too obvious.”  
Will sighed. “Really, sis? More obvious than hitting someone?”   
“Look – you can’t just turn round and stare at people; you have to be more subtle about it. Just wait.”  
“Oh, for God’s sake!” Will took a slurp of his pint. “What can possibly be so interesting in our local on a Saturday night? Has Prince Harry walked in or something?”  
“What? No…. ok; look now!”   
Will turned around, rolled his eyes then turned back to his beer. “It’s just your mate Lucy.”  
“Yes, but have you seen who’s she’s with? It’s that woman who moved into a flat in my block a month or so ago. Helen.” Sam lowered her voice. “There’s something strange about her.”  
Will laughed. “Sis, there’s something strange about everyone!” He gestured around the crowded bar. “Extroverts, loners, show-offs, you name it – everyone’s strange. Except for us, of course.”  
Sam shook her head. “There’s something about her that doesn’t quite stack up. It’s just a feeling but…”  
“Better quench that feeling with another drink then.” Will waved a ten-pound note at the bartender. “Hey, Tom – same again please, mate.”  
As their drinks were refreshed, Sam continued to - surreptitiously - watch Lucy and Helen. Not that they seemed to be doing anything other than chatting and drinking. Despite this, Sam was worried. Ok, Helen had seemed friendly enough when she’d first encountered her by the entrance to the flats some weeks previously, but, weirdly, when she’d met her gaze, the hairs on the back of Sam’s neck had prickled in disquiet. And that hadn’t happened for a long time – not since she was little and had had that peculiar about the man who lived next doo-   
“Tell you what is strange…” Will interrupted her thoughts. “…Pompey finishing 2-1 at the weekend – first win for bloody ages!”  
“Mmm…” Sam frowned as something else occurred to her. “Hey - have you noticed that Lucy and Helen are wearing identical jackets? Bit odd, isn’t it?”  
Will raised his eyebrows. “A coincidence? Or maybe – now, here’s a thought – they went shopping together?”  
“And they’ve got similar hairstyles – Lucy’s put hers up in that kind of bun arrangement, just like Helen’s.”    
“So what are you saying, that friends can’t have similar tastes now?” Will shook his head. “Seems like you’re becoming obsessed by those two. Or jealous, maybe? Oh, they’re coming over - best behaviour, now.”   
“Hiya Sam. Will.” Lucy smiled at the siblings, then nodded at Helen. “You’ve met Helen, haven’t you? She started at Peterson’s a couple of weeks ago; I’ve been showing her the ropes.”  
“Hello again,” said Helen, smiling.   
Sam shivered. “Hi,” she said, hoping that Helen hadn’t noticed her involuntary reaction. “Er, have you two been out on the town, then?”  
Helen laughed. “If only,” she said. “No, we thought we’d have a quick drink after we’d been shopping together.”  
Will caught his sister’s eye with a smug expression. See – told you!  
Sam ignored him. “Good for you, Luce; get any bargains?”  
Lucy glanced quickly at Helen and nodded, gesturing to her jacket, then rummaging in a coloured carrier and bringing out a flowery dress. “This coat and dress. Helen said they really suited me, so I went for it!”  
“Well, when she said she’s practically lived in trousers since she was a child, I said it’s definitely time to start showing her feminine side - hence the dress,” said Helen.   
Sam raised an eyebrow. Funny – in the ten years or so she’d known her, Lucy had not once expressed an interest in changing her appearance. It seemed rather domineering of Helen to be telling her to be more feminine; surely only really close friends had the right to do that? Good friends like herself? Oh, Helen was still speaking. Sam quickly tuned back in.  
“…so I wondering if you – and you too, Will, if you’d like - would like to join Lucy and I for dinner at my place - maybe next Friday, if you’re free? I’ll cook something special.”  
Dinner? Despite her initial inclination to refuse, Sam thought she probably owed it to Lucy to at least try to get to know Helen better, and also to find out if her first impressions were true. She smiled. “Lovely, thanks.”    
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By the time Friday had arrived – and Will had pulled out with the excuse that he was working late (Sam had suspected he’d gone out on the booze with his mates) – she had come to the conclusion that she was just being paranoid about Helen; that the friendship between the other woman and Lucy was just that: friendship. Maybe Will had been right, that she, Sam, did feel a little jealous? After all, she’d been good friends with Lucy for some years now, and for Lucy not even to tell her about her new friend… Well, anyway, perhaps tonight would iron things out a bit?   
However, as she was ushered in to Helen’s rather gloomily-decorated flat, Sam once again felt a sensation of unease. She tried to push it aside, accepting a glass of wine from Lucy and downing it rather more quickly than she would normally. Anything to feel a little more relaxed. And, by her third glass, the strategy was working; she was beginning to feel pleasantly mellow. A little drunk, even.  
“I hope you like steak?” asked Helen, serving a large portion onto Sam’s plate.   
“Great,” Sam answered, although it wasn’t one of her particular favourites. “So… how’s it going at work – have you settled in ok?”  
“Oh yes, it’s fine, thanks; no problems – I’ve just about got the team where I want them now, eh Lucy?”  
Sam watched as Lucy smiled demurely, dipping her head towards Helen in a manner which seemed totally out of character. Subservient, even. She decided to change the subject, addressing her old friend. “How’s Dave these days, Luce – I haven’t seen him around for a while?”  
With a quick look at Helen, Lucy shook her head. “We split up a few weeks ago; it wasn’t working out.”  
“But…” Sam stopped. Wasn’t this the man who Lucy had declared the ‘love of her life’ only a couple of months previously? What on earth had happened to part them? And why hadn’t Lucy told her about it? Unless… She looked at Helen. The other woman was patting Lucy’s arm, supposedly in a gesture of comfort but, to Sam, it looked more… territorial. Sam shook her head, now feeling the effects of the alcohol even more than before. Her mind seemed clouded. Muffled. It probably hadn’t been a great idea to down the wine so quickly. Better soak it up a bit, then. She took a mouthful of steak, wincing at the bloody texture. Wasn’t it usual to ask your guests how they liked their steak - not just to serve it up practically raw? She supposed it would be impolite to complain, though, so continued eating, despite the rather gritty texture.   
Yet, although consuming as much of the main course as she could, Sam couldn’t shake the woolly sensation from her brain. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse. Practically slumped across the dinner table, she listened to Lucy and Helen chatting away, feeling totally distant from them and feeling unable to join in with the conversation. She couldn’t even follow the thread of what they were saying either: it was as if she were just a bystander, with no capacity to interact. She blinked a few times, trying to clear her head.  
Helen turned to her and smiled. “Alright Sam? Did you enjoy the steak?” Strange, her voice seemed far away: distant. Sam opened her mouth to answer but frowned as nothing came out. She tried again. Nothing. Panicking, she went to rise from the table but found that her limbs wouldn’t comply. She couldn’t move. Had she suffered some sort of stroke? A paralysing disease of some type? Or… she remembered the metallic taste of the steak. But that was absurd… wasn’t it?   
Now frantic, she tried to catch Lucy’s eye. Surely her friend couldn’t be that subjugated – that entranced by Helen - that she wouldn’t help her? But Lucy had bowed her head, not even acknowledging, let alone responding to her friend’s pleading gaze.    
Helen laughed. “So… I’m going to tell you about a little alliance I’ve started since I’ve moved here. Well, I say little, but, actually, we’re recruiting new members all the time… Members just like you, Sam...”    
As Helen continued to speak, Sam found that all she could do was to stare into the other woman’s unfathomable, hypnotic eyes. Despite trying to drag her gaze away, she found it impossible, instead finding herself drawn deeper and deeper into the darkness…