

# **Suicide is Easy**

**By**

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## Chapter 1

In the dark rain, I tripped up over something in the alley. Something big right across the road. I bent closer and Harry's sign flashed on for a second. In the blue light I looked into David's open, staring eyes. Water was running down his face.

Why wasn't he blinking? Why was he letting water run into his mouth?

I couldn't see properly.

I couldn't have seen David. How could I? He was young and strong. Why was he lying on the ground? Why hadn't he closed his eyes? His face was wet. Something was wrong in a big way. What should I do?

I looked around.

Get help.

Harry.

I ran back to Harry's Bar. I knocked and shouted. I knocked again. And again.

Finally Harry opened up, taking forever to open the locks and bolts. He was in his dressing gown. He scowled when he saw me. 'Tina?' he moaned, 'What now? I've had enough of you. Why can't you act your age instead of like some stupid teenager?'

'No. No. It's David. He's in the alley. I think he might...' I couldn't finish the sentence.

Harry frowned. He stood at the door and swallowed deeply. 'Show me.'

I led him to the alley. He was so slow, too fat and too old. He kept stopping and looking around. I guess he was puffed out.

I kept rambling. 'He's lying there. Eyes open. Lying. Is he all right?'

No answer. We had to get very close. David wasn't easy to see in his black jacket and jeans.

As soon as he saw the body Harry turned and walked back into his bar. I stood staring.

Harry was there again. This time with a torch.

He felt for a pulse, looked into his eyes and said 'I think he's dead. I don't know any First Aid. I don't know what to do.'

'Do you think he might drown? With all that water going into his mouth?'

We both stared for a few seconds. The blue light of Harry's sign blinked on and off, reflecting in the puddles and on David's wet face. 'I think it's too late,' he said. He jumped a little. 'Come on. Quick. Inside.'

Harry pushed me inside looking around all the time. I held my purse close to me. He locked the door.

'What? Why? Shouldn't we be with him?' I asked.

'He might have been murdered. His killer might be out there still. And if he is, the last thing I want a killer to see is you in that dress.'

I was scared. I wished I wasn't in my sexiest black dress.

'That could have been me,' I shouted. 'I was wandering around out there.'

Harry ignored me and rang for an ambulance and the police. Then he got me a towel to dry myself off and wrap around my shoulders. He is nice. Just like the dad I always wanted.

‘Harry...,’ I paused. ‘Why did you think he was murdered?’

‘I don’t know. We don’t know he was murdered. You needed to be safe. Just in case.’

‘Toby was murdered, too.’

‘Toby?’ He was shouting.

I flinched. ‘Yes. And I think it was for the same reason.’

‘Toby committed suicide. Stop going on about him. We don’t know what’s happened to David. Can’t you see how stupid you look? Why are you so obsessed about Toby? You can’t go back and change what you did.’ He was angry again.

No. I wanted to say it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t mess Toby about. Okay, I say dumb things all the time. Doesn’t everyone?

I didn’t say a word too Harry. He was usually so placid. It was extra scary when he was angry.

## Chapter 2

It was a warm, summer, Saturday afternoon, before Toby and David died. I was early at Harry's Bar just to be there and to see what was happening. Harry's place is so tiny with peeling blue paint and tacky little white plastic tables. Outside there's a blue, neon sign that's broken so it flashes on and off at strange times. Harry hasn't looked after it for so long it's nearly fallen apart.

The band and I wouldn't be on for ages. When I arrived Harry and Alec were the only ones there and they were having one of their stupid arguments. They argue when they're bored. The arguments are always good natured, though, they're both too good to be nasty.

'Hi Tina,' they both said, almost in unison. They looked back at each other.

Harry was old but not so old he was about to retire or anything. He wasn't much to look at, but he was a great laugh. He still had most of his hair, even if it was grey and thin. He was so fat and he really should have dressed better or at least differently some days. His face was always clean shaven, but he had a big nose, huge white cheeks and a double chin, so maybe he should have grown a beard. A beard would at least hide the worst bit, so, it might have been worth it. He was always in this bright red bow tie and a garish, red waistcoat with flowers all over it. The waistcoat was stained. It didn't suit him, it just drew attention to his stomach. Sometimes I wondered why he wasn't married. He should have been attractive to some women. Not to me, of course, but there must be lots of old women who would have liked him. Perhaps it was because he smelt of booze

even though he never drank. He was always behind the bar, so I sometimes wondered if he wore old trousers and slippers all day. One day when he was busy and wasn't looking at me, I leaned over the bar and checked him out. He was wearing jeans and trainers of all things. He was nice to everyone, and a great person to dump your troubles on. Like the barmen in all the old black and white movies who are always there for you in the middle of the night.

Alec was younger than Harry, but he was still lots older than me, so I guess he was middle aged. He was athletic and strong and he had masses of brown hair. He always wore khaki combat trousers and green sweat shirts with army boots. He was clean shaven and it suited him, because he had a nice firm jaw line and a tanned brown face. He was a nice guy, too. But he was always going on about caring for everything. He'd say 'every creature has a right to happiness,' or, 'you should always forgive everyone even if they were really horrible and raped you or killed someone you care about.' He was too much.

Harry and Alec were silent as I sat on my favourite stool, facing the doorway and next to the bar. The bar was an uneven box with the long side near to the door. I was on the short side leaning against the wall and farthest from the door. This wall was one of the few places in Harry's that you could lean on and not worry about bits of paint or mould coming off onto your clothes. Harry's place is so tiny, that there's nowhere else to hide other than the toilets. I could see who was coming in but they couldn't see me because I was hiding between the charity boxes and big showy empty bottles. I put my purse on the counter where I could see it. Not that anyone in Harry's would have stolen it, of course.

‘The usual?’ asked Harry.

‘Yeah, the usual. Hi Harry. What’s up?’

‘Don’t ask.’ Harry frowned at Alec as he poured a glass of pineapple juice.

I don’t drink anything harder before I’ve sung. I opened my purse, as always, and Harry said, ‘you don’t have to pay, Tina.’ As always.

‘I don’t want to put you out of business,’ said Alec continuing the argument. ‘Just help people to live their lives in moderation. Never take drugs or stimulants. People need to learn to look after themselves. And you like it when I help someone who’s feeling down. You wouldn’t want someone killing themselves here, would you?’

Harry stared sternly at Alec. ‘Of course I don’t want anyone to kill themselves, but why do you have to come to Kilburn?’

‘Yeah, sorry. No one wants someone to kill themselves,’ said Alec. ‘But they do. I know, I’ve seen so many. I’m just looking in the most likely places. That’s why my workshops are based here.’

I’d heard of these workshops before. They’re for the suicidal. ‘Alec,’ I said, ‘what would happen if someone killed themselves after doing your workshop?’

He frowned at me. ‘They do occasionally. It happens. In the workshops I try to confront them with the consequences of their suicide. Bring it up close.’ He moved his hand from arm’s length to close to his chest. ‘Let them see what it really means instead of just having a romantic notion. But sometimes ...’ He stared into his drink, sad and remote.

Harry looked at Alec, worried. 'Okay, but why my place?' he said, to provoke him. 'What about that Poverty Incorporated or whatever it's called? That's in Oxford? Why don't you stay in Oxford? There's lots of people needing help there. What's so special about Kilburn?'

Alec smiled. 'Harry, don't be difficult. You know it's called Poverty Life Line. And it's there to help the poor in the Third World, but I have to help the people in Britain, too. I don't particularly want to be in Oxford, but where we are the rent's cheap and it's a good place to meditate. There's more for me to do in Kilburn. I'm here for people like you.' Alec was preaching again. He always goes on with these long lectures, and he never leaves a pause long enough for anyone else to get in. Worse than that, he often loses it and ends up shouting and angry if everyone doesn't agree with him.

Harry scowled. 'Is that all? You're trying to look after everyone in Kilburn? I don't need help, I just need more profits.'

'You think that your profits are low?' said Alec. 'What about people who have to work every day for almost nothing? You don't know how good things are.' Alec was starting to work up, his voice was getting louder. Any minute now he would be shouting at Harry.

'But you're losing me customers,' said Harry, 'and I only have a few. If it wasn't for this gorgeous creature and her band I wouldn't have any customers.' He put my drink in front of me.

I smiled at Harry. It was so nice of him to call me gorgeous. He was just like one of those old knights who's always polite. And in my low cut dress, with my makeup and my long blonde hair I think I did look sexy.

'It's not my band,' I pointed out. 'It's Keith's. That's why it's called the Keith Harkins Group. Duh. I'm just the singer. They don't really need me, do they?'

Alec smiled at me. 'Tina, you do more than you can imagine in that band.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I think there might be some men who come here just to see you.'

'Perhaps. But I'm not available to any of them. They're all too old and fat.' Harry looked at me kind of funny.

'Yeah,' said Harry, 'and a good looking young girl like you doesn't want anyone old and fat, do you?'

There was a knock on the door. It was the police. Harry let them in. They were wet. They spoke quietly. I looked at Harry and he glanced at me. He caught my eye and shook his head as if to say that David was dead.

I sat and waited, looking out the open door. I could see the blue flashes of the police cars outside.

A policeman came to me. I recognised him. It was a cop I saw at Kilburn police station a few days before when I went to find out about Toby's death.

'I believe you found the body, Miss. Could you give me some details?'

'You said body. Is he dead?'

The policeman bit his lip. I don't suppose he was allowed to say that.

'If you could just give me some details, Miss. Did you know him?'

'Yes. His name was David. David Gough. He worked at Sheen and Callam. With a friend of mine called Toby Parkes. Toby was killed, too.'

I could hear Harry sigh. He must have been listening. I just hoped he wasn't going to tell me to grow up yet again.

The policeman looked at me carefully. 'I'm sorry miss, I didn't get your name.'

'Tina. Tina Towner.'

'I see. And have you discussed this Toby Parkes with anyone?'

Now there was going to be trouble. 'Yes. Inspector Woods.'

He smiled very slightly. 'I recognise you. Did you come to us a few days ago?'

'Yes. It was last Wednesday.'

'I see. I thought so. Well, let's not go over any of the details of this other Toby man again. Especially if you've made a full report to Inspector Woods. Why do you think that David was murdered? Did he have any enemies?'

Time to lie. They obviously wouldn't believe me when I told them that Toby was his enemy and his friend. He was dead, anyway, so it wouldn't matter. After all Toby couldn't have killed him from the grave, right?

'I guess I don't really know if he was murdered. He had lots of enemies. He was a right bastard. Maybe someone at his work.' I was sounding like such a fool. There was so much I could tell them, but they wouldn't listen before, so

why should they listen now? I needed to learn more about David and then I might be able to figure it all out and give them the whole case solved with answers and proof.

‘Do you know how he died?’ I asked.

‘Not as yet. Did you touch the body? Did you notice anything nearby? Did you move anything?’

‘No,’ I said. Of course there might have been a clue near him. If only I’d looked. I should have checked his pockets.

The policeman spoke again. ‘Okay. Look, Miss Towner, maybe you’re a bit confused right now. I don’t think that this is urgent. Do we have your address already?’

‘Yes, Inspector Woods has it.’

‘Good. If we need more detail from you we’ll contact you again.’

They were really cool about it. This couldn’t be normal procedure could it?

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘We may be able to find out everything we need from the body, so don’t be surprised if we don’t get back to you. Thank you for your help Miss Towner.’

He went over to talk to Harry.

This was sloppy. Didn’t the police care? Wasn’t this a murder scene? I know they didn’t think that Toby was murdered but what about David?

Shouldn’t they be trying to find out who murdered him?

I didn't recognise Toby when he first entered Harry's Bar. Alec and Harry were sitting and talking to me. Alec was in his army gear, as always, and Harry was in his bright red bowtie and jacket, as always. I was wearing my blue evening dress and high heels, holding my cute, blue bag with the beads.

Alec called to Toby, too loudly, with too much cheer and too many words, like he was encouraging a little kid. 'Toby,' he said. 'I'm so glad you came. Come in, come in. You'll like it here. Do you like jazz? Here,' – pointing at us – 'meet Harry and Tina.' Alec nodded towards each of us. 'They're great people. This is a great place. Real life and lots of jazz.'

Toby couldn't see me properly. Now that I knew his name I remembered him. I used to call him Cardy Parkes. I hadn't seen him since school. The poor guy was still in that awful grey shirt and trousers and he was even in a grey cardigan still! Not only that but now he had a pathetic, scruffy beard, too. He didn't know how to use a comb then and he hadn't learnt since. I used to call him Cardy, because of those stupid cardigans. I was a bit nasty in those days.

Alec was still speaking. 'Toby is a bit down these days, I'm afraid. He needs a bit of cheering up.' Toby mostly looked at the ground, occasionally glancing at each of us hesitantly.

Harry and I both looked at each other with eyes raised. It had to be someone from Alec's suicide workshop. This guy was going to be depressed or suicidal. Great.

'I know you already, Toby,' I said. He looked at me, still keeping his head down a bit. He was puzzled. He probably didn't recognise me. I would never have talked to him at school. Still, I was more polite these days.

'Remember me from school?' I said. 'I used to call you Cardy. It's me. Tina Towner.'

He smiled at me a bit. 'Hi Tina.'

If Alec said he needed cheering up, then perhaps I could try. 'Do you live in Kilburn?' I said, all cheery.

Toby nodded, still looking around and trying to take in how the place looked. He acted like a frightened child, overwhelmed by his first visit to the circus. I kept rabbiting on, trying to make him feel at ease. 'It's great here. It's got everything within walking distance. I don't need a car or anything. How do you get around?'

A mobile phone rang. We all looked around as Alec jumped up to get it out of his pocket.

'I hate mobile phones,' I said to Toby. 'I hate it when they ring while I'm singing. There is no way in the world I will ever get one.'

Alec must have overheard, because he smiled at me while he was answering the phone and then walked outside.

Toby looked around the room some more. Harry was serving someone who had just come in. I could hear the glasses clinking. People were muttering in the corner and a wild Wayne Shorter piece was playing on the sound system, full of screaming saxes and a pounding backing line. The place was filling up nicely. I

looked at my bracelets and fiddled with them for a bit waiting for Toby to say something. He pulled out a scruffy packet of rolling tobacco.

‘You’ll have to take that outside,’ said Harry, shouting from down the bar over the noise. He must have been looking in our direction.

Toby stared blankly at Harry.

‘No one’s allowed to smoke in here,’ I said, ‘you’ve got to smoke outside.’ It’s true, too, it must be the only jazz bar in the world where smoking is banned. Perhaps that’s why Harry never made any money.

Toby carefully put away his pouch as if it was really important to do it just right. More people were coming in and it was getting crowded near the bar. He kept staring at the ground.

‘So do you remember me, now?’ I said.

He was gradually coming closer to me forced along by the people pushing to the bar. ‘Yes. Yes, I remember you. Yes. Tina. Of course.’

Toby finally bumped around the end of the bar where I was and he was able to notice me in my best show dress. It’s dark blue, off the shoulder and low cut, pinched in at the waist to show my figure. It looks so sophisticated. Up until now, he could only see me between the charity bottles.

He stared at me. ‘Tina, you look fantastic,’ he said. I suppose his reaction was a bit over the top.

At the time I really appreciated it, so I gave him a nice big smile back.

‘I didn’t know you were so beautiful! That dress is amazing.’ He was staring at my chest. Perhaps the dress was a bit low at the front. I pulled it up a bit at the front.

‘It’s for when I sing, later on,’ I answered. It was nice to be admired, even by Toby.

I wasn’t used to compliments when I was younger. They used to say I looked like a horse. But I keep fit and my body has filled out and I have long blonde hair, so with enough make up and in the dark, I must have looked really good. Anyway, the old piss pots around the bar were always try to chat me up when they weren’t stretching their stomachs with beer or moaning about not being able to smoke inside or arguing endlessly over whether bee bop was better than cool jazz and why no one writes any good jazz anymore.

‘So what are you doing, now, Cardy?’ I blurted out. His face went sort of sad at this, like a puppy that’s just been kicked for no reason. ‘Sorry. Toby.’ I felt guilty, so I tried to make up by touching his hand. It was cold and clammy. Funny, how guilt became such a big issue. He gave me another big smile.

‘I work for Sheen and Callam as a programmer. I design their computer system for handling all their accounts around the world.’

‘Really,’ I answered. ‘That’s amazing. I’m an accountant at Blue Smith Accountancy. Sheen and Callam are our biggest clients. I don’t work with them, though, because of how they treat people in The Third World. Don’t you feel guilty working for them?’

‘No. Why should I?’

‘They rip people off. They use child labour. They dump all their pollution on poor people.’

‘No.’ He didn’t look down or anything. He looked me right in the eye. He must have really believed this. ‘Sheen and Callam aren’t bad. They’re a big company, but they give people a chance to work. There’s nothing wrong with making money. They don’t employ kids these days. Not that they ever knew about it, before.’

‘They pay poverty wages. They make people do things they don’t like. They pollute places,’ I said. ‘The amount they pay is close enough to slavery. Look, Toby, everyone knows they rip everyone in the third world off. You shouldn’t be working for them. You just help them make even more money at the expense of some really poor people.’

‘Tina, I have to work for them. It’s good money. I can’t let anyone else do my job. I’m the only one that can do it right. I don’t even take a holiday. My job there is everything to me.’

I laughed a bit. ‘You know, as an auditor, I’d be dead suspicious of someone who never took a holiday. They’re usually the people on the take.’

He frowned. ‘Good thing you’re not an auditor at Sheen and Callam, then,’ he said.

I shrugged.

He touched my arm. ‘You are so fantastic, Tina,’ he said.

I looked back at him.

He gazed right into my eyes like a big puppy dog.

I felt a bit uncomfortable.

‘You’re so beautiful,’ he said, ‘and intelligent, too! You’re my ideal woman.’

I couldn’t match Toby’s stare, so I looked back at Harry. He was looking at me kind of oddly, scowling at Toby, too. He wandered off down the bar a bit, as if he wasn’t going to listen. But I know Harry, and I’m sure he was all ears like some huge satellite dish listening to something far off in space. You could just see the Harry Ears Sensor System attached to the back of the U.S.S. Enterprise with two enormous ears twenty metres across and Captain James T. Kirk saying, ‘Can you hear anything, Harry?’

And Harry would answer, ‘yeah, Tina is having difficulties with her boyfriend in bed and she just sang a note off key.’

And then Scotty would interrupt and say, ‘The Harry Ears dinna can take it, Captain. They’ll burn off if they listen to Tina with her boyfriend. They can’t listen to that sort of thing.’

Toby was staring at me. Perhaps he had said something while my mind was wandering. Time for me to change the subject.

‘So, Toby, how do you know Alec?’

‘I met him today at his workshop.’

‘Oh. The workshop for the Suicidal?’

Toby sagged a bit and studied the floor some more. ‘Yeah.’

‘Why were you there? Are things a bit tough?’

‘Yes, my girlfriend left me and I’ve been feeling a bit down.’

‘I know just how you feel. My boyfriend has just pissed off, too.’

I didn’t think much of it at the time, but this must have been why Toby smiled at me like that. What a fool I was! He was convinced by now that I was giving him the come on because I had no boyfriend.

‘Yeah,’ he continued. Alec convinced me to come along here tonight and to get a life. He got me to go to his workshops, too.’

‘I heard he set up the workshops after he tried suicide once?’

‘Really?’ I answered. ‘Thank goodness he didn’t do it.’ Here was my chance to do some good for Toby. ‘You wouldn’t do it would you Toby?’

‘No, I’m too sane. Sane people don’t commit suicide. They just use it as a cry for help.’

‘But you must have been just a bit down, weren’t you? So, how do you feel now?’ I was being very caring, looking deep into his eyes to support him at this difficult time. He was sad again.

‘I miss her, so much. She went away. She writes occasionally, and asks for money. But I’m over her now. I was depressed for a while, so I went to the workshop, but everything’s going to be just fine.’ With those last words he was staring into my eyes. All my warning signals were going off and I was ignoring them. I don’t know why I was being so stupid. Right now, it was like they were little B road signs that said, ‘Warning: Geek.’

‘So, you didn’t need the workshop?’

‘No, not really. I don’t want to die. Alec helped me understand. I just need a new girlfriend. Someone I can fancy and who can fancy me.’

I was still ignoring those signs and they were getting bigger. Now they were the size of motorway signs that said, 'Tina, the silly bugger thinks you're going to marry him.'

'What actually happens in them?' I said.

'We pretend to commit suicide, with a note and all. Alec says something about finding out feelings. It makes you realise who would be hurt if you died. Except that I couldn't think of anyone who'd be hurt. No one.'

'I'm sure there would be someone.'

He stopped and stared for a second. He was a sad puppy again. 'It doesn't matter, anyway. I'll never commit suicide,' he continued. 'I couldn't even write a suicide letter. I tried in the workshop and all I could do was take the piss. Here, I'll show it to you.' He reached into several pockets looking for the letter. 'I must have left it at the workshop. Anyway, all I could do was make a joke about Goodbye Cruel World I'm off to join the circus, but I sort of hid it by writing it down as the start of each line.'

'I wouldn't want you to kill yourself.'

'Okay,' he said smiling even more. 'It must be almost impossible to actually kill yourself.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'I could never kill myself. Not ever. No way. You'd have to be a bit mad. My boyfriend has left me, but it's still not that bad.'

Toby snorted with a little laugh. 'You'd have to be a complete nutter.'

'Yes.' I jumped off my seat. 'A sane person could never commit suicide. It's not enough just to feel despair or have a broken heart. Suicide is more

extreme than that. You need something else to take you over the edge, like fear or pain.'

'What do you really know about it, Tina?' said Harry. He's great at showing you when you're being silly.

I sat down again.

Toby went back to being depressed. What a change of mood! 'It's easier than you think,' he muttered. 'You get so down and just when it's at the worst and you can't bear it, another knock comes along and someone rejects you again and it's all meaningless. You don't have to be mad. Honest, it can get to anyone. I tell you, no one would ever care if I was to die. No one in the world. If I were dead, everyone would just write me off and move on.'

By now the warning signs were enormous with massive lettering that you could see from outer space. You could just see Mr Spock saying, 'Long range sensor readings from 100 lights years away show that Tina is being fancied by a suicidal geek and she doesn't seem to have a clue and is just sitting and listening to him spouting on.'

'Toby,' I said. 'You aren't going to commit suicide, are you? Now don't be stupid.'

'Yes, but if I died, everyone would think it was suicide.'

'But you aren't going to die, are you? So it's not a problem.'

'But what if I did die? Would you just let it go?'

I should have ignored him. I should have just reminded him he was being silly, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for those sad, little boy eyes. 'I wouldn't

let it go Toby. I'd want to know all about it. I wouldn't just accept it as if nothing had happened.' I didn't know it at the time but these were the most dangerous words I have ever said.

'Really,' he said, eyes all watery. 'That is so nice.'

And now even the Klingons, the Vulcans and every other race millions of light years away and created from masses of latex rubber, even the ones without the Harry's Ears would be saying, 'Tina has just given encouragement to a lonely loser who is desperate for a woman,' and there'd be klaxons sounding and red lights flashing.

Tina, the completely oblivious bimbo, however, was still making what she thought was light conversation. 'So, do you know what's happened to everyone at school?'

'I work with David Gough. That's the only person I've seen since then.'

'That slime. He tried to touch my breasts once, the bastard.'

'Yeah, I remember that. And you flattened him with one punch. God, you were magnificent Tina. I wish I could hit him like that sometime. He's always taking the piss. I really hate him.'

'I used a wrist lock, not a punch. The bastard was reaching for my bra.'

'Yeah. Perhaps. Actually, probably not. He never tried it again, though did he? Do you still do that Kung Fu? You were really keen on it once.'

'It's Aikido. Yes, I just got to be second dan last week. And I'm still keen on it. I'm bloody good these days.'

‘You are so amazing Tina. You look so sexy, you can sing, you can look after yourself. You’re the perfect woman. How often do you sing here?’

The warning signs had gone quiet for a while. They flashed back up again, but weakly as though they couldn’t be bothered to warn someone who was so stupid and deserved everything that was going to happen to her. I still didn’t see them.

‘Almost every Friday and Saturday night. We start at about 9 and sometimes play until midnight or 1 or 2, but I usually stop at around 11 and the band do instrumentals after that.’

During all this Toby just kept staring at me, mostly into my eyes. I probably had been touching his arm as we talked, too. I do that when I’m a bit unsure, it’s like I’m keeping him away from me. I finally started to realise what everyone else in the known universe and several parallel universes knew. Toby was falling desperately in love with me. I wished it was someone like Johnny Depp who fancied me and not a geek. How was I going to let Toby down gently? There was no way I would ever go out with him.

‘Tina,’ he said, ‘I’m going to come here every Friday and Saturday night just to listen to you. I will be your biggest fan.’ He put his hand onto mine.

Okay, so now it wasn’t just warning signs. This was a message being tattooed on my hand and drilled into my skull. I finally over-reacted.

‘Toby,’ I started. ‘Look you’re a nice guy and you’ve been let down by some girls, but don’t get the wrong idea. You and I can’t get together. Okay?’

You're not my type. There is no way we could ever get together. Not even once. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.'

And with that clumsy statement I crushed him, not realising just how bad he would take it. I never once thought that he'd kill himself, though. Even after all these warning signs.

He went white and looked down. Then he gave me such a pathetic look. He looked as if he might try to argue so I looked sternly at him.

'No Toby. Don't be so pathetic. Sort yourself out.' It was time to go, so I wandered off to the band who had finally arrived. They were setting up and making sound checks.

Toby spent the rest of the night drinking heavily.

Later on Harry came up to me. 'What do you think you're up to?'

'What do you mean?'

He nodded towards Toby sitting at a chair, pissed. 'You could have been a bit more adult than that.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'You should act your age. You're not a teenager, you know.'

I sulked a while, but that night was just the start of my big guilt trip. It lead me to the situation I'm in right now. Toby and David are both dead there is no proof that they were murdered and I'm the only one that cares enough to find out why.

## Chapter 3

I had so many nice memories of singing in the band. Especially one Saturday night when I was singing in Harry's in my tight, little black number. It seemed to be smaller than when I bought it, so I kept pulling it down at the bottom and up at the top.

Keith, the band leader and sax player, was in a good mood. He looked so cool in his black trousers and black shirt. They matched his lean frame and dark hair perfectly. He must have wanted some attention. He has really bad moods so I was grateful he was happy.

The audience was ignoring us, chattering on and not caring whether we were playing or not. The only attention I was getting was the sleazy stares of the old guys. There were candles on all the tables, although since it was Harry's bar they were leaning at odd angles and dripping on the table or they had gone out. The whole place was a bit dead. I hate it when we're ignored like this. I really like it when everyone's looking at me because I sing so well, and not because my dress is too small.

'Let's wake them all up,' said Keith.

What was he up to now?

He called out, 'Harry!' Harry was busy. Keith called again 'Harry!'

Harry finished serving a guy and looked around. 'What?'

'Fancy a horn riff?' said Keith.

Harry smiled, looked around and yelled back, 'give me ten seconds.' Then he shouted to the room, 'bar's closing for a few minutes folks. I won't be long.' He disappeared into the back room.

'This'll be good,' said Keith.

I was grinning. We were going to get these people's attention.

We waited for Harry. Gordon hugged his double bass and stared blankly like he always does. Barry was fiddling with his drum kit and didn't seem to know what was happening. Chris, was smiling, his big hands resting on his keyboard.

It was only a minute before Harry came back carrying his trumpet. He was fast for someone so fat. He must have had it set up just inside the door. He gave me a fatherly wink and I grinned back.

'Fancy the horn line on "Watermelon Man"?' asked Keith looking at Harry.

'Yeah,' said Harry, 'but it's got to be straight ahead. Just jazz. I don't do funk.'

'Okay,' said Keith. Since Harry hadn't practised it with us, he needed to fill him in on what to do. 'Tina's learnt some words we got from a Clark Terry and Coleman Hawkins version.'

Harry nodded and smiled at me, impressed. I shined with pride, but the words weren't really that hard.

'Gordon and Barry, will start us in with a vamp,' Keith said to Harry as we all listened in. 'When I nod, you and I'll hit them with the horn line. Chris and

Tina will come in on the second time through. Play the head twice at the end.

We finish with a vamp, swapping fours.'

Keith turned to all of us. 'Harry solos first. Okay, let's shut these people up. Let's make them know there's a band here.' He clicked his fingers as he counted, 'One..., Two..., One, Two Three Four.'

Bass started first. Quiet and steady on the first beat of the bar. Gordon hit the drums tapping out semi quavers on the hi-hat and hitting the snares on the off beats. The audience was still ignoring us, but I could see that their bodies were starting to respond. Mouths might be chattering, but hands and feet were tapping. I felt a shiver of excitement.

Harry and Keith opened up and blasted the audience with the riff. No one could ignore this. The band was a wall of harmony. Everyone just stared for a few seconds, then they smiled and started swaying. My face was all grin.

Chris pounded out chord inversions with a typical Herbie Hancock backing. I kicked my legs to the beat, swinging the microphone from hand to hand. Every note I sang was right on time and pitch. I had practiced this so often, I didn't even need to think about it any more. I sang of hot summers and cool watermelons. The place was perfect, hot and steamy, and I was letting the song come out.

Every single body was moving, whether its brain was ordering it to or not. Even Piss Pot in the Corner seemed to be rocking in time to the music. By the time Harry started his solo the whole place was bouncing. He leaned back so that his waistcoat stretched over his stomach. You couldn't see the stains anymore,

just the candles reflecting off his trumpet as he blasted the room. He punched out the high notes playing a fast running solo over the backing. I knew he played brass, but I never knew that Harry could hit those notes. His solo grabbed every ear in the house and spoke to it, sending the message 'move, feel' straight to the body. Everyone was looking at us now and I was a part of it all.

Keith stepped forward to take his solo on tenor. By now, piano and bass were playing a sound like heavy rain syncopating on the roof of a boat. Keith's solo was a storm over wild water, coming in slightly ahead of the beat. I loved the urgency this created and danced even more wildly. Barry and Gordon were playing right on the beat, driving it with exploding cymbals and slave galley Tom Toms. No one was talking any more. This was too loud, too insistent and too compulsive to ignore. A woman jumped up, grabbed her boyfriend and led him into a little space just in front of the band. They started dancing free and fast and everyone cheered. For a moment I wished I could be dancing with that guy, especially when I saw him glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. Still, I was singing and that was even better.

Keith signalled to Gordon who shook his head and looked to Chris. Chris picked up the cue. He pounded away at that keyboard. Then the magic between him and Gordon on bass took over. They seemed to be so close that they sounded like one person playing a solo on two instruments. All the while, the beat was still driving everyone forward, drums, feet and bodies going wild. Keith looked to Barry who ignored him, so Keith pointed a finger at his temple and mouthed 'head'. Right on time, Harry, Keith and I came in together, the powerful riff on

the horns backing me. We finished with Harry and Keith vamping out and the audience going wild, clapping and cheering.

There was such a buzz to being in a band when we played like this. We had the overpowering feel of leading the music and the audience together. It was unbeatable. It made up for the boring job and not having much money and no lover.

This was the sort of night that kept Harry in money all week. Perhaps a few couples had only come to listen and have a good night out. I wonder if it was what they were expecting or if they'd be horrified that there was no Irish music playing and no food for sale? But if they didn't like this, they would have to be dead inside.

It was several days after I first met him when Toby wandered in to Harry's with David Gough. I was singing in the band. Toby was surprisingly well dressed in jeans and a shirt. It was warm, so he'd left his cardigan behind. He might have shaved that wispy beard, too. He was improving. Maybe someone was advising him on how to dress. It could have been David, I suppose, but I couldn't see that creep being nice to anyone, especially not Toby.

David was so cool in his black leather jacket and jeans. He was thin and good looking. He stood in the middle of the room and looked around, head high, like he was in charge of Harry's and he was inspecting it to see if it met his standards.

I just hoped he wasn't as rotten as when I knew him at school.

I smiled to Toby and waved and he grinned back. I couldn't be sure of how he felt. I didn't know what to do as I wanted to make sure he was okay but I didn't want to encourage him. At a break in the set I wandered over to them.

David was a total lech. He stared at my tits, and then into my eyes and smiled a really smarmy grin. Do, he was still a problem. He'd have made a really good lecher in one of those Carry on Movies that are always on in the middle of the day. A bit like Sid James but better looking and without the wrinkles.

'Tina,' said The Creep. 'I haven't seen you for years. How are you? Still beating people to a pulp?' He made a big show of looking up my body. 'Who'd have known you could sing so well and look so sexy?'

I just frowned at him. Toby absolutely stank of some aftershave. He must have wallowed in a whole bottle of something disgusting that boys at school cover themselves in. I just hoped it wasn't supposed to be a scent to get me attracted to him. He was probably stupid enough to believe those ads where even a wart hog gets a beautiful babe because of this muck. I couldn't think of what to say to Toby and I didn't want to talk to David, so I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

'Hi Toby. Been at any good workshops, lately?' Oops, another dumb question.

'Hi Tina,' Toby answered. He sort of looked confused as if he didn't know what to say next and looked at the ground.

The creep interrupted whatever Toby was going to say. 'So, what's this workshop, Toby? I'll bet they were all beardies like you. I bet you had the most pathetic beard, too. Can't even grow a proper beard, can you?'

Toby said nothing but he looked down, frowning.

The bastard kept on talking. 'It's got to be something. Is this where you met Tina? Tell me about it. I might go. I could pick up a gorgeous school friend, too.'

'It wasn't a pick up place and it's not where I met Tina,' defended Toby. He was trying to protect me, but I don't think he was thinking too carefully. 'It was a suicide workshop, so she wouldn't need it, would she?'

I almost groaned as The Creep smirked. 'Yes, Toby. Suicide,' he said, 'That would be a great idea. You could put us all out of your misery.' He turned to me. 'I can see why you don't need a suicide workshop, Tina, but if you are ever feeling down, come to me and I'll comfort you.' He went to put his arm around me, but I stepped back and scowled. He paused, and stepped away, slowly lowering his arms, palms forward. Protecting himself from me. He kept talking, though. 'You can't imagine how good I could make you feel. You won't want to commit suicide after I've sorted you out. You'd feel more alive than ever. You'd be...'

Toby shouted at David. 'Suicide is not a joke.'

David smiled.

Toby looked confused, but he still kept talking. 'Suicide is not funny. What about the consequences?'

David was enjoying this. 'Toby,' he said, 'suicide is easy. MASH was right. They even wrote a song about it. It's easy. Anyone can do it. Even you. Although I imagine you'd probably get it wrong somehow. You're such a hopeless geek, you probably couldn't even top yourself properly.'

I had underestimated him. He was worse than I remembered.

Toby was taking him too seriously and responded to his baiting. 'Look,' he said face down, lips tight, eyes narrow. 'Suicide is not simple and it's not easy. What if you get it wrong? What if you disable yourself? It's not easy. It's not just about madness. There are real consequences. That's what the workshop showed me.'

I finally interrupted them. 'Toby, don't answer him. He's just winding you up. Look, it's good to see you again. I was hoping you'd be back again.'

'Really?' said Toby so eagerly.

Perhaps I shouldn't have said it like that?

'Yes,' said David, 'You're just what Tina needs. A loser who fancies her and won't go away.'

This was getting ridiculous. I decided to distract the toad. Amber was sitting in a corner on her own trying to hook a client with her fake blonde hair, a blouse unbuttoned to her navel and panda painted eyes.

'David, do you see that girl over there?' I said.

He looked in the direction I pointed. Her breasts were huge, almost certainly fake, so I'm sure he enjoyed the view.

‘Her name is Amber,’ I said, ‘and she’s so lonely that she’d even talk to you. Why don’t you go and talk to her?’

It was a horrible thing to do, because he would probably think his luck was in until he realised she was on the game. He swaggered away.

Toby looked over at David and Amber. ‘He’s right,’ he said, ‘I am hopeless. He makes my life unbearable, you know.’

‘Ignore him, Toby,’ I said staring off at David as he left. ‘Amber’s a pro so the creep’s in for a disappointment.’ I looked back at Toby. ‘So, what’s going on?’

‘I just wanted to come and listen to you again, Tina. You sound so good. I hope you don’t mind.’

He almost flinched as he said this, as if he was scared I was going to hit him. It made me feel even more guilty.

‘It’s okay, Toby, you can be a fan. Just don’t get your hopes up, okay?’

He sagged a bit.

So, he still fancied me.

No, this wasn’t helping. It could only explain David’s death if Toby was alive. Toby’s death was the key to everything. Then I remembered who else I had met that day when Toby first appeared at Harry’s. Alec had come back after taking a call on his mobile and Martin was following behind him. It was Alec’s mobile phone that reminded me. I could remember every detail.

Alec waved an open palm towards Martin. 'He's an old friend from the army and my best friend at Poverty Life Line. He's had a rough time lately. I want you to make him welcome.'

I could see why he had had a rough time. He was a rough guy. He was tall and thin, with a craggy face and very short hair, a crew cut wearing a checked shirt and jeans with cowboy boots. He had a pockmarked face, probably acne, but it might have been lots of little scars from fights. He looked us all in the face, one at a time, scowling. I had to look away when he came to look at me.

Alec was still talking, still too cheery. 'Martin's my Finance Director at Poverty Life Line. He didn't have much accounting experience, but we've sorted that out, now, haven't we Martin? He's an essential member of Poverty Life Line. Aren't you? But he needs to get out a bit more.'

You'd expect someone to be smiling with all this praise but Martin just scowled all the time. And he stared. It would have been okay if he was just staring at my body or something like that. I mean I hate that, too, but it was more normal than the way Martin always looked at you out the corner of his eye. Creepy. Martin saw me looking at him and turned away to stare at Alec instead. That was the other creepy thing about him. The way he stared at Alec. If I didn't know better I would say he loved Alec. I could see it in my head. Martin was the mad, gay lover who wielded an axe and killed anyone who said a bad word about Alec. Alec could not be gay, but that didn't stop Martin being a killer, did it?

Alec was still doing the talking for all of us.

'Martin, this is Harry. Tina. Toby.'

Martin was staring at Toby now. It was the worst scowl I've ever seen. Filled with hate and contempt. I was scared that he was going to kill him then for some unknown reason. Perhaps he kept the axe hidden in his sleeve. I hoped he never looked at me like that.

Toby's face was white and he was staring at Martin. He sort of stuttered as he said, 'I met you today, Martin, didn't I? At the workshop.'

'Yes,' grunted Martin. His words were cut short and bitter. 'I saw your note.'

Toby looked like he was about to wet himself in fear.

Alec interrupted again. 'Now, Martin, don't take things so damned seriously. It didn't matter. It's not like Toby meant anything. After all, it's not like he was actually hurting anyone or anything.' Alec turned to us as if to explain. 'Martin helps me out at the workshop and I don't think he felt that Toby was taking it as seriously as he should.'

The policeman had finished talking to Harry. Harry didn't have that much to say. He didn't really know that much about David. They both walked over to where I was standing, near the door.

Harry was all fatherly and caring. 'Is it safe out there?' he asked the policeman. 'Will it be okay for Tina to go home? I don't think she should go outside.' He was looking at the door all the time.

'Yes,' the policeman answered, looking out the door himself. 'I don't think there was a robber or a killer out there. I'm pretty sure he wasn't murdered.'

Harry's eyebrows went up as he stared at the policeman.

'How can you be sure?' I asked.

The policeman looked at me. 'I can arrange an escort if you want but it could take several hours. How far do you want to go?'

'Not far,' I said. 'Just a few blocks towards Hampstead.'

The policeman seemed very caring. 'You'll be fine, Miss. Just don't wander into the side alleys.'

'If you're sure,' said Harry. 'It's just that I'm knackered and I need my bed.' He stared at the door like it was dangerous or something.

'I'll be fine,' I said.

The policeman wandered out the door.

I realised then that he never answered my question.

'Did they say anything to you about why David's dead?' I asked Harry. I leaned on a table. I didn't feel like standing, but Harry wasn't sitting down so I didn't either.

'They asked lots of questions about whether he was a drug user.'

'David? A drug user?'

'Yes, Tina, didn't you know?' He kicked the table, making me step away in case it fell over. 'There's more than alcohol and jazz, here. There's prostitutes and drugs as well. That's why Alec comes here. To save them from themselves. I don't know why they pick on me. I try to keep a clean bar, but, somehow they all collect. All the gutter people. The ones who don't have a home life. No

family and no kids and no dog. The ones who drift in to avoid any meaning in their life.'

'The police asked if we saw anything near David,' I said.

'Yes. Do you think we would have seen a syringe if it had been there?'

'I couldn't see anything. I could hardly see David. Are you sure that David was a user?' I wished I knew more about it than just the lectures we were given at school. I didn't even know the right words for everything or even the slang words. If I thought anyone was using anything I stayed well clear. I didn't want to die like all the Jazz Greats.

'No, of course not, but I've had my suspicions over Amber for quite a while.'

I had to ask the obvious. 'You don't think that Toby...?' I started.

'Will you give up on Toby?' Harry shouted back. I jumped. He stepped closer to me with an angry expression. 'I don't know anything about him and you're getting to be very, very boring. David is dead, probably from drugs. Just shut up about Toby.' He pointed a finger at me. 'You said lots of stupid things, so just grow up and act your age. Accept that it was your fault and get over it.' He made a hand motion to the side, brushing it all away. 'There's people around here who are still alive. Think of them, for once. Stop being so bloody selfish all the time. There are other people in the world!'

'Okay... Okay.' I backed away. 'I'd better go now.'

He was still angry. 'Yes, go.' He looked at me and softened his expression a bit. 'Go carefully. And don't wander down any alleys, in case you discover something else you don't want to see.'

I turned towards the door.

'And please think about what it is you're doing and why,' he added. 'There's people all around who care about you so much. Just stop and grow up a bit.'

I looked back. He was crying a bit. I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. I was confused. Was I really that dumb? That childish?

'Wait Tina,' he said. 'Just a second. It's important.' He walked over to the bar and picked something up. 'Look, I know you don't like these, but why don't you take this one?' He waved a mobile phone at me. 'Just in case. Here's the charger. Just for me. Please. I won't worry as much if I know that you can contact me.'

'Okay, Harry. Seeing as it's you.' I took the phone. I could leave it in the house. Maybe bring it to Harry's so he could see me with it.

'I'll lock up after you.'

I left the bar. It was dawn and it had stopped raining. The police were still gathered around the body. I couldn't see what they were doing and I was going in the opposite direction, anyway, so I headed straight home. I'd have to find out what was happening another time.

I was so tired I had to walk slowly. All the way home, I went over it all in my head again and again but I couldn't think straight. David had warned me.

Toby had been killed. Toby knew about the accounts. It sounds paranoid, but I couldn't help thinking that David had been killed, too. Harry thought that too. That's why he rushed me inside. Everyone seemed to be linked. It couldn't have been an accident or suicide.