

*The Curious Case of the Kitnapped Cat.*

Heather Prendergast blinked as a piece of chalk whistled past her ear.

‘You at the back there,’ Professor Morrisson shouted. ‘Would you like to tell the rest of the class what you’re thinking?’

‘Is that a trick question, sir?’ Prendergast asked, assuming that Morrisson had lobbed her a curve ball. After all, he knew better than most that she was, as a rule, ever ready and willing to share her thoughts with anyone prepared to listen. The problem was that they were few and far between. Anyones, that is. She had no end of thoughts.

‘In your own time, Miss Prendergast,’ Morrisson said. ‘I’m sure we would all like to hear what you have to say.’

Prendergast stood to attention, cleared her throat and said, ‘when we have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’

‘As I thought, you weren’t listening.’ Morrisson looked around the classroom and gave his stubble a thoughtful scratch. ‘Right then, who would like to recap for Miss Prendergast’s benefit?’

Terrence ‘Tiny’ Bottomley put up a hand. ‘You were telling us that the most important weapons in a modern detective’s armoury are forensics, CCTV footage, DNA analysis, psychological profiling and criminal investigation software. These days, policing is all about lab work, not guess work. Rigorous scientific process is the order of the day.’

As he paused for breath, Prendergast chipped in with her twopenneth’s worth. ‘All well and good, but I beg to differ,’ she said with a certainty of purpose that brooked no possible doubt. ‘In my book, there can be no substitute for good old-fashioned gut instinct. In the words of the greatest detective ever to have lived, you can’t see the lettuce and the dressing without suspecting a salad. Ask a glorified abacus to crack a case involving a colander of tossed greens, a stick of celery, some diced cucumber, a dash of olive oil and a dribble of balsamic vinegar and see where it gets you. I would humbly suggest, not very far.’

‘Give me strength . . .’ Morrison rolled his eyes in a show of anatomical exasperation. ‘That’s it. I’ve heard enough. And the rest of you, stop sniggering. Class dismissed. Not you, Miss Prendergast,’ he said with a note of ominous intent. As the other students

shuffled out chattering like natterjacks, he clasped his hands behind his back, looked Prendergast in the eye and broke into a ferocious scowl. 'If I may say, Miss Prendergast,' he said, 'it is high time you bucked up your ideas. Intuition has no a place in modern policing. Hard cold facts are the be all and end all. I should know. Damn it, I spent thirty years in the Met before being appointed Professor of Applied Deduction at Merton College. Had you taken the trouble to read the prospectus, you would know that I have a Master's in Administration, a Doctorate in Policing and a PhD in Social Policy.'

'Gosh, sir, your mother must be awfully proud. But with all due respect, a retired pen-pusher with a few diplomas from goodness knows where is hardly an ideal role model. As my aunt would say, those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.'

'I beg your pardon?' Professor Morrisson glared at Prendergast as if he had a deaf wish. 'Good grief, I have never heard the likes of it in all my born days. It's hardly surprising you are the most unpopular girl in college.'

'Oh, come on, sir. Nothing could be further from the truth. Terrence Bottomley is forever pestering me to go out with him. As if . . . Oik. And really – how was I to know that all my classmates would be too busy washing their hair to attend my inaugural Sherlock Holmes study group? We did roleplay, or at least I did. Had a whale of a time.'

'Oh, is that so? And does that include Tomkins?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Busy washing his head, was he? He's as bald as a coot.' Morrisson tapped his chin with the blunt end of a pencil and said, 'can't pretend I'm not worried about you, Prendergast. I've noticed that you always sit on your own at the back of class. And correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't remember seeing you at the Christmas party.'

'There was a party? Golly. No one told me.'

'Maybe it would help if you dressed . . . well, let's just say, a little more modestly. It might have escaped your notice, but none of your classmates buy their clothes in Paris and Milan.'

'I say, sir, that's rather elitist, wouldn't you say? It's hardly my fault they have no taste.'

'What I'm getting at, Heather, is that you need to make more of an effort to fit in. Reporting Rory Gardener for having a bald tyre on his wheelchair and demanding that

Sandra Bullingham be expelled for dropping a sweet wrapper on the pavement haven't exactly endeared you to your fellow students.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but littering is an extremely serious offence. If we can't keep our own house in order, how can we be expected to police the nation? Cripes, anarchy would break out in the streets.'

'Enough. Fact is, I asked you to stay behind to discuss your coursework.'

'Thanks awfully, sir. I've been meaning to have a word in your ear about that. One out of ten was frightfully mean. I did my best.'

'That, Miss Prendergast, is what concerns me. If I may say, you are not cut out for public service. Considered a career in hospitality? I hear McDonalds are recruiting.'

'Not likely, sir. I've had passion for solving crime ever since I caught Brown Owl and Scout Leader up to no good in the boiler room at boarding school. It put a whole new slant on the meaning of bob a job week, I can tell you. Must say, crouching in that cupboard peeking through the keyhole for hours on end made a dreadful mess of my gymslip, but needs must as needs be, I suppose. To be fair, I must admit that paperwork isn't my strong point, but give me a case to crack and you have my word that I won't let you down. Guide's honour.'

'Hmmm. Well, maybe I'll give you one last chance. After all, your aunt paid for the new sport's pavilion, not that the principal would let that cloud his judgement,' Professor Morrisson said, then muttered, 'not much it wouldn't,' under his breath. He sighed, shook his head, and sighed again 'Very well. For this week's assignment, I would like you to write an essay about tracking down a missing person. And you better step up to the mark, young lady. Make no mistake, you are drinking at the last chance saloon.' He pressed two fingers together and held them up for her to see. 'I am that close - that close - to asking you leave. The chance of you passing your exams is about as likely as my wife winning a beauty pageant, and she's built like a sumo wrestler. Packs a punch like one too,' he said with a grim grimace.

Deep in the dumps of despair, Heather Prendergast trudged back to her digs with her shoulders hunched and her hands in her coatigan pockets. A girl of action not words, listening to Professor Morrisson drone on about procedural pernicketies was not what she had in mind when she enrolled at Merton Police College. How on earth, she asked herself,

was she going to salvage a career that looked as though it might have hit the buffers before it had even left the station? Her spirits slumped still further when she found Terrence 'Tiny' Bottomley waiting for her. 'Can't,' she said when he invited her to join him for a milkshake and a muffin at the campus coffeeteria. 'Must have a word with cook, Missus Pratley, about the food in the dining hall. If I see another chicken curry or pasta bake, I swear I'll lose the will to live.'

'Mind if I tag along?' Tiny asked.

'Mind? I'd be mortified,' said Prendergast as diplomatically as she knew how. Feeling smaller than a gnat's genitals following her classroom humiliation, she left Tiny to mope and made her way to the college diner. After a detour to the library to return a copy of Elementary Anatomy by Doctor John H. Watson – in her humble opinion a ripping yarn, if a little too explicit in places and not explicit enough in others, – she arrived to find the kitchen relatively cookless. Manning the fort – in a gender neutral manner of speaking – was a job-opportunity skivvy mindlessly scrubbing congealed grease off curried saucepans and scraping baked pasta off copper porringers. Seeing how long in the face she looked, Prendergast asked, 'I say, young lady – are you alright?'

With a sniffle and a snuffle, the girl dabbed her eyes with a cornerflap of pinafore. 'Don't know what to do,' she mumbled. 'Been looking after gran's cat, Puffball, while she's in hospital having a new hip fitted. When I went to pet him in me tea break, he was gone. Can't have done a runner. I locked the door when I left. Anyway, his shit-tray's missing. Someone's nicked him. Must have. Gran will go mental if I don't find him. He's all she's got since me granddad ran off with his therapist. Last I heard, they were living the life of Reilly in Billericay.'

As is so often the case, a casual comment triggered a humzinger of an idea. Not just a penny but a mighty fifty-pence piece dropped as it struck Prendergast that if she could crack The Curious Case of the Kitnapped Cat, it would restore her credibility with Professor Morrisson, win the respect of the *ghastly* swots in her class and steer her career back on track. Hiving with excitement, she said, 'chin up, young lady. This is your lucky day. You see, I'm apprentice constable Heather Prendergast, one of the home county's foremost trainee detectives. Rest assured, you can leave the matter in my capable hands, Miss . . .'

'Debbie Smith,' the kitchenary assistant said. 'Me mates call me Debbs. Mind if I call you Preggers?'

'I'd rather you didn't.'

'Well, I'm going to, so like it or lump it.' Debbie cocked Prendergast a snook and stuck out her tongue.

Resisting the temptation to give the *unspeakable* brat a clip round the ear, Prendergast found a smile and said, 'righty-ho, Debbs. What say you we meet up after school and get cracking?'

That afternoon blinked by in the lash of an eyelid, figuratively speaking. As was her modus operandi, Prendergast sat at the back of the lecture hall gazing out of the window dreaming of an illustrious career as Prendergast of The Yard. Trying not to yawn as Professor Morrisson prattled on about this and that in a monotonous monotone, she asked herself why on God's good earth was she frittering her life away listening to a washed up pension-pusher extol the virtues of pseudo-scientific claptrap? To her way of mind, a superannuated PC Plod with a few highfalutin study coupons was hardly qualified to lecture her - to lecture anyone - on blood spatter analysis, psychopathic amygdala or mass spectrometry forensics. Let's face it, he was hardly Hercule Poirot.

By the time her last class - Racial Profiling and Taserling - wound to a dreary close, Prendergast had confected an audacious plot of action. To say that she was a jangle of nerves would not be overegging the pudding. Fact was, she was on tenterhooks - and for good reason. Having devoted so many years to the study of Sherlock Holmes, Sam Spade, Frank Drebin, Philip Marlow, Lieutenant Columbo and other masters and - in the case of Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher - mistresses of the noble art of crimebusting, she could scarcely believe that at long last she had a real life felony to investigate. If she cracked the case - and she had not one shadow of a nary doubt that she would - it might take her one step further along the yellow brick road to her destiny as Prendergast of New Scotland Yard. Having said that, it went without much saying that all would not be plain sailing. In particular, it was as clear as moonlight that Debbie Smith was no Maddie Hayes or Doctor Watson. But still, as Aunt Elizabeth never tired of reminding her, needs must as needs be in the pursuit of righteous justice, adolescent whippersnappers notwithstanding.

Keen as mayonnaise, Prendergast hurried back to her digs, raring to go. After wolfing down a chocolate orange and a finger of fudge to equipoise her blood sugar levels, she rooted through her cloak and daggeries and applied some subterfugal makeup. Toggled

up to the nines, she inspected her reflection in the wardrobe mirror and, confident that not even she would recognise herself, set off for a hard night's day of gumshoeing.

'Why are you dressed like an old codger?' Debbie asked, trying not to giggle when Prendergast came striding down the lane.

'I'm in disguise,' Prendergast explained as she adjusted her false beard and straightened her wig. Granted, her overalls itched like a monk's twitch, and as for her hobnail boots, clumpy was not the word. Or maybe it was. But as Aunt Elizabeth would say, one must make sacrifices in the line of plainclothes' duty, bargain footwear notwithstanding. 'I'm planning to stake out the park,' she told Debbie. 'I've a hunch that Puffball might have been snatched by a vagrant with a Dick Whittington complex.'

Barely ten minutes later as the clock flies – give or take a tick or two – trainee police officer Heather Prendergast and her makeshift Watson, cookery assistant Debbie Smith, could be found lurking in Ducktail Park, a stone's skip from the scene of the crime – Debbie's bedsitting slum in Merton Estate. Assuming the air of a common-or-garden horticulturist, Heather took cover behind a rhododendron bush and – to use a technical term miss-learnt in Copperslang class – cased an eye over a bedraggled straggle of homelessness swigging cans of gaseous water by the ornamental pond. As her snacktime sugar-rush ebbed and her dopamine receptors flagged, she was beginning to nod off when she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder.

'Here, what's your game, mate?' an officious voice demanded.

Prendergast glanced over a shoulder and pressed a finger to her lips. 'Shh . . .' she whispered. 'I'm looking for pussy.'

'Oh, you are, are you?' The park keeper said. 'Well, we'll see about that. Consider yourself bang to rights, you dirty old git.'

Prendergast swallowed. She swallowed twice. She swallowed several times. She was about to move seamlessly into panic mode when parkman howled and staggered back clutching his backside.

'Come on, Preggers – let's leg it before that jobsworth digs the trowel out of his arse and busts you for tompeepery.' Debbie grabbed Prendergast's arm and dragged her into the bushes. 'If you take off that rubbish disguise,' she said, 'he'll never recognise you.'

‘But I’m not wearing anything under my overalls,’ Prendergast stuttered. ‘Just a bra and knickers.’

‘Count yesself lucky. All I got on under me tracksuit is an electronic ankle tag,’ Debbie said with a smutty smirk. ‘So its strip down to your Lady Godivas or get your collar felt. Your choice.’

Left with no sartorial alternative, Heather Prendergast did as Debbie suggested and hid her blushes in the bushes. When she was satisfied the coast was clear, she tiptoed out of the shrubbery, goosepimpled and shivery, with Debbie a toetip behind. ‘Rats,’ she cussed as she rattled the park gate. ‘We’re locked in.’ Sweating like a radish, she took a deep - a very deep - breath. ‘Only one thing for it, Debbs. We’re going to have to climb over the fence.’

‘Piece of piss,’ Debbie said. ‘One of my fellas lives in a third floor squat. I’m in and out of his bedroom window like a randy spider. Come on, follow me.’ Like a will o’ the wanton wisp, she clambered up the fence and jumped down on the other side.

‘Lordy Lou, what a palaver,’ Prendergast gulped as she gripped the fence and searched for handholds in the sheer. But minded that Prendergast of The Yard knows no fear . . . earwigaphobia and occasional bouts of dreadheightedness excepted . . . intrepid as always - reckless, it might be said, or witless - she grabbed ahold of the railings and hauled herself up, hand over fist, fist over hand, foot by foot, one yard, two yards, three . . . Bruised, battered and bemused - her hair was a *frightful* mess and her nails were scuffed beyond affordable repair - she scrabbled over the topmost railing like a dyslexic pool vaulter and was about to leap to freedom when she was accosted by a bellow from below.

‘Hello, hello, hello - who have we here?’ the policeman shouted at the top of his voice. ‘This is a municipal park, not a nudist camp - more’s the pity.’

With a helping hand from the long arm of the law, Prendergast clambered down the shallow side of the fence, embarrassed beyond all measure by her virtual nakedness. Before she could fabricate a plausible lie, Debbie burst out of the bushes like a pocketsprite and came haring to the rescue. ‘Me mate was assaulted by a sleezy bloke with a scraggy beard and grey hair. He near as not stripped her naked and would have done me too if I hadn’t legged it,’ she said before Heather could plant a foot in her mouth. ‘We hid in the duck-house till it were safe to scarper.’

'I see,' the policemen said in such a way as to suggest that he didn't believe a word . . . not a misplaced comma, not a stolen colon, not a periodic full stop. 'You better accompany me to the station and give me a full description, Miss . . .?'

'Holmes,' Prendergast said. 'Shirley Holmes. And this is my assistant, Dot Watson.' She waved a hand at Debbie, who waved two fingers back.

It was late - very late - by the time that Heather Prendergast and Debbie Smith left Merton Police Station. Or to put it another way, it was early - very early - in the morning before Prendergast was released from the cells, having persuaded the desk sergeant that her naked swanabout was a rag week stunt. She was raising money for the Police Benevolent Fund, she claimed with a poker face. To add credence to her perfidy, she debit-carded an eye-watering swipe for the charity. In return, she was let off with a raised finger rather than an official caution. Another hefty cardswipe purchased a grubby ex-conman greatcoat from the lost and nicked department. Although it hid her shame, to be frank - as she went to great pains to be - it was hardly the height of cutting edge fashion. But what really sent her hackles into orbit was the *ghastly* colour - olive-green clashed with her ginger hair like impetigo on a honeydew melon. Still, needs must as needs must, she reminded herself stoically, colourclash anathema notwithstanding. When Debbie said that she looked like a dosser, she huffily pointed out that - to quote Aunt Elizabeth - beggars cannot as a rule be choosers. Anyway, she said snootily, preloved clothes were all the rage in the circles she moved in.

'So let me get this straight . . . you forked out two hundred squibs for a grubby overcoat with no belt and most of the buttons missing just to be trendy?' Debbie gave her head a slap to make sure she wasn't imagining things. Unconvinced, she pinched a leg and, to make quite sure, pinched the other.

'Shabby-chic doesn't come cheap, Debbs,' Prendergast said with a superior smile as they set off for the Merton Estate. 'Hang about . . .' She pointed to a *something* moving in a dimly lit alley on the unattached side of a semi-detached house. 'Think that could be Puffball?' She gripped Debbie's arm and, soflee-softlee-catchee-pussee, sneakerpimped into the alley. But rather than four legs, whiskers and a tail, the object of her suspicions turned out to be a flabby backside wedged in a frosted glass window.

'Excuse me, sir,' Prendergast said in her most officious voice. 'Mind telling me what you think you're doing?'

‘Piss off,’ came the curt reply.

‘Now, now, sir. We’ll have none of that language, thank you very much. I will have you know that I am a police officer,’ Prendergast said, and almost added, ‘almost,’ under her breath.

A grunt or two later, the voice belong to the bum, said, ‘lost my keys and tried climbing in through the toilet window but got stuck. If you give me a leg up and a push, I should be able to wriggle through.’

Prendergast glanced at Debbie, who shrugged as if to say, WTF? After a quick confab, the girls put their shoulders to windowman’s bumcheeks and shoved with all their might. After a good many grunts, groans, gripes and grouses, the backside disappeared into the black of beyond.

‘Ta, my lovelies,’ windowman whispered through the window. ‘Do us a favour and keep this to yourselves. Don’t want the old lady to get wind of it. Like as not, she’ll put me on a goop wellness diet. Now off you pop.’

‘Right you are, sir. Mind how you go.’ Prendergast said as she passed bum-man’s balaclava, torch and sack through the window. Pleased as Punchinello to have discharged her civic duties with such due diligence, she bade Debbie goodnight, made her weary way home and flopped into bed like a flippertigibbet. Within seconds of her head hitting the pillow, she had drifted into default dreams of Prendergast of The Yard - the greatest detective the world would ever know.

Next morning, Prendergast burst into the classroom in somewhat of a tizz. Through no fault of her own – nothing ever was - she was a little late, but only by an hour or two. She looked around, not sure whether to be puzzled or relieved or both to see that Professor Morrisson was nowhere to be seen. When she asked her classmates where he was, they ignored her. Only Tiny Bottomley acknowledged her existence. ‘The prof’s house got burgled last night while he was asleep,’ he told her. ‘Forensics reckon the perp was wearing gloves, but they found two sets of dabs on a downstairs window. They think it might be Tubby Thompson’s gang. They’ve been on their case for ages. The organised crime squad are checking all the security cameras in the vicinity to see if their mugshots are on file.’

‘Jolly good show. Sounds like a result,’ Prendergast said with a rub of the hands. ‘It’s possible I might recognise someone. Think I should offer to help with the investigation?’

‘Wouldn’t bother,’ Tiny said. ‘Like they say, too many cooks spoil the broth.’

‘I wasn’t suggesting I make them lunch,’ Prendergast said, tongue possibly in cheek. Possibly not.

‘Hey, those pink patent-leather sandals are dead cute,’ Tiny said with a glint in his eye. ‘Must say, I like the dress. Spandex doesn’t half suit you, and those freesia polka dots go great with your freckles.’

‘What, this old thing?’ Prendergast fingered her pleats with an air of casual aplomb. ‘I’ve had it weeks. Wouldn’t be surprised if it hasn’t already gone out of fashion,’ she scoffed with an offhand flick of a wrist. And then she was struck by one of the most brilliantest ideas to permeate her little grey sludge all day . . . all month, quite possibly. ‘Tiny,’ she said, hardly able to precipitate her perspicacity. ‘Know anything about drones?’

‘Why?’

‘I’m on the lookout for a kidnapped cat. It’s a highly sensitive matter, so keep it under your hat. I seem to remember someone telling me that search and rescue teams use drones to find missing persons.’

‘That was Professor Morrisson. He gave us a lecture on the subject yesterday. Weren’t you listening?’

‘Oh, really, Tiny. Course I was. Just wanted to make sure you were, that’s all. So how do they work? In practice, that is, not all that baloney Morrisson kept harping on about.’

‘Let’s discuss it over a milkshake and a muffin,’ Tiny said. ‘And call me Terry. After all, we’re best mates.’

‘Crikey, is that the time?’ Prendergast made a pretence of checking her watch. ‘Must wash my hair before I forget. Unless you can remind me what Profession Morrisson said.’

‘Oh, all right,’ Tiny mumbled. ‘There’s these new miniature spy-in-the-sky copter-drones, see. They work by remote control, like playing Grand Theft Auto.’

‘Grand *What What?*’ Prendergast gasped, shocked to the tucks of her little cotton socks. ‘Terrence Bottomley, wash your mouth out with soap and water. Kindly remember where you are. We are studying to be police officers, not washerwoman . . . washermen . . . washerpeople.’ She paused for thought, cleared her throat and asked, ‘so, how would I go about getting my hands on one of these pie in the sky thingummies?’

‘Spy, not pie. College has a bunch in the labs. They’ve been upgrading them with artificial intelligence. Security in the science block is pants so you could lift one, easy, and no one would be any the wiser.’

‘Hmmm . . . strictly speaking that would be against the law, but don’t suppose anyone would notice as long as you put it back first thing in the morning.’

‘Me?’ Tiny gasped. To say that he was gobsmacked would be doing a gross injustice to the noble art of gobsmacking. And so, to put it another way, let’s just say that his eyes all but popped their sockets.

Prendergast cosied up to him and pouted her lips. ‘Surely you can do me this one little favour, Terry. Pretty please?’

Caught on the thorns of a dilemma, Tiny shuffled, squirmed, squirmed and shuffled in no particular order. ‘Oh, all right,’ he said - with the greatest reluctance, it must be held. ‘But if I do, will you come out on a date with me?’

Heather answered with a flutter of the lashes and a coy smile.

‘We can grab a burger at that new place on the High Street and catch a movie. There’s a double bill showing at the Gaumont – Reservoir Dogs and The Sound Of Music.’

‘Oh, goodie. That would be such fun.’

‘Can we sit in the back row?’

‘Why not?’

‘And can I snog you rigid?’

Tiny picked himself up from the parquet floortiles and dabbed his bloody nose with the back of his hanky. ‘I was joking,’ he moped.

‘Well, I wasn’t,’ Prendergast hissed through gritted teeth. ‘I’ll expect to see you outside the cafeteria at seven . . . with a drone.’ She set her jaw and narrowed her eyes. ‘And don’t go getting any ideas or you’ll be eating breakfast through a straw.’

Prendergast was late for the rendezvous - it had taken her near enough *forever* to decide what to wear. Caught in several minds, she eventually settled on an everyday pair of hipster jeans with *fleur de lis* motifs on the flares and the first buttercup-lemon Muga silk blouse that came to hand. To make matters worse, it took an *absolute age* for her nail varnish to dry.

Unimpressed, she made a mental note not to skimp on essentials in future. Still, what can you expect for only fifty guineas, she told herself with a frugal smile. Me, oh, my . . . the lengths a girl must go to look presentable, she sighed as she laced up her Miu Miu platform sneakers. She was sure that dear old Sherlock never had this trouble; a tweed suit, cape, spats, brogues, a magnifying glass, a deerstalker hat, a revolver and *voila* – he was dressed to kill. After a quick glance in the mirror and several much longer ones, she grabbed her shoulder bag from the baghook and dashed out of the door, keen as custard to set to work.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ she said when she joined her crack team of undercover sleuths puffing and panting like a geriatric puffin after sprinting down the lane. ‘Hope you didn’t get bored waiting.’

‘No worries,’ Debbie said as she zipped up her jeans and tucked in her t-shirt.

‘We found stuff to do,’ said Tiny as he wiped the lipstick off his pimply face, brushed the hair off his turtle-neck and belted up his bell-bottoms.

After a quick headcount to make sure that everybody was present and correct, Prendergast led the way to a humpy hillock with a panoramaed view of the rolling hills, the undulating dales, the historic village of Merton-on-Wandle, the ancient woodlands stretching far into the distance, the lazy old river awash with raw sewage and dead fish and the six-lane highway slicing through the idyllic countryside like a chainsaw massacre . After briefing her team, she rubbed her hands ready to spring into action like a clockwork goat. ‘Jeepers, is that the drone?’ she gasped when Tiny took a techniflummoxed whirlybird out of his carryall.

‘Sure is. State of the art. Onboard camera with an ultra-definition telephoto lens, high-resolution microphone, miniature hard disc recorder and an infra-red sensor capable of detecting a pulse at two hundred metres. This is the remote control. Neat, eh?’ Tiny showed Prendergast a small box-shaped box with three rows of buttons, an LED display and a telescopic antenna. ‘If you want the drone to go left, nudge the joystick left. If you want to go right . . .’

‘Yes, yes, I get the picture.’ Prendergast wrested the remote from Tiny’s hands and dismissed his protests with, ‘I’m heading up the investigation so I’ll take charge, thank you very much. What’s this for?’

‘Don’t,’ Tiny screamed as she pressed a large red button.

‘Fuck a duck,’ Debbie expleted as the drone took off like a pocket rocket, shredding her baseball cap into cottonbuds as it whizzed past an ear.

'Go left,' Tiny yelled as Prendergast pushed every button she could find. 'I said left, not right. Oh no . . .' He caught his breath and covered his eyes with his scarf.

Debbie pointed to a nearby petrol station. 'Reckon that girl will be able to get out of the way before . . .?' Her question proved more rhetorical than not as, with an ear-splitting scream, the petrol pump attendant dropped the fuel hose and threw herself to the ground when the drone whirred past her head. Moments later, a sheet of flame engulfed the pumps and a chariot of fire raced towards a petrol tanker parked on the forecourt. According to the coroner's report, the explosion could be heard in Casablanca and the fireball seen from the dark side of the moon.

'Golly. So, how do I get this this thing back to base?' Prendergast asked as the drone emerged from a billowing cloud of thick black smoke and turned towards the motorway.

'You can't. When you pressed that red button, you activated the on board artificial intelligence. It's flying solo. You'll have to abort the mission. Hit self-destruct,' Tiny urged. 'Quick.'

'Which knob?' Prendergast asked and to be on the safe side, pressed them all.

'Oh my God . . . you just ordered it to attack,' Tiny groaned as, buzzing like a swarm of angry mechanical hornets, the drone made a beeline for a highway patrol car speeding down the motorway towards a conflagration that seemed dead set - with the emphasis on dead - on reducing the picturesque village of Merton-on-Wandle and its chirpy-chappie habitants to a crisp.

'Crikey, you didn't tell me it was armed,' Prendergast panicked as the drone swooped into the breakneck dive of a kamikaze Stuka and opened fire.

Tiny said, 'Relax. They're only blanks.'

'Not sure about that,' Prendergast said nervously as a hail of bullets slammed into the patrol car sending it swerving into an ambulance - a fitting end for two police officers and a morted superintendent. 'Oh, no,' she clapped her hands to her cheeks as the drone banked through ninety degrees and, machine guns rattling like gatling guns, headed for an articulated lorry. As a burst of fire shattered the windscreen, the truck driver keeled over with a heart attack and slumped down on the steering wheel with one foot on the gas and the other on the brake. Swerving this way that and the other, the trailer jack-knifed into the bullet-riddled patrol car crushing it like an empty beer can before shunting the mangled ambulance over a parapet onto a railway line, turning a high-speed express into a stationary hearse and

prematurely ending life's nasty, brutish and short journey for the driver, a guard and a good many of the five hundred and some-odd passengers.

Meanwhile, seemingly in slow motion, the articulated wrecking ball toppled onto its side, skidded along the motorway in a shower of sparks and burst into flames. The mother of all mayhem ensued. The resulting pile-up stretched as far as eye could see as three-score-ten vehicles – maybe more – concertinaed in a whizz-bang-wallop of locking brakes and a snap-crackle-pop of slamdunking metal. To a cacophonous claxophony of honking horns and a boom-bang-a-bang of crash-bang-wallops, the rogue drone turned its malice towards a herd of cattle grazing in a nearby field. Spooked by a burst of gunfire that extirpated three heifers and decapitated a bonnie milkmaid, the herd stampeded through a fence onto the motorway, trampling scores of dazed motorists underhoof. With the drone hovering above their heads like a maniacal gadfly firing willy-nilly at anything that mooed, the cows careered across the central reservation into the path of an oncoming coach, bringing it screeching to a halt in a squeal of oily tyreburn. Panic-stricken as a queue of cars, lorries, pantechniwagons and vans piled into the back of his charabanc, the driver leapt out, ran screaming down the motorway waving his arms in the air and was flattened by a fire engine speeding towards the pile-up, bells a-ringing, emergency lights a-flashing. When the firemen jumped out to assist, they were gored *en mass* and their mangled bodies trampled underfoot by the marauding horde.

As the mad cows stampeded down the motorway towards Merton town center, bellowing for all their frenzied worth, mission accomplished the miscreant drone disappeared over the horizon, leaving a trail of gore, blood, death and destruction in its wake.

'Golly.' Heather chewed her bottom lip and gulped. 'What say you we keep this to ourselves?'

'Too right,' Debbie said. 'I'm on probation. There's no way I'm taking the rap for this clusterfuck.'

For several minutes, the sleuthsome threesome shuffled, squirmed and sweated, hoping upon hope that the drone would find its way home without further cowtastrophe. They were beginning to give up hope when a cranky whir announced that, like a mechanical fuelpigeon, the dissolute disasterdrone had decided to return to its handlers. For the briefest of moments, it hovered above their heads before the motor gave up the ghost and it crashed to earth in a tangle of twisted rotors, blistered transistors, fizzing resistors and smoldering solder.

As Tiny stared at the tangled heap of high-tech scrap, utterly lost for utterable words, Prendergast rooted through the wreckage for the black box recorder. 'I'll check the video footage back at my place and see if there's any sign of Puffball.' She turned to Tiny and said, 'right. Fix that drone and put it back where you found it. And make sure no one can tell it's been moved.'

As Prendergast wandered off with the black box tucked under her arm, Debbie nudged Tiny in the ribs and asked, 'is she for real?' When he shrugged, she shot him a wink and said, 'fancy coming back to my place for a bevvy and a shag?'

Next day, Heather Prendergast turned up at college breezy, bright and early. If there was a spring in her step, it was for good reason. She had been up all night putting the finishing touches to her last-chance salon assignment, as she missomered it. It was, she fancied, her bestest, bestest, *bestest* piece of coursework ever, even if she did say so herself. She was sure that Professor Morrisson would agree. No, she was convinced that he would, so much so that she went to his office before class to show him what tumultuous strides she had made in the last few days. However, his reaction was anything but encouraging.

'According to this,' Morrisson said with a thunderous glower on his eczemaed face as he read the first page, 'you seem to think that animals and people are the same. Your entire essay is devoted to the search for a missing cat.'

'Not the entire essay, sir.'

'Speak when you're spoken to, Prendergast.'

'Don't I always?' Prendergast reminded him. 'And really – there's no need to be rude.' She tossed her head and stuck her nose in the air. 'Two can play that game - rotter.'

'I'll give you rotter . . .' Morrisson growled and turned the page. 'What's this? Park keepers, naked girls in bushes, buttocks stuck in windows . . . it reads like a work of fiction.'

'Thank you, sir. Most kind.'

'Button your lip. Ah, I see you paid attention to my lecture about drones the other day. Although . . .' Morrisson ground to a halt. 'I don't recall briefing the class on attack strategy. Good grief – so you were the lunatic responsible for the carnage on the motorway last night. The Prime Minister interrupted the final of Strictly Come Dancing on the BBC to address the nation. He claimed that the European Union had launched a surprise attack so he was putting the nuclear deterrent on high alert. By all accounts, we only avoided World War Three by the

skin of our teeth. Might have guessed you were responsible.’ He tossed the essay on his desk, sat back and crossed his arms. ‘I was going to recommend you be suspended, but looking at this, I doubt that will be necessary. My guess is, you’ll be spending the next twenty years at His Majesty’s Pleasure.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so, sir. I suggest you take a look at the last page. It’s an absolute hoot.’

Morrisson’s face turned a deathly shade of pale as he examined the appendix – a handful of high-res photographs reproduced in all their gory glory. ‘What’s the blazes?’ he gasped . . . as if he couldn’t guess.

‘The video I lifted those stills from makes *Fifty Shades of Grey* look like a nativity play,’ Prendergast said with a butter-wouldn’t-melt expression of virtual virtue. ‘Check your inbox.’

Professor Morrison’s hands trembled as he downloaded a file. Five minutes later, having seen more than enough in every sense of the tense, he slammed his fliptop shut and buried his head in hands. ‘You scheming little cow,’ he groaned.

‘Talking of cows, you really ought to take a look at the other video I sent – after you’ve had a stiff drink.’ Prendergast struggled to keep a straight face as Morrison’s went a pasty shade of pastry. ‘If you don’t me saying, an experienced detective like you should know better than to leave the curtains open when you’re having rumpy-pumpy with the guv’nor’s wife. I mean, who knows when a drone will fly past? They’re all over the place.’ She pointed to a particularly lurid photosnap. ‘I didn’t twig who you were humping until she took off her pinny. Cook looks rather fetching in the buff, wouldn’t you say? I can see why her husband gets so jealous. Would you believe, Principal Pratley used to be the Metropolitan Police heavyweight boxing champion? His temper is legendary. So is his right hook. Doesn’t bear thinking about,’ she said with the mother of all shudders. ‘Let’s hope your wife, the sumo wrestler, doesn’t find out.’ She broke into a witchy grin and rubbed her hands. ‘I think my essay deserves eleven out ten, don’t you? Or should I post my coursework on the World Wide Web and let others be the judge?’

Full of the joys of life, it was with a marsupial bounce in her step that Heather Prendergast left Professor Morrison to drown his sorrows in whatever he could lay his philandering hands on. She had his assurance – signed, sealed and delivered on official notepaper – that she would graduate top of the class. Walking on air – metaphorically

speaking - she breezed into the dining hall. She had a gut hunch that after a word in cook's nibbled ear, filet mignon, venison, roast pheasant and smoked salmon would magically appear on the menu. As she pushed through the door, she bumped into a chirpy Debbie Smith arm in arm with Terrence 'Tiny' Bottomley.

'Hiya, Preggers,' Debbie said. 'You'll never guess, but I found Puffball.'

'That's wonderful news, Debbs. Where?'

'Would you believe, he was at gran's? She gave the surgeon a mouthful cause he was black so the operation got postponed and she's on a ten year waiting list. Her new fella collected Puffball while I was out. He's a locksmith so he opened my door, no probs. Well, to tell the honest truth, he's a cat burglar. Tailor made for the job. Looks like we got a top result.'

'Yes indeed, Debbs,' Heather Prendergast said with the great-grandmother of all smiles. 'We most certainly did.'