

ONE

The girl had been reported missing by her mother at 2 a.m. when she'd failed to return home. Her body was found three and a half hours later, in the heart of Bristol's red light district by refuse collectors on the early shift picking up the rubbish put out by the bars and clubs and restaurants.

It was jammed into a boarded-up doorway, behind two wheelie bins towards the top end of Stone Lane, a cobbled cul-de-sac leading from West Street to a row of commercial warehouses and goods depots, all of which would have been empty of people after daytime hours.

There were CCTV cameras protecting the commercial premises and more outside a pair of incongruous, run-down, Edwardian villas set back to the left; but none covering the stretch of cobbled street where the dead girl lay and where she had almost certainly met her death.

There could be no doubt that she had been murdered. Detective Inspector Vogel wondered if the perpetrator had known where the CCTV cameras were positioned and had calculatedly avoided his violent crime being recorded.

Little attempt had been made at concealment. The wheelie bins provided only a partial screen. It was reasonable to assume

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that the body could not have remained unnoticed, had it lain there during daylight hours the previous day.

The girl had almost certainly been strangled. That seemed clear enough to Vogel before even a preliminary medical examination had been conducted.

The Detective Inspector stood looking down at the skinny little body lying before him. She was the same age as his own daughter. He already knew that she was fourteen.

Her tongue protruded from blackened lips showing the vestiges of vermilion lipstick. Her face was swollen and her neck bruised. Her unseeing eyes were wide open, their dead emptiness emphasised by the dark eyeliner that encircled them and the black fringe of lashes heavy with mascara.

There was dried blood on her face, spattered on her clothes, her exposed flesh, on the raised step beneath her and over part of the cobbled street.

She looked only tragic now. And so very young. Vogel tried to imagine how she had been the previous evening. She would have appeared considerably older than her years, he thought, which no doubt had been her intention. She'd been wearing a sparkly black top over a denim micro-skirt, black lacy tights and silver shoes with platform soles and very high heels.

Vogel imagined her teetering off on those heels, excited, perhaps just a bit nervous, embarking on what was to be her last adventure.

Her mother had thought she was visiting a school friend for a homework-sharing evening. As time passed and her daughter did not return home, the anxious mother had telephoned the school friend, who'd confessed that she hadn't seen the girl at all.

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The girl surely wasn't wearing the sort of clothes she would have chosen for an evening at home with a chum. She'd had some other plan. An arranged meeting more than likely. Perhaps with someone she had met on the internet, some pervert who had groomed her and persuaded her to meet him.

Vogel couldn't know that, of course. He was already aware that no computer had been found at her home. Neither her mother nor her husband, the girl's stepfather were computer people, apparently. That meant they might not be fully aware of the dangers vulnerable, young people faced from the internet, and the ease with which they could be tempted into high-risk and often out-of-character behaviour. The girl had a laptop, the mother had said, but she'd taken it with her, in the little, pink ruck sack that served as her schoolbag.

Now the rucksack lay on the ground a few feet away from her body. It had her name stencilled on it, at the centre of an elaborate doodle of vibrant, multicoloured butterflies. Mel Cooke. Short for Melanie. That was how the preliminary identification had been made so quickly.

Vogel glanced at his watch. It was 7.05 a.m. on an unseasonably cool, mid-May day. The second Friday of the month. He shivered in the chilly, early-morning air; though the heartbreaking sight of the dead body was probably the cause of that every bit as much as the cold.

His nose was beginning to run and he feared he might be about to have a sneezing fit; something to be avoided at a crime scene. After taking a couple of steps away from the body, he pulled down the zipper of his Tyvek suit (worn to protect the integrity of the scene) and reached into the pocket of his inadequate, corduroy

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jacket in search of a handkerchief. His fingers brushed against the envelope he had been carrying around with him for over a week. Even now, being reminded of its presence unsettled him. He couldn't just ignore it, but neither could he think about it at such a moment.

He turned his attention back to the dead girl. Even in the condition she was in he could see that she must have been exceptionally pretty. Her hair was only gently wavy but very black and her skin just dark enough to indicate that she was probably of mixed race.

He wondered if she would have been allowed to go out on a school night if it had not been for her homework sharing story. A lot of parents didn't insist on that sort of thing any more, of course. But as she had bothered to lie, the indication was that she might otherwise have been kept at home. Not for the first time Vogel reflected on the fine thread from which all human life was suspended.

He stepped carefully towards the pink rucksack. He thought the butterfly drawing was rather well done. Assuming that Mel Cooke herself was responsible for it, maybe she would have grown to be an artist of some kind, like Bristol's own Banksy, or another Tracey Emin. Banksy's influence was ever present in Bristol, where those seeking to emulate him plastered the city with graffiti, including on the walls of Stone Lane.

When confronted by murder victims, Vogel could rarely stop himself wondering about their lost lives. What the future may have held for them. What they may have become.

With the fingers of one gloved hand he unzipped the rucksack and peered inside. He could see no laptop, only what appeared

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to be a change of clothes. He called over a Crime Scene Investigator to empty the rucksack. It contained a pair of jeans, a tee-shirt and a sweater and a pair of trainers.

Vogel had half expected to find those clothes, or some that were similar. The girl's mother had given a description which indicated that when she'd left home she had not been wearing anything like the provocative outfit in which she'd been dressed when she met her death. He assumed that the skirt and the glitzy top and shoes had been in her rucksack ready for her to change into as soon as she got the chance. Her mother would have taken it for granted that the bag contained schoolbooks for her daughter's homework session. And her laptop, of course.

Would they never learn, Vogel wondered? He knew the answer, of course. At that age you didn't see danger. Only the thrill of a new experience. That was how it had always been. Vogel suspected that was how it always would be. Parents could make rules, the police and the media could issue warnings and publicise the dire consequences of rash behaviour. It made no difference, and it never would.

With a heavy heart he glanced back at the dead girl. It was such a damned waste.

Her top had been ripped open, exposing slightly paler skin and one, barely-formed breast. The little skirt had been pushed up around her waist. Her tights and panties, both black, had been torn from her. They lay in shreds alongside her body. Vogel wondered vaguely if the tights had been torn before the attack. He was an observant man. And, in any case, it was impossible not to notice the modern fashion for ripped clothing – jeans as well as tights – favoured by the young. Vogel did not find it

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attractive and was glad that his own daughter had not shown any tendency towards that particular fashion. Not yet anyway. But he supposed both Rosamund and this poor, dead girl would consider his attitude to be that of a boring, old fogey.

The girl had barely any pubic hair. Vogel blinked rapidly behind his thick, horn-rimmed spectacles. His hands were trembling and he was sweating now, even though the morning air was so cool. He had lost count of the number of murders he had investigated. It never got any easier. And this was a bad one.

Melanie Cooke was just a child to Vogel. He didn't want to look at that part of her. He felt like a voyeur. With the camouflage of her street-wise attire half removed, she was so very vulnerable.

Her thin legs were covered in scratches from her assailant's fingernails perhaps inflicted as he ripped at her clothing. But wouldn't he have worn gloves? Vogel wasn't sure. It would, he supposed, depend on whether or not the attack was premeditated.

Even if a meeting had been arranged with some pervert, even if Vogel was right about that, it did not mean the bastard had meant to kill. It did not even mean that he had meant to assault the girl. Men of that ilk often thought of themselves only as seducers; they believed they were capable of getting their way by persuasion. And sometimes they so captivated and confused their young victims that they were able to do just that.

Not in this case, though, that was clear.

SAUL

I wanted to get married. No, it was more than that. I *needed* to get married. I'd been married before. But that was when I was little more than a kid and it was just a distant hazy memory. I felt if I had a wife now, the right wife, that would solve everything.

I wanted the security of it. Somebody once wrote that marriage was the deep peace of the double bed after the hurly-burly of the chaise lounge. I'd never known peace. Not in my entire life. Surely I was entitled to some peace? Just like other people. That was all I wanted really, to be like other people.

But I couldn't quite trust myself, because I never knew when the demons were going to get hold of me. So I didn't feel able to court a woman in the normal way. Internet dating seemed to be the solution. I liked the anonymity. You can hold back as much of the truth about yourself as you like. Indeed, tell no truth at all, if you wish.

It wasn't that I was ashamed of myself, what I did, what I was. Far from it, really. But I wanted to be sure that I hadn't made some dreadful mistake, before I revealed too much about myself. There were things about me which were difficult to share. I wasn't a straightforward man. I had certain personal difficulties. I needed to protect myself.

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And I wasn't just secretive. I was also shy.

I googled dating sites first, but most of them were not what I wanted at all. They were all about sex. Sex was incidental to me. I wanted a wife, one who had the same ideals and priorities that I had.

So I signed up to *Marryme.com*

It was pretty easy. I just had to supply an email address, a picture and write something about myself. And pay a fee, of course. Photo-shop is a wonderful tool; I used a real picture of me and then doctored it. I changed my hair colour, gave myself tinted spectacles and some facial hair, altered the shape of my chin and nose – just a bit. The idea was that, if I ever got to meet a woman this way, she would be able to accept that the picture was one of me – with a different look. After all it's not just women who do different looks nowadays, is it? But if anyone who knew me happened to log onto the site and call up my profile, they wouldn't recognise me at all. That was what I hoped for, anyway.

Then came the personal details and the message to prospective brides. Clearly the idea is that you should sell yourself or, at least, make an attempt to. I wasn't very good at that sort of thing. I might not be ashamed of myself, but I suppose I don't have very high self-esteem. So I'd tried to be brief and factual, whilst making it very clear how serious I was about the outcome of any internet-based liaison. After all, there was no point in not doing so, was there? I certainly wasn't seeking 'a bit of fun', as a lot of would-be internet daters seemed to call any kind of sexual encounter. Indeed, I had never been very good at 'fun'. The various sexual encounters

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I'd experienced over the years had, more than anything else, been stressful to me.

I suppose people might regard me as a dull sort of man. I'm certainly awkward socially, which doesn't help when you are trying to find yourself a wife. So there was no point in trying to portray myself as being a dashing, charismatic sort of chap. I could only hope that I might somehow come across a woman who was like me. She didn't have to be beautiful or clever or anything special. Just someone who wanted what I wanted.

'My name is Saul and I am a 33-year-old supply teacher,' I wrote. 'I live in a village near Swindon and I would like to meet a young woman of around my age whose intentions are as serious as mine. I can easily travel anywhere in that region or to London or the West of England. I want to share my life with someone. I want a family, so I'm looking for someone who would have a child with me. I don't care what that someone looks like, what she does or doesn't do for a living, or anything like that. I don't mind whether or not she already has a child or children. I just want someone to care for, who will care for me. I've never really had that, not as an adult. I want the same sort of marriage my parents had: long, loving and complete. But I never seem to meet anyone with the same values and ambition that I have. My interests are simple and quiet. I like to read and go to the cinema. If you are out there, please get in touch. I need you.'

It was true. I needed her. I really did. Even though I did not yet know who she was. In fact, there was a lot of truth in what I wrote for my profile on that website.

Not all of it, of course. But I was confident that, when I

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finally met my someone, she would understand my reluctance both to post an accurate photograph of myself and to plaster the intimate details of my personal life all over the net.

I would save that for the right person. For the one who would become my wife. Until then I would keep my secrets.

TWO

Vogel was still standing, quietly looking at the sad scene before him, when the rest of his team began to arrive.

One high-heeled, silver shoe lay close to the body. Totally unsuitable footwear for a 14-year-old in any circumstances, Vogel thought. He knew his colleagues (and sometimes even his own wife) considered him old fashioned and behind the times, but he was too old and set in his ways to change now. In days gone by – before the age of political correctness – police, judges, and lawyers alike might well have referred to a victim, dressed up the way this one was, as having asked for it. Vogel would never even think that. He was a compassionate man. He felt deeply for the victims he encountered, sometimes rather too much. He just wished that young girls would think a little more about how they presented themselves and the effect that might have on the wrong sort of man. They shouldn't have to, of course, he didn't disagree with that. But there was no shortage of evil perverted bastards out there and this poor kid had been unlucky enough to meet up with one.

Vogel couldn't see the second shoe. The CSIs might find it. The girl could even be lying on it. It was also possible that her murderer had taken it as a souvenir, such things were not unusual.

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‘Morning boss.’

Vogel swung on his heels. DC Dawn Saslow, newly transferred from uniform, sounded as bright and cheery as she always did.

Vogel grunted.

Saslow’s eyes dropped to the body at his feet. Her whole demeanour changed.

‘Sorry boss,’ she said, her voice quiet now.

Saslow, an attractive young woman, fresh-faced with shiny dark hair fashioned into a geometric bob, had already proven herself to be an officer with considerable promise.

‘You’ve nothing to be sorry for,’ said Vogel. ‘Not yet anyway.’

The DC half smiled.

Not for the first time did Vogel wonder at the way they all behaved when confronted with such horrible sights. The coppers, the doctors, the CSI team. There was always banter. It was the only way they could get through it, he supposed.

Detective Sergeant John Willis was right behind Saslow, still fastening his protective polyethylene suit as he hurried towards the crime scene.

He and Vogel had been working together for six months now. Vogel found Willis to be intelligent and often, he thought, more sensitive than a lot of police officers. At 35 the DS would be hoping for promotion soon. Vogel would be sorry to lose him. The two men had already gained something of a rapport, although neither of them were prone to giving away a great deal about themselves.

Vogel nodded towards Willis, who inclined his head very slightly, his watchful, grey eyes taking in the scene before him. Vogel saw the sergeant wince. But, in common with his superior officer, it was not Willis’s way to show the emotion he was

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undoubtedly feeling. Not if he could help it anyway. He glanced back at Vogel and waited for instructions.

Unlike Saslow, Willis didn't speak. He didn't make it necessary for Vogel to say something banal. Nor indeed to pass any comment about the wretched nature of this inquiry, which the Avon and Somerset Constabulary's Major Crime Investigation Team were about to embark on. DCI Reg Hemmings – the head of MCIT – was Senior Investigating Officer, as usual in a case of this severity. Vogel had already been appointed deputy SIO, a more flexible and hands-on role. He began to issue the instructions now required.

'Right Willis, let's see if we can find someone, anyone, who saw or heard something,' Vogel began. 'There must have been some noise. Screaming, I would say. There are flats over a lot of those shops and bars in West Street and presumably people living in the two houses just up the lane. Get a team together to knock on doors.'

Willis spoke for the first time.

'Yes boss,' he said quietly.

The DS was always a man of few words; something else Vogel liked about him.

Vogel turned to Saslow.

'OK Dawn, you're with me,' he said. 'The poor kid's mother hasn't been told yet.'

Vogel watched the shadow flit across Dawn Saslow's face. He would have been disappointed if she hadn't reacted like that. He hated this side of the job too. They all hated making death calls.

The district Home Office Pathologist arrived just as Vogel and Saslow were about to leave. Karen Crow had been the first

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woman in the country to gain such an appointment. She was nearing retirement now and inclined to give the impression that she had seen it all before.

None the less she shook her head sorrowfully at the sight of the young body spread-eagled before her and glanced curiously around.

Even now that day had broken, Stone Lane remained shadowy and somehow forbidding. The entire network of insalubrious alleyways and cul-de-sacs, which led off West Street and Old Market Street, was inhabited only by rats and the occasional prowling cat after dark.

‘What the heck was she doing here on her own at night?’ Karen Crow muttered vaguely in the direction of Vogel.

‘She wasn’t on her own,’ said Vogel grimly. ‘And I’ve no idea what she was doing here.’

The whole Old Market area was certainly no place for a schoolgirl, not once night had fallen. There was The Stag and Hounds on the corner; Bristol’s oldest pub and looking its age. A number of bars better known for late night brawls than anything else. Sex shops catering for every possible inclination, one was little more than camouflage for a brothel and several other brothels in the neighbourhood were making no pretence of being anything other.

‘I suppose it’s possible the body could have been moved,’ Vogel continued.

The pathologist was staring at the dead girl, as if willing her to come to life and tell her story.

‘I don’t think so, do you?’ she muttered. ‘Not from the way she’s lying.’

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Vogel shrugged his agreement.

‘We can approximate a time of death from what the girl’s mother has already told us and from the time her body was found,’ he continued. ‘It’s unlikely she would have been killed here until quite late in the evening. Too many people about, even on a Thursday night, and it’s mid May. Doesn’t get dark until nearly nine. But you’ll let us know as soon as you’ve got anything more concrete, indeed anything at all, won’t you, Karen?’

‘Oh no, I was planning to keep it all to myself.’

Vogel stretched his lips into an apology for a smile. He just meant he didn’t want to have to wait for a written report. And Karen Crow knew that perfectly well.

‘My mobile, yeah?’ he said.

‘Naturally, Detective Inspector,’ the pathologist countered.

‘Right we’re just off to . . .’

Vogel didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to. Karen Crow knew exactly where he and Saslow were off to.

‘Good luck,’ the pathologist said quietly.

Vogel smiled wryly. A genuine smile this time. He actually liked Karen Crow because he knew how good she was at her job. Nothing else about the people he worked with really mattered to Vogel.

LEO

I sat in a corner of the Bakerloo line tube trying to make myself invisible. It was always like that. As usual on these occasions, I was convinced that everybody around me would know at once what I was. Not that I was entirely sure myself, of course, nor ever had been. I would be all right, well just about, once I'd completed my transformation. But a bag of nerves until then.

I'd hurried home to get ready as soon as I'd finished work and now I was on my way to Soho, to the heart of London's gay scene.

I wasn't a frequent visitor, but there were days when I just couldn't keep away. This was one of them. And I had a special reason for returning rather sooner than usual after my last visit.

As the tube I'd taken from my railway station approached Piccadilly Circus, I began to think about what might lie ahead that evening. It wasn't straightforward for me. It never had been. I wasn't just out to get laid, like so many men, straight or gay, of my age.

Or maybe I was. I wasn't entirely sure about anything connected with my sexuality.

Certainly I was aware of a degree of excitement rising within me as I rode the escalator to street level, followed the shuffling

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queue of other passengers through the ticket barriers and headed for the exit closest to Leicester Square.

There is something about coming to terms with what you are. And I rarely did. I wasn't like most gay men I'd encountered. I wasn't glad to be gay. I didn't have the slightest desire to be gay.

I didn't even like the word. I've never liked euphemisms, and surely that's what 'gay' is.

When you called yourself a homosexual, it didn't sound quite so modern and attractive. And what about queer? Is that what I was, queer?

I had a 1969 edition of Pears Cyclopaedia at home that had belonged to my mother. Homosexuality is listed in it as a mental illness. In my blackest moments that was how I thought of myself. I was mentally ill. Irreparably so. And nobody could help me.

It wasn't about other people's perception of me, because nobody in my life knew. I hadn't been given a bad time for it by my parents, or anything like that. Neither my father, my mother, or my stepfather ever had a clue about my secret sexual leanings. Why would they have done? I wasn't the slightest bit camp in my everyday life. I made damned sure of that. I wore the most conventional of clothes. I joined in with all the usual sexist, and sexual, banter you get among a group of men at work and in the pub. I was one of the lads, wasn't I?

I had an invented love life. With women, of course. Nothing too extravagant. I left most of it to the conveniently disreputable minds of others. Occasionally, I made sure that I was seen with an appropriately attractive, young woman in a bar or at a party.

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Indeed, I dated them. That wasn't difficult for me. I enjoyed female company and women always had liked me. Perhaps because they instinctively knew that I wasn't really one of the lads. That I was actually as uncomfortable as they were with some of the near-the-knuckle jokes and innuendo. Make no mistake about it, even in this the age of political correctness, such jokes remain the staple conversational diet of the majority of men of all ages when no thought-police are present. Particularly after a drink or two. Usually when women were out of earshot, but not always even that.

I rarely dated a woman twice, and there was never an attempt at anything sexual, of course. I couldn't cope with that.

I live alone now, so I don't have to pretend in my own home. But I'm alone deep inside myself, too. That's the problem. Terribly alone. Sometimes the urge to share what I am, or what I think I am, with another, similar human being becomes too much for me. It's more than a sexual urge. Human beings are like all animal species, aren't we? We have a need to be with our own kind. Birds of a feather flock together. Hyenas run with hyenas. Wolves hunt in packs. Rabbits interbreed in their burrows.

So, every so often, I can no longer keep up the pretence of being an uncomplicated, heterosexual man, with little more than one thing on his mind. It's then that I venture out into the gay world. Even though it frightens me to do so. I seek camouflage. I transform myself, or try to anyway. I have a small separate wardrobe of clothes set aside for these occasions: my favourite clothes.

For my trip to Soho, I'd chosen the pale blue skinny Levis I

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called my pulling jeans. On top I had a black T-shirt, with a V-neck that showed off my pecs and my six-pack. I was, after all, pretty fit. Also I had a tight-fitting, light-weight, black leather jacket, with studs on the collar and cuffs, which I always wore with the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbow.

I wasn't wearing any of those on my journey of course. I couldn't take the risk of being seen dressed like that as I left my house or anywhere en route. They were tucked away in the rucksack I carried over one shoulder.

Once I'd arrived in Soho, I always felt safe somehow. I believed I could be myself. Indeed, anything I wanted to be. I knew a pub in an alleyway off Leicester Square, where the gents' toilet was conveniently situated down a flight of stairs right by the door. It was there that I habitually changed out of my straight clothes.

As usual, I scurried in with my head down. I would look totally different when I left. The cubicles were of a generous size and fairly clean. I slipped quickly out of what I was wearing and into what I regarded as my gay-man gear. Then I took the jar of styling gel from my bag and smeared it over my hair, combing it through and pressing it flat to my head – except for a small quiff to one side at the front.

I carried with me a little mirror, which I hung from the hook on the cubicle door so that I could check my appearance.

My *pièce de résistance* was the snake tattoo, which wound itself around my deliberately exposed right forearm. Only, it wasn't a real tattoo, of course. Just a clever transfer, which I would be able to remove before returning to work after the weekend.

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It always gave me a tremendous sense of forbidden pleasure to apply that fake tattoo. I had done so before I left home and also liberally applied fake tan – almost everywhere except my face, much of which was covered in designer stubble. I'd deliberately missed shaving that morning, so that by the time I arrived in central London my naturally heavy facial hair would provide a certain camouflage.

A close shave before I returned to work would get rid of that, but the fake tan would take a few days to fade away. Until it did, I would have to be careful to keep the sleeves of my shirt down and my cuffs buttoned.

It would not be hard for me, though. I was used to being careful.

I ran up the stairs and left the pub as swiftly as I'd entered it. I hurried back towards Piccadilly Circus again, turned right into Shaftesbury Avenue then left into Greek Street and left again into Old Compton Street. This was it. The heart of gay Soho. I passed The G-A-Y Club and The Admiral Duncan without pausing. The former was too stereotyped for me; the first stop for gay men who had just got off the train from the provinces. The latter held too much history. Unlike many of its clientele, I was old enough to remember the night the place was bombed by anti-gay activists in 1999. Three men were killed and upwards of 70 injured. I'd not long left school and was struggling to come to terms with the nature of my sexual feelings. I had already come to despise myself for them; something that has never really changed. A part of me, in those days, thought the Admiral Duncan atrocity would, in my case, have been justifiable retribution. It was possible that a part of me still did.

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I crossed the road to Clone Zone, one of a chain of sex shops, which proudly promoted itself as having ‘the UK’s largest selection of top-quality, gay sex toys, aromas, fashion, underwear and jock straps.’ It also boasted that all its merchandise was ‘processed through our own fulfilment centre.’

I don’t have much of a sense of humour. Neither the gay nor the straight me. But even I couldn’t imagine how anyone could pronounce something like that and keep a straight face. They had to be joking, surely.

The Clone Zone sold Poppers, a drug widely used by gays which enhances sexual arousal and performance. That’s why I went to Clone Zone. I could buy them on the internet. But I prefer to purchase what I need while I am in Soho and discard it, just as I do my gay self, before returning to my other life.

Poppers is a slang term for a group of chemicals also known as club drugs. Composed of alkyl nitrates or isopropyl nitrates, they have been popular since the 1970s disco scene and, more recently, widely used amongst gay men as a way to enhance sexual pleasure.

The drug opens up blood vessels, increasing blood flow and reducing blood pressure, while increasing the user’s heart rate and producing, literally, a rush of blood to the head.

It is legal to sell them in the UK, in bottles with labels like Liquid Gold, Rush and Xtreme Power, as long as they are not advertised for human consumption. I don’t do the harder drugs popular in some sectors of the gay community, like mephedrone or crystal meth. I need to remain in control of my head, even if not other parts of my body. I continued on my way, turning right off Old Compton Street into Wardour Street. A bottle of

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Xtreme was tucked into my jacket pocket, which I, one way or another, was quite determined to find a use for later.

I was beginning to feel the spirit of 'anything goes' all around me. I began to walk with more of a spring in my step. I held my head higher and started to look around me, taking it all in. There was a drag queen standing in a doorway to my right, smoking a cigarette through a long, black, Bakelite holder, twenties or thirties style. She smiled at me. I smiled back.

This was fantasy land, I reminded myself, I could do what I liked here and with whom I liked. I could be whoever I wanted to be whilst I was here.

I felt almost happy as I approached The Freedom Bar. This was a cool place. A gay cocktail bar with style and panache. I peered through a window. Even the waiters were gorgeous, muscles bulging through tight white shirts. The clientele looked relaxed, at ease. Like any group of people in any bar.

I'd never been to the bar before. After all, I wasn't worthy of this sort of place or these sort of people. I was the hole in the corner sort. I didn't have the courage of my own convictions. Not in anything. How could I ever aspire to be accepted by the likes of them, when I couldn't even accept myself?

I had met men like me before. Well, perhaps not quite like me, but men who were not entirely sure of themselves. Decent ordinary men who had another life, one they were not yet ready to share with the world, even in these allegedly enlightened days.

There was one in particular I hoped I might meet again. Here, in this bar. Not that I could really expect him to have anything to do with me, though, not after the last time.

There were no empty tables. In any case, I told the greeter,

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a woman wearing a tuxedo over tights and a bow tie, that I preferred to be at the bar. She escorted me to a vacant stool. I ordered myself a Cosmopolitan. I'd never drunk one before, but I knew it was popular amongst gay men. It was pink after all. I found that I quite liked the drink. It was certainly more to my taste than the beer I usually downed, as part of my straight camouflage. I glanced casually around, in such a way that I did not seem to be looking. Nonchalant. Cool. Or that's what I hoped, anyway.

The truth was that I was well aware that I wouldn't be cool if I lived to be 100. I am the living breathing walking epitome of not cool. Dressed the way I was that night, complete with gelled hair and tattoo, I might almost have looked the part. Amongst those gathered in this bar I may even have overdone the 'gay look.' But I wasn't truly it, and never would be.

Also, this was all too open, too ordinary. I was not comfortable.

My spirits fell again. Perhaps I should just go. I didn't belong here.

I downed the rest of my Cosmo in one gulp, and was about to stand up and leave when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I heard the voice at the same time.

'Leo,' he said.

I turned to him. He was even more gorgeous than I remembered. Fresh-faced and boyish. He made me feel even less confident of my own appearance. But then, he was thirteen years my junior. A little more than that actually, because I'd fibbed, just a bit, about my age. I hoped I didn't look like some of the older guys I'd seen around Soho, trying so desperately to be hip.

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But at least I was fit, I told myself.

He had tousled dark blonde hair and gentle brown eyes. The haircut was different to when I'd met him before, even though that was just a few days ago. It was shaven at the sides and spiky on top. I took in the already familiar smattering of freckles on his forehead and along the top of each cheek. His lips twitched into half a smile.

'Tim,' I responded. 'I was hoping you might be here.'

He looked at me quizzically, his head slightly on one side.

'You remembered?'

'Of course. You said you'd heard about this place, that it was hot on Friday nights and that you might try it the next weekend.'

'Only might,' he said.

I shrugged.

'I was hoping you would remember too,' I said.

His smile broadened, fleetingly. Then his face clouded over and he removed his hand from my shoulder.

'I didn't understand what happened the last time, though,' he said. 'Why did you just go off like that?'

I stared at him. Unsure what to say. After all, how could I explain? But I so didn't want to lose him again.