

CHAPTER 1

Monday, 26th May 2014

The cellar walls were dark and damp. Her metal chair sat in the centre of the room, bolted to the concrete floor. Her feet were strapped to the legs of the chair with gaffer tape, and no matter how much she struggled against them, they didn't budge an inch.

Her hands were secured behind her, and the stress on her shoulders only eased when she passed out. Either from the nagging pain or the cocktail of drugs, they gave her. In the fleeting minutes when lucid enough to assess her surroundings, she was unable to see a thing. Her underground prison was in total darkness.

If only she could get her hands free and cover her ears. As she sat there, hour after hour, alone in the pitch-black room, it was the sounds that drove her mad. A constant drip from a pipe, somewhere high-up on the wall behind her. The staccato movements of mice, or worse, when they skittered across the floor, heading for holes in the walls.

As much as those sounds preyed on her sanity, there was the ever-present fear of her captors' return.

The woman knew the exact moment her nightmare began.

She left her colleagues at five o'clock on Friday evening to drive the short distance home. After a busy week, all she wanted was a long soak in the bath, a pizza, and a cold beer. The others were going to a local bar for cocktails before making a Tube journey to the outskirts of the capital, or a train trip back to the country.

Why didn't she listen to their cries as she headed to the underground car park?

"Aw, come on, don't be such a wuss," Brandi shouted.

"It'll be a laugh, babe. I'll get us Sex on the Beach," Selina offered; which brought squeals of laughter from the rest.

She had waved a hand in their direction, smiled a weak smile in reply, and carried on taking the stairs to the lower level.

Why did she prefer solitude, to the heady social whirl of a raucous wine-bar on a warm summer's evening? Memories of her past life shaped her present attitude; those places had been the building bricks of the lifestyle she led in her twenties. They had been the slippery slope into addiction, and prostitution. These days she shunned every invitation that might tempt her back into her old ways.

Her drive home posed a few problems. Instead of making for Holland Park Avenue as she did nine times out of ten, she cut up Kensington High Street. Big mistake. Traffic was at a standstill. The roadworks she had forgotten reading about caused her to spend the next fifteen minutes in her hot little car, with no air-con, as hundreds of drivers negotiated the temporary traffic lights. Patience was at a premium. At last, she turned onto Abbotsbury Road. She endured a brief skirmish with pedestrians on Holland Park Avenue and then reached a calmer spot where a red light stopped her progress near the Gate cinema.

Almost there now she had thought; her flat lay just around the corner. The streets nearby home to a variety of stores, restaurants, and cafés plus more specialist shops which dealt in rare

records and antiques. This was the neighbourhood where she settled a year after leaving University.

The Gate, a Grade II listed building had stood here since Edwardian times. A place she visited often, and which was far more beautiful on the inside than the façade through her windscreen might suggest. Several bars and clubs were dotted about too in the vicinity, but those weren't on her radar any longer. Despite the temptations they offered, she was happy with her choice of where she lived, and wouldn't change it regardless of her financial situation.

That thought drifted away in seconds as she experienced spasms of pain in her shoulders and lower back. On earlier occasions, she had screamed, or cried for help. This time she laughed; and the more she thought how ridiculous this reaction was, given her current predicament; the more she laughed.

Why didn't the bastards come and dose her up again? She craved the release the needle would give. To be knocked out for hours. Not feeling a thing, or to spend what felt a day on a multi-coloured drug-fuelled trip was preferable to sitting here wide-awake, losing her grip on reality.

Nobody came.

Friday, at five pm, yes, that had been the start of this nightmare. Thirty-five minutes later she reached her street. Then she parked the car and climbed the four steps to the front door of the Victorian terraced house she shared with five other flat owners. Her ground-floor flat was sheltered from the sun in the afternoons, so she had opened a window and flopped onto the sofa. The stuffy atmosphere from the flat being shut up all day soon went. She relaxed in the cool air for a while, flicking through TV channel menus to find something to watch that evening.

Ten minutes later, the pizza had been ordered, the bath was filling, and a clean glass sat on the worktop by the fridge, alongside her Holsten Pils musical bottle opener. She entered the bathroom at six o'clock, just as the theme music for the news bulletin started. It struck her as strange that she could remember everything she had done during that sixty minutes.

How many hours had passed since then? How many days?

The aches and pains in her arms and back had now been replaced by cramp in her left calf. No, if she concentrated hard, she could isolate five separate individual areas of pain. Her calf was now at nine out of ten, her shoulders and back had subsided to eight apiece. The cramp in the toes of her right foot a mere six. The fifth, remaining niggle came from her bladder.

Back in her flat, however long ago, as she leant over to turn off the taps, she heard the doorbell. She cursed Domino's every stride she took away from the luxurious bath that awaited. Seven o'clock she told the muppet on the phone; it wasn't a problem if they couldn't get there until a quarter-past, half-past seven even. But not before. She had wrapped her dressing gown tight around her, and stood behind the door, with the chain on, as she opened it to give the delivery boy a volley of abuse.

The heavy wooden door hit her squarely in the face, cracking into her nose, as it flew open. She had been stunned, and fallen back onto the stripped wooden floor, unable to protect herself when the intruders burst into her flat. She tried to clear her head, to get back onto her feet. It was no use; she felt the point of a needle pierce the skin on her neck below her right ear.

That was when the passage of time got away from her. She drifted in and out of consciousness several times while her attackers prepared to leave. It was clear they were taking

her with them. A canvas hood was placed over her head. Her hands and feet were bound. They collected items from her medicine cabinet, checked drawers and cupboards. Then she remembered nothing until she woke up here, in this room. Whatever they injected her with had taken effect, at last.

When she awoke, she had been seated exactly where she sat now. The hood had gone, but it changed nothing. There was no light whatsoever. No amount of screaming, crying, or struggling made any difference to her situation. Her nose throbbed like crazy.

She felt vulnerable. She was naked under her flimsy dressing gown. Her early thoughts centred on why they broke into her flat. Was it a burglary gone wrong? Had she been kidnapped? Did they intend to rape her? Who were they? Where were they?

Her captors first visit told her everything she needed to know.

A door opposite her chair opened, and lights in the corridor outside blinded her. She had hung her head on her chest to shade her eyes from the glare. There were three voices. Guttural. East European accents perhaps. Men in their thirties or forties, not kids. She had no clue how long she sat there, but her bladder betrayed the fear she felt. She wet herself.

The man closest to her had grabbed her chin roughly and lifted her head. Then he slapped her cheek hard with his open hand; cursing her in his native language. Was that Bulgarian? Hungarian? She must have peed on his shoes. Served the bastard right.

Another man now stood behind her. He pulled her hair away from her neck, and she felt another sharp prick. He whispered into her ear in English, this time, but heavily accented: -

“It would have been better for you to do as ordered,” he said, “now we will use you as a guinea pig.”

A chill had run down her spine. Dawn Prentice knew at that moment who had taken her and why.

These days she worked for a charity helping recovering addicts. Eight years had passed since she escaped her old life under the yoke of addiction. The wealth she inherited from her late parents had been put to good use over the past year. Brandi, Selina, and the others she worked alongside battled day by day in the fight to stop the spread of drugs. It was an evil that always found a way into every level of society. Their fight against that evil was relentless, but the forces they faced were brutal and almost overwhelming.

Dawn’s past life was public knowledge. The press made great play of it soon after her parents were killed. The charity didn’t shy away from her offer of financial help however, they recognised there’s no such thing as bad publicity. A former addict donating vast sums in the hope that she could help make a difference gave the charity a boost.

The ‘feel-good’ factor didn’t last. Her colleagues noticed a change in her attitude. Dawn became withdrawn, less engaged. There had been similar occasions to last Friday evening, when Dawn rushed away, rather than mix with them socially. Something troubled her; or someone.

Dawn said nothing to her friends. A man had approached her in the street one Saturday morning as she walked to the nearby deli to pick up something for lunch. He walked beside her, close enough to intimidate, but never laying a hand on her. She didn’t recognise him, but he knew her name, where she lived and worked; the car number of her little Fiat. He knew the things from her past she tried to keep hidden for eight long years.

The man mentioned a name. He said his boss wanted to get in touch. Dawn shuddered at

the memories the name brought back. Adam Kovacs had been the last in a long line of dealers to have supplied her with the drugs she craved. They reached the door to the deli. Dawn waited for someone to exit the shop before entering. When she pushed the door open, she realised there was no one behind her. The man had disappeared.

Minutes later, with her sandwich, and smoothie in her large shoulder bag, Dawn stepped back onto the street, looking both ways. Dozens of faces streamed past in either direction, but she saw no sign of her old dealer's errand boy. She thrust her hands into the pockets of her coat and scurried back to the flat. When she withdrew her house keys from her right-hand pocket, a piece of paper fluttered to the hallway floor.

Dawn grabbed it and ran inside, locking the door behind her. She emptied her purchases onto the kitchen table and threw her coat over the back of the sofa. She imagined the slip of paper to be a receipt or a shopping list she had scribbled listing a few necessary items to buy several weeks ago. Dawn was on the point of screwing it up and throwing it in the bin when she saw the handwritten note.

'It's been too long, Dawn. Ring me in the next twenty-four hours, if you want your little secret to be kept hidden.'

The note was signed 'AK' and the mobile number scribbled underneath was unchanged from the old days. Adam Kovacs threatened to uncover her sordid secret. Dawn had been desperate for a fix, flat broke, and too ashamed to ask her family for money. She turned to prostitution. Adam had been her first customer, then he pimped her out to his colleagues. It had only been for six, or eight weeks, but realising she had reached rock-bottom was the spur she needed to break free of Adam's clutches and try to get clean. If she continued, her outlook would have been bleak, and an overdose, accidental or otherwise lay in wait.

For the rest of that Saturday Dawn stared at the slip of paper and wrestled with her conscience. If she rang Adam, it could lead her back into the life she now donated tens of thousands of pounds to help conquer. If she didn't call him, she would read of those horrid days in the media. It was bad enough the world and his wife learning she was an ex-addict. What she did to pay for those drugs at her lowest ebb was something she dreaded being exposed.

It had been an awful weekend. On Sunday evening, Dawn rang the number she hadn't dialled for eight wonderful years. The mere sound of Adam's voice made her skin crawl. She asked him what he wanted her to do for him.

In return for his silence on her past, Adam told Dawn these days he imported designer drugs from Central Europe. Their potency meant small, easily transported packages could slip through customs. Dawn learned Adam wasn't working alone. He was part of a gang operating on both sides of the Channel.

Adam forced her to finance the import of those raw materials. His suppliers then manufactured and packaged the final product. When the drugs reached him he and his fellow dealers got them to the consumer.

Dawn knew how damaging it could be to the charity if word got out she financed the very trade against which she campaigned. That was why she distanced herself from her friends. It pained her to do it, but they must never discover the truth concerning her past, nor how she intended to protect it.

After a while, it became easier to cope. Adam gave her details of an anonymous sounding

bank account his fellow gang members had provided. She set up a monthly bank transfer, and while the money kept getting transferred, thankfully she heard nothing further from Kovacs. Neither did his errand boy happen to bump into her on the streets of Notting Hill Gate.

Dawn pushed thoughts of the matter deep into a dark corner of her mind. Something she had grown accustomed to doing with unwanted memories.

At the end of April, she arrived home one evening to discover a note shoved into her letter-box. It was from Adam Kovacs.

‘We’re having a party this weekend. You should come. I have friends who wish to meet you.’

Dawn hadn’t called him on his mobile. She didn’t want to hear his voice. She sent him a text.

‘What’s in the past, stays in the past. You’re getting the hush money, nothing more.’

She waited and waited for a response. After a day or two Adam sent his reply: -

‘OK. Sorry that you can’t be available.’

Dawn heard nothing more. Although she continued to keep her distance from her colleagues, she hadn’t anticipated the events of that Friday evening. As the days, and weeks ticked by, she thought Adam was happy to take her money, and that would be the extent of her involvement in the filthy trade.

She had learned of these new designer drugs through her work with the charity. When she started using, she had taken the traditional route to the gutter. A little weed at parties, a few uppers and downers, then a gradual but inevitable slide into heroin and cocaine.

In the days, or was it weeks, that she had been strapped to this chair, she came to know a new cocktail of products that hadn’t been on the charity’s radar when she was kidnapped. Her punishment for not attending Adam’s party as a plaything for his foreign friends was to be a human lab rat.

The spasms in her shoulders were back. She tried to move position slightly, to ease the stress. The movement kicked off another bout of cramp in her toes. The urge to pee grew greater. That niggle fast became a necessity. After their first visit, her captors brought a metal bucket and placed it between her feet. With a few painful presses of her hips, she could get far enough forward to relieve the pressure on her bladder.

Dawn dragged herself back in the chair and tried to forget the aches and pains in her calves, and toes. She fantasised over that hot bath she had run, and how wonderful it would be to immerse her aching body in water. Her captors provided her with few creature comforts.

The raid on her medicine cabinet allowed them to keep her on active birth-control pills so far, which was one less worry for her. Also, one less problem for them to handle. When she needed to do more than pee, she held on until they brought her scraps of food and water. She imagined this was daily, in the mornings, but couldn’t be certain. When she fell asleep through pain, exhaustion, or the effects of the designer drugs, she had no idea whether she slept for an hour or half a day.

The routine for the visits she received was simple. The three men entered the room, and one released the bindings on her hands. She received a bowl of odd scraps of fruit, cold vegetables, and chicken to scoop into her mouth with her hand. A plastic cup of water helped her swallow her pill, and whatever else they wanted to try out on her.

If she begged to squat over the bucket, they re-tied her hands, and then released one leg

from the chair. The first time, they laughed as she tried to squat, but the strength had gone from her legs and she and the metal bucket toppled over.

Dawn received another open-handed slap that loosened a filling for that misdemeanour. She had needed the bucket only three times so far. Maybe that meant, with the lack of food, she had been here for between six and eight days? Who knew?

The last thing they did before they left each time was to wash her. This was further humiliation. One man drenched a sponge in cold water from the container they used to fill her plastic drinking cup. Then with her hands and feet securely tied once more, he wiped her face, under her arms, and they took turns to stroke her breasts, and between her legs.

The last two stages seemed to take forever. The conversation was limited. Each time Dawn thought they would rape her, but so far, they had gone no further.

When they were satisfied she was clean or humiliated enough for one day, they laughed and prepared to leave. Her daily 'special' was injected if a pill wasn't what was being tested on that occasion. After exchanging a few words in their own language, they left her alone in the dark.

Dawn knew from literature at the charity what to expect in the hours following swallowing a pill or receiving an injection. Her only hope was she got one dose of different synthetic drugs rather than successive hits of the same basic synthetic. Many of these new drugs could destroy life by triggering psychotic episodes of hallucinations, aggression, paranoia, suicidal thoughts and homicidal tendencies.

Alone in her dark prison Dawn had no way of controlling these symptoms. She twisted and turned on her chair trying to break free, to run away from people she imagined were chasing her. She sweated profusely, saw flashes of colour, and experienced long, dull headaches.

Almost everything they fed her produced a negative or negligible reaction. Her heart raced one minute and beat normally the next. She was confused. One trip left her seeing Adam's face on all three of the men who next visited the room. She vomited as soon as the cold sponge brushed against her face. She was punched hard in the face. If her nose hadn't broken before; it did then.

Dawn assessed the pain from her nose at ten that morning. It registered only a six or seven now; she supposed it would need to be re-broken and set straight when she got out of here. If she ever got out. She pushed that negative thought into the same dark corner as the bank transfer.

The wait for a visit seemed longer this time. Her bladder had been emptied maybe three hours ago. They didn't feed her much, but her hunger wasn't so great that she was desperate for food, or water. Dawn wondered whether the next thing they tried on her would be a 'happy' pill. She could suggest the men played with her a little longer, in return for a real buzz that gave her several hours grinning at the blackness that surrounded her.

"I'm losing it," she said, as the tears came unbidden, and ran down her cheeks.

The door opened. One man stood silhouetted against the brightly lit corridor.

It was Adam Kovacs.

He walked across the room and stood in front of her.

Adam looked as if he had arrived from a company board meeting. He wore a well-tailored dark suit, light blue shirt, with a burgundy tie, and highly polished shoes. Dawn spotted the diamond stud in his left earlobe and remembered how it had felt against her inner thigh. The

bile in her throat threatened to make her former drug dealer clean those smart leather shoes.

“We have a problem, Dawn,” said Kovacs.

Dawn swallowed hard. Kovacs continued: -

“The bank transfer that should have arrived in our account this morning was stopped. We queried this matter. It appears your work colleagues worried when you didn’t turn up to the charity offices where you volunteer, for a whole week. Everyone knew of the money left to you by your parents. Two of your friends called your landlord and asked to be allowed access to your flat. They were concerned something may have happened to you. My boys forgot to tidy up after they collected you, and the landlord found the door unlocked. Inside, your friends found the number for your solicitor. It appears you instructed him weeks ago to freeze your credit cards, and bank accounts should you go missing.”

“Your errand boy made me nervous,” said Dawn “I sat and fretted all weekend over that note you sent with him. I talked with my solicitor at once after I visited my bank to set up the transfer. I’d forgotten I’d done it. I’m sorry.”

“Until you are seen in person by your solicitor, to sign various documents, there will be no more money,” said Kovacs. “This means, as helpful as you have been as a guinea pig over the past three weeks, I now have no further use for you.”

Dawn struggled against her bonds, panic gripped her, as she realised what the drug dealer said. This was not to be a kidnapping for ransom. There would never be any cosmetic surgery on her broken nose.

“Goodbye, Dawn. Sweet dreams,” Kovacs said as he turned and strode out of the room.

Her three tormentors appeared in the doorway. Only one of them entered. The other two watched impassively as he approached her chair. He waited long enough for her to thrash around until she was exhausted. It was to no effect, as always, and the limp figure now slumped in front of him registered acceptance.

He gently lifted the hair from Dawn’s neck and the needle performed its final task.

Without a word, the three men left the room. Dawn was plunged into darkness once more.

Minutes passed, and she noted tiny flutters of her heart and subtle changes in her blood pressure. This was what she had been dreaming about. That feeling of euphoria, the intense excitement of well-being that nothing provided her with in the past three weeks.

Dawn Prentice found despite her restraints she could relax. The pain levels dropped. Seven. Six. Five. Dawn understood what lay ahead and wanted it more than anything she had wanted in her life.

A few short breaths away stood oblivion.